

FIXING



ABRAHAM

HOW TAMING OUR BIBLE HEROES BLINDS US
TO THE WILD WAYS OF GOD

CHRIS TIEGREEN




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Fixing Abraham: How Taming Our Bible Heroes Blinds Us to the Wild Ways of God

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INTRODUCTION

I knew it would happen eventually. I just didn't think it would be so soon. After all, I had made a serious vow long ago: never would I get sucked into an online debate by posting a comment after someone's article. But I slipped up, and the ensuing melee consumed half my week.

Yes, I know. I shouldn't have broken my vow. But the temptation was irresistible as the statements of the author were practically screaming for clarification. And then the "post your comments" link at the bottom of the article just glared at me—a steely, piercing, relentless stare—for what seemed like eternity. I refused, vehemently at times, but it wouldn't be moved. Eventually, I blinked.

The article in question was one evangelical writer's critique on what he considered gushy worship music that portrayed God as having romantic love for his people. He took the lyrics of a popular song and picked them apart, blasting away at the unfounded ideas contained in each line. He emphasized the majesty and holiness of God and our rather severe need for justification by faith. God's love, he said, is not gooeey. We aren't loveable, and the almighty Creator doesn't yearn for us. He saves us because we need saving, but we've watered down the gospel by exchanging his loving-kindness for romantic mush. And that, in his opinion, has no biblical basis whatsoever.

I understand, of course, what the writer's concerns were. He was reacting against what can sometimes seem like overfamiliarity with the sovereign Lord and righteous Judge of the universe. He lamented the fact that many people have a much-too-casual approach to God and never realize the holy ground they stand on. And I agree that this is an important point to make. What bothered me was his sarcastic and condescending tone toward some songwriters who are genuine Christians and really do seem to love God—and who were using an entirely biblical image. I couldn't let his insulting verbiage or some of his unfounded and unbiblical overstatements go unchallenged.

So I challenged them. I quoted verse after verse illustrating that God presents himself in Scripture as the Husband of his people and Jesus as

the Bridegroom of the church. I cited many passages from the Psalms and prophets that reveal God's tender heart toward us, and I pointed out the pervasive interpretation throughout history by both Jewish and Christian theologians of the Song of Songs as an allegory of God's love for his people. With great satisfaction, I thought, *Yes, the Bible is clearly on my side. The critics will have nothing to say in response.*

Surprisingly, most didn't get the point. In fact, I was amazed at some of the responses to all of the biblical examples and quotes I and other like-minded posters provided. "That's unbiblical!" one said. "This is a blasphemous idea," wrote another. "We're really on dangerous ground when we try to remake God in our image like this," warned several.

So I posted another response, in which I cited the Jewish interpretation of the Sinai covenant as a betrothal ceremony, an interpretation found even within the pages of the Bible itself (see Jeremiah 2:2; 3:8-14; 31:32; and Ezekiel 16:8, for example).¹ I reminded other participants in the discussion that Israel's idolatry was quite often referred to as "adultery," that God said he would rejoice over his people as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, that God does use the language of yearning and brokenheartedness in numerous places in Scripture, that prophets like Ezekiel and Hosea used rather graphic terms and lifestyles to illustrate the romantic heart of God, and that the Bible and history culminate with a wedding. I made it clear: this is not a minor biblical theme.

And because the author of the article and many others who posted responses seemed to feel that this idea of a romantic God is a newfangled plague sweeping across a compromising, pseudo-Christian church, I cited great figures of Christian history like Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, and Hudson Taylor, who all saw this romantic imagery and interpreted the Song of Songs as a picture of God's love.

What I found most fascinating was my critics' contention that I was picking and choosing Bible verses according to my faulty understanding and ignorance of the plain teaching of Scripture. In other words, all of my Bible quotes, though by no means taken out of context, were unbiblical.

That's like a friend I once knew who thought Jesus' declarations of woe on the religious leaders weren't very Christlike. I'm pretty sure that the definition of Christlike is being like Christ, and since Jesus is the Christ, then by definition he's Christlike. Same goes for all the Scripture

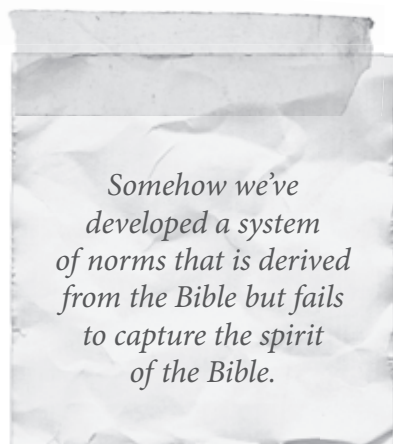
references I pointed out. The fact that they were taken directly from the Bible kind of qualifies them as biblical.

But my detractors didn't see it that way. They have every right to agree with the underlying purpose of the original article and to disagree with the tone of the song in question, but they have no case when they start calling Bible verses unbiblical. When people are so set in their theology that they think Scripture is unscriptural—and call an obvious biblical theme *nonsense* and *garbage*—something is seriously wrong.

I joke about my online experience, but it's really a symptom of an alarming problem. Somehow we've developed a system of norms that is derived from the Bible but fails to capture the spirit of the Bible. We know detailed chapters and verses without grasping major themes. (Case in point: One of the commentators in that discussion informed me that he had done a word search and

the word *romantic* did not appear in any version of the Bible. Therefore, it wasn't biblical. Meanwhile, huge portions of the prophets and wisdom literature remained unaddressed.) This is why some of our doctrinal discussions turn into either/or debates. In my experience, Christians typically gravitate toward one of two extremes: God is holy, awesome, majestic, and righteous; or he's gentle, tender, intimate, comforting, and loving. Isn't it obvious from Scripture that he's all of that and more? Both ends of that spectrum are well attested in the Bible. Yet our mental framework often tries to force one or the other, because apparently he can't fit both descriptions in the same human mind. Does God save us for his glory or because he loves us deeply? Are his thoughts infinitely higher than ours, or do we have the mind of Christ? Does he save us from our sin or our loneliness? Is he strong and mighty or tender and affectionate? People actually choose sides about such things—and claim, rather stridently, that theirs is the biblical view.

But apart from the possibility of initiating or getting pulled into some heated online debates, what's the danger of adhering strictly to our understanding of biblical principles? Aren't biblical principles essential? Don't



they keep us on the straight and narrow? Don't we need some clear definitions about what we do and don't believe?

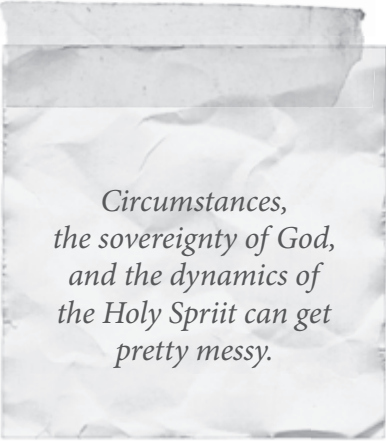
In one sense, this is true. Holding fast to these standards can prevent us from getting sucked into the false doctrines of a cult. They help us focus on the essentials of our faith. They keep us anchored in truth.

But these benefits can also become a real problem. In preventing us from hearing the strange doctrines of a cult, they also immunize us from any radical, paradigm-shifting messages from God. In keeping us focused on essentials, they make us vigilant and even obsessive about what an "essential" is—which can turn out to be any minor doctrinal detail—and cause us to split with believers who happen to have a different set of "essentials." And in keeping us anchored in truth, they can keep us anchored—period. Even when the Spirit wants to move us.

Though our principles may give us a sense of safety and prevent us from making some wrong moves, they can also give us the false impression that we've got it all figured out. The result is an air of smugness filled with the unpleasant odor of misdirected zeal, and it's hardly attractive or helpful to those who are hurting—or even to those who simply crave a dynamic relationship with a nonformulaic God. People who are struggling generally have questions that aren't easily answered by broad scriptural principles. We need a personal touch. And hyperdoctrinalism is anything but personal.

