***THREE LEVELS OF HOW THE BIBLE TEACHES***

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When we use the Bible as a source of knowledge and make claims about what it teaches, we engage the discipline of epistemology (= the sources, nature and validity of knowledge). How do we know what we claim to know and why is our view more valid than another?

The *fact* that we have one inspired text and many uninspired interpreters is evidenced by the great variety of views that have always existed with Judaism and Christianity. While there are some core beliefs that have bound these religions to the Bible, there has never been a fully unified theology in either. Why? If we have one Bible and one God, why has this kind of unity never existed? Furthermore, some claim that the Holy Spirit is the trump card and “tells” us what Scripture means. This last claim seems odd, even arrogant, in light of the fact that several equally godly and trained scholars can come to radically different conclusions [the so-called idea of “illumination” that claims the conveyance of interpretive content is a popular level misunderstanding of the biblical concept of the “witness of the Spirit”].

Does this mean we are condemned to relativism in interpretation? No. It merely means, in a worldview kind of way, that God has chosen to give us an inspired text but not inspired interpreters. For reasons beyond our knowing, God has ordained to allow this diversity and not intervene. My personal opinion is that God has set up a situation that allows risk and tension so that we can reflect the image of God by how we deal with it.

There are, of course, many theological issues around which believers are unified. It would be impossible to assign percentages of unity and diversity and it is needless. What we do need to engage is “how do we handle our diversity?”

***Locating How the Bible Teaches***

I believe there is a paradigm that can help us reflect on how to understand the unity and diversity of interpretation that we experience. I call it “The Three Levels of How the Bible Teaches.” Before I define the model, it is helpful to review the domain of biblical and theological interpretation known as “The Theological Encyclopedia.”

Christian study is such a broad and complex task it requires numerous professional fields of study in order to pursue meaning. The following chart (credits to James Grier who developed the idea from ‘Westminster divines’ with modest revisions by Meadors) images the “encyclopedia” of the tasks involved with the study of Scripture.

Please think through the pyramid chart:

**THEOLOGICAL ENCYCLOPEDIA**

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| **MINISTRY THEOLOGY**  Doing theology in the context of ministry |

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| **APOLOGETICAL THEOLOGY**  Theology’s defense of its conceptual framework |

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| **PHILOSOPHICAL THEOLOGY**  Theology’s evaluation and interaction with creation’s struggles |

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| **SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY**  A Church or tradition brings into reflective focus its own teaching based on its derived conceptual model |

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| **HISTORICAL THEOLOGY**  A record of the church’s reflection upon its own theological development |

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| **BIBLICAL THEOLOGY**  Provides structural and conceptual model within which exegesis operates |

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| **EXEGESIS**  Competency to make reasoned judgments about biblical texts. Even prior to exegesis is textual criticism that establishes the text to be studied. |

The various disciplines that comprise the encyclopedia are to be integrated not bifurcated. The work of interpretation, however, must begin with the foundation of the triangle, the task of unpacking the meaning of the biblical text itself, and move to the top. *A reverse process reads “into” the text rather than “from” it.* If the initial work of exegesis and biblical theology is flawed, everything that follows is tainted.

From the bottom up, the first two categories order the actual speech of the Bible. Their goal is to let the Bible be the Bible on its own terms and unpack what it actually says, not what we want it to say. This is our best effort toward the “direct” teaching of Scripture. The continuing categories draw from the first two and contextualize Scripture into our own time and place to address the “implicational” and “creative construct” levels of teaching (see following discussion).

The next paradigm addresses the question, “How does the Bible teach us?” I would suggest a model of three levels by which the Bible teaches us in consort with our own interpretive skills. We will use the following diagram as a paradigm for this model.

**THREE LEVELS OF BIBLICAL TEACHING**

**IMPLIED**

**DIRECT**

**Theological Analysis High Taxonomy**

**(Higher level**

**of critical thinking)**

**CREATIVE**

**CONSTRUCT**

**Teaching**

**Intent**

**LowTaxonomy**

Christians affirm that the Bible is their ultimate source of knowledge for faith and practice. But when they look for a biblical passage that addresses the questions of their current setting they often discover that there is *not* a text that *direct*ly addresses their concerns. In order to compensate, they become ventriloquists, using the Bible as the dummy to say what they want to hear. The words of the texts seem to correlate with their question, but the contextual meaning of the passage they are forcing to serve their purposes has nothing to do with the subject queried. This is a reality we have all observed, been victimized by, and perhaps even practiced! This scenario merely illustrates that sometimes believers do not know how to read the Bible beyond a proof-text-for-my-pretext level.

