



Read Well: Hear God In Scripture

Nathan Guy, editor



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## **Main Sources & Conversation Partners**

### **Twelve Helpful Books For A General Overview of Reading Well:**

Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Reading the Good Book Well: A Guide to Biblical Interpretation* (Abingdon Press, 2007).

Kenneth L. Cukrowski, Mark W. Hamilton, & James W. Thompson, *God's Holy Fire: The Nature and Function of Scripture* (ACU Press, 2002).

Brad East, *The Doctrine of Scripture* (Cascade, 2021).

Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed (Zondervan, 2014).

JL Gerhardt, *Look to Love: A Better Way to Read the Bible* (Independent, 2021).

John Mark Hicks, *Searching for the Pattern: My Journey in Interpreting the Bible* (Independent, 2019)

Dan Kimball, *How (Not) to Read the Bible* (Zondervan, 2020).

John W. Kleinig, *God's Word: A Guide to Holy Scripture* (Lexham Press, 2022).

Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read The Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Zondervan, 2018).

Matthew Mullins, *Enjoying the Bible: Literary Approaches to Loving the Scripture* (Baker Academic, 2021).

E. Randolph Richards & Brandon O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture Through Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (IVP, 2012).

N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

## **Background Helps for Reading/Interpreting the Bible Well:**

Read: Nathan Guy, “What Is Healthy Theology?,” blogpost series on healthytheology.com:

<https://healthytheology.com/healthy-theology-10-part-snapshot/>

Watch: Bible Project “How To Read The Bible”

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/how-to-read-the-bible/>



## Class Outline & Reading Options

Week 1: Read Reverently: The Bible As The Church's Book (February 4)

East, Chap 1	Kleinig, Chap 2	Cukrowski, Chap 1-2
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Week 2: Read Confidently: A Bible You Can Trust (February 11)

Keller, Chap 7	Boa & Moody, Chap 6	Jones (pamphlet)
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Week 3: Read Wondrously: Learning To Love The Bible (February 18)

Gerhardt, Part I	Mullins, Intro & Chap 7	Kleinig, Chap 1
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Week 4: Read Humbly: Ancient Contexts, Foreign Cultures (February 25)

Fee, Chap 1	Kimball, Prelude	McKnight, Part I
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Week 5: Read Discerningly: Genre Matters (March 3)

East, Chap 6	Fee (whole book)	
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Week 6: Read Normally: Usual Elements In Real Conversation (March 10)

East, Chap 6	Hadwin (whole book)	
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Week 7: Read Communally: The Value of Tradition (March 10)

East, Chap 3		
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Week 8: Read Theologically: God & Gospel At The Center (March 24)

East, Chap 2		
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Week 9: Read Devotionally: Participating in God's Life (March 31)

East, Chap 5		
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Week 10: Read Responsively: Transforming Encounters (April 7)

East, Chap 5		
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## **Week 1: Read Reverently The Bible as the Church's Book**

**Object of the Class:** To fall on our face with awe as we consider that God wishes to communicate with us, that God speaks in and through Scripture, and that the church considers Scripture as our first and primary authority.

Suggested Outline for Class:

### **1) Opening Questions (5 minutes)**

What is “the Bible?” How would you explain what it is to someone with no Christian background?

Share some of “your story with the Bible.” How has it played a role in your life?

What are some key words that come to mind when you speak of/describe the Bible?

### **2) Why Did God Write A Book? (10 minutes)**

Why did God write a book? Think of all the ways a book is helpful, but also all the ways it is unhelpful when you have questions.

Scripture speaks of God relating to the world (you and me) by His “word.” Thus God’s word is eternal (Psalm 119:89-90), “living and active” (Heb 4:12), and it “stands forever” (1 Pet 1:24-25). It will never pass away (Luke 21:33). We see God speaking creation into existence (Genesis 1:3; Heb 1:3), and by his word sustaining that world (Ps 33:8-9). We hear of God’s wisdom calling forth (expressed through words) in Proverbs 8-9. In the Old Testament, a prophet would often receive or speak a “word” from the Lord; this “word” is revealing and is a guide—“a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path” (Ps 119:105).

It is interesting that the Father speaks (Heb 1:5-13), the Son speaks (Heb 2:12-13), and the Holy Spirit speaks (Heb 3:7-11); they in all of this it is the one and same

God who speaks (Heb 1:1-4), and He speaks one unified message, or “word.” In the book of Acts, the central message and teaching of the apostles and prophets is called “the word,” “God’s word,” or “the word of the Lord.” The message of God, through his people, is one word: the word of the gospel (Acts 8:25; 15:7).

But the gospel is the story of Jesus Christ. All of Scripture bears witness to Christ. The whole story is really the story of Christ. That is why we read of Jesus as the “Word” that existed in the beginning and made the world (John 1:1-14). All of this helps us see that the “word of God” is something long before we had Bibles. The “word of God” is one creating, revealing, communicating message seen in God’s acts and his person.

- We learn about God through nature. How has God “written his word” in nature?
- We learn about God through reason and reflection. How has God “written his word” in our hearts?
- We learn about God in Jesus. How is Jesus the ultimate “communication” of God to humanity?
- We learn about God by reading Scripture. How can Scripture—written texts telling the story of God at work among his people—reveal the “Word of God” to us? By recording how God spoke to our ancestors, how they struggled with faith, how God was faithful in spite of their mistakes, and how God made and fulfilled promises to and through his people, Scripture makes communication from God to us (“Word of God”) something we can equally share, learn from, reflect on, and refer to.

Reflect on these questions. Does this enhance/help your view of a written book that we declare to be “the word of God written”?

- The Bible is “word of God” because it is the record of God’s words (and dealings) involving his self-revelation. The word of God written records the words of God in history (Num 12:5; Jer 1:9; 1 Thess 2:13).
- The Bible is “word of God” because it speaks of Christ (even before he came to earth). The word of God written points to the Word of God incarnate.



- The Bible is “word of God” because it is the primary way we access the revealing of God to humanity. The word of God written summons us to respond to God in prayer and obedience.

In short, in Scripture God speaks. God gives us His word (John 17:20), and we are then called to abide within it (John 8:31-32).

### **3) A Word That Acts (5 minutes)**

Words not only describe things; they can also “do” things. For example, when the officiant at a wedding says, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” those words spoken into the air cause something to happen. Before those words, they were not married; after those words, they are married.

God’s Word is “living and active” in part because God is living and active and when he speaks, something happens. Just think of creation. “He spoke,” says the Psalm, “and it was done” (Psalm 33:9). It is “powerful and performative,” says John Kleinig, “effective and productive.”

Consider Isaiah 55:10-11:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven  
And do not return there but water the earth,  
Making it bring forth and sprout,  
Giving seed to the sower and bread for the eater,  
So shall my word be that goes out of my mouth;  
It shall not return to me empty,  
But shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
And shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Unlike our speech, God’s word only does good and always leads to what God wants. It gives life, energizes us, cuts us deep to the heart, and forces us to examine and re-examine ourselves and the world.

The word of God saves (Acts 13:26), gives life (John 6:68), nourishes (Jer 15:16), heals (Ps 107:20), energizes (Heb 4:12),

The Bible, then, is God’s living and active speech in written form, pointing to Jesus Christ and calling us, by the Spirit, to be reborn to new life, energized by the Spirit, and changed forever.

#### **4) How The Church Reveres the Bible (5 minutes)**

It is remarkable that a single page of Scripture has survived. Even more remarkable is the story of how the Bible was preserved, translated, and disseminated. Reflect on God's providential care in giving us Scripture.

Scripture is true and trustworthy. "How" is something for another day. Be careful to allow yourself to be open to learning how. We will learn later that Scripture is true in what it claims to teach; this is different than assuming every person's interpretation is true. It is trustworthy in that it will lead us out of sin and into salvation; this is different than treating it like a magic book intended to give hidden clues. We should appreciate the Bible's "normal" literature styles (which can include metaphors, stories not meant to be read literally, etc). But the church throughout history has claimed that Scripture (both Old and New Testaments) serves as the primary vehicle for learning who God is and what He wants to tell his people about Himself. We can trust that witness.

#### **5) Reasons the Church holds Scripture as the primary witness (15 minutes)**

*Scripture's claims:* The Bible actually says very little about itself. The Bible is a library of books by different authors with various styles. Authors were sometimes passive (receiving messages), sometimes active (worked or collaborated in receiving messages or sharing insights), and sometimes wrote based on eye-witness testimony. Some authors even consulted sources before writing (which we don't have) (Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18; 1 Kings 15:31; 16:20; 2 Kings 10:34; 13:8; Ezra 7:1-26; Luke 1:1-4). But the church believes above and behind all of that is one author and one unified message. Scripture is concerned with what "Scripture" has to say (John 13:18; Rom. 1:17; 3:10; 4:9). God is the underwriter of Scripture, His Spirit sealing affirming and confirming it (Acts 1:16; Heb 3:7). The claims of Scripture are such that the church believes it is the word of God written.

##### Five Key passages

##### **A. 2 Timothy 3:14-17**

"Inspiration" (2 Tim 3:16) literally means "God-breathed." It reminds us of God breathing into Adam, and man became a living being (Gen 2:7). It reminds us of God life into the dry bones, renewing his people (Ezek 36-37).

"All" Scripture is God-breathed, including the Old Testament (2 Tim 3:15) and the New Testament (see 2 Peter 3:16).

Inspiration refers to the product more than the process. It means God is the ultimate author, involved in a unique and special way. It means God has given Scripture to the church as a reliable witness to accomplish his purposes and reveal the nature, heart, and will of the God who gave it.

### **B. 2 Peter 1:19-21**

Prophets were directed by the Spirit of God (1 Pet 1:10-12; 2 Pet 1:20-21); we are to pay attention to them until Jesus returns (2 Pet 1:19).

### **C. Luke 24:25-27, 44-49**

In the end of Luke's gospel, Jesus draws his disciples attention to "everything written about me" in all 3 parts of the Old Testament Scriptures—the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. We are also told that Jesus is in the business of "opening minds to understand the Scriptures," which involves seeing how the prophets wrote about Christ. This is why we ought "to believe all that the prophets have spoken" or "written."

### **D. 1 Thessalonians 2:13**

Paul cites his own words, the Old Testament, and the words of Jesus alongside one another as authoritative (1 Cor 15:51). He tells the Thessalonians that what he communicated to them was not "words of men" but "word of God" (1 Thess 2:13). And note that this refers not just to the message, but the words used to articulate that message.

### **E. Galatians 3:16**

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul makes an argument based on the tense of a single word (or, in English, a single letter) (Gal 2:16). Thus the words of Scripture have the seal of the Holy Spirit (verbal inspiration) and this extends to the whole Bible (plenary inspiration).

What, then, is Scripture? Here is a helpful (working) definition:

- God's approved message (1 Thess 2:13),
- the final authority for faith and life (Matt 5:17-19).
- It reveals a unified and trusted message from God (Ezek 3:27)
- through humans (1 Thess 2:13; Jer 36:1-2; Ezek 11:5; Micah 3:8),
- meant to be understood (Acts 8:30; James 1:21),
- and to transform us into Godly people (2 Tim 2-3),
- and to bring about a Godly world (Heb 4:12).

*Scripture's role as arbiter:* The church through the ages has proclaimed that people may have different views, philosophies, and theories; but it is the word of God written that settles our debates or determines how serious to treat our debates.

## **6) Standing Under Scripture (2 minutes)**

There are three options for how we treat/relate to Scripture:

Stand *over* Scripture. This is to make ourselves gods, our own cultural lenses the final arbiter, and our own internal desires the standard of truth. This is disastrous, and has been proven so throughout world history.

Stand *alongside* Scripture. This is to treat Scripture as important, but only one of many important factors, equal to our own reasoning, church tradition, or experience. While those play an important role in interpreting Scripture, we proclaim Scripture as standing above all others.

Stand *under* Scripture. This is the call of the biblical witness and the claim of the church throughout the ages. This doesn't mean to refuse to use our minds in reasoning and interpreting. It means that we revere Scripture and the truth of the biblical witness as the goal of our interpreting. "What he says we will do; where he sends, we will go."

## Questions For Class (Week 1)

1. What is your “story with the Bible”? How has it affected you or shaped you?
2. Consider the decline in biblical literacy. Why is this a problem? What happens when a person, a family, or a culture loses knowledge of the Bible?
3. How is the “word” of God something bigger and earlier than the Bible?
4. How is the Bible the “word of God”?
5. How is the word of God “living and active”?
6. Why does the Church revere the Bible?
7. What does Scripture say about itself?
8. What does it mean to stand “under” Scripture?
9. How can we grow/improve in reading Scripture “reverently”?

*Other Suggested Helps for Week 1 for Teachers or for your Class*

### Video

William Lane Craig, “Can We Trust The Bible Written 2000 Years Ago?”  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reYBCz\\_kf1c&ab\\_channel=100huntley](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reYBCz_kf1c&ab_channel=100huntley)

The Bible Project, “The Public Reading of Scripture”  
<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/public-reading-scripture/>

### Chapters/Articles For Further Insight To Accompany This Lesson

Kenneth L. Cukrowski, et. al., *God’s Holy Fire: The Nature and Function of Scripture* (ACU Press, 2002), Chapter 1: “Rediscovering the Word of God.”

Brad East, *The Doctrine of Scripture* (Cascade, 2021), Chapter 1: “Source.”

John W. Kleinig, *God’s Word: A Guide to Holy Scripture* (Lexham Press, 2022), Chapter 2: “The God Who Speaks.”



## Week 2: Read Confidently

**Object of the Class:** To know that our Bibles are trustworthy. God has preserved His message faithfully, He speaks truth in the content of Scripture, and what He centrally wishes for us to believe and know is not obscured by modern translations.

Suggested Outline for Class:

### 1) Opening Questions (5 minutes)

Why is “trust” so important? Consider what life would be like if we didn’t have a high level of trust in our courts, our government, our marriage, or our social relationships?

How is trust built and maintained? How is trust broken?

Do you trust the Bible? Why or why not?

### 2) Your Bible Is Trustworthy Because It Was Preserved Faithfully (10 minutes)

Picture a scribe, sitting in his monk’s habit, seated at a roughly hewn table, reading and writing by candlelight without the help of eyeglasses. Using “quill pens and ground charcoal mixed with gum and water,” this man begins “to scratch the sacred words of Scripture on rough papyrus” (Jones). This image was, by far, the norm for most of history when it comes to the transcribing of Scripture. When you think of it this way—copies by hand being made from copies made by hand—it can be jarring. I’ve played the game “telephone” before. How can we trust these writings? How do we know they were originally authentic? And how can we have any confidence that what we have *now* is what they wrote *then*?

A. *Eye-witness testimony.* The first thing to note that the Scripture claims to be based on eye-witness testimony (Luke 1:1-4; 2 Peter 1:16). First and second century

authors such as Papias (AD 60-130), Polycarp (AD 69-155), and Irenaeus (AD 130-?) confirm the ancient tradition that the gospels, for instance, accurately reflect eyewitness testimony.

