

Attitudes towards the Scriptures

God expects each individual faithful person to think. Certainly, everyone should be seeking to fix the glaring errors of the past that we have inherited. But, we must also recognize that we will introduce whole new errors that a future generation will recognize, fix, and wonder how we could have been so blind.

In Jesus' day, the mainstream denominations were run by highly educated people who offered complicated doctrines. In the gospels, Jesus made several comments about how those theologians had missed the point of the Scriptures. For example, in the first half of Matthew 15 or its parallel in Mark 7, Jesus concluded an exchange with, "Let them [the scribes and Pharisees] alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall in a ditch." Don't waste your time arguing with complexity. Both Moses and Paul wrote that this stuff was not too difficult for the ordinary person.

Second example, from the first half of Matthew 12 (with parallels in Mark 2 and Luke 6), Jesus was challenged by the Pharisees because His disciples were plucking heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath. Jesus' first conclusion was, "If you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless." His advice was to focus on fixing root causes rather than settling for being forgiven failures. The disciples plucked the grain from the edges of the field, which was reserved for the poor such as they were. Rather than addressing the hunger, the leaders focused on defining failure.

In the Mark account, Jesus concluded with the observation that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. The practices of our religion should make things easier, not harder.

Several more scenes in the gospels further address the issue of how to play out the things of God. Do we search for commands, examples, and necessary inferences, or justice, mercy, and faithfulness? Throughout the history of the church, leaders have wanted clearly defined rules, because in them we find the illusion of security and comfort.

How can we go about doing a better job than those who have gone before? I propose four attitudes. The first attitude is that the Scriptures have as their purpose to illustrate and build faith.

Our assumptions about the Scriptures strongly influence what we find. It is not a book of one-liners, a rule book, or a pattern. Rather, our first and most important attitude must be that the Scriptures are about faith – how to build it and the promises upon what it is based. Many people trust (have faith in) things God never promised. The Scriptures provide the documentation of the real promises. My list just from the New Testament is 884; of course, many of them are repeats.

The Old Testament is very different from the New Testament. The audience of the Old Testament was the nation of Israel, the vast majority of whom were unfaithful; and this nation represented a tiny fraction of the world's population. God never expected more than a few percentage points of faithful people in Israel, let alone the rest of the world. Just look at the size of the court of the tabernacle: 50 yards by 25 yards. Free will offerings, which were required to accompany the required sin offerings, had to be cooked and eaten in the tabernacle court. When the tabernacle was first built, Israel had 608,000 men of fighting age. God did not expect a very big turnout. Certainly, the court of the Temple was larger, but so was the population.

As history books go, the Old Testament is not very good: lots of gaps but details on events that were really historically insignificant. That is because it had other purposes, for example:

1. It is a chronicle of a few faithful people in an unfaithful nation.
2. The Law of Moses was to hold Israel together (not get mixed in with the neighboring cultures and be absorbed) until its purpose, the Messiah, could be produced.

3. The Old Testament contains predictions about the Messiah. Jesus needed a platform of evidence upon which to stand.
4. The Old Testament chronicles the work of God to produce the Messiah, along with many other direct interventions by God in human events. It does not contain all the times God did something, but it provides a sufficient sampling to validate that God did a lot of impossible stuff.

The New Testament, however, has a completely different purpose. I think the two biggest differences are that (1) the New Testament was directed at a 100% faithful audience whereas the Old Testament was directed at a single-digit faithful audience, and (2) the Old Testament was for the nation of Israel (both faithful and unfaithful), whereas the New Testament is for faithful people worldwide. This is not to say that the New Testament is not a useful resource when teaching unbelievers. But, don't expect them to pick up on the same meanings as you do because, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:16, 1 Corinthians 2:14, and Romans 8:7, those without the Spirit are not going to understand much.