Let’s unpack the meaning of this chart.

Biblical teaching is developed in at least three levels: Direct, Implied and Creative Constructs (see Chart).

1. The **DIRECT** TEACHING LEVEL relates to discerning the authorial-textual intension of a given context. This teaching might be as straightforward as a simple imperative, “Thou Shalt not…,” or as complex as an extended narrative. The supreme commands of the bible, to love God and your neighbor, seem simple until we ask, “What does that entail?” Direct teaching is not necessarily simple teaching but the starting point seems “clear”. Exegesis and biblical theology tend to work on the direct level.
2. The **IMPLIED** TEACHING LEVEL relates to concepts that are not directly stated by biblical words in a context but are teachings that the believing community recognize as the extensions of biblical statements and contexts. This level accounts for a number of crucial doctrines. For example, we hold the doctrine of trinity as essential for Christian thought, but it is an implied rather than a direct teaching. Alister McGrath observed, “The doctrine of the trinity can be regarded as the outcome of a process of sustained and critical reflection on the pattern of divine activity revealed in scripture, and continued in Christian experience. This is not to say that Scripture contains a doctrine of the trinity; rather, Scripture bears witness to a God who demands to be understood in a trinitarian manner.” (*Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, p. 294] Much of the work of the early Church Fathers and creedal development evidences this category. Many of the core concepts of the theology disciplines also reflect this category.
3. The **CREATIVE CONSTRUCT** LEVEL is the product of selecting one’s view of macro understandings of how the Bible has framed certain subjects. For example, are you premillennial or amillennial? Are you a covenant theologian or a dispensationalist or some other construct that provides a synthesis of the whole Bible? Are you an Arminian or a Calvinist…or just confused?![[1]](#footnote-1) These views of the whole Bible are large frames that help interpreters exposit the sense of the whole from its parts. *Constructs are the product of our sustained reflection upon texts, but they are seldom proven from any specific direct context.* Constructs are the product of an inductive process. The use of inductive logic brings another perspective to the nature of creative constructs. It is impossible to address this dimension with brevity, but let me put it this way. We have a Bible that is the product of revelation (deductive), but we use “inductive Bible study methods” to unpack it. In formal logic, deductively sound arguments can lead to certainty, but induction only leads to degrees of probability. Consequently, no matter how tightly argued and how convinced we are about our creative construct systems, they are still only in the realm of probability not certainty. Heated theological debates are the result of conflicting views/constructs about texts/subjects.

While creative constructs often emerge as large paradigms, they are not limited to that.  There are many legitimate CCs.  But there are bad CC readings take all kinds of shapes. For example, "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thess 5:22, KJV) has often been used to whip people into submission to a viewpoint.  They claim that this text = guilt by association.  BUT that is a bad creative construct from a surface reading of the words forced on the text.  When studied, this text means, "avoid every form/kind of evil" (which is more concrete in definition).  Avoid murder, lying, etc.  Not avoid a restaurant that serves booze!  Or a movie theater!  To force guilt by association on this text is neither direct or implied but their imagination (bad CC).

As you move from the bottom of the triangle upward, you move from “simple” direct teaching to more sophisticated theological structures, from “teaching intent” that the basic features of the text can sustain to complex lines of reason that comprise “theological analysis.” You move from a “low taxonomy” (= brute facts) to a “high taxonomy” (sophisticated systems of thought).

Every subject or text we study must be evaluated against these three levels of teaching. Where does our “claimed” text rest on the pyramid? One’s confidence and humility of conviction should also be scaled in concord with the appropriate level. One’s willingness to compromise for the sake of the community is also related to this scale. We might die for the Trinity, but not for a certain eschatological position. One’s ability not to be manipulated by others can also be controlled with this model. If someone claims a view that is only their construct, you have no obligation to conform to their view of things. The model also gives you a base line for discussion of your different views on the text. All of us have a propensity to deify our own views from time to time. American Christianity is drunk with individualism derived from our culture. With this individualism comes the assumption of self-authenticating authority. Theology, however, requires a community.

We should perceive that as we go up the pyramid we are in the process of relating an ancient text written in ancient settings to modern questions. For example, is slavery an acceptable practice as “God’s will?” Most would say no. But how do you argue your view when there is no “proof text” to support your position? Furthermore, how do you avoid the embarrassment of biblical silence in relation to certain modern issues? In essence, how the Bible is *relevant* in the progress of history when culture moves “beyond” out-dated mores is a major challenge to hermeneutics. This is a more advanced discussion than the reflections of this handout can provide (For a fuller study of this see Gary T. Meadors, editor, *Four Views on Moving from the Bible to Theology*, Zondervan, 2009).

