

“An Overview of Contemporary Challenges to Sustaining a Model of Literal Interpretation”
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Introductory Comments

Throughout the last forty years, conservative evangelical scholars have seriously engaged hermeneutics and theological method and in more recent years have included such topics as enculturation and accommodation. This interaction continues to provide a healthy chastening of hermeneutics, epistemology, and theological method. This engagement also includes addressing cultural problems not directly identified in the text of Scripture. The process begins with a contemporary question or societal issue of concern and then moves back into the Scripture. The topic is first subdivided into questions that relate to theological/ biblical concepts through using the seven worldview type questions and the biblical meta-narrative. These worldview questions assist in surfacing the real theological framework so the issues can be critiqued through a biblical-theological grid. As an example one might develop a type of dialogical-integrative theology of ecology or a theology of genetics or a theology of materialism. I personally welcome these suggestions as long as we stand clearly within the intention of the human author of the biblical text and prioritize what the Scripture authors have theologized for us.

However, not all reformers in the large tent of evangelicalism are merely calling for a chastened view of hermeneutics and epistemology. In recent years, I have spent considerable time in analyzing and rebutting the post-conservative views of epistemology, the nature of Scripture and theological method.² I have also interacted with many of the more popular expressions of this post-modern hermeneutical expression.

² See the following recent articles and papers: “A New Kind of Christian: A Review” by David A Mappes in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (July-September, 2004): 289-303; “The Nobility and Knowability of Truth: Part 1” by David Mappes in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 12 (Spring 2009): 64-105 and “The Nobility and Knowability of Scripture: Part 2” by David Mappes in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 13 (Fall 2009): 1-22; “Humility and Tolerance: Exploring their Biblical, Theological, and Cultural Expression” presented by David Mappes at the Faculty Forum of Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit PA, October 25, 2010; “Current Trends in Hermeneutics and Theology: Certainty and Simplicity,” *Paraklesis* (Summer 2010), 1, 6; “What is Faith in Luke 18:1-8” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-September 2010), 292-306; “Love Wins by Rob Bell: A Biblical and Theological Critique,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2012) 87-121; How to Think about and Practice Theology, *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2014), 65-85; David Mappes, “Prioritizing and Revising Articles of Faith,” *The Baptist Bulletin* (July / August 2016).

Generally, many post-conservatives assert that one of the primary filters that necessitate a provisional status of all knowledge entails the limitation of language. They allege that since human language (actually the very fabric of language) is constructed by a particular culture/society, then any truth assertion (including doctrine and Scripture) is actually a cultural expression particular to one social-culture group. They assert, “How can finite language express the infinite?” Communities are portrayed as being trapped in their own linguistic world. Knowledge of truth then is always provisional and viewed as a creation of emotions and values embedded in a community’s linguistic construction (adapted from “The Nobility and Knowability of Truth: Part 1” by David Mappes in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 12 (Spring 2009): 64-105) and *Paraklesis* (Summer 2010), 1, 6.

In one of his earlier commencement addresses President Obama mirrored post-conservative values of truth and knowledge when he spoke to the Notre Dame graduating class in May 2008.³ The President started his address by way of expressing appreciation for his honorary degree and said, “I know it has not been without controversy”⁴ as he indicated that his presence at Notre Dame University had re-ignited the abortion debate. As the President spoke on matters of personal faith, he exhorted the graduates to be “unafraid to speak your mind when those values are at stake. Hold firm to your faith and allow it to guide you on your journey . . . [and to] Stand as a lighthouse”⁵ However, later in his speech President Obama cautioned the graduates by saying:

But remember too that the ultimate irony of faith is that it necessarily admits doubt. It is the belief in things not seen. It is beyond our capacity as human beings to know with certainty what God has planned for us or what He asks of us, and those of us who believe must trust that His wisdom is greater than our own This doubt should not push us away from our faith. But it should humble us. It should temper our passions, and cause us to be wary of self-righteousness. It should compel us to remain open, and curious, and eager to continue the moral and spiritual debate that began for so many of you within the walls of Notre Dame.”⁶

