

DO I NEED AN EXPERT TO TELL ME WHAT THE SCRIPTURES MEAN?

Systematic Theologies and Interpreting Scriptures

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Introduction

Do you remember having that feeling of randomly opening up the Bible to a page, for example to a Psalm, and being reduced to tears or lifted to awestruck? I think almost every new believer has that kind of experience in one way or another. Everything we learn is so new and fresh, almost intoxicating-sweet water to a thirsty soul. It's wonderful, personally communing with the Word and the Person who wrote it. The verses just leap off the page, and you can scarcely contain the desire to tell everyone around what you've just learned.

As the "new kids on the block," so to speak, we may eventually feel like the novices we are. Out of need and trust, we tend to rely on a pastor-teacher to help us interpret the bigger picture. After all, the Bible is a big book, and what we know about it may seem relatively small and insignificant. It's great to sit at the feet of those who seem to make the Bible "come alive" with their knowledge and style. They can be very informative, and persuasive, giving insights and stating truths that seem completely straightforward and self-evident. The real truth of the matter, though, is that *the Bible is alive with or without those clever people*. We can learn from all sorts of sources, but, ultimately, we should never turn over our individual responsibility for knowing what the Bible says to someone else. We open ourselves up to all sorts of confusion, and one of the consequences could very well be deception. Don't forget, we have an enemy who is the author of confusion. He can take a question that we have, or a doubt, and turn it into something that winds up causing us to doubt God and His Word. That is serious.

My main purpose here is to convince people that it is possible, and easier than one might think, to keep the trusting outlook and enthusiasm alive. (At this moment in time, the Lord has managed to keep the flame going in me for over thirty years.) In no way do I promise any sort of self-help, step-by-step solution to all the disagreements that believers have. How arrogant could I be? This is not about how to improve your marriage, to witness more effectively, or how to lead worship. There is absolutely no payoff for me if you agree, and I won't lose face if you disagree. My convictions are my convictions. Nevertheless, *if* we can learn to let the Bible form the foundation of our knowledge, the knowledge of its Author and our Creator, and let this common foundation inform our discussions *as peers* in the kingdom, *then* and only then do we level the playing field and make dialogue possible.

We will also have access to an impartial arbiter, someone who can help us resolve some of our differences of opinion. We will have to agree to disagree, but that is as common as the air we breathe. It takes place in every single area of knowledge that I know anything about. The more you know about any area of knowledge, philosophy, plumbing, politics, psychology, or whatever, the more you know that disagreements are par for the course. Nevertheless, we can learn to discern between the heroes of the faith and the villains, without resorting to personal attacks, without getting angry or frustrated, and without becoming easy prey for the ravening wolves that Jesus told us to watch out for. We can learn not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, or have our entire world collapse around our ears just because we see one of our heroes fail. We may learn to put the mistakes of others and ourselves into a deeper context.

To start with the conclusion, we need to read the Bible from cover to cover (more than once) with our own eyeballs, so that our reactions to life's challenges can be informed by God's Word. At first glance, this seems like a job for superman; I mean, we are all overwhelmed with the activities of our daily lives (cares of the world?). But, at the bottom of the causal chain, confusion is most likely the result of a combination of ignorance (we are not sufficiently knowledgeable) and listening to *too many other voices* besides (or in addition to) the *one* that speaks directly from Scripture. We may not have the ability to tell which point of view or teaching is truly based on what the Scriptures teach, and which one is not. There will be gray areas, and there is no doubt about that. If you want an infallible guide to all the players, their positions, and their teams (to use an analogy from sports), then the Bible is the place to go. But, because we're dealing with fallen and fallible humanity, we have to expect blurry lines and some fuzzy conclusions. Some things will just have to wait until we are in the presence of the One who *is* infallible and knows all things, when the Messiah stands among us to judge the sheep and the goats. In the meantime, we can build a file called, "Things to ask Him when I see Him."

Growing up: pitfalls and pratfalls

You may have noticed that, as we grow and "mature," our views start to change. Growth pangs are gradual, and quite predictable. Like children when they first venture out of the house, we meet new people. (Once a child leaves the house for the first time, the parents may never know what he or she may bring home.) These new people could be different pastors, teachers on the radio, or someone from the internet. We pick up a few books recommended by a friend or acquaintance, or maybe just because we've heard the names of the authors before. We may not know who the authors really are or what their points of view might be, but we read on trying to feed that new-found hunger for truth. We may read an article by an impressive Bible expositor, and get "hooked" on his or her teaching. We begin to see that there are opposing views of the Bible. This can be a problem. I'm not suggesting spiritual anarchy, or that the multitude of voices is an indication of chaos in the "church world." As the saying in Israel goes: two Israelis, three opinions. What I am trying to point out is that the Bible is understandable, believe it or not. No one is going to know what every word or passage means; but, if we remember Who wrote it, we can always ask the Author.

Our intuitions tell us that our child-like innocence, the faith and simplicity that we felt when we first experienced belief and that intimate contact with God, needs to remain intact. But is that realistic? (My quick answer is "yes.") We all know that we must be like children, but does that mean that we should be naive and gullible, and believe every voice we hear? (Of course not.) Worse, do we have to pick one, *only* one voice? (The answer is "yes," but it is not necessarily from a list found in a religious bookstore.) Failing to take responsibility for my own knowledge and opinions of fact by passively letting a pastor-hero think for me is like turning my mind over to someone else. What if he's wrong about something? Is he a false prophet? How disappointing it is when we find a fly in the ointment, a flaw in a trusted pastor's teachings.

