

# How to Think about and Practice Theology

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## INTRODUCTION

The Bible is the single most important book ever written since it is God's word through human penmen, not simply a word about God. God has taken the initiative to intelligently and verbally disclose himself and his will to humanity. The epithet describing believers as "people of the book" is well known as is the famous statement by Patrick Henry who mused that the Bible is worth more than all the other books ever printed.<sup>1</sup>

Conservative evangelical believers (or historical fundamentalists) adhere to verbal inspiration, factual inerrancy, and sufficiency of Scripture and to a conservative framework of hermeneutics (theory of interpretation). The Bible possesses the authority and clarity to tell mankind what to believe and how to live. Believers are responsible to live day-to-day seeking to understand and appropriate God's grace and truth into their lives so as to walk humbly and blamelessly before God. This article overviews how each believer can interpret the Bible and practice theology. In light of inroads of pluralism, the current theological haze, and relentless attacks on the nature, knowability, and authority of God's word each believer needs to carefully interpret the Scripture and practice theology.

## HOW TO THINK ABOUT SCRIPTURE AND TRUTH

The Scripture attests to its own identity and truthfulness as God's Word and to its own knowability.<sup>2</sup> This identity is a form of Scriptural foundationalism. Scriptural foundationalism should not be confused with enlightenment foundationalism that allegedly leads to a complete neutral, comprehensive, indubitable, objective knowledge, resulting in the impossibility of doubt (i.e., what is alleged as Cartesian foundationalism). Rather, Scriptural foundationalism asserts the presence of objective truth grounded in Scripture which is the most basic foundation for a belief system. Scriptural foundationalism recognizes that while truth is

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<sup>2</sup> For further review see the following by David A. Mappes: "A New Kind of Christian: A Review," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (July–September, 2004): 289–303; "The Nobility and Knowability of Truth: Part 1," (Spring 2009), 64–105; "The Nobility and Knowability of Scripture: Part 2," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 13 (fall 2009): 1–22; "Current Trends in Hermeneutics and Theology: Certainty and Simplicity," *Paraklesis: A Ministry of Encouragement from Baptist Bible Seminary* (Clarks Summit, PA.), Summer 2010; "Love Wins by Rob Bell: A Biblical and Theological Critique," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2012), 87–121.

ultimately personal since it is sourced in the Triune God himself, God nonetheless reveals his truth in Scripture in clear propositional revelation. A proposition is generally understood as the meaning of what is true or false as expressed in a declarative type statement. Propositional revelation asserts that revelation discloses truth in a cognitive manner that is not reducible to personal experience or personal perspective. In other words, propositional revelation is timeless and not limited, reducible, nor defined or affected by personal experience.

The Scripture directly and explicitly identifies itself as God's self-expression-Scripture is divine revelation and not simply a witness or history of divine revelation. To deny the clarity and authoritative verbal element of God's dealing with his people is to deny God's ability to speak and thus deny God himself. Both Jesus and the writers of the New Testament spoke in terms of absolute, authoritative certainty. The phrase "thus saith the Lord" appears over 400 times in the Old Testament. This edict served to incite absolute obedience as the words of the prophet were to be absolutely, authoritatively obeyed. Elijah's words in 1 Kings 21:19 are referred to as the Lord's oracle in 2 Kings 9:25-26. Many times the prophet spoke for God in the first person (2 Sam 7:4-16; 2 Kgs 17:13); hence to disbelieve or question a prophet was to disbelieve or question God himself (1 Kgs 20:35-36). Paul referred to the Scriptures as the oracles of God (Rom 3:2) and referred to his own words as conveying the Spirit's words (1 Cor 2:13). For this reason Paul can write, "the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandments" (1 Cor 14:37). In Acts 1:16, Luke writes, "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas." Notice that the Holy Spirit (who is God) is the author of the Scripture through the human agency of David; the human agency of David did not detract or distort the nature of Scripture as God's word. God providentially prepared mankind (Gal 1:15; Jer 1:5) to write the Scriptures as the human authors were superintended by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21). The authors recorded God's intended word through their own words and personalities (Mark 12:36; 1 Cor 14:37) so that their writings indeed were God's words.