Let me be emphatic up front that I'm not arguing against doctrine.

The Bible spells out some absolutes for us that can't be compromised.² Nevertheless, the voice of God almost always stretches us beyond what we thought we understood. The more specifically we try to set in stone what we understand, the more shattered we'll be when God tries to interact with us. When we assume we can anticipate how life will work out, we'll eventually be disillusioned with our faith. Circumstances, the sovereignty of God, and the dynamics of the Holy Spirit can get pretty messy.



*Circumstances,
the sovereignty of God,
and the dynamics of
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pretty messy.*

If you do with doctrinal definitions what the Pharisees did with the law of Moses, you'll probably miss out on some adventures with God. You won't have "ears that hear" when he calls you out of your comfort zone and invites you to participate in some unique avenue of Kingdom building. You'll also be less likely to encourage others who are being challenged by the Holy Spirit to step out in faith. In fact, in many cases, you'll actually discourage them. Why? Because "God wouldn't/doesn't/can't" do what they think his voice is telling them.

I have a friend, for example, who has sensed God calling her to leave a ministry organization to put herself through cosmetology school so she could minister to women about their potential beauty and identity in Christ as she's beautifying their outward appearance. To me, that sounds like a wonderfully creative mission that comes straight out of God's heart, but she has had to listen to "deep concerns" over her plans. If she heeded all this godly, biblical advice—"You're too gifted for this," "I'm worried about your faith"—she would try to deny herself and crucify that desire. But if the desire came from God in the first place, wouldn't that be tragic?

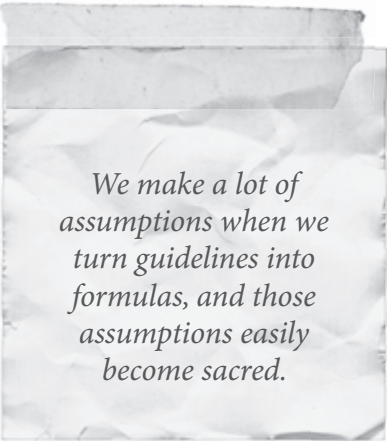
Our tendency to stick doggedly to our expectations of how God is supposed to work is remarkably reminiscent of a certain group of priests, scribes, and religious scholars who lived about two thousand years ago. They used a very similar approach to determine that the teachings and works of a particular Messiah could not have been from God. Their reasoning? What he said and did wasn't scriptural. There were no specific references authorizing some of the claims he made. In fact, several aspects of his ministry seemed to directly contradict the plain teaching of Scripture. Therefore, he was a false teacher. And because his claims were so extravagant, his false teachings were blasphemous. So he was summarily executed.

FENCING THE GOSPEL

Don't misunderstand: I believe in the absolutes of Scripture, and I'm deeply committed to the fact that God breathed his Word into the people who wrote it. It's all true, from Genesis to Revelation. But let me also emphasize that I wholeheartedly stand behind the absolutes *of Scripture*, not the assumptions of evangelical culture, of historic Christianity's

time-honored interpretations, or of our various expressions of systematic theology or denominational practice—what I refer to from now on as “biblical principles.”

These can involve doctrinal definitions, but I’m thinking more specifically of the set of principles that cause us to write books, preach sermons, lead Bible studies, and so on, that focus on “how to ____.” Topics like “Six steps to effective prayer,” with the implication that God rarely or never hears prayers that miss one of the steps; “How to heal broken relationships,” as though anyone who follows these biblical principles will get along with everyone; or “When God speaks, he will always _____,” as if God’s voice could be reduced to a formula to figure out. We make a lot of assumptions when we turn guidelines into formulas, and those assumptions easily become sacred. We then find ourselves having a wonderful relationship with principles rather than a wonderful relationship with God. And only the latter will satisfy, because we were never designed for the former.



We make a lot of assumptions when we turn guidelines into formulas, and those assumptions easily become sacred.

It’s not that I think these principles are always wrong. All of them can be accurate and helpful—to a point—

and all have significantly shaped my Christian growth in positive ways. But we have to understand them for what they are—guidelines derived from Scripture—rather than as the scriptural answer for such-and-such a problem. I don’t believe in our infallibility as interpreters of God’s Word, and I’m convinced that we often approach it in much the same manner as some scribes and priests did a couple thousand years ago. We end up with a well-developed Christianity that has little room for Christ.

Here’s an example of what I mean. God gave Israel the Torah (the law and teachings of the first five books of the Bible), which included some very specific commandments for righteous behavior and forms of worship. Because God’s warnings against breaking his commandments were rather strong, over the course of time ancient rabbis instituted quite a few laws as a “fence” around the Torah. These were their binding instruc-

tions that would protect people from getting too close to breaking God's commandments. For example, the laws for Sabbath forbid work on the seventh day of each week, but a rabbinic law forbids picking up an implement of work. Why? Because the one holding it might accidentally use it before remembering that it was the Sabbath, thereby breaking the original commandment. So over time, layers and layers of such boundaries were placed around God's law and actually became laws themselves. Whenever someone—let's say Jesus, for example—broke one, he would be charged with doing something unbiblical, even though only the original law was in the Bible.

I think many Christians do the same thing today, both literally and figuratively. One example of the literal sense involves the principle of not causing a fellow believer to sin (derived from 1 Corinthians 8:1-13). I've encountered various cautions along these lines, ranging from the obvious (like not offering an alcoholic a drink) to the hardly necessary (like forbidding men from wearing shorts when they play church-league softball because there might be a woman nearby who has a thing for calf muscles). Most, of course, fall somewhere in between these extremes.

Developing an extrabiblical behavioral norm is one thing, but the figurative ways we fence the Word raise the stakes considerably if they constrain the Spirit. For example, we know that many can be enticed from godly living by their own desires³ and that the world and its desires are passing away,⁴ so we've developed a theology that comes very close to saying that our desires are so misleading that they must always be sacrificed for God's will—which, of course, assumes that his will is usually the polar opposite of our desire. It's true that our desires can be misleading, but that's not the only side of the story; if we delight in the Lord he gives us the desires of our heart,⁵ and if we live in fellowship with him, we can ask whatever we wish and it will be done for us.⁶ We're so afraid of people abusing that privilege—that's always a possibility—that we throw lots of cold water on the fire of those promises. The problem is that it isn't always *biblical* cold water, but it still effectively puts out the fire in those who would otherwise believe that perhaps a deep desire was given to them by God. Countless Christians are currently trying to crucify a desire that God put in their hearts in the first place. Why? Because we've drawn boundaries around the dangerous truth and said, "Believe it, but don't get too close."

This "death to all personal desire" is just one example of the many

evangelical ideals we've developed. Many of these ideals have reached mythical status as an overarching, self-evident truth of Scripture, though a closer look at other related passages shows them to be anything but self-evident. We're right to want to adhere to the principles set forth in God's Word, yet we need to admit that God does not always act as we expect him to. We can see evidence of that if we reread passages about the prophets, the apostles, and Jesus himself and then honestly evaluate our reaction to their words and deeds. Based on our assumptions about how God works, we would have more than enough wise advice to fix people like Abraham, David, Isaiah, and Paul. If they walked into our churches today, we would counsel them not only against the flaws they had and the mistakes they made, but also against the things God told them to do. We wouldn't tolerate their obedience because it wouldn't look like obedience to us.

In the characters of the Bible, we have enough evidence to undo the following Christian myths:

- + Desiring anything other than God himself is unspiritual.
- + Worshiping God for the benefits we get from him is unspiritual.
- + The Holy Spirit's work will never confuse us or contradict our biblical principles.
- + God won't answer our prayers if they're mixed with impure motives.
- + God doesn't speak to us in dreams or visions anymore.
- + Embarrassing behavior doesn't come from God. It comes from the world, the flesh, or the devil.
- + God doesn't want you to base your faith on someone else's experience. If he wants you to believe a truth contained in someone's testimony, he'll prove it to you directly.
- + Any guidance that hints of immorality is not from God.
- + When you find yourself standing alone against the advice of godly counsel, you can be sure you're not following God.
- + God wants us to have faith, but he doesn't want us to be unreasonable.