In addition to this discussion of the interpretation of Scripture, there is also the next question, “How is Scripture applied in our modern setting?” (the issue of “application”, or “contextualization” of texts to current culture). The three levels assist us in this discussion but we need to expand on how the Bible teaches.

Richard Hays (pp. 207ff.) lays out a number of ways the Bible teaches us that can expand upon and be incorporated into our above discussion.

**FOUR different modes to appeal to Scripture for “ethical” decisions.**

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| **MODES** | **DEFINED** | **ILLUSTRATIONS** |
| RULES | **Direct** commands. Either positive or negative | Divorce (Matt 10:2-12 and parallels |
| PRINCIPLES | “General framework of moral consideration by which particular decisions for action are governed.” | LOVE command LINKED by Jesus …original command (Deut 6:4-5; Lev 19:18) linked to the “new” commandment to love your neighbor to form a model (Mark 12:28-31 and parallels) |
| PARADIGMS | Stories or accounts of characters who model exemplary or negative conduct. | Jesus uses the “Good” Samaritan to answer “Who is my Neighbor?” (Luke 10:29-37) |
| SYMBOLIC WORLD | Items that create perceptual categories through which we interpret reality … these represent the human condition and depicts the character of God | Rom 1:19-32, the “fallen” human condition (assumes results)  Matt 5:43-48, characterizes God (**read** this text to see point) |

EXCEPT for DIRECT TEACHING… we must glean IMPLICATIONS (perhaps stated) as a mode for action.

As Hays states it, “The presence of all these modes of discourse within the New Testament suggest that all of them are potentially legitimate modes for our own normative reflection. Thus, the hermeneutical task is—in part—the task of rightly correlating our ethical norms with the modes of Scripture’s speech.”

Would answering the question, “What would Jesus do?” ore “What would Paul do?” or…. Be a challenge to think beyond the direct. The PROBLEM is thinking text carefully vs. assuming you think you know what they would do!!

BECAUSE the Bible does not directly answer all our questions, we must work other ways of reading the text to perceive what God would have us do. The MODES other than direct do this (“going beyond”\* direct to theology). [[\*Hays interestingly asserts that all of this questions the dictum of *sola scriptura.* He notes, “No matter how seriously the church may take the authority of the Bible, the slogan of *sola* Scriptura is both conceptually and practically untenable, because the interpretation of Scripture can never occur in a vaccum.” The Bible is always read by interpreters with “their” lenses to make Scripture relevant.]]

Consequently, we must carefully explicate our interpretation/use of Scripture in relation to other sources of authority such as “tradition,” “reason,” and “experience” (Hays, 210). BUT pursuing these “going beyond the Scripture directly” has brought significant pluralism to the Church and even its scholars.

**EXPANDING THE CATEGORIES AND ISSUSES OF DEFINING/ADJUDICATING GOD’S WILL**

When we ask the question of knowing God’s will, we open numerous issues of “HOW” we know “WHAT” we claim to know. This is extremely important, but not simplistic. So, strap down your thinking caps and begin to mature the way you think about living God’s way.

**The Big Picture of How to Process Claims concerning God’s Will**

1. Categories to which discernment is/has been applied:
2. The Church “global” (the total Church, e.g. Early Church Councils)
3. The Church’s ethics (mostly moral categories)
4. The question of an “individual” will to be “found.” There is NO biblical pattern for finding a private, personal will of God.
5. Categories of identifying “will” in relation to God.
6. God’s Sovereign will
7. God’s Moral will
8. God’s narrative and proverbial “Patterned” will (illustrated by believers living in the biblical record))
9. Personal items of life that some claim God will provide if they seek answers.

**How The Church Has Worked Out Issues not directly addressed in Scripture**

Since the Church’s birth at Pentecost, a myriad of views have been created by believers to reflect their view of what the Church is and what it should believe. Which one is right? Which is “the” God’s will view? !

For example, which theological system is God’s will?

Calvinism?

Lutheranism?

Catholocism?

Anglicanism?

Arminianism?

Which Church is “the” Church that God validates?

Roman Catholic?

Protestant? (Which one?!)

Baptist?

Pentecostal, Church of God, etc. ?

The Vineyard Church?

Furthermore, is one choice biblically and/or morally superior to another?

History records how the Early Church worked out major issues not directly addressed in Scripture. The did ot just pray and ask God for more Revelation than they already had (The Bible). They worked through what they had and culled out the implications of Scripture and addressed foundational issues such as Trinity, the nature of Christ, etc.

