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God Revealed (1)

How Should we Read, Interpret, and Apply God's Word?
Part One

*“And when Moses had finished speaking all these words to all Israel, he said to them, ‘Take to heart all the words by which I am warning you today, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. **For it is no empty word for you, but your very life, and by this word you shall live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess**” (Deut. 32:45-47).*

Without wanting to exaggerate, let me say this as forthrightly as I possibly can: there is no more critical or urgent issue that you will face in your personal life than that of **authority**. By “authority” I mean this: ***By what standard or on what grounds or from what source or for what reasons do you believe something to be true and therefore binding on your conscience and conduct?*** What ultimately shapes your belief and your behavior?

The options, actually, are quite limited. There are six possibilities:

(1) **Personal experience** – By this I mean empirical observation: what you have personally seen or heard or felt or participated in. Ultimately you trust your senses: sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. If you cannot verify/prove an assertion or doctrine by one or more of these senses, you have no grounds for believing it.

(2) **Tradition** – By this I mean confidence in what has been believed by those who have come before you for no other reason than that they have believed it. Certain ideas or practices have been handed down through the years and you find yourself standing in the flow of that particular historical path. Because your father (or denomination) believed it, and his father believed it, and his father before him, the tradition has proven durable and practical and you, on that ground, embrace it as truth.

(3) **Culture** – In appealing to culture, you simply take note of the beliefs and customs and artifacts of the surrounding society and embrace the values it promotes and the practices it embraces.

(4) **Reason** – By reason I simply mean what strikes you as logical, sensible, and rational. *Your own mind becomes the final judge in all matters.* What most corresponds in your way of thinking to the way things really are becomes, for you, truth.

(5) **Church** – This is actually one form of appeal to Tradition noted earlier. This is typically the view found in both the RCC and Eastern Orthodoxy who regard the consensus of the church, as expressed in its traditions and creedal formulations, as the authoritative guide to God’s will; hence, “What the Church says, God says”.

(6) **The Bible** – The last option, the one I embrace, is that the Bible is the final arbiter of truth, the ultimate and all sufficient standard by which all other claims to truth are judged and measured. Consider the Westminster Confession of Faith: “The supreme judge by which all controversies are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” [I,x]; hence, “What Scripture says, God says”.

In saying the Bible is my authority, I do not mean that I disregard the other five I’ve mentioned. I can and must learn much from them. But in the final analysis, in the day of reckoning, so to speak, they all stand under the Word of God and must be judged by it.

This is what is meant by the Latin phrase, ***Sola Scriptura***, or *Scripture alone*. We are not asserting that Scripture is our *only* authority but that it is our *final* authority. All other legitimate sources of knowledge are ultimately subject to the final judgment of the Bible.

But we who believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible face an acute problem. We must address the fact that the Bible was written long ago to diverse people in cultures vastly different from our own, people whose problems

and perspectives often seem as strange to us as ours no doubt would to them. How, in the light of this, can we find truth and meaning for our own time and circumstances?

In our world today we find countless realities, gadgets, and experiences that were utterly absent from the ancient world in which the authors of Scripture wrote:

Sex change operations, in vitro fertilization, gambling addictions, child pornography, I-phones, airplanes, global media, global terrorism, radical Islamic fundamentalism, genetic manipulation, stem-cell research, the internet, democracy, capitalism and a free-market economy, communism, radical feminism, same-sex marriage, etc.

None of this is to suggest that the Bible does not apply to us in the 21st century, but it does complicate the task of determining precisely *how*. That is the task before us: to determine in what sense the Bible is authoritative for us today and how we should go about both understanding it and making application of it to our lives.

What is the Bible?

Let's keep in mind several facts about the Bible that people today often ignore.

- In the original Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament there were no vowels, only consonants. Vowels were introduced into the text hundreds of years after Christ (scholars are generally in agreement that this took place in the early middle ages). Thus the first sentence above would have appeared something like this:

“n th rgnl Hbrw mnsrpts f th ld Tstmnt thr wr n vwls, nly cnsnnts”

- In the original manuscripts of the Greek NT there were no spaces between words (that is to say, the previous sentence would have looked something like this:

“intheoriginalmanuscriptsoftheGreekNTtherewerenospacesbetweenwords”

- In the original manuscripts of the Greek NT there was no punctuation.
- The chapter divisions in our modern translations were first introduced into the Latin Vulgate by Stephen Langton in the early thirteenth century.
- The numbering of verses did not exist until developed by Robert Estienne for his Latin-Greek NT in 1551.