I realize that many of these are valuable beliefs that have helped a lot of people, but they aren't infallible rules that can be universally applied

to everyone across the board. They are good principles derived from biblical truth, but they aren't biblical truth itself. And in some cases, they're just wrong. I'll demonstrate why in the pages of this book, as we see how dangerous our wisdom can be when used as a blanket for everyone. But that's the unfortunate nature of principles; they don't bend with each situation.⁷ They cause us to make incorrect judgments of people who deviate from them.

IT'S A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE

A more significant problem is this: these principles can quickly and silently become the substance of our faith. As Frederick Buechner has said, in unapologetic bluntness, "Principles are what people have instead of God."⁸ That's tragic, because the substance of our faith should be a real, dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

God gives us a great illustration of how we are to be guided by the movement of the Spirit in the way he led Israel in the wilderness. He never allowed them to develop a set of guidelines for wilderness wandering. "In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted" (Exodus 40:36-37, NIV). Neither would he allow them to stock up on manna—except, of course, on the day before the Sabbath, in which case stocking up for the extra day was perfectly fine. He had given them plenty of rules and regulations, and they were to obey them strictly. That consistency is an important part of following him. But the law was not the substance of their relationship with him. Obedience to a written code of conduct could never become a substitute for obedience to his voice. He had called them and delivered them before establishing his commandments, and he insisted that they follow whenever and wherever he led. In very irregular movements, he gave them personal guidance that wasn't contained in the law.

Jesus essentially said the same of people who follow him. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8, NIV).⁹ That verse is more than a little problematic for most Christians, because we like to know where things are coming from and where they are going. We don't like the uncertainty of a spiritual life

without well-defined parameters. But Jesus made it abundantly clear—in these words, in his ministry, and through the movements of his Spirit in Acts—that the Christian life is not predictable. We can never say “This is how God always works” or “God wouldn’t say something like that” unless we know for certain all the details of a situation *and* are talking about his absolute, unchanging, clearly revealed attributes. Like it or not, there’s no formula for following the Spirit. Guidelines, yes. But no formulas.

Jesus made this point when some rigid disciples of the law pointed out that he and his followers were violating the clear dictates of Scripture by gathering some grain to eat on the Sabbath. And they were right; he *was* breaking a clear scriptural principle. Jesus could have told them that their understanding of the law was completely off base, but he didn’t. Neither did he give his followers license to disregard the law at will; instead, he simply informed the Jewish leaders that breaking that law had a clear scriptural precedent. When David and his companions were hungry, they went into God’s house and ate sacred, dedicated bread—bread that had been offered to God according to the requirement of the law. No one was allowed to touch that bread but a priest, and then only under certain conditions. Jesus was clear: this “was not lawful for them to do” (Matthew 12:4, NIV). But David and his companions did eat it, God approved, and Jesus held him up as a positive example. That’s unpredictable and way beyond formulas.

That doesn’t fit the religious convictions of most committed Christians today. That’s because discipleship in much of contemporary Christianity is largely a seminar-type process. We go to lectures—we usually call them sermons—where we sit passively and learn. Then, if we’re diligent and committed, we fill in the gaps between sessions with our own study of the Bible and related materials. We like clear definitions, so even when God doesn’t offer them, we come up with some and enforce them.

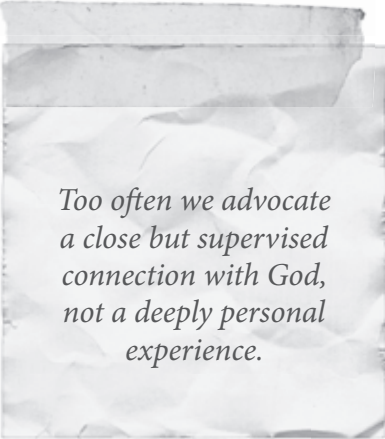
Our faith becomes a matter of knowing the right things and, one would hope, putting them into practice. God’s Word goes into the mind and out through the mouth, the hands, and the feet. Rarely are emotions or intuitive perceptions considered an integral part of the disciple’s walk because those things aren’t measurable and accurate. (Neither is our objective reasoning, by the way.) So while we may be encouraged to spend time listening for God’s voice, we’re warned against putting too much faith in the words we sense the Spirit is speaking to us.

WHAT IS JESUS DOING?

There's no legitimate Christian alternative to an ongoing, dynamic, conversational relationship with God. That's why "What would Jesus do?" is usually the wrong question to be asking. It sounds awfully hypothetical for someone who's interacting with us in some pretty intimate ways. The better question is, "What *is* Jesus doing?" An even better question is, "Jesus, what are you doing right now in this situation, and what role do you want me to have in it?" Actually, that's two questions in one. But this does a much better job of acknowledging that your relationship with God is actually a relationship.

We evangelicals are great at emphasizing this need to have a personal relationship with God, but we blow a gasket when someone's relationship gets personal in unconventional ways. In reality, too often we advocate a close but supervised connection with God, not a deeply personal experience. For example, quite a few Christians get really nervous when someone says God spoke to them, even though two-way communication is integral to any real relationship. In some circles, any offering to God that is much less or much more than 10 percent of gross income is highly suspicious for its weak faith, on the one hand, or its excessive zeal, on the other—even though any real relationship rises and falls in intensity and varies in its needs and demands, depending on the season. In our desire for a consistent walk with God, we far too often strive for a predictable walk and feel guilty when it doesn't happen. So for all our talk about personal relationships, apparently what we really want is for people to follow conventions and get to know a static God. And that is not biblical discipleship.

Anything that puts your discipleship on cruise control inhibits a real relationship with God, and that includes a set of principles. It also includes a systematic theology that bends the Bible to fit its logic rather than bending its logic to fit the Bible.¹⁰ Theology is certainly important,



Too often we advocate a close but supervised connection with God, not a deeply personal experience.

but we often turn it into a structure that the Bible doesn't support. We treat Scripture like a box full of puzzle pieces that we have to figure out how to put together. Haven't you ever wondered, though, why God didn't give us a systematic theology to begin with? He gave us an inspired collection of experiences and stories that express who he is without reducing him to definitions. I believe he gave us historical narratives and poetic wisdom and real-life experiences because our categorical thinking inevitably reduces him in our minds. If he spelled out our theology for us, we'd develop a relationship with the theology rather than with him. That's formulaic spirituality, and it deludes us into thinking we're relating to God when we're not. Whether it's theology, law, marriage, employment, friendship, or anything else, a rigid structure can squeeze the breath out of all that's good. "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."¹¹

Our systematic tendencies often lead to a militant attitude when we encounter "unbiblical" ideas and unclear theology. Many evangelicals see themselves as troubleshooters, watchdogs on the prowl for any hint of doctrinal impurity.¹² We can be really condescending toward other Christians who don't see things the way we do. And a lot of times our logic about whether something is biblical or not comes out of thought processes that aren't biblical in themselves.

Here's one way that works: You've certainly heard the kind of logic that says something like, "If verse A says this, and verse B says that, then doctrine C is obvious." That's good, Greek, linear logic, and it can be helpful, but it isn't infallible logic in the Kingdom of God. For example, imagine you're a sincere teacher of God's law in Jesus' day.¹³ The Law was very explicit in its prohibitions against eating the blood in animal meat, to the degree that the very idea of eating or drinking any amount of blood was considered grossly immoral. And this wasn't just a cultural taboo; it was divine law given at Mount Sinai by a thundering voice from heaven. "As for the life of all flesh, its blood is identified with its life. Therefore I said to the sons of Israel, 'You are not to eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off''" (Leviticus 17:14).¹⁴ With this firmly in your mind as an eternal, divine ordinance, imagine listening to Jesus teach one day and hearing the words, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man *and drink His blood*, you have no life in yourselves. . . . For My flesh is true food, and *My blood is true drink*" (John 6:53, 55, italics added).