DEVELOPMENT OF A PROCESS FOR MAKING JUDGMENTS

In later times, a variety of groups took the lead of the Early Church and created a process which has been adopted by many. In the Western world, the Anglican John Wesley developed what became known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. His theory took three items that had long been recognized and added a fourth that fit his view:

1. Scripture (the whole Bible)
2. Tradition (beginning with the Post-Apostolic Fathers and continuing in the development of denominations)
3. Reason (classic rational process)
4. Experience (Wesley’s addition, which has become more major than he probably intended)

Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Comprehensive Introduction to New Testament Ethics. (Harper Collins), pp. 209-11, evaluated the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.* [Label coined by Albert C. Outler, in 1964 introduction to his work, *John Wesley* (Oxford).]

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| FORMS OF AUTHORITY | DEFINITION | ILLUSTRATION |
| SCRIPTURE | ***Norma normans*** (“the norming norm”) | God’s imperatives. [which are still subject to interpretation across Scripture!] |
| TRADITION | Not general customs but refers “specifically to the Church’s time-honored practices of worship, service, and critical reflection.” History is important (cf. “Just War” theory and how it changed in modern times to fit political goals).  ***Norma normata*** (“the normed norm”) | Ancient Creeds, Orthodoxy, Dogma, Providentially key figures in Church history including key “teachers” God has given various Church expressions without violating Jesus’ exhortation of warning to those who “abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition” (Mark 7:8 and parallels) |
| REASON | Reason is an aspect of being created in *imago dei* (image of God). Yet in the human arena, reason is “cultural logic.” Our task is to bring “biblical logic” to bear on “cultural logic,” “…to coordinate the cultural logic of the Bible with the cultural logic of our own historical setting.” (210) Tension is inevitable. | Reason depends on epistemology, it is culturally condition by our setting. We must discipline ourselves to be aware of these merging cultures…God and ours…and exercise our God created skills (Hebrew *hokma*, wisdom is skillful living) in our discerning work. |
| EXPERIENCE | Not individual experience BUT refers “to the experience of the community of faith collectively” (210-211). | Private claimed revelatory experience are not norming. The witness of the Apostles is norming. Church history figures have had major norming influences, but not always in agreement!! The Apostolic Fathers, Post Apostolic Fathers, Luther, Calvin, etcetera.  “Experience is the living appropriation of the text, which becomes self-attesting as it is experienced in faith.” (211)  But in our human experience, diversity soon creates pluralism. Since God has allowed such tension in our Christian culture, it must serve his will in ways we do not now understand. |

“The right relation of Scripture to each of these other sources of authority has been a perennial problem for theology. The challenge has taken slightly different forms in different historical eras, but the church must always struggle to get the balance among these four factors right.” (211)

Many Christian groups/denominations have adapted the Quadrilateral as a base for adjudicating issues not directly addressed in Scripture, although many excepted the “Experience” category or defined it according to their own understandings.

But even after all of this analysis, we end up with diversity that reads the same Bible differently!! This FACT is a major reality that cries for us to incorporate into our worldview and values structures.

If this diversity exists in God’s will

And If we are not able to really affirm “who is right”

Then it must be God’s will to put us into this matrix!

But then someone will claim that hermeneutics is a moral issue and they have the moral high ground and are therefore right in their judgments! I don’t think so.

And these are not all of the challenges. What about

* The issue of causality? (does God cause drunks to run over children?)
* The issue of how the Fall has distorted God’s will.
* John 9, the man born blind and the struggle everyone had with it!

The only answer I can see is that it is God’s will that we struggle with this diversity because we are created in his image and we glorify him by our struggle.

1. Many individuals feel overwhelmed when they try to study these large paradigms of interpretation and often feel that real understanding will never happen. So some turn away from the hard work of the text. However, this should be an expected perception *because* one never understands any part of a paradigm until they understand the whole paradigm (e.g. the book of Revelation). Understanding the whole requires more reading, thinking and plain old hard work than most Christians are willing to do. I do not think that any person can grasp large paradigms with understanding and conviction—be it the eschatological issues or the bible on divorce and remarriage, or whatever—without working through a couple thousand pages of reading and studying on the topic. This, obviously, is the task of leadership not the laity. The Bible implies that this is why God ordained leaders in the church. My life verse is 2 Peter 3:16. In this text Peter refers to Paul saying, “… His [Paul’s] letters contain some things that are hard to understand….”. If the apostle Peter had a problem understanding the Bible, who are we to think we should not struggle with texts?! [↑](#footnote-ref-1)