

## 18.

### The Covenantal Lens

It has long been recognized that nobody interacts with his or her world as a neutral observer. We all understand our environments from the context of prior experience.<sup>35</sup> If the only dog I had ever met had bitten me on the leg, then the next encounter with a dog would be a guarded one. I would be predisposed to have a cautious attitude toward the dog based on prior experience. The same is true of our understanding of what we read.

When we pick up our Bibles, we are coming to it predisposed to read it and understand it in certain ways. A particular brand of atheist may believe the Bible to be a collection of human myths that seek to bring hope into an otherwise hopeless world. He may read of the resurrection of Christ, just as a believer would, but his predisposition would lead him to conclude that this is not historical but mythological. He would understand this as a reflection of human yearning to provide an answer to the great problem of death. His brand of atheism is the lens by which he understands the Bible.

A Roman Catholic reads the Bible expecting passages to reinforce and confirm the teachings of the church. For instance, when a Catholic reads that Mary was the mother of Jesus and he had brothers and sisters, the church teaching on the “perpetual virginity” of Mary leads the Catholic to conclude that these brothers and sisters must not be *literally* brothers and sisters, but only close relations who are affectionately referred to as brothers and sisters. So we can see how the teachings of the church become the lens with which a Catholic understands the Scriptures.

The truth is, none of us reads the Scriptures without putting on our particular lens, which has been fashioned by prior experience and prior knowledge. Our predispositions inform the way we understand

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<sup>35</sup> See John Frame’s discussion in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, P&R, 1987, 126.

the Bible. We need to clear the air of any naive ideas that anyone can open their Bibles with absolute objectivity. Not only is this not possible, it is not even preferable. As human beings, we are necessarily conditioned to understand present encounters by the information we have received in the past.

In order to make the point I will further develop my dog illustration used above. After meeting the first dog that resulted in my being bitten, what is needed in order to correct my fear of every dog I encounter, is not to erase my thoughts of prior experiences with dogs in order that I would achieve absolute objectivity. In reality, this would not be possible. Even if I had never seen a dog before, I would still be predisposed toward this hairy four legged creature by my experience of similar animals in the past.

We are always gathering information from prior experience in order to make the best possible evaluation of new experiences. What I would need is not detached objectivity, but more information about dogs. I would need more experiences with various kinds of dogs in all kinds of situations, then I would be better at making a correct evaluation of potential danger. The lens through which I see and understand dogs becomes sharpened and more precise.

When we come to the Bible, it will not work to say we must get rid of all predispositions in order to properly understand it. We cannot tell the Catholic that they must try to read the Bible without their lens of traditional church teaching and read it objectively. Rather, what we must suggest, is that traditional church teachings that have evolved though the centuries may not be the best lens to use in seeking to understand documents written centuries before those doctrines ever existed. If the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary came into being hundreds of years after Mark wrote his Gospel, then it is not at all likely that Mark had that doctrine in mind as he wrote about Mary and Jesus Christ in his Gospel.

The same is true for modern evangelicalism. It is well documented that modern evangelicals read their Bibles through the lens of the justification by faith alone doctrine.<sup>36</sup> People are predisposed to see this doctrine in the Scriptures because they open their Bibles with

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36 In the book, *Justification by Faith Alone*, Dr. Joel Beeke makes the point that the faith alone doctrine “was the key that unlocked the Bible for Luther.” All the contributors to this book reflect this mindset as they seek to defend what they understand to be traditional reformed orthodoxy. See *Justification by Faith Alone: Affirming the Doctrine by which the Church Stands or Falls, Soli Deo Gloria*, 2003.

their lenses in place, ready to see this teaching on every page.

There is a difference here between the evangelical and the Catholic. It will not be sufficient to suggest to the evangelical that it may not be best to interpret the Scriptures by a doctrine that Martin Luther discovered in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, because the evangelical does not claim to stand on traditional church teaching, but on Scripture alone. So the evangelical believes that the lens he wears is biblically derived. For them, Martin Luther's eyes were opened to the true meaning of the Bible.

On this point, the evangelical position is far superior to the Catholic. The evangelical recognizes that God has manifested His will in a special way through the Scriptures, and it is only through the Bible that we are able to discern the wisdom and truthfulness of our traditions. The Catholic, in reality, holds church tradition in a higher place than Scripture, because the historical church teaching becomes the lens by which the Scriptures are understood. This opens the way for the Bible to be interpreted with the intention of harmonizing it with tradition, or to put it more negatively, to wrest it from the intended meaning of the original authors and make it an advocate of what the church has come to believe. Because the church teaches the perpetual virginity of Mary, Jesus' "brothers and sisters" could not be Mary's children, even though there is nothing in the biblical context that would suggest otherwise. This particular lens serves to distort rather than clarify original intent. In contrast, the evangelical seeks to fashion his lens from the proper source which is the Scriptures understood in their historical context.