As a faithful, obedient follower of God, what would your response be? If you approach the situation with the thought processes and criteria almost universally applied in Christian circles today, you would be compelled to reject him. Defenders of the faith would say something along the lines of, “I’m not sure exactly what he means by that, but this is clear enough that we can safely say he’s contradicting the revealed will of God. God says emphatically that consuming blood is strictly forbidden. This man says we must drink his blood. Even if he means it symbolically, it’s a slap in the face of scriptural principles. Therefore, Jesus cannot possibly be the Messiah, because he’s advocating something God has forbidden.” And as a faithful believer in God’s Word, that would make perfect sense to you. Someone’s words might be an enigma, but you can always count on the plain meaning of Scripture to keep you anchored.

Can you see why most of the teachers of the law rejected the Savior himself, not just on the basis of this incident regarding the blood, but also because of his clear violations (in their minds) of the Sabbath, his abrasive words and frequent public confrontations, his propensity to participate in dinners where a lot of alcohol was being served, his extremely arrogant claims, and so on? This kind of thinking might lead any of us today to miss the Messiah too.

SEEING WITH GOD’S EYES

Why is this so important? Because, I believe, we are in an age when the strange and marvelous works of God are on the rise. God is pouring out on his people fresh insights about himself and his ways—not new truth, but new perspectives and deeper understanding of the truth. Like a brilliant, multifaceted diamond, the truth that has always been there displays its beauty in new ways when under a different light, or against a different background, or with newly developed technology to study it. The diamond hasn’t changed, but its visual manifestations sometimes do. As the age-old gospel is applied to modern situations, spiritual insight shifts and even expands. And externally, the Spirit seems to be showing his repertoire more prominently than during many other stages of church history. Reports of signs and miracles seem to be dramatically increasing in frequency. Along with this flowering of the Spirit’s work are plenty of fake revelations and miracles; counterfeits always cling closely to the real

thing. And that's where an authentic experience with the Spirit of God—that real relationship that can't be substituted with principles, as we'll explore throughout this book—becomes absolutely critical.

Many have rejected entire movements because they've noticed a few counterfeits. (Interestingly, they don't stop handling all U.S. currency when they've spotted a counterfeit bill, but this knee-jerk reaction seems perfectly normal when applied to spiritual issues.) The typical Christian response to unfamiliar movements of God is to come up with several verses that "clearly" dictate against it, interpret the statements of key people in the worst possible light, demonstrate how these people violate "the plain teaching of Scripture," and then marginalize any preacher/teacher who looks like, smells like, or talks like he or she has brushed up against that movement. And if you look closely enough in the Gospels, you'll see exactly the same approach applied to Jesus and his followers.

It is not possible in these days or in the future to apply biblical formulas to what God is doing. If we do, we'll miss him just as surely as the priesthood of Jesus' day missed the time of their visitation. No, an intellectual understanding of the Bible will only get us so far; if we really want to encounter him, we'll need to be open to the possibility that he may actually defy our expectations once in a while.

He may use people who look foolish to see if he's more important to us than our own sense of sophistication.

He may stretch our doctrinal understanding to see if we're more in love with the Spirit than we are with our education.

He may pit our logic against our experience so we'll have to choose between scientific laws and supernatural faith.¹⁵

In these days (as always), he's looking for those who are more committed to him than to their own understanding.

In this book, I'll be arguing for a change in the evangelical perspective in several areas. Specifically, we need:

- + *A more textured, multilayered view of the Bible.* The people in Scripture were real people with real struggles and real questions about God's will. They didn't know at the time how their story would turn out, and many of them wondered if God would

really vindicate their faith. Some, like John the Baptist sitting in prison while Jesus preached about setting captives free, seemed to wrestle with the idea that they had missed God's voice and gotten themselves too far out on a limb.¹⁶ We have to read their stories with these things in mind. Their lives are more textured than we think, with a lot of dynamics and influences and second-guessing going on around them. Their actions and attitudes are also much more layered than we think; in addition to the obvious surface meanings, they're often filled with deeper, symbolic, spiritual significance.

Where we see our Scripture in black and white, we need to start seeing it in color. It isn't a two-dimensional text, it's a multidimensional image. The difference between the way we read it and the images it portrays is stark. We listen to its words like we're listening to a single-speaker radio when, in reality, we should be absorbing it as if we were in the presence of a full orchestra. Otherwise, we'll become very frustrated with our faith when life doesn't fit our one-track expectations.

- + *A willingness to answer theological questions with "I don't know" and not really be bothered that we don't have it figured out.* There's no biblical imperative to fit everything into a systematic theology and force it to make sense. There's no law saying that God must fit into the logic of a Western, modern (or postmodern) worldview. He has not obligated himself to be explainable in terms that a finite mind can sort out. Neither has he obligated his people to be explainable to fellow believers. Accountable, yes. Predictable, no.
- + *A gentler apologetic toward fellow Christians who don't have the same doctrinal positions we do.* There are essentials, of course: the nature of God as a triune being (including the deity of Jesus); the nature of salvation as a gift received by grace through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ; and the inspiration and authority of Scripture. In broad strokes, those are the core beliefs of our faith that can never be compromised. But there's no need to be abrasive about the nonessentials or to label people who love God within those core beliefs as "heretics," as many are prone to do.

- + *An open mind toward the fascinating ways God is moving in our generation.* This is really the main purpose of the book. As I've explained, I believe from what I've observed that we are in an era of the unexpected, a time in which God's Spirit is moving through his people in remarkable ways. If our expectations of how he works are rigid, we'll miss him in the same way that the devout religious leaders missed Jesus. Like Christians in any era, if we don't have a vision of what the Spirit is doing at a big-picture level, we risk falling short of his purpose for our individual lives.¹⁷ It's entirely possible for us to be saved but unfruitful, or at least on the outer fringes of God's most fruitful fields. An overly critical, faultfinding approach that jumps on any variation from traditional understanding or methods will put many in that marginal place, or sometimes even in the unfortunate position of opposing God's work. We do have to be discerning about counterfeits, but we also have to be open to God's unpredictability. That's why a real, intimate, dynamic relationship with him is essential. If we're operating strictly on biblically derived principles rather than with the living Word—a difference we'll explore as we proceed—our discernment won't be accurate. We'll throw the genuine out with the counterfeit and miss God.

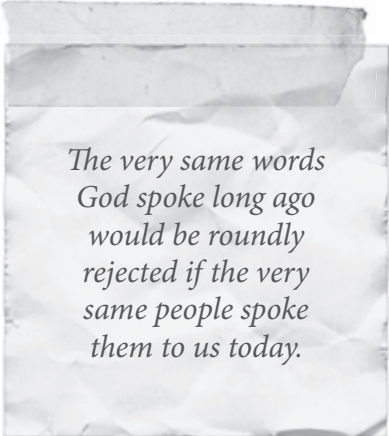
Perhaps the best way to address some of our assumptions and re-focus on the true nature of God is to take another look at the people he has used throughout history. Imagine the words of ancient Scripture being spoken in our midst today by people who don't have silk robes or halos—regular people with personality quirks and occasional body odor, the kind we might or might not be able to have a decent conversation with if they sat next to us on a bus. The very same words God spoke long ago would be roundly rejected if the very same people spoke them to us today, even if they put them into our cultural context. And we'd have plenty of advice for all of them because we have plenty of “biblical” advice for *everyone*.

In the following pages, we'll explore many of these issues by looking at this overarching question: How would Christians today respond to biblical heroes if they walked into our lives and our churches? What

advice would we come up with to try to fix Abraham? What would we say to Ezekiel? How would we counsel Paul? What reactions would we have if we saw and heard Jesus without two thousand years' worth of the-ology coloring our perspective?