As an example in their book, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*, Grenz and Frankie write, “The simple fact is we do not inhabit the ‘world-in-itself’ . . . we live in a linguistic world of our own making . . . human reality is ‘socially constructed reality.’” (Stanley Grenz and John Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in the Postmodern Context*: Louisville: Westminster/John Knox 2001, 53); Grenz posits that certainty of truth has only a future orientation as he writes, “Until the eschaton, truth will by its own nature always remain provisional and truth claims contestable.” (Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 20). Olson clarifies that postconservatives are not simply calling for a revision to the anti-intellectualism of social fundamentalism of the 1950’s and 1960’s as he writes: “**Postconservative evangelicals believe that many of the leading voices in contemporary evangelical theology are really fundamentalists or at least still have one foot firmly planted in that movement out of which post-WW2 evangelicalism emerged especially in the 1950s [emphasis mine].** They perceive a knee-jerk preference for the most conservative answers to theological questions and a tendency to defend the status quo (which means scholastic Protestant orthodoxy especially as articulated by Hodge and other representatives of the Old Princeton School of theology such as B. B. Warfield)” Roger E. Olson, “Postconservative Evangelicalism: An Update after a Decade,” www.generousorthodoxy.net/thinktank/files/postconservative.pdf. 7-8; Accessed 15, September 2010.

³ Adapted from “Humility and Tolerance: Exploring their Biblical, Theological, and Cultural Expression” presented by David Mappes at the Faculty Forum of Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit PA, October 25, 2010.

⁴ Obama Notre Dame (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/17/obama-notre-dame-speech-f_n_204387.html). Accessed 12 September, 2009.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

President Obama exhorted the graduating class to remain *open, tolerant, to exercise humility to continue the debate* and to mediate the knowability of God's through faith though he never qualifies nor defines tolerance and humility. He simply asserts they need to exercise tolerance and humility.

Interestingly, President Obama never explains why the Roman Catholic Church who holds to an unequivocal position against abortion should be open, curious, and tolerant and humble to other positions-namely his position. When he addressed the importance of civil rights for all God's children, he addressed these virtuous civil rights as fundamental, equal, non-reducible absolutes which must be held with certainty and without tolerance. However, he failed to include the unborn within these absolute civil rights.

According to President Obama no difference exists between knowing what God has planned for us (which of course no one knows except God) and what God asks us to do which presupposes an unknowable and non-authoritative view of Scripture. Further, it is this alleged lack of accessibility to God's truth, which according to the President must be mediated by faith requiring doubt that should govern any expression of how one embraces truth claims.

In the final analysis President Obama appears to be exhorting others to be humble, open, and tolerant while he himself appears convinced (certain) of his own position. A simple rhetorical use of humility and tolerance removes any substantive, intellectual conversation, debate or even attempt to validate one position above another. Michael Winters in his article, "Obama Gets a C Minus at Notre Dame" writes:

During the campaign, when asked about when human life begins, candidate Obama said the question was "above my pay grade." But, he had no difficulty doing a theological riff on Sunday afternoon as he spoke at some length about the relationship between faith and doubt.⁷

While the President does not claim to be an evangelical, his comments about tolerance, humility, journey of faith and the necessity of faith admitting doubt, and the human inability to know with certainty illustrate the current crisis of interpretation and knowability.⁸ Unfortunately President

⁷ http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&id=28452923-3048-741E-7282751823625667
(Posted at: Sunday, May 17, 2009 05:19:44 PM (accessed 2010 Sept 15).

⁸ When most evangelicals (and myself) use the phrase certainty or *objective faith*, they are not advocating a sense of Enlightenment foundationalism that results in a complete neutral, comprehensive indubitable objective knowledge that leads to the impossibility of doubt (i.e., what is alleged as Cartesian foundationalism). For more extensive

Obama's views are similarly promoted by some evangelicals who "reduce the notion of "the faith" to simply "faith," thereby emphasizing only one's personal, subjective faith experience...⁹

During this presentation, I hope to touch on a number of practical topics related to sustaining a model of literal interpretation. These topics include defining literal interpretation, practicing a self-correcting theological method, and promoting a credible taxonomy of doctrine. Much of this presentation will be extracted from prior published articles, which I have indicated through footnotes. The presentation is intended to emphasize how we as pastor-scholars might help our students embrace legitimate practices of literal interpretation, theological method and taxonomy.

Defining and Describing Literal Interpretation

Perhaps the most important aspect of Ryrie's *sine qua non* of dispensationalism entails a consistent practice of literal interpretation though dispensational scholars are at times inconsistent in how they define, describe and practice literal interpretation. Far too often, literal interpretation is defined in a contrastive manner with the allegorical or figurative sense; literal interpretation is said to not practice the allegorical or figurative sense; this contrast then leads to such assertions as to "take the literal sense unless the literal sense makes no sense." Others describe literal interpretation as the clear sense, the normal sense, the plain sense, the obvious sense or the straight-forward sense.

