

— 2025 ENTRUSTED CONFERENCE —

BIBLICISM

THE BATTLE FOR AUTHORITY



AUGUST 22-23, 2025

“

AND THE THINGS
WHICH YOU HAVE
HEARD FROM ME IN
THE PRESENCE OF
MANY WITNESSES,
ENTRUST

THESE TO FAITHFUL MEN
WHO WILL BE ABLE
TO TEACH OTHERS ALSO.

2 TIMOTHY 2:2

”

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On behalf of the leadership of Indian Hills Community Church, welcome to the 2025 Entrusted Conference!

To borrow from the title of an old Harold Lindsell book, a “battle for the Bible” is underway in today’s evangelical climate, and at the heart of this battle are questions concerning the authority of Scripture and the sufficiency of Scripture. Does the Word of God truly contain “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3)? Must we rely on extra-biblical resources to accurately handle the word of truth? Putting it even more simply: is the Bible enough?

These questions seemingly were settled more than 500 years ago, in the days of the Protestant Reformation and its commitment to sola Scriptura—“Scripture alone.” But today there are those who, though operating from a Protestant worldview, are not-so-silently eroding this core Reformation principle. Specifically, there is a growing insistence in certain theological circles that we can only read the Scriptures rightly if we do so in conjunction with creeds, confessions, tradition, history, theology, philosophy, and the like. To which one has to ask, “Are the Scriptures sufficient, or are they not? Is the Bible enough, or is it not?”

The topic for this year’s Entrusted Conference is “Biblicism: The Battle for Authority.” This is a timely and important topic.

We are grateful for the gifted group of speakers the Lord has lined up to help us think through these important matters. We are grateful that you have carved precious time out of your weekend to join us, and we pray the sessions will both encourage and refresh you. And above all, we are grateful to our great God, who has spoken to us clearly – and authoritatively – in His timeless and sufficient Word.

“Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, encourage your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word” 2 Thessalonians 2:16–17.

Yours in Christ,



Jesse Randolph

Schedule

FRIDAY, AUGUST 22

6:00 PM	Registration
6:30 PM	Plenary 1: Pastor Jesse Randolph
7:45 PM	Plenary 2: Dr. Mark Snoeberger
8:45 PM	Dessert Fellowship

SATURDAY, AUGUST 23

7:30 AM	Prayer Meeting
8:00 AM	Light Breakfast
9:00 AM	Plenary 3: Dr. Cory Marsh
10:15 AM	Breakout Sessions Breakout A: Dr. Jack Hughes Breakout B: Dr. Gary Gilley Breakout C: Dr. Rick Goertzen Breakout D: Jenna Randolph (with Jesse Randolph)
11:15 AM	Plenary 4: Dr. Richard Bargas
12:00 PM	Lunch
1:30 PM	Plenary 5: Dr. Jack Hughes
2:30 PM	Plenary 6: Panel Discussion: All Speakers

Speakers



DR. RICHARD BARGAS

Executive Director, IFCA International

Dr. Bargas serves as the Executive Director of IFCA International and editor of Voice, a bi-monthly theological magazine. He has served as a pastor for more than two decades and taught as a Faculty Associate at The Master's Seminary. He speaks at churches and conferences across the country, blogs at Always-Reforming.com, and is passionate about sound doctrine and helping local churches flourish.



DR. JACK HUGHES

Lead Pastor/Teacher, Anchor Bible Church, Louisville, Kentucky

Dr. Hughes serves as the Lead Pastor/Teacher of Anchor Bible Church in Louisville, Kentucky. He received his MDiv from The Master's Seminary and his DMin from Westminster Theological Seminary. He runs a website intended to help equip preachers and Bible teachers at DrivenNails.com.



DR. CORY MARSH

Professor of New Testament, Southern California Seminary

Dr. Marsh serves as Professor of New Testament, Director of the ThM program, and Director of SCS Press at Southern California Seminary. He has authored or edited multiple published essays, books, and articles in various academic journals, and is a frequent conference speaker. He serves as Scholar in Residence at Revolve Bible Church, in San Juan Capistrano, CA.



PASTOR JESSE RANDOLPH

Pastor-Teacher, Indian Hills Community Church

Pastor Randolph serves as the Pastor Teacher at Indian Hills Community Church. He holds an MDiv from The Master's Seminary and has spoken at a number of conferences and written for a number of publications. He co-hosts a podcast called Sound Words which releases a wide variety of content to help Christians love and live out God's Word.



DR. MARK SNOEBERGER

Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary

Dr. Snoeberger serves as an Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. He received his MDiv and ThM from DBTS and his PhD in systematic theology from Baptist Bible Seminary. He has authored a number of books and journal articles in various academic journals.



DR. GARY GILLEY

Senior Pastor, Southern View Chapel, Springfield, Illinois

Dr. Gilley pastors Southern View Chapel in Springfield, IL. He is the author of a number of books on various topics related to biblical, practical, and historical theology. Pastor Gilley received his B.A. from Moody Bible Institute and his M.B.S. and Th.D. from Cambridge Graduate School.



DR. RICK GOERTZEN

Senior Pastor, Countryside Bible Church, Hampton, Nebraska

Dr. Rick Goertzen pastors Countryside Bible Church in Hampton, NE, and has spoken in numerous venues throughout the country. He earned his Doctor of Ministry from The Master's Seminary, and is passionate about preaching God's Word and equipping the saints for the work of service.

Seminars

FRIDAY, AUGUST 22

6:30 PM **Plenary 1: 'Biblicism:' A Bad Word?"**

Speaker: Pastor Jesse Randolph

Description: There is a battle brewing in broader Christendom today — a battle over biblical authority. And “ground zero” for this battle is found on the question of sufficiency. Is the Bible enough? For the past 500 years, conservative Christians have consistently answered this question affirmatively, citing the core Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”). But today, a groundswell of opposition is forming — in both seminaries and on social media — to the idea of being a “biblicist.” So what gives? Is Scripture sufficient, or not? Is “biblicist” a label to be avoided, or embraced? This session will set the stage for the conference by examining the issues in play, while equipping attendees to stand firm in the fight.

7:45 PM **Plenary 2: Biblicism and Hermeneutics: Reading the Bible Like a Biblicist**

Speaker: Dr. Mark Snoeberger

Description: The reader of Scripture truly committed to biblical authority knows but one valid approach to hermeneutics, historically called literalism, or more recently originalism. Bound by necessity to discover the single, fixed meaning of the text conceived by its author, the faithful biblicist refuses to assign alien meaning to the text, content instead to discover, from the original words and syntax used in their historical context, the meaning that the original author manifestly intended.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 23

9:00 AM **Plenary 3: Who Wants to Be Labeled a “Biblicist”?**

Speaker: Dr. Cory Marsh

Description: The term “biblicism” is often a derogatory term, associated with selective proof-texting, an ahistorical mindset, even “bibliolatry.” However, self-identifying biblicists define it differently, emphasizing an unquestioning commitment to the authority of the Bible and rooted in the presupposition that Scripture ought to be understood according to its own terms. Challenging modern misconceptions and pointing out historical dangers of dismissing core convictions of biblicism, this talk defends the label “biblicist” as a noble identity for evangelicals maintaining an unshakable trust in God’s inerrant and infallible Bible, understood through a consistent interpretive approach, and aligning with the Protestant principle *sola Scriptura*.