These examples of certainty and authority do not suggest anything less than absolute certainty and absolute authority. Jesus continually affirmed the absolute authority of the Scripture. He used Scripture to rebuke Satan (Mt 4:4-10), He used the authority of Scripture to rebuke the pharisaical traditions (Matt 15:3, 4), and He used Scriptural authority to cleanse the temple (Mark 11:17). He said one could build their life upon the rock of truth (Matt 7:24) and that not the smallest letter or stroke of the law would pass away until its fulfillment (Matt 5:17). Paul commanded the church leaders to speak with such authority and certainty so as to silence false teachers (Titus 1:9-16). Peter refers to Paul's writing as accurate and in accordance with truth and understands Paul's writings as Scripture (2 Pet 3:16). Luke says that he used detailed research to present an accurate account of Jesus and the early church (Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1) and Paul cites Luke's writing as Scripture (1 Tim 5:18, cf., Luke 10:7).

Scriptural foundationalism also affirms that Scripture provides its own sufficient primary interpretative context and presents some doctrines with such clarity and repetition that these doctrines are fundamental and foundational to Christianity and to living the Christian life. These doctrines should be embraced with interpretative certainty. This interpretative certainty then presides as the final arbiter over religious traditions, personal intuition, and mystical encounters and even over personal doubt. God gives humankind an awareness of certain truths in Scripture regarding himself and his plan that corresponds to God's mind. Truth then is defined as correspondence to what is real and not just what one perceives to be real. Scriptural foundationalism denies that truth and doctrine are simply subjective experiences of a faith community or particular culture.

The Triune God is a God of reality and he has disclosed himself to us through his Son and his revelation. In spite of humanity's fallenness, sinfulness, and presuppositions, these truths have a primary and privileged claim on forming our views of life and God. Not all our

knowledge of truth and doctrines has this kind of Scriptural, foundational clarity and objectivity. Some doctrines require a synthesis from multiple passages given in different periods which may contain many interpretative nuances. These doctrines are held at interpretative levels of confidence.

## **HOW THINK ABOUT AND PRACTICE THEOLOGY**

### **Scriptural Priority**

What is God like? Why did he create me? How can I know God's will for my life? How could the changeless Son of God become a man? Will Jesus really return to this world and what will his return look like? Why does God allow evil? Could Jesus have sinned like I sin? What happens after death? Answering these questions is called theology. However, answering these and similar questions requires a very careful, thorough systematic study of the entire Bible. Answering these questions with the full weight of all Scripture is called systematic theology.

Any orthodox theology begins with serious reflection and interpretation of the Scripture. Serious reflection requires using a legitimate theological method that guides the reader to understand the author's meaning as revealed in his writing. The biblical authors presumed that their intended meaning would be discernible and knowable through reading their text. They repeatedly directed believers to focus on what was revealed and to avoid speculation or worse, divination to acquire what was not revealed. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law." Israel was to view God's revealed Word as the supreme and ultimate authority. The OT Law itself contains provision in Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and Deuteronomy 18:15-22 to examine and evaluate truth claims by comparing any truth claim to the written law of Moses. This command of comparing truth claims to the law demonstrates that the law was sufficiently clear and knowable to test other truth assertions. Even if supernatural manifestations accompanied false truth assertions, the law of Moses would serve as the final arbiter in testing a truth assertion. Thus, the written, knowable law of God would have supreme authority over Israel in all matters.

Similarly, the Apostle Paul says he (and a unique group of other apostles and prophets) received God's truth through divine disclosure which he discusses in his letter to the Ephesians (Eph 2:20-12). Paul indicated that his intended meaning could be understood by reading his letter. Further, he assumes that the Ephesian believers could read and understand this verbal revelation through the literary conventions of their day and that his writings would serve as foundational instruction for God's people.

Paul summarizes that when the Ephesians read his letter they would understand his insight into the divinely disclosed mystery of Christ, and this authoritative written revelation would govern their lives and community (Eph 3:3-4). The authors of Scripture present truth as a knowable, truthful, and trustworthy portrayal of the reality of God. In the Great Commission, Jesus commanded, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt 28:19-20). All that Jesus commanded entails both what Jesus himself taught while on earth as well as what Jesus continued to teach to his apostles through the Spirit after the ascension (since the apostles were agents of the Scripture; John 14:16; 1 Cor 14:37; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Pet 3:2).