Let me acknowledge up front the challenges of bringing biblical characters into a modern context. Obviously these hypothetical case studies contain anachronisms and a few added peripheral details. After all, we don't always know exactly what these heroes were thinking or how, in light of cultural practices of their day, their behavior would have been received by others.

However, the essence of each character's story has been retained. Bringing their stories into the present illuminates the many unconventional ways in which God works—often through unconventional people. The point is not to tear down what we believe, but to highlight those areas in which we've let rigid yet unbiblical convictions blind us to some of the unpredictable ways God works. I believe that in many respects we've missed his heart because we've been too dogmatic with our own reasoning. In some cases, as we'll see, we've developed even higher standards than the Bible lays out for us. And in the process, we've opposed some things God has wanted to do among us and argued against truths he has wanted to teach us. My hope is that this will change—that as we see how easy it is to fall into the trap of trying to “fix” Abraham and many other servants of God in these illustrations, we'll go a long way toward fixing ourselves.



*The very same words
God spoke long ago
would be roundly
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THAT SOUNDS DECEPTIVE



“NO,” SHEMUEL KEPT TELLING HIMSELF. “I *won’t* be deceived. I *won’t* disobey. I *won’t* neglect the law. I’ve bound the words of the Lord (blessed be his name) to my hand and my forehead. I’ve hidden them in my heart. They’re on my doorposts. I won’t fall for lies. I just *won’t*. The Lord (blessed be his name) will keep me in truth.”

That wasn’t an unusual attitude for a Jew in the time of Jesus. The raw determination to rigidly follow the law and the prophets was one of that era’s most admirable characteristics. It’s reflected in the Pharisees and priests who, for the most part, were honest, faithful followers

of the Torah handed down to them from the time of Moses. Neglecting that law had gotten them in plenty of trouble in the past—a long exile in Babylon, for one example—and it was now the only thing that kept them from assimilating into Greco-Roman society. Stubborn adherence to the revealed will of God was paramount.

It still is. Scripture tells us not to be carried away by every wind of doctrine and to stay away from empty philosophies and arguments. Our potential for being deceived is made abundantly clear in God's Word, so we are rightly zealous about guarding ourselves from falsehood and training ourselves in truth. Discernment is a vital aspect of being a Christian.

But what if our discernment is based on the wrong criteria? What if, like the religious leaders of first-century Judea, our zeal for the details of Scripture causes us to miss the big picture? What if our theological arguments have become the very kind of deceptive talk we're trying to avoid?

That can happen when a relationship with God turns into only a religion about God. It's a very subtle temptation, a constant urge to nail down scriptural parameters that, in all likelihood, don't take into account the whole of Scripture. But we do it. We've all done it. And in the process, we've become so discerning about God's patterns that we miss his peculiarities. The standards of our discernment don't always line up with the standards he applied to people in the Bible—and they aren't the product of living in his presence. The result is that God's voice sometimes sounds deceptive to our ears.

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CHAPTER 1

CREATIVE INTERPRETATION



Transcript of NT101 lecture/session 6, Dr. Ferris E. Didaski, professor of biblical hermeneutics, Theologicus Institute of Religion, June 6

All right, folks, let's get started. You'll notice from your syllabus that we'll be talking about foundational hermeneutic approaches the next couple of weeks, and the reason for this emphasis is the absolutely critical need in our ministries, especially in our preaching, to get the right message from the biblical text. I won't bore you today with endless examples of how the Bible has been misinterpreted and misapplied because you can come up with quite a few examples off the top of your head, I imagine. You've probably heard Aunt Mabel's philosophy on sparing the rod or Brother Jim's earnest desire just to lift Jesus up in worship so all will be drawn to him as he ignores, of course, the plain interpretation that John spells out for us in that text.¹ In one of your outside reading assignments, which we'll probably discuss next time we meet, we find quite a few examples of this kind of misinterpretation, proving that spurious biblical hermeneutics have a long history of abuse and distortion. I want to open your eyes to this—to tear down what you think you know about how the Bible came to us and reconstruct for you a more realistic approach.

Remember rule number one. Don't ever forget this, as long as you live—or at least as long as you preach or teach classes or write articles. Rule number one is “context.” The context is the key to understanding any passage. If you miss the original intent of the author in the context in which he wrote, you will find your doctrine corrupted with all sorts of misunderstandings. That is why this class will focus so intensely on the background of the biblical text. You may wish at times that you could just get to the meat of the passage itself, but you will find in the long run that understanding the context in which these sacred Scriptures

were written will save you from error. We don't want any false doctrine springing out of this group down the road, do we? So remember, context. Context, context, context.

Now in order to understand the context, you'll need to have a firm grasp of the original language—that's why most of you are muddling through Greek or Hebrew 101 this semester and hating it. Consider it an investment in your commitment to orthodoxy. You'll also need a clear understanding of the history and the cultural and social dynamics of the time, and a very objective approach. These sacred writers did not write in a vacuum, as most people sitting in the pew might imagine. They had their own biases, their own perceptions and observations, and a wide range of influences bearing down on them and coloring the lenses through which they looked. They may have been quite subjective—in fact, they certainly were, without exception. But you are not afforded that privilege.

You must train yourself not to do as they did because they have the authority of apostleship and inspiration behind them and you do not. Adding your subjectivity to theirs will only take you further off course. You must become a Sherlock Holmes of sorts and investigate exactly what the author meant and how his readers understood it. That, my dear students, is how you may become a scholar and a sage instead of a seller of shallow sentiments. The church has too many of the latter. Now, where was I heading with that point . . . oh, yes. The reading. Interestingly, Matthew's Gospel aptly illustrates the hermeneutics we are trying to avoid. But never forget: his writing of the Gospel was inspired. Your interpretation of it is not. Remember that, for as you read it, I want you to see how many misapplications of Scripture you can find. This document will quote extensively from the Hebrew Scriptures, but if you're familiar with said Scriptures, you'll hardly recognize them. I'll give you a few examples to get you started. For instance, there's a prophecy in the book of Isaiah in which God tells the prophet that he will preach to a people who will hear but not understand, and see but not perceive²—a prediction that was rather unambiguously fulfilled during the course of Isaiah's ministry. Yet roughly seven centuries later the writer of this document quotes this passage and says “now it is being fulfilled” in his own day.³ Or, for one a little more egregious, a Hosea passage clearly referring to Israel's exodus from Egypt⁴ is applied to the Messiah figure⁵ as though the primary meaning of the prophecy had never even occurred to the writer.

This is clearly not proof of the Messiah, though the writer evidently thinks it is. And again, Micah's assessment of the Israelites' lamentable condition in his own day is used by Matthew to depict how the Messiah would pull families apart!⁶ Or, if you need more to go on, a passage in Jeremiah about the Babylonian captivity is applied to the children of Bethlehem centuries later.⁷ We even have one example where the scribe quotes a verse in Jeremiah about thirty pieces of silver, not noticing that this passage occurs nowhere in Jeremiah but in Zechariah instead.⁸ This list could go on and on, of course, but that's for you to discover as you read.

I hate to cast aspersions on our most revered New Testament writer, but Paul appears guilty of careless interpretation at times as well. You may recall Romans 1:17, the verse that, in some degree, launched the Reformation: "the righteous will live by faith" (NIV). Now what does that mean, do you suppose? It could mean that those who are righteous will live in a faithful way; or that those who are righteous came to be so because of their faithful living; or that the just shall survive, i.e., not be condemned, because of their faith; or so on. And, in fact, when we turn to the original passage, Habakkuk 2:4, it seems more likely that the prophet intended to say that those who are righteous will live in a faithful manner. But Paul seems to apply the verse to matters of final judgment or present justification; and Martin Luther certainly understood the verse this way, crediting it with opening his eyes to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. The question I would pose to you, and which we will discuss on Thursday, is that as this truth is being bounced around like a beach ball, who blew it up to begin with? Obviously, Habakkuk did. So we should rightly defer to his intentions for the right interpretation. This will be our guiding principle in this course and, I hope, yours for the rest of your life.