*B. Preserving Ancient Traditions.* In 1 Corinthians 15:1-7, the Apostle Paul uses key words that suggest he is citing “oral tradition” – statements that were passed down or handed over word-for-word from an earlier source. In fact, he uses Aramaic terms (not just Greek terms) which implies he heard historical accounts of the life of Jesus from eyewitnesses (Gal 1:18). Some critics claim Christianity altered their earliest traditions over time. But this shows the heart of the story was learned and handed over from the earliest times.

*C. The use of literate scribes.* Luke was a physician (Col 4:14; Philemon 1:24; 2 Timothy 4:11), and writers were more than willing to use professional scribes (Rom 16:22; 1 Pet 5:12).

*D. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.* Before these scrolls were found, the earliest copies of the Old Testament dated to AD 900. But these scrolls were copies of the Old Testament dating to around the time of Jesus! When the scroll of Isaiah was compared—with nearly 1,000 between them—the scrolls “agreed word-for-word more than 95% of the time,” and no scroll differed in ways that altered central beliefs (Jones).

*E. The insignificance of the variants.* We have 6,000 ancient Greek manuscripts for the New Testament, not to mention other sources. When you count up all the variations (spelling differences, sentence structure, and word changes), there are around 300,000 differences! And yet...these are so slight and insignificant that “there is more than 99% agreement between all of the known manuscripts of the Bible” when you exclude the minor variations (Jones). The problem of NT studies is not having too little information, its having too much!

Video: Dan Wallace, “Can you trust the New Testament when the original manuscripts are different?”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NikVdhp0YFs&ab\\_channel=zondervan](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NikVdhp0YFs&ab_channel=zondervan)

Video: Pastor Nelson of Got Questions, “Has the Bible been corrupted, altered, edited, revised, or tampered with?”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksJ7wj6bAxY&ab\\_channel=GotQuestionsMinistries](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksJ7wj6bAxY&ab_channel=GotQuestionsMinistries)

### 3) Your Bible Is Trustworthy Because It's Content Is True (10 minutes)

A. *Historical veracity.* Not all of the Bible attempts to tell historical events (think of parables, for example). But when addressing history, the Bible has constantly shown itself to be historically reliable in ways unparalleled among ancient writers.

B. *Predictive prophecy.* The Bible provides detailed prophecies that came to fulfillment.

C. *Influential ethics.* Show me a society that has improved by denouncing the 10 commandments. Show me a better personal ethic than that provided by the Sermon on the Mount. Tell me some deeply-held view about human ethics, and it is likely I will show you a Judeo-Christian history behind it. Recently, the award-winning historian Tom Holland published *Dominion*—a telling of how the ethics of ancient Greece and Rome do not line up with the assumed ethics of the Western world. As it turns out, our intuition that life is important, people ought to be respected, and humans should be treated with equality, are deeply Christian views.

D. *Transformative message of salvation.* Many religions speak of man chasing after the gods. But the Bible tells the story of a God who comes chasing after humanity. Unlike the warring gods of the ancient world, the God of Scripture is unified in goodness, truth, and beauty, and offers a meaningful response to our existential crisis. We know there is something wrong with the world (the Bible calls it “sin”). We know that we need rescuing from our malaise (the Bible calls it “salvation”). We know that the standard of goodness, truth, and righteousness is higher than us. The Bible comes along and tells us that God takes it upon himself to provide salvation from sin, living by the standard of goodness, suffering the penalty of sin for the sake of justice, and frees us from the consequences of our wrong choices. The story is beautiful, it rings true, and it speaks to the deepest areas of human existence.

Video: Tim Keller, “Why is the Bible reliable?”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZAPFKXMy\\_Y&ab\\_channel=TheVeritasForum](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZAPFKXMy_Y&ab_channel=TheVeritasForum)

Audio: Tim Keller, “Literalism: Isn't the Bible historically unreliable and regressive?”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ03Qu0YL7g&ab\\_channel=GospelinLife](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ03Qu0YL7g&ab_channel=GospelinLife)



#### **4) Your Bible is Trustworthy Because Modern Versions Reflect the Central Truths of God’s Message (10 minutes)**

A. “Translation” is inevitable and was involved even in the original. Jesus spoke Aramaic, and the gospels record words of Jesus in Greek. The New Testament writers were (in large part) using and reading their Greek version of the Old Testament—which was originally written in Hebrew.

B. Pick the version you believe is the best (or is the only “right” one)—it is reliable and can also stand to be improved. Just as minor variations in the manuscripts do not change the plot, minor variations in versions do not change the central teachings of Christ. [If they do, or ever have, it is easy to correct them]. And even staple modern versions are in constant revision. For example, you may have heard that the King James Version came out in 1611. This is true, but virtually no one reads the 1611 version. There was a major revision in 1858, revising archaic language and making other revisions.

C. Translation is equally art and science—and the reasons for a translation may differ. Read the “preface” to your favorite translation; you will find an agenda at work. This is ok. We need accuracy—but what good is accuracy if it’s not readable? We need readability, but what good is it if its not accurate? What good is a readable and accurate translation that does not bring over the “dynamic equivalence” of what kind of response those words would bring about today compared to how they would have impacted readers in the original? Finally, language is constantly changing, providing a need for continued translation work.

D. But the church continues to profess that God speaks through his living and active Word; we can find that living and active word in the story of God among his people. This is found in any modern translation.

Video, The Bible Project, “Choosing A Bible Translation.”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmO0Fwa74QM&ab\\_channel=BibleProject](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmO0Fwa74QM&ab_channel=BibleProject)

Video, Bill Mounce, “Why are translations different, and can I trust them?”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFuCS4YAJ3g&ab\\_channel=BillMounce](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFuCS4YAJ3g&ab_channel=BillMounce)

Video: Mark Ward, “Three reasons you should trust modern evangelical Bible translations.”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTJ9FjxHNKk&ab\\_channel=MarkWard](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTJ9FjxHNKk&ab_channel=MarkWard)

### **Questions For Class (Week 2)**

1. Why is trust so important?
2. Do you trust the Bible? Why or why not?
3. The Bible is an ancient book. What are good reasons to believe the Bible has been preserved faithfully?
4. How is the Bible the best attested ancient book?
5. The Bible claims to be a unified message from God. What are good reasons to believe the Bible speaks/reveals truth?
6. On the one hand, why is it that many who doubt the Bible’s truthfulness are actually questioning the Bible’s role as authoritative?
7. On the other hand, why can debates about “inerrancy” & “infallibility” sometimes be unhelpful? What do Christians mean when they say the Bible is true?
8. If inspiration refers to the original autographs (which we don’t have), why should I trust my modern English translation? Why should I be open to other modern English translations beside my own?

*Other Suggested Helps for Week 2 for Teachers or for your Class*

**Videos**

William Lane Craig, “Can We Trust The Bible Written 2000 Years Ago?”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reYBCz\\_kf1c&ab\\_channel=100huntley](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reYBCz_kf1c&ab_channel=100huntley)

Dan Wallace, “Can you trust the New Testament when the original manuscripts are different?”

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksJ7wj6bAxY&ab\\_channel=GotQuestionsMinistries](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksJ7wj6bAxY&ab_channel=GotQuestionsMinistries)

Tim Keller, “Why is the Bible reliable?”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZAPFKXMy\\_Y&ab\\_channel=TheVeritasForum](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZAPFKXMy_Y&ab_channel=TheVeritasForum)

John N. Clayton, “The Bible’s Checkability.”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpnoHedrGMY&list=PLIajzsXrQd5syiti8lAb\\_rQt7v7mvjJVZR&index=13&ab\\_channel=Full4God](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpnoHedrGMY&list=PLIajzsXrQd5syiti8lAb_rQt7v7mvjJVZR&index=13&ab_channel=Full4God)

The Bible Project, “Choosing A Bible Translation.”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmO0Fwa74QM&ab\\_channel=BibleProject](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmO0Fwa74QM&ab_channel=BibleProject)

Bill Mounce, “Why are translations different, and can I trust them?”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFuCS4YAJ3g&ab\\_channel=BillMounce](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFuCS4YAJ3g&ab_channel=BillMounce)

Mark Ward, “Three reasons you should trust modern evangelical Bible translations.”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTJ9FjxHNKk&ab\\_channel=MarkWard](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTJ9FjxHNKk&ab_channel=MarkWard)

## Audio

William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith Defenders Podcast: The Doctrine of Scripture, Parts 8 & 9:

<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-4/doctrine-of-revelation/difficulties-with-biblical-inerrancy-part-8>

<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-4/doctrine-of-revelation/approach-to-biblical-difficulties-part-9>

Tim Keller, “Literalism: Isn’t the Bible historically unreliable and regressive?”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ03Qu0YL7g&ab\\_channel=GospelinLife](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ03Qu0YL7g&ab_channel=GospelinLife)

## Chapters/Articles For Further Insight To Accompany This Lesson

Kenny Barfield, *Why the Bible is Number One: The World’s Sacred Writings in the Light of Science* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997).

Ken Boa & Larry Moody, *I’m Glad You Asked: In-Depth Answers to Difficult Questions about Christianity* (Victor Books, 1994), Chapter 6: “How Accurate Is The Bible?”

William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith Defenders Podcast: The Doctrine of Scripture, Parts 8 & 9:

<https://www.reasonablefaith.org/podcasts/defenders-podcast-series-4/doctrine-of-revelation/difficulties-with-biblical-inerrancy-part-8>

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Timothy Paul Jones, *Why Trust the Bible? Answers to the New Critics* (Rose Publishing, 2007). Pamphlet.

Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), Chapter 7: “You can’t take the Bible Literally.”



### **Week 3: Read Wondrously**

**Object of the Class:** To recapture the art of wonder, finding joy, mystery, beauty, and ‘wow’ when encountering God and His voice in Scripture. This class seeks to re-define why we read the Bible in the first place: to enter a new world of love.

Suggested Outline for Class:

#### **1) Opening Questions (5 minutes)**

Tell the story of how you and your spouse fell in love. What was the moment? How did you know?

Did you write letters to each other? What were they like?

Now, tell the story of how 20 years of life together—with beautiful highs and terrible lows—have brought you closer together. What does it mean to say “he/she loves me” now, compared to that first moment?

#### **2) Bible Reading Is Like Falling In Love**

The thoughts in this section are inspired by JL Gerhardt’s *Look To Love: A Better Way To Read The Bible*.

Think about that first letter you received from your significant other the day after they said—for the first time—“I love you.” You read it. I know you read it! But why? What were you looking for? Why kind of questions were you asking yourself when you read it? I bet you weren’t asking these:

--How is any of this useful in my daily life?

--What are the main points so I can gather them together to figure out the main argument being presented?

--Why should I trust anything in this letter?

Do you know why? Because you loved them back. Because you don't read a love letter the same way you read a dictionary or a history book.

What if we began by seeing the Bible as a love letter from God? Of course it is more than that. *But it is no less than that.* Just read the Scriptures that emphasize love in getting to know the person and will of God.

Consider how much the Bible focuses on the heart of a person—where their love lies.

Now consider the greatest commandment: to love the Lord your God with all you have and all you are.

.....

Why do so many people not read the Bible? Why do so many who do read the Bible not enjoy reading the Bible? Why do daily Bible reading plans fail and fail miserably? The answer: We think we are doing homework. We don't think we are reading a love letter, sent from a foreign field, by our dearest love.

Ask new questions:

Where is God? What is he up to? What is he like? How do I love him more? How can I sense his relentless love in this story? In other words, ask the question you ask when you are seeking to fall in love.

Read Exodus 33:11 – God speaks to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.

### **3) Bible Reading As Entering New Worlds**

I love that many of our English Bibles use the term “wonder” for signs and miracles given by God (see Exodus 11:9-10). When God showed up with fire and awe, he showed “signs and wonders” among the people.

Wonder is a lovely word. It describes how children see the whole world—in an enchanted way. I once heard that a researcher walked into a kindergarten classroom and drew some squiggly lines on the board. “What do you see?,” he asked. The

answers were as wide and wonderous as would be given were they to describe what they saw in the clouds. But that same researcher went to a high school classroom, drew the same squiggly lines, and asked the same question. The only answers received were two: (1) “squiggly lines”, and (2) “nothing.”

Why do we lose our sense of wonder? It is not true that the Lord does “wonders among you” (Joshua 3:5)? Does he not do “wonder upon wonder” (Isaiah 29:14)? The house of the Lord was to be built according to specification, for sure; but it was also to be “great and wonderful” (2 Chron 2:9). Perhaps this is because those who attended the house of the Lord were to be reminded of all of God’s “wonderful deeds” (Psalm 9:1). Even the heavens are called upon to praise God’s “wonders” (Psalm 89:5). Just hear the sorrow in the words of the Psalmist who describes those who “forgot his works and the wonders that he had shown them” (Psalm 78:11).

Everything about creation brings wonder to mind. Even you and I are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). This is why we can and should proclaim “wonderful are your works” (Psalm 139:14).

And when we see God at work in our lives, should we not respond the same? Listen to this account of what transpired when people saw Jesus at work in their world: “the crowd wondered, when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled healthy, the lame walking, and the blind seeing. And they glorified the God of Israel” (Matt 15:31). Even in Acts, when people saw God at work through the Apostles, “they were filled with wonder and amazement” (Acts 3:10).

We should approach Scripture with the same sense of awe. “Your testimonies are wonderful” (Psalm 119:129). May we read the Bible with this prayer on our lips: “You are the God who works wonders” (Psalm 77:14), and you, O God, are our “Wonderful Counselor” (Isa 9:6).

Scripture calls us to awe and wonder as we search, seek, probe, and discover. Like the characters in *The Lion*, *The Witch*, and *the Wardrobe*, we enter into the story only to find ourselves in a brand new world. Without this sense of awe, we miss out on why we were invited in the first place.

#### **4) The Bible Is Meant To be Enjoyed**

The following is inspired by Matthew Mullins’ *Enjoying The Bible*.

Raise your hand if you have read poetry in the last year? According to a recent survey, only 6-7% of people say “yes.” Why do you think that is? The reason, it seems, is because we are trained to read for information, and poetry doesn’t seem to fall into that category.

I want to say three things about this. First, we need to recognize that much of the Bible is more like poetry than we care to admit (just notice how much of the Bible is “Psalms”). Second, poetry can and does offer information—just think of how love letters tell so much about the other person, ourselves, and our relationship.

But the third thing to mention is that much of our reading is intended to do more than impart information. *Scripture is meant to be enjoyed.*

Is that a hard sentence to get out of our mouths? Remember that Bible reading is a form of worship—and all forms of worship are intended to do more than impart information.

Why do we sing? If the only reason we sing to God is because we are commanded to sing, we are most to be pitied. “If anyone is merry, let him sing songs” writes James. Singing is instinctive; we sing because we have feelings bursting to get out! God delights in this. And we should delight in this as well. We are more than minds; we are more than brains. We are body, soul, and spirit. Singing often involves moving our hands, tapping our feet, dancing to music, lifting our heads, closing our eyes, etc. Singing brings all parts of us to bear on what we are doing. Do we enjoy it?

