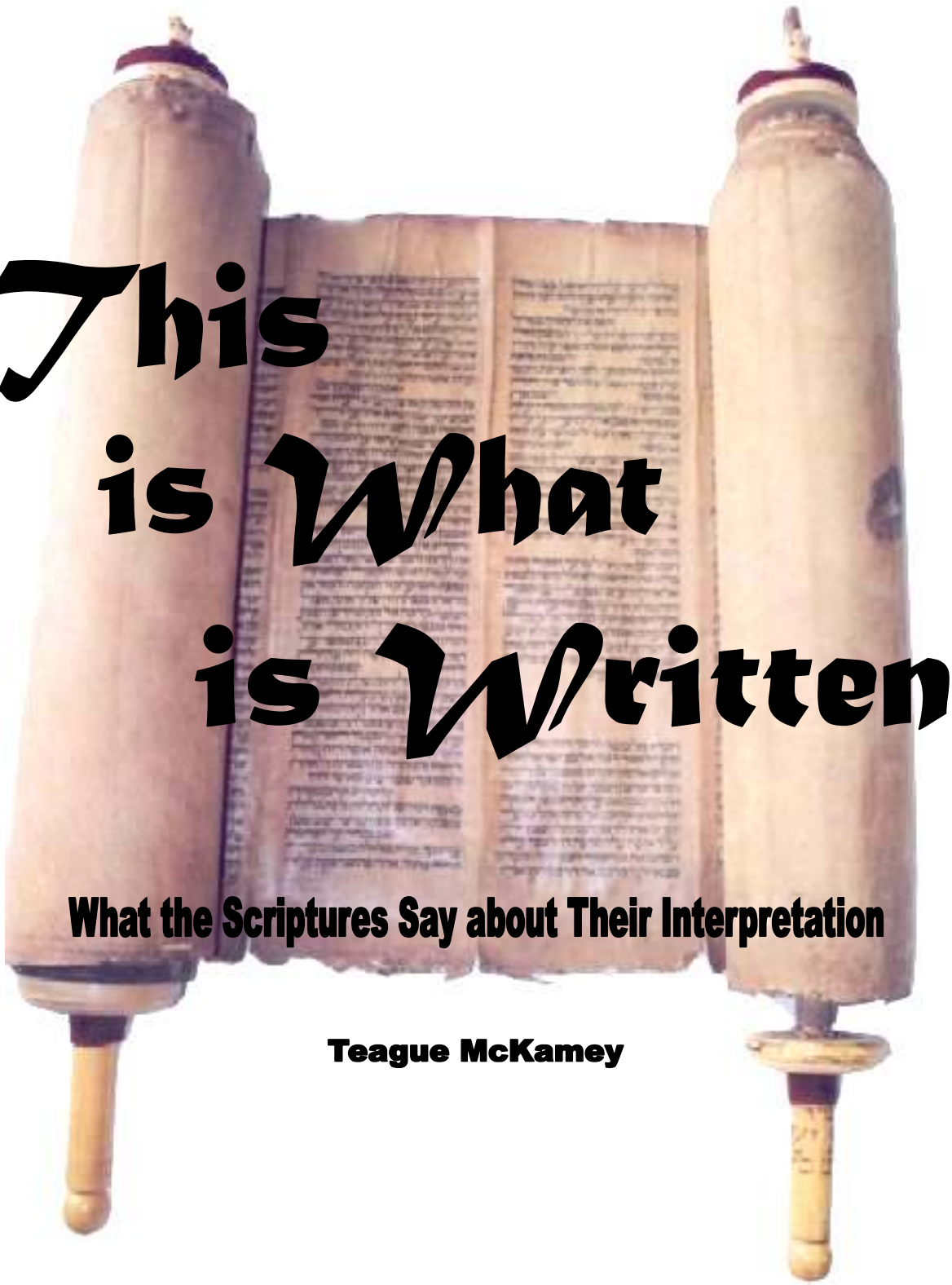

This is What is Written

What the Scriptures Say about Their Interpretation

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to:

Carrie McKamey, my wife

Bryan Halferty

R.T. & Debbie Nusbaum

Mallory Patrick

The Students at Accelerated Christian Training School

Your feedback was essential.

"When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"
(Luke 24:30-32).

Introduction

For most Christians, how to interpret the scriptures is central to their beliefs. After all, the way someone interprets the Bible is closely related to how they understand and live out their faith.

In this day and age, many methods of biblical interpretation have been advanced. Some favor a literal interpretation, some a wholly symbolic one. Others believe that no book of the Bible can be understood unless we first study the historical and cultural context in which it was written. Tradition also plays a major role in our approach to the Bible. What tends to be ignored as we consider how to interpret the scriptures is what the scriptures themselves teach us about interpretation. It seems the Bible is our authority except when it comes to understanding what it says. The Bible contains, not only direct commentary about its interpretation, but examples of interpretation given by those that wrote it. The purpose of this booklet is to examine what the scriptures say about themselves

and to discover how they can guide our understanding of them.

This Is What Is Written

"Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:26, 27).

"Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations…." (Luke 24:44-47).

These verses from Luke are perhaps the plainest statements in the Bible about how to interpret the scriptures. What do they teach us? First, that the message of the Bible cannot be grasped through the historical facts or the literal meaning of the text alone. Jesus must open our minds. The meaning of the scriptures must be revealed to us.

When it comes to revelation or going beyond the plain meaning of the text many of us start to feel on edge and rightly so. Not a few people have

pulled something out of left field and called it revelation. Many have started cults based on supposed revelation. How do we evaluate the truth or quality of revelation? What plumb line do we have? Again, the verses above give us an answer—scripture can only be understood by revelation, but Jesus also tells us that revealed knowledge has to do with Himself. This is the plumb line for all scriptural interpretation. When we come to the Bible, we will read history, laws, poetry, descriptions of temples, prophecies, and letters. But we should also expect to know Christ or we have not comprehended the full meaning of the scriptures (Php. 3:10).

Not to Abolish but to Fulfill

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To say that the full meaning of the scriptures is found in Christ, however, is not to say that the scriptures have no other meaning. Jesus said, "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:12). Just as Jesus did not abolish but fulfilled the law and the prophets, Jesus will fulfill and not abolish the literal or

historical meanings of any text. That is, every verse was written in a certain historical context and has a meaning related to the circumstances in which it was written. Having our minds opened to understand what is written about Jesus does not mean that the scriptures no longer mean what they did when they were originally written. To see Jesus in the scriptures is to see the original meaning of a verse fulfilled or brought to fullness in Him.

For example: Isaiah saw the Lord "seated on a throne, high and exalted," and prophesied that the Israelites would be "ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving" (Isaiah 6:1-9). This passage is indeed about a vision that Isaiah had "in the year when King Uzziah died," about God warning His people that they would go into captivity unless they turned to Him, and about the promise of redemption through the holy seed left in the land. These things predicted actual events that came to pass: Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and took all of Judah captive, yet a remnant returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple of the Lord in about 458 BC. Nevertheless, John says it was

Jesus's glory that Isaiah saw and interprets these verses to be a prediction that Israel would reject Him (John 12:40, 41). The fact that there are two understandings of Isaiah six does not mean we are forced to choose one or the other, or that one is right and the other wrong. We can understand Isaiah to be rebuking God's people for rejecting their true King, the one he saw seated on a throne, high and exalted. But we can also see that the Israelites' rejection of their true King did not reach its fullness until they rejected Christ—God's anointed King of kings.

A second example is found in Isaiah 7:14—"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." It is well known that Matthew applied this prophecy to the birth of Christ (Matt. 1:23). But when Isaiah gave this prophecy, the promised son was the one born to him and a prophetess. God gave this son as a sign to king Ahaz that He would deliver Judah from the enemies oppressing her (Isaiah 7:1-8:4). Again, we needn't choose between these two interpretations. Just as the son born to Isaiah was a sign that "God is with us," so Jesus was the ultimate expression of God being with us.

And while God did deliver Judah from her enemies in the time of Isaiah, it was not until Christ's death and resurrection that the last enemy—death—was destroyed (1 Cor. 15:26; 2 Tim. 1:10).

Another aspect of interpretation that will not be abolished by seeing Jesus is that of scriptural principles. Sowing and reaping is a good example of this. Genesis 8:22 establishes sowing and reaping as a law of this creation: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." We then see Paul picking up this principle and applying it to financial giving: "Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously" (2 Cor. 9:6). Paul also uses this principle to explain the connection between our present behavior and our eternal destiny:

> **God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life (Gal. 6:7, 8).**

Sowing and reaping is a real law that God established for this creation. We can learn about it from the scriptures, and applying it can help us live godly lives in this world. Nevertheless, the full understanding of sowing and reaping is found in John 12:24—"I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains by itself, alone. But if it dies, it brings forth a harvest." Jesus said this in relation to His death and resurrection. Paul also discussed death and resurrection in terms of sowing and reaping (1 Cor. 15:12, 35-49). God established sowing and reaping as a natural parable about His Son. It is a law because God designed everything in creation after the pattern of Christ (Rom. 1:20). It is possible to understand the principle but not grasp its full meaning in Jesus. But if we know Jesus, we will know all principles through Him.

Finally, the Lord may use the scriptures to address present situations or guide our decisions. For example, God used verses from two different psalms to show Peter the disciples should choose someone to succeed Judas as an apostle (Acts

1:20-22). Seeing Jesus in the scriptures will not abolish the Lord's ministry in this way. But ultimately, the Bible is not about us or our plans. It is about God and His plan in Christ. God is keen to direct our steps, but He wants to do so within the context of His eternal vision. If Christ is not revealed to us in the scriptures, we risk approaching the Bible as a sort of Christian divination tool, and empty it of any divine meaning.