Now, let's turn our attention to the related matter of exegesis—drawing truth out of the original text—as opposed to the scandal of *eisegesis*—by which we mean reading our own interpretations into the text. . . .

+ + + +

I recently heard a well-known Bible teacher lecturing about hermeneutics—one's method of interpreting the Bible—on the radio. He opened

his talk with an illustration of a former student of his, a young woman who was in zealous pursuit of a husband. Not a particular husband, just a husband. As I recall the story, she had recently broken up with a man and was feeling rather despondent over her prospects. But one day she came to this professor with a bright smile on her face, declaring in all sincerity that she was soon going to meet her husband and get married. How did she know this? the professor asked. She had indulged in “lucky dipping” the night before, she explained. That was her term for the practice of opening up the Bible and reading the verse your finger lands on, hoping that it’s God’s word to you for the moment. She didn’t normally do this, she said, but she felt inspired to do so that evening, and the results were very encouraging. Whatever verse she landed on, it resonated with her, telling her that her desire would be fulfilled shortly and that it would even happen within a couple of weeks.⁹ She was convinced the Spirit had told her that it was a promise from God.

For obvious reasons, the professor was amused at the attempt. That’s not a very scholarly approach to Scripture. So as he was finishing describing this negative example on the radio program, he introduced his topic for the day: keys to biblical interpretation. And he almost got fully into the “right” way to study Scripture without mentioning the end of the story, but he couldn’t resist. “Now as it turns out,” he said (and I’m paraphrasing), “she did happen to meet a man a couple of weeks later and they ended up getting married. I keep in touch with them to this day. But I tell her that God did that in spite of her faulty hermeneutic rather than because of it!” And he laughed.

No offense to this respected Bible scholar, but that’s the worst possible illustration he could have used to introduce his point. I have no idea whether that girl’s promise from God actually came from God, but I suspect that in her situation it did. Would I recommend “lucky dipping” as a regular practice? Obviously not. But neither would I say God never works that way. In this case, he apparently did; what she believed did happen, down to the specific detail. But because this preacher’s theology couldn’t bend to that possibility, he believed it happened “in spite of” her superstitious approach to God’s Word.

I’ve read, heard, and participated in numerous doctrinal discussions in which a phrase like “That’s not what that verse means!” or “That’s taken out of context” occurs. That’s because we have essentially one approach

to biblical interpretation: that of the professor in the fictitious lecture transcript above.

We can always stop a heresy in its tracks by appealing to “original context” or the “original language,” as well as to our principles of logic. But in doing so, we’re basically undermining the many ways the writers of the New Testament employed Hebrew Scripture in their Gospels and letters. If we held people like Matthew to our hermeneutical standards, he would be laughed out of any respectable seminary today. Those verses pulled from the Old Testament would be “proven” to have little to do with the Messiah and therefore not applicable to Jesus through any reasonable method of interpretation. Yet Matthew was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write those things. His hermeneutic was apparently acceptable to God.

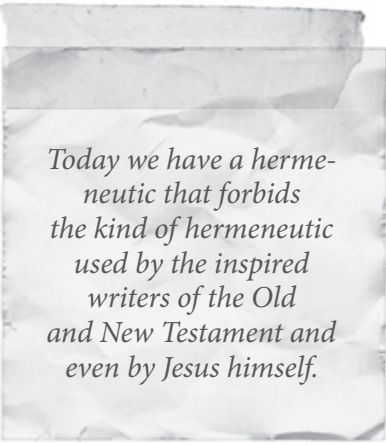
How can this be? Why would God authorize bypassing the plain meaning of a verse and using it in a secondary or even symbolic sense that had little to do with the original context? One answer lies in normal biblical interpretation at the time the New Testament was written. Rabbinic interpreters from ages past used four main interpretive methods for understanding Jewish Scriptures. The first was *p’shat*: the literal meaning of a text, the plain and simple objective facts. That was the primary hermeneutic then, and it’s still our default hermeneutic. It’s foundational for developing doctrine and should form the backbone of all other interpretations. But with the Jewish sages, unlike with us, it didn’t end there. The second means of interpretation was the *remez*: the deeper meaning hinted at in the subtleties and nuances of the text. Third was the *drash* or *midrash*: the comparative, allegorical, metaphorical meaning drawn from the verse as it related to others using similar symbolism or terminology or even word forms. And then there was the *sod*: the hidden meaning, the philosophical meanderings prompted by the text, the secret or mystical interpretation. It was very subjective and, though acceptable during certain periods of Christian history, has remained very unwelcome in Christian interpretation for the last few centuries.¹⁰

I’ve heard seminary professors and well-known pastors issue strict warnings against looking for some passage’s “hidden meaning.” But New Testament writers and early Christians relied on *sod* sometimes.¹¹ All four modes of interpretation came into play, and there was nothing contemptible about any of them. You wouldn’t build doctrine on the more

mystical interpretations, obviously, but you wouldn't ignore them either. They would supplement your faith and inform your more objective interpretations. All were fair game.

This puts us in a difficult spot. Today we have a hermeneutic that forbids the kind of hermeneutic used by the inspired writers of the Old and New Testament and even by Jesus himself.¹² In other words, our limited mode of interpretation doesn't match God's broader intentions for his Word. To me, that sounds like a pretty indefensible position.

Our rigid interpretations have led to some pretty harsh criticisms of people who quote the Bible or explain how God spoke to them through his Word. If those people don't quote the verse with the exact meaning and original context in mind, a chorus of accusations arises: that person must be "ignorant," "unbiblical," or even "heretical." No other symbolic or imaginative interpretation is allowed, no hints and subtleties, no intuitive impres-



Today we have a hermeneutic that forbids the kind of hermeneutic used by the inspired writers of the Old and New Testament and even by Jesus himself.

sions—nothing but clear, objective fact. Some of the words I used in the previous sentence would be extremely alarming to many biblical scholars and Christian teachers and apologists, but that's only because we forbid hermeneutical approaches that the Bible itself allows. That's an odd position to be in, isn't it? In our zeal to be biblical, we've become decidedly unbiblical.

Obviously, I have no reason to criticize Christian versions of *p'shat* and *remez*. I think the objective, contextual approach to Scripture is vital. This is where we get the plain meaning of God's Word and discover the truth about God's attributes and the plan of salvation and all sorts of doctrinal essentials.

But this kind of interpretation will never give specific guidance in specific situations not covered in Scripture. I was once profoundly encouraged and filled with faith when the words of a passage jumped out at me. It was a passage making a spiritual application from an agricul-

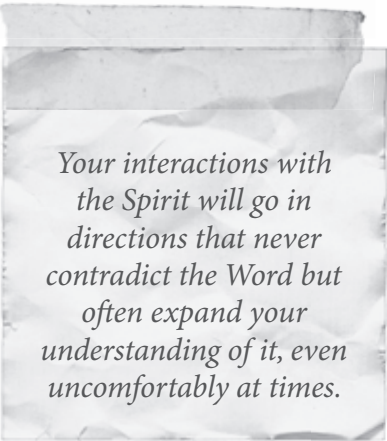
tural principle, and when it mentioned “rain,” I knew what it meant symbolically for my situation, even though my situation didn’t really fit the original context. The Holy Spirit spoke at that moment—and on countless other occasions since—by taking a phrase or metaphor in Scripture out of its immediate context and applying it to my personal issues. This happens quite often in personal guidance, as well as in broader biblical interpretation when the Spirit unfolds layers of his truth.