These generic qualifiers are far too nebulous and place far too much emphasis on the readers' perspective rather than on the author's intent within the author's own historical timeframe. Dispensational and some reformed scholars have progressed to describe literal interpretation as the grammatical-historical practice. While the grammatical-historical nomenclature is very important, it is also incomplete. Any description or definition of literal interpretation must also entail the historical framework of the human author's message. The

discussion on matters of *the faith* containing propositional verbal truth assertions as well as the importance of living faithfully see the following recent articles: "A New Kind of Christian: A Review" by David A Mappes in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (July-September, 2004): 289-303; "The Nobility and Knowability of Truth: Part 1" by David Mappes in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 12 (Spring 2009): 64-105 and "The Nobility and Knowability of Truth: Part 2" by David Mappes in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 13 (Fall 2009): 1-22; "What is Faith in Luke 18:1-8" *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-September 2010).

⁹ David Mappes, "Prioritizing and Revising Articles of Faith," *The Baptist Bulletin* (July/ August 2016), 17.

author's meaning then is limited and derived by examining its immediate historical-textual parameters through a grammatical-historical study.

Prioritizing the immediate historical-textual parameter of the human author is essential since it is this parameter that limits meaning to the historical author. The very essence of dispensational theology entails preserving the *sensus literal* meaning of a text within its own deposit of special revelation.

The general parameters of this [dispensational] theological method include a stratified process that collates and analyzes data first at the exegetical level to form a biblical theology which then serves as the basis for systematic theology... Once the human authorial meaning is determined, then that meaning becomes fixed in time and does not change. The reader then examines how a later author uses that historically conditioned meaning in subsequent writings. Since the OT provides the foundational building block for NT theology, the traditional dispensationalist argues that the OT literal interpretation must be preserved in light of later progressive revelation.¹⁰

Students often wonder why dispensational theology has so many complex issues for resolution and why the system is so nuanced; the answer of course is that dispensational theology seriously considers all 66 books of biblical revelation and does not practice New Testament priority thereby limiting the 66 books of the Bible.

Prioritizing the immediate historical-textual parameter also controls textual meaning by dispensational scholars who posit a *sensus plenior* or *reference plenior* view of the divine and human intention;¹¹ the immediate historical parameter of a text provides a textually controlled extension of the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. This immediate historical-textual parameter component also disallows a progressive resignification of the passage through

¹⁰ "A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism" *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2013), 12-13.

¹¹ While *sensus plenior* and *reference plenior* are indeed different they both allow for the divine intent to say more than what the OT human author actually, consciously intended or comprehended to say. So a distinction is allowed between what the human author fully comprehended his text to historically mean and what the divine Author intended. Importantly, the divine intent always includes the human authorial intent and is controlled by the human authorial intent though subsequent revelation can clarify and reveal the fuller sense of the divine author. This model allows for the NT author to demonstrate the richer and fuller divine intended meaning but does not change the human author's verbal meaning. Most importantly, any fuller NT explanation is only an extension and development of the OT authorial verbal meaning and thus always governed by the initial pattern of authorial meaning; therefore any *sensus plenior* or *reference plenior* remains a textually controlled extension of the grammatical-historical method of interpretation rather than a non-textually controlled allegorical method of interpretation (modified from page 10-22 of "A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism" *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2013), 10-11.

later revelation often referred to as the Historical Progress of Revelation or Christocentric Model of Exegesis.¹² I suggest the practice of literal interpretation be defined as “*discern[ing] the intention of the human author by examining what the author affirms in the historical context of his writing.*”¹³ The literal meaning (*sensus literal*) of a text then is limited by its immediate historical-textual parameters.

The question remains if the word literal should be used or discontinued. Some scholars have suggested we not use the term *literal* but use the term rather literary; this is a major oversight that can lead to denying or de-historicizing events and the factuality of the Scripture. Other scholars suggest we simply omit both the terms *literary* and *literal* positing we simply assert the meaning as the historical-contextual meaning of a passage.