SATURDAY, AUGUST 23 (CONTINUED)

10:15 AM

Breakout Session A: Defending the Faith Like a Biblicist: How Biblicism Establishes Guardrails for the Truth of Scripture

Speaker: Dr. Gary Gilley **Location:** Auditorium

Breakout Session B: Shepherding Like a Biblicist: How the Sufficiency of Scripture Fuels Convictional Leadership

Speaker: Dr. Rick Goertzen **Location:** Bible Learning Center

Breakout Session C: Preaching Like a Biblicist: How Careful Exegesis Leads to Effective Exposition

Speaker: Dr. Jack Hughes **Location:** Chapel

Breakout Session D: Living Like a Biblicist: How the Authority of Scripture Anchors Godly Womanhood

Speaker: Jenna Randolph (with Jesse Randolph) **Location:** Room 1430 (JH Room)

11:15 AM

Plenary 4: Biblicism and Theological Conviction: Developing Theology Like a Biblicist

Speaker: Dr. Richard Bargas

Description: What does it mean to be truly biblical in how we understand and articulate theology? In this message, we will consider how sound doctrine is not just shaped by Scripture—it is drawn directly from it. Emphasizing the inspiration and sufficiency of the Bible, this message will challenge believers to develop deep theological convictions that are rooted in the text of God's Word, not tradition or personal opinion. Discover how a biblicist approach to theology safeguards the truth and strengthens the church in an age of confusion and compromise.

1:30 PM

Plenary 5: Exegesis and Action: Applying the Bible Like a Biblicist

Speaker: Dr. Jack Hughes

Description: What is the biblicist's perspective on how to find practical application from a text of Scripture? How can meaningful principles be extracted from the Bible and applied to the hearts of people today? In this session, we will bring together all that has been covered thus far in the conference and propose a method of Bible-study which will help us better apply God's Word like faithful biblicists.

2:30 PM

Plenary 6: Panel Discussion

Speaker: Pastor Michael Otazu & All Plenary Speakers

Description: Panel discussion with all of our plenary speakers led by Pastor Michael Otazu.

FROM DERISION *to* DEFINITION

Confronting Misconceptions of Biblicism¹

By Dr. Cory Marsh

Like *fundamentalist* and *fundamentalism*, the terms *biblicist* and *biblicism* are not wildly popular among the evangelical elite. Because a biblical fundamentalist can also be called a biblicist in the right context, the idea of biblicism for how I and others understand it should be explained.

For some scholars, biblicism conjures up images of selective proof texting to justify one's orthodoxy.² For others, it gives the impression of an "ahistorical mindset" that devalues all insights and formulations from Christian thinkers throughout history.³ And still others view biblicism as an extreme form of literalistic interpretation, "with no respect for Scripture's poetic devices or Aristotelian

rationalism."⁴ One dictionary even conflates *biblicism* with *bibliolatry*, the latter being a pejorative term to castigate those who value Scripture to the extent of apparently idolatrizing the Bible.⁵ If being a biblicist relates to any one of these views, it's not surprising that astute Christian thinkers would want to stay as far from it as an identity as possible!

Now, I must admit that there are people in this world who probably fit within one of those descriptions. That said, I believe it's unfair to tag a group of people with a label that is used entirely differently by those who intentionally self-identify as biblicists and contribute to the academic community. Unfortunately, scholars who push a version

of the label onto others who define it differently tend to be the most published and influential within academic evangelicalism and therefore become the standard bearers of what they believe a word should mean, despite what it did mean before them. These are often voices within the current Reformed evangelical trend of returning to a form of catholicity that can (not always) resemble the medieval scholasticism justifying the “dark ages” when the Roman Catholic Church kept the light of God’s word from their people.⁶ I say it’s better to go directly to those who are informed from the inside and self-identify with a label, and consult their definition for how they use the term. Doing so reveals a more accurate portrayal of biblicism that looks much different than those given above.

For example, according to self-identifying biblicists John MacArthur, Richard Mayhue, and the faculty that produced a respected textbook on biblical doctrine, *biblicism* is defined simply as, “a very strong and even unquestioning commitment to the authority of the Bible.”⁷ This simple definition is not reflected at all in the sample offered by those who deride the term above. In MacArthur and Mayhue’s view of biblicism, there is no worship of the Bible (bibliolatry) nor a disrespect for Scripture’s poetic devices as suggested in those derogatory statements.

They are not alone, as some writers choose to highlight the historical pedigree of the idea of biblicism. Previous scholars like Alfred Russell even document the term “evangelical biblicist” as in use centuries ago to differentiate the non-conformists or puritan separatists from the “sacramentarian ecclesiasts” who held onto vestiges of aberrant Roman Catholic dogma in the wake of the Reformation.⁸ Adding the qualifier biblicist proved helpful to identify someone who held to the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith more than what “evangelical” could simply express. The latter term was eventually redefined by historical-critical

scholars, and in the course of time became the catch all phrase that it is today. As Russell pointed out, the higher criticism made popular in German theological circles eventually spread to the UK and to the US, and as it did, “‘Evangelical’ gradually ceased to be the designation of true Biblicists and became merely a blanket phrase covering practically all Non-Romanists.” Ironically, the term evangelical now not only blankets “non-Romanists” (i.e., non-Catholics) who desire the label, but even extends in some uses to cover non-Protestants (i.e., Catholics and others) as well.

By sola Scriptura, we mean that ultimate authority lies with the written revelation from God expressed through his chosen prophets and apostles—in other words, the Bible.

By *sola Scriptura*, we mean that ultimate authority lies with the written revelation from God expressed through his chosen prophets and apostles—in other words, the Bible. The principle does not mean that other authorities don’t exist or should never be consulted (e.g., history, tradition, scholarship, etc.). Contrary to some definitions of biblicism, a Christian biblicist does not supplant *sola Scriptura* with *solo* (or *nuda*) *Scriptura* as if believing God hasn’t gifted countless teachers throughout church history with spiritual and intellectual prowess that elevate their insights to levels higher than mere opinions. Rather, the biblicist (or biblical-fundamentalist) understands that Scripture is the inerrant, infallible, and authoritative word of God that can be understood by the Holy Spirit indwelt believer in Jesus Christ who’s applying a consistent method of interpretation.

During the 2025 Entrusted Conference held at Indian Hills Community Church in Lincoln, Nebraska, several of us offered the following definition for *biblicism*: “The commitment to the authority, perspicuity, and sufficiency of Scripture which is rooted in the presupposition that the Bible ought to be understood according to its own terms.” How I and others apply the term in no way identifies someone who disparages the study and insights of extra-biblical literature. We just recognize there is a pecking order where nothing on earth can usurp the Bible’s authority—and that recognition is reflected in their conversations and scholarship. “While not a perfect term,” admits MacArthur and Mayhue, “we have chosen [to

identify as] biblicists, because at the core of our conviction lies an unshakable trust in God’s inerrant and infallible Bible, rightly interpreted.”¹⁰ Clearly, to believe the Bible carries God’s authority is to read it in such a way that would result in that belief which shares with the Protestant principle of Scripture’s clarity. Thus, a chain becomes apparent: biblical inerrancy, biblical authority, and biblical clarity are all indelibly linked with a consistent interpretive approach that justifies the idea of biblicism. If such is what being a *biblicist* truly means, then frankly, no genuine evangelical should ever disparage the term even if disagreements over hermeneutics arise. Instead, they should adopt the term with resolute conviction. ♦

END NOTES

¹ This essay is adapted from my forthcoming book, *Recovering a Vintage Faith: Five Fundamentals of Evangelical Identity* (Christian Focus/Mentor, 2026).

² Michael S. Horton, “Why Historical Theology Matters: The Trinity and the Dangers of Biblicism,” *Theo Global Journal* 1 (Nov 2024): 233.

³ Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 21.

⁴ J. D. Douglas, ed., *New Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), s.v., “Biblicism.”