The task then of the Great Commission actually necessities that believers collect, properly interpret, and synthesize Scripture so as to bring the full weight of Scripture to bear on any given subject that the Scripture addresses. Systematic theology entails this comprehensive

process of collecting, interpreting, synthesizing, and defending all biblical revelation to portray the total picture of God's revelation on a particular matter. Systematic theology, however, is always measured by an exegetical based theology. Exegesis means to draw the author's affirmed meaning out his text; hence the priority of authorial intention. The goal is to determine the meaning of what the author intends and affirms by his writing. Rather than asking "what does the passage mean to me," priority is always placed on the biblical author's conscious intended meaning as revealed in the context of his book. The question of how the meaning relates to the reader is called significance (or application). While significance is very important, the meaning of the biblical author always controls it. One noted scholar has recently re-emphasized that, Christians need to look for the one single objective meaning of what the author affirms by his text, and not why he affirms his meaning or even worse to look for the author's meaning beyond the text.<sup>3</sup>

Theologians use different sub-disciplines of theology to help discern, define, and defend the Christian faith. Systematic theology should be practiced within the context of other theological disciplines such as biblical theology, historical theology, etc., as illustrated:

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| Exegetical Theology | The process of studying of a single portion of Scripture using an historical, grammatical hermeneutic without any necessary organization of doctrines.   |
| Biblical Theology   | The process of discovering the particular viewpoint of a biblical author (e.g., Pauline theology) or the study of revelation in particular historical time period (e.g., theology of wisdom literature). |
| Systematic Theology | A cumulative and comprehensive answer and defense to what the Bible in entirety teaches on a given subject.  |
| Historical Theology | The study of how the church throughout history has understood various doctrines and how those doctrines were developed.  |
| Practical theology  | The process of taking truths primarily from systematic theology and integrating them into ministries of the church such as preaching, counseling, evangelism, worship, Christian education, etc.         |
| Apologetics         | The process of studying and presenting theology to defend the teaching of Christianity and Scripture against critics, cults, and cynics while providing evidence of credibility.                         |

### Understanding and Practicing a Biblical Theological Method

A correct (and self-correcting) model for how to theologize (theological method) is necessary since the Scripture is progressively revealed, and no one topic is fully addressed by any one author in any one time era. Rather, Scripture comprises 66 separate books in the Bible written over a 3900-year time span. Many times interpreters ask the wrong questions or ask the right question in the wrong way about a particular subject matter or text, which then creates difficult interpretive issues. A correct theological method is crucial in the interpretative and application process.

A theological method exhibiting the following characteristics will help ensure a biblically balanced and self-correcting approach:

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<sup>3</sup> Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 290-93.

**1. Canonical.** First priority and authority is always given to the canonical books of Scripture (*canon* refers to all 66 books of the Bible) over personal experiences, personal sensibilities, other writings, background studies, speculation, etc. In sum, Scripture is used to interpret Scripture in its proper context. Scripture possesses a kind of inherent clarity to allow its central message and truths to be self-evident. Rather than this maxim being circular reasoning, this principle of the self-authentication of Scripture simply provides the right for Scripture to speak first and provide a context for understanding. Background information and knowledge gained through general revelation can be helpful though priority should always be placed upon Scripture interpreting Scripture. Theologians refer to this as the perspicuity (or clarity) of Scripture. Critics of perspicuity of Scripture assert that since everyone has pre-understanding, then there can be no valid authoritative interpretation of Scripture—only views based upon one’s pre-understanding. This assertion, however, is patently false and self-contradictory. These critics claim that non-objectivity is universal; thus they themselves affirm an alleged universal truth of non-objectivity. Furthermore, they expect their readers who may have different pre-understanding and presuppositions to fully understand, alter, and even embrace their own arguments.

