

When Doctrine Divides

Doctrinal Fidelity and Christian Unity



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Resurrection Church
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Purpose

As Christians, we want to be biblical—we want to root our beliefs and practice in the Bible. Yet, Christians interpret the Bible in different ways and, as a result, find themselves in disagreement on matters of doctrine and conscience. In this class, we will consider how to navigate these important matters while avoiding the twin errors of doctrinal sectarianism and doctrinal minimalism.

Course Schedule

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Lesson 1 | Why We Divide Over Doctrine¹

*Oh let me fall as grain to the good earth
And die away from all dry separation,
Die to my sole self, and find new birth
Within that very death, a dark fruition
Deep in this crowded underground, to learn
The earthy otherness of every other,
To know that nothing is achieved alone
But only where these other fallen gather.*

“A Grain of Wheat”
Malcolm Guite

Introduction: Divide and Conquer

Western Christians have long recognized that we live in a post-Christian age, not primarily in terms of morality but the conditions for belief in the Christian God. The publication of Charles Taylor’s monumental work on the subject, *A Secular Age*, marked the complex development of secularization that led to the present post-Christian secular age.² In the wake of this complex development stands, undeniably, the reality that society at large is increasingly hostile toward Christianity.³ Despite this

¹ The foundational sources for this Bible Class are Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die on: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020); Rhyne R. Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God: An Evangelical Approach to Theological Diversity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020); Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, eds. *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020).

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-24. Taylor’s work is massive and sometimes difficult to follow. For a good companion works, see James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014) and Collin Hanson, ed. *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading Charles Taylor* (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017).

³ Sometimes antagonism toward Christianity represents rejection of the gospel and the core tenants of the Christian faith. At other times, however, non-Christians have recognized instances when the Church failed to live up to her own beliefs and, for that reason, question the entire enterprise. This kind of rejection is *not* secularism, but an instinctual reaction that comes from an unconscious acceptance of truly Christian values. Reactions against Christians for non-Christian beliefs and ethics shouldn’t be considered antagonism toward true Christianity but to a de-formed Christianity.

swelling animosity, Christians appear to be increasingly divided over doctrinal, conscience, and prudential matters.⁴ Rhyne Putnam observes, “Even as society becomes increasingly antagonistic toward traditional Christian beliefs and practices, many followers of Jesus remain gridlocked over doctrinal matters that separate them. Though we live in what is becoming a post-Christian culture, some segments of the church have never been more theologically engaged—or divided.”⁵

Why does division flourish among Christians while they are pushed into greater cultural and societal isolation? In the cramped corners of social marginalization, Christians may instinctively turn on each other out of frustration and self-protection. Yet, whether in the majority or not, Christians have a knack for doctrinal division. Consider the example of Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli.

In October 1529, the German Reformer Martin Luther and the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli met at Marburg Castle to debate face-to-face under the directive of Philip of Hesse. Zwingli and Luther had already exchanged a series of writings debating the meaning of the Lord’s Supper in which Luther essentially argued for reforming Roman Catholic sacramentalism, while Zwingli wanted to abandon it altogether. In the end, they did not resolve their differences. Although both men appealed to the

Intriguingly, many who reject formal Christianity point to the inconsistencies and hypocrisy within the church that are only perceptible through the unconscious appropriation of Christian teaching and values (cf. Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019). George Lindbeck gives the example of a crusader beheading a Muslim while shouting “Christ is Lord” as an example of this de-formed Christianity. Resistance to Christian crusades is not anti-Christian—the crusade is anti-Christian even as it is perpetuated by the Church. See George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 64. For an evangelical evaluation of Lindbeck’s doctrinal schema, see Rhyne R. Putnam, *The Method of Christian Theology: A Basic Introduction* (Nashville, B&H Academic, 2021), 30-34.

⁴ Sadly, Christians who hold the same doctrines and practices are often divided over issues that have nothing to do with the Church or the mission of Christ, even to the point of going to war against one another to champion some non-Christian endeavor. Elizabeth Newman draws attention to secular influences on the church and their consequences: “Under the influence of [non-Christian, modern ideologies], Christians have been trained to be willing to kill other members of Christ’s own body in the name of their country, or in the name of democracy or freedom.” Elizabeth Newman, “The Lord’s Supper: Might Baptists Accept a Theory of Real Presence?” in *Baptist Sacramentalism, Studies in Baptist History and Thought*, vol. 5 (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 212 fn. 3.

⁵ Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides*, 23.

Scriptures as the source of their theological conclusions and even though they practiced the Lord's Supper in virtually the same way, they could not agree on the meaning of the Lord's Supper. At the end of the debate they came to an agreement on fourteen of fifteen points of doctrine, but Luther would not acknowledge Zwingli as his Christian brother—and neither appreciated the 'Radical Reformers' like the Anabaptists.

These Reformers were not divided by their *practice* but by their *doctrine* of the Lord's Supper. Fundamentally, they read the same Bible, but they read it differently. They agreed about the nature of Scripture and its authority but interpreted it differently. As a result, they were deeply divided—even to the point that they regarded one another as heretics rather than fellow Christians.⁶

Three Influencing Factors

In this class, we will consider how to navigate disagreements and when division may be necessary, but in this lesson, we will focus on why Christians who share a reverence for the Bible end up dividing over doctrinal and conscience matters. It would be premature to identify *how* Christians should navigate disagreement and *whether* they should divide before determining *why* Christians disagree in the first place.