Why do we pray? Prayer is release—sharing our souls with the one we love. In the Bible, people lay down, kneel, stand, walk, and even sit when praying to God. People pray with hands held high, while weeping, and while singing with joy. Prayer is an all-of-me experience. Do we enjoy it?

Why do we take the supper of the Lord? We sit at the table and feast with Jesus as members in the Kingdom. We reflect on our relationship with God and we join in sharing the body and blood with other Christians all around us. The Supper involves taste, touch, sight, smell, togetherness, and personal reflection. Do we enjoy it?

And so it is with Bible reading. Whether public or private, alone or in a group, reading the Bible should be an enjoyable experience, in which all-of-me is brought to bear on a journey to know all-about-Him.



## 5) Invitation To A Banquet

The Bible should be “tasted.” Slowly. Enjoy every morsel. That imagery is not original with me—it is given to us by the Bible itself. Just read the following passages: Psalm 34:8; Proverbs 9:5-6; Isaiah 25:6-9; 55:1-3; Hebrews 6:4-5. Instead of trying to “prove” the Bible or “argue” about the Bible, what if you tried *relishing* the Bible? Taste and see that God is good to the very last drop.

## 6) The Bible Is Meant To Question Us

Tom Olbricht (Owen’s brother) once said “Scripture is not meant to answer our questions as much as it is written to question us.” Reflect on this powerful sentence. Compare three different “approaches” to Bible reading:

Approach #1: The “Give Me An Answer” Approach. I have a question: “Is it wrong for a country to legalize marijuana?” So I go to my concordance and look up marijuana. The word is not there! So I look for “herb” or “grass” and I find those words. So I scour the Bible for these terms and come up with an answer—even though the Bible never directly addresses this question, nor does it speak to how a modern democracy should function! I went to the Bible assuming it was a dictionary or encyclopedia written to answer my specific question. I end up with an “answer” to a question the Bible itself never actually asks.

Approach #2: The “What’s In It For Me” Approach. I read a text with three questions in mind: (1) what am I told to obey? (2) How can I obey it this week? (3) How can I tell my neighbor that he is failing to obey it? I end up with a checklist and bunch of pride.

Approach #3: The “Who Is God” Approach. I read the text to enter into a new world. Yes, I may find answers to some of my often-asked questions. Yes, I may find a call to obey. But I am looking for God to tell me more about Himself. I am looking to immerse myself in Him and His world. I am looking to get out of myself, and lost in His love, grace, mystery, power, and wonder. I go to be changed from the inside out. I go to be challenged and come away with a glowing face.

May I encourage you to read with approach #3.

## Questions For Class (Week 3)

1. How did you fall in love? What were your first letters like? How did you read them?
2. In what way is the Bible a love letter from God? How would you read it differently if you conceived of it this way?
3. Why does the Bible speak so much about our “hearts”?
4. How can the Bible open up new worlds to us?
5. Is the Bible meant to be enjoyed?
6. How is Bible reading like an invitation to a banquet?
7. Do you let the Bible question you? How can we better do this?

*Other Suggested Helps for Week 3 for Teachers or for your Class*

### **Chapters/Articles For Further Insight To Accompany This Lesson**

JL Gerhardt, *Look To Love: A Better Way to Read the Bible* (2021), esp. Part I.

John W. Kleinig, *God's Word: A Guide to Holy Scripture* (Lexham Press, 2022), Chapter 1: “Invitation To A Banquet.”

Matthew Mullins, *Enjoying the Bible: Literary Approaches to Loving the Scriptures* (Baker Academic, 2021), esp. Introduction and Chap 7: “Why We Worship.”



## **Week 4: Read Humbly**

**Object of the Class:** To see our need to interpret, to recognize the historical distance between us and the text, to develop an interest in hard questions, and to adopt a humility that begins with “I need to spend more study on this.”

Suggested Outline for Class:

### **1) Opening Exercise (5 minutes)**

The instruction is as follows: Working **individually**, decide if the Biblical statement/command is Essential (E), meaning it continues to be required, or if it is Negotiable (N), meaning it is culturally-specific to its original context and therefore is not essential today. Here is the list:

- \_\_\_ Greet one another with a holy kiss.
- \_\_\_ Wash the saints’ feet.
- \_\_\_ Lord’s Supper on the first day of every week.
- \_\_\_ Baptism by immersion.
- \_\_\_ Shake the dust off your feet.
- \_\_\_ Sell all you have and give it to the poor.
- \_\_\_ Don’t forsake the assembly.
- \_\_\_ Bring Paul his cloak.
- \_\_\_ Women must wear veils when praying publicly.
- \_\_\_ The husband is head of the wife.
- \_\_\_ If you drink poison, it will not hurt you.
- \_\_\_ Kill every male child.
- \_\_\_ Love one another.
- \_\_\_ Do not even eat with an immoral brother.
- \_\_\_ Do not take your brother or sister to court.
- \_\_\_ Do not eat meat offered to idols.
- \_\_\_ To require circumcision denies the faith.
- \_\_\_ Pray for God to kill my enemies.
- \_\_\_ Be in obedience to those in authority.

- \_\_\_ Do not resist an evil person.
- \_\_\_ Lend, and do not ask in return.
- \_\_\_ Drink a little wine for your stomach's sake.
- \_\_\_ Slaves, be obedient to your masters.
- \_\_\_ Wives be submissive to your husbands.
- \_\_\_ An elder must be the husband of one wife.
- \_\_\_ The Spirit will guide you into all truth.
- \_\_\_ I wish that you would all prophesy.
- \_\_\_ Do not forbid speaking in tongues.
- \_\_\_ You may stone a disobedient child.
- \_\_\_ Whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
- \_\_\_ You may eat of every tree that is good for food.
- \_\_\_ Whoever sheds man's blood, his blood must also be shed.
- \_\_\_ Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.
- \_\_\_ Praying "thy kingdom come."
- \_\_\_ Anoint the sick with oil.
- \_\_\_ Women should not wear gold, pearls, or braided hair.
- \_\_\_ It is shameful for a man to have long hair.
- \_\_\_ People who do not work should not eat .
- \_\_\_ Be perfect.

Ok. Set your answers aside. We will revisit this list later. (Or, if your teacher has time, you might compare your list with your neighbor).

## 2) Waking Up To A Problem

In his book, *How (Not) To Read The Bible*, Dan Kimball recounts an email from a friend who became an atheist *by reading the Bible*. As he read, these were the questions he found himself asking:

- Why is it wrong for Herod to kill babies but it was ok for God to do the same thing? (See Exodus 4:21-23 & 12:29-30).
- Why does God seem to be fine with beating slaves and selling your daughter? (See Exodus 21:7, 20-21).
- Does it even make sense that a cure for a moldy house is to kill a bird and sprinkle its blood around the house seven times? (See Lev 14:48-51)
- Why does God show chauvinism and gender discrimination toward women? (See 1 Tim 2:11-12; 1 Cor 14:34-35)

-Why does God want to kill every single person on earth and destroy everything on earth—like a monster? (Genesis 6)

-Do I have to believe that modern science is part of some grand conspiracy, and instead believe the earth was made in a week and the first people interacted with a talking snake? (See Genesis 1-3)

Can you see how someone could read the Bible and come away thinking it is an anti-science, anti-women, pro-violence, pro-slavery book describing a murderous God who has nothing but contempt for the world? Who would follow a God like that? Who would *want* to?

It is important that we Christians—who revere the Bible, read it confidently, and believe in the joy and wonder of it all—take seriously how Bible reading can be confusing and even painful. It is extremely important that we learn how to read the Bible and how *not* to read the Bible. The Bible has been used in history to hurt and bludgeon people. Virtually every major wrong in human history has been justified—by some people—by appealing to the Bible. *You can make a text say just about anything you want it to say without some helpful parameters to guide healthy Bible reading.* This is an attempt to begin introducing some helpful (and unhelpful) approaches.

### 3) Recognizing Our Need To Interpret

Consider three statements:

- “I don’t interpret the Bible. I just read it and do what it says.”
- “If the Bible needs interpretation, then it isn’t given by inspiration.”
- “Common sense is the only interpretation method we need to understand the Bible.”

Have you ever heard someone express sentiments like these? It usually comes from a good heart, and a strong belief that the God who loves us enough to save us wouldn’t leave us in the dark about His will for our lives. I actually think there is a lot of merit to that assumption, and at the end of this study we will address it again.

But if you are reading your Bible in English, then you are already benefiting from the serious study of those who believe strongly in the art of interpretation. There are a great many Greek and Hebrew words in the Bible that simply have no perfect English equivalent. Decisions have to be made based on interpretation—and these decisions can make a big difference. In his book *God’s Word in Man’s Language*,

Eugene Nida shares some interesting (and funny) stories along this line. One missionary was translating from his Spanish Bible into a native language in Latin America. The word *bienaventurados* in the Beatitudes means “blessed,” “fortunate” or “lucky” in English; but in the native language, it came across literally as “Lucky in gambling are the poor in spirit...Lucky in gambling are those who mourn.” Just as we have non-literal expressions in English (“how’s it hanging?” or “give me a break”), other languages do too. When one translator tried to give a literal rendering of “gave breath to the image” (Rev. 13:15), it was literally rendered into the new Latin American language as “He made the image stink.” In one Latin American literal translation, a woman “broke a stone jar of ointment” on Jesus’ head...which must have hurt a great deal (Matt 26:6), and Herod threw a drinking party on the very day he was actually born (Mk 6:21). “Holy Spirit” in one Sudanic language means “clean breath”...so the translators have to do some choosing and make some interpretive decisions in order to express the sense for a new people. Imagine the native Americans of southern Mexico (living in corn huts) reading about scribes who “*devour widows houses*”...and wondering if “scribes” is a word for starving cattle. How would you translate Revelation 3:20 (“behold I stand at the door and knock”) to the Zanki people in Lake Victoria, who know each other so well, that only a thief makes a knocking noise at their hut? The translators changed it to “behold I stand at the door and call” to match the sense in the new culture. All of these—in one form or another—show us that simply by using translations we are already involved in questions of interpretation.

But translation is not the only way to get us to see the need for interpretation. Look again at that exercise with which we began the class.

You might have noticed three things from that list. First, every statement is listed somewhere in the Bible as a command or rule (someone, at some point, was commanded to do this or believe this). Second, it is often tough to know without context how to understand a particular statement. And third, it is highly unlikely that your answers to all 39 questions will be the same as the person sitting next to you.

I know...because we’ve tried it. In 7 years of teaching this class (often multiple sections more than once in a year), I never had any 2 students in the same class whose answers matched when they compared all 39 answers. What are we to make of this?

The problem gets even more complicated when I give my students another sheet. This time, allowing them to get the full context, and to work in groups. Here are the questions they have to answer:

- Is John 5:4 inspired? Look it up in two different translations. You'll see why this is an interesting question (because in at least one of your translations, it doesn't even appear, or is in a footnote! That's right, your Bible most likely simply skips from verse 3 to verse 5!)
- Is 1 Corinthians 7:36 talking about a (soon-to-be) wife or daughter? (English translations actually give different answers if you compare them).
- Of whom is Revelation 13:18 speaking (the mark of the beast, of course).
- Who is the "man of lawlessness" Paul is so concerned about in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. Has he already come?
- Read Luke 12:33 where Jesus gives a series of general commands—"Do not worry about your life;" "Consider how the lilies grow;" "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness"—then immediately says this: "Sell your possessions and give to the poor." So, why do you still have possessions?

Even while working in groups, my students have disagreed. I imagine you are beginning to see why the idea that "we don't need any interpretation" is a hard pill to swallow.

In the opening chapter to their book *How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth*, Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart tell us every reader is, at the same time, an interpreter. This doesn't have to scare us. It doesn't mean we all have to go back to school and earn a master's degree in theology and Biblical studies (but wouldn't that be nice?!). Not all of our questions require a trip to the library. But some do. For this reason, Fee and Stuart claim the most important ingredient you bring to the task of interpretation is *enlightened* common sense. There are any number of issues where three good people with common sense might come to three different conclusions on "the plain meaning of the text." Therefore, we all interpret, but we don't always interpret well.

#### **4) How (and How Not) To Interpret**

How do we overcome this challenge? According to Fee and Stuart, we should start by recognizing that the antidote to bad interpretation is...good interpretation! So what does that involve? A few key things can be shared here, though we will explore most of them in later weeks:

1. **Historical Context.** Appreciate the "then and there" side of reading an ancient book. The Scriptures are eternally relevant, says Fee and Stuart, but they are

also “historically particular.” If you read a novel set in the south several generations ago, you might find a heroine claiming to have “the vapors.” We shouldn’t assume this means whatever you and I mean by vapor. We need to know that was a common term/phrase for a wide range of things—from light-headedness to clinical depression.

2. **Literary context.** That leads to a second thing to look for. In addition to appreciating the “time and place” (or *historical* context), we should appreciate the literary context. Usually words or phrases appear within verses. Verses are set within paragraphs. Paragraphs within longer passages. Passages within books. Books with a particular genre. And books within a covenant or testament. All of these are important in teasing out what a particular word or phrase means.
3. **Ancient meaning.** This next line is probably an overstatement (I can think of a few exceptions). But I like it as a general rule: “The text can never mean what it never meant.” Think about this line. When someone says “the original author of Psalm 100 was simply trying to tell us to praise the Lord, but if you use every 5<sup>th</sup> letter in English you come up with a secret code from God to you,” you are probably reading it wrong! That wouldn’t have meant anything to the Hebrew people reading a Hebrew text. Our goal is to bring out the meaning God intended, not cleverly devised ideas of our own making.

There are other helps—and nuance to each of these—but this should help us when getting started with hard questions and troubling passages. It should lead us to ask better questions, to listen to others, to read good books, and to appreciate the distance between us and the original text. I fully believe the Holy Spirit can (and will) help us interpret, but we should not assume whatever my initial instinct tells me is always right.

## 5) Enjoying Asking New, Good Questions

A number of helpful books—such as E. Randolph Richards’ *Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes* and Scot McKnight’s *The Blue Parakeet*—remind us of three general truths that will help us read with humility:

1. **The text is like a foreign land.** We who have grown up with the Bible begin to think of it like a contemporary friend. Bible verses and Bible language were always in my home growing up. This can easily lead me to think words used there are how I use those words now. But let’s try a new analogy. Have you



ever had a friend from a different country? Have you ever dated someone from another country? In those cases, you probably found that you needed to throw away your assumptions. You needed to ask more questions. You needed to stop and “clarify” things every now and then. That is a better way to approach the Bible.