The sections of the New Testament have different purposes. For example, the gospels are not history books, as John noted. They contain a fraction of what happened around Jesus when He was on earth. The real purposes were, of course, as Luke wrote, to record the facts accurately, and, perhaps even more importantly, to chronicle how godly character (Jesus' character) plays out in a messed-up, broken world. The book of Acts includes a little about Peter and Paul, but the history of the other apostles is frustratingly absent. Why is the book there? I suggest that it is the history of faithful but imperfect people fumbling their way through their task of spreading the gospel. The letters recount common missteps resulting from dragging our cultural baggage and damaged selves into the church, and how to fix it, all while residing in a downward-spiraling world. And, finally, Revelation is all about the horrors of the first century, that this worst time in all of history, as Jesus predicted and described it, was planned. God was not hanging on by His fingernails, desperately trying to salvage something from a world controlled by evil. Rather, this series of woes and devastations marked the end of Satan's reign and the beginning of Jesus' worldwide kingdom, on schedule, as planned. Those living through it needed some reassurance that, despite appearances, God was in control.

If we are trying to get things out of the Scriptures that were not part of the intended use, we are in for a bumpy ride, as we can see in the history of the mainstream denominations for nearly 2000 years. And, we should not assume that we are any smarter or more faithful than they were. Many have confidently asserted, "The Scriptures clearly state..." And, I am sure that the vast majority of people who start sentences in that way truly believe what they propose. It may be clear to them, but not so much to me. How do we go so far wrong? Again, what we see in the Scriptures depends largely on our assumptions going in.

Here are a few examples.

- Up until a couple of hundred years ago, Christians of every variety thought that slavery was normal. The transition in that thinking was neither swift nor easy.
- Fashion has been endorsed or condemned depending on climate, culture, and century.
- Organization within a congregation has followed the prevailing political norms, ranging from aristocracy to democracy to various shades of gray.
- The Lord's Supper has varied from a feast to a light meal to a snack to a crumb and a sip, depending upon which excess was being opposed at the time.

- Baptism was modified to sprinkling because of a few strange exceptions over a span of 500 to 700 years. Then, the exception brought on by seeming necessity became the norm because the ritual became more important than what it was supposed to teach.

The examples are endless. They all make the point that we find that which we seek, whether it is really in there or not. So, it seems exceedingly important to have expectations that match those of the text.

We need to remember that reading comprehension is a skill, not a given. As is depressingly illustrated by today's political landscape, logic may be desirable, but very few know what that is. Further, the problem may be me; I need to be open to other ways of thinking and rejoice when I find that I was wrong. After all, I just fixed a problem with my understanding. To use the illustration of 1 Corinthians 3, my house now has a little more gold, silver, and precious stones, and a little less of the flammable wood, hay, and straw. We must abandon the notion that my group finally got it right. First, being right is not the criterion at Judgment, it's faith. Of course, the more pieces of faith you have, the smoother life goes. And I don't mean that bad things won't happen to you – just remember how it went for Jesus, the apostles, and the early Christians. Their comfort factor was low, but they attained a life worth living.

The purpose of the Scriptures is to develop faith. A part of faith is hope, a confident expectation. The New Testament is intended to develop a confident expectation of success, not a fear of failure. A part of Biblical faith is acting on God's promises – all of them, not just my list of minimum requirements. A part of faith is telling others the good news, so we need to know the multifaceted good news so we can match up one or more of those facets to the needs of those to whom we speak. A part of faith is evidence. Our belief system must be firmly grounded in provable facts and logical conclusions. Without these parts, it simply is not Biblical faith.

God's purpose for creation, the reason He went to all this trouble, was and is to build a big family that will last. God has determined that two characteristics are necessary to be in each family member if the family is to continue to function forever and not end up like earth. Those two characteristics are faith and love, better stated as mutual trust and selfless concern. If we will opt into the first, He promises to give us the second (Romans 5:5). Further, God promises to reconstruct our damaged characters and irrational thought processes back to the way they were designed – the job of the indwelling Spirit. And, as a side note that I consider obvious but has been overlooked by the vast majority, faith and love require that we have free will, or both become meaningless. God cannot micromanage or He achieves only a race of robots, which is kind of sick. God cannot have an IEP, Individual Eternity Plan, for each person because we make a lot of bad choices along the way. God would be rewriting everyone's plan about every 20 minutes. And, He would have to tell us what those individual plans are, clearly, and we all know that our God could never be described as subtle. No, God has one plan for all, that all be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. It is our job to get on board with Biblical faith.