The factors that contribute to unnecessary doctrinal divisions are legion. Human limitation, sinfulness, faulty communication—the list continues. Precisely identifying every possible influence is impossible, so we will limit our examination of why Christians disagree to three categories: 1) misconceptions about the nature and authority of Scripture, 2) misconceptions about ourselves as interpreters of Scripture, and 3) overstatements about the nature and depth of disagreements. Each of these categories significantly contributes to unnecessary divisions among Christians.

Nothing Is Achieved Alone

There are times when Christians should divide over doctrinal disagreements. The suggestion that Christians should never divide over doctrine is naïve and unsustainable from the start. As much as we might want to say, "Let's stop dividing and start loving one another as Jesus did." But you can't get around issues like the definition of love, the doctrines

⁶ Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides*, 19-22.

concerning who Jesus is, and what he actually did.⁷ When we articulate who Jesus is we are making a doctrinal statement (*Christology*)—unity in Christ requires doctrinal expression. But the full measure of ecclesial unity is eschatological—it will be brought about by King Jesus. Until then, doctrinal division is frequently unavoidable.

On the other hand, Christians sometimes divide over doctrines unnecessarily, resulting in strict sectarianism that can't hold differing ideas together and ultimately can't hold Christianity together in any recognizable sense. Whether the source of division has to do with a doctrinal position, a matter of conscience, or even American politics, Christianity at large tends to be marked by division rather than unity.⁸

Unnecessary division is lamentable. Putnam warns against the disunity and sectarianism common among Christians,

We love protecting our tribes, our labels, and the self-assuring safety that comes in numbers. Though we should be modeling civility for our deeply divided political and cultural climate, we who are the people of God have done little to set ourselves apart from the broader culture. Instead of embodying the gospel of grace, we have just been part of the problem.⁹

That unity is a cherished doctrine located within the Scriptures is beyond debate. In fact, the biblical authors make clear that Christian unity is a testament to God's powerful work in Christ (cf. John 17; Eph 2-4). Christopher Morgan and Kristen Ferguson summarize the powerful effect of Christian unity:

The apparent unlikelihood of unity in the church—because of our differences, disagreements, and division—makes unity a powerful witness to the world and evidence of our salvation in Christ. The supernatural ability to lay down our own ego, preferences, and habits

⁷ Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, 46.

⁸ For a helpful consideration of the relationship between the gospel and politics, see Patrick Schreiner, *Political Gospel: Public Witness in a Politically Crazy World* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, forthcoming Oct. 18, 2022). Of course, some might be completely unaware that they are living in a sectarian bubble. In that bubble, they may not realize how deeply divided they are from other Christians.

⁹ Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides*, 23-24.

for the sake of others continues to demonstrate that God indeed has made us one as he is one.¹⁰

They go on to argue that unity is a doctrine cherished by the Church at large, but particularly (and surprisingly!) by historic Baptist churches and especially among British Baptists. After examining Baptist confessions of faith across centuries, they note that the strongest affirmations of Christian unity are found in the oldest confessions. They observe that “a large portion of the best material on church unity in Baptist confessions is more than 300 years old, borrowed from other Christian traditions, and partially occasioned by the need to avoid persecution.”¹¹ In other words, modern (and especially American) Baptists are not as good at emphasizing the doctrine of Christian unity as their predecessors were.

This class is intended to give foundational ideas for being part of the solution instead of being part of the problem. Giving attention to this issue of unity is both Christian and distinctively (at least historically) Baptist. Again, Morgan and Ferguson are on track:

Church unity *is* vital—but not just because of the current context. The unity of the church is a core doctrine of the Christian faith. The unity of the church is an essential spiritual reality for every believer in Christ. The unity of the church is a beautiful goal in God’s eternal plan. And the unity of the church is a transformative agent in God’s mission. We are united in Christ, indeed to the whole Trinity. In Christ, we are united to each other and are now constituted as the people of God, the church. Our unity as the church grounds our common mission and obliges our cooperation. This cooperation includes churches working together, Christians working together, and, as much as is good and possible, denominations working together for kingdom purposes.¹²

¹⁰ Christopher W. Morgan and Kristen Ferguson, “Baptists, the Unity of the Church, and the Christian Tradition” in *Baptists and the Christian Tradition*, 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 24. “They also point out that modern Baptist confessions generally shift the basis of Christian unity. Older confessions grounded cooperation in a shared unity in Christ while modern confessions (like the Baptist Faith and Message of the Southern Baptist Convention) ground cooperation in a shared mission. The shift from a shared Savior to a shared mission is problematic because it grounds unity in passing concerns rather than in the enduring Christ.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25.

This class is all about tying into the beautiful doctrine of Christian unity across denominational lines and within the local churches that make up those denominations. We will lay the groundwork for navigating between the errors of doctrinal minimalism and sectarianism as we pursue a culture of unity and charitable engagement that will, Lord willing, become part of our DNA as a local church.