The Prophets

"For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev. 19:10).

Having established the content of revelation—God's testimony about His Son—we will gain much by looking at examples of how Christ was revealed to New Testament authors. Taking our cues from Luke 24 again, let's start with the different types of writings Jesus named: the law, the prophets, and the psalms. Since most believers are accustomed to the idea that people prophesied about Christ, we will first consider

the prophets. Many of us may already be thinking of passages such as Isaiah 53, which describes God's suffering servant and predicts Christ's death and resurrection:

> **But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:5, 6).**

Any doubt that these verses speak of Christ must be quickly put aside because Peter quotes them in reference to the cross and God's salvation through it (1 Peter 2:24, 25). Using other lines from the same chapter of Isaiah, Philip shares Christ with an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:30-35).

Micah 5:2 is another familiar messianic prophecy: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from

ancient times." Matthew quotes Micah verbatim in reference to Christ's birth.

Finally, in Acts 15, James ends a dispute about God's acceptance of the Gentiles by quoting Amos 9:11, 12:

> **"In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name," declares the LORD, who will do these things.**

David's tent—the lineage of the messiah—fell when Jesus died. Through Christ's resurrection, God restored David's tent, established his throne forever, and opened the way for all nations to seek God.

As amazing as such passages are, New Testament writers saw Christ in verses that were not messianic predictions as well. Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1 in reference to Jesus's return to Israel from Egypt where his parents fled to protect Him from Herod (Matt. 2:14, 15). Yet when we read Hosea 11:1, we find it is not a

messianic prophecy at all but a poetic description of the exodus from Egypt.

Jesus taught that Jonah was a figure of His death and resurrection: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:40; Jonah 1:17-2:10). Again, the book of Jonah contains no messianic prophecies, only the history of Jonah's flight from the Lord and his ministry to Nineveh.

The Law

"Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law" (Psalm 119:18).

Asking the Lord to reveal the meaning of the scriptures is not only a New Testament idea, as the verse just quoted shows. The writer of Psalm 119 sought to know something wonderful, something beyond "You shall" or "You shall not." In the New Testament, we find that the law was a shadow of things to come (Col.2:17; Heb.

10:1). "[T]he reality, however, is found in Christ," Paul tells us (Col. 2:17).

When John the Baptist calls Jesus the Lamb of God, he sums up every Old Testament offering—particularly those prescribed by the law—in the death of Christ (John 1:29). Jesus reinterpreted the Passover meal as a figure, not only of His death, but also of the believer's participation in His resurrection life and incorporation into His body (Luke 22:19, 20; 1 Cor. 10:16, 17). According to Hebrews, the Sabbath is only truly observed when we believe in the finished work of the cross and enter God's rest in Christ (Heb. 1:3, 4:3). Paul saw Deuteronomy 21:23 fulfilled in Christ crucified—"Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree" (Gal. 3:13). And circumcision was given as a sign that God would surgically remove our fleshly nature through Christ's death and resurrection, "having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col. 2:11, 12).

Besides commands about morality and religious practice, the law also contains historical records in which Christ was revealed to authors

of the New Testament. For instance, God promised Abram an heir, and Isaac was the immediate fulfillment of that promise (Gen. 15:4; 17:19). But in Galatians we learn that the promises of God "were spoken to Abraham and to his seed…who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). Paul saw Isaac as typifying God's true heir to come. Paul further develops his thought about God's promised seed in his treatment of Genesis 21:10. The account of Ishmael persecuting Isaac and of Sarah's dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael is said to be a figure of two covenants: the old covenant of slavery to the law, and the new covenant of freedom through Christ (Gal. 4:21-5:1).

In 1 Corinthians ten Paul discusses the events of the exodus and teaches that the rock from which the Israelites drank while wandering through the desert was Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). He then explains that the history of the exodus "happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11).

John also records a revelatory understanding of the exodus taught by Jesus. After talking about the manna eaten by the Israelites in the

desert, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:32, 33). The bread written about in Exodus, and of which Jesus spoke, is Himself, the bread of life given at the cross (Ex. 16:4; John 6:35).

A final example is found in John 3:14, 15: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." The image Jesus uses is drawn from Numbers 21. To discipline His people for their grumbling and unbelief, the Lord sent a plague of venomous snakes against them (Num. 21:4-6). The anti-venom? God commanded Moses to fashion a snake of bronze and to lift it high on a pole (Num. 21:8). Everyone who looked at the snake was cured of their bite and lived. In the same way, Jesus taught that anyone poisoned by sin may look to the Son of Man lifted up on the cross and live.

The Psalms

"I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world" (Psalm 78:2; Matt. 13:35).

Anyone looking for Jesus in the scriptures will find ample material in Psalms. Jesus and Peter both quote Psalm 118:22—"The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" (Matt. 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7). The rejection of Christ, the Living Stone, happened at the cross. His selection as cornerstone, as the foundation of God's living temple, happened through the resurrection.

Psalm 2:1 and 2 say, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One" (Acts 4:25, 26). The disciples quoted this verse after the Sanhedrin reprimanded Peter and John for preaching in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18). Though these verses were written by David about God subjecting all Israel's enemies to him, the believers saw them

fulfilled in the crucifixion of Christ, David's heir: "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed" (Acts 4:27).

Hebrews chapter one is a virtual symphony of verses from Psalms, all quoted in worship of Jesus (Psalm 2:7; 104:4; 45:6, 7; 102:25-27; 110:1). In chapter 2, the writer of Hebrews quotes another psalm, Psalm Eight. Verses five and six of Psalm Eight say, "You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet" (Heb. 2:7, 8). Hebrews 2:9 then explains this passage by Christ's death and resurrection: "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death…."

Jesus Himself quoted Psalm 22 from the cross—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Psalm 22:1). This quote, along with the piercing of Jesus's hands and feet, the dividing of Jesus's garments, and other details that predict the circumstances of the cross, invite us to apply the whole psalm to

Christ. Besides expressing His anguish at being cut off from His Father, Jesus quoted this psalm in the hopes that those who heard Him would know Him by understanding that the scriptures spoke of Him.

All the Scriptures

What of genres other than the law, the prophets, and the psalms? For in our understanding, these three categories do not encompass all the books of the Bible. However, the Hebrews organized all the scriptures into those three categories. This is why Luke 24:27 says, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."

We have already seen New Testament writers share Christ from historical passages in the law and prophets. Hebrews chapter one quotes 2 Samuel, a historical book, in reference to Christ: "I will be his father, and he will be my son" (2 Sam. 7:14; Heb. 1:5). God said this to David regarding his unborn son, Solomon, and promised that, through Solomon, David's throne

would be established forever. As interpreted by the writer of Hebrews, Solomon is a type of God's Son, whom God would raise to share His eternal throne.

Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are classified as wisdom literature. Proverbs is not quoted frequently in the New Testament. But in Hebrews, Proverbs 3:11 and 12 are used to encourage us to endure suffering as Christ endured the cross: "the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son" (Heb. 12:6). For the writer of Hebrews, we must look at Christ crucified in order to understand the divine sonship discussed in Proverbs (Heb. 12:11).

Some books, such as Song of Songs[1] and Lamentations, are never quoted in the New Testament. Be that as it may, Jesus said all the scriptures spoke of Him. We should not think Christ cannot be found in some books simply

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[1] Paul says marriage is a shadow of Christ and the church. This being so, we cannot say that Song of Songs is only about husband and wife becoming one flesh in marriage. It must be about Christ and the church. Otherwise, we are caught in the awkward position of saying that actual marriage is a shadow of Christ and the church, but that writings about marriage are only about the shadow.

because there is no record in the New Testament. John says that if everything Jesus did was written down, the world couldn't contain all the books (John 21:25). Should we expect that the New Testament contains every conceivable reference to Christ contained in the Old Testament? Probably not. The New Testament isn't meant to provide an exhaustive catalog of Old Testament references to Christ. The references it does contain, however, provide an interpretive toolkit that gives us liberty to see Christ in all the scriptures.

Allusions

Besides direct quotes, the New Testament is filled with allusions to the Old Testament. Allusions are like hints. Many times, New Testament authors didn't come right out and say they were using a certain Old Testament passage to share Christ, but they hinted at it. For example, when Jesus walked on the water, it may have been an allusion to Job 9:8—"He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea." In this case, Jesus was not merely

performing a miracle or using supernatural power to establish who He was. He was showing that He is the exact image of God, the Son who does what He sees His Father doing in the scriptures (Heb. 1:3; John 5:19).

When Jesus presented the cup at the last supper, He said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (Luke 22:18). In Numbers six, we find the Lord telling Moses, "If a man or woman wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the LORD as a Nazirite, he must abstain from wine or from other fermented drink. […] As long as he is a Nazirite, he must not eat anything that comes from the grapevine" (Num. 6:1-4). The Nazirite concluded his separation to the Lord by offering a sacrifice, after which he was free to drink wine. Considering these verses together, Jesus may have been pointing to Himself as the true Nazirite, whose vow of separation to God was fulfilled when He offered Himself on the cross.

Jesus made this enigmatic statement when calling His first disciples: "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God

ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:51). Genesis 28:10-22 records Jacob's flight from Canaan. While camped in the desert one night, Jacob had a dream in which he saw a stairway or ladder "resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Gen. 28:12). Clearly, Jesus was claiming to be Jacob's ladder, the One who would make concourse between heaven and earth possible.

One final example is found in Romans 8:33 and 34. Paul's language here is remarkably similar to Isaiah 50:8 and 9, and indicates he saw these verses fulfilled in Christ:

He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who is he that will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up (Isaiah 50:8, 9).

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us (Rom. 8:33, 34).