Surrendering to someone else's thinking also opens me up for another one of life's most devastating disappointments: If you keep your eyes open and wait long enough, you'll see your favorite person make some dreadful mistake, stumble, and maybe even fall face-down in his/her own humanity. I'm so used to my own blunders that I've stopped counting. (When my odometer shows all zeroes, it is not because my car is brand new. It probably just turned to the next million.) When my heroes fall, everything and everyone I have believed in may fall, too. I don't mean to project a cynical image of pastors and teachers in any way. We need them and their gifts, and we should pray for them. Clearly, God has gifted certain people in those areas of leadership. But, their potential contributions are sort of peripheral to the real job of personally following Jesus.

My cautiousness isn't limited to pastors, that's for sure. I'm very familiar with "experts" and "specialists" in a number of fields. Sometimes their personal lives are less than confidence builders. (I have a couple of sayings that I like to tell my students. One is, "Just because someone has a PhD doesn't mean that he or she is a well-adjusted individual.") A specialist needs to have a very narrow focus in a specific area to qualify as "knowledgeable". For example, medical doctors have their specialties. There are no "general practitioners" who have expertise in every single aspect of modern medicine. You wouldn't go to a brain surgeon for a pain in your big toe, and, in the same vein (pun intended), you wouldn't go to a podiatrist to have a brain tumor removed. Very few people are experts in all aspects of Bible.

Having some sort of special talent or gift, or *doing* something that requires tremendous discipline is one thing. *Being* a truly godly person is quite another (read Galatians 5:22, 23 for a list of the "fruits of the Spirit," the kinds of attributes a person should have as a result of a real and intimate relationship with Jesus). I'm convinced by what I know of human nature that we should always maintain a healthy and Biblical view of our leaders and peers. We shouldn't pass unfair expectations on to anyone. It can only do them harm; the pressure can actually contribute to their eventual failure. We should never put people on pedestals through constant flattery and praise, or make them think that they're somehow infallible and better than they really are. I try hard not to listen when someone praises me. Pride comes before a Fall!

So, do I need an expert to tell me what the Bible means? Sometimes, it is a good idea to read what a specialist writes. It may expand my knowledge. But,

to turn over my responsibility for thinking to someone else (letting someone think for me) is an entirely separate issue.

The Bible and the average reader

One key issue that has divided families, split huge populations, and even started wars is whether or not the common person is even capable of understanding what the Bible says, that is, without the help of a "paid professional," someone specially trained, a priest, rabbi, professor at a seminary, or member of the "clergy." The experts have taken all the proper courses in Biblical interpretation (hermeneutics-the science of interpreting), doctrines, theology, and so on. In fact, this is one of the key issues that has pitted orthodox-style institutions such as the Roman Catholic and Eastern Rite churches against so-called Protestant denominations with a bitter residue of hostility. Are we, by virtue of a personal relationship with the Living God, a priesthood of believers, all equally capable of knowing God and His will, as Luther pointed out?

You can read for yourself; this is one thing that the scriptures clearly teach (1 Peter 2:4-10). There is no valid distinction between the *clergy* (ordained, religious professionals) and *laity* (from the Greek word meaning "the people"), normal folks like you and me. If you hold to the idea that God has created some "chain of being", something like a religious food chain with one person at the top and everyone else falling into place (in degrees) down to the little peasant guy, then there is a problem. Peasants like me don't like being told that we can't make decisions because we're too lowly ("If I only had a brain"). Worse, the guys at the top may think that they're above reproach. With news of the many child molestation scandals, particularly among leaders in the Roman Catholic Church, spreading across the headlines of the world press, people point fingers *at the results of the problem* without really understanding the problem. If we understand what the Bible tells us about humankind and acknowledge that we are all human beings without exception, then we *know* that the failures of individuals are merely *symptoms*. The *cause* is rebellion, deliberate or not, against the expressed Will of God, His plan and purpose that He has revealed to us. If we all read the same Bible, the debate should end there.

Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, that we are to be transformed "by the renewing of the mind, that ye may prove [test] what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God." The "ye" is plural, and it applies to each and every one of us. Instructions like that must be possible, or we wouldn't be commanded to do them. The way to accomplish this transformation is to allow God to change us, to change our minds to conform to His. Our response is to read, study, and think and quietly reflect (meditate) on what we've read, and to *pray*-in other words, by communing with God in that child-like, trusting way. In defense of my personal view of the importance of thinking and the renewal of my own mind, I refer to the words of Jesus:

And behold a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He [Jesus] said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" So he [the lawyer] answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all

your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind," and "your neighbor as yourself'." And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live." Luke 10:25-28

It seems simple enough, which is not to say that it is easy. Some jobs may be simple and difficult at the same time, like lifting huge loads, while others may seem very complicated, yet easy for the experienced person, like playing the violin. Isaiah 26:3 states: "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in Thee." So, there is great benefit in keeping our *minds* on the things of God, in continually thinking about God's instructional guide for us. We cannot, however, do it all in our own strength, by our own willpower. We need the active participation of the Author-but, He has promised to do just that. He is the Good Shepherd, and we are the sheep of His pasture.