It is our goal to cultivate a Christian community (Resurrection Church) marked by uncommon unity under the authority of Christ and the Scriptures and the celebration of diversity in matters of doctrine and conscience while guarding against misidentifying charity as compromise and the opposite error of disguising compromise as charity. Our aim is to *keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace* as we embrace our one calling to *one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all* (Eph. 4:3-5).

The Clarity and Authority of the Bible

Most divisions connect to attitudes toward Scripture. When doctrinal conclusions ignore Scripture altogether, or when the authority of Scripture is denied, Christians who cherish the Scriptures and seek to submit to its authority will almost always (rightly) choose to divide. However, where two people disagree about doctrine and matters of conscience or Christian living but agree about biblical authority, division is usually not necessary (or is limited to certain areas of cooperation and fellowship). Still, even when two people affirm the Bible's central place of authority for the Church and Christian living, they may come to disagreements. How is it that two God-loving, Christ-obeying, Spirit-filled Christians can disagree about the interpretation and application of the same text of Scripture? Don't we believe that Scripture is clear and that the Holy Spirit illumines believers who are attempting to read the Bible? Why would we need anything other than the Holy Spirit and the Bible if we believe in *sola Scriptura*?

The main goal of this section is to shed some light on the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture, the nature of the Bible, and the reformational principle of *Sola Scriptura*. More basically, the goal of this section is to help us come to terms with the complexity of theological formulation. The more aware we are of the challenges we face in interpreting the Bible and deriving doctrine from it, the humbler and more charitable we should be when drawing our own conclusions and when disagreeing with others.

The Clarity of Scripture

Protestant Christians believe in the doctrine of the clarity (or perspicuity) of Scripture. Some might conclude that the doctrine of Scripture's clarity means that every Christian should be able to read the Bible and immediately understand what it means.¹³ But if Scripture is clear, then why don't Christians all agree on what it means?

The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture originated in response to the Roman Catholic Church's emphasis on the need for a magisterium to interpret the Scriptures for untrained laypeople. Untrained laypeople were unable to deal with the complicated Scriptures for lack of education or other reasons. So, to avoid faulty interpretation, the magisterium held authority for interpretation. More than that, Roman Catholics elevated the authority of the magisterium to be equal to that of Scripture.¹⁴ Yet, as the Reformers saw so clearly, the magisterium was comprised of imperfect humans who could also produce faulty interpretations of Scripture. Worse, this center of interpretive authority had the capacity to intentionally distort the Scriptures for their own benefit.¹⁵ The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture suggests that laypeople can read the Bible and the proclamation of *sola Scriptura* (discussed below) addresses the issue of an authoritative interpretive body (i.e., the magisterium).

¹³ It is this kind of thinking that can lead to charges of unfaithfulness to Christ when disagreements arise. When the supposed meaning of a text seems so plain to one person it is hard to explain why another person can't see it—unless they are not a faithful Christian. This kind of charge is arrogant and, most likely, misplaced.

¹⁴ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., declares, "Sacred Tradition [the Church's voice] and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal" (§80). This notion of the dialogical nature between Scripture and Tradition is not off-base. However, the problem comes when the two are equated: "Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence" (§82). What is more, while the magisterium is "not superior to the Word of God, but its servant" (§86) the notion of an authoritative interpretive body (i.e., the magisterium) is problematic because it gives one errant and fallible interpretive body authority. "The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ" (§85).

¹⁵ Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 120-141.

Recovery of the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture was necessary to again recognize the ability of the common Christian to read and interpret the Bible. But this doctrine does not teach that Scripture is *easy* to interpret or that every portion of Scripture is equally clear. In the words of St. Peter, who wrote some pretty challenging texts himself, *our dear brother Paul has written to you according to the wisdom given to him. He speaks about these things in all his letters. There are some things hard to understand in them* (2 Pt. 3:16).

The classical Protestant confessions of faith affirming the clarity of Scripture recognize that “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all.”¹⁶ As Michael Bird concludes, “Yes, while Protestants don’t like having to rely on a professor or pope to tell them what to believe, and they generally affirm the clarity of Scripture, they also know that clarity is not evenly distributed across the Bible.”¹⁷ Putnam asserts, “The general clarity of the subject matter of Scripture does not guarantee a perfect, automatic understanding of every difficulty in the biblical text.”¹⁸

What does the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture mean if the meaning of Scripture isn’t immediately clear? It means that “The main subject matter of Scripture is so clear and so accessible that any interpreter who brings due diligence to the duty of interpreting the text can make sense of its meaning.”¹⁹ It teaches that “those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, then not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”²⁰

In other words, the Bible is sufficiently clear that *in a due use of the ordinary means*—through attending to the hard work of careful reading and interpretation—that anyone may gain a sufficient understanding of God’s redemptive work in the world through Jesus Christ by his Spirit. Notice, though, that this knowledge doesn’t happen magically—it happens through *due diligence to the duty of interpreting the text*. Scripture’s clarity does not mean that “simply pronouncing the words magically yields

¹⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith (1649); London Baptist Confession (1689).

¹⁷ Michael F. Bird, *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew about the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2021), 113.