What's in a Name?

Now that we have seen that Christ was found in and shared from all genres of scripture, it will be instructive to consider topics or subjects through which Christ was revealed to New Testament authors. Hebrews chapter seven is a premier example of the ways in which our minds can be opened to seeing Jesus in the scriptures. This rich teaching is gleaned from just three verses—Genesis 14:18-20. This is a historical

account about Melchizedek the priest blessing Abram after his military victory over Kedorlaomer and his allies. Yet, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the author of Hebrews helps us to see Christ within the text. He begins by telling us that Melchizedek's name means "'king of righteousness'; then also, 'king of Salem' means 'king of peace.'" (Heb. 7:2). The author expects that we will already begin thinking of Jesus, King of kings, who alone is righteous and brought us "peace through His blood, shed on the cross" (Col. 1:20). Then he picks up on the conspicuous fact that no genealogy is given for Melchizedek. In a book like Genesis, where being in covenant with God depends on having the right ancestry, it is significant that a priest with no pedigree breezes into the picture to bless the likes of Abram, who was to become the father of God's covenant people. In the writer's mind, this could only point to the fact that Jesus is an eternal priest without ancestry and that the priestly ministry He fulfilled through the cross is without beginning or end. (And though the writer of Hebrews does not mention it, is it mere

coincidence that Melchizedek covenants with Abram over bread and wine just as Jesus introduced the new covenant over communion?)

The way the writer of Hebrews treats Genesis 14:18-20 gives us permission to read historical details in their literal sense, but also in the revelatory sense that Jesus intended. Translations of names, genealogies (or the lack therof), and countless other specifics can be arranged into a picture of Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Scripture Salad

Let's consider another example from Hebrews. In chapters three and four, the writer is discussing the rest into which God has invited His people. We enter this rest by believing in Christ's complete work of atonement (Heb. 1:3, 3:13, 14). This understanding is drawn from the scriptures and communicated in a remarkable way. He begins with a psalm about Israel wandering in the desert. The land, in the author's treatment, is God's complete work in Christ. Just as Christ is a salvation for which we

did not work, so the land was endowed with "large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant" (Deut. 6:11). Unbelief keeps us from resting in Christ's full salvation just as it kept Israel outside the fullness of the land. To this image of the promised land as Christ, the writer adds the account of the seventh day of creation from Genesis chapter two (Gen. 2:2, 3). Again, we have a finished work (creation) that we are meant to see fulfilled in Christ. Just as God commanded man to rest with Him in the first creation He finished, so we are commanded to rest in Christ, God's new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). This is a fascinating bit of interpretation because the writer weaves a psalm, Israel's wandering in the desert, the creation account, and Sabbath law into a single understanding of salvation in Christ. For many of us, such treatment of scripture is confusing—a scripture salad— because we tend to see the Bible divided into different subjects. We cannot see Christ for the scriptures, to borrow the cliché. But the writer of Hebrews saw all Bible subjects

as witnesses bringing one testimony, that of Christ. Because of this, it did not confuse or trouble him to toss Numbers, Genesis, and a psalm together in this way.

Ark-itechture

New Testament authors also built their testimony of Jesus on various structures described in the Bible. Peter shows that Noah's ark is really a figure of salvation through Christ's resurrection (1 Peter 3:18-21). We are saved because we are in God's true Ark, who rose out of the waters under which the world remained buried.

Another structure, taken up in nearly every book of the New Testament, is the temple. As the center of Jewish religious life, the temple naturally became a focal point in New Testament authors' understanding of Christ. Jesus very plainly taught that the temple spoke of His death and resurrection:

> **"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews replied, "It has**

> **taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken (John 2:19-21).**

Besides Jesus claiming to be the true temple, there is something else we should take note of. After Jesus rose from the dead, it doesn't only say that the disciples believed what Jesus said. It says "they believed the Scripture" (John 2:21). That is, believing in Christ opened their eyes to the true message of the Bible, and they received its witness.

But, in addition to representing Christ, isn't the temple used to symbolize the individual believer and the church? This is a good question, and we will not fully appreciate the temple's testimony of Jesus until we answer it. We might begin with 1 Corinthians 6:19—"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" This verse seems to teach that each individual is a temple, but while the word "body"

is singular, the word "your" is plural. That is, everyone Paul is addressing is one body, a temple of the Holy Spirit. Just before verse 19, Paul does talk about individual bodies, but he refers to them as members of Christ (1 Cor. 6:15). We cannot, at one and the same time, be members and whole temples. By saying each of us is a member, Paul is trying to move us from serving our individual bodies to serving the body and temple of Christ. As he says, "You are not your own" (1 Cor. 6:19). We cannot do as we will anymore than my arm can act apart from the impulses of my brain. Were we to examine similar verses, such as 1 Corinthians 3:16, we would again find plural "yous," and discover that the New Testament does not teach that the individual believer is a temple of God. This is not to suggest that God does not indwell us individually. But it would seem God indwells us individually only as we are joined to Christ and to one another.

Other scriptures seem to present the corporate church as God's temple. Ephesians 2:19-22 speaks of all believers being built on Christ, the chief cornerstone. And 1 Peter 2:4, 5

says we are living stones being built into a spiritual house. The key to understanding such verses probably lies in Ephesians 2:21—"In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord." Connecting this verse with John 2:19, we must conclude that the temple raised was not the individual, Jesus of Nazareth, but Jesus and all those in Him. Noah's ark suggests this same truth. Consequently, temples in scripture do symbolize the church, but not as an entity separate from Christ. Instead, temples point to the fact that Christ rose with members, that living stones have come to the Living Stone, that the whole building is joined together in Him and is Him.

The Day of the Lord

It is apparent to many believers that Christ's second coming corresponds to the Old Testament "Day of the Lord." Juxtaposing Old and New Testament passages brings out the connection:

Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace (Mal. 4:1)

Then the LORD my God will come, and all the holy ones with him (Zech. 14:5).

The LORD their God will save them on that day as the flock of his people (Zech. 9:16).

This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus…on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed (2 Thess. 1:7-10)

In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth (Zeph. 1:18).

By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men (2 Peter 3:7).

These verses show that the Day of Christ, as Paul calls it in Philippians 1:10, will be at once a day of

fiery judgment on the fallen world and a day of liberation for the people of God. The Day of the Lord will bring this creation to an end and inaugurate, as Peter says, "a new heavens and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13).

But the Day of the Lord was not only taught through specifically prophetic verses. Jesus depicted His coming using two historical accounts: the flood in the days of Noah and the destruction of Sodom by fire (Luke 17:26-37). In both accounts, as in the Day of the Lord, a righteous remnant is saved while the rest are consumed in a cataclysmic judgment. With Noah, there is also a glimpse of the new creation when God's remnant steps out of the ark into a world purged of evil.

But Jesus's use of the flood as a figure of His Day raises a question, for we have just discussed the fact that Peter saw the ark as a type of salvation through baptism into Christ's death and resurrection (1 Peter 3:20, 21). Can a single passage of scripture be about more than one thing or have more than one fulfillment? Apparently Peter—who was present when Jesus

spoke about the flood in the days of Noah—saw no contradiction in using the same passage to teach about Christ's resurrection. Unless we are prepared to say that the Bible is contradictory or that Peter deliberately broke with Christ's teachings, we have to consider other explanations.

One possibility, which some might consider speculative, assumes that scriptures about the Day of the Lord speak, not only of the second coming, but of Christ's death and resurrection as well. In this case, we need to consider whether verses about the Day of the Lord relate to all these things.

To begin with, the cross was a day of judgment and salvation, just as the Day of the Lord will be. The cross stands in history like the edge of a sword, dividing humanity, diverting every person to one final destiny or another, that destiny being fully manifest on the Day of the Lord. Just before the cross, Jesus said, "Now is the time for judgment on this world" (John 12:31). Paul also said, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I

to the world" (Gal. 6:14). If we want to find the judgment of the world and the salvation of the saints predicted by the prophets, we must first come to the cross.

Consider also the following verses about the Day of the Lord—

> **For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah and a great slaughter in Edom (Isaiah 34:6).**
>
> **For the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will offer sacrifice in the land of the north by the River Euphrates (Jer. 46:10).**
>
> **Be silent before the Sovereign LORD, for the day of the LORD is near. The LORD has prepared a sacrifice; he has consecrated those he has invited (Zeph. 1:7).**

Certainly, the picture of the Lord offering sacrifice takes us to the cross, where God offered up His Son. Zechariah 12:10 also reminds us of Jesus's death: "They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son." John

quotes this verse in reference to Christ's crucifixion, but the passage in which it occurs is about the Day of the Lord (John 19:37).

Malachi 4:2, on the other hand, foreshadows the resurrection—"But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings." And Zechariah 13:1 evokes Christ's death and resurrection with its description of living water cleansing God's people from sin: "On that day a fountain will be opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and impurity." Zechariah 2:10, 11 extends redemption to all nations: "'For I am coming, and will live among you,' declares the LORD. 'Many nations will be joined with the LORD in that day and will become my people." To be sure, it is not only at the second coming that many nations will be joined to the Lord. Now, through the preaching of Christ, people from every nation are being joined to Him.

Isaiah 65:17 looks ahead to the new creation: "Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind." Be

that as it may, the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, as seen in 2 Corinthians 5:17, has already begun: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

One final thought: In Malachi 4:5, the Lord promises, "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes." Jesus identified Elijah to come with John the Baptist (Matt. 17:12, 13). As taught by Jesus, then, "Elijah" came before the cross.