Our expectations of others should never exceed the expectations we have for ourselves. If we feel insecure about our own ability to interpret scriptures, then we should probably feel insecure about the abilities of others. From the "other" perspective, that of the pastor-teacher, leaders of any kind assume a tremendous responsibility and, as a result, face much greater scrutiny for their work. A keen sense of responsibility is important. For instance, the more important my job, the more responsibilities I'll have. If I represent a business, I'll be open to the scrutiny of both my clients and boss. If I say that I represent God, then I am definitely going to receive a lot of scrutiny (and the pressure that goes with it) from my students and peers, on the one hand, and my Boss-God, on the other. He doesn't take misrepresentation lightly. The 24th chapter of Ezekiel sends a very clear message of God's view of the responsibilities of shepherds towards their sheep. Leading them astray is serious, even if it is done innocently.

I would be a blatant hypocrite if I tried to project an air of superiority-so, feel free to disagree with my conclusions. But, please think about what it means to follow Jesus, what Jesus meant when He said: "Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and *doeth* [emphasis mine] them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock" (Matthew 7:25). As a result, the first step in building a solid foundation is to learn of Him.

The purpose of scripture

Paul (nee Saul of Tarsus), who encountered Jesus personally, was a dedicated student of scriptures. As an older leader, he wrote to his junior, a young man named Timothy, the inspired view of the *purpose* of scripture: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine [teaching], for reproof, for correction, for instruction [training or discipline] in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). Even with only the slightest knowledge of the context of this letter, the term "scripture" that Paul uses refers to the *Tanach*, the so-called Old Testament writings that included the Law (*Torah*), Prophets (*Navi'im*), and writings (*Chotvim*) such as the Psalms and Proverbs. The inspired writings of Paul and other New Testament authors came later and were added to the

acknowledged body (canon) of scriptures. These later writings were also designed to instruct. They form the obvious basis for the proper interpretation of the entire Bible.

The issue of Biblical interpretation is much more than a question of who is right, who is wrong, or how can a normal person tell the difference. I personally would never make the claim that I am anything other than the average reader. Like everyone else, I have my opinions about almost everything and everyone, including politics. My thinking is affected by my culture, experience, and limited intellectual capacities. I don't think I'm stupid, particularly naive, or gullible to a fault. I also don't think that I'm any sort of genius or special conduit of God's Truth or special revelation. I have my insights; I suppose some of them are more profound than others. I know the Bible instructs us that God has truly gifted some of us with specific abilities and talents as pastors and teachers, but we respect them within the human context of fallibility. We still can't lift them up to some sort of god-like status. Nevertheless, acknowledging true leaders does not mean that normal people like you and me are eternally doomed to be followers or that we are complete dummies, *incapable of discerning truth*.

On the contrary, I am firmly convinced that each and every believer has the individual responsibility to participate in his/her training, and to learn of the Messiah Jesus, just as He specifically instructed us. We cannot pass the buck to a paid professional, put all our trust and faith in him/her, and align ourselves into little cliques or groups in opposition to all others. Even a cursory reading of the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans makes that abundantly clear. The point I'm trying to make is that you and I can understand what the Bible clearly states. As the resource God has given us for our survival and for true knowledge of Him, *it is designed to instruct*. It is the Textbook of Life, with built-in features such as repetition and review to reinforce key points. It has ways it emphasizes particular issues, most notably those of personal character ("Blessed are the pure in heart"). On every *key* issue, it is completely clear. Going back to child-like trust, this means that God has revealed Himself to humankind because He loves us, and He will not withhold from us anything that is essential for our survival.

As an object of study, and brilliant piece of literature, the Bible has been interpreted to mean a wide range of things. Just look around and observe the many divisions and how each group considers itself to be the right one. There are legitimate reasons for disagreements, to be sure, but there are also other reasons and motivations that should be looked at with suspicion. Most of us have heard the one about taking a verse *out of context*, including the warning that some more unscrupulous preachers will take a particular verse and twist it around into something that it clearly does not mean in the greater context. Behind this is the suspicion that there is some kind of dark and selfish motive for misinterpreting a scripture, perhaps to deliberately mislead the gullible listener. We shouldn't think that everyone who takes a verse out of context has something evil up his (or her) sleeve. Sometimes, one individual verse will catch our attention and "speak" to us. But, it really is the context of scriptures along with our life experiences that gives an individual verse its real impact on us. If I take a step back to my child-like trust in God the Father, then I *trust*

that the Spirit of the Living God is trying to instruct me through the words on a page. I return to my direct link to the Omniscient, Omnipresent, and Omnipotent God. I hope that it goes without saying that it would be arrogant to say that this only applies to me. It applies to you and me and every other true believer.

Three words: hermeneutics, doctrine, and theology

These three words, *hermeneutics*, *doctrine*, and *theology*, are obviously not dirty words. They are nothing any reasonable person should fear or run away from. When most of us hear the words, especially for the first time, we may get mental images of monks and seminary professors, eggheads of the highest order. But, let's first look at the definitions of the words and see if we can defang them somehow. *Hermeneutics* is the science of interpretation. *Doctrine* merely means teaching, and *theology* is the study of God. They seem pretty relevant for every normal believer as she or he studies, matures, and grows. We all need to interpret scriptures and understand the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and all the others. And, the Bible itself is the one and only textbook for any authentic study of God.