⁵ See J. J. Scott Jr., “Biblicism, Bibliolatry,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 152. Interestingly, this entry does not appear in the subsequently revised editions.

⁶ Let me be clear I do think there is much that can be learned from supposed retrievals of classic theology and the like. I even enjoy personal friendships and collegial associa-

tions with many who fit within, and publish as advocates of, this modern trend. It is the issue of charity and respect for other Christians that I value most. Unfortunately, some within this crowd have failed to demonstrate these ethics toward those who don’t view themselves as accurately portrayed in their scholarly re-definitions of historic terms like *biblicist* or *fundamentalist*. The re-branding of biblicism by some often amounts to elitist and unloving derogatory statements toward other believers within evangelicalism, thereby violating Jesus’s clear ethics in Matthew 7:12 and John 13:35.

⁷ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 925.

⁸ Alfred U. Russell, “In Defence [sic] of Fundamentalism” *Central Bible Quarterly* 02.1 (Spring 1959): 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine*, 26.

THE ONLY HERMENEUTICAL METHOD COMPATIBLE WITH TRUE BIBLICISM

BY DR. MARK SNOEBERGER

The term *biblicism* has been variously defined in the history of Christian theology. Many have used the label craftily, appealing to the Bible only after assigning novel meanings to its words. Karl Barth is representative, suggesting in his commentary on Romans that he happily owned the label “biblicist...provided I am allowed to explain what I mean by it.” Sadly, he defined the term much differently than we have defined it here at the 2025 Entrusted Conference.

In this conference we have striven to restore a more straightforward meaning to the term *biblicism*, one that affirms that the Bible is true and without error, authoritative and normative in all that it affirms, and imbued with timeless and immutable clarity that is accessible to all who seek faithfully to think God’s thoughts after him. The term

biblicist, we affirm, is only helpful so long as its users are committed reading the Christian Scriptures according to the same laws of language and in pursuit of the very fixed messages that the biblical authors originally intended. That is to say, we must be committed to “authorial intent.”

But how, one might ask, can we know what Paul or Peter or James or Jesus meant? We cannot enter their minds or interview them. Their words were set adrift when they died, and we may at best try to advance their general concerns, as we see them, in a world very different from theirs.

This theory of language is known in legal circles as “purposivism.” It argues that modern interpreters may and ought to extrapolate the unstated “germ” or “spirit” of

a given law, then extrapolate new understandings and applications of that law consistent with the original authors' "trajectory of thought." Each reader, in the end, is permitted to offer his own opinions about what the original authors might have said differently today had they survived to see the world as it has become. This is variously described as an *activist*, *progressive*, or *liberal* approach to the Constitution and other legal precedents.

As such, we do not need to learn new ways of reading that are unique to the Bible, cast about for special codes that divulge its "fuller" meaning, nor ascend levels of spirituality in order to unlock its "deeper" truths.

It is this approach to which Justice Antonin Scalia was responding when he championed an approach to interpreting the nation's founding documents that eventually came to be known as *originalism*. An originalist does not seek to forecast some elusive trajectory of meaning from above/outside a document; rather, he discovers within a document itself the static meaning that immutably seated in the "original public meaning" of the words that the original authors used when they wrote them. An originalist interpreter seeks at all times to remove himself from his own task (i.e., his contemporary concerns and preunderstandings about what he thinks a given text ought to say) and lets the original authors speak for themselves. That is to say, his task is objective, not subjective.

This is precisely how we should read the Bible. Our goal as readers is never to impose on the Bible contemporary norms—say, the

(1) the assured results of science (as modernism did), (2) new and evolving social trends (as postmodernism does), (3) political whimsey (as Christian nationalism does), or (4) any of a great number of ascendent theological concerns that wax and wane in popularity—and then assign new meanings to the biblical text that conform to and validate these norms. This approach is the very antithesis of the biblicism being defended in this conference. It treats the Bible as a kind of wax nose that can be conformed to any socio-political and ecclesiastical exigency that happens along. It replaces biblical authority with personal autonomy in the reading of Scripture.

Instead, we must engage always in *exegesis*, a term that is very much a sum of its lexical parts—a "drawing out" of the meaning assigned originally by the biblical authors, a meaning known expressly and exclusively from the **words** and **sentences** that they used at the **time** that they used them. We call this approach, for these reasons, the "grammatical-historical" approach to interpretation. It rejects all novel "senses" that have been imposed historically on the biblical text (i.e., the allegorical/typological, tropological/moral, and anagogical/mystical senses) as alien senses, contrived and assigned by the reader, which distract from the plain, normal, or literal sense of the text.

While in one way the Bible is the only book of its kind (it alone is inspired, inerrant, and universally authoritative), in another it is not. In terms of its literary character, it is just like any other book. It uses ordinary grammar, syntax, genres, idioms, and so forth, and a reader absorbs its message just like we do any other piece of literature. As such, we do not need to learn new ways of reading that are unique to the Bible, cast about for special codes that divulge its "fuller" meaning, nor ascend levels of spirituality in order to unlock its

“deeper” truths. The meaning of the Bible is accessible to all who have a rudimentary understanding of how human language works.

So what are these rudimentary laws of language? In my conference presentation I seek to unpack four such laws: transcendent laws that must be assumed in order to communicate effectively in any context; laws that must ironically be used in order for anyone to read successfully what I have here written and know that they have done so.

1. The Univocal Nature of Language.

Language-users always speak with “one voice” or, more precisely, with distinct and fixed intent. This does not mean that language-users can never use figures with double meanings (puns, irony, metaphors, etc.), nor does it mean that their words cannot be variously *applied*; rather, it means that readers may not assign new or occult *meanings* to a speaker’s words after the fact and additional (much less contrary) to his manifest intention.

2. The Jurisdiction of Authorial Intent.

A reader is not free to assign any meaning within the semantic/syntactical range of options for a given set of words. By this we do not deny that ranges of meaning exist; rather we are suggesting that the author alone is the arbiter of his own specific intention. The job of the readers is not to select an attractive meaning from a buffet of options, but to discover the author’s own intention by means of grammatical/syntactical clues, historical context/convention, the overall theological consistency/coherence of the biblical writer, and so forth. As we noted above, we hold firmly to the *grammatical-historical* method.

3. The Unitary Authorship of Scripture.

While nearly every Scripture involves both human and divine “voices,” these voices always and necessarily speak in concert. There is never a discrepancy of intention between the divine and human authors in

the production of Scripture. By its very definition, inspiration is a “divine act that creates an identity between a divine word and a human word” (Frame, *Doctrine of the Word of God*, 140). That is to say, the two authors always intended exactly the same thing. While the divine author, of course, knew more implications of the Bible’s words than the human author, God does not harbor intent *additional* to that of the human author in any given word set, and most certainly does not secretly insert meanings *other* than that of the human author.

God does not harbor intent additional to that of the human author in any given word set, and most certainly does not secretly insert meanings other than that of the human author.

4. The Textually Based Locus of Meaning.

The only valid vehicle granted us to discern biblical meaning are the words that the author used. And thanks to the miracle of inspiration, we know that these words were dispensed without error and preserved. Rejected here is the idea that the words are merely a *hinweis* or “pointer” to ineffable revelation that resides above the text in some way, accessible by (1) Barthian encounter or (2) Gnostic ascent. Also rejected here is the idea that Old Testament saints depended upon later revelation to possess an accurate or complete understanding of their Bibles.