2. **You bring your baggage with you.** We all read the Bible through lenses. If you had a bad father, it may affect how you see God as “father.” If you were abused by a spouse, you might read language about “submission” in a way that can affect your understanding (or disgust) for such language. If you have heard sermons all your life, you probably have hardened views on what texts mean, and seldom think to question what you’ve “assumed all your life.” So, recognize that what you have seen and experienced will affect how you read the Bible. Talking with others, asking good questions, reading from other perspectives, and challenging your own instincts are healthy practices when we realize this is taking place.
3. **Not all interpretations are good.** We need help. My instincts are not always right. The consensus of my group may not be right (after all, whatever brought us all together under the same roof may be an assumption that, itself, needs to be questioned). It is important to seek help and to seek healthy practices to help us along the way.

## Questions For Class (Week 4)

1. Why did your answers (at least to some extent) differ from your neighbor? Is it only because one of you is ignorant and apathetic?
2. Why is interpretation necessary (and inevitable)?
3. How can someone read the Bible and come away hating God?
4. What are some ways NOT to read the Bible?
5. What are some helpful tips to aid us in read the Bible well?
6. What is the “historical” context and what is the “literary” context?
7. Do you bring your baggage with you when you read a text? Is this good or bad?

*Other Suggested Helps for Week 4 for Teachers or for your Class*

### **Chapters For Further Insight To Accompany This Lesson**

Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed (Zondervan, 2014), Chapter 1: “The Need To Interpret.”

Dan Kimball, *How (Not) to Read the Bible* (Zondervan, 2020), Introduction.

Scot McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet: Rethinking How You Read The Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Zondervan, 2018), Introduction & Part 1.

E. Randolph Richards & Brandon O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture Through Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (IVP, 2012), Introduction.



## **Week 5: Read Discerningly**

**Object of the Class:** Each section of scripture should be read according to its genre. Failure to do this well creates new problems; doing this well resolves many of them.

Suggested Outline for Class:

### **1) Opening Exercise: Genre Matters (5 minutes)**

Watch this 5 minute video from the Bible Project: The Bible Project: “Writing Styles and the Bible” (Video). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUXJ8Owes8E>

Tell me what kind of story or statement you are about to hear from these clues:

- A. “Once upon a time...”
- B. “Congress shall make no law...”
- C. “To be or not to be, that is the question...”
- D. “In the year 1056, a major schism occurred within the church...”
- E. “Please unload the dishwasher.”
- F. “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways...”
- G. “George was a good little monkey, and very curious...”

What would you say to someone who responded to “Once upon a time...” with “now, what year was that? I don’t remember reading about that in my history book of the period”?

What would you say to someone who read a Driver’s manual and said “I love those stories. I wonder what those sentences are meant to symbolize for us today?”

### **2) Wisdom & Poetry**

The Bible is a collection of writings that took place over many centuries, by a wide-range of authors, from different backgrounds, in different languages, using different

genres. Today, we will learn how important it is to read Bible passages according to their proper genre.

Read Psalm 137:9:

*“Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
Happy is the one who repays you  
According to what you have done to us.  
Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
And dashes them against the rocks.”*

The book of Psalms served as the songbook of OT Israel as well as the songbook of the early church. Are you having a hard time finding an appropriate song where this verse could be sung as a church?

It is ok if you are having a hard time imagining that. The truth is, not every Psalm was intended for communal singing. Some of the Psalms were simply an author pouring out their prayer, or their reflections—speaking the words that we may feel welling up within ourselves when we are in difficult situations. But are we supposed to wish for God to kill infant children?

The answer comes when we recognize that the Psalms fall under the category of “poetry” and “wisdom” literature.

The book of Proverbs provides an even better example. Have you ever heard a really wise saying? Consider statements like these: “Cleanliness is next to Godliness” (John Wesley), or “God helps those who help themselves” (Algernon Sydney). These can be helpful statements. But are they always true? Are there never exceptions, or times when they need to be qualified?

As it turns out, “poetic” or “wisdom literature” (such as Job, Psalms, Proverbs & Ecclesiastes) describe thoughts, feelings, and statements that are helpful and often true—but not always, or at least not in an unqualified sense. Wisdom literature can be defined as “general truths.” Consider these:

“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Proverbs 22:6 ESV).

“A soft [or gentle] answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1 ESV)

Can you think of examples where these general truths do not always lead to the conclusion listed? Of course we can. Human free-will is involved in the response! The point of these passages is not to give commandments, or to suggest assurance of the conclusion. The point is to give guidance for those who wish to raise their children well and to avoid angry situations. These are general truths.

Consider these two verses listed side-by-side in the text:

*“Answer not a fool according to his folly,  
lest you be like him yourself.  
Answer a fool according to his folly,  
lest he be wise in his own eyes” (Prov 26:4-5).*

So...which is it? Should we answer a fool or not answer a fool? The answer is...it depends! Sometimes! These are general truths with a general observation of what to expect were you to try these out. This is how the genre works.

We hurt sincere parents if we tell them their wayward adult children are always and only the fault of their parents, citing Proverbs 22:6. We must appreciate the genre for what it is.

A similar truth can be found in how we read the songs of Israel. Some of these psalms express true but raw emotions. Not every Psalm is appropriate for all occasions. Each outburst is tied to a larger theme—such as reflection on God’s holiness, protection for God’s people, and disgust at generations of evil. When I read difficult Psalms like 137, I learn that God wants to hear us voice our raw emotions. I learn that there is something good in wanting a cycle of evil to end. I learn that there is an appropriate sense of finding comfort in the judgment of God. But, no—I don’t believe we should publicly sing—in a congregational setting—for God to kill infants. And I don’t believe Psalm 137 teaches that God delights in that, or that we should actually, truly, want that. We know the full story—including redemption; our ultimate prayer is that God will change hearts. We want God to end oppression, and then lead to reconciliation. But it is ok to feel the pain of oppression and evil, and to call for God’s justice to be present. That is what I see and hear in Psalm 137.

### **3) Genesis and the Law Books**

The first five books of the Bible are sometimes called “the Law,” or “the books of Moses,” or “the Pentateuch.” The idea of God choosing a people and then having a special relationship with them is most clearly seen beginning in Genesis 12. He chooses Abraham and enters into a covenant with him (Gen 12, 15, 17). He guides his children and descendent (Gen 18-50), pulls them out of slavery (Ex 1-19), takes them to the desert and gives them a covenant law (Ex 20ff) and explains how to faithfully engage in this relationship that God himself has given (the rest Exodus through Deuteronomy). Three things are crucial to notice here:

- A. The importance of covenant. God makes a “pact” or “covenant.” We tend to think of two equal partners who shake hands on a deal. But this covenant is one where God (who is perfect) makes a deal with an imperfect people, knowing the people will not live up to the covenant. And yet, God promises to be faithful not just to the covenant but to “himself” (which means, he will find a way to protect his people and support them even in their failures). It is remarkable and powerful—it also provides the basis for the New Testament teaching of God relating to his church through Jesus Christ.
- B. The importance of faith, obedience, and sacrifice. The covenant includes acts of giving (usually an animal from the flock), sacrificing (death is involved), and confessing (acknowledging that a death is required to make amends for the wrong that has been done). This very early teaching sets the stage for the death of Jesus in the New Testament.
- C. Only God is the real hero. Yes we learn great things about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. But they are flawed characters. The real point of the story is how God remains faithful despite these people, rather than on account of their goodness.

But the first 11 chapters of Genesis—how the Bible begins—is a unique matter. Those chapters form their own genre. But what genre is that? Bible scholars are not entirely united on this question. Some see elements of history, some see elements of poetry, some see elements of moral story, and some see elements of mixing and combining. I am convinced that we don’t always have to approach these texts with an “either/or” view but rather a “both/and” view. A writer can illustrate a moral truth by telling a historical story (it doesn’t have to be one or the other). Relatedly, a historical event can be “framed” in a way that makes sense to the original readers (using language and motifs already popular in the culture) so that you will understand the moral truth more precisely than the details of the historical event.

So, when we approach the creation story, we learn that God created everything in the world, he brought order out of chaos, and he was intentional in bringing life

about. We learn that people are made in His image, and that God thinks all he made was “very good.” These moral truths stand in sharp contrast to other “creation stories” that were circulating when Genesis was written or compiled. These are truths that set Judaism (and Christianity) apart. On the other hand, some of those stories also show similarities—such as a heaven and an earth, separation of waters above and below the dome of the sky, people made from dirt, trees in a garden, a talking snake, and so forth. It is possible that God communicated truth to his people using language and motifs that were already present in the culture in such a way as to (a) speak truth, and (b) make it understandable.

This leads to two conclusions about Genesis 1-11:

- A. You can trust that what Genesis wishes to teach it teaches truthfully. Genesis does not communicate lies. Discerning what Genesis 1-11 is trying to teach takes work (see last week’s lesson), but God is trying to tell his people good and truthful news about all things being created by God and radically dependent on God.
- B. God can (and does) tell truth through stories and motifs in which not all the things mentioned have a clear historical reference. We know that Jesus taught in parables, and yet no one is upset if it turns out there was no “sower who went out to sow his seed” in the precise way Jesus tells the parable. That is not the genre of parable. The purpose of parable is to get a moral point across. Genesis 1-11 is more complicated than parable (for example, it is clearly rooted in history), but the main reason some of these stories are told is not to write a history book but to explain how God is faithful. Reading Genesis 1-11 as if it is a straight-forward history book can create confusion and unnecessary rifts with geology, astronomy, archaeology, biology, and many other lines of scientific inquiry. This is sad and unnecessary. The goal is to discover what Genesis 1-11 is attempting to teach through a mixed genre of history, poetry, and moral story.

#### **4) Historical Narratives**

How should we read the “History” books (or the historical narratives)? Some whole books lend themselves to history; other books include historical narratives, mixed with other genres.

It is important to make three observations:

- A. First, appreciate the power of story. Do not subject ancient historical accounts to modern definitions and expectations of historical accounts. Lack of precision, or coupling history within a larger narrative (where you “frame” the story) was common in the ancient world; no one would have considered this tampering with history or failing to fulfill a historian’s job. Historical narratives sometimes tell you what you would have seen were you to have a video-camera handy. Other historical narratives give you highlights of what you would have seen (but not the whole story). Other historical narratives group different events into one over-arching narrative. Other historical narratives attempt to describe the effect of what happened even more than to detail the events in order. In other words, appreciate the way history is told as part of a larger story. {Note: there is a sense where this is still true. All history is part of a larger narrative. There is a reason a history tells *this* story and not *that* story. There is a reason the historian draws *these* morals and not *those* morals from it. There is a reason the historian places *those* stories together (to see *those* links between them) rather than *these* stories and *these* links. We all “frame” history.} Genesis, Jonah, the parables, and the cross are very different; but there are ways they are similar—or links and lines that bring these together.
- B. Second, look for cultural markers. History is told for a reason. Besides asking “what happened, when did it happen, and where did it happen,” we should ask “what are we learning about the story of God among his people by hearing about this narrative?” For example, we will see that what Moses did, or what David did, are told a certain way, and then Jesus is described doing the same things the same way. The “framing” is for a reason: to get us to see Jesus as fulfilling a larger story.
- C. Third, look for God. What do we learn about God in this historical narrative? Too often we read about Esther and then wonder if we should be do what she did (or Gideon with the fleece, or David killing Goliath, or Sampson bringing down the house). The historical narratives tell us what people did, but not always what we should do. Even more so, the historical narratives tell us what God did with, through, or *in spite of* human failings. The main thing to look for is what God is up to. So, listen for what is being said about God and His will.

## 5) The Gospels & Acts

When it comes to the gospels, it is helpful to think of them as biographies, but also helpful to think of them as *more* than biographies. Yes, the genre of gospel is an



attempt to reveal the actions of the main character. You can trust that Jesus did and said the kind of things described. But there is still “framing” going on (which is why the same speech sounds slightly different in Matthew than in Luke). Why?

Because each gospel writer is also a theologian—with a sermon to preach. Matthew is writing a gospel for those with a Jewish background. He is concerned with presenting Jesus as the new Moses, the true interpreter of God’s law. He wants to make sure the readers know Jesus never violated the law, that he fulfilled Scripture, and that he is the Messiah described in the Old Testament.

Mark writes for a wider audience and describes Jesus as someone who overturns tables and expectations. Jesus acts mysteriously, does things that concern the audience without explanation, and makes demands without promises of reward. Why? Because Mark is asking and answering a different question: would you follow God, and do his will, even if the only result was that God would be glorified?

Luke is a historian, and he is more interested in comparing historical accounts and providing something closer to a play-by-play. But even Luke has themes, a narrative with a plot and an arc—and a second volume (the Book of Acts) in which the church acts like the Jesus described in his gospel. Luke brings out Jesus’ concern for Gentiles, his concern for mercy and care for the poor, his raising up the lowly, reaching out to outsiders, and making heroes out of people often considered villains.

John may be the most intriguing of them all. John’s gospel looks quite different as he offers a look at the stories from a Divine perspective (to complement the human dimension seen more clearly in the other gospels). Where Luke starts with Jesus as a human—asking if he is more than that, John starts with Jesus as Deity, asking what it means for Deity to also be human. John provides conversations with the apostles appearing in no other gospel, and claims to be written for apologetic reasons—to bring people to faith.

Each writer use the same basic story (Jesus’ life and teachings) to bring out different facets and aspects. Each gospel brings out a truth; it is a mistake to think compiling all 4 accounts into a new “fifth” gospel that includes them all would give us a “truer” picture of the scene. Doing that actually obscures the particular sermon being preached by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

Acts appears to be a history book—and we are right to see it as a record of the actions of God’s Holy Spirit in and through the early church. But it is also framed. The book of Acts gives us a snapshot of church ideals. If you have ever read the book and felt

depressed that your local church never looks or acts like that....it is good to feel both challenge (let's do better!) and peace: it is unlikely every day appeared that way in all churches. This is a highlight book. The *main* goal of Acts is to describe God's fulfillment of his promises to restore a people to himself. It is a *secondary* goal to see Acts as prescribing how we should act if we wish to act as the people of God. That is a very important distinction: seek first to see a *description* of what the church was like; only secondarily do we ask if and how we can be or do the same.

When you read Acts, listen for who God is, what He has done, and what He is up to. Then ask how we can follow the Apostles' teaching to be more like the God we see in Jesus Christ.

## 6) Epistles

The letters of Paul and other followers of Jesus make up Romans through Jude. Each letter is occasional (meaning, written on a particular occasion to address particular issues or to offer a particular help), dealing with issues on the ground at the time. We should remember that Paul (for example) is a missionary, and his letters apply deep truths to real-life situations. Your real-life situation may be different, and before you seek to replicate the situation, seek first to find the principles being applied to a very different situation than your own. Paul starts with foundational truths (true for all time), but he makes application for first-century people. As times change, we must pray for discernment to know when the application is meant to be as universal as the foundational truths being mined, and when those foundational truths may be applied in new situations that may look different. Examples would be when Paul wants a church (that customarily kisses) to be friendly and encouraging. It may be right to hear "greet one another with a holy kiss" as a call to greet in our usual way of greeting, rather than a call to continue the practice of kissing. We should major in the foundational truths, and pray for discernment when it comes to contemporary application.