As technical terms, however, they can be intimidating. To some, the title "Professor of Hermeneutics" carries with it a certain kind of weight, prestige, and authority. Unfortunately, titles don't impress me a whole lot. And, I'd have to say, I still feel obligated to think about what any person has to say to me and compare it with what I do accept as truth—the Bible, for example. As a linguist and specialist in my own very small corner of academics, I know that *formal terms* such as these can be used in one way or another by specialists. In linguistics, one of the worst insults is to have your work called "sloppy linguistics." Unless I live on a different planet in a separate reality from religious experts, I imagine that some theologians call others sloppy, as well. There must be sloppy hermeneutics and sloppy doctrines, too.

In my experience, there are two kinds of experts, those who have either (a) earned the title, even by those who disagree, or (b) those who proclaim themselves to be experts. Self-proclaimed experts often perceive themselves to have expert abilities because of their egos (they think they're special or superior), their psychological profiles (perhaps mental conditions that are otherwise harmless), the adulation of their fans, or maybe because they've persuaded others to accept their assertions as truth or fact. Our own persuasive abilities can create a kind of a trap: if I can talk you into agreeing with me, then, aha! I must be right. This is one reason why I insist you read the scriptures and test what I've written *because I could be wrong*. I'm not an expert in Biblical exegesis.

So, the rather obvious conclusion is that hermeneutics is really for all of us. Lesson 1, therefore, in "hermeneutics for dummies" is *read the whole Bible*. You can't possibly understand a book you haven't even read. If you look for just a few minutes at a reference Bible (one that shows how one Biblical author refers to another, or how topics and terms are linked from one book to another), you can see that such writers as Paul constantly referred back to the Law and the

Prophets. Jesus was a master at this, which is one of the reasons why He stood out among His contemporaries. People marveled at how Jesus taught with "authority," not as the other rabbis of the time. His professional, rabbinically trained contemporaries typically cited each other, which is very common in any denomination, in academia, seminaries, anywhere people are trying to set themselves up as authorities, to inject a degree of credibility into what they say or write. If I declare that my teachings are accepted by a lot of important people, then you are obligated to be impressed! I also flash my knowledge by citing all the other experts, especially those who agree with me. It's like a group of people who arrive at some sort of consensus and say, "We believe this and that." This applies to everyone from bird watchers to theologians. If enough respected people (e.g., experts, community leaders, etc.) agree with me (or I with them), then what I say will appear to be valid. In Philosophy 101, this is known as the logical fallacy called the *Appeal to Authority*. In other words, you have to disregard my statements automatically. Logically speaking, it makes no difference who believes me or how many; we could all be wrong. Can 50 million Germans be wrong? Yes.

There are both *quantitative* (how much) and *qualitative* (what kind) dimensions to the interpretation of scriptures, and they obviously interact. Quantitatively, the more that I know, the more connections I can make. When I increase the number of connections I can make about people, places, and events, the causes and effects of those events, and God's reaction to them, I increase my understanding and my ability to tell accurately whether or not what someone says or writes is consistent with scriptures. Qualitatively, I know that the Bible is *more than a collection of information, facts, and figures*. Reflecting on the intent of the message, asking God to reveal to me what He means by a particular passage, is much deeper than just being able to connect the dots and recite chapters and verses. I allow God to show me when my own thinking is contrary to the Bible's overall content and intent. Following the example of the Psalmist, who meditated on God's Word, I learn to hear that single, consistently loving voice. His mercy endures forever.

To illustrate how these dimensions interact, understanding who King David was is key to understanding why Jesus was called the "Son of David." David's personal character is very important, as well, in order to understand why he has been called "a man after God's own heart" (see Acts 13:22). Most importantly, despite David's impressive credentials as warrior, prophet, poet, musician, and statesman, we are constantly reminded of his humanity: He was also an adulterer and murderer—in other words, far from perfect. There is no resemblance at all between the real-life figures written about in the Bible and the portraits and frescoes on display in cathedrals and religious galleries. Biblical descriptions give candid pictures of real people, warts and all. Even for "religious" people, some of the characters in scripture are rugged and all too human. The Bible plainly teaches about human nature: "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). Also, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings" (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

Both Jesus and Paul knew what the Scriptures taught from beginning to end. That is one reason why, when we read their words, we can have complete confidence. The *doctrines* of Jesus and of Paul are transparent (clear) and trustworthy. It should go without saying how critical it is for all true believers to know what those teachings are. Jesus had no agenda of personal power or wealth. Neither did Paul. Jesus' goal was *not* to own a mansion in South Florida or one along the coast of the Mediterranean somewhere. His mission was to demonstrate the character of His Father, and in utter obedience, to offer Himself as the Lamb of God.