If we are going to properly interpret the Bible we must be alert to the numerous ways in which people misunderstand its nature and purpose. For example:

- The Bible is not an answer-book that provides ready-made explanations for all problems or solutions to puzzling questions. When I run into a problem with my computer, I click the Help button and find a topically organized list of solutions to virtually every difficulty I may be facing. But the Bible did not come to us with an Index of topics or a Table of Contents.
- Although the Bible was not written **to** us, it was written **for** us. The challenge we face is to determine how something written directly and personally **to** someone else in a different historical and cultural context has meaning and application **for** us who live so far removed from that original audience.
- As Gordon Fee and Douglas Stewart have said, “*A [biblical] text cannot mean what it never meant.*” Thus the primary task of interpreting the Bible is to determine, as best as possible, what the original author intended by his words.
- The previous principle, however, does not require us to believe that the Bible can never mean something of which the original human author was not consciously aware when he first wrote it. When the NT is allowed,

as it always must be, to interpret the OT, we discover that there is often a fuller or thicker meaning to OT statements that the original author may not have been consciously aware of. Some refer to this principle as *sensus plenior* (lit., the fuller sense or more complete meaning).

- Be very careful and cautious about seeking guidance from God through random words or verses taken out of context. Often people will encounter a particular word in a verse that corresponds to something in their present experience, a word they believe is God’s way of instructing or guiding them in the making of an important decision. But every “word” in the Bible means what the original author intended within the specific context in which it is found. Likewise, a single “verse” is often wrenched out of its original context and applied to some situation in the present day that has no relation to what the original author intended.
- Contrary to what many think, not every command in the Bible is meant to be obeyed. Some commands are conditioned or bound to the particular biblical covenant in which they are found. Other commands are uniquely governed by the historical, cultural, or theological context in which it first appears.
- Related to the previous point is this comment by Robert Plummer:

“The Bible is not a policy book, with each page giving equally timeless instruction. Yes, ‘every word of God is flawless’ (Prov. 30:5). Nevertheless, the Bible is more like a multivolume narrative, in which the later chapters clarify the ultimate meaning and sometimes the temporary, accommodating nature of earlier regulations and events (e.g., Matt. 19:8). Old Testament commands that are repeated in the New Testament (for example, moral commands, such as the prohibition of homosexuality [Lev. 18:22; 1 Cor. 6:9]) or not explicitly repealed (as are the civil and ceremonial laws [Mark 7:19; Heb. 10:1-10]) have abiding significance in the expression of God’s Spirit-led people” (*40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, 169).
- We must be careful to differentiate between what is *descriptive* in the Bible and what is *prescriptive*. That is, some passages merely describe events, actions, and words as they occurred (or were spoken), without necessarily endorsing the truthfulness or expecting others to emulate their behavior. A good example would be the speeches in Job of his purported “friends and counselors” or certain narrative descriptions of early church life in the book of Acts.
- Contrary to what many think, not every promise in the Bible can be claimed as our own.
 - Consider Jeremiah 29:11-18 and 2 Chronicles 7:11-22
 - Each biblical promise is given to a particular individual or group at a particular stage in redemptive history and applies most immediately to their own unique situation.
 - Many biblical “promises” are less divine guarantees and more of the nature of human opportunities or invitations.
 - Many promises are not unconditional but depend on the response of those to whom they are given. There is a difference between a divine “declaration” and a divine “decree” (consider the experience of Jonah as an example).
 - Even though not all promises can be “claimed” as applicable to us today, all promises do tell us something about the nature of God.
- Some biblical commands are universal and timeless whereas others are uniquely specific and tied into the culture of the day in which they were written.
 - Compare Leviticus 19:19 and 1 Corinthians 10:31.
 - Compare 2 Timothy 2:2 and 1 Corinthians 16:20.

- The Bible is not to be read as one would read and study Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*. The truth of Scripture comes to us primarily through a variety of literary forms (genres), cultural circumstances, diverse personalities, and at different times in history.
- Biblical revelation is progressive and situational. Scripture did not descend to earth by means of a parachute, fully formed. It is organic (as the seed produces the stem which in turn produces the fruit or flower).
- The principle of first reference versus the principle of final reference. Some argue that the meaning of the first occurrence of a word in the Bible should determine the meaning of all subsequent uses of the word. Although valid in many instances, even more important and determinative of meaning is the *final* appearance of the word in the fully formed canon of inspired Scripture.
- The key to finding the relevant application of any biblical text is to ask the question: *Where do we stand in the story?*
- The Bible is not designed to provide us with exhaustive answers to every conceivable question. It is designed to provide us with everything we need to know about the nature and purposes of God and how we can live in godliness and for his glory.
- The authors of Scripture always differ as to their time, circumstances, purposes, and personality, and what they write under the inspiration of the Spirit will always reflect such factors. The inspiration of the Bible does not eliminate the humanity of the text. Consider 1 Cor. 1:14-17

Which Bible? Choosing the Best Translation

I often marvel at the spiritual energy and acrimony that erupts whenever people talk about their favorite English translation of the Bible. Let’s agree up front not to let our preferences become hardened and dogmatic causes for division. Sadly, some have made the choice of a particular translation a test of orthodoxy.

In making a choice for which translation to use, several factors should come into play.¹

(1) Accuracy. The primary goal of a Bible translation is to accurately reproduce the meaning, not the form, of the original Hebrews, Aramaic, and Greek text. For example, if you were to render the Greek text of John 3:16 word-for-word and in precisely the form in which it appears, it would read as follows:

“So for loved the God the world, so that the son the unique he gave, in order that every one the one believing in him not he might perish but he might have life eternal.”