Everyone has pre-understanding and assumptions which should be honestly acknowledged and brought into submission to the Scripture. Pre-understanding is simply a personally acquired knowledge that either consciously or unconsciously influences one’s view of life, including interpretation. Scholars have identified three categories of presuppositions for the interpreter to examine: (a) theological presuppositions-doctrinal beliefs that affect interpretation of individual passages of Scripture; (b) philosophical presuppositions-beliefs about reality, about the nature of truth, the nature and direction of history, etc.; (c) methodological presuppositions, the use of logic, deduction, inferences, etc. A valid theological model will promote examination and alteration of these presuppositions by the full canon of Scripture. Unfortunately, some interpreters either ignore pre-understanding to their own peril or exaggerate pre-understanding well above the knowability of the text of Scripture which leads to mere perspectivism. A wise interpreter of Scripture will reflect and actually write down and critically examine previous significant experiences and views related to a passage being studied. This examination process can help to adjust pre-understanding with the meaning in the Scripture text. Wise interpreters ask themselves if the specific passage supports their views and experience. They work through a process of evaluating and understanding their own pre-understanding. Then they adjust their pre-understanding to the text of Scripture.

Many times interaction with others is helpful in this process of identifying pre-understanding. It is helpful to balance one’s study of Scripture to include more than a powerful and dominate personality so be sure to read good balanced material. The careful interpreter must learn the plot line of the entire Bible. This general plot line is referred to as the meta-narrative, which is the grand overarching story line in Bible of how God is glorifying himself. Another phrase often and more correctly used to describe this overarching story is the unfolding drama. The unfolding drama begins in Genesis 1 with God glorifying himself through creating the earth, and the drama is completed in Revelation 21 with his creation finally acknowledging and fully glorifying him as Creator God. The drama includes five principal parts: (a) the Creator God, (b) the creation (primarily mankind), (c) the corruption and chaos resulting from sinful rebellion, (d) Christ and promise of redemption, and (e) the final consummation or completion of the drama. These five aspects of the drama are intertwined much like a rope is intertwined with cords and they are progressively revealed throughout Scripture. These overarching themes appear repeatedly in the various books throughout the Bible. Careful interpreters learn how each book further advances the Bible’s plotline. Many times it is helpful to evaluate and validate an interpretation within this overall plotline of the

Bible. Many believers will read the Bible through each year and at the same time focus on a more detailed monthly reading in a specific Bible book or topic. Attending a good church with a commitment to an expositional teaching ministry will help one to understand the meta-narrative of the Bible and practice valid interpretation of Scripture.

**2. Comprehensive.** All biblical teaching on a topic must be examined with greater weight given to the clearest and most definitive passages rather than selective or vague passages. This comprehensive process helps avoid mere proof-texting. Proverbs 18:17 says, “The first to plead his case seems just, until another comes and examines him.” Thus any theological model must entail extensive examination and interaction with all Scripture. Partial and fragmented knowledge will lead only to a distorted view and shallow ministry and life. Some passages require extensive examination of nuanced interpretative views from those who agree with a view as well as with those who disagree. In other words, wise interpreters seriously interact with both detractors and with supporters of a position as long as both groups share a similar high view of the inspiration of Scripture. Wise interpreters continue to examine both primary literature (the Bible) and secondary literature (commentaries, theology books, etc.). Further reading and interaction helps to unpack the issues and surface a number of sub-related themes and questions related to the initial question. Careful students are sure to restate and refine the initial question as they study. Many times properly defining the issue or question provides a path for healthy resolution. The overall goal is to become more sensitive to the literary features of these passages and allow a comprehensive view of a truth to shape one’s understanding and life with God.

**3. Consistent hermeneutical approach.** Hermeneutics comes from the Greek term *hermeneuo* which carries the idea of explaining, interpreting, or translating the sense of one language to another. It is the science and art of interpretation. The interpretive philosophy must be consistently used rather than allowing a shifting hermeneutical philosophy to vary from topic-to-topic, or passage-to-passage, or even from the Old Testament to New Testament. The goal is to always understand and validate the author’s affirmed meaning by examining the historical-cultural meaning of the passage within the context of the author’s book. God did not give all his revelation in one exhaustive act. Rather, he provided revelation through distinguishable stages in many literary styles or genres of writing. Each text of Scripture must be read in light of its own historical setting rather than simply superimposing later revelation onto earlier revelation. While the entire Bible is for Christians, it is not all directly addressed to Christians. The grammatical-historical-cultural-literal interpretation allows for figures of speech (hyperbole, similes, metaphors, etc.) as well as various forms or genres of writing (poetry, wisdom literature, narrative, etc.). These various genres, however, do not negate the historical accuracy of an event nor do they deny the factuality and truthfulness of Scripture. The interpreter should seek to determine and validate the original authors’ intended meaning by examining the writing within its own historical context and literary genre. Believers should seek to understand the literal meaning of a text by its immediate historical-textual parameters. This interpretative method allows the immediate historical context of a passage to define and limit textual meaning.