Over and over, He told us that His kingdom was not of this world, and by implication, *I am instinctively suspicious of anyone who tries to construct a kingdom of this world by developing a following or cult of personality*. This suspicion also includes those who try to defend the institutions of men, for example, the traditional denominational structures that come and go, and claim authority over their converts or *over all of mankind*. To me, that is simply incredible. Tradition (as in the *Fiddler of the Roof*) has its charm, and many denominations have their bells and smells, but defending anything like the Roman Catholic Church to me evaporates to plain ignorance. Anyone who believes that that particular institution is run by God and is, therefore, beyond criticism has never read its history. Understanding the origins of groups or movements can be very instructive, especially when it's easy to see that most start out with the noblest of intentions and then drift into institutions run by men and/or women.

Correct doctrine is defined by the things Jesus spoke. Take the Sermon on the Mount, for instance. Jesus clearly taught us how we should live our lives and what our priorities and values should be as human beings, as His disciples (those who follow after Him) and students. For this reason, I am also suspicious whenever a self-proclaimed expert presents an argument to me *as if* he or she assumes correctness and some kind of authority based on a set of abstract principles of interpretation. When that person tells me that I must interpret a passage of scripture in a particular way to get its "real meaning" (especially if I have to ignore the literal, plain-English reading), I am immediately skeptical. Anytime someone assumes that I'm ignorant or that I've gone astray somehow, I think I bristle up-a very human reaction. Of course, this is in the context that I know that I'm prone to error and fallible at best. But so is everyone else.

Reading through the Bible

Let's take a brief look at the books of the Bible. The historical works are just that: they record the history of Israel. Obviously, the more you know about the participants and the events, the more information you'll be able to connect together. You will learn the patterns of behavior and God's responses to those patterns. While particular aspects of the history are meant to instruct (by example), and analogy seems to apply, other symbols are much deeper and rooted in the literature itself. The Prophets, for instance, deal with symbolism, and I'm convinced that there are principles for us to interpret them by (e.g., "first mention", when a symbolic expression like "shepherd" is first used, that's what it will mean throughout the Bible). Still, when prophecies were given, the

words always had literal meanings. Otherwise, it's hocus-pocus. They used "real" words with real referents.

One Jewish-believer friend e-mailed me once that prophets like Jeremiah didn't have a group of theologians walking after him interpreting what he meant to his audiences. The people he spoke to understood what he said without the help of an "official" interpretation. A case in point is identifying the Messiah. Many were looking for Jesus when He came (for example, Simeon, the old man who saw Jesus as a baby when He was being dedicated at the temple), but others missed it because they did not understand what the Scriptures said (see Matthew 22:29).

The other written works (literature), Psalms and Proverbs, for example, contain practical wisdom, models for prayer, a good deal of symbolism, and so on. But, where symbolism is involved, it is not cloaked in mystery-to the believer. When responding to His disciples why He spoke in parables, Jesus answered:

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. (Matthew 13:1316)

As Jesus said, there are those who think that they see, but are nonetheless blind, blind to the kind of language He chose to use. His disciples, however, were not among them. Why? They clearly understood the truth of scriptures and had Jesus for their Teacher. His followers would eventually understand the nature of His speech. Peter knew the Messiah, but it would still take the Holy Spirit to reveal the hidden meanings woven into His parables. To those who follow Jesus, the mysteries are revealed. Knowledge comes first, then wisdom. My expectations are to know the Truth, and then the Truth will set me free. Nowhere am I taught that I will know all things. I'm still a human being, and my knowledge will be limited in size and kind.

Presuppositions as guides to interpreting anything

Some people within the "church" appear to be somewhat leery of academic people, in general, but especially those who are involved in education (e.g., professors), the media, or other popular figures who take part in shaping culture. It doesn't make much sense to me to suspect someone just because they think. There is nothing to fear in dialogue, as long as we know what we're talking about (having a base in true knowledge from God's perspective). If we wish to communicate, we also need to know *how our words are understood*. As Simon Peter wrote (1 Peter 3:15), "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear." And, this obviously includes knowing the impact of the words we use. We also need to know a little bit about those with whom we speak, what apparently

well-educated individuals are saying, and *how* and *why* they say it. From my own academic background, the real problem boils down to something called presuppositions-the things we assume to be true before we even begin the discussion.

To those unfamiliar with the term, *presupposition* means: facts or principles that we assume to be true, that help us organize our knowledge and understanding of the universe. It is a very deep and fundamental issue whenever we discuss anything with anybody. For example, it is at the very foundation of debates involving Creationism and Evolutionism. On the one hand, sincere evolutionists generally *presume* either the atheistic position, that no God exists (or that God does not exist), or the agnostic position, that nothing can be known about any God based on rational evidence found in the universe. So, when the Bible believer refers to the Genesis account of Creation, it sounds simplistic, childish, and patently absurd to the evolutionist, like a bad Sunday-school story. Even if the creationist has earned a PhD and studied scientific evidence and various philosophies for a lifetime, the evolutionist has a difficult time taking his/her conclusions seriously. Life boils down to a long, tedious morality play, and almost everybody goes to Hell.