Taken together, these “received laws” of language are adequate for the man of God to be “thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:17). Set aside, their absence will inevitably validate false ideas and notions that lead us astray. ♦



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WE STAND *or Fall* ON THESE TRUTHS

By Dr. Richard Bargas

The rallying cry of the Protestant Reformation is often summarized in five sola statements: *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *solus Christus*, and *solus Deo gloria*.¹ Although these five sola statements can appear in different orders, their sequence is significant, and the first and last are always given prominence. This is intentional. *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) forms the foundation for all the other doctrines that follow. *Soli Deo gloria* (glory to God alone) is the conclusion of all that precedes. The Protestant reformers understood that the gospel could be lost, and souls could be damned if the church forgets that our starting point must be the authority of Scripture, and Scripture alone.

The Roman Catholic system didn't completely reject the Bible. Instead, it simply added another authority that exists alongside the Scriptures, claiming authority over the Word of God and its interpretation.² And although Roman Catholicism's view of Scripture was the initial reason that the Reformers

sought to reaffirm the sole authority of the Word of God, it was not the only threat.

Today, many within and outside the evangelical church threaten the authority of God's Word in various ways. Many charismatics and Pentecostals, for example, claim to believe in the Word of God and agree with the Protestant doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, affirming that the Bible is without error. However, their openness to and pursuit of new revelation undermine the authority of Scripture. This is evident in theologian Wayne Grudem's redefinition of the gift of prophecy to include errors, impressions, and impulses from so-called modern prophets or apostles.³ Besides the risk of adding authority and new revelations, cults like the Latter-Day Saints include their Standard Works and modern-day prophets alongside the Bible, undermining the sole authority God has given His Word. Today, evangelicalism is heavily influenced by charismatic theology, even as the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (1978) attempted to

address this issue by stating, “We further deny that any normative revelation has been given since the completion of the New Testament writings” (Article V).

And although they would not deny *sola Scriptura*, some of our Reformed brethren have strayed from the Bible as their only authority by insisting that creeds and confessions are necessary to understand Scripture. This has not always been the case. The Belgic Confession states: “Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore, we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule, as the apostles have taught us, saying, Prove the spirits, whether they are of God. Likewise: If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house.”⁴

Unfortunately, many within the Reformed community use the term *biblicist* as an insult against those seeking to uphold the authority of God’s Word above all else. I personally am not insulted to be called a *biblicist*, but I wear such a label as a badge of honor. R. Scott Clark, professor of Church History and Historical Theology at Westminster Seminary in California, argues that those who reject the authority of creeds in favor of the Bible are not in the historic line of the Protestant Reformers. In his book, *Recovering the Reformed Confession*, Clark points to “Hermanus Herbertsz, a pastor in Dordrecht and Gouda, [who] refused to preach the catechism.” Dr. Clark presents Pastor Herbertsz as a prime example of the danger of using Scripture as our sole authority. He states, “From 1582 to 1607 Pastor Herbertsz repeatedly promised and then refused to use

the [Heidelberg Catechism] as directed by various assemblies in the Dutch Reformed churches. As Donald Sinnema observes, Herbertsz’s objections were not to the doctrine of the catechism but to its authority. He charged the Reformed churches with placing the catechism above God’s Word. He said, ‘You not only consider [the Catechism] equal to Holy Scripture . . . but place it above; this I can prove by the following reasons: first, you have divided into fifty-two Sundays, and every Sunday read and explain a part of it from the pulpit as if it were God’s Word . . . ; second, you also place it so much above Holy Scripture that you make Holy Scripture a servant by which one must explain and interpret [the Catechism].’”⁵

And although they would not deny sola Scriptura, some of our Reformed brethren have strayed from the Bible as their only authority by insisting that creeds and confessions are necessary to understand Scripture.

The refusal by Pastor Herbertsz to preach the catechism bothers Clark because he cannot accept biblical teaching that relies solely on the exegetical study of God’s Word. To him, the errors of human interpretation of the Bible can, and often do, lead to mistakes in theology, and therefore, we must recognize the authority vested in the confessions and creeds as being more authoritative than the Bible exegetically interpreted by the individual believer, including pastors trained in the Reformed tradition! This raises the question: From where did the framers of the creeds and confessions derive their doctrine?

Besides all the attacks on the Bible that have been mentioned, theological liberalism

has made the biggest and most obvious assaults on the Bible's authority. Liberals attack the Scripture and undermine its authority by positioning themselves as the final arbiter of what is true and what is not. By claiming to approach the text with a purely scientific methodology, the biblical critic places himself above the Bible as a judge. The liberal critic has sought to undermine the Bible through several methods that introduce doubt into the reader's mind. The strategies and arguments may vary, but the ultimate source of these attacks always remains the same. The questioning of the Lord's authority goes back to the Garden of Eden, when the serpent asked, "Indeed, has God said...?" (Gen 3:1).

Biblical fundamentalists have one authority—the Bible. We have one way to read the Scripture—using the literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation. We have one purpose as we read the Bible—to hear from God. We agree with J. I. Packer in *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, "What Scripture says is to be received as the infallible Word of the infallible God, and to assert biblical inerrancy and infallibility is just to confess faith in (i) the divine origin of the Bible and (ii) the truthfulness and trustworthiness of God."⁶

But in case any reader thinks that the "Battle for the Bible" has been won, and we should move on to more urgent issues, remember that this battle is for the core of everything we hold dear. Like the Reformation solas, the Bible is the starting, middle, and ending point for all the fundamental doctrines of our faith, and our enemies understand this.

Norm Geisler fought valiantly for the Word of God, so he understood what was at stake. Dr. Geisler warned of the danger of ignoring the attacks on Scripture, saying, "It has been said that a table must have at least three legs to stand. Take away any of the three legs and it will surely topple. In much

the same way, the Christian faith stands on three legs. These three legs are the inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of Scripture. Take away one and, like the table, the divine authority of the Christian faith will surely topple. These three "in-" doctrines complement each other, yet each expresses a slightly different distinction in our understanding of Scripture."⁷

If the Bible fails in anything it teaches, even one small thing, then like a façade, our faith will crumble, and we will no longer have reason to believe that anything else it says is trustworthy.

We stand or fall with our doctrine of Scripture. To admit that the Scriptures contain even one error would be devastating because there would no longer be any reliable way to prove that there are no other errors, including in those doctrines we place all our hope and trust in. No doctrine would be safe if we deny inerrancy.

We also must cling tenaciously to infallibility as well. If the Bible fails in anything it teaches, even one small thing, then like a façade, our faith will crumble, and we will no longer have reason to believe that anything else it says is trustworthy. If the Bible fails in prophecy, history, science, or any of the countless things it addresses, how can we continue to place our faith in the God who authored it? And if God cannot ensure His written word remains uncorrupted after emerging from the pens of His prophets, how can we be sure He can keep us from hell for eternity, or that the errors introduced by human authors are not critical and damning?

We must hold tightly to the inspiration of the Word of God, knowing that "...no prophecy was ever made by the will of man, but men being moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:21), and that "all Scripture is God-breathed..." (2 Tim 3:16). Our commitment to the Bible must rest on the fundamental truth that this book we

preach is God's Word, not man's. From this foundation, we derive all our authority to proclaim the matters of life and death to the Church and the world (2 Cor 2:16). Ultimately, we trust in the inerrancy, infallibility, and inspiration of the Bible because we trust in the God who affirms that His Word is inerrant, unfailing, and inspired. ♦

END NOTES

¹ Scripture alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, glory to God alone.