This is the first attitude we need going in if we are to use the Scriptures successfully. The Scriptures have as their purpose to illustrate and build faith.

The second attitude is that we seek the meaning of the passage, we do not seek to prove what we already believe. Even the revered scientific method is no help here. We must not propose an hypothesis and then search the Scriptures to prove or disprove that hypothesis. Although your teachers made a big deal about it in science class, it is not all that great a process. It leads to valid conclusions reasonably often, far better than random guessing, but it also has produced a long list of truly comical conclusions – at least they were comical after we got over the shock that we could be that badly wrong.

Here are a few of the pitfalls of finding supporting passages:

- We tend to stop after finding one or two. For example, I could show you nine passages that clearly state that, on the last day, we will be judged by our works. Many have stopped there, thinking that nine supporting passages were enough. But, there are twenty more that attribute our acceptability to faith. We need to find them all, and make all of them say the same thing.
- We tend to assume that, if the other position can be shown to be wrong, my position must be right. Nope. We can both be wrong.
- We tend to assume that the first century Christians carried around the same Bibles that we do, except in their native languages. Wrong. Not one person referenced in the Bible owned one, because all the books of the New Testament were written in the twenty years before the destruction of Jerusalem, by eight different people who were not in the same place but rather were scattered across more than a thousand miles. The New Testament was not compiled until decades after the individual books were finished. So, the recipients of 1 Thessalonians could not refer to Colossians, because it had not been written yet. Even after both existed, it is unlikely the original audience had both letters. Each book must stand on its own and make sense by itself. If we need cross references to make our point, it is not one the writers ever thought about.
- We often fail to look up Old Testament references, but rather make assumptions about them without knowing their contexts. For example, from the cross, Jesus quoted the first verse of Psalm 22, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” A known fact of crucifixion is that death generally resulted from suffocation when the condemned no longer had the strength to push up on the nailed feet to relieve the pressure on the diaphragm to be able to exhale. So, Jesus could not make speeches. He quoted the first line of a well-known psalm. I believe that Jesus would use the psalm in context, not give it a whole new context contrary to the original. Rather, He quoted that line to remind the hearers of the whole psalm. Unfortunately, many have missed this really simple point and created convoluted doctrines of how God abandoned Jesus, that God could not look upon sin, and so on. However, Psalm 22:24 says, “For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He turned His face from Him; but when He cried to Him, He heard.” There are lots more good applications in that psalm about how to understand the crucifixion, but are not known unless you read the context of the quote. A second example, from Romans 3, beginning in verse 10, “There is none righteous, no not one, there is none who understands.” This goes on in the same vein for 9 verses. But, if you look up where Paul got all these, in each case, he was writing about the fool, the unrighteous, the worker of iniquity. The righteous in those psalms were not included in that first group. Paul’s point was not that all people are not only clueless but also inherently sinful, but that we did not seek God; rather He came looking for us.

Instead, we need to stick to the passage at hand and put ourselves in the mindset of the original audience. We can do that. If God were to address people of old using features of our culture, they would have no way to ever understand. But all it takes for us to get into their mindset is a little background research. Some examples:

- First find applications for the original audience. We are reading someone else’s mail. Once we understand what they would understand and apply, only then can we begin to apply it to ourselves, if indeed it has a direct application for us. For example, Jesus told the Eleven in Acts 1 to wait in Jerusalem for power from on high. So, they did. I think the application is

obviously for them, not for us, or what are we doing in Missouri? This is not difficult stuff; just ordinary reading comprehension, which perhaps is the problem.