On the other hand, the Biblical worldview *presumes* that God, the Supreme Being, created the heavens and earth, just as it says in Genesis. It follows that God created a systematic universe, and the order that we see is there by design. Because God is rational, His universe is rational. He is Creator, Designer, Architect, and Builder, and He set principles and laws in motion for the operation of His created universe. Because He created all facts, He knows all facts. To the creationist, the evolution of humanity from inert matter (the primordial ooze) by sheer accident or pure chance (which is merely the concept of mathematical probabilities and not a being or force that can *cause* anything to happen) sounds like bad science fiction. It sounds more like the wishful thinking of a person who completely refuses to be responsible for his/her deeds and thoughts to any kind of "Higher Power." There is also the rather irrational idea that *humankind* is the higher power, making all moral decisions for ourselves (with very limited knowledge of the universe and the consequences of our actions, e.g., psychological impact of sexual behaviors, abortion, murder, lying, and so on). There are occasional trips to the stars, to be sure, with speculation about aliens, or vague concepts of spirits. But, none of those beliefs are based on any kind of scientific data or facts. The conclusion that "everything is everything" simply means that out of nothing we came, and into nothing we go. Our lives have absolutely no intrinsic meaning other than to live and let live, a very dark picture.

Obviously, the consequences of two people debating from two mutually-exclusive viewpoints is that they have no hope whatsoever of agreement. They will talk for hours, days, maybe years, and agree to disagree, that is, if they were friends in the first place. Unfortunately, the end is more likely to be name calling, with both sides standing firmly with their fingers in their ears (like the monkey that hears no evil).

Presuppositions and theologies

In exactly the same way, when the term *theology* is used in more formal contexts, it typically refers to *an organized system of belief* (guided by presuppositions), one that is thought to be drawn from or *inferred* from scripture. As a belief system, it is used to interpret all facts, and all other scripture. One such theology is called Arminianism (named after Jakobus Arminius, a contemporary of Jean Calvin). It assumes beforehand certain attributes of God that are held up to our ability to reason logically. And, that's where the problem lies, in our ability to accurately think through all facets of God's personality.

The belief in our logical powers, called *rationalism*, is very common in Western Culture. It says that humankind can, by virtue of its mental capacity (originally assumed to be a gift from God), figure out the nature of facts merely by observation (the way Newton observed the Law of Gravitation), and then assemble those individual facts into an objective system of truth. (Read David Hume's *Critique of Pure Reason* to understand how that kind of philosophical approach was "defeated" by later generations of philosophers). Nevertheless, any appeal to a rational argument may lead to yet another logical fallacy, the *Appeal to Reason*. I may think that something is true because it *appears* logical. Another warning I give my students is this: Just because you understand something doesn't mean it's true.

Theologians, most likely influenced a great deal by rationalism, often assume the same kind of thing. If I can construct an argument that appears logical, it must be true. The key point is that particular characteristics of God can be assumed beforehand that will ultimately influence how I interpret scripture. When I read the scriptures, I try to fit bits of information into my overall knowledge of the Bible. But, if I accept Arminianism, I look through the lens of a system and try to reconcile all scriptures and facts with that system. For example, according to Arminianism, God exists along the same time line as me, His creation. We are both subject to Time. I can't see the future, and neither can God. Not only that, He is very, very old. Even though He knows all facts, He's limited regarding the future. Therefore, *prophecy* isn't based on God's knowing the future, His *foreknowledge*, but on probabilities (He knows all probabilities). Like an infinitely large calculator, He can predict events in the future, but, He still can't *know* if they will happen. As the thinking goes, if God knows the future, the future can't be different. So, if my decision to follow Jesus is already known, it is predetermined; I can't say, "No." Consequently, by denying God's foreknowledge, Arminians point to choice and freewill, lessening the impact of grace. Taken to its extreme, it is a hotly contested position.

Contradictory evidence to any kind of underlying and presupposed system can become a problem. I must "reason away" all disturbing facts, just as the evolutionist does when presented with counter evidence of the supposed "missing links" of evolution and the utter impossibility of testing his/her hypothesis. Or, the facts must be reinterpreted according to the accepted presuppositions. For the Arminian, this means reinterpreting some scriptures. To illustrate, more than once, the Bible refers to "In the beginning," and every time, it mentions the existence of God at that first point in time. Unless He sprang into existence Himself right as time began, and His beginning *is* The

Beginning, or He must have been there *before* the point that time began, and the beginning wasn't really *the* beginning after all.

The main opposing view is that God exists entirely separate from and outside of Time, from the vanishing point in the past and to the vanishing point in the future, in all directions. He is not on a timeline, getting older (and decaying) by the minute. He *sees* all events in our past, present, and future as *occurring*, as acts/events in progress. His supposed foreknowledge is simply His knowledge, and knowledge does not cause or predetermine anything any more than probabilities *cause* random events. Knowing that something will happen cannot cause it to happen. The Arminian view must interpret for me what "In the beginning" means, according to presupposed attributes of God.

While I really can't say Arminianism is false doctrine, or its adherents are heretics or anything of the sort, I still can maintain that an objective and impartial reading of the plain language of the Bible suggests that God was already in existence when Time began. As part of making the heavens and the firmament, which included God's speaking the materials of creation (matter) into existence, He created both Space and Time, and not just one or the other.

The Scriptures teach me that salvation is by grace, God's unmerited favor, not by works or an accumulation of good deeds that might outweigh all the bad things I've done. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that a particular brand of theology, other than the belief in Jesus and His Word, is a condition for salvation. Believing is a behavior, just like trusting. When we *do* what Jesus *told us*, we believe. The bad news is, of course, that so much can be added to the simple, straightforward Bible message that the truth is completely obscured and no longer visible. Or, so much is taken away and interpreted as legend or myth that the Bible looks ridiculous and far from absolute. Beliefs can become so vague and abstract that they are nothing but fuzzy blurs.