## 7) Prophets & Revelation

Revelation feels like an enigma. But did you know it is easier to understand the better you know the Old Testament prophets? This is because there are more allusions and "echoes" to the Old Testament than any other book in the New Testament.

So let's start with the prophets. The Prophets are divided into "major" and "minor" prophets. This has nothing to do with the importance of the work—only to the *length*. The "major" prophets are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The minor prophets

are also called “the book of the 12” because they include the 12 last books of our Old Testament: Hosea-Malachi. You will notice these (with maybe an exception or two) are much shorter than the major prophets.

- A. Read the prophets first as speaking to their own day. Prophets sometimes predict the future. But far more often prophets are simply preachers, telling the people of their day what is right or wrong with them. So prophets sometimes *foretell*, but they more often *forthtell*.
- B. Appreciate the role of apocalyptic. When you read in Ezekiel about angels with eyes, or you read in Isaiah about the moon and stars falling from the sky, you are reading a genre known as apocalyptic. This is using “bigger than life” language to explain the significance of real down-to-earth events. For example, read Isaiah 13. On a first reading, it sounds like “the end of the world.” But the header to the chapter in many Bibles will tell you Isaiah is describing the fall of Babylon—a real-life war that happened a long time ago. The reason for this kind of genre is because events can have huge consequences—so big we just don’t have language for it. If God’s people, in God’s holy city, are taken into captivity, that is more than “some people got hurt.” If the people who claim to be the greatest nation on earth have been hurting God’s people, but God comes in judgment and destroys them, this is more significant than “one nation fell and another arose.” Thus...apocalyptic.
- C. Understand “the day of the Lord.” The prophets often speak of “the day of the Lord” and it can get confusing. The term does not always mean the one future day of judgment after the resurrection. It can mean any time God makes his presence known and “judges” a people. The day of the Lord can be the fall of Babylon, or the beginning of captivity, or the end of captivity, or the deposing of a king.
- D. Recognize how covenant and ethics are related. God made a promise to his people way back in Genesis. The promise was that God would have a people. In Exodus, he gave them a law—with rules and stipulations—and an extended promise: if you keep my laws I will protect you; if you do not, I will allow you to be punished to learn a lesson. And yet...God promises to be faithful to himself. This is hugely important. Through the prophets, we see God’s people failing to keep God’s law. They go through terrible consequences. But at the end of each prophet, we see seeds of hope. God says he hasn’t given up on his people. He won’t forsake them. He will bring them back. He will find a way. The prophets emphasize *the faithfulness of God* even when describing the faithlessness of people.

All of this is helpful when we come to the last book of the Bible—Revelation. Revelation has historically been interpreted in 4 broad ways:

- A. Preterist: everything happened in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Whether referring to the fall of Jerusalem (AD 69) or the fall of Rome (AD 96), the book is forthtelling and foretelling that the generation reading John’s words will experience the results. Support for this view can be found in the phrase “I am coming soon” and these events “must soon take place.”
- B. Historical: the book describes the history of the world from John’s own day until the final day when Jesus returns. Various symbols (such as seals and bowls) describe different periods of history. Support for this view can be found in how various movements of history have been connected to the book of Revelation as people have sought to interpret it for 2,000 years.
- C. Idealistic: the book is simply a symbolic representation of good vs. evil. The book isn’t referring to any particular world event, but what happens in most every world event: evil rises up, seems to have it all cornered, good people get hurt, but God wins in the end. Support for this view can be found in the fact that the other views often have weaknesses (or places where the history doesn’t always fit well).
- D. The future: The book is primarily about what will happen at the “end of time.” Support for this view is that much of the book sounds foreign (in the sense that you might say “that hasn’t happened, has it?”), it refers to events in heaven and hell, and the last two chapters read like the second coming of Jesus.

You might find people in the room where you are sitting who hold any of the 4 views I’ve just described—the church is that divided over how to read Revelation! But here is the good news...the same basic facts about the prophets can be applied here. Revelation does have something important to say in its own (first century) day. The book does use apocalyptic (“signs”) to use bigger-than-life language for some real-world events. The book does describe judgment of God which can refer to the end of the world but doesn’t have to. And the book does give us encouragement that God will remain faithful and will win the victory.

## Questions For Class (Week 5)

1. Does genre matter? Why?
2. Give an example of where a verse or passage could be very unhelpful (or dangerous) if it were read in the wrong genre.
3. How should we read poetry in the Bible?
4. How should we read historical narratives in the Bible?
5. What if the genre is mixed—how should we approach a text like that?
6. What is wrong with turning every character into a hero or a villain?
7. Why do you think God wrote the Bible with so many different genres?

*Other Suggested Helps for Week 5 for Teachers or for your Class*

### **Chapters For Further Insight To Accompany This Lesson**

Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed (Zondervan, 2014). This whole book is extremely helpful.

The Bible Project: “Literary Genres & The Stories We Tell Ourselves (Podcast).  
<https://bibleproject.com/podcast/how-read-bible-part-3-intro-literary-genres-and-stories-we-tell-ourselves/>

The Bible Project: “Writing Styles and the Bible” (Video).  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oUXJ8Owes8E>



## **Week 6: Read Normally**

**Object of the Class:** What are our usual means of communication? How do we usually go about deciding what someone means (now) or meant (before)? The Bible is more than “just a book”—but it is helpful to think about how one normally reads a book, and how one normally seeks to understand another person. We will consider CENI (commands, examples, necessary inferences): its strengths and weakness.

Suggested Outline for Class:

### **1) Opening Exercise: What Does She Want? (5 minutes)**

Suppose next week is your wife’s birthday, and you want to get her a gift you know she would want. How do you know what to get? List all the possible ways you could find out. List ways you might assume your gift would please her, ways you could find out for sure what gifts would please her, and ways you might imagine she would be pleased by your gift.

Examples:

- She specifically told you “I want you to get me \_\_\_\_\_ for my birthday.”
- She usually likes these kinds of things and has said so in the past.
- I’ve asked her friends who know her well.
- I’ve watched carefully what she buys herself, and listened to what she says she likes.
- I know her so well, I can generally assume the kind of things she doesn’t like, which helps me narrow the options of what she might like.
- I’ve come to realize that as long as I put effort and sincerity into it, she tends to like most anything (within reason).
- Etc.

We can probably group all of the examples we come up with into the following 6 categories:

- Direct statements/commands (“She told me to get THIS one”)

- Historical examples (“She showed me gifts she has liked in the past”)
- Obvious hints that can’t be mistaken (“Get the green or black one...and NOT the green one!”)

There are at least 3 others, though they will be discussed at a later time:

- What is reasonable
- Family tradition
- Personal experience

## **2) The Bible Is A Book (& A Collection of Books)**

We know the Bible is more than “just a book.” But, at the same time, the Bible comes to us as a book—a written collection of words, verses, paragraphs, chapters, and genres. It is helpful to ask common questions involved in “normal” reading:

- “How do we usually go about reading a book?”
- “How do I know an author’s main point?”
- “What do I look to know if the author wants me to do something?”
- “How do I decide if a story about them back then is a story that ought to be about me right now?” (AKA, how do I decide if what needs to be carried over are principles behind the practice or the actual practice?)

In this lesson, we consider “natural” forms of communication, how they are helpful, but also why a rush to make those “natural forms” into a be-all-end-all method of interpretation has its drawbacks.

## **3) Look for Direct Statements or Commands**

One way we can know what someone wants is to listen for any direct statements or commands they may give to us. Jesus gave commands he expected to be obeyed (Matt 28:20). It appears to be common sense to recognize the role of direct statements and commands.

While it is good to look for direct statements or commands, we should also offer a word of caution: commands are not all “equal.”

- Not all imperatives in the New Testament are meant as “rules” or “mandates” (Phil 4:4; Eph 2:11)
- Some commands are addressed to specific people and are meant for *them*, not *us* (Lk 24:49; 2 Tim 4:13)

- Some commands, direct statements, and promises given to specific people may or may not apply to us all (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:17)
- Some commands given to whole churches may or may not apply to us all (1 Cor 11-16: head coverings, prophesying, tongue-speaking, greeting with a holy kiss)

#### 4) Look For Historical Examples

A second way to understand what someone wants is to look for historical examples. This is true in our religious life as well. We are told to follow the example of Jesus' life (John 13:15; 1 Peter 2:21). Technically, that would fall under "command"—but notice the command is to look to his *example*. Can we find examples in Scripture that are clearly *exemplary*? Of course we can. It is easy to find places where characters in Scripture did things that were lovely and good, holy and sincere, and these become guides for us in seeking to please our Lord.

While it is good to look for examples in the New Testament where Apostles did good things to show love for the Lord, we should also offer a word of caution: Examples have layers.

- Examples are, first of all, descriptive (they tell us what people did). But why would we assume examples are prescriptive? The idea that Acts was written to tell us how to "do church acceptably" is an assumption; but there is no statement in Acts or a preface to the Bible that makes this obvious. So caution is advised.
- Apostolic-approved examples are not always applied consistently: How often should the church assemble—every day (Acts 2:42-46), every week (Acts 20:7), or all the more often as we see "the Day" approaching (Heb 10:25)? How should the church use the funds from the treasury? Some churches see no authority for paying staff members, buying church buildings, purchasing food to eat in the building, buying toys to give to children, buying trinkets to give to visitors, or even to give to poor non-Christians (so no church-funded food pantries for non-Christians who come to the church door). They believe the church can only use church money for things the apostles approved by their example in the stories and illustrations used in Scripture where the church used their funds for those specific reasons (see 1 Cor 8-9; Acts 2:44-45).
- It is not clear how to decipher which elements in a historical example are binding. Should the Lord's Supper be taken in an upper room, which is the only identified place in examples where the Lord's Supper was taken? Must the church fast when choosing elders (Acts 14:23)? May Christians take the



Lord's Supper twice on Sunday? If no, is it right to "assemble with the saints" (on Sunday evening) and not take the Supper with other Christians because you already took it before them—something Paul warns against in 1 Corinthians 11? Since the Lords' Supper was instituted on a Thursday night, but historically taken on Sundays, are we to conclude Sunday is a binding example for what day it is *allowed* or what day it is to be *exclusive*? How do we know if church buildings, bible classes, padded pews, projectors, banners, and pulpits are aids or additions?

- In other words, what beyond "carrying out the command" is required?

It is interesting to note that Alexander Campbell saw real problems with using "approved apostolic example" as a test for what God requires or exclusively approves. He wrote this:

"There is too much squeamishness about the manner of cooperation. Some are looking for a model similar to that which Moses gave for building the Tabernacle. These seem not to understand that this is as impossible as it would be incompatible with the genius of the gospel."

## 5) Consider Obvious Hints & Conclusions Too Hard To Miss

A third way to seek out what someone wants is to look for where their words naturally lead. Sometimes a conclusion is unstated...but it follows from what *is* stated. Sometimes a speaker or writer points very strongly in a certain direction, so strongly we are supposed to "pick up" on the hint.

The technical term for an "obvious hint" is an "implication." A speaker implies something when their statement leads to a conclusion that is expected but not actually stated. While the speaker implies, we—the hearers or readers—pick up the conclusion that is too hard to miss. That is called an "inference." When the inference is not just possible, or even probable, but down-right unavoidable, that is called a "necessary inference." Consider these three statements and the level of implications (leading to levels of inference):

Statement 1: "Here is a watermelon. I sure am hungry." Possible inference: He would like to eat the watermelon. [Possible, but it could just remind him he is hungry for something else].

Statement 2: "Here is a watermelon. I sure am hungry for watermelon." Probable inference: He would like to eat the watermelon. [Probable, but he might not dream of eating another person's watermelon].

Statement 3: “Here is a watermelon. I am hungry for watermelon. I would like to experience having eaten this watermelon.” Necessary inference: he wants to eat this watermelon. [Necessary because he can’t have the experience of having eaten this watermelon unless he actually eats this watermelon].

Jesus used implications in his debates with the religious leaders, forcing them to make necessary inferences (Matt 22:23-33).

While it is good to look for inferences in order to draw out implications, we should also offer a word of caution: implications are not always clear, and inferences are not always necessary.

- Consider your everyday life. How often have you assumed something communicated to you by e-mail, text, or even on the phone meant for you to do more than was actually communicated? How often have you found out later that your inference was not actually what the speaker or writer intended to convey? Hints and inferences are notoriously difficult to get right.

Thomas Campbell (the father of Alexander Campbell) believed inferences had no place in determining rules to impose on other Christians (at the personal or congregational level). Here is his quote:

“That although inferences and deductions from scripture premises, when fairly inferred, may be truly called the doctrine of God’s holy word: yet are they not formally binding upon the consciences of Christians farther than they perceive the connection, and evidently see that they are so; for their faith must not stand in the wisdom of men; but in the power and veracity of God. Therefore no such deductions can be made terms of communion, but do properly belong to the after and progressive edification of the church. Hence it is evident that no such deductions or inferential truths ought to have any place in the church’s confession.”

Thomas Campbell seems to have two points:

- If we bind necessary inferences on those who don’t see them, don’t agree with our view on them, or don’t understand them, then we are actually forcing others to put their trust in *us* rather than in *God*.
- An inference may be necessary, but it also may not be! Binding something on others that God does not bind is *just as wrong* as allowing something God does not allow.

## 6) Making A Problematic Method: CENI

These three elements—direct statements, historical examples, and clear implications—are common-sense descriptions of everyday communication. These are not imposed methods or invented devices for communication: they describe how we naturally come to understand what we want from each other. These are tools—very helpful tools—in our communication toolbox. We should appreciate them.

However, in our history we have sometimes elevated these three into one overall model for interpretation (sometimes known as CENI: Command, Example, Necessary Inference). The problem is that these elements are incomplete and cannot represent the whole toolbox. We have already seen weaknesses of each individual element; but here are some drawbacks of this three-step model as the end-all-be-all model for interpreting the Bible:

#### (A) CENI Assumes What The Bible Is

- CENI does not inherently differentiate among context and genre. It will not yield adequate results without first understanding how context matters and genre matters. Consider these three phrases: “break my heart,” vs “break a leg” vs “break me off a piece of that Kit Kat Bar.” Context and genre help us know how to interpret. We have to go beyond asking “is this a command.”
- CENI does not inherently consider the intention of the author. Paul’s letters are, first of all, occasional letters intended to help first-century people deal with first-century problems. When he gives instructions on head coverings, or eating meat sacrificed in the public square, or how and when to bring a cloak and books to him in prison, we instinctively assume there is probably a “back then and there” element to his teachings; but CENI doesn’t tell us this, or what to do with this. It treats all elements of the writings equally and alike. CENI cannot tell us if Acts is descriptive or prescriptive (or which teachings are). CENI cannot tell us if the gospels were intended to prescribe church life or just describe the interim period between the Old Covenant passing away and the new one coming into being.
- No Scripture is written TO us, but all Scripture is preserved FOR us. CENI does not differentiate.