- Work on developing pictures in your head of life in the first century, both for Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. What would be confusing to them? What would be impossible? What would be ordinary? How would it give you peace, or anxiety? How would it give you hope, or despair? Many false narratives have been introduced that have gotten a lot of traction. For example, American churches tend to spend a lot of time on the cruelty and pain of crucifixion, although the New Testament never makes a point of it. Rather, the humiliation was the point. Further, crucifixion was a daily occurrence, nothing unusual. People in Jerusalem walked by criminals on crosses every day. Another example, many have taught that the sacrificial system was gory and messy. In reality, the priests were expert butchers, and the Temple platform had built-in drainage and wheeled water carts for rinsing and washing. Some have taught that, because it was so messy, you left splattered with blood so everyone knew your shame. That was not the case. Every time you went to a festival, you brought both a sin offering and a free-will offering. When you left, you were carrying three-quarters of a perfectly dressed free-will offering which became the main course for dinner. You left with a smile, and perhaps the beginning of a drool, anticipating a wonderful family celebration.

Seek the meaning of the passage, not support for what is already believed.

My third attitude is completeness. Of course, if you are dealing with just one context, being complete within that context is straightforward. And, of course, if you are in the gospels, look for parallel accounts. Know why that book was written, to whom and by whom. Know something about the original audience, their culture and their history. But, if you are researching a topic or a word, completeness becomes of first importance.

Let's consider word studies first. Many English words have become associated with religion, like faith, righteousness, baptism, grace, mercy, fellowship, blessed, and many more. Because of their religious trappings, they have been defined in many ways by many people, mostly badly. I have put step-by-step directions for how to do a word study on our website. You can do it yourself if you have a concordance. I find this method reasonably simple and can be completed in a few hours – as long as the word is not used like 50 or 100 times. But then, I'm a researcher by trade, so, to me, this type of process is routine.

Why would I care about doing a word study? Most importantly, so you can give someone a common-sense definition for a complicated-sounding religion word, so they can understand what they read in the New Testament. Avoid church jargon at all costs. Second, you get to see the whole picture, not the boiled down summary that is the result of translation. Here are some examples of useful word studies:

- Blessed, as in “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” All the beatitudes in the New Testament start that way, “Blessed are those who...” But what is it to be “blessed.” Unfortunately, “blessed” can be a noun (or adjective or predicate nominative), or the past tense of “to bless.” To bless means to say good things about someone or something. The Greek word is where we get our English word, eulogy, to say good things about. The noun, blessed, means “above the cares of this life.” The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament has a long article detailing the development of the word for five centuries before Jesus. So, all the beatitudes start, “Above the cares of this life are those who...”

- Fellowship is connectedness of spirit, not necessarily with those in the same geographic location.
- Mercy is one step beyond compassion. Mercy includes a compelling desire to fix the root cause. Some things can't be fixed. I cannot bring back someone's deceased loved one. Compassion is as far as I can go. But I can have mercy or compassion on someone whose child has a drug problem. Compassion helps the parents through the terrible times, which is a good thing. Mercy goes one step beyond, pursuing the kid and committing to making a difference with the kid, which is a better thing.
- Grace is the collection of godly character traits with special emphasis on the way those traits are integrated and consistent. In contrast, parents often have trouble with this. We sometimes treat our kids too harshly, while at other times we become enablers of their bad behaviors by being too soft. God is gracious – He has the necessary balance to make things work optimally.
- Sacrifice is a celebration of forgiveness with family and friends in the presence of God, not giving something up I would rather have kept for the purpose of manipulating my god.
- Faith has several essential characteristics including evidence, promises, transformation, confident expectation of success, growth, and evangelism.
- In the New Testament, perfect does not mean flawless but consistent. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Translators have taken a random approach to that one and translated it as perfect, mature, or complete in various places as they saw fit for supporting their preconceptions. "Consistent" works in every situation and, in fact, is the theme of the Sermon on the Mount.
- Forgive is a figurative use of a literal word which means to push aside. So, forgiveness is pushing aside past untrustworthiness so that a relationship may be re-established. Redemption is different; which was completed by Jesus, once for all, nearly 2000 years ago when He offered His own blood in the tabernacle in heaven in Hebrews 9. But forgiveness is about God pushing aside the past and trusting us again.
- Worship is never used in the same context as a gathering of Christians. The faithful worship all the time. We meet for entirely different reasons.
- And the list goes on. There are about 47 such word studies on our web site.