How, then, can we relate the death, resurrection, and return of Christ in a way that incorporates all the verses we have surveyed about the Day of the Lord? Perhaps a picture would be the most useful: The Day of the Lord dawns at the cross and reaches full day at the second coming (Prov. 4:18). Judgment and liberation begin at the cross, grow as people accept or reject Christ, and come to full manifestation at the second coming. Assuming this is true, it wouldn't be the first time the New Testament taught something involving multiple fulfillments. In the gospel of John, Jesus employed the concept of "a time is coming and

has now come." When talking of the future day when the true worshipers of God would worship in spirit and truth, Jesus pointed to Himself as the present fulfillment and beginning of that reality (John 4:21-24). He also claimed to be the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). Bodily resurrection will occur for all of us one day—some will rise to live, others to be condemned—but resurrection unto life is already happening now for those who hear the voice of the Son of God and accept His word (John 5:24-30). Paul also says that "God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). In the same way, a time is coming at the Day of the Lord that has now come through Christ's death and resurrection.

Why would God prophetically describe the time between the cross and the second coming as a day? Again, it isn't the first time. After recounting the days of creation, Genesis 2:4 says, "This is the account of the heavens and the earth in the day when they were created." That the Day of the Lord could be a span of time and not a literal day isn't so strange when one considers that "With the Lord a day is like a thousand

years, and a thousand years are like a day" (2 Peter 3:8). It could also be due to "prophetic perspective," such as when one looks at things from a distance and can't tell how much space separates them. To the farsighted prophet, events like the cross and the second coming might have appeared to be one event, just as one might think a tree is right in front of a mountain until the tree is actually reached and the intervening distance realized.

But more than likely, the Lord prophetically gathered everything between the cross and second coming into one day because what He saw and was speaking of was not a period of time or different events but a Person—the Person of His Son. And in that Person, that Day, God purposed the administration of the fullness of time—"to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph. 1:9, 10). Consequently, the Day of the Lord encompasses all that is involved with God's eternal plan as accomplished through the death, resurrection, gospel, and return, of Christ—the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the All and in all (Rev. 22:13; Col. 3:11).

Returning to Noah and the flood, Jesus's and Peter's varying interpretations will be confusing if we see this passage as being a type of certain events rather than a Person. If the scriptures prophetically speak about events, then either Jesus or Peter was wrong, for Noah and the flood must correspond to a future moment, whether Christ's death and resurrection, or His return. But if, as we have been saying, the scriptures speak of Christ, both interpretations make sense within the context of God's testimony about His Son (1 John 5:9).

In the end, each reader will have to prayerfully decide what they believe about the Day of the Lord. But regardless of how we conceive of it, scriptures describing this Day find their reality in Christ, and this is the main point that we should note regarding the interpretation of such verses.

Incar-Nation

Just as foundational to Jewish identity as the temple was the nation of Israel. Apparently, Israel was also seen as a figure of Christ, though

New Testament authors established this more through allusions and pictures than by explicit statements. Israel, as found in Genesis 32:28, was the name given to Jacob by God. Jacob had 12 sons whose families grew into 12 tribes named for the sons. Exodus 1:5 tells us these tribes numbered 70 persons when they first came to Egypt, but "became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them" (Ex. 1:7). This "exceedingly numerous" people was forged into a nation during the exodus, and was called by the name of the seed from whom they had grown—Israel.

The numbers mentioned above become especially important in the gospels when Jesus chooses 12 apostles, then 70 disciples, and sends out both groups to preach the kingdom of God (Luke 9:1, 2; 10:1). The connection between this arrangement and the formation of the nation of Israel is unmistakable. Clearly, Jesus is the new Jacob, the apostles His 12 sons/tribes, the 70 the beginnings of the true Israel (Gal. 6:15, 16). Like natural Israel, the forging of spiritual Israel occurred through the death of the Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7). All who believe are the Christ

nation, the Incar-nation—those born of the eternal Word, in whom that Word is also becoming flesh (John 1:12-14).

We are, perhaps, more accustomed to thinking of Israel as foreshadowing the church and not Christ. Paul says that "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel," Peter declares us "a holy nation," John calls the redeemed "a kingdom and priests to serve our God" (Rom. 9:6; 1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 5:10). This is certainly true. But as we saw with the temple, we are not meant to understand this nation as an entity separate from Christ. We are Christ's flesh and blood just as Israel was Jacob's flesh and blood. We bear Jesus's new name just as Israel bore Jacob's new name (Rev. 3:12).

Understood properly, Israel represents Christ and all those in Him. Paul describes the Incar-nation as "one new man" in Ephesians chapter two, and we have to wonder if he is alluding to verses such as Judges 20:1—"Then all the Israelites from Dan to Beersheba and from the land of Gilead came out as one man and assembled before the LORD in Mizpah" (see also 1 Sam. 11:7; Ezra 3:1; Nehemiah 8:1). The

message God gave Moses for Pharaoh is also interesting in this regard: "This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me'" (Ex. 4:22, 23). Again, Israel is referred to as a single person—the son of God.

Does this give us permission to understand other biblical nations as representations of Christ? The previous section about the Day of the Lord anticipated this question. People from all nations either receive Christ, becoming part of the Incar-Nation, or refuse Him and remain under judgment. Paul said, "This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 3:6). Paul probably came to understand "this mystery" through verses such as Isaiah 19:23, 24: "The Egyptians and Assyrians will worship together. In that day, Israel will be the third, along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing on the earth." Also consider Isaiah 66:23—"'From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,' says the LORD." Such verses are not

just about evangelism but point to the incorporation of people from all nations into Christ, the one new man. Alternatively, "The LORD is angry with all nations; his wrath is upon all their armies. He will totally destroy them…. All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; […] For the LORD has a sacrifice in Bozrah and a great slaughter in Edom" (Isaiah 34:2-6). Scriptures concerning judgment must ultimately lead us to the consummate judgment of the cross and its cosmic manifestation at the second coming. Consequently, whether a verse speaks of the nations sharing in redemption and salvation, or being destroyed in God's judgment, verses concerning the nations find their fulfillment in the death, resurrection, gospel, and return of Christ.

Ritual Reality

We have already touched on the fact that the Passover meal was a figure of Christ's death and resurrection. In 1 Corinthians, Paul expands this

interpretation to the whole feast of unleavened bread as well:

> **Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth (1 Cor. 5:7, 8; Lev. 23:4-8).**

The feast is truly kept, not by eating ritual foods at a certain time of year, but by living in Christ where we are free from the old yeast of our sinful nature.

Paul also identified the feast of firstfruits with Christ when he said, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. […] But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him" (1 Cor. 15:20-23). During firstfruits, the first of the crop to ripen was brought to the priest who presented it to the Lord as a wave offering (Lev. 23:9-14). The firstfruits represented the full harvest in several ways.

First, as a pledge that the whole harvest would ripen as had the firstfruits; second, that the full harvest was accepted and blessed in the acceptance and blessing of the firstfruits; third, the firstfruits are described as a tithe and represent the Lord's ownership of the whole crop, just as a financial tithe is a sign that all a person's wealth belongs to God (Deut. 26:12). In the same way, Christ's resurrection is a pledge of our own, his acceptance and blessing is conveyed on us, and we belong to the Father as sons having been given in Christ.

What other rituals and ceremonies did New Testament writers see fulfilled in Christ? Baptism is a ritual that predated Christianity and was practiced by the Jews. John the Baptist's ministry is evidence of this, as well as the statement in Hebrews that exhorts us to mature beyond "instructions about baptisms" (Heb. 6:2). The reality of baptism is found in Romans 6:4— "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." In 1 Corinthians, Paul also says, "For we were all

baptized by one Spirit into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13). And Peter tells us that baptism saves us through the resurrection of Christ (1 Peter 3:21). Baptism (which means "dip" or "immerse" or "plunge") speaks of our immersion in Christ who died to sin once for all but now lives to God (Rom. 6:10).

Marriage was also around long before Christianity proper, as seen from Genesis 2:23, 24:

> **The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh."**

As with sowing and reaping, marriage was established after the pattern of Christ. After quoting Genesis 2:24, Paul shows the ultimate fulfillment of marriage in Christ: "This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). John also sees believers from all times and places united with God, His glory shining from within her, and

hears this testimony: "Come I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:9). Perhaps this is why Jesus said, "At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven" (Matt. 22:30). Ultimately, there will only be one marriage—between Christ and the church. The shadow, then, will have no further use.

Again, to say that Jesus is the fulfillment of all rituals does not mean that the practice of them is abolished. While we do not keep Passover or Unleavened Bread, Christians do observe a distilled version of these feasts in the ritual meal of communion (1 Cor. 11:23-26). Jesus also taught His disciples to baptize and the New Testament shows that the early church practiced it (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38; 10:47, 48). Concerning marriage, we are warned that forbidding marriage is "taught by demons" (1 Tim. 4:1-3). Paul further upholds marriage when he says, "[E]ach man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2). Be that as it may, we should practice these rites with understanding and in the knowledge that they are

not ends in themselves, but shadows cast by Christ.

Christ…On Location

Previously, we discussed the promised land, the nations, and also the whole creation as pictures of Christ's full salvation. Mount Zion, or simply Zion, was another biblical place whereby New Testament authors gained their understanding of Christ. Zion—perhaps better known as Jerusalem—was especially identified with David. In fact, it was also called "The City of David" (2 Sam. 5:7). Because God promised David an eternal throne, Zion also became identified with the messiah. The City of David would naturally be the city of the messiah who would come from David's line. Additionally, the temple was in Zion. God's covenant, His law, the intercession of the High Priest, and the removal of sin through sacrifice all became associated with Zion. Zion was at once the city of the king and the city of God, the seat of political power and of spiritual life. Consequently, Zion came to represent the fulfillment of all God's people

hoped for: one day, sin would be removed, and God would be joined to His people in the eternal kingdom of His messiah.