#### (B) CENI Assumes What To Do With Silence

- The silence of the Scriptures is an interesting study and question. There were two schools of thought among the Reformers: one school said silence is

always concessive (or, offering an allowance): if the Bible doesn't forbid it, then the Bible allows it. The other school of thought said that silence is always prohibitive: if the Bible doesn't directly tell us to do it, then it is wrong (and presumptive) to do it.

- The early leaders of the Restoration Movement adopted what was originally more of a middle ground. They used the phrase “where the Bible is silent, we are silent.” That phrase historically meant “we will not comment or have a position on it.” But this is rarely the practice today. Instead, where the Bible is silent has usually led CENI followers to prohibit (or condemn) any practice not expressly derived from CENI. The thought is often expressed along this line: “If it is not expressly taught by command, example, or necessary inference, then God has not taught it, and therefore it is not approved. There is no authority for it. Therefore it is prohibited.” Again, this was not the what the “where the Bible is silent, we are silent” line meant originally, but it has become standard among CENI-following churches.
- The truth is that silence is ambiguous. Sometimes silence is prohibitive. In Hebrews 7:14, the Hebrew writer makes an argument for what must be true because Scripture says nothing about the alternative option. There is a case of using silence in a prohibitive way. If someone says, “silence is always concessive,” they will have a hard time explaining Hebrews 7:14. Plus, we know in our everyday lives that silence is often prohibitive. How many times has a parent told their child, “why did you do that? I didn't give you permission to do that!” We know that silence can be prohibitive—especially when the thing we are doing is an addition, adding to God's commands.
- But silence also appears, at times, to have been concessive. The Old Testament never sanctions the use of a synagogue. Worship was to take place in the Temple. Synagogues were developed to allow Bible study, prayer, and worship in local places when one was not in the Temple. Jesus and Paul frequent synagogues and they show no objection to them. It appears that synagogues were considered aids to teaching and learning.
- The hard thing, of course, is deciding which “silent” things are merely *aids* to what God has already told us He wants, and which things are *additions* to what He has told us he wants. CENI has no internal mechanism to weigh what is “central” to a teaching and what is “peripheral” to a teaching. It is too flat to include actual people, with intentions, in a loving relationship. Real communication involves real-world understanding of all the people involved, the situation at hand, and the nature of a relationship. CENI cannot factor such things in.

## (B) CENI Has Led To Division After Division

- Consider what those within our own movement have split churches over, with both sides using CENI to support their views:
  - Use of mechanical instruments in worship
  - Formation of a missionary society above the local eldership
  - Financial cooperation and support of orphans homes
  - Financial cooperation and support of Christian colleges (out of the church budget)
  - The authorization for church fellowship halls, meals, gyms, and church-sponsored forms of entertainment
  - Employing a paid local staff for an individual congregation
  - Forming a Bible class (or having multiple classes at the same time) in addition to the one assembly on Sunday
  - Using multiple communion cups when taking the Lord’s Supper
  - The approved/official name on the church sign as decisive on whether they belong “with us” or “among us”
  - Accepting believer’s baptism for a biblical reason (other than ‘forgiveness of sins’) and/or not requiring rebaptism from those coming from other churches
  - The role of women in the assembly of the church—including female translators for the deaf, female teachers in classes outside the assembly, etc.
  - The list could go on and on and on and on and on.

Churches have split over these issues and more...and people on both sides of the debate have appealed to CENI. You can see how that could happen, especially if we recognize there are a whole host of assumptions before, during, and after employing CENI. The point is not to speak ill of commands, examples, and inferences; it is to recognize that these, combined, are still an incomplete package. Something more is needed.

## **7) Why These Are “Tools” Not “Predictors”: Knowing God Is Key**

When I was just a boy in church, I remember being told this illustration to support CENI as the end-all-be-all method for Bible interpretation:

“Suppose your father gave you \$5 and said ‘go to the store and buy a loaf of bread and a gallon of milk.’ If you came home with less than that, or more than that, what do you think your Father would say to you? Isn’t it obvious that if you came back with less, more, or different, you didn’t please your Father?”

But what if it was your mother's birthday, and you got her a candy bar? What if you paid for that bar with your own money? What if the store was out—could you get a substitute? What if you got hurt on the way to the store, so you didn't bring back food; instead your father ran to you and took you to the doctor.

What I wish I had said to the teacher was this: "It depends on who your Father is, and how well you know each other."

CENI is a wonderful set of tools to place in our interpreting toolbag. But it is no substitute for a relationship with God, and it cannot work well divorced from a larger—more wholistic—approach to reading the Bible.

## Questions For Class (Week 6)

1. Suppose your spouse has a birthday coming up. How do you know what to get them?
2. How do you normally read a book? What questions do you ask?
3. How are “direct statements” or “commands” one way to know what God wants? How are “direct statements” or “commands” in the Bible sometimes NOT what God requires of his people today?
4. How are “approved apostolic examples” one way to feel confident concerning what God wants? How are “approved apostolic examples” in the Bible sometimes NOT what God requires of his people today? How are they sometimes problematic when binding on other Christians?
5. How are “obvious hints” or “implications/inferences” one way to seek out what God wants? How are “obvious hints” or “implications/inferences” problematic when binding on other Christians?
6. Name some strengths of CENI.
7. How has CENI failed to produce unity/harmony among all who use the method?
8. Why is CENI helpful but not total? How does a true relationship with God affect the question of “what pleases the Lord”?

*Other Suggested Helps for Week 6 for Teachers or for your Class*

### Chapters For Further Insight To Accompany This Lesson

Stafford North, “Command, Example, & Necessary Inference.”

<https://faculty.oc.edu/stafford.north/comm-ex-inf.htm>

Milo Hadwin, *The Role of New Testament Examples As Related To Biblical Authority* (1974). <https://www.amazon.com/Testament-examples-related-Biblical-authority/dp/B0006YPGY0/>

John Mark Hicks, *Searching For The Pattern: My Journey In Interpreting The Bible* (2019). <https://www.amazon.com/Searching-Pattern-Journey-Interpreting-Bible/dp/1689634626/>



## **Week 7: Read Communally**

**Object of the Class:** We are not the first generation (or first group of Christians) to ask hard questions of the Bible. It is helpful to read the Bible with the rest of the church. We should ask how Christians through the centuries have interpreted Scripture, how Christians today who live in very diverse cultures read the Bible, and how people in my own congregation who are different from me read the Bible. Reading the Bible with the dead and alive.

Suggested Outline for Class:

### **1) Opening Exercise: Tradition & Perspective (5 minutes)**

- What are some family traditions you inherited from your parents and grandparents?
- What are some “rules of thumb” or “rules for life” you remember from your grandparents?
- What are some good, valuable, and true things about history and tradition, that you think people lose if they don’t value and respect what has come before them?
  
- Have you ever been part of a book club or a reading circle where you felt like a minority (maybe you were a man in an all-woman’s group). Describe what it is like to be surrounded by people who think and read differently than you.
- Have you ever found that your views of things shift when you hear perspectives different from your own? Discuss.

### **2) The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, Reason, Tradition, & Experience**

Genre is important & natural communication methods are helpful. But knowing the difference between proverbs and laws is not a complete method of interpretation. Knowing how to find commands, examples, and obvious hints is not either. Those are tools in the interpreter’s toolbox, but something more is needed.



Believers throughout church history have also valued three larger approaches to understanding how to interpret the text of scripture. These three are (1) reason, (2) tradition, and (3) experience. What is sometimes referred to as the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” we believe Scripture stands above all, but that we bring reason, tradition, and experience to the table when we are interpreting Scripture. This happens whether we admit it or not. Admitting it allows us to make the best use of these three tools that also appear in our communication toolbox. Let’s address them one at a time.

### **3) Ask “What Is Reasonable?” or “What Does Wisdom Suggest?”**

When we open our Bibles, we all bring reason (in varying amounts) to the text. We assume (rightly) that God gave us brains and intended for us to use them. After all, God calls us to love Him with all of our minds. This means that reason is a gift from God. Reason allows us to weigh options and to judge between them. Reason helps us communicate with others, since we are constantly deciding how to interpret words, signs, and symbols on a daily basis. If we didn’t apply our reason, we would be in all sorts of trouble.

We see this in church history. There have been key moments in history when someone was willing to “take a stand” or draw a line in the sand based on reason. Often, this has helped change the course of history. Being open to reason, and using reason in reading Scripture, can help us avoid dangers and mistakes. If our child read the Sermon on the Mount, and then announced to us he was going to actually pluck out his eye, we would rightly stop him. We know intuitively that God made our eyes for our good; it is unreasonable to assume on the surface that Jesus is calling for self-mutilation.

But, while reason has its strengths, we should offer a word of caution: reason has its limits.

- The phrase “common sense is not so common” reminds us that we are often far less rational than we assume.
- In addition, sometimes our religious commitments cloud our reason (in ways we don’t even realize). Have you ever said “even if it doesn’t make sense, I will obey the Lord?” Does this mean that reason is a help or a harm in such circumstances? Consider Jephthah’s vow (Judges 11:29-40). Perhaps you can see the problem.
- Our reason is shaped by education, experience, and a number of other influences. Reasonable people disagree. Some things sound reasonable because they are familiar. Some sound reasonable because they agree with

my echo chamber (people who already agree with me). In addition, my stubborn will can actually cause me to rationalize my extreme and minority viewpoint, keeping me from contributing to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Self-interest and peer-reinforcement can confirm our desires more than be our true teachers.

- Finally, we often come to know things most fully through experience. Some things seem right until we actually experience them.

The fact is that in addition to “Scripture alone,” we all bring reason to the text; recognizing this can help us. Yet my reasoning power alone is simply not an absolutely safe guide for knowing truth.

#### **4) Ask “What Does Tradition Say?”, or “How Does Church History Vote?”**

When we open our Bibles, we all bring *tradition* (in varying amounts) to the text. We assume (rightly) that many “new ideas” are not new, but are old ideas defeated long ago. We know that we do not need to reinvent the wheel in every generation, and that tradition is often “the wisdom of the ages.” Tradition connects us with Christian history and adds weight to our conscience when we wonder if we are the only ones who see things a certain way.

We value or trust church history if we

- Use a Bible with 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament books
- Believe English versions of the Bible are reliable
- Believe there are central Christian truths
- Use commentaries and believe it’s helpful to know what “most scholars believe” about a passage

Church tradition—those things passed down throughout church history across fellowships and among all the various groups—can be extremely helpful. It gives us a clearer set of central identifiable doctrines at the heart of Christianity. It provides a general “check” to idiosyncratic readings. It serves as a larger witness of the body of Christ. If there are views that only appear in one small segment or group within the broad sweep of Church history, it is unlikely that view is a central Christian doctrine that no one saw in Scripture until that small group appeared.

But tradition has its limits. Tradition is often diverse. You can usually find various views with a long pedigree. In some cases, tradition continues to develop, which blurs our understanding of what “tradition” is! And history doesn’t always get it right! Consider how long it took to end slavery, or to treat women as equals to men

(with voting rights). A long history can simply be a long history of confirming prejudiced readings of Scripture. In this way, tradition, if wrong, can become less of an anchor stone on which to stand, and more of a millstone hung around our necks.

The fact is that in addition to “Scripture alone,” we all bring varying amounts of tradition to the text; recognizing this can help us. Yet tradition alone is simply not an absolutely safe guide for knowing truth. Tradition cannot be our ultimate authority.

## **5) What Has Experience (My Personal & Our Collective) Taught Us?**

When we open our Bibles, we all bring *experience* (in varying amounts) to the text. We assume (rightly) that having experienced something gives us a better perspective. We are likely to know that some Proverbs—such as “a soft answer turns away wrath” or “train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it”—are general truths (not absolute truths) precisely because we have experienced life. Our study of astronomy helped us re-read passages about the earth standing firm or the sun rising as poetic. We may suggest reading a passage differently because we “tried that way” in the past and found it wanting. Experience can be a great teacher, helping us avoid past mistakes, and shining a light on wise past decisions.

- Experience shows us that some traditions have hurt more than helped.
- Experience shows us that some readings of Scripture that seemed reasonable at the time were in fact prejudiced readings.
- Experience shows us that some things we thought were going to be bad or good turned out to be the opposite.

But experience has its limits.

- Our experiences are not universal. Your experience in life differs from my mine. How could we determine whose experience is more true?
- Our experiences are influenced and shaped by many factors, some of which we are not even aware. For this reason, experiences can be mistaken, misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misapplied. It is very difficult to even consider Bible passages that conflict with our experience, often causing us to remove possible readings by choosing our interpreted experience over all other suggestions. How do I question my own experience when the community of faith disagrees with me?
- Experiencing pleasure in something can make us think that thing to be good. But some experiences are morally or factually wrong, even if they are pleasing (since our desires are not always holy).

- Experience can lead to a lack of objectivity. When it is hard to doubt or re-examine and re-interpret our experience, we are tempted to deny the testimony of every other person in our circle, every other Christian group in history, and every other person's experience, in favor of our own. But why would we do that? Humility and reason suggest this is a bad use of experience.

The fact is that in addition to “Scripture alone,” we all bring varying amounts of experience to the text; recognizing this can help us. Yet experience alone is not an absolutely safe guide for knowing truth.

## **6) The “Creed” & 2,000 Years of Church History: An Exercise In Reason, Tradition & Shared Experience**

There is no doubt in my mind that God has provided all that we need to know in matters pertaining to “life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). In our search for such things, it is right to appeal “to the teaching and to the testimony” found in Scripture (Isaiah 8:20). The very words that Christ spoke (and are given to us in the Bible) will serve to judge us on the Last Day (John 12:48); and the teachings of the Apostles—recorded in Scripture—are not simply wise thoughts from smart men; they are “in truth, the words of God” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). It is for this reason that some Christians might use the phrases *Prima Scriptura* (Scripture first) or *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone); in doing so, they are affirming that the Scriptures point us to God, and serve as our final authority on earth for theological matters.

But it didn't take long for the early Christians to realize that there was no internal mechanism within humanity that would guarantee a perfect understanding of Scripture, or uniform agreement on all matters. Claiming that Christian Scripture speaks authoritatively is one thing; universal agreement on what it means, knowing which teachings are “essential” to Christian fellowship, and knowing how to apply its teaching in new contexts and settings is quite another.

Thus, Christians engaged in theological reflection, that is, thinking about God in ways consistent with what has been revealed. When the early Christians were asked “what do Christians believe?” they wanted to give an answer more specific than “we believe the Bible” (since many Christians didn't even have access to the whole Bible), and one more concrete, practical, and universal than to say, “well, we all have our own opinions!” So they looked to the teaching of the Apostles as expressed in shared faith statements, handed down throughout the churches. This led to the development of Christian creeds and Church tradition.