**4. Congruency.** The method of study must allow for harmony, complexity, and tension of Scripture without creating direct contradictions or forced harmonization. Valid interpretation does not minimize or worse, deny, one truth while holding firmly to another truth. Some truths simply exist side-by-side which the biblical authors never try to resolve. As an example, it is disingenuous to claim that God is love while then ignoring that God is also holy or wrathful. Scripture teaches that God’s nature entails both holiness and love. Interpretative questions should come from the text of Scripture rather than create a false dichotomy between two polar choices. The statement that “if God loves me, then why did He allow this event in my life” is a classic example of not allowing the complexity and tension in Scripture. The Scriptures clearly

teach that God does love us and that he is sovereignly orchestrating events in our lives; thus this question denies both these central truths. A theological method does not create false contradictions.

**5. Coherence.** Any theological method must demonstrate a logical, clear ordering of investigation which provides the greatest weight of direct teaching material to address a topic. Some practices are described in the Bible (e.g., betrothal in marriage or washing feet before entering a home) while other truths are prescribed (e.g., how a husband should treat his wife). A coherent approach recognizes this “prescriptive vs. descriptive” or the “is vs. ought” differences and allows the weightiest, clearest passages to address a topic. Descriptive truths describe things that simply existed while prescriptive truths prescribe a higher moral and ethical standard of what life ought to be.

**6. Call of Response/Application.** The call for personal response(s) must relate to the verbal meaning of the Scriptural truth/passage that is being considered. The authorial meaning of Scripture always controls this specificity for personal response (or the significance of Scripture). The extent to which a truth can be applied to the contemporary reader is measured by the degree of transfer.<sup>4</sup> The degree of transfer is the extent to which the current reader is similar to or different from the originally intended recipients. If the passage is specifically addressing Christian husbands, is it legitimate to then apply and transfer that meaning to wives or to children? If a passage does not have a high degree of transfer, then broader Scriptural principles from the passage may apply. However, these Scriptural principles should always be measured by other Scripture that directly address the topic. Principles should not serve as the final weight of a truth or an application but rather be used to illustrate a truth taught elsewhere in Scripture. Most importantly, careful interpreters must pray that God would illumine their minds to personally apply the truth you are studying. Illuminating insight from the Holy Spirit is directly linked to the interpreter’s appetite for following the Lord. A prayerful attitude of obedience to the truths being studied indicates a reverence and adoration of the truth giver, God himself.

As the interpreter forms tentative conclusions about a topic, those conclusions should be tested through time and careful interaction with the Christian community. Careful interpreters continue to evaluate the amount of literary evidence in the Scripture that supports their conclusions. In particular, they look for multiple, larger blocks of Scripture which might support their conclusions. They also look for other biblical texts which address similar issues that support their interpretation and application of Scripture. The Bible is always its own interpreter.

## **Spiritual Growth and Biblical Convictions**

### ***Doctrinal Taxonomy***

A valid theological model will allow for growth and maturity in theological development as well as the affirmation of first-order knowable truths. First-order knowable truths refer to core, essential doctrinal truths of Christianity that define Christianity (and living as a Christ follower). This growth and maturity involves cognitively understanding the Scriptures as well as applying these truths through faith. Oftentimes doubt (lack of faith) in appropriating or believing the truth is confused with cognitively understanding the truth. A valid theological model allows for growth in both the cognitive developmental understanding of Scripture as well as maturing in faith-obedience to the truth. God has revealed himself through unique

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<sup>4</sup> See Daniel Estes, *Learning and Living God’s Word* (Schamburg, IL: Regular Baptist, 1993) for further discussion.

special revelation though mankind is both finite and sinful; hence humans do not always fully understand or consistently apply that revelation to their lives. A valid theological model will acknowledge that differences exist between interpretative certainty (lack of doubt), legitimate interpretative probabilities (degrees of interpretative confidence on some doctrines), and lack of application of these truths.