Every facet of meaning associated with Zion is captured when John writes, "Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads" (Rev. 14:1). Here, on Mount Zion, we have a people belonging to God, set apart by His name on their foreheads, and their King is the sacrifice that removed the stain of sin from their hearts. On Mount Zion, the throne and the altar become one and the same entity in the person of Christ.

The writer of Hebrews presents this same hope when he writes, "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God…to the church of the firstborn…to God, the judge of all men…to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (Heb. 12:22-24). Perhaps, given the fact that New Testament writers saw

Christ in places like Zion, we too are invited to discover geographical testimonies of Him.

People

As far as people typifying Christ, we have already had ample illustrations: the son born to Isaiah (Immanuel), Isaac, Jonah, Solomon, and Melchizedek. At the risk of over-doing it, let's consider one more example. In Acts, Peter made this statement: "For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people" (Deut. 18:15, 18, 19; Acts 3:22, 23). As prophet, covenant maker, and head of the nation of Israel, Moses was a figure of Christ to come.

Certainly, every person mentioned in the Bible really existed and served God (or didn't) in their own generation. But the examples examined also give us liberty to see Jesus

reflected in those whose lives are recorded in scripture.

Truth or Consequences

Having considered many examples of New Testament interpretation, the remainder of this booklet will be spent answering the following questions: Why is it important that we see Christ in the scriptures? How is the expression of our faith affected when we do not understand Christ to be the message of the Bible? What is the ultimate purpose of having our minds opened to see Jesus in the scriptures?

We will find that the subheadings in this section all end in "—ism," meaning, "belief in." Broadly speaking, the ultimate consequence of not seeing Jesus in the scriptures is belief in something besides Him or in addition to Him. Psalm 115:4-8 says:

> **But their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see…they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with**

their throats. Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.

Jesus is the image of God (Col. 1:15). Belief in some other image, as this psalm shows, means we are changed into something unlike God and present a distortion of Him to the world. We will discover presently that such distortions begin with the message we receive from the Bible and that many problems in Christianity have their roots in the fact that our minds have not been opened to see Jesus in the scriptures.

Each of the following sections contains doctrines or practices that can be found throughout the church, in various denominations or movements. These are not offered to be critical but to provide concrete examples by which concepts may be grasped more easily. As far as criticism is concerned, only one person has ever walked perfectly with God and that is Jesus Himself. The rest of us are disciples, "learners." Consequently, every person and every church falls short in some way. We are all growing in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus (2 Peter 3:18). Additionally, the examples given are by no

means exhaustive. Application can definitely be made in many more ways than is contained here. The intent of this section is not to catalog problems but to show how scriptural interpretations are embodied in the practices of individuals and churches.

Legalism

"Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4).

Legalism has been one of the most pervasive problems faced by the church. This is attested to by the fact that nearly every book of the New Testament records something about the church's struggle with it. Paul attributed legalism to the fact that Christ remained veiled when people read the scriptures (2 Cor. 3:14-16). For example, instead of understanding the cutting away of sinful flesh that God accomplished through Christ's death on the cross, legalists thought the command of circumcision was only about genital surgery required by God.

Circumcision isn't the hot-button issue it was in New Testament times, but legalism survives in other forms whenever and wherever Christ is veiled to us. If we read the scriptures with a veil over our hearts, we will see a standard that God wants us to fulfill instead of seeing Christ who fulfilled all things. Christians who advocate a literal Sabbath, for instance, believe that God's law is only fulfilled if we assemble on Saturdays. They are blind to Christ, God's Sabbath, and to the complete salvation in Him God calls us to rest in by faith.

Most would agree that we are not required to keep the law of Moses. Yet the command to disciple all nations is uttered frequently, and many believers confess a sense that they are falling short of fulfilling it. It is also common to hear that personal holiness is, in some measure, required if God is to anoint us and do miracles among us. While this makes a certain amount of sense, it is incumbent on us to answer Paul's question to the Galatians: "Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard?"—which was the message about Christ

crucified (Gal. 3:1-5). What is more, the church at Corinth flourished in the operation of spiritual gifts and in the miraculous, yet Paul had to discipline them heavily for division, worldliness, and sexual immorality (a man who slept with his step-mother!)(1 Cor. 1:11, 3:1, 5:1). Where does this leave our assumed connection between holiness and the move of the Spirit?

Legalism also thrives under the auspices of conscience. It is not uncommon to hear that we need to obey our consciences, and some believers go so far as to identify conscience with the voice of the Holy Spirit. But Paul makes it clear that conscience is an inner law—"their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" (Rom. 2:15). Certainly, conscience plays an important role as we walk with God, but its role doesn't consist in helping us do the right thing. Like the law of Moses, conscience can be a school master that leads us to living by faith in Christ (Gal. 3:24). But if it fails that purpose and becomes an end in itself we will find ourselves acting as enemies of God for conscience's sake (John 16:2).

More examples could be given but the bottom line is this: If we do not find Christ in the

scriptures, we will find criteria for obedience. Out of our sincere desire to please the Lord, we will set about trying to do what we imagine God requires and yoke others to this burden (Acts 15:10). In contrast to this, when the crowds asked Jesus, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus replied, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:28, 29).

Traditionism

Tradition, as used in the New Testament, means, "that which is handed down." Not only does tradition play a role in Christianity but in a certain sense there would be no Christianity apart from the faithful transmission of its beliefs and lifestyle from generation to generation (1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15). Nevertheless, tradition can take on a life of its own. Instead of serving God and preserving what is of Him it begins to serve and preserve itself. Jesus identified this problem when He said to the Pharisees, "Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition" (Matt. 15:6). Peter also described tradition as an "empty way of life" and said we

had to be redeemed from it (1 Peter 1:18). In its negative aspect, tradition is a sort of entropy, the degradation of spiritual things "to an ultimate state of inert uniformity."[2] Over time, what was originally done in response to the living word of God is done because, "We've always done it this way," or "We need to do it like they did it in the past."

Traditionism is perpetuated when the scriptures are treated as a window to the past instead of to the One "who is, and who was, and who is coming" (Rev. 1:8). Without the Spirit's revelation, it is very easy to approach the Bible as a procedure manual, a guide to "correct," historic Christianity instead of to Christ. At the mention of tradition, many of our minds picture robes, funny hats, rituals, holy days, and the like. But for some of us, the attempt to establish an "authentic" New Testament church by imitating what we see in the book of Acts is a form of traditionism. Instead of seeking to pattern ourselves after the church in any period of

[2] "Entropy." *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. Merriam Webster: Springfield, MA, 1986, 416.

history, we should pray that God would conform us to the pattern of His Son.

Similarly, the move to re-establish the ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher can be a form of traditionism (Eph. 4:11). There is a tie to legalism in this movement because the thinking often is that God will not move or bring revival apart from the reinstitution of these five ministries. Certainly, God has gifted the body to help us grow up into our head and attain to "the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:15). But we need to ask ourselves: Is God free to arrange the parts of the body as He wants them, to change church government or forms of leadership when it better serves the growing up of the body into the fullness of Christ? (1 Cor. 12:18). Is the dispensing of God's power a matter of certain titles? If it is, we must ask why Paul gives a different list in 1 Corinthians 12:28—"[F]irst of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues." Here again, instead of Christ

being the content of the scriptures we are using the Bible as a guide to "correct" forms prescribed by history.

Unfortunately, when we forget that traditions and forms exist for, and testify of, Christ, we fall into a form of idolatry. We have discussed the bronze snake—called Nehushtan—through which God delivered His people in a figure of Christ to come (Num. 21:8, 9). However, God later condemned some of His people because they continued to gather around Nehushtan and burn incense to it (2 Kings 18:4). Alienated from its original purpose of depicting Jesus, Nehushtan became an idol of tradition which the people of God preserved against His wishes.

This isn't to say that anything drawn from the past is devoid of divine life and value. The rejection of all tradition is a tradition in its own right and can be just as much a hindrance in the expression of Christ. Portions of the church suffer from the tyranny of the latest thing even as other groups suffer from the tyranny of what has come before. Both of these represent a master lording over the church that is not Christ, a

master that comes to power because Jesus has not been revealed to us in the scriptures.

Ritualism

Closely related to legalism and traditionism is ritualism, the belief that the ceremonial acts we perform in church have spiritual power in themselves. Again, this results when we read the Bible with veiled hearts. Instead of seeing that Christ is the reality of every ritual, we come away from the scriptures thinking the substance of spiritual life is found in certain ceremonies. More than one tradition teaches that communion doesn't merely represent our participation in Christ's death and resurrection but literally is how we participate in His death and resurrection. Our salvation and sanctification, therefore, depend on whether or not we ingest the ritual bread and wine. Yet Hebrews 13:9 gives this counsel: "It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them." After offending most of His disciples with the "hard teaching" about eating His flesh and drinking His blood, Jesus explained, "The Spirit

gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life" (John 6:60-63). Jesus gave His flesh for the life of the world (John 6:51). The reality of Christ's sacrifice, administered to our hearts through the word and the Spirit, is the source of spiritual life, whereas ritual meals will not profit us.

There is also more than one tradition which teaches that salvation literally occurs through the ceremony of baptism. If one is not dunked under or sprinkled with physical water, then believing we have been incorporated into Christ's death and resurrection by the action of God's Spirit is not enough. Such tenants are held despite the fact that Peter says "baptism…saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience before God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21). It is the resurrection, then, and not the ritual, that cleanses our consciences and saves us from sin (Rom. 6:3-11).