“Tradition” is not a bad word. The New Testament makes it very clear that true teaching—given by the prophets, the Lord himself, and his Apostles—was meant to be “handed down,” thus creating traditional doctrines. Just consider a few passages:

- “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you...For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you” (1 Corinthians 11:1-2, 23).
- “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter” (2 Thessalonians 2:15)
- “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2)
- “I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3)

Likewise, “creed” is not a dirty word. The Latin word *credo* simply means “I believe.” Anyone who begins a sentence with “I believe” is, in fact, offering a creed. It is not wrong for Christians to believe things, or to assert what those things are, or to defend them. The New Testament actually offers a number of creedal affirmations. Just consider some of the following creedal claims about Jesus:

- “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matthew 16:16)
- “We have come to believe and know you are the Holy One of God” (John 6:69)
- “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3)

In addition, there are places in Scripture where it appears that several creedal beliefs are combined, forming, as it were, partial lists affirming what Christians believe. Consider, for example, the following:

- “For us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Corinthians 8:6).
- For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared” (1 Corinthians 15:3-7)
- “Have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled

himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:5-11)

- “He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory” (1 Timothy 3:16)
- “Therefore, let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment” (Hebrews 6:1-2)
- “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6)

By the early second century, a church leader named Irenaeus could speak of “the rule of faith” which all Christians, everywhere, believed. He describes “this faith” as belief in the following things:

*“in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all the things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who made known through the prophets the plan of salvation, and the coming, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his future appearing from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things and to raise anew all flesh of the whole human race.”*

When Hippolytus offers guidance on how to perform a baptism (in the third century), he shares this central body of core doctrines:

*“When the person being baptized goes down into the water, he who baptizes him, putting his hand on him, shall say, ‘Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?’ And the person being baptized shall say: ‘I believe’ ... And then he shall say: ‘Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born of the Virgin Mary, and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and was dead and buried, and rose again the third day, alive from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the*

*living and the dead?’ ... And again he shall say, ‘Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, in the holy church, and the resurrection of the body?’ The person being baptized shall say, ‘I believe.’”*

Even today, in churches all over the world (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant), you might hear the congregation recite the Nicene Creed or the Apostles Creed, which contain core doctrines or statements of belief which Christians have affirmed throughout the centuries.

As early Christian leaders testify, these collected statements of belief, or “creeds” were extremely useful for Christian instruction. Cyril of Jerusalem gave the following piece of wisdom:

*“But in learning the Faith and professing it, acquire and keep that only, which is now delivered to you by the Church, and which has been built up strongly out of all the Scriptures. For since all cannot read the Scriptures, some being hindered as to the knowledge of them by want of learning, and others by a want of leisure, in order that the soul may not perish from ignorance, we comprise the whole doctrine of the Faith in a few lines. This summary I wish you both to commit to memory when I recite it, and to rehearse it with all diligence among yourselves, not writing it out on paper, but engraving it by the memory upon your heart... I wish you also to keep this as a provision through the whole course of your life, and beside this to receive no other, neither if we ourselves should change and contradict our present teaching... So for the present listen while I simply say the Creed, and commit it to memory; but at the proper season expect the confirmation out of Holy Scripture of each part of the contents. For the articles of Faith were not composed as seemed good to men; but the most important points collected out of all the Scripture make up one complete teaching of the Faith. And just as the mustard seed in one small grain contains many branches, so also this Faith has embraced in few words all the knowledge of godliness in the Old and New Testaments. Take heed, then, brethren, and hold fast the traditions which you now receive, and write them on the table of your heart.”*

As time passed, there was a progressive movement toward a greater dependence on the “authority of the Church’s interpretation” (to borrow words from Vincent of Larins), and the more elaborate the teachings became, the more people questioned the value and relevance of raising this shared tradition of interpretation to the same level as simple reading of Scripture itself. Perhaps you have heard of the Protestant reformation, which, in large part, was a reaction to those who put the teachings and

general interpretations of church leaders on the same level as Scripture itself. I share this Protestant concern and see the danger. It is very easy (and tempting) to blindly accept the “majority view” on something and not search for ourselves. And this can have the unintended consequence of letting people’s thoughts (no matter how many, or how well-meaning) to be our final authority, rather than Scripture itself. In a later lesson, we will consider some ways to guard against that. However, Vincent of Larins offered this advice that is at least worth considering:

*“But here some one perhaps will ask, Since the canon of Scripture is complete, and sufficient of itself for everything, and more than sufficient, what need is there to join with it the authority of the Church’s interpretation? For this reason,—because, owing to the depth of Holy Scripture, all do not accept it in one and the same sense, but one understands its words in one way, another in another; so that it seems to be capable of as many interpretations as there are interpreters... Therefore, it is very necessary, on account of so great intricacies of such various error, that the rule for the right understanding of the prophets and apostles should be framed in accordance with the standard of Ecclesiastical and Catholic interpretation. Moreover, in the Catholic Church itself, all possible care must be taken, that we hold that faith which has been believed everywhere, always, by all. For that is truly and in the strictest sense...Catholic...which, as the name itself and the reason of the thing declare, comprehends all universally. This rule we shall observe if we follow universality, antiquity, consent. We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith to be true, which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is manifest were notoriously held by our holy ancestors and fathers; consent, in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at the least of almost all priests and doctors.”*

This early teaching—that the church is “catholic” (a word which originally meant “universal”) in the sense that Christians affirm central teachings universally held by all Christians everywhere—led to the standard definitions of “orthodoxy” and “heresy.” The word orthodoxy literally means “right teaching,” but refers in practice to faithful allegiance to the classic articulation of the Christian faith as offered in the historic Christian creeds; heresy refers to those who offer teaching that differs from those historical Christian creeds. Irenaeus condemned a heretical movement in the second century because their teaching did not align with what “the prophets preached, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles handed down” (Against Heresies 1.8.1). The same is true today.



In other words, the dead (Christians) get a vote!

## 6) A Wholistic Approach: Putting It All Together

The Bible says “a triple-braided cord is not easily broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12 NLT). The principle applies well here. Any one of these tools is helpful but incomplete. Put together, we have a much stronger ‘system’ for Bible interpretation. What is most helpful about this system is that it incorporates elements we think of as obvious or natural, and elements that have served the church well for centuries. Let’s pick a topic or question and run it through the lens of 6 tools we now have in our toolbox.

Topic: The Trinity (Father-Son-Spirit)

Issue: [Choose one from class]

Step 1: Direct Statements

“Godhead” (Acts 17:29; Col 2:9)

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Step 2: Biblical Examples

?

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Step 3: Obvious Hints or Implications

One “name”: Father, Son, Spirit (Mt 28:19)  
Father, Son, and Spirit each called “God”  
But there is one “God”

---

Step 4: Reason

This has proven difficult (can 1 be 3?)  
But logic requires making sense of step 3

---

Step 5: Tradition

Very strong and early in Christian tradition  
Considered essential Christian teaching

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Step 6: Experience

? Not a very helpful guide on this  
Trinitarian thinking makes God “relatable”

---

Conclusion:

Neg: reason and experience say this is hard to understand

Pos: There is a “Godhead” that needs to be explained

Pos: Implication and tradition strongly endorse Trinity as the answer

Therefore: I accept with humility (not sure I fully understand)

## Questions For Class (Week 7)

1. Do you value traditions in your family and home? Why?
2. Why is it important to recognize the role of “reason” when it comes to interpreting the Bible? Can you think of a viewpoint you rejected because it was simply unreasonable?
3. Discuss the role of “experience” in Bible interpretation. Can you think of an issue or topic where your mind has been changed due to your experience?
4. What comes to your mind when you hear the word “creed”? Where does your feeling (good or bad) come from?
5. Why is it important to ask if a viewpoint is considered central or “orthodox” throughout church history?
6. Pick a topic or issue that is of interest to you. Run it through the 6 tools of the last two weeks (direct statements, examples, hints, reason, tradition, experience). Does this approach provide more encouragement that your reading is both true and consistent with Christian practice?

*Other Suggested Helps for Week 7 for Teachers or for your Class*

### Chapters For Further Insight To Accompany This Lesson

Nathan Guy, “Appreciating Orthodoxy.” Healthy Theology Website.  
<https://healthytheology.com/healthy-theology-4-orthodoxy/>

Nathan Guy, “Believing Well.” Healthy Theology Website.  
<https://healthytheology.com/healthy-theology-5-believing-well/>

Joel Miller, “Why Apostolic Tradition Matters.” Patheos.  
<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/joelmiller/2012/12/why-apostolic-tradition-matters/>

Savi Hensman, “Thinking Theologically: Bible, Reason, Tradition, & Experience.” Ekklesia website. <https://old.ekklesia.co.uk/node/13404>

John L. Thompson, *Reading The Bible With The Dead*.  
<https://www.amazon.com/Reading-Bible-Dead-History-Exegesis/dp/0802807534/>



## Week 8: Read Theologically

**Object of the Class:** Now that we have considered “nuts and bolts” step-by-step approaches (such as CENI, reason, tradition, and experience), we will step back and consider the central truth in every story and the overarching narrative to which all stories point. In other words, where is God in our reading of Scripture?

Suggested Outline for Class:

### 1) Opening Exercise: Big Rocks Example (5 minutes)

Stephen Covey, author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* and *First Things First*, popularized an effective illustration meant to show the importance of priorities. [Feel free to act this out!]

Imagine a jar sitting on a table, accompanied by three piles: big rocks, small pebbles, and fine grain sand. Given the instruction to place all three piles in the jar, you quickly notice the need for priority. If you begin with the sand and pebbles, there will not be enough room for the big rocks. However, if you place the large rocks in first, the pebbles will then naturally fall around the big rocks, and the sand will fill the remaining crevices. The moral of the story? Big rocks first.

See it here:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyL93MIR\\_I0&ab\\_channel=EmileDeWilde](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyL93MIR_I0&ab_channel=EmileDeWilde)

### 2) Why We Need Theology

C. S. Lewis is probably best known for his series of children’s books known as the Chronicles of Narnia. But Lewis—who died on the same day as President Kennedy—is also rightly regarded as perhaps the most influential Christian thinker of the 20th century (rivaling Karl Barth). He possessed no academic qualifications in Biblical studies or theology in general. He was Anglican, but never sought the priesthood. Lewis was a medievalist, a professional literary critic, and on religious

matters considered himself simply a layperson, a fellow-traveler seeking to know what is true.

It is for this reason that I find the following quote from him so striking:

*“In other words, Theology is practical: especially now. In the old days, when there was less education and discussion, perhaps it was possible to get on with a very few simple ideas about God. But it is not so now. Everyone reads, everyone hears things discussed. Consequently, if you do not listen to Theology, that will not mean that you have no ideas about God. It will mean that you have a lot of wrong ones.”*

Do you know when and where Lewis said this? In a series of radio talks meant for the public airwaves in Britain in the 1940’s, Lewis lectured on God, morality, and central doctrines held by all orthodox churches throughout the centuries. These talks were later collected into the book known far and wide as *Mere Christianity*. As he began the last section (meant to discuss the difficult doctrine of the Trinity), Lewis wanted his audience to know that thinking about God is not a profession reserved for stuffy people donning robes; it is the passion and privilege of the people of God.

But, believe it or not, it was an uphill battle. “Everyone has warned me not to tell you what I am going to tell you in this last book” wrote Lewis. “They all say ‘the ordinary reader does not want Theology; give him plain practical religion’.” In reply, Lewis penned these poignant words:

*“I have rejected their advice. I do not think the ordinary reader is such a fool. Theology means ‘the science of God’, and I think any man who wants to think about God at all would like to have the clearest and most accurate ideas about Him which are available. You are not children: why should you be treated like children?”*

But surely we can all imagine some of the concerns shared by Lewis’ friends. “Theology” is one of those words that seems to invite glazed eyes and feelings of equal amounts of foreboding and boredom. And, worst of all, “theology” sounds so far removed from any active, living experience of God, knowing Him as your friend, rejoicing in the personal relationship with your Savior, or walking hand-in-hand with the powerful Holy Spirit of God.

But this is where Lewis is at once brilliant and deeply sensitive to our concerns. Take a person, says Lewis, who has had a real experience of God, and yet finds tracts and

treatments of doctrine to be far inferior. This is quite understandable, says Lewis, and actually quite right!

*“When he turned from that experience to the Christian creeds, I think he really was turning from something real to something less real. In the same way, if a man has once looked at the Atlantic from the beach, and then goes and looks at a map of the Atlantic, he also will be turning from something real to something less real: turning from real waves to a bit of coloured paper.”*

In Christian history, some have placed church teachings, doctrinal creeds, or even the most sacred writings about God (the Bible) ahead of God himself, or as stand-ins to replace God in one’s life. There is actually a term for this in theological studies; we call it “bibliolatry.” It takes that which points to God—even the most important pointer—and changes its intended use, turning that God-given tool into an idol. Lewis rightly points out that the goal of all theology is not greater reflection on God, but a more intimate relationship with Him; not knowing more about God, but coming to know God as He would have us know Him.

*The goal of all theology is not greater reflection on God, but a more intimate relationship with Him; not knowing more about God, but coming to know God as He would have us know Him.*

“But here comes the point,” writes Lewis. A map of the Atlantic Ocean is simply pictures on a paper. But there are two very important truths about this map that you must keep in mind. First, “it is based on what hundreds and thousands of people have found out by sailing the real Atlantic,” taking multiple experiences just like yours and “fitting them together.” Second, “if you want to go anywhere, the map is absolutely necessary.” If your curiosity and interest never rises above the level of your experience, than a map is unimportant. But if you want to get somewhere, especially to realms greater than your own experience has led you, a map is vitally important.

“Now, Theology is like the map,” writes Lewis. Simply reading and regurgitating Christian formulas are no substitute for the real thing, and they must never be treated that way. But Christian theology—complete with orthodox Christian doctrines resulting from careful reflection on the ways of God in the world and in the lives of His people throughout the centuries—provides a kind of map, produced by a vast ‘cloud of witnesses’ who have indeed experienced God. The Apostles were specifically chosen by Christ to speak truths of God and to share these teachings with faithful others who would carry the message into new lands. Orthodox Christian

teaching reflects the development of the Apostolic message, as Christians through the centuries sought (and continue to seek) to understand the heights and depths of the love of God, and to mine the riches of Christ’s teachings as well as rely on the leading of God’s Holy Spirit.

Why is Theology important? In the introduction to a book entitled Theology Matters, Randy Harris (who teaches at Abilene Christian University) offers three reasons (by way of summary) why Theology is important.

- First, only when we understand true teaching are we able to give true answers to thoughtful questions about God. The Bible challenges us to “[a]lways be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).
- Second, true theological reflection provides spiritual vitality, leading to a healthy spirituality. Only true teaching sustains us in the difficult moments; bad teaching breeds bad character, and tempts us away from truth when we need it most.
- Third, seeking proper doctrine is seeking what is actually true. Theology helps us know who God is, and there is nothing more real than that.

For all these reasons, and many more, Theology is indeed important. As we have learned, “Theology” is simply learning to embrace good and right ideas about God. C. S. Lewis’ comparison of the study of theology is to holding a map of the world—a much needed help if you are interested in serious exploration. The question you might be asking now is simply this: who needs theology when I can just read the Bible and do what it says?