² United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington D.C., Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2016); <https://www.usccb.org/sites/default/files/flipbooks/catechism/> [Accessed 3/14/23]. The following quotations from the Catechism (CCC) show that, despite claims that any Catholic can interpret Scripture as they understand it, the only valid interpretation of Scripture according to the Vatican is that which is given by the Magisterium of the Church as understood in their interpretation of sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture:

"It is clear therefore that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, Sacred Scripture, and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together each in its own way, under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls" (CCC, 95).

"The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone" (CCC, 85).

"The task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the Magisterium of the Church, that is, to the Pope and to the bishops in communion with him" (CCC, 100).

"It was by the apostolic Tradition that the Church discerned which writings are to be included in the list of the sacred books" (CCC, 120).

³ F. David Farnell, *The Master's Seminary Journal*, "Fallible New Testament Prophecy/ Prophets? A Critique of Wayne Grudem's Hypothesis," <https://tms.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/tmsj2h.pdf> [Accessed 3/14/23]. For a helpful critique of Grudem's view and clear examples of how this does damage to an orthodox understanding of the infallibility of Scripture, see The CrippleGate post by Nathan Busenitz, "Five Dangers of Fallible Prophecy," <https://thecripplegate.com/five-dangers-of-fallible-prophecy/> [Accessed 3/14/23].

⁴ Belgic Confession, Article VII.

⁵ R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice*, Kindle ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), loc. 436.

⁶ J. I. Packer, "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), 95-96.

⁷ Norman L. Geisler and Shawn Nelson, "What Is Inerrancy and Why Should We Care?" in *Vital Issues in the Inerrancy Debate*, F. David Farnell (ed.), Norman L. Geisler, et al. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 20.

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THE “SO WHAT” FACTOR

HOW TO FIND APPLICATION FROM GOD’S WORD

By Jack Hughes

Have you ever been reading your Bible and it seemed outdated or irrelevant to your life? You read in the Word of God of ancient cultures, times, and history, but you live in a modern, technological age, which seems distant from the ancient world and cultures you read about in the Bible. After having devotions, you are glad that you spent time in the Word, but sometimes your Bible reading seems mechanical, dry, and to be frank, not very nourishing to your soul. Like eating dry garbanzo beans. You hear garbanzo beans are supposed to be good for you, but they are not very tasty or easy to swallow.

It makes you wonder what is missing. The same thing can happen with Bible reading. You hear people at church talk about their times in the Word as amazing, life changing, and soul rejuvenating. Your preacher, Sunday school teacher, or Bible study leader are able to extract interesting, convicting, wonderful truths from the Bible, yet your Bible reading often feels dry, like a stroll through the Gobi desert at high noon in the middle of summer. Why? What is wrong? And more importantly, how can you fix it? Let me see if I can give you some help for finding application from your Bible.

A good, but not so obvious place to start is the Apostle Paul's admonition in 2 Corinthians 13:5 to "examine yourself to see if you are in the faith." Many wrongly assume that if they go to church, call themselves Christians, and speak "Christianese," that they know the Lord and are truly born again. Yet many active church members are not Christians, even though they think they are and claim to be. Could that be you? It never hurts to examine yourself to see if you are in the faith. But consider how much it hurts if you are mistaken about the true condition of your soul. If you don't know the Lord, you don't have the divine interpreter, the Holy Spirit, dwelling in you to help you understand and experience the life transforming power of God's Word (1 Cor. 2:6-16; 1 Jn. 2:20, 27). If you have a hard time being consistent in your Bible reading, or if the Bible just doesn't make sense to you, it may indicate the absence of the divine interpreter within you. The Bible "performs its work in you who believe" (1 Thess. 2:13), but if you don't believe, it won't sanctify you. Bible reading and study for the unbeliever is like trying to dial in FM radio stations using an AM radio. It just doesn't work.

But how can a person know they are truly born again by grace? What does the Bible say gives a person assurance of salvation? Though we can't delve into this subject in detail here, let me give you some bullet points to help you "examine yourself" to "see if you be in the faith."

You have an intellectual understanding of and can articulate the content of the gospel. It is the gospel alone that is "the power of God for all who believe" (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18). If you don't know the gospel, you can't be a Christian. Do you know the gospel?

- You know how to biblically appropriate the gospel. Many hear the gospel preached, but then are told to do some extra-biblical work e.g., go forward at an altar call, ask Jesus in their heart, pray the

sinner's prayer, make a decision for Christ, etc. These things are not found in the Bible. Even if you hear the true gospel and can articulate it but try to receive or appropriate its benefits in an unbiblical way, you will remain lost, though you might think you are saved. The Bible usually calls upon those who hear the gospel to repent and/or believe (Isa. 30:15; 45:22; Mk. 1:15; Lk. 13:1-5; Jn. 3:15-16; 5:24; 6:40, 47; Acts 17:30-31; 1 Jn. 5:13). Repentance and faith are like two different sides of a coin. Repentance describes what you turn from, let go of, reject, or forsake so you can turn to, receive, trust, have faith in, or rely on Jesus Christ alone to save you. You can't fly to Los Angeles unless you leave Lincoln. Have you biblically appropriated the gospel?

- The born-again believer will bring forth fruit in keeping with true, saving repentance (Mt. 3:8; Lk. 3:8). In other words, your life will continue to change (2 Cor. 3:18; Phil. 1:6). Jesus in Lk. 6:46 said to some who claimed Him as Lord and Savior, but did not obey Him, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I say?" When Jesus is your Lord, Master, King, and Savior, you strive to obey Him. John 3:36 reads, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." Jesus said in Jn. 10:27, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." If you are "born again" (Jn. 3:3, 7; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23), regenerated (Titus 3:5), made into a new creature in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17), then your life will change, and you will bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance (Lk. 3:8). Does your life bear fruit in keeping with repentance?
- Based on your knowledge of the gospel, your biblical appropriation of the gospel, and the clear evidence of a transformed life, the Holy Spirit will testify within you

that you are a child of God. The Apostle Paul in Rom. 8:16-17 writes, "The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him." The Apostle John says something similar in 1 Jn. 5:10-11 saying, "The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son. And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son." Do you have an internal testimony of the Holy Spirit within you, based on what we have discussed above, that affirms you are a child of God?

The Bible teaches there are many unbelievers in local churches who think they are saved but are not.

- ♦ You will long to be more like Jesus (Phil. 3:14-15).
 - ♦ You will love Jesus and demonstrate your love for Jesus by keeping His commandments (Jn. 14:15; 1 Cor. 16:22).
 - ♦ You will discover the Bible has come alive to you and that you can understand it like never before (1 Cor. 2:10-14).
- You may be thinking to yourself, "I thought you were going to talk about how to find application from the Bible?" Yes, that is exactly what we are doing. In the words of Jesus to the Pharisee Nicodemus "the teacher of Israel," "You must be born again" (Jn. 3:3, 5, 7). The Bible teaches there are many unbelievers in local churches who think they are saved but are not. In the sermon on the mount Jesus describes them as "the many" on the broad road to destruction (Mt. 7:12-13). He speaks of others being deceived by false teachers (Mt. 7:15-20). He speaks of those in the church, who call Jesus 'Lord, Lord,' and do miraculous deeds "in Jesus' name," but are rejected by Jesus on judgment day and cast into hell (Mt. 7:21-23). Jesus goes on to describe those in the church whose spiritual house/life is "built on the sand" (Mt. 7:24-27). In other words, they are religious people who hear Jesus' words but do not act upon them. Other texts speak of "tares among the wheat" (Mt. 13:25-30), "sheep among the goats" (Mt. 25:31-46), "hidden reefs in your love feasts . . . for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever" (Jude 12-13). Consider Jesus' words in Lk. 13:24, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." Could you be one of the many who have not entered the narrow gate? Could you be sincerely deceived? If you are not sure, meet with your pastor, elder, or a mature godly saint and "be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you" (2 Pet. 1:10).
- Other changes will be obvious in the life of someone who is truly born again e.g.,
 - ♦ You will have a desire to be with the saints (Heb. 10:23-27).
 - ♦ You will hunger for the Word of God (Ps. 119:83, 123; 1 Pet. 2:2).
 - ♦ You will have a heightened sensitivity to sin (Job 42:45-6; Isa. 6:5).
 - ♦ You will have a desire to keep your sins confessed (Ps. 32:3-4; 1 Jn. 1:9).
 - ♦ You will have a supernatural love for others (Rom. 5:5; 1 Jn. 2:10).