Another, subtler, form of ritualism involves the trend in some churches to set up a "holy of holies" in the church building. Though called by different names (prayer rooms, holy places,

upper rooms, inner rooms) the concept is the same: a room in the church is set apart from the rest of the building as a place where the Lord is to be sought more intensely. Often, such places are marked by signs advising entrants to remove their shoes (the place you are standing is holy ground), forbidding food and drink, requiring silence, and giving other guidelines that set a higher standard of conduct than in the rest of the church. The higher standard and reverent atmosphere contribute to the assumption that those who seek the Lord there will do so with elevated passion and desire for God. Because a higher standard of purity is assumed in what goes on in prayer rooms and inner rooms, there is an expectation that God will respond more powerfully, and that those who seek Him in these places will have a deeper experience of Him. Here again we see the flawed belief that the Holy Spirit moves in proportion to holy behavior. Additionally, advocating prayer rooms and holy places shows we have not comprehended the scripture. For "the Most High does not live in houses made by men," but in His true Temple—Christ, the Living Stone, and all who are built

together in Him (Acts 7:48; Eph. 2:21, 22). In our ignorance of Jesus, we are rebuilding a relationship with God based on ritual models of reality in Christ, facsimiles whose purpose ended when Christ came (Heb. 8:5, 9:24). The only reason God dwelled in structures under the old covenant was to testify of His Son and because His preferred dwelling place—mankind—had not yet been cleansed from sin. Once Jesus accomplished this through His death and resurrection, God could dwell in a new humanity in Christ. As long as we do not walk in the reality that we have become the Holy of Holies in Christ, we are diminishing the work of the cross which removed the need for God to dwell somewhere other than in people.

In Ephesians chapter six, Paul admonishes us to put on the whole armor of God and names some of the pieces: the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:11, 14-17). Physically mimicking the act of putting on the armor of God as a spiritual exercise is sometimes preached and personally recommended by

believers. Some say this should be done every morning as soon as one rises to avoid spiritual vulnerability and protect oneself against the enemy's attacks. However, Paul's admonition is certainly an allusion to Isaiah 59:15-17:

> **The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice…so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak.**

Since the armor in these verses is something worn by the Lord, it would seem that Paul is telling us to live in Christ, where we are protected by everything God has provided in Him—truth, righteousness, salvation, and the rest. Paul begins this teaching by saying, "Finally, be strong IN the Lord and in his mighty power" (Eph. 6:10). But when Christ is not grasped in these verses, we reduce Paul's teaching to a type of Christian magic, and the armor of God to a charm of protection whose power comes, not

from faith in Christ, but from routine performance of the ritual.

Similarly, anointing persons and things very easily slips into a form of ritualism. In the Old Testament, we see the anointing of priests, the sanctuary, kings, prophets, and even sacrifices (Ex. 30:30, 40:9; 1 Sam. 16:13; Psalm 105:15; Lev. 2:1). Every one of these, of course, was fulfilled when Christ—our High Priest, God's Temple, King of kings, Prophet, and Lamb of God—was anointed with the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38). Because we were joined to Jesus through the cross and resurrection, we also came to share in His anointing (2 Cor. 1:21, 22). The result was the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4). In the New Testament, anointing with oil is only mentioned in conjunction with praying for healing. However, it isn't clear if oil was applied as a sign of the Holy Spirit, or simply as a medicinal balm to provide physical comfort for the ailing person (Mark 6:13; Luke 10:34; Jas. 5:14). Nevertheless, there is probably nothing wrong with using oil to represent the Holy Spirit when we minister. Anointing only goes wrong when we think the act of anointing has power in itself, or

that the Holy Spirit moves because we have put oil on someone rather than because of our union with the Anointed One.

The interesting thing about ritualism is that the real, spiritual work that God accomplished through Christ's death and resurrection becomes peripheral because the whole efficacy of God's work in Christ is transferred to ceremonial reenactments or representations. The line between symbol and symbolized is blurred beyond all distinction. Most of us would laugh at the idea that the passion plays performed at Christmas allow us to actually participate in the incarnation. But is the thinking so different?

Certainly, performing a ritual or using a ritual space while believing in the spiritual reality it represents is not wrong. As said previously, the Lord commanded us to observe some such commemorations. But we are never commanded to believe in them. We are only commanded to believe in God and in Christ (John 14:1).

Method-ism

Method-ism—a close cousin to legalism and ritualism—does not here refer to the denomination. Method-ism refers to finding methods in scripture instead of finding Jesus. For instance, in Acts it says, "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42). From this verse some have concluded that going door to door is God's method of sharing the gospel. If this method is not employed, we have fallen short of how God wants us to minister.

The command to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," is familiar (Matt. 28:19). Since Acts 4:12 says that Jesus is the only name "by which we must be saved," some teach that Jesus is the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, and that baptism must be in the name of Jesus. If a minister says, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit," it is not spiritually valid because the name "Jesus" wasn't invoked.

Another, more popular example of method-ism is drawn from 2 Chronicles 20:14-30. In this account, King Jehoshaphat's army is led into

battle by priests praising the Lord in song. As the priests sang and praised the Lord, the Lord caused the enemy armies to turn on each other and destroy themselves. Without question, this was an astounding move of God on behalf of His people. But again, this gets reduced to a method: Praising God is the key to a victorious spiritual walk. If we are not being led in triumph in Christ, we need to praise, and God will move on our behalf.

As we have said, the things recorded in scripture were recorded, ultimately, as witnesses and figures of Christ. Each move of God issued forth from His heart as a way of drawing us into partaking of the divine nature. Method-ism changes these living expressions of Christ into dead formulas in which God is subjected to an "if/then" relationship. "If we _____ then God will _____." Israel fell into this kind of thinking when fighting the Philistines. After being defeated, they asked themselves, "Why did the LORD bring defeat upon us today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the LORD's covenant from Shiloh, so that it may go with us and save us from the hand of our enemies" (1

Sam. 4:1-3). When they brought the ark into the camp there was great enthusiasm because the ark was seen as the key to Israel's victories in the past. They had the right method, the right formula—if they had the ark then God would defeat their enemies. Unfortunately, not only were the Israelites defeated again, the Philistines captured the ark.

Can God work in a way that is similar to the past? God can do anything He wants. Can God use scripture to inspire us to act or believe in a way that is similar to what has been done before? Absolutely. For example, God could move us to praise in a seemingly impossible situation and bring deliverance as He did for Jehoshaphat. Paul and Silas were released from prison while praising. But the important question is why they were praising. Was it because they believed it was the method for procuring deliverance or because they had been given the opportunity to suffer with Christ? (1 Peter 4:16). In the end, we should never think that what is written in the Bible is written to furnish us with spiritual methods or formulas other than walking in union with God and allowing our lives to be living

testimonials of Christ. There is no method outside of doing what we see our Father doing (John 5:19).

Scripturism

Addressing scripturism—belief in the scriptures—is a sensitive task because belief in the scriptures is generally considered a good thing. But if we really think about it, the New Testament doesn't teach us to believe in the scriptures but to believe the scriptures. What's the difference? The difference is best expressed by Jesus in this rebuttal to the Pharisees: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39, 40). Apparently, we can diligently study the Bible and never come to Jesus (2 Tim. 3:7). Believing in the scriptures occludes the relationship with Jesus we have been called to, while believing the scriptures means we receive their testimony about Him and come to Him for spiritual life. The scriptures are

the end all in the one paradigm while in the other they merely ferry us to Jesus.

What forms does scripturism take today? One possibility is the belief that the gospels, especially the "red letters" (the words of Jesus), should be regarded with greater honor than the rest of the scriptures. There is something attractive about this point of view because of its devotion to Jesus. However, it is devotion to the wrong Jesus or, rather, to an incomplete Jesus. The red letters tell us, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of Truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:12, 13). Through the Spirit of Truth, Jesus continued speaking to His disciples after His resurrection. The rest of the New Testament, then, records the words of the risen Christ through His body. We need a lot more red ink! In fact, if we want to be really consistent in our view of scripture, we have to admit that the Word was in the beginning with God, and that the Old Testament is a record of what the eternal Word spoke to us before His incarnation. Perhaps it would be simpler (not to mention easier on the eyes) just to stick to black

ink throughout the whole Bible. Beyond the absurdities of ink color, however, elevating certain portions of scripture over others obscures Christ's fullness, leaving us with a distorted view of both Him and the Bible.

Elevating certain translations of the Bible may be another type of scripturism. There are different reasons Christian groups claim that a particular translation is the "right" one. Whatever the reasons, one translation is sanctioned by the church or is considered divinely inspired whereas other translations present Christianity in a distorted way. To be sure, every translation has strengths and weaknesses; every translation loses something of the original in the transfer to English. One might even argue that some translations are of higher quality or accuracy than others. But if we believe our reception of divine truth depends on which translation we choose then we are merely committing the pharisaical error of thinking that we have eternal life in the scriptures themselves. These are the scriptures that testify, not of a certain translation, but of Jesus, and it is to Him we must come for eternal life.

Another form scripturism may take involves the promises of God. Without a doubt, the Bible is full of promises, both material and spiritual, that believers can trust in and count on. But the fullness of every promise uttered by God is found in Christ. "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor. 1:20). Unfortunately, it is possible for us to come to the scriptures and understand nothing about God except that He is an agent of benefit. In this case, divinely sanctioned self-interest eclipses Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness, and we trade Christ for blessings in much the same way Esau traded his birth-right for a bowl of soup. We might also find parallels with the tribes that took their own inheritance east of the Jordan instead of fully entering the land of promise and dwelling in the inheritance marked out for them by God (Numbers 32:1-5). The land east of the Jordan met their needs, was safe, and was given of God. They were satisfied, and it apparently didn't enter their minds to consider whether God was satisfied with what was less than His full intention for them. For His intention was not just to make their lives better than they were in Egypt

but to make them heirs of Himself (Exodus 19:4-6; Rom. 8:17). Christ, too, is not just promises, but a land of promise. To live in Him is to live and move and have our being in promise. He is the measure of what promise is, yet too often we measure promise according to what appeals to us, pleases us, or blesses us. When we believe that the scripture is merely a list of all the good things we have, God's promises become ends in themselves and blind us to God's full intention in Christ.