The NT writers present that the true gospel and true gospel living is discernible from counterfeit, false gospels. The gospel and gospel living have doctrinal parameters and boundaries. While some may not fully understand or be able to fully affirm and articulate those boundaries, they could not intelligently deny them without denying the gospel itself. Throughout the book of Acts, the gospel truth is presented in contrast to false teaching from both Judaism and paganism. Examining the actual content of apostolic preaching, their refutation of false teaching, and their own comments referring to first-order doctrinal truth helps interpreters to discern core, essential doctrinal components which should be held in an absolutist (though not triumphalistic) fashion. In Acts 2, Luke emphasizes that Peter’s first sermon to the church contains such core, essential truths as the crucified, risen, and ascended Lord and that salvation is only in his name; Peter also mentioned the work of the triune God as he reveals the person and salvific work of Christ and that individuals can appropriate this salvation only through conscious, personal faith in Christ alone. The following chart partially summarizes some of these core essential issues of the apostolic message in the book of Acts<sup>5</sup>.

| Passage  | God’s nature | Person of Jesus Christ | Work of Christ | Salvation by grace alone through faith alone | The truth needs to be proclaimed as essential doctrine |
|----------|--------------|------------------------|----------------|--|--|
| Acts 2   | yes          | yes                    | yes            | yes  | yes  |
| Acts 3   | yes          | yes                    | yes            | yes  | yes  |
| Acts 4-5 | yes          | yes                    | yes            | yes  | yes  |
| Acts 10  | yes          | yes                    | yes            | yes  | yes  |
| Acts 13  | yes          | yes                    | yes            | yes  | yes  |

When Paul addresses churches in Galatia, he immediately presents core, defining, non-compromising, and non-provisional aspects of the gospel message and gospel living. In Galatians 1:6-12, Paul asserts he received divine disclosure directly from God (neither from man nor through man) for his teaching and establishes this divine disclosure as objective criteria for all other gospels. There is no sense of provisionality here in his letter but rather essential core components which could be known with objectivity and certainty. This sense of objective certainty in Galatians 1:6-24 is so objective and so knowable that these truths can even preside over and adjudicate angelic messengers and even Paul’s future teachings.

Scripture repeatedly commends to its readers a basic framework of doctrinal truths and apostolic traditions which entails doctrinal content of this first-order. The term tradition (2 Thess 2:15) focuses on such content as handed down from the apostles to the churches. Sound doctrine denotes a fixed body of doctrine—a fixed, orthodox confession of faith that believers have received and that believers are responsible to preserve against heresy. If these truths are violated or simply re-interpreted to mean something less than their original intent, then apostasy would ensue. Believers are instructed to guard this faith (2 Tim 1:13-14; 4:3; Titus 1:9), defend it (Jude 3) and not drift, thereby passing it on to succeeding generations.

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<sup>5</sup> Chart modified from “Core Christianity” by Charles J. Colton, May 2006 (D.Min dissertation at Baptist Bible Seminary), 70.

Believers are commanded to compare and contrast teachers and their message with the revealed truth of the Scriptures (Matt 24:24-25; 2 Thess 2:1-5; 1 John 4:1-6; 2 John 9-11). This revealed truth in Scripture is objective truth that is knowable and that can adjudicate counter assertions. Paul admonishes Titus about “men who turn away from the truth” (Titus 1:14). In each case the apostolic deposit of truth is to serve as the measurement for error. Paul warns that Satan can transform himself into an angel of light and deceive others through false apostles and deceitful workers (2 Cor 11:13-14). The Scripture presents truth with such objectivity, knowability, certainty, and authority that false teachers are to be silenced and removed from the assembly if they do not repent (1 Tim 4:1-3; 2 Tim 2:14-19).