Systems breed controversies - the seminary

A controversy typically involves a difference of opinion or worldview in which the participants are firmly entrenched in their positions. Each side of a debate will be convinced of its correctness, and equally convinced that its opponents are categorically *wrong*. If you choose to debate a person convinced of a systematic, over-arching view of God, then you'd better be prepared to argue for a long time and *lose* the debate. Granted, in making the following statements about theologies and the kinds of controversies they breed, I am very likely guilty of overgeneralization. But, based on my personal knowledge of seminary methods and materials, I believe there's some truth in them.

In my opinion, any systematic theology can be an *abstraction* (pulling away from) what the Bible plainly teaches. They can be systems of thought *about* the Bible and not necessarily a system built directly *on* the Bible. The "theologian" can take a significant step away from merely interpreting scripture by scripture. Systems of thought are especially important whenever we think of the special training that professional religious people go through. For example, seminaries typically belong to specific denominations or institutions of some kind, and

students are trained according to the prevailing theology. Of course, there may not be many alternatives for the aspiring church leader. If you want to be the pastor of a Baptist church, you go to a Baptist seminary. Being an independent in this regard may be difficult, particularly when financial support becomes an issue, and it will.

My personal experience is that I'll never know *everything* that my professors know, and that a student seldom goes beyond his/her teacher. A professor's knowledge of a specific area can be impressive, and the temptation is to accept what she or he says on authority. We also have to consider that the primary focus of seminary training is not usually what the Bible objectively states. Knowledge of the Bible might be assumed, but the purpose of a seminary is to train along specific lines, not to provide the general kind of knowledge that the normal person can gain by reading the Book itself. Because the topics are systematic theologies and opinions of professors (and the books they've written), discussions have very special characteristics. Instead of disagreements of what one individual scripture may mean in the context of Scripture, belief system smacks against belief system. I include in the "controversy" category teachings of the end times, the Second Coming, the Great Tribulation and its companion, the Millennium. Like most people, I have my opinions and convictions, right or wrong. Despite what I think, there are people who are very passionate with their viewpoints, who seem to think that there is only one correct view, and it's theirs! All other viewpoints are wrong, and, the implication is, the poor people who accept wrong beliefs are doomed to eternal error or worse.

In this respect, I often think about the people in Hebrews 11, in the "Hall of Faith." I wonder what they *knew* about the end of the world. They are mentioned by name and held up as examples of people whose lives impressed God. They were a ragtag bunch of wanderers, mostly, just like you and me, but they had vibrant, living relationships with the Living God. I'm sure they had their theologies and accepted beliefs, but that isn't what distinguished them. It would be absurd to think that they would agree with me on everything or that I would even agree with them! The point is simply that any recently contrived approach or end times scenario doesn't seem to be necessary for a life of faith, nor is it something integral to pleasing God. It isn't the greatest gift or highest priority.

I doubt we'll be judged (a final exam?) according to our various levels of knowledge or on the basis of beliefs on topics that are clearly peripheral to issues of salvation. When Jesus explained that He would separate the sheep from the goats, He didn't mention theological questions (Matthew 25:31-46). Our intellects vary and our ability to interpret scriptures according to God's perspective will be relative. Some study more than others because circumstances vary. No matter what kind of qualifications I might have, I know that I can memorize the entire Bible, and still be prone to error in interpretation, irrespective of how much I read, pray, or anything else. We are all sinners, affected by the Fall of Adam, and our minds are always affected by other people (our "heroes"), our cultures, our capacities—a multitude of factors. The best we can do is study diligently, and walk humbly with our God.

One presupposition: scripture interprets scripture

The one basic presupposition involved with interpreting scripture by scripture is that the Bible is God's revelation of Himself. In other words, because God is good (He is love), He is not hiding from us. He actually wants us to know all about Him. Therefore, God has entered our history and revealed Himself progressively through His people, Israel, the rightful seed of Abraham, which has been recorded in the historical portions of the Scriptures (first the Tanach, and then the writings of the so-called New Testament). As Western philosophy has gleefully pointed out, we cannot know anything about the *character* of God based on what we see in the universe. We see both good and evil at every turn. We can speculate, but the god of this kind of speculation is often either some kind of romanticized Good (e.g., kind and all-loving) or Evil (angry, capricious, and vengeful), just like the gods of the Romans and Greeks. Consequently, if we presuppose God's revelation of Himself based on the fact that it is (a) *necessary*, then it follows that it is (b) *authoritative* (the scripture is Truth from the Creator's perspective and all arguments end in scripture), (c) *sufficient* (He has given us enough information to *explain* comprehensively His design and purpose for creation), and (d) *clear* (that the overall message can be clearly understood by *all* humans-the objects of God's great love).