Literalism is probably the most common form of scripturism. This view of scripture says that the Bible has no meaning beyond the literal meaning. What the letter says is what it means. To be fair, the intent of those who first championed this view was to honor the Bible and defend it against people who taught that the Bible was completely symbolic. Proponents of the symbolic approach took their views to such extremes that they denied biblical truths such as God having created the world. However, literalism represents just another swing of the pendulum and has led many to interpret the Bible in a rather unbiblical way. For if the literal

meaning is the only acceptable meaning, then we must admit that every New Testament writer has misinterpreted the scriptures. But if God's intention is that we see Christ in the scriptures, then limiting ourselves to the literal meaning of the text will obscure the Bible's message and end in the embracing of biblical distortions.

One final example: Many hold that God dictated every word of the Bible so that the text itself is perfect, without error. Perhaps this is true. Perhaps it is false and there are mistakes in the biblical text. Then again, perhaps the question itself misses the point. Concerning the inerrancy of scripture, we need to ask ourselves what is more in line with the gospel message: 1) Knowing God depends on the scriptures being perfect, and God completely controlled the writing of the Bible so that there would be nothing human or fallible in it; 2) God entrusted a perfect message to imperfect messengers so that knowing Him would depend on grace rather than faultless communicating. Put more simply, does our faith rest on communication skills or God's power (1 Cor. 2:4, 5)? Is the Bible inerrant or is Christ, its testimony? How we answer such

questions may be an indication of whether we believe the scriptures or believe in the scriptures. In the end, as seen in Luke 24, our minds must be opened to understand the message of the Bible. Since this is the case, we cannot receive the gospel just from the Bible text, whether it is perfect or not.

Subjectivism

At the beginning of this booklet we named Christ as the plumb line of scriptural interpretation. Subjectivism refers to a situation where the subject—the one reading the scripture—finds a testimony other than Christ.

What other testimony could be mined from the Bible? At a prayer meeting once, a woman read Song of Songs 3:7—"Look! It is Solomon's carriage, escorted by sixty warriors, the noblest of Israel…." She said that the warriors were intercessors, prayer warriors, and that Solomon represented the presence of God. The message was that those involved in intercessory prayer bring in the presence of God. Certainly, this interpretation has a certain appeal and seems

spiritual. But it is not the testimony of God. For the testimony of God is not about us or our ministries. It is about His Son. While wrapped in godly sounding lingo, this interpretation was more self-centered than anything because the woman's interest in her own ministry—prayer—was lifted up and given the distinction of bringing in God's presence.

The following discussion of Abraham's journey to Canaan provides another example of subjectivism:

> **Abraham represents the mind. In fact Abraham signifies passage. Therefore, in order that the mind, which in Adam had allowed itself to run to pleasure and to bodily attractions, should turn toward the ideal form of virtue, a wise man has been proposed to us as an example to imitate. […] This mind then was in Haran, that is, in caverns, subject to the different passions. For this reason it is told, "Go from your country," that is, from your body.[3]**

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[3] *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. *Genesis 12-50*. Thomas C. Oden, gen. ed. IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2002, pg 2.

The Bible definitely encourages us to turn away from our passions and to live godly lives (Titus 2:12). But while there is truth in what this author writes, nothing in scripture indicates we should understand Abraham as representing the mind. How did the author arrive at this conclusion? It isn't entirely possible to say. His elevation of human reason and denigration of the body suggests his interpretation was influenced by Greek philosophy. Many Greek philosophers also taught that virtue was cultivated by imitating a wise man, as the writer suggests with Abraham. But no matter what shaped his interpretation, the bottom line is this: Instead of the light of Christ shining out from the story of Abraham, the author read other ideas into the text.

Applying scripture to ourselves when it should be applied to Christ is, perhaps, the most epidemic form of subjectivism. An example of this is found in Ephesians 1:4—"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight." Often, we hear this verse saying, "For he chose us *to be* in him." But it does not say that. It says, "For he chose us *in him*." Christ is God's chosen. Mishearing this

verse makes *us* God's chosen. We are chosen only by virtue of being in Jesus. When we believe into Christ, we believe into God's choosing of Him. By applying this verse to ourselves instead of Christ, we fundamentally distort what the scriptures are communicating. Misconstruing the verse in this way leads to believing in a fatalistic scheme wherein God has predetermined to save some and condemn others.

Ephesians 3:20 provides another instance where scripture is often applied to the individual instead of to Christ: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us…." This is usually understood to mean that God can do anything, and that we should not limit His ability to what we think is possible. Mark 10:27—"all things are possible with God"—certainly affirms this truth. But this isn't really what Paul is saying. Just prior to declaring that God is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, Paul prayed that we "may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Eph. 3:18). This stunning prayer calls

the church to an equally stunning vision of Christ and to the daunting task of His love being a reality among us. Yet Paul doesn't even waver in asserting that we can grasp the fullness of Christ's love because of his confidence in the power of the resurrection at work within us. Be that as it may, we usually apply this verse to our personal aspirations and/or problems: God can save more people than we expect, God can help us overcome impossible obstacles, God can get even the most hard-hearted spouse to come to church, etc. To be sure, trusting God with various life situations is valid. Misapplying this verse probably doesn't do any real harm or lead to deception. But it certainly diminishes the scope of what Paul is communicating and prevents us from obtaining a vision of Jesus beyond our personal concerns. It is not simply that we have a habit of taking this or that verse out of its scriptural context. It is that we too often read the entire scripture outside of its divinely intended context—Christ.

The real consequence of subjectivism is confusion. In Christ, we are the New Jerusalem (="foundation of peace"). Yet, within our walls

there is a cacophony of conflicting voices, the din of Babylon (="confusion"). We are overrun with messages and gospels and take it as a matter of course (2 Cor. 11:4). God the Father has no other testimony than that of His Son: "God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son" (1 John 5:9). The Holy Spirit has no other testimony: "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me" (John 15:26). We cannot claim revelation from God while bringing a different testimony.

"I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1, 2).

Pentecostism

Before too many defenses are raised by the heading of this section, terms should be defined. "Pentecostism" in this booklet does not refer to the movement of Christian groups that believe in the present operation of spiritual gifts such as

prophecy, healing, or speaking in tongues. Rather, "Pentecostism" refers to a mindset that inadvertently separates the work of the Spirit from Christ by improperly emphasizing it. Belief in Pentecost overshadows belief in Christ.

Joel 2:28-32, as quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17-21, reads,

> **In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below…. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**

This prophecy was integral in helping the early church understand the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. But Peter's explanation is what is really key: "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy

Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear" (Acts 2:32, 33). Notice that Peter didn't understand Joel's prophecy to be a prediction that God would do lots of miracles or orchestrate an unprecedented evangelistic campaign in the last days. Yet, that is all many believers understand from these verses. By contrast, Peter's interpretation centered on the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was first a sign of the salvation of the cross. Second, the Holy Spirit is the resurrection life and anointing by which Jesus was declared King, Christ, Anointed One. In that Christ's anointing flowed to the church, Pentecost was a sign that we have been raised with Christ, and share in His exaltation to God's right hand.

Unfortunately, some believers are sidetracked by passages like the one just considered. God's vision is not that a lot of signs and wonders happen, or that everyone operates in spiritual gifts. His vision is that we attain "to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). To be sure, God will use gifts and miracles just as He causes everything else to work together toward

His purpose (Rom. 8:28, 29). Christ is the context in which the Holy Spirit operates, the source and end of all the Spirit's ministry. But when we think God's goal is just for the Spirit to move, we read this into the scriptures and remain ignorant of any purpose in Christ other than having supernatural experiences. We see the Spirit's activity as the goal instead of as a tool by which God would draw us into Christ's fullness. This can only disappoint the Holy Spirit who was sent to testify of Jesus and lead us into all truth in Him (John 15:26, 16:13-15). Apart from Christ, the move of the Spirit really is just a form of intoxication, as critics of the first Pentecost said (Acts 2:15). And, while signs will follow when Christ is preached, Christ will not follow when signs are preached (Mark 16:20).

Activism

Historically, the gospel has been a great motivator of social change. Ministries have been founded to combat poverty. Abolitionists denounced the slave trade in the name of Jesus. The cause of the unborn has been taken up by the

pro-life movement. Conservative and liberal politicians alike claim God's blessing on their agendas. But while the gospel may motivate social change, social change is not the gospel. Christ is the gospel. When the eyes of our heart are not enlightened to Him, the Bible becomes a handbook for social activism instead of painting a divine portrait of Jesus. The kingdom of God is replaced by Utopia (literally, "no place").

The line between the kingdom and Utopia isn't always obvious. John asks how the love of God can be in us if we ignore the physical needs of those around us (1 John 3:17). Yet Jesus said to His disciples, "You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me" (John 12:8). Jesus set service and ministry to Himself above service and ministry to the poor.

Like all socio-politico-religious (or shall we just say "human") systems, the one in Jesus's time perpetrated injustices against its populace. Jesus confronted injustice whenever it crossed His path: He protected the woman caught in adultery, questioned discrimination against Samaritans, and exposed the way the Pharisees misused their position to gain social privilege

(John 8:1-11; Luke 10:25-37; Matt. 23:1-12). But when enduring the worst injustice in history—His own execution—Jesus did not advocate socio-political change. He said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Though Jesus undeniably changed the world, He didn't ultimately come to do that. He came to bring forth a new world through His death and resurrection (2 Cor. 5:17; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1, 4, 5).