You might say that such a translation is literally accurate, but it is largely useless because it does not convey the meaning of the passage.

(2) Clarity. A good translation will be as clear to modern English readers as the original Greek texts was clear to its readers in the first century. Here’s an example. In Hebrews 1:3 we are told that Jesus upholds all things *tō hrēmati tēs dunameōs autou*. A strictly literal rendering of this would be:

“by the word of the power of him.”

The KJV, NASB and ESV translate it:

“by the word of his power.”

¹ For more helpful information on this, see Andy Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: 12 Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (forthcoming).

Is that clear? Do you immediately know what it means? The NIV, NET, and HCSB translate it:

“by his powerful word.”

(3) Readability. Some translations, especially the KJV, simply doesn't sound natural. That is to say, no one today talks the way the King James Bible reads. Take one example, from the opening line of the Lord's Prayer:

“Our Father which art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name” (Matt. 6:9).

Does that sound natural to you? Is that how you typically communicate? A more natural translation is what we find in the NET and HCSB:

“Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored as holy.”

The Three Primary Approaches to Translation

Most English translations fall somewhere on the scale between what is known as formal equivalence and free paraphrase.

By **formal equivalence** I mean essentially “word for word” or “essentially literal” translations. In other words, these translations labor to make the English text formally equivalent to or the same as the Hebrew and Greek text, while retaining a high degree of readability. These translations typically do not interpret the text as much as others do, although all translations are to some extent interpretations. Examples of translations that embrace formal equivalence are the KJV, the NKJV, the NASB, and the ESV. I should point out, however, that the ESV was created precisely to read more fluidly and intelligibly than the more woodenly literal NASB or NKJV. On the scale of being literal, the most literal is the NASB, KJV, and NKJV, with the ESV and the NCSB less so.

The view known as **functional or dynamic equivalence** is more concerned with making the English version natural and easy to read. It is not so much concerned with giving us a “word-for-word” translation but rather a “thought-for-thought” translation. It tends to be more interpretive and places a higher value on the English version being functionally the same as the original text rather than essentially the same. By *functionally* the same I mean the English translation provides a comparatively accurate translation but without bringing across into English the actual form of the original words and sentences. The NLT would fall under this heading.

A somewhat **mediating** view between that of formal and functional equivalence is found in the NIV, the NCSB, and the NET Bible. The NIV is still moderately literal, but often times goes beyond a word-for-word translation and provides its own interpretive perspective.

There are two prominent versions of the English Bible that shouldn't be called translations. The Living Bible (LB) and The Message are **expanded paraphrases**. For example, compare how the ESV and the Message render 1 Corinthians 13:1.

“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (ESV).

“If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate” (The Message).

The Two Best Study Bibles

The production of so-called study Bibles has gotten a bit out of control. Famous pastors such as W. A. Criswell, Charles Ryrie, John MacArthur, and David Jeremiah, just to mention a few, have each come out with their own study Bibles that typically reflect their own unique theological perspectives. There is also the Reformation Study Bible (decidedly Presbyterian and Reformed in emphasis), the New Spirit-Filled Life Study Bible (produced mostly by Pentecostals and Charismatics), The Life Application Study Bible, The Apologetics Study Bible, and a host of others.

There are only two study Bibles that I believe you need, and both are good to have. The best is the ESV Study Bible (Crossway). The NIV Zondervan Study Bible (Zondervan) is also an excellent resource. Both of these volumes have excellent, orthodox, and insightful commentary at the bottom of each page, together with introductions to each book of the Bible, historical timelines, numerous charts, maps, and illustrations. They also both contain 15-20 articles on a variety of themes related to the Bible and theology.

The one danger when using a study Bible is the tendency for people to confuse the interpretations at the bottom of each page with the biblical text itself. Don't ever forget that only the biblical text is inspired and always true. The notes are the interpretations of fallible human beings.

Discussion Questions

(1) As you look back over your life as a Christian, how often have you consciously sensed that the Bible was the authority that determined what you believed and how you behaved? In what ways were other, lesser authorities given weight in your decision making?

(2) Consider this statement: "When you and the Bible disagree, the Bible wins." Do you believe that? Give some practical examples of how the Bible has "won" in your life.

(3) What do we mean by *Sola Scriptura*? What do we *not* mean?

(4) In the material above, this statement was made: "Be very careful and cautious about seeking guidance from God through random words or verses taken out of context. Often people will encounter a particular word in a verse that corresponds to something in their present experience, a word they believe is God's way of instructing or guiding them in the making of an important decision. But every "word" in the Bible means what the original author intended within the specific context in which it is found. Likewise, a single "verse" is often wrenched out of its original context and applied to some situation in the present day that has no relation to what the original author intended."

Can you give some personal examples of how this has occurred in your experience or in the experience of others?

(5) What is meant by the "functional" authority of Scripture.