Topical studies are an extension of word studies in which you look up in a concordance all the words you can think of that relate to the topic at hand, so it is like doing a dozen word studies at a time. A better way is to read through the whole New Testament with your topic on a 3 x 5 card stuck in the top of the pages. You will run across everything that relates. Write down the references on the card. When you finish reading all the way through, go back and look up all the contexts and start fitting things together. Bottom line, always be trying to prove yourself wrong. Any fool can prove himself right.

The first attitude has to do with the purpose of the Scriptures: not a rulebook but an illustration of how faith works in a broken world. The second attitude is to find what it says, not to support what I believe. The third attitude is completeness. And finally, the fourth attitude is knowing your goal for your study.

Memorization is nice; understanding is better. If you strive to understand the context and how the original audience felt and the overall purpose of God, relevant passages will start popping into your head at the right times. If you just memorize, the new information has no connection in your brain, so quickly gets overwhelmed by life. The goal is not memorization but understanding and the ability to describe it simply to ordinary people.

Don't jump from passage to passage. No one can follow you. They can't even get to the passage, let alone evaluate the context, before you have moved on. This confusion technique has been used for generations, and you see its result today. The goal is not to prove your point with citations like a legal brief, but to promote common-sense understanding that can be reproduced by anyone.

Developing a mental chronology of the Bible is useful not only for you to have a place to file stuff, but also, and perhaps more importantly, what you say in this chronological setting will be much more understandable to those with whom you speak. The goal is to be sensible and understandable.

Search for contradictions in your own understanding. If you must continually add a patch to your position, something has gone wrong. Illustration: if you are looking for examples in the New Testament for the church to emulate, deciding which ones to keep and which ones to overlook gets confusing. Some have suggested that some examples are essential while others are expedient, but the New Testament nowhere makes that distinction. So, different people have different lists and division results. The proper conclusion is not to search for another patch to kick the problem one more step down the road, but to abandon that ill-fated theoretical design. God expects us to think.

Our goal is to think through what we believe to uncover the ridiculous conclusions we have all been carrying around. And then rejoice because we straightened out something and will be more clear to those with whom we speak in the future.

Is my goal to get people in the water? Look, baptism is referenced over 30 times in the New Testament. If you just get someone in the Word, they will run across it and want to know what it is about. If you have to argue the point, they are not ready because they are still making excuses or are blinded by what they have always heard. If you focus on baptism, you get people wet, but they don't have any idea what it means. There are, by my count 11 symbols going on in there, and they need to know them all before they can make a reasonable commitment to God, which may have something to say about child immersion.

Our goal is to be filled with the Spirit to that we can overcome ourselves and accomplish what ordinary humans cannot. Our goal is to continually demonstrate the humanly impossible so that people will want to know where that power came from. Our goal is the miraculous, not the mundane.

God's objective is a big family that will last. God knows and has told us what is necessary for a family to work for the long haul: mutual trust and selfless concern (in religion words, faith and love). A family hangs together because they trust each other and care about each other, not because they are polite to each other. In earthly extended families, we all have people we hope won't show up to family gatherings because they are self-centered or arrogant or untrustworthy. But we also have family members whom we trust, even though they may have a checkered past. When the chips are down, you know they will show up, armed if necessary.

We talk a lot about trusting God. Have you noticed what is needed is mutual trust? God must also trust us. That's kind of scary. But look what He did. He put the earthly church in the custody of, shudder, people.

The selfless concern part is a given, literally. If we have that trust, God has promised to give us the love. Romans 5:5, "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us." So, our goal is to develop faith through the promises of character development through the Spirit, building faith in myself and whomever happens to be standing in front of me.

If we stick with this, people will notice that our explanations make sense, are not defensive, and are open for further questions.