For example, depending on what you’re going through and how the Spirit has been working in your life, the statement that “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9, NIV) can mean different things. To someone at a funeral, it speaks of promises of eternal glory. To someone making a decision about a career or a mate, the Spirit can use it for reassurance of God’s good plans for us in this age. To those going through a spiritual awakening, the Spirit may inspire a vision for going well beyond the “normal” or “status quo” Christianity that most people experience. And what did it mean in the original context? Well, that depends on which “original context” you’re talking about. Paul was referring to God’s revelation of his deep, mysterious wisdom—the plan of the ages—through the nascent church. But Paul was actually quoting Isaiah, who had been inspired to write this statement about how God acts on behalf of those who wait for him.¹³ One inspired statement, multiple inspired interpretations and applications—some of them not even hinted at until hundreds of years later. That’s what it means to read the living Word.

This idea makes a lot of people nervous, and there’s certainly some basis for that. Scripture has been distorted and manipulated, used for evil purposes, or simply misunderstood by noninspired interpreters. Cults have sprung up from a few twistings of Scripture for selfish or ungodly purposes. But it grates against my understanding and experience of who God is to believe that people who are humbly seeking truth and asking the Holy Spirit to guide them while affirming a willingness to be corrected by other parts of Scripture will make such an error. It’s generally pride or an underlying agenda, not a faulty hermeneutic, that leads people to false interpretations of the Word. In fact, I’d argue that humble interaction with the Spirit is much more likely to lead someone into truth than strictly logical study of Scripture would.

The most common biblical objection to approaching Scripture as the Living Word is 2 Peter 1:20: “No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation.” But no one in rabbinic circles of long ago or in the church today, as far as I know—there are always fringe exceptions—would say that this fourfold approach to interpretation falls in that category of self-interpretation. Just as the Holy Spirit inspired people to write the words of Scripture, he opens the reader’s ears to hear what he wants them to hear. He is intricately involved in the interpretation, just as he was in the inspiration. If we say one end of that process is reliable and the

other isn’t, we have a pretty strange doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The fact that the Bible is his own breath during any moment when it is being written or read opens the door for hearing the Spirit in full and exciting ways.



Your interactions with the Spirit will go in directions that never contradict the Word but often expand your understanding of it, even uncomfortably at times.

I’m a huge proponent of intellectual understanding, but experiencing God is not simply a matter of knowing biblical truth. The Bible is much, much more than a sourcebook for divine principles. When read by someone in fellowship with the Spirit who authored it, it becomes a living, breathing companion that may sur-

prise you at some point in the conversation. It’s interactive, inviting you to ask questions and hear answers not only about doctrine but about what, specifically, to do with your life the next couple of years or whom to associate with. And it’s the *beginning* of the conversation, not the definition of it. Your interactions with the Spirit will go in directions that never contradict the Word but often expand your understanding of it, even uncomfortably at times.

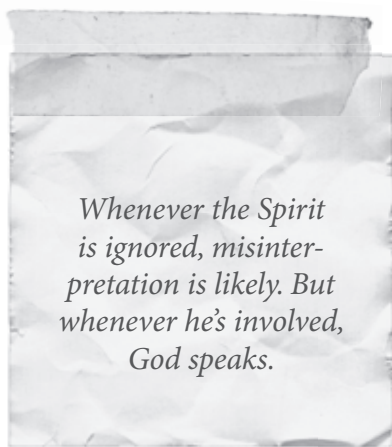
I have several friends, for example, who have wrestled with their experiences at worship services that seemed very disorderly, which, in their understanding, violated 1 Corinthians 14:33 and 40: “God is not a God of disorder but of peace. . . . Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (NIV). This struggle is common to visitors at an Orthodox church, a charismatic church, and everything in between. Why? Because

what's orderly to one person isn't necessarily orderly to another. Members of highly liturgical churches often find Baptist and Methodist services much too casual and disorganized, while Baptists and Methodists can make little sense of a Catholic service on the first few visits. Orthodox services have no concrete beginning or end, and a standing and pacing congregation seems at times to be rather detached from the priestly duties being carried out. And charismatic worship services are seen by many as a free-for-all. Any of the above can be a violation of "fitting and orderly" by someone's standards because order is in the eye of the beholder.

In every one of these cases, however, those who have been immersed in the "culture" of the given church can easily see the parameters and predictability in their own worship services. In each flavor of Christian expression, there's a sense of what's appropriate and what isn't, of the right and wrong times for whatever takes place, of doing things in their proper order. But a rigid definition of Paul's instructions about "fitting and orderly"—a definition that a person most often equates with his or her own upbringing—might keep a person away from a fellowship the Holy Spirit is guiding him or her to become involved in. The Spirit is under no obligation to comply with our expectations.¹⁴

Yet reading the Bible as a living, dynamic, organic voice makes people afraid. It just opens it up to all kinds of misinterpretation, some say—as though the purely objective, contextual hermeneutic has led everyone to the same conclusions. Regardless of the interpretive approach, the Spirit is a necessary companion. When he's ignored, misinterpretation is likely. But when he's involved, God speaks. Is that infallible? Nope. But neither is anyone else's hermeneutic. And I'd rather walk hand in hand with the Spirit through Scripture than trust my objective reasoning alone.

I find it rather liberating to know that my interpretation of a passage of Scripture isn't necessarily *my* interpretation—that the Holy Spirit is stirring up within me an understanding that he has long desired to impart to



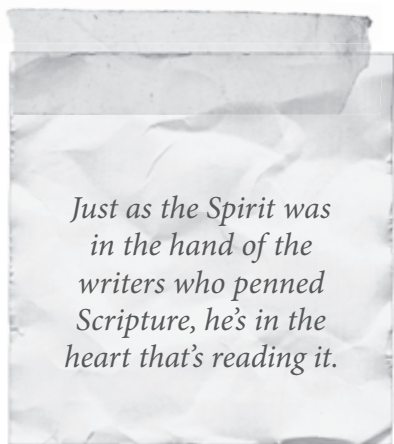
me and anyone else who will listen to him carefully. Are there dangers in my belief that he speaks hidden meanings? Of course—there are dangers in *any* kind of interpretation of Scripture. But I know from the overt, literal meaning of Scripture what his character is like and how he works, so that's a guardrail of sorts. He won't violate that. So if I tell him that I'm trusting him to speak in a way I understand and to keep me from error, I can be confident that he'll do that. When I (or any other Christian) ask the Spirit to unfold his truth—and to guard my heart and mind from error—hints and parallels and images seem to come to mind much more often. These, in turn, can be sifted through and examined in the light of the rest of Scripture just as any sermon or book would be. But almost always, such interpretations deepen one's understanding of the Bible and offer guidance in current circumstances. Why? Because just as the Spirit

was in the hands of the writers who penned Scripture, he's in the hearts of those reading it.

I have a recurring mental picture of evangelicalism's doctrinal guardians criticizing someone—let's say me, for example, since that's usually who's in my picture—applying a verse in a way that's unconventional and doesn't pay enough homage to the original context. Charges of “mysticism” and “distorting God's Word” and “ignoring the plain meaning of the text” are flying all over the place. Then I envision Matthew walking over to me and

saying, “Why are they so mad at us?” And I answer, “Me, because I heard God say something. You, because you misused the Bible when you wrote the Bible.” And then we get into a discussion of the irony of an “unbiblical” hermeneutic becoming biblical by authenticating itself within the pages of Scripture.

I'm strongly convinced that there's nothing in Matthew's interpretation of Scripture that needs to be fixed. I love studying the original context and languages of the Bible, and I do it almost obsessively. But there are other ways—intuitive, philosophical, mystical, metaphorical, etc.—



of hearing God's voice in the Word. Really all it takes is to ask him and be open to how he leads and reveals himself and his Word. There are no special techniques, no formulas, no step-by-step instructions. Just ask. And expect. And if it's still uncertain, ask him about your uncertainties. The Holy Spirit was there at the inspiration of Scripture, he has preserved it over the centuries, he has opened countless minds and hearts to its truth, and he's right there with you as you read it, discern it, and discover new aspects to it.