Even promises of future events such as the universal judgment and the visible return of Christ are presented as divine future certainties. These promises of God (which could/can be known) were to carry more authority than the reality early Christians found themselves situated in; they were to allow God’s word to create a framework to interpret and judge their cultural events rather than allowing their cultural situation to interpret Scripture. Even what appeared as incredible evidence by the false teaches in 2 Peter 2 in discounting God’s promises was summarily dismissed in light of the clarity and certainty of the verbal promises of Scripture—thus no amount of evidence could be marshaled against the promise of Scripture so as to disregard the promise or obfuscate the meaning of the promise. This speaks of non-provisional, absolute, authoritative core doctrinal values of Christianity.

In his second epistle, Peter addresses false teachers who denied the second coming of Christ. Peter’s description in chapter two portrays an historical overview of God’s past acts of judgment that transcends any human ability to access and validate the truthfulness of these past judgments apart from OT Scripture. Peter refers to such past acts of judgment as the imprisonment of angels, the flood and preservation of Noah, judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, preservation of Lot, and judgment of Balaam. Peter then argues that these past acts of God’s judgment become the basis for the guarantee of future judgment of the false teachers at the return of Christ. Peter’s recipients could not validate these facts of past judgment nor prove future judgment. Nevertheless readers were (and are) to allow the verbal promises of God to interpret and adjudicate the false teachers as well as their own lives. The Scripture authors present their writing as the authoritative divinely inspired Word of God.

While Bible-centered Christians do agree on essential, core theological issues related to Christianity, they also disagree on a number of interpretative nuances surrounding these essential components. As an example, Bible-centered Christians all affirm the absolute certainty of Christ’s visible second coming to earth, though they disagree on specific events related to his return. Believers must discern the relative degrees of importance of theological beliefs. What beliefs are essential, secondary, peripheral, or simply incredulous? What doctrinal truths are indispensable to Christianity and to Christian living and what beliefs should be held in a less essential manner? Theologians refer to this prioritizing of doctrines as doctrinal taxonomy.

### ***How to think about Essential and Non-essential Doctrines***

Determining these essential and non-essential nuances cannot simply be formulated around simplistic statements as “Jesus died for me” or worse a generic comment such as “God loves us” as comprising the essential category. This method many times creates a skewed, truncated, and even false gospel. Each of these simplistic phrases carries incredible critical biblical nuances that require further explanation. Even some of the more serious attempts to categorize the essential doctrines as being restricted to the grace-gospel-salvation category many times can fall short or be misapplied.

The method of creating a grace-gospel-salvation essential category vs. all other issues can create a false comparison. Who would disagree that the salvation is an essential category and eternally important? However, some essential truths of Christianity are not explicitly stated in the gospel message though they are nonetheless essential truths.

The essential vs. non-essential question should be framed by asking what the biblical authors disclosed as being essential to each specific subject they are addressing. In respect to personal conversion, the grace gospel through faith alone is essential; otherwise the gospel is perverted. When addressing issues of eschatology (study of end time events), the second visible return of Christ to judge the living and the dead is an essential component as is the notion of general resurrection, God's sovereign control over history, God's recreating the fallen creation, and removal of the curse, etc. When addressing Christian life issues such as having a truly Christian marriage or being a Christian citizen in a hostile government atmosphere, then other essential non-negotiable components surface. It is far better to compile all the biblical evidence addressing any particular subject matter and then wrestle with specific interpretative nuances of refined views. The next step is to create the essential vs. non-essential categories under each topic rather than just comparing all topics to the grace-gospel-conversion essential category. Some doctrines relate to the gospel message while other doctrines relate more to Christian living and areas of discipleship, though both are essential.

### ***Determining Doctrinal Weight***

Determining the weight of each doctrine or doctrinal nuance entails a number of considerations: (1) biblical clarity and repetition of the truth. Direct, repetitious Scripture addressing the same subject always carries the greatest weight in determining the degree of importance and authority; (2) The weight the Scripture author associates with the truth is also crucial. What are the textually stated or implied consequences of misunderstanding or denying the truth as well as obeying the truth?; (3) The relevance of the truth to the character God. Will confusing or minimizing the truth minimize or distort the character of God?; (4) The relevance of the truth to the character of the gospel; (5) The relationship of the truth to other doctrines as well as to orthodox Christianity itself; (6) The degree of consensus of other Christians (including both past and present); (7) The current as well as past cultural pressures to deny or accept the truth.<sup>6</sup> While the full weight of all these criteria is important, the first two criteria provide the priority in determining doctrinal taxonomy.