¹⁸ Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides*, 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁰ Westminster Confession of Faith (1649); London Baptist Confession (1689).

understanding.”²¹ As Grant Osborne notes, “By the very fact that scholars differ so greatly when interpreting the same passage, we know that God does not miraculously reveal the meaning of passages whenever they are read.”²²

Church historian Gregg Allison gives a well-rounded articulation of the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture:

Perspicuity [= clarity] is a property of Scripture as a whole and of each portion of Scripture whereby it is comprehensible to all believers who possess the normal acquired ability to understand oral communication and/or written discourse, regardless of their gender, age, education, language, or cultural background. However, the level of people’s comprehension of perspicuous Scripture is appropriate to and usually varies proportionately with various factors, including, but not limited to, spiritual maturity. In addition, the doctrine of perspicuity is always affirmed in the context of a believing community, a context which assumes the assistance of others in attaining a more precise understanding of Scripture, and perspicuity requires dependence on the Holy Spirit for Scripture to be grasped and calls for a responsive obedience to what is understood. Moreover, perspicuity includes the comprehensibility of the way of salvation to unbelievers who are aided by the Holy Spirit, and it does

²¹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 113. Some theologians have contributed to misunderstandings about Scripture’s clarity by adopting underdeveloped theories of language. For example, Rolland McCune (Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary) suggests that Scripture is clear because “Language speaks with ‘one voice.’ That is to say, a given word can only mean one thing at a time; it can have but one signification in any given instance.” This kind of thinking fails to account for the challenges of translation and word meaning. What is more, it limits language to semantic/descriptive function, denying its pragmatic/action function. Linguistics is a complicated and challenging field, but necessary for biblical interpretation. Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: Volume 1* (Detroit: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008). See Douglas Mangum and Josh Westbury, eds. *Linguistics and Biblical Exegesis*, Lexham Methods Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017); Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

²² Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 24.

not exclude some type of cognition of Scripture in general by unbelievers.²³

Christians will disagree about what the Bible teaches because it requires interpretation, and not every Christian is equally up to the task. What is more, no Christian is up to the task of individual biblical interpretation. Community is required—and the more fractured and in-grown the interpretive community, the more de-formed the biblical interpretation and its resulting theological formulation.

Finally, interpreting the Bible is hard work! Although the Bible is a supernatural book, it is not a magical book. John Piper reminds us that the Bible requires *more* effort in reading than most books, not less.²⁴ Christians must develop the skills and intuitions necessary for biblical interpretation.²⁵ While the Bible can be said to be clear and understandable, it is not necessarily *easily* understandable.²⁶

The Nature of the Bible

One complicating factor to biblical interpretation is frequent confusion about the nature of the Bible. Sometimes, in the pursuit of doctrinal precision, the Bible is treated as if it straightforwardly lays out every doctrine and all Christians need to do is find the right verse to arrive at the right doctrine. We have already seen that while the Bible can be said to be clear, its meaning is not self-evident or easy to apprehend.

Another challenge is the Bible's method of teaching. The Bible is not a systematic theology but a stretching narrative of God's redemptive action

²³ Gregg R. Allison, "The Protestant Doctrine of the Perspicuity of Scripture: A Reformulation on the Basis of Biblical Teaching," diss. PhD. (Deerfield, IL: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1995), 516-517.

²⁴ John Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 33. Piper also stresses the importance of communal reading: "God intends that a reader of his word understand and enjoy it with the help of others.... Another way to say it is that God reveals more of himself through his word when it is read in community than he does when it is read in isolation" (15).

²⁵ We can be thankful for the breadth of helpful guides to reading the Bible. Two especially helpful books are Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) and Richard Alan Fuhr Jr. and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Inductive Bible Study: Observation, Interpretation, and Application through the Lenses of History, Literature, and Theology* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016).

²⁶ Allison, *Historical Theology*, 140.

in the world articulated in a variety of genres by authors with distinct voices but, nonetheless, contributing to a unified whole. What is more, when it comes to matters of conscience and daily living, the Bible is not a trans-cultural, trans-temporal instruction manual. Every part of the Bible is culturally located and literarily constructed, making each engagement with it a cross-cultural literary experience.²⁷

Unfortunately, the nature of the Bible is often misunderstood, contributing to frustration among Christians when they disagree about what the Bible teaches:

For some people, it seems to function at the level of car maintenance or garden tips, or even first-aid: it's a book to turn to when you need to know about a particular issue or problem. ('What does the Bible teach about x, y, or z?') For some, it's like a dictionary: a list of all the things you're supposed to know and believe about the Christian faith, or an atlas, helping you find your way around the world without getting lost. This is what some people mean when they speak of the Bible as being the ultimate 'authority,' and so they study it as you might study a dictionary or atlas, or even a car manual.²⁸

Certainly, there are instructions for daily living, yet the Bible is much more than that. Furthermore, the Bible doesn't directly address most of the questions that we have about daily living simply because our living situations are thousands of miles and years different than the situations of the biblical authors. Christians need to read the Bible on its own terms, not on our own terms. For that reason, Christians have to develop interpretive skills and intuitions (as noted above), but they also have to become conscious of the methods that they are employing for constructing their theology. Every Christian has a method for interpreting the Bible and formulating theology—even if they do so unconsciously and incoherently.²⁹

²⁷ Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 263-264.

²⁸ N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 39.