We must know Christ through the scriptures. As we know the King of kings and walk with Him in the kingdom that is not of this world, we will help those in need, we will defend the powerless, we will challenge the rulers of this dark world. But if we do not know the King, the Bible will merely be a platform for our pet causes, an "Antichrist Cookbook," so to speak. We will be as poor and naked as those we aim to help (Rev. 3:17). We will be as oppressed as those we hope to free. We will be as devoted to the world and as worldly as the systems we try to reform. Moreover, if we feed the hungry but do not also give them the bread of life, they will hunger again (John 6:35). If we clothe them but do not also

bring them robes of righteousness, they will be cast into darkness (Gen. 3:21; Matt. 22:11-14; Rev. 19:8). We can release slaves and fight oppression but unless the Son sets a person free they remain slaves to sin (John 8:33-36). In the end, all the comfort, help, and improvement we bring to a person's social circumstances may only serve to mask the depth of their inward need for Christ.

Doctrinism

Simply defined, the word doctrine means "teaching." Atonement—the teaching that our sins are covered by the shedding of Jesus's blood—is an important doctrine or teaching of Christianity. Like scripturism, addressing doctrinism is a sensitive task because of the vital role doctrine plays in the life of the church. Beliefs must be defined for at least two reasons: 1) To preserve Christian truth; 2) What we believe about God largely determines our experience of Him.

Ultimately, doctrines are explanations or descriptions of revealed truth. It is quite possible

(and all too common) for Christians to believe in the same reality yet hold differing doctrines or explanations of it. For instance, all Christians accept the fact that Jesus's blood atoned for our sins. Yet, some describe atonement as *propitiation*, and others as *expiation*. What's the difference? Propitiation says Christ's sacrifice appeased God's anger toward sin. Expiation says Christ's sacrifice brought an end to our guilt. Why does this matter? Proponents of expiation object to the idea of an angry God requiring blood sacrifice. Those in favor of propitiation maintain that God was angry about sin. Only considering the removal of guilt is incomplete and centered on man. These explanations of atonement can be very important to people, yet scripture doesn't mandate that we believe either of them. Scripture does mandate that we believe in Christ's death and resurrection, but belief in propitiation or expiation will not save us (Rom. 10:9).

Of course, not all doctrinal disagreements are mere differences of wording or definition. Should we pray to saints as well as to God? Does God predestine us to our eternal end or do we

choose it? Which is our authority: scripture or tradition? Are we saved by faith, works, or a little of both? Sincere Christians don't merely use different lingo regarding such doctrinal questions. They give very different answers as well.

Regardless, when we fall into doctrinism, we tend to view scripture as a source of correct teachings rather than a medium of divine relationship through revelation. We are more interested in creeds than communion. Even Jesus is more of a teaching we accept than a Person whom we know through the Holy Spirit. Certainly, it is important that our beliefs about God are correct. Scripture encourages us to watch our doctrine closely (1 Tim. 4:16; 6:3, 4). But our concern for believing the right things can blind us to the One who died and rose again and prevent our growth in Him. The Pharisees and Sadducees (sects or denominations within Judaism at the time of Christ) had many doctrinal differences. These differences are nowhere stated more succinctly than in Acts 23:8—"The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels

nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all." From this verse we can see that the Pharisees' beliefs were most like our own. Their doctrine was correct whereas the Sadducees taught error. In fact, when Paul was on trial for preaching about the resurrection, some of the Pharisees argued in favor of Paul's theology (Acts 23:9). But in the end, neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees recognized Jesus. Correctness of doctrine made no difference. Only those whose eyes and hearts were opened perceived Jesus (Matt. 16:17).

Transformed into His Likeness

The Process of Transformation

What is the purpose of seeing Christ in the scriptures? Having discussed distortions that can occur when Christ is not revealed to us, we now need to answer this final question. To do so, we should turn to 2 Corinthians 3:14-18:

> **But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old**

> **covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. […] And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.**

Paul is here describing the process by which Christ is revealed in the scriptures. First, we must approach the Bible with our hearts turned toward the Lord. If we come seeking holiness, signs and wonders, Bible knowledge, traditions, prosperity, faith, or anything else, we may get those things but fail to know Jesus. The pure in heart see God (Matt. 5:8). This isn't to say that we have to come free from sin, failure, or flakiness. If we could come that way, what need would we have of transformation? Being pure in heart means that our heart is set on Christ and not on anything else (1 John 3:2, 3).

Second, when we seek Jesus, the Holy Spirit will remove the veil over our hearts that prevents us from seeing Him in the word. This is what

Luke described when he said that Jesus opened the minds of the disciples so they could understand the scriptures. They had read the laws, the prophecies, the psalms, and the history, but they had never had their eyes opened so that they could read about Christ.

Next, the word "reflect" in this passage is interesting because it can also mean "behold." The verse could just as easily read, "And we, who with unveiled faces all behold and reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." When we see the Lord by revelation, the Spirit of the Lord transforms us. But this transformation isn't something God imposes from the outside. Christ, the Lord, is in us. We are transformed by the revelation that the One we see is the One within. The One we behold is the One we reflect. Continuing in this relationship leads to a cyclic increase of the glory of Christ.

We can use photography as an analogy for this whole process. When we want to photograph something, we point the camera, the shutter is removed, the object in view reflects light into the

camera, and the film reflects the image. Likewise, when we are pointed at Christ, the veil is removed, the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ shines in our hearts, and we reflect His image (2 Cor. 4:6). This is the purpose of seeing Christ in the scriptures.

Of course, the words of the Bible have no power in themselves to bring about change. The mere letter of God's word kills (2 Cor. 3:6). Only when the Holy Spirit takes us beyond the letter do we find Christ and life (2 Cor. 3:6). Our ministry is not to motivate change by preaching the letter and threatening people with spiritual death. Our ministry is to declare the revealed Christ, and to point hearts toward Him that the Holy Spirit may remove the veil blinding them to the hope of glory within (Col. 1:27). This is the ministry Philip participated in when he shared Christ with the Ethiopian (Acts 8:27-39). Philip's eyes had been opened to the testimony of Jesus in the scriptures. Through Philip's testimony, the Holy Spirit was able to reveal Christ to the Ethiopian.

The Necessity of Transformation

Transformation is all-important. If Christ Himself is not appearing within and bringing change, then even seeing Jesus in the scriptures will fall short of what God desires. Knowledge, even knowledge of Christ, will pass away (1 Cor. 13:8). But Christ Himself will remain. What God wants is the Person. Even the most correct understanding of the Person is a counterfeit, and a counterfeit made even more grievous by the fact that it is so like the real. Cultivating the right spirit—the spirit of Jesus—is infinitely more important than having the right understanding. It is all too possible to say the right words yet fail to embody the Word. God wants each of us to be a message and not merely preach a message.

Seeing the Lord caused many people in the Bible to fall down as though dead (Isaiah 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; Dan. 10:8, 9; Acts 9:4; Rev. 1:17). They were then raised up by the Spirit of the Lord. This is the litmus test for all revelation. If seeing Jesus in the scriptures doesn't judge our flesh and bring self to an end, if it doesn't raise us again by the life of God alone, then we have not

had revelation at all. We have only had an experience. Our mind and/or emotions have been stirred but nothing spiritual has occurred. At the creation, God spoke and the Spirit of God brought light, formed the dry land, and caused life to come forth from the earth (Gen. 1:1-28). God has spoken in His Son (Heb. 1:1). The Holy Spirit must bring forth the reality of the Word in us or we will be new creations in name only (2 Cor. 5:17). God may be speaking into our lives, but Christ Himself must be formed within or we will remain formless, void, and in darkness (Gal. 4:19, 20; Gen. 1:2).

Conclusions

Having surveyed New Testament approaches to interpreting scripture, we need to ask why New Testament modes of interpretation are infrequently employed and are even disparaged in our age. Certainly, interpretations plagued by subjectivism have discredited the idea of revelation in the minds of some and caused others to feel apprehensive about it. Fundamentalism has played a role too in that it insists the Bible

may only be understood literally. We also need to examine the modern mindset we have inherited. Many of our assumptions spring from a materialistic, sense-evidence based worldview which is critical of spiritual reality and of things like prophecy or revelation. A good portion of Christians probably reject the faithless premises of such a worldview, yet uncritically accept its disbelief in a revelatory understanding of scripture. Some attempt to reconcile modern unbelief with Christian faith by embracing dispensational theology. Dispensational theology says the supernatural elements of the Bible, including revelation and direct communication between God and humans, died with the apostles. This "have your cake and eat it too" theology is another factor affecting our interpretive choices.

These, and other ways of thinking, have largely made New Testament interpretive approaches off limits. If the apostles could preach in this day and age, many of us would consider their inspired understanding of scripture to be simple-minded or heretical. This should give us pause. With all our interpretive prohibitions, could we have even received the

gospel if God chose to announce it in our age instead of in the time of Christ? Are we truly able to receive it now? If the things set forth here are at all accurate, then Christians need to face this hypocrisy: We accept the testimony of the Bible yet snub the modes of interpretation by which early Christians received that testimony. "My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?" (James 3:10, 11).

Hopefully, what is written here has shown that we have the liberty to receive revelation in the ways that New Testament authors did. It is our privilege, as disciples, to ask Jesus to explain everything to us, so that the Bible is more than an overgrown parable (Mark 4:34). As Paul prayed for the church at Ephesus, "I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better" (Eph. 1:17). Amen. Let it be.

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...to know and preach nothing but Christ

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