Let's assume from this point on that you know the Lord, can articulate the gospel, have biblically appropriated the gospel, and are bringing forth fruit in keeping with repentance. You have the testimony in yourself that you are a child of God. However, you are having a hard time being consistent in your devotions, and when you do read, study, or meditate on the Word of God, you are not edified.

A second problem that puts a damper on Bible reading that edifies the soul is living in unconfessed sin. As a wise person once said, "The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible." If you are living in unconfessed sin, grieving the Holy Spirit, walking in the flesh, you will have a hard time wanting to read your Bible, and if you do, Bible reading will probably only convict you and make you feel guilty about your sin. Like oil and water, sin and the Bible don't mix. When King David committed adultery and murder and didn't confess his sin to the Lord, he wrote in Psalm 32:3-4, "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer." If you are living in unconfessed sin, you must repent of your sin and confess your sin to the Lord (Psalm 32:1-2, 5-7; 1 John 1:9). You must "walk in the Spirit" so that you "do not carry out the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16-24). It is walking in the Spirit that enables you to get the most out of your Bible reading, study, and meditation. Are you keeping your sins confessed to the Lord? Are you walking in the Spirit?

Now, let's say you've checked off every box mentioned above! Yet, you are still not always able to get the gold out of the ore of Scripture. You know the gold is in the ore somewhere, but you have no idea how to get it out. Here is a very simple, maybe obvious, but necessary step you must take if you wish to understand and be edified by the Word of

God—pray to the Lord for help! Pray to the Lord as the Psalmist prays in Ps. 119:18, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law." It is a request you know God will answer. The Lord wants you to understand and obey His Word. 1 Jn. 5:14-15 tells us, "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him." Ask the Lord to help you understand and apply His Word to your life.

Charles Spurgeon said: "I have always found that the meaning of a text can be better learned by prayer than in any other way. Of course, we must consult lexicons and commentaries to see the literal meaning of the words, and their relation to one another; but when we have done all that, we shall still find that our greatest help will come from prayer."¹ In another place Spurgeon wrote:

"If, for your own and others' profiting, you desire to be 'filled with the knowledge of God's will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding,' remember that prayer is your best means of study. . . . Stones are not broken, except by an earnest use of the hammer; and the stone-breaker must go down on his knees. Use the hammer of diligence, and let the knee of prayer be exercised, and there is not a stony doctrine in revelation which is useful for you to understand, which will not fly into shivers under the exercise of prayer and faith. You may force your way through anything with the leverage of prayer. Thoughts and reasonings are like the steel wedges which give a hold upon truth; but prayer is the lever, the pry bar which forces open the iron chest of sacred mystery, that we may get the treasure hidden within."²

Do you pray to the Lord for help as you read and study your Bible? Let me now give you some "techniques" to help you find application from texts whose practical appli-

cation is less obvious. The application of some texts is clear e.g., Exodus 20:13, "You shall not murder." You understand that you are not to murder with a gun, a knife, poison, or chainsaw. The New Testament letters to the churches are, for the most part, straight forward e.g., "do this..." and "don't do that..." but you will encounter other texts in the Bible that make you ask, "What does this text have to do with me and my life?" You know "all Scriptures is ... profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16), but the text you are reading seems to be an exception to the rule.

You read in Leviticus 3 about cutting off the fat of the kidneys and offering it up as a burnt offering and soothing aroma to the Lord. You are not the kind of person who cuts fat off kidneys. You don't have any animals to sacrifice. Besides, you know Jesus is the once for all sacrifice. You also know you are not under the Law of Moses or the Old Testament sacrificial system. This makes you wonder, "What is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness" in these instructions about cutting the fat off the kidneys to offer up as a soothing aroma to the Lord? Other times you read about a wicked king who did evil before the Lord and died. So what? Or you might read those pesky genealogies whose only purpose seems to cure insomnia. The application of some texts is less obvious. What can you do to get to the gold of application?

Taking a class or reading books on how to study the Bible i.e., "hermeneutics" is helpful and yet beyond the scope of this article. You do need to learn how to read the text carefully in its context, make precise observations of the text, and discover what the original author meant for his original audience to understand by what they wrote, etc. Ask your pastor for recommended resources. You may be interested in an entry level "How to Study the Bible" series on my website (www.driven-

nails.com/how-to-study-the-bible-1). Here are some practical prybars to help you break open hard texts and get to the golden treasure of application within.

1. Consider the big picture and theme of the book in which your text is found. Books in the Bible have themes, and each section, paragraph, and verse in a book are like the pieces of a puzzle that make up the theme. I recommend Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa's *Talk Thru the Bible* for what is called "special introduction" material for individual books of the Bible. Any good study Bible will also have special introduction material before each book. Find the theme of the book you are studying and see how your text fits into the outline of that book and contributes to the theme. This will often help you see the significance, meaning, and application of the text to your life.

2. Consider the near, immediate context and flow of the text you are studying i.e., what comes before and after your text. Context is the king of Bible study principles. Let's say I wrote you a ten-page letter describing my summer vacation. You skip the first five pages, go to the middle of the letter and you read the line, "I was blown away." What does that mean? Well, it could mean several things, but you can't know without consulting the context. Was there a BBQ propane tank that exploded, and I was physically blown away from where I was standing? Or maybe I was floating on an inflatable raft, fell asleep, and I was blown away from the dock into the middle of the lake. Or maybe I was watching a speed boat race and was emotionally "blown away" at how fast they were. Context is what gives meaning to words, phrases, and verses in the Bible. So make sure you read the near preceding and following context of your text carefully. It will help you understand the meaning of your text and its application.

3. Know that you can find application from biblical texts if they have positive or

negative examples. Joseph was tempted by Potiphar's wife to commit adultery but fled to maintain his purity. Joseph is a positive example to follow. "Flee from immorality," (1 Cor. 6:18). King Hezekiah was sick, prayed for healing, asked for a sign, and the Lord gave him a sign and healed him. Yet 2 Chron. 32:25 says Hezekiah, "gave no return for the benefit he received." Hezekiah in this instance is a bad example whom we should not follow. "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18).

Since God's character and nature do not change, we can often find application for our lives based on God's response to man.

How do we know good and bad examples found in the Bible are a legitimate way to find application? Because the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 10:1-5 gives several examples of Israel's sinful behavior in the wilderness and then says in vs. 6, "Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved." He gives more examples of Israel's sinful behavior in vss. 7-10 and again in vs. 11 says, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." Look to find application in good and bad examples found in your text.