### **3) Why We Need To Prioritize Bible Doctrine**

If God sets rules, we are called to keep them. “If you love me,” says Jesus, “you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). “Here’s how we can be sure that we know God in the right way,” writes John: “Keep his commandments” (1 John 2:3 MSG). It’s even possible to speak of “loving” God’s rules, since they give us peace, freedom, and hope (Psalm 119:97).

But over the years, some within Christianity have acted rudely, harsh, or even spiteful toward others, claiming they were simply “following the rules.” You can find stories of some groups boycotting military funerals, or leading murderous Crusades, or otherwise mistreating their fellow man—all in the name of keeping some rule they think they found in Scripture.

Most of us can appreciate these two “poles”: on the one hand, we know we should keep God’s rules. On the other hand, we know we shouldn’t act unChristian, since God would never make a rule like that. But how do we know how to read these rules? What can we tell our friends who are sincerely attempting to follow God’s rules, but end up acting unGodly in the process? I’d like to suggest that we find a lens through which all of God’s teachings should be read. Let’s start by putting first things first.

The Bible says that we must discern and prioritize Bible teaching. It’s easy to assume that every Bible teaching is on an equal level—and it’s easy to understand why we assume that. After all, it sounds right. How many times does God have to say something for it to be true? Just once! How many things does God command, without expecting obedience? Not one! But if you look at the Scriptures themselves, the Bible teaches that some things matter more than others — even when it comes to matters of Bible teaching. Let that thought sink in for a second. The Bible teaches that some Bible doctrines are more important than other doctrines.

What is the central teaching of the New Testament? Paul spells it out clearly in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4:

*“Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you...For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”*

Paul says that he passed on to the Christians in Corinth matters that were of “first importance” (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). The Greek word here for “first” can mean “first in a list,” but more likely means “first in priority.” However, on either reading, it proves the point that some things take precedence. There are starting places, foundation stones, upon which we ought to build healthy theology. The foundation of a house is both the most important element in construction, and the first thing laid down.



But “first importance” implies some things are “more important” than others. According to some estimates, there are 613 specific commands or duties given in the Old Testament. But when Jesus was asked “Which commandment is the most important of all?”, he didn’t reply “What a silly question! Don’t you know that since they are all from God then they are all equal?” Instead, he answered the question.

*“Jesus answered, The most important is...you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28-31 ESV).*

Do you remember when Jesus called the teachers of the Law “hypocrites” in Matthew 23? He had lots of reasons. One was this: “You have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former” (Matthew 23:23 NIV)

“The more important matters of the law” means there are some commandments that are more central, more tied to the foundation stone, than others. Yet notice how he ends the verse: “These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.” On the one hand, everything God says is important. But on the other hand, there are some teachings that have priority, ought to be learned first, and ought to take precedence when making judgments.

Jesus illustrated this very well in two stories concerning healing on the Sabbath. One Saturday, Jesus came to the synagogue and noticed a man with a withered hand. The text, speaking of Jesus’ adversaries, says, “they watched Jesus, to see whether he would heal him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him” (Mark 3:2). Jesus looked at them with justifiable anger, grieved at their hard hearts (Mark 3:5). On a different Saturday, when Jesus went to dinner at the home of a Pharisee, he was confronted with a man suffering from dropsy. Yet again, Jesus’ adversaries were “watching him carefully” (Luke 14:1).

The questions Jesus asks on these two occasions are profound. Listen carefully:

- “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” (Luke 14:3)
- “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:4)
- “Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?” (Luke 14:5)

Consider these three questions in modern English. “Does God allow us to heal on Saturdays?” “In any given situation on a Saturday, is it God’s will to do good and to be life-giving, or to inflict harm, and destroy?” “Besides this, in actual practice, who wouldn’t rescue their son—or even their pet—if they needed help on a Saturday? You wouldn’t let your ox die of a broken leg on the Sabbath; but you condemn me for healing your fellow man!” The point of these questions is to reveal just how blind we can get when our misguided hearts cause us to place a higher priority on keeping every rule even if it means ignoring the hurting people around us. But in such cases, it means we never really understood the rule! Or, we were guilty of loving rules simply for the rules’ sake. Jesus is challenging us to live with a “common sense” that says some things take priority when two good rules collide (ex: help those hurting and keep the Sabbath). Rules and regulations are good, important, and often necessary. God gives lots of them and intends for us to follow them. But *loving* God and *loving* people take priority over *loving* rules for rules’ sake.

In fact, “valuing rules over valuing people” seems to be one of the central problems that resulted from the Pharisee’s way of reading and applying Scripture. When Jesus is confronted with unhealthy teaching that stems from hard-hearted readings of Scripture, he does at times ask the Bible scholars of his own day (perhaps rhetorically) “have you not read” (Matthew 12:5), which is equivalent to “are we reading the same Bible?”

But more often, Jesus is less worried that the religious teachers don’t know what Scripture *says*; he is concerned that they don’t understand what Scripture *means*. Because they have failed to use proper lenses. When Jesus chose to reference Micah 6:6-8 and Hosea 6:6 (just some among a number of passages which show God’s priority for loving actions toward God and neighbor), the most provocative move is how he frames the conversation. “Go and learn what this means” says Jesus, as he cites Scripture (Matthew 9:13). “If you had known what this [passage] means”, says Jesus, “you would not have condemned the guiltless” (Matthew 12:7). If we reflect on the meaning of Scripture, says Jesus, we’d be able to discern and prioritize Bible teachings.

In all of these passages, we see that God never intended for his Word to be read “flat”, where every teaching is held of equal weight without regard to priority. Some things are primary, some secondary, and it matters a great deal what teachings receive priority.

What have we learned? That not all ideas about God—or even teachings from God—are of equal weight and measure. Some things are primary, others are secondary. Some things are central, others are peripheral. Even Scripture itself teaches that a failure to appreciate the “weightier matters” of “first importance” can lead to disastrous consequences. Somehow, we need to learn how to put first things first.

#### **4) Why We Need To Know What The Big Rocks Are**

Good and honest hearts often disagree about how to interpret the teachings of Scripture. Common-sense only gets us so far. What we wish, of course, is that the Bible came with a preface giving us both a lens through which to read Scripture and a list of topics that are of first importance.

So, in our last class, we began to consider some ways to piece together what that preface might look like. Whatever group you come from—within the larger vision known as “Christianity”—you have likely adopted teachings shared by everyone else who claims to be a follower of Christ. There is a very good reason for this. Church history is an extended conversation among people searching for the same goal; when seen from this light, we can begin to appreciate the concept of shared values and healthy tradition.

Since the earliest days of Christianity, believers have sought for an appropriate shorthand that expresses the central claims of the Christian faith—the main theological themes in the light of which all other issues and teachings are clarified and understood. Some early Christians spoke of a “rule of faith” which could effectively describe the core of Christian doctrine; this rule of faith was eventually clarified and codified. These early “I believe” statements (which, in Latin, are called “creeds”) have stood the test of time across numerous divides in Christendom. The word “orthodoxy”—coined in the light of these early claims—has long served as a marker to signify core, central teachings of the Christian faith. In other words, we are looking for the “big rocks” (from our illustration at the beginning of class): the central teachings have long held prime position in Christian thought and life.

C.S. Lewis understood the importance of emphasizing the big rocks when it comes to theology. In the preface to *Mere Christianity*, Lewis explained the rationale for choosing topics on which to write. “Ever since I became a Christian,” writes Lewis, “I have thought that the best, perhaps the only, service I could do for my unbelieving neighbours was to explain and defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times.” Of course there are finer points of detail worth holding and

defending—as Lewis himself, admits. But some things are central starting points. His illustration is not rocks vs pebbles, but rather a long central hallway that properly belongs in the house of faith. There are various doors leading to various rooms—important fields of exploration in their own right. But this shared central hallway of faith, what Baxter called “mere Christianity,” is what appeared to Lewis most in need of defending. “I was not writing to expound something I could call ‘my religion,’” writes Lewis, “but to expound ‘mere’ Christianity, which is what it is and what it was long before I was born and whether I like it or not.” Those occupying various rooms differ from one another, to be sure; and “one of the things Christians are disagreed about is the importance of their disagreements.” But “at the centre of each” room, group, or school of teaching within orthodox Christian thought “there is something, or Someone, who against all divergences of belief, all differences of temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice.”

What is the voice at the center? What is the “preface”, the “lens”, the “rule of faith” that serves the role we are looking for? If we consult the topics listed in Ephesians 4:4-6, or what topics continually appear in all the speeches of Acts, or what topics have long been considered central to the Christian faith across denominational lines (see, for example the earliest Christian statements of faith: such as the Old Roman symbol, the Apostles Creed, and the Nicene Creed), we begin to hear that voice emerge.

### *ON GOD: THE FATHER, SON, & HOLY SPIRIT*

For starters, Christians must affirm that there is one God who made everything there is – in heaven and on earth, whether visible or invisible. The very fact that something exists means that it owes its existence to God. All dependent things find their origin in God. Reflecting on this powerful truth has led to some fascinating explorations in philosophical theology. But on the most simple of terms, God is ultimate Creator—and shares that space with no one and no thing besides.

Christians affirm that God took on humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (what is known as the incarnation). As a result, Jesus is portrayed both as divine (conceived by the Holy Spirit) and human (born of the Virgin Mary). Jesus suffered death at the hands of Pontius Pilate, being crucified and buried. However, on the third day he was raised from the dead by the power of God. After his resurrection, Christ ascended to take his place at the right hand of the Father. He is the Christ (meaning the anointed King), God’s own Son, our Savior and Lord.

Christians also believe in the Holy Spirit who is the Lord and giver of life. Scripture fills out the ways in which the Spirit serves in these roles. For example, the Spirit was there at creation bringing life to the world. He anointed Jesus at his baptism, directed and empowered him in his temptation and ministry, and by the will of God raised him from the dead. He was poured out on the apostles at Pentecost and sanctifies Christians so that the Church is made holy and made perfect in eternity.

What are we to make of these three confessions? Christians affirm that there is one Savior: our Lord and God. That God makes himself known to us in the New Testament as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ was not “created” or “made,” which means He is of the same essence as the Father—God from God, light from light, very God of very God. Likewise, the Holy Spirit is not created, but proceeds from God and is to be worshiped alongside the Father and the Son. This important teaching means that God is perfectly one, yet exists in an eternal relationship of giving and receiving love. As the Athanasian creed puts it, we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity, whose glory is equal, and majesty coeternal.

### *ON CREATION, SALVATION, & THE CHURCH*

Christians affirm that God is “maker of all” and also that He is “the giver of life.” This means that God—by His Son and in the power of His Spirit—not only created the world but also sustains it. Everything came into being by God, and remains in being by God. For this reason, creation matters.

However, humanity has rebelled against God, and all of creation bears the effects of sin. We cry out for help, as we stand in need of something, or Someone, to restore our relationship to God and heal all the effects of sin. Christians affirm that sin has an ultimate remedy: Jesus Christ. For us and for our salvation Christ came down from heaven, was made man, and died, resulting in forgiveness of sins. Christ, the Holy One, died so that we might be Holy—set apart and redeemed.

Christians believe all the redeemed are placed in one community (or “church”) which is holy, catholic (a word meaning “universal”), and apostolic (that is, built on the teaching of the Apostles as recorded in Scripture). This one church enjoys fellowship together, known as the “communion of saints,” and experiences the gift of salvation, known as the “forgiveness of sins.” While a number of activities might characterize God’s people, two prominent ones exemplify these shared truths: those in the church have the shared experience of baptism (the tangible sharing in “one baptism for the forgiveness of sins”), and of participating in the Lord’s Supper (the tangible sharing in “the communion of saints.”)

## *ON THE END: RESURRECTION, JUDGMENT, & LIFE EVERLASTING*

We believe that death is not the end. One day, the last enemy (death) will be destroyed, and that God will raise our bodies from the dead. Christ will then offer judgment of all people—the living and the dead. There is a warning of everlasting punishment for some. However, believers in Christ live in hope. We affirm that God will change our bodies to be like Christ’s glorious body, and that, in the world to come, we will enjoy life everlasting with God, sharing in a kingdom that shall have no end.

The early Christian creeds flow out of serious reflection on the Apostles’ doctrine, and, as such, invite us to take the Bible seriously. Christ’s death and resurrection were “according to the Scriptures,” foretold by the Holy Spirit “who spake by the prophets.”

These teachings have long been dubbed the “catholic faith”—meaning, what the Church universal affirms and believes. You will notice there is no emphasis on popes or priests, tongue-speaking or visions, Sunday school classes or youth campaigns. There is nothing in these teachings peculiar to one Christian subset, and everything taught here can be affirmed by believers across denominational lines.

### *BIG ROCKS...NOT THE ONLY ROCKS*

Is this all that needs to be said in matters of doctrine? Of course not. Christians are called to live strong ethical lives as ones made in the very image of God, to live after the example of Jesus as recorded in the gospels, and to adhere to the Apostles teaching as developed in the epistles (which, in turn, are rooted in the larger revelation of God). There is certainly more to be said, and even the topics listed above are often fleshed out in varying (and sometimes, controversial) ways from person to person and group to group. But we are searching for some shared understanding that can offer a starting point for healthy theology, and a healthy reading of Scripture.

If our reading of Scripture causes us to deny these central teachings, we are not reading Scripture right. If our church community—due to experience or reasoned argument—has separated itself from all other believers based on peculiar teachings that are not central to the Christian faith, that may be a sign that we have failed to appreciate the universal faith of the Christian community. But if, in turn, we

recognize the big rocks for what they are, we may just find that our house of faith is being built on solid rock rather than shifting sand.

### Questions For Class (Week 8)

1. What is the point of the “big rocks” illustration? Be honest with yourself—what things have been “big rocks” in your religious, theological, and doctrinal upbringing? Why were they “big rocks”?
2. What is Theology? Consider Lewis’ illustration of a “map.” How can studying Theology be helpful to understanding the Bible and God’s will for your life?
3. Are some Bible doctrines more central than other Bible doctrines? How do you explain this, while believing everything the Bible teaches is important?
4. If two people disagree about which teachings in Scripture are “more important” (or more central), how do you settle the matter?
5. Share the 7 ones of Ephesians 4:4-6. How are these helpful as “big rocks”? Why do you think this is the same basic outline for the speeches of Acts and for the earliest Christian creeds?
6. What happens when we read the Bible through a theological lens—looking for God and the seven ones?

*Other Suggested Helps for Week 7 for Teachers or for your Class*

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

Kevin Youngblood, “The Heart of the Matter.” Sermon: Downtown Church of Christ (March 16, 2014): <https://downtownchurch.wordpress.com/2014/03/18/the-heart-of-the-matter/>

Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide* (Cascade, 2015).  
<https://www.amazon.com/Rule-Faith-Guide-Cascade-Companions/dp/162564759X>

Steven Covey, “Big Rocks” Illustration:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyL93MIR\\_I0&ab\\_channel=EmileDeWilde](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VyL93MIR_I0&ab_channel=EmileDeWilde)