²⁹ For a brief introduction to theological method, see Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 75-93. For a full, but basic, introduction to theological method, see Putnam, *The Method of Christian Theology: A Basic Introduction*. For advanced proposals, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*

Sola Scriptura

The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone) is easily misunderstood as meaning that 1) Scripture alone is authoritative and required for the formation of doctrine and for directing Christian living and 2) that the interpretation of Scripture should happen alone, in isolation from other Christians (living and dead).

It is right for us to ask what the Bible says about any particular subject, but often, we will find that there are no verses of Scripture that address a particular issue. Even the most conservative theologians admit that more than Scripture is needed for the formation of theology (doctrinal matters) and the direction of daily living (conscience matters). In general, evangelicals agree that Scripture, T/tradition, nature, experience, and culture all have a role to play—though precise agreement on the role of each source for theological formulation is elusive.³⁰ Although Scripture is our *final* and *supreme* authority and the judge by which we test all doctrine, it is not our only authority.

One point to stress regarding the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is that, quite often, those who proclaim the doctrine most loudly have convinced themselves that they are both interpreting the Bible properly and that they are interpreting the Bible objectively with no outside influences on them. But people are not blank slates—our thinking and reading practices are all unconsciously shaped by our culture, our place in the stream of philosophical thought, our experiences and emotions, and the tradition we were raised in. When this false sense of objectivity combines with misunderstandings about the clarity and nature of Scripture, the result is not only poor theology but also the inability to attribute disagreements about Scripture to anything but unfaithfulness to Christ resulting in deeply felt division.³¹

(Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005) and N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 1-144.

³⁰ Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 51-74.

³¹ This problem is especially evident in debate among Christians from different denominations. For example, some Baptists might accuse Lutherans or Anglicans who hold to baptismal regeneration of adopting works-based salvation and of rejection the central teaching of the Reformation that justification is by faith alone. Yet, Baptist thinking about the doctrine of justification has been shaped in large part by Martin Luther, who himself believed in baptismal regeneration. There may be good reasons for rejecting the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, but it won't be because that doctrine is in conflict with justification by faith.

Another point to stress is that while Scripture alone is the *final* and *supreme* authority, we should not read Scripture alone—either in terms of personal isolation or apart from the reading and teaching of the church across place and time. Vanhoozer explains,

Neither Luther nor Calvin advocated traditionless interpretation. It is important not to confuse *sola* with ‘solo’ *Scriptura*. The problem with thinking that individuals interpret the Bible alone—that is, by and for themselves, in isolation from the church and tradition—is not only the lack of checks and balances on their readings, but the inevitable ensuing neglect of the gifts the Spirit has provided. In particular, ‘solo’ *Scriptura* denies the importance of reading in communion with the saints.³²

He concludes,

In sum: *Sola Scriptura* is not a blank check individuals can cash in to fund their own idiosyncratic interpretations of the Bible, but a call to attend to the broader pattern of Protestant authority and to listen for the Spirit speaking in the history of the church’s interpretation of Scripture.³³

At a basic level, this means that we should pursue reading and interpreting the Bible with other Christians in our local church communities. We should never devalue “God-and-I Time,” but we also should not overly value reading the Bible individually at the expense of reading the Bible communally. More than that, we must always guard against confusing the authority of Scripture by making our individual interpretations authoritative.

What’s more, fellow-church members should feel secure sharing their readings of Scriptures, doctrinal positions, and conclusions about matters of conscience with one another and with their pastors for the sake of fruitful conversation. But if there is always pressure for people to conform to one another with precision and when disagreements on these matters are responded to without charity or attempts at understanding, those conversations become really difficult. In these settings, churches create a culture of apparent unity—but the unity is only skin deep because no one

³² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 176.

³³ *Ibid.*, 183.

has the freedom to think out loud while they are working through doctrinal development or to arrive at non-conformist position without fear of relational damage. In the end, everyone involved is deprived of meditating on the Scripture and deepening in the faith, not to mention the strengthening of relationships through thoughtful conversation.

At a larger level, this means that we should draw on the interpretive insights of other churches, traditions, and denominations rather than prizing one particular denominational tradition. I like the way that Vanhoozer puts it:

Denominations are like houses: they are places where disciples can be sheltered and nurtured. There's nothing wrong with living in a house (it beats homelessness), as long as one practices hospitality to strangers and neighborliness to those who live next door.... The point is that we should train disciples not only in our family traditions, but also to be good neighbors. Please note that each house (each denomination, each local church) is charged with representing *the whole neighborhood*. The local church's first responsibility is to be a royal priesthood that represents Christ, not a particular denomination.³⁴

One way that we can be a good neighbor, representing the whole neighborhood, is by identifying who we are in terms of our shared possession by Christ rather than in terms of our distinction from other Protestant traditions. I like that our name is Resurrection Church; embedded in our name is the focal point of our Christian hope and immediate common ground with every orthodox Christian. Instead of being the neighbor who tries to point out what is wrong with everyone else in the neighborhood, we should be the neighbor that learns to appreciate the families on our block—strengths, weaknesses, quirksiness, and all. Nor should we be so blind to think that we don't have any weaknesses or quirks.

To press the analogy further, when we engage with our neighbors and find that our house needs some repair, we shouldn't neglect to repair it. There's no virtue in refusing to clean our yard or paint our house in order to remain distinct from the other neighbors.