4. Ask the right kinds of questions of your text. Asking the right kinds of questions of a text is a nearly infallible way to find application. Ask:

a. "What does this text tell me about the character and nature of God?" Since God is

the grand theme of "the Word of God," looking for God in the text often leads to application.

b. "What does this text tell me about how God responds to man?" We can sometimes find application in certain texts by observing how God responds to or relates to men e.g., is gracious, kind, longsuffering, merciful, just, faithful, etc. Since God's character and nature do not change, we can often find application for our lives based on God's response to man.

c. "What does this text tell me about mankind?" By considering people in the text, you can find positive and negative examples as stated above. We can also learn practical truths from how saints and sinners think, behave, or speak. Let's say you are reading in the book of Exodus and find application in learning that men are sinners, have hard hearts, are unconvinced by miracles, often are cruel towards those who try to help them, forget God's grace, exaggerate their trials, and idealize the past, etc. Israel, in their wilderness wanderings, teach us many practical truths about mankind that apply to our lives.

d. "Which of two great commands (love God and love your neighbor) does the command being studied relate to?" Let's say you come across the command in Lev. 3 to "offer up the fat of the kidneys to the Lord as a burnt offering." You might quickly realize that this command relates to loving God directly through worship, which is one way of obeying the great commandment "love God." From this you can derive the principle that we need to love God directly by worshiping Him in an acceptable way and from that principle derive application for your life e.g., I need to directly worship the Lord.

e. "Which one of the ten commandments does the command being studied relate to?" Using the example above from Lev. 3, you might see that offering up the fat of the

kidneys as a soothing aroma to the Lord is an expression of the second commandment, “You shall worship God.” There is your application!

f. “What does this text tell me about Christ?” In the example above from Lev. 3, we see that the Lord, because He is holy and just, requires blood sacrifice of those who worship Him. The blood sacrifices were repeated because you can’t atone for the sin of a human being with the blood of an animal. The animal sacrifices of the Old Testament were pictures, shadows, types of the once for all sacrifice, Jesus Christ (e.g., Hebrews 7-9). Though we are not under the Law of Moses, all the same principles are true for those who wish to worship the Lord today. (1) God is still holy and just and must be treated as such. (2) If we wish to worship God in an acceptable way we must have our sins atoned for by blood sacrifice. Believers under the Law of Christ can only worship God in an acceptable way through Jesus’ once for all, perfect sacrifice.

g. “What theme or doctrine does this text reveal?” Most texts mention or imply biblical doctrines e.g., doctrines of the Bible, God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, man, sin, salvation, the church, heaven, hell, angels, or end times events. Once a doctrine is discovered in a text, it can be studied further by examining key cross references, commentaries, and other theological works. Usually, application for your life will become evident.

Good questions asked of a text help break up the ore of Scripture so you can find biblical principles, truths, or doctrines that apply to any Christian, living at any time of history, in any culture. Once application is found in a text, then the final step must be taken—implementation. You must not merely discover what the application of a text is but must also put it into practice in your life. To a new believer the exhortation, “Read your Bible,” is like saying, “rebuild the engine

on your car.” Rebuilding a car engine is an easy concept to understand, but the exact process is complicated. We must consider how specifically we are going to put the application of a text into practice in our lives. Thomas Watson warned, “Knowledge without practice is but a torch to light men to hell.” As the old proverb states, “The road to hell is paved with a thousand good intentions.” We must read, study, and meditate on the Word to apply what we learn to our lives.

Consider James 1:22-25, “But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.”

Be blessed by learning to interpret, understand, apply, and implement texts that seem, at first glance, to lack application. Never forget, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:15-17). There is something to be found for godly living in every text of Scripture. ♦

END NOTES

¹ C. H. Spurgeon, “The Preparatory Prayers of Christ,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, vol. 56 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1910), 5.

² C. H. Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening: Daily Readings* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1896).

FAMINE *for the* WORD

A Reflection on the Past, Present, and Future
for the Need of Pastor/Scholars

From general observation to suffocating surveys, theological drift and biblical illiteracy have come to be recognized as the norm in much of the evangelical, even conservative church. As a result, there is clearly a famine in the land regarding understanding and applying biblical truth. The blame for this demise are many: the busyness of modern

life, social media influence, the diminishing ability to concentrate, the hesitancy by many to read the Bible, let alone study it, and a culture of entertainment, to name a few. However, in this article we will examine the role pastors have and are playing in this back peddling from the truth, and what can be done to right the ship—if I may mix metaphors.

DR. GARY E. GILLEY

Historical Perspective

It could be argued correctly that the pastors of local churches have historically been theologians. That is, among their duties as pastors is the teaching of biblical truth (exegesis) and sound doctrine. While few of the apostles, church planters, and pastors in the New Testament era would have called themselves theologians, and with rare exception (e.g. Paul) most did not have advanced theological training nor had formally studied the Scriptures, all were called to proclaim not only the gospel but “sound words” handed down by Christ (2 Timothy 1:13-14) and the apostolical teachings (Matthew 28:20; Acts 2:42). It would be difficult to improve on the clarity of Paul’s injunction to Timothy, in his pastoral role at Ephesus, as found in 2 Timothy 2:2: “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”

The above texts hardly exhaust the emphasis on theology found in the final three letters written by Paul, often called the Pastoral Epistles. For example, “doctrine” is specifically mentioned and emphasized in 1 Timothy 1:3; 4:1, 6; 6:1, 3; 2 Timothy 4:3; Titus 1:4, 9, 13, 14; 2:1, 5, 7, 10, and the importance of truth is stated in 1 Timothy 2:4, 7; 3:15; 6:5; 2 Timothy 2:15, 18, 25; 3:7; and 4:7. Add in the synonym “the faith,” (1 Timothy 1:2; 3:9, 13; 4:1; 5:8; 6:10, 21; 2 Timothy 2:18; 3:8; 4:7; Titus 1:1, 13; 3:15) and there are at least 36 references to theology in these epistles alone.

The essential role of truth is highlighted by the ever-present danger of doctrinal deception. After all, we are warned in virtually every New Testament book about false teachers and the possibility of apostasy. In Paul’s second letter to Timothy, he cautioned often of this potential, stating that some have gone astray from the truth (2:18); repentance is needed to come to the knowledge of the truth (2:25); others never come to the

knowledge of the truth (3:7); some are opposed to the truth (3:8); and warning is given of those who will turn away from the truth and turn to myths (4:3-4).

To this sampling of theological prominence from the Pastoral Epistles could be added a multitude of similar texts throughout the New Testament, including Ephesians 4:11 where pastors, as teachers, are considered one of the gifts the Lord provided for His church in order to equip the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ (v. 12). From the New Testament witness, we learn of the vital function of Scriptural instruction, modeled by the local church elders and pastors. And undeniably, this pattern was continued by the early Church Fathers.

The post-apostolic church leaders were not seminary professors or academics; they were usually pastors who shepherded local assemblies of God’s people. Irenaeus (130-202) is well-known today for his polemical work *Against Heresies*. Athanasius (296-373) led the charge for Trinitarian truth during the time of the Nicene Council. John Chrysostom (347-407) was renown for his excellent expositions and, of course, Augustine (354-430), who shaped much of Christian theology (some for good and some not so much) was the outstanding cleric-theologian of the early church. Some have traced the fading of theological emphasis among pastors as well as laymen to the rise and influence of Constantine (274-337) who made Christianity the state religion in 330. On the related subject of Catechesis, J. I. Packer and Gary Parrett wrote, “as entire communities became nominally Christian, and Jewish opposition subsided and Gnostic groups ran out of steam, the adult catechumenate shrank to the vanishing point, and catechizing for practical purposes ceased. Lay ignorance of the faith during the Dark and Middle Ages was a melancholy legacy of this decline.”¹

The monastic movement of the Middle Ages found most theological expression flowing from the minds of monks such as Benedict (480-550), the Venerable Bede (673-735), Gregory the Great (540-604), and Anselm (1033-1109). While some significant advancement in theology can be found in their writings, the rise of asceticism, mysticism, and tradition led to serious errors that were embraced by the emerging Roman Catholic Church and Eastern Orthodoxy. Further hampering encouragement for pastors to pursue theology was the rise of the university in the 13th century, as serious theological engagement and teaching shifted largely from the pulpit to the academy. Scholars, such as Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) began to dominate the theological front lines as pastors turned their attention to other shepherding duties. In time, a university education was all but required for those entering pastoral ministry.