Perhaps I will acquiesce and agree with candidate Obama and simply say the question of using the term literal is simply "above my pay grade." However, given the rich tradition of using literal interpretation and roots of dispensationalism being within the church and Bible conference movement (not the academy), I favor continuing to using the term literal though perhaps with a parenthetical explanation. Perhaps when referring to the literal meaning we could add a parenthetical explanation referring to the authorial-historical-contextual sense; so then as dispensationalists we might speak of literal interpretation (authorial-historical-contextual sense) or simply the authorial-historical sense or the contextual-sense while avoiding such generic qualifiers as plain, normal, common sense meaning, non-allegorical and obvious meaning.

¹²In general, this model incorrectly allows the NT author to alter and change the historic verbal meaning of the OT text through based upon a broader NT context. The basis for this model revolves round the A/author distinction of the text as both human and divine. Poythress argues that any statement interpreted must be based on the context of the speaker/author but in Scripture there are two authors, human and divine; hence how can their contexts be *exactly* the same? (Vern S. Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” *WTJ* 48, no. 2 [Fall 1986]: 249–55). He posits the grammatical-historical-literal model is inadequate since he alleges “the NT authors characteristically do *not* aim merely at grammatical-historical exegesis of the OT” (Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” 276). He advocates for a progressive reading and meaning of a passage. The passage is first understood “in the context of the particular book of the bible in which it appears and in the context of the human author and historical circumstances of the book” and then understood “in the context of the total canon of Scripture available up to that point in time” and then understood “in the context of the entire Bible (the complete canon).” (Vern S. Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” 241–79, esp. 267). Modified from David Mappes and H. Wayne House, “A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2013), 11.

¹³ David Mappes and H. Wayne House, “A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2013), 8.

Introduction to Theological Method and Taxonomy.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ A proper Theological Method differentiates hermeneutics, interpretative practices, theological method and theology.

Self-Correcting 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. Secondly, a self-correcting theological method is required since interpreters grow in their knowledge and understanding of Scripture. 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; these difficult issues take both time and proper exposure to resolve. A theological method exhibiting the following characteristics will help ensure a biblically balanced and self-correcting approach:

Canonical.

First priority and authority is always given to the canonical books of Scripture (*canonical* refers to all 66 books of the Bible and not to canonical interpretation) over personal experiences, personal sensibilities, other writings, background studies, speculation, etc. In sum, Scripture is used to interpret Scripture in its proper context of progressive revelation. 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.

¹⁴ Much of this section is copied and adapted from "How to Think about and Practice Theology" in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2014), 65-85 by Dr. David Mappes and the article, "A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism," in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, (Spring 2013), 5-56 by Dr. David Mappes and Dr. H. Wayne House.

¹⁵ As an example see Deut 29:29; Eph 3:1-6; Gal 1:6-24.

Background information and knowledge gained through general revelation can be helpful though priority should always be placed upon the meaning of Scripture in its immediate context and then weighing an interpretation with other 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 various views based upon one’s pre-understanding. This assertion, however, is patently false and self-contradictory-while these critics claim that non-objectivity is universal, they themselves then 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) promise of redemption (Christ) 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 and serve as overarching themes 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.

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.

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 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.

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 should not create false contradictions.

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.

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.¹⁶ 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

¹⁶ See Daniel Estes, *Learning and Living God's Word* (Schamburg, IL: Regular Baptist, 1993) for further discussion.

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.

The following chart illustrates how I use these components to have students evaluate actual theological systems and the doctrine of sanctification. Rate the thoroughness of each component on a scale of 1-5 (5 being the best).

Model	Wesleyan	Pentecostal	Reformed	Keswick	Augustinian-Dispensational
Canonical					
Comprehensive					
Consistent hermeneutical approach					
Congruency					
Coherence					
Call of Response/ Application					

Balanced Taxonomy and Spiritual Growth

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.

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 of 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.¹⁷ 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

¹⁷ Modified from Erik Thoennes, *Life's Biggest Questions: What the Bible Says About the Things that Matter Most* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 34-37.

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 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 of 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.¹⁸ The central controlling motif in doctrinal taxonomy is always the clarity and authorial meaning of the Scripture.

This presentation has addressed three inter-related practices that we as pastor-scholars can mirror to help our students sustain a model of literal interpretation. These topics include correctly defining and describing literal interpretation, a self-correcting theological method, and a balanced doctrinal taxonomy.

¹⁸ The die, divide, debate, dismiss words are adapted from “Learning to Distinguish Between Degrees of Certainty” by Gerry Breshears, in *Lessons in Leadership*, ed. Randy Roberts (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 48-53.