I can, therefore, assume that the language that God has chosen is composed of words that I can understand. In order to know Him, I need to read His words and trust that He's explained all the important matters. Why would He leave me in the dark about anything that could affect my life or well-being? The God that is depicted in the Bible does not dangle little flashes of insights and truth that only "special" people can see. I am a child, and Jesus encouraged little children like me to come to Him, "for such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:14). If I can't accept these four things, the necessity, authority, sufficiency, and clarity of the Bible, then everything I read in it is on a par with every other book ever written. It is either THE truth, only one system of truth in competition with a bunch of others (true only for me and not necessarily for anyone else), or it is not true at all.

My own view as a linguist of language, translations, and so on may be relevant. Only the Creator, whose characteristics are defined by His own Self-revelation, knows all facts and how every fact relates to every other fact. He is omniscient, and consequently, His knowledge is exhaustive. *His language*-the way Yahweh communicates His thoughts-is absolutely infinite. Every human language is, in principle infinite (as most introductions to linguistics instruct). We are capable of speaking infinitely long sentences (just add "and"), understanding sentences we've never heard before, and uttering sentences we've neither heard nor spoken before-the possibilities are endless. But, our limited knowledge of the Universe and God will always affect our ability to express or interpret anything. This applies to science, philosophy, linguistics, the Bible, and so on. As the origin of all communication (He created our language faculty and included language in our mental repertoire), God can communicate. It would be absurd to think otherwise. It's simple, easy, and automatic for Him to encode His thoughts into any human language. He knows the right words-I hope you get the picture.

So, rather than trust my own pathetic, human resources, limited by definition, I trust God's ability to communicate with me. This is why it is always a good idea to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to instruct us as we read God's Word. We can assume, however, that the totality of meaning, that is, knowing how every fact relates absolutely to every other fact, will escape us, but not God. That is why I can state with certainty that no man or woman has it all, no one understands it exhaustively, except Jesus Himself. So, every human inference may be subject to debate. God won't say one thing to one person and something entirely different to another. He has integrity: all of His personal characteristics are consistent, and He does what He says. It is our lack of perspective, specifically lack of His perspective, that leads us into differences of opinion. Where the text of the Bible is clear, we can be clear. Where the Bible may be less than clear (and open to interpretation), we are less than clear. As a consequence, I can tell you that I have reasoned this and that on a number of non-essentials, and happily say that I could very well be wrong. I am, nonetheless, convinced of certain things. God gave me an intellect, the ability to read, think, and so on.

Taking the Bible literally

I think some people are embarrassed by the literalness required to accept *all* the stories of the Bible as actual historical accounts. The world has great contempt for all who hold the Bible as literal truth. It hates us and persecutes us, just like it did our beloved Savior. Modern intellectuals (those with non-Biblical worldviews) put pressure on anyone who takes them seriously. They may put the Bible in the realm of mythology with moral implications (how to be nice), or presume that it is only one version of truth. They may even say it's harmful, particularly in the hands of zealots. Based on the unbeliever's view of the world and life, it's hard to accept Noah's ark, Jonah and the fish, Ezekiel's four wheels (flying saucers from outer space, proof to alien watchers that the origin of humankind is out there, not down here?), and especially the Life, Death, and Resurrection from the dead of the Messiah, Jesus. From the Biblical worldview, the images of Ezekiel, Daniel, and the Psalms may escape me for the moment, but reasonable understanding is not beyond my grasp. Jesus told us of the *cross*: we are to pick up our crosses and follow Him. That is a symbol hard to miss.

Nevertheless, *one step away from literal interpretation leads to a path that has no end*, the famed slippery slope into disbelief. Anytime we embark on a non-literal path, we have to turn to a guide other than the Holy Spirit, Jesus, the scriptures, and the clearly stated view that we are a priesthood of believers. Yes, we can disagree on the interpretation of various individual verses, but we can't agree if one thinks that the scripture is literal truth and the other that it can only be interpreted figuratively, that the "stories" are mere allegories we are to learn from, or that its inherent symbolism makes it unknowable. Jesus took the scriptures as literal truth, so do I, but not because I haven't thought it through. My faith in scripture is grounded in its historical accuracy, in its sound wisdom, and in its ability to transform my life. I can't view God's revelation of Himself as being part myth, part fact, part symbolism, part literal truth. If it is not literal truth, then there is no reliable history of Israel and the Jewish people. Roman Catholics and other orthodox-style denominations have great difficulty

with these things. If they say that the scriptures are to be taken literally as Truth *above* doctrines of men and human opinion, then they open a can (Diet?) of worms that would lead to their own discredit and end.

The book of Revelation seems to present special challenges. The things that John saw and recorded in Revelation were obviously symbolic, and his words reflected that. But, most of the symbols appear earlier in the writings of the Prophets. This book alludes to the so-called Old Testament (Tanach) writings more than any other book in the New Testament in my opinion. So, rather than leap into abstract systems of thought based on what has been inferred by one man or group of people, the place to go for interpretation is (yes, you guessed it) the Bible itself, into the Old Testament. The consequences are that we must *believe* (in the John 3:16 sense), *trust* (as Jesus did), and *obey*-the crucifixion was the objective lesson that Jesus taught, the most important one we could ever learn: Not my will, but thine be done.

If you have an intimate relationship with the God of the Bible, ask Him how He wants you to interpret His Word. Read the words that are there, and let the divine Teacher instruct you. You do not have to understand everything in the Word or be correct on every single teaching in order to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and mind.

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