Vanhoozer then gives a warning to local churches and to individuals:

³⁴ Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 185.

Just as individual heretics are those who choose to go their own way, so too churches need to guard against the temptation of thinking that only their interpretation or way of doing discipleship is biblically authorized. The priesthood of the believer is not a license for epistemic egoism as much as a mandate for epistemic conscientiousness, that is, for acknowledging that other Christian believers in other denominations have the same natural desire for truth and the same general powers and capacities that we have in ours. Each church tradition has its blind spots, cultural, social, and sometimes doctrinal. In this sense, then, there is no such thing as an 'independent' Baptist church. To be a disciple is to follow the Christ of the Scriptures with others who are doing the same. The Reformation did not sanction interpretive individualism, but, on the contrary, insisted on keeping *sola Scriptura* and the royal priesthood, canonicity and catholicity together.... I submit that this process of conversing together and corporate submission to the authoritative word of God is Protestant Christianity at its best.³⁵

In summary, the doctrines of the clarity of Scripture and the authority of Scripture (*sola Scriptura*) require reading and interpreting the Bible together as a local church community situated within the larger Christian tradition. If doctrinal disagreements are permitted pride of place, the Christian responsibility for communal reading will be hampered. When the voices of the Church (past and present) are muted, biblical interpretation becomes stunted, resulting in languishing doctrine and feeble Christian practices. Communal reading requires the maintenance of fellowship and unity even as denominationally distinct doctrines are maintained.

We take seriously the pastoral "obligation to help their local churches read in communion with the saints who are in other local churches, in other countries, and in other times" because we believe that "a community of disciples discerns the whole counsel of God and thus speaks the whole truth only in the context of the council of the whole church."³⁶ We need to draw on the whole Church to become hearers and doers of the whole Bible.

³⁵ Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 186-187.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 188. He concludes, "In my dreams, I imagine denominational differences contribute not to deeper dissension but to dialogues that produce a richer, deeper, *dialogical* unity." Reading in community across the denominational scene is not intended to cultivate simple debate for the purpose of entrenching views, but to deepen our apprehension of the Scriptures and to cultivate unity through the dialogue. It is probably also worth noting that cross-denominational dialogue sometimes results in

The Illumination of the Spirit³⁷

A final word related to the interpretation of Scripture is needed. We've already seen that the Bible should be received as communication, divine and human, requiring all of the disciplines (biblical studies, linguistics, philosophy, etc.) needed for understanding how communication works. Christians should utilize the various tools for interpretation, but they should not do so in isolation from others. Nor do they do so apart from the illumination of the Holy Spirit. But what does it mean for the Holy Spirit to illuminate our readings of the Bible?

As you might expect, theologians disagree about what the doctrine of the illumination of the Spirit actually entails. Martin Luther equates the Spirit's illumination with the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture, while John Calvin

Christians leaving one denomination for another. There are times when someone should depart from their inherited denominational identity—sometimes you need to move into a different house. However, more often, Christians should work to strengthen their denomination through dialogue with others—even if that strengthening is limited to their friend group or to their local church. I appreciate the perspective of Steven R. Harmon who points out that denominational transfers are often a transfer in name only. The person leaving one denomination for another still remains traditioned by the first denomination. A Baptist who becomes an Anglican is traditioned as a Baptist and cannot operate from the perspective of someone traditioned as an Anglican, and vice versa. Although denominational transfers may be necessary (especially for those who desire to tradition their children in a particular denomination), it may be better for Christians to go deep within their own traditions to recover the doctrines necessary to compensate for denominational weaknesses. As Harmon comments, this can happen only when Christians “commit themselves to remaining with the communions of their nurture and calling, warts and all, and with great patience work to help their churches towards something that will probably not be realized within the temporal span of any living theologian's ministry. Ecclesiology and ecumenism are inescapably eschatological: they belong to the tension between the realized and the as-yet-unrealized aspects of the reign of God in which the church participates.” Stephen R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 201-202.

³⁷ One of the best Baptist resources on this issue is Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: B&H Academic, 2020). In their volume, they give provide a rigorous examination of the biblical texts relating to the Holy Spirit, but they also engage in interdisciplinary studies. For example, On the inspiration of the Scriptures and the illumination of the Spirit, they take into consideration the insights of Speech Act Theory. They conclude, “A prayer for illumination requests the Spirit's aid both in rightly understanding the meaning of Scripture and in enacting its properly understood meaning, whether that is obedience to a command, trust in a promise, confession of sin, praising God, or the like” (322).

defines it as the Spirit's confirmation with our Spirit that the Word is true and trustworthy and that the Scripture is truth that is necessary for the Christian. Regardless of these distinctions, neither Reformer suggested that the Spirit makes understanding automatic—after all, Christians who partake in the one Spirit come to different readings of the Bible.