Some pastors certainly continued to offer important doctrinal contributions, but scholarship increasingly became localized in the universities. The combination of the monastic movement, the rise of the universities, and the Roman Catholic Church's hierarchical lock on Scripture and doctrine, eventually left the layman in the dark. In addition, few non-clerical people had access to personal copies of the Bible and were reliant on the Church to inform them of biblical truth. The Pope, the magisterium, and the university scholars were seen as the repository of doctrine, while the local church busied itself administering the sacraments and dispensing Rome's theology. Pastors in this environment had little need for Bible or theological study.

The Reformation changed all of this with its insistence on *Sola Scriptura* and perspicuity, which taught that normal Christians armed with the Word of God could understand what they read. This reversal of ideology also led to a boom in pastors returning to the study and proclamation of Scripture and

theology. Gerald Heistand and Todd Wilson write,

The Reformation seems to have funneled Protestant theologians away from the universities and back into the churches in a way that represented a reversal of the previous era. During the two hundred years following the Reformation, clerical theologians within Protestantism emerged as a robust body of leading theologians, every bit the intellectual and theological equals of their university counterparts.²

Anyone who has read the writings and sermons of Puritan pastors, such as John Owen, Richard Sibbes, Richard Baxter, John Bunyan, and Thomas Watson, cannot miss the robust theological nature of their ministries.

While scholastic theologians such as Melancthon, Tyndale, and Luther were plentiful, a number of pastors held their own theologically such as Zwingli, Cranmer, Knox, and, of course, John Calvin. The Puritans, who viewed pastors as physicians of the souls, built on the foundation of the Reformers. Anyone who has read the writings and sermons of Puritan pastors, such as John Owen, Richard Sibbes, Richard Baxter, John Bunyan, and Thomas Watson, cannot miss the robust theological nature of their ministries. This legacy extended to the American Puritans such as Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards in the early 18th century.

Modern Times

Sadly, the emphasis on pastoral theological study, writing, and preaching waned in America in the post-Edwardian era. The

First Great Awakening was steeped in rich doctrinal preaching, but the Second Great Awakening during the early and middle portions of the 19th century was far more pragmatic in nature. The leading light during this time was Charles Finney who taught that the human will was free to receive Christ, and it was the preachers' duty to find the right means to attract people to the gospel. With this philosophy, pragmatic methods began to dominate theology; and pastors, those who wanted to be successful, became masters of techniques (called "new means" at the time) that tended to draw the masses. As Owen Strachan writes, "The Puritan sermons with fifty subheadings were out; the freewheeling pulpiteer, master of the homespun story, was in."³ Why would a pastor who truly wanted multitudes to come to Christ or who wanted to build a large church major on theology that few cared about, when rousing sermons and emotional methods attracted the crowds. Given this scenario, it is no wonder that pastors increasingly preached lightweight, enthusiastic sermons and left the theological heavy-lifting to the seminar-ies and scholars.

Moving into the 20th century, Strachan claims that "theology had become a specialist's discipline [while] pastoring was now a practical profession, more concerned with meeting immediate personal needs than with formulating, timeless truths."⁴ With the steady march of revivalism, church growth, and pragmatism in the 20th and 21st centuries, the concept of the pastor who fulfilled the role of careful theologian seems to have become a relic of the past. Yet, on a positive note, recently there has been renewed interest in the pastor as scholar and the scholar as pastor, as is reflected in John Piper and D. A. Carson's book by that title.⁵

Recent Trend

With this growing emphasis in mind, let's turn our attention to some trends and efforts in recent years to correct this imbalance,

beginning with a united effort by three well-known authors who have attempted to pull back the curtain on evangelicalism's theological anemia.

In the early 1990s, David Wells, Mark Noll, and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. received "a grant from the Pew Charitable Trust to write a trio of books on the decline of evangelical theology and on ways it might rebound."⁶ Mark Noll wrote *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*; Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., wrote *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, and David Wells actually authored a series of five books, the first *No Place for Truth* and the last, *The*

With the steady march of revivalism, church growth, and pragmatism in the 20th and 21st centuries, the concept of the pastor who fulfilled the role of careful theologian seems to have become a relic of the past.

Courage to be Protestant. Wells' work was ultimately the most insightful and had the greatest impact on evangelicalism. *Renewing the Evangelical Mission* by Richard Lints was written in Wells' honor. In this volume, twelve different authors from a wide range of evangelical thought and tradition contributed scholarly essays related to the themes Wells addresses, including Os Guinness, Mark Noll, Michael Horton, J. I. Packer, and Cornelius Plantinga.

In Plantinga's chapter entitled "Renewal of Evangelical Theology," he accused American evangelicals, as far back as 1995, of failing to sustain a serious intellectual life, which resulted in them becoming remarkably more secular as they accepted the worldview of the culture. Plantinga believes the church is reaping some of what the

Second Great Awakening, with its anti-theological, anti-intellectual emphasis, sowed, as well as some of what the baby boomers with their rejection of authority and tradition have woven into the culture. As ministers adapted the spirit of their age, they increasingly read “not theology but *Leadership* magazine, which is in the habit of citing not Scripture but psychologists and business managers.”⁷

Four decades ago, a Gallup poll revealed the diminishing knowledge of doctrine and Scripture and concluded that “we are having a revival of feelings but not the knowledge of God. The church today is more guided by feelings than by convictions. We value enthusiasm more than informed commitment.”⁸ At about the same time, David Wells was teaching a seminary class. Questioning his students’ interest in theology, he opened the course that semester with what he thought was a rousing speech to motivate the students to embrace theological studies. Thinking he had succeeded, he nevertheless was surrounded after class by several students who proved he had failed. Wells writes the following:

That day, an obviously agitated student who had come forward told me how grateful he was for what I had said. It was as if I had been reading his mind. He told me that he was one of those I had described who felt petrified by the prospect of having to take this course. As a matter of fact, he said, he had had a mighty struggle with his conscience about it. Was it right to spend so much money on a course of study that was so irrelevant to his desire to minister to people in the Church? He plainly intended no insult. As a matter of fact, this confession, which I rather think he had not intended to blurt out, had begun as a compliment. That was the day I decided that I had to write this book.”⁹

The book was *No Place for Truth*, and Wells would go on to write five volumes in a series calling evangelical leaders to the importance of theology in the Christian life.

Unpacking the effect of this theological neglect, as well as its cure, would take much effort, and is beyond the scope of this article. But, hopefully, this essay lays the groundwork for future comprehensive exploration. ♦

END NOTES

¹ Richard Lints, ed. *Renewing the Evangelical Mission* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013), 112-113. J. I. Packer and Gary A. Parrett, *The Return to Catechesis*, defined as “The integrated, or orderly—you could say, systematic — teaching of the truths that Christians do and must live by, coupled with instruction on the way to live by them.”

² Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian, Resurrecting and Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 37-38.

³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian, Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵ John Piper and D. A. Carson, *The Pastor as Scholar and the Scholar as Pastor, Reflections on Life and Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

⁶ Richard Lints, 189.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁸ As quoted in J. P. Moreland, *Love God with All Your Mind, The Role of Reason* (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 1997), 19.

⁹ David Wells, *No Place for Truth, Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 3-4.

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