One popular paradigm suggests believers can help envision these essential and less essential issues in the following manner:

- (1) What biblical truths believers should legitimately die for regarding Christianity (and living Christianly). Many times these beliefs are referred to as first-level, foundational, fundamental, absolute, or core beliefs that are essential to Christianity; they define Christianity (and the Christian life) and if altered then Christianity and the Christian life will ultimately cease to be Christian. A few examples of these foundational truths would include the virgin birth of Christ; the full humanity of Christ; the deity of Christ; Christ's sacrificial death; the physical resurrection; the second coming of Christ; The personhood of God; salvation by grace alone through conscious personal faith alone. Denials or depreciations of these foundational, fundamental truths (and implications of these truths) could lead to either apostasy or to a tragic shipwrecked life. The

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<sup>6</sup> Modified from Erik Thoennes, *Life's Biggest Questions: What the Bible Says About the Things that Matter Most* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 34-37.

interpretative evidence is so strong with such clarity that believers should be willing to die for these truths or they would deny the Christian faith. Throughout church history, heretics and false teachers have attacked these foundational beliefs resulting in the formation of long lasting church creeds. Many of the early Christian creeds and early councils reveal the essential nature of these fundamental doctrines as well as notion of interpretative certainty and biblical authority. As the church faces new cultural and spiritual challenges, the church will need to study and refocus the Scripture to address other topics. As an example, Christians are now focusing the Scripture on the nature of marriage to correctly demonstrate that marriage is a one-man to one-woman union so as to exclude same sex marriage and polygamy. Hence, one of many essential aspects of marriage then is a one-man to one-woman union. Christians are also refocusing the Scripture on the nature of humanity to emphasize the intrinsic worth of all life including the unborn.

- (2) The second level weighting doctrine refers to what believers, who hold to essential truths, might legitimately and lovingly divide over? Many times this category is referred to as second-level doctrines or convictions. One example of this dividing occurred when Paul and Barnabas separated over the issue of John Mark (Acts 15:36-40). Some examples might include charismatic issues or some issues of baptism, etc. The notion of dividing need not imply divisiveness or belligerence, nor does it imply mere indifference. It does, however, imply the issue is so important that doctrinal boundaries are formed. While discussion on the non-essential issues is important and should continue, that single discussion cannot be allowed to consume all of one's time and effort. Otherwise the more essential truths might be marginalized or distorted. Many times denominations and fellowships are created on this notion of dividing while still holding to essential truths.
- (3) The third category refers to what should believers legitimately debate or discuss in a church or fellowship? This category many times is referred to as third-level doctrines which might include such theologically refined issues as the possibility if Jesus could have sinned while affirming He did not sin or perhaps some refined aspects of eschatology, etc. Spirited debate is good and healthy amongst believers as long as the debate occurs with an irenic spirit and desire to further understand and resolve the interpretative issues.
- (4) The fourth category entails what should believers personally decide based upon personal conscience and conviction? Some NT examples include gray areas such as eating meat, worship styles, etc.).
- (5) And lastly, the fifth category revolves around what believers simply dismiss as word wrangling and pure speculation.<sup>7</sup> The central controlling motif in doctrinal taxonomy is always the clarity and authorial meaning of the Scripture.

## CONCLUSION

The Bible reveals everything believers need to know to live according to God's pleasure. Believers must approach the Scripture with reverence and with a correct, theological method to properly discern and apply the authors meaning in Scripture. Proper interpretation with legitimate application is critical in Bible study, yet it is often neglected. Ezra set an example of being one who studied and practiced the law of the Lord (Ezra 7:10). Christ warned of the inevitable defeat of the those who fail to act upon the truth of God's word (Matt 7:24-27).

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<sup>7</sup> See Gerry Breshears, "Learning to Distinguish Between Degrees of Certainty" in *Lessons in Leadership*, ed. Randy Roberts (Grand Rapids: Kregal, 1999), 48-53.

James commands believers to be “doers” of the word and not “forgetful hearers,” for it is the “doer” of the Word that is blessed (James 1:22-25).