It is probably best to conclude that the Spirit “makes it possible for believers to receive the Word of God as truth, but this supernatural work does not ensure perfect comprehension or absorption of that word.”³⁸ Instead, the doctrine teaches that the Spirit works through interpretation and the natural cognitive processes; the Spirit does not bypass the necessary elements of reading and interpretation.³⁹ For that reason, we should be especially cautious when appealing to the illumination of the Spirit when we disagree with other Christians. We should avoid framing our interpretations with, “The Holy Spirit has shown me....”⁴⁰

The Christian as Interpreter

We can rightly speak of Scripture's clarity, authority, and even its inerrancy, but we cannot say the same of every interpretation of Scripture.⁴¹ Putnam identifies five reasons that humans make errors in interpretation.⁴²

First, we interpret with many limitations. Human reason is limited.⁴³ Humans are not infinite, so their capacities for knowledge, reasoning, and

³⁸ Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides*, 64.

³⁹ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1980), 2.

⁴⁰ Robert H. Stein begins his hermeneutics book with a funny (fictional) anecdote of a neighborhood Bible study where one individual proclaims that the Holy Spirit showed him that “the baptism of the Spirit” means that a dove-like representation of the Spirit will descend on people when they get baptized. *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 1-2.

⁴¹ Of course, as we have seen, each of these ideas can be misunderstood. In this lesson, we did not consider Scripture's inerrancy, the notion that Scripture is without error in all that it affirms. On inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy, see Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 704-725; see also Bird, *Seven Things I Wish Christians Knew About the Bible*.

⁴² Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides*, 50-56.

⁴³ Listing every limitation related to interpretation would be difficult. But our reasoning, conceptualization, and categorization is limited in part because of our physiological makeup. We can't consider every piece of data simultaneously, whether when we are adjudicating between doctrinal positions or observing a leaf. More than that, much of our cognitive operation happens unconsciously, “under the hood,” so to

remembrance are limited, along with other important interpretive virtues like curiosity and critical thinking. Sometimes we interpret in an overly cognitive way, while at other times our emotions drive our interpretations. The need for interpretation is part of our everyday existence—not just when it comes to the Bible. Our human limitations make interpretation an all-of-life activity. “Life itself is a hermeneutical venture, and it is so because of the nature of the human being as finite, as located and situated.”⁴⁴

Second, we interpret texts from our own cultural and personal perspectives, and these perspectives influence what we pay attention to, the questions that we have, and our categories of thought. The notion that a person can read a text with pure objectivity is a myth—we all read with some measure of subjectivity and, often, without realizing it. What seems patently objective to one person does not to someone else. Every interpretation takes place within a certain time, place, and culture, informed by the presuppositions attendant to those locales.

Third, we interpret the Bible from a historical, cultural, geographical, and linguistic distance. There are many humorous anecdotes about cross-cultural experiences because of the great differences (and false similarities) between cultures.

These differences influence every aspect of communication, including the meaning of words. For example, the comment “I’m mad about my flat” could mean that someone is upset that they got a flat tire (American context) or that someone is psyched about their new apartment (British context). Or, consider the way that statements phrased as questions are actually commands, like when a mom asks her teenage son if he’s done his

speak. Lakoff and Johnson suggest that “Conscious thought is the tip of an enormous iceberg. It is the rule of thumb among cognitive scientists that unconscious thought is 95 percent of all thought—and that may be a serious underestimate. Moreover, the 95 percent below the surface of conscious awareness shapes and structures all conscious thought.... All of our knowledge and beliefs are framed in terms of a conceptual system that resides mostly in the cognitive unconscious” in *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 13.

⁴⁴ James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 96. Smith makes the case that, even in the new creation, we will need to interpret as part of our existence because it is impossible to overcome this need without shedding our finiteness—without becoming gods. In fact, the attempt to overcome finiteness, to become as God, was the essence of the Fall (89-90).

homework—while she’s looking at the backpack he tossed on the floor in his rush to get to the gaming system. The “natural” way of hearing or reading language often proves itself to miss the authorial communicative intent.

Often, we unintentionally project our own cultural and philosophical context on the text of the Bible, resulting in a misreading of Scripture.⁴⁵ These differences require gaining important historical, cultural, geographic, and linguistic tools for biblical interpretation in order to make sense of the text.

Fourth, we interpret the Bible with preunderstandings of what we read. For the most part, we assume that we already know what a text means when we begin to read and interpret it because we are already familiar with the Christian faith. Yet, as many have experienced when they go deeper in the study of Scripture, initial readings often require adjustments. What might seem like a natural reading of the text often turns out to be an incorrect reading of the text. For this reason, we should operate in terms of having a provisional reading (no one is a blank slate) that is open to adjustment.

Fifth, we interpret the Bible as sinners. In addition to our natural human limitations that are part of our creaturely makeup, our sinfulness, prejudices, and selfish desires all have the potential to produce distorted interpretations of the text.

We could add other reasons that account for flawed human interpretation, but these five help us approach biblical interpretation and theological formulation with humility. Without exception, every Christian faces these challenges. Some of these challenges can be mitigated through education, communal reading, careful study, and even intentional cross-cultural

⁴⁵ This is true for post-modern readers, but it is also true for “conservative” readers of the Bible as well. Even though conservatives may rightly avoid projecting post-modern cultural and philosophical assumptions on a text, they may project cultural and philosophical assumptions from 200 years ago on the text, which is just as foreign to the Bible’s 2,000+ year distance from the modern day. Dru Johnson emphasizes the importance of adopting the philosophical categories of the biblical authors in *Biblical Philosophy: A Hebraic Approach to the Old and New Testaments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). For a popular level introduction to the culture of the Bible, see E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O’Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

experiences, but they cannot be removed altogether. For that reason, we should exercise some level of caution when asserting that we arrived at a full and accurate interpretation of Scripture. We should listen to Paul, who warned, *If anyone thinks he knows anything, he does not yet know it as he ought to know it* (1 Cor. 8:2).