But opening ourselves up to more layers of meaning requires loosening our exclusive grip on the ones we already know. If we want to have more intimate fellowship with him, we'll need to learn how to hear him unconventionally. Not unbiblically, mind you, but unexpectedly and unashamedly. And always true to who he is.

FORGOTTEN LESSONS FROM MATTHEW:

- + The Bible is alive, constantly moving and breathing into us—and the Spirit can speak through it however he chooses.
- + Today's rigid hermeneutic is only part of true biblical interpretation. By itself, it's insufficient for hearing and understanding God's voice as a means of specific guidance in a personal conversation with him.
- + The Spirit was there when the Bible was inspired, and he's there when we read it. It's okay to trust him with the text.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. See also Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 205.
2. I cling to those doctrines that involve (1) the nature of God (including the Trinity and the deity of Jesus); (2) the means of salvation (justification by grace through faith in Christ); and (3) the inspiration and authority of Scripture, which, though prone to a variety of interpretations, is God's revelation of eternal truth. These core beliefs are, in my opinion, a bare minimum for defining orthodox Christianity, as I'll emphasize later as well.
3. 2 Peter 2:10, 18
4. 1 John 2:17
5. Psalm 37:4
6. John 15:7 (also John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-26)
7. I'm not proposing situational ethics, at least not in the sense of applying true biblical absolutes selectively. The situational nature of our principles applies to those we only think are biblical.
8. From a *Time* magazine review of *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,907053,00.html>.
9. John 3:8. I realize that in this verse Jesus is speaking specifically about how the Spirit brings people to saving faith; however, I believe this is the particular application of a larger truth—that this is how the Holy Spirit works in general.
10. I'm intentionally not using the term *systematic theology* very precisely here—at least not in a formal, academic sense—because we all have a systematic theology to some degree. Formally, systematic theology draws truths and principles and doctrines out of the narratives and discourses of the Bible, which did not come to us in very systematic form at all. Theologians do this on a grand scale, but we all do it some, and in most cases, we do it rather appropriately. For example, we read of the Red Sea parting, we draw some conclusions about God's character (like "He's a merciful deliverer"), and we add that to our descriptive profile of who God is. That's good and right, but when this profile becomes the extent of our understanding of God, we have head knowledge about God's character without having any "Red Sea" experiences ourselves. And that's where God prefers to interact with us—in experience and at a heart level.
11. 2 Corinthians 3:6
12. I realize that I've assumed the role of a troubleshooter in this book, so there's some level of hypocrisy in my complaint. I do admit a need for watchdogs of the faith; I just want to make sure they're watching the right things, barking only at the dangers worth barking about, and not trying to chase the Holy Spirit off of their turf.

13. Though no teacher in Jesus' day would have considered himself to think like a Greek, Judaism had been dramatically affected by Greek culture over the previous three centuries. This was certainly true of "Hellenized Jews"—those scattered across the Roman empire—but even the religious leaders in Jerusalem who were still distinctively Hebrew weren't quite as distinctive as they thought. The Hellenization of Jewish thought and logic had long been underway.
14. See also Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 3:17; 6:30; 7:26-27; 17:10-14; 19:26; Deuteronomy 12:16, 23-25; 15:23; 1 Samuel 14:32-34; Ezekiel 33:25.
15. Though I imply that these tensions contradict our biblical understanding, they don't actually contradict the Bible. In fact, there's plenty of biblical evidence that God uses foolish, unexpected, logic-defying vehicles for his works.
16. Matthew 11:2-4
17. A biblical example of this is the Judaizers whom Paul battled so fiercely. They were professing Christians who clung to the Old Testament expectation that anyone who comes to God, including Gentiles, should observe the laws of the Torah. They are a historical footnote today because unlike Peter and James in Acts, who didn't understand how or why the Spirit was falling upon Greeks but saw clearly that he was, they didn't grasp the Spirit's surprising work in the Gentile world.

CHAPTER 1: CREATIVE INTERPRETATION

1. In John 12:32, Jesus says, "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." This picture of lifting Jesus up has been used in discussions of praising and exalting the Savior as it relates to evangelistic witness and mission efforts. In the next verse, John specifies the intent of Jesus' statement: "He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die." As we'll see, the primary meaning of this passage relates to Jesus' death on the Cross—but it's not the only possible application.
2. Isaiah 6:9-10
3. Matthew 13:14
4. Hosea 11:1
5. Matthew 2:15
6. Compare Micah 7:6 with Matthew 10:35-36
7. Compare Jeremiah 31:15 with Matthew 2:18
8. Zechariah 11:12, quoted in Matthew 27:9 but prefaced by "that which was spoken through Jeremiah the prophet." This is explainable by the fact that the book at the beginning of a scroll was often used as the title for the whole scroll, even though several books were in the collection. A "Jeremiah" scroll could easily contain the works of several minor prophets as well and be referred to as "that which was spoken by Jeremiah (the book)" as opposed to Jeremiah (the prophet). Still, this looks careless on Matthew's part and would not comply with our hermeneutical standards today.
9. I wish I could remember the verse he said she cited so I could see how she derived the specific time element, but I wasn't able to write it down and have now forgotten it.

10. These methods of interpretation were perhaps formalized in the classical rabbinic period (after AD 70), but their foundations are much earlier than that. These methods of interpretation—all four, but *sod* to a lesser extent—are evident in the apocryphal books of the intertestamental period; the Oral Torah (Mishnah); writings attributed to Philo, an Alexandrian Jew; the pre-Christian literature discovered at Qumran; and even the later Old Testament's use of earlier Old Testament books. On the latter, Benjamin Sommer writes, "Priests and prophets, psalmists and scribes composed Scripture by recycling Scripture, by turning it and turning it to find new truths in it. For many biblical writers, new words from God emerged from intense examination and reordering of the old ones. The interpretation of a sacred text could yield revelation, as much as revelation yielded a sacred text. If this is so, then the gulf that separates the Bible or *Torah shebikhtav* ("Written Torah") from rabbinic tradition or *Torah shebal peh* ("Oral Torah") is smaller than one might think" (from "Early Nonrabbinic Interpretation" in Adele Berlin, Mark Zvi Brettler, Michael Fishbane, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], 1838). Sommer further writes that "Midrash, then, is not just a postbiblical invention used by the Rabbis to revise the Bible as they saw fit. It is a biblical means of relating to the Bible, which the Rabbis inherited from the biblical authors themselves" (p. 1832) and that the Rabbis followed scriptural precedent in "purposefully misquoting" scriptural passages (p. 1833).
11. The writer of Hebrews, for example, goes well beyond allegory (*midrash*)—and beyond a brief reference in Psalm 110:4—in comparing Jesus with Melchizedek in Hebrews 7. His treatment of Genesis 14 requires a *sod* approach to describe the hidden connection between them. Paul's allegory of Hagar and Sarah as representative of two covenants, a *midrash*, also has elements of *sod* in it. And John employs this approach, plus ample *remezim*, quite frequently in Revelation as he draws out hidden meaning (and adds some more) in multiple implicit and subtle references to Ezekiel, Isaiah, and other Old Testament texts.
12. You'll notice in some of the sample verses from Matthew above that the Gospel writer is simply quoting Jesus' application of an Old Testament verse.
13. Isaiah 64:4
14. Most notable among biblical examples of God-ordained chaos is the day of Pentecost, which hardly any human being would describe as "orderly." It is described in Acts 2 in words that indicate mass confusion—various languages being spoken simultaneously as a multiethnic crowd clamors in bewilderment and amazement. Only when Peter stands up and begins to clarify the situation does the disorder subside. From God's perspective, this confusion went exactly according to plan.

CHAPTER 2: THE MOSTLY TRUE PROPHET

1. By "prophet," I mean anyone who is able to hear the Lord's voice and deliver his message to a particular people in a particular situation. This, of course, includes the Old Testament prophets—those who wrote, like Isaiah, as well as those who didn't, like Elijah and Elisha—but also those who perform that function