The Danger of Overstating Disagreements

The Bible was not written as a systematic theology textbook, clearly outlining doctrines of the Trinity, salvation, etc. Still, Scripture's clarity ensures that the boundaries of doctrinal articulation are somewhat limited. For that reason, it is not surprising that Christians agree on far more than they might realize. At times, Christians overstate their disagreement and force unnecessary division when, if the differences are taken into perspective, their positions are not that different after all.

For example, the Bible does not have a heading called *Soteriology*, where the doctrine of salvation is precisely communicated. Instead, there are texts of Scripture that contribute to the doctrine of salvation. Because Christians interpret texts differently, there are different articulations of the doctrine of salvation. Still, the larger affirmation of what God is doing to accomplish salvation and what salvation entails are relatively similar. Kevin Vanhoozer comments, "While there are indeed a variety of interpretations, especially about how salvation happens, mere Protestant Christians agree about what happened and who did what (e.g., Father, Son, and Spirit)."⁴⁶

Consider Plummer's example regarding divorce. Christians agree that divorce is bad, but they might disagree over whether there are valid reasons for divorce or what those reasons are. Christians also agree that God forgives repentant divorced people, though they may disagree on whether repentant divorced people can serve as church leaders.⁴⁷ On the whole, there is greater agreement on this issue than disagreement,

⁴⁶ Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel*, 113.

⁴⁷ Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021), 195. Plummer's answer to the question, "Why Can't People Agree on What the Bible Means?" is instructive. He gives six answers that are similar to those offered in this lesson: 1) Non-Christians can be expected to misunderstand and distort the Bible, 2) the amount of disagreement among genuine believers is overstated, 3) God did not reveal all issues with the same clarity, 3) interpreters have varying levels of knowledge and skill, 4) interpreters have varying levels of spiritual illumination and diligence, and 5) interpreters have various biases.

especially when those disagreements are set in contrast to beliefs about divorce in society at large.

In the next lesson, we will think about which doctrines should divide us and why, but it is important to enter into that consideration with the realization that Christians often overstate the amount of disagreement and allow that overstatement to influence division and separation. As we identify points of disagreement with others in our church (and those outside of our church), we should be quick to ask whether or not we are overstating the differences. More often than not, overstatement will be at work, if for no other reason than because we are seeking to establish the distinctions of our own viewpoints. In the end, however, we should work to minimize those overstatements in the interest of avoiding unnecessary division—even if we don't come to a resolution about the real differences in view.

Initial Recommendations

In this lesson, I've tried to help us understand *why* it is that Christians end up disagreeing about biblical interpretation, doctrine, and matters of conscience. The sheer complexity of interpretation and theological formulation should instill humility in our pursuit of doctrinal fidelity. Still, interpretation and disagreement are unavoidable. So how should we proceed?

1. We should seek God's guidance, help in understanding and, most importantly, help in responding appropriately to his Word. As we should do so, we should pursue the interpretive virtues of humility, sensibility, diligence, curiosity, and trust.⁴⁸
2. We should grow in our interpretive abilities through reading books about interpreting the Bible and by drawing on resources (study Bibles, commentaries, background books, etc.) to help us in our interpretive journey. Some might consider pursuing formal education

⁴⁸ Andreas J. Köstenberger with Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2021), 655-657; Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 238-239; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Excellence: The Character of God and the Pursuit of Scholarly Virtue* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011); N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010); Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010).

through online seminaries; some might consider talking about works of theology in a group; some might attend lectures or listen to podcasts. We live in an incredible time when experts can be accessed for free through a variety of media platforms and when many of those experts offer their writing and work for free. In so doing, we recognize our finiteness and our limitations.

3. We should work to be aware of valid interpretations of texts that might be different than our own. Often, we hold a position because we have never taken the time to consider other positions. Many evangelical publishers produce books with multiple contributors laying out an argument for possible viewpoints. Zondervan's Counterpoints Bible & Theology series is an especially helpful tool for familiarizing yourself with a spectrum of viewpoints.⁴⁹ As you read viewpoints that are different than your own, try to determine what about other views make them compelling and what it would take for you to change your view.
4. We should read the Bible and do theology with other Christians. Reading in community with other Christians in small group Bible studies, in books studies, in Homegroups, and in the formal teaching of the church. Read authors living and dead, local and global. Take advantage of the 2,000 years of church history during which Christians have wrestled with tough texts of Scripture. Involve others in your reading of the Bible, formulation of theology, and decisions about matters of conscience and practical living.
5. Pursue well-rounded relationships with others, including those who have different interests, backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. Get to know people and grow to genuinely care about them. Often, we tend to disagree and divide more easily with people we don't know well than with people we love and care about. Work to build deep relationships and, without working too hard, you will probably find yourself being challenged *and* encouraged as you walk the road of discipleship together.

⁴⁹ <https://zondervanacademic.com/products/category/counter-points>.