Again, we can employ our dog illustration in order to show why this is most appropriate. To put it simply, if you want to understand dogs you don't study chipmunks. The lens of predisposed understanding is fashioned from the study of what you want to understand. Experiencing many different kinds of dogs in various contexts serves to sharpen my lens when encountering a dog I have never met before. I am predisposed by past encounters in order to accurately understand new ones. When I approach a dog who is wagging his tail with his tongue hanging out and head close to the ground, I know that we have a friendly dog because one that behaves like that has never bitten me.

Likewise, the Scriptures provide the lens with which we are to understand the Scriptures. This is the understanding that informed John Calvin's writing of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The *Institutes* are the fruit of Calvin's understanding of biblical teaching. His book was to be read as a lens, or an interpretational guide, by

which the average Christian was to understand the Scriptures.<sup>37</sup> However, he also taught that the Scriptures were to evaluate his *Institutes*.<sup>38</sup> For Calvin, the Bible was the tool that would sharpen his lens (the *Institutes*) in order to better understand the Scriptures. This is also the logic of the evangelical Scotch Confession of 1560. The Confession is understood to be a sum of biblical teaching and the average Christian is to read the Scriptures through the lens of the Confession. However, the writers of the Confession wisely incorporated the possibility of being corrected by the Scriptures themselves as they included this provision:

We protest that if anyone will note in this our Confession any article or sentence repugnant to God's Holy Word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity's sake, to admonish us of the same in writing; and we, upon our honor and fidelity, by God's grace, do promise him satisfaction from the mouth of God (that is, from the Holy Scriptures), or else reformation of that which he shall prove amiss.<sup>39</sup>

As in all of life, and because we are human and not divine, we will always be growing in our understanding. Because we believe the Scriptures to be the baseline of our understanding, we must always be open to the possibility of our predispositions or lenses undergoing necessary correction and adjustment. In this sense we are always being reformed according to the light God has provided in His Word.

In this book, we operate with the same commitment to the foundational authority of the Scriptures. However, while Luther considered justification by faith alone to be his *biblically derived* lens, and Calvin considered the *Institutes* to be his *biblically derived* lens for the people, we advocate that the covenant God has made with His

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37 Calvin exhorts people to read his book by writing, "I exhort all those who have reverence for the Lord's Word, to read it, and to impress it diligently upon their memory if they wish to have, first, a sum of Christian doctrine, and, secondly, a way to benefit greatly from reading the Old as well as the New Testament." *Institutes*, Vol. 1, pg. 8. Also, "For I believe I have embraced the sum of religion in its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents" (4).

38 Calvin closes his note to the reader of the *Institutes* by writing, "Above all, I must urge him to have recourse to the Scripture in order to weigh the testimonies that I have adduced from it" (8).

39 Philip Schaff, *The History of the Creeds*, Baker, 1998, 683.

people to be the only reliable lens for understanding the Scriptures. Everything can and should be understood as an aspect within the covenant. The reason for this is straight-forward. If the Old and New Testament are documents of the covenant, then it stands to reason that the covenant will provide a reliable interpretational framework for understanding the information contained therein. The biblical concept of justification needs to be understood in terms of how that term functions *within* the covenant. The meaning of the Lords' Supper needs to be understood, not in terms of the platonic philosophical concepts of substance and accident, but in terms of how the Passover meal functioned *within* the covenant. The covenant is the overarching framework.

Since the Bible is a collection of documents written within a covenantal relationship with God, it stands to reason that the covenant needs to be understood in order to understand the documents within it. Of course, it is from the Scriptures that the covenant is understood as God's authoritative communication to the world, and conversely, it is from that biblical understanding (shall we say, *informed* predisposition) that the Scriptures are understood. Scripture (the biblical covenant) interprets Scripture (all the biblical documents) and conversely, Scripture (all the biblical documents) correct and adjust our understanding of Scripture (the biblical covenant).

As I have illustrated, the best way to understand dogs is to study dogs. The study of other animals may provide helpful supplemental information, but encounters with dogs provides the understanding that will keep me safe. Likewise, while the study of other writings may offer helpful information (i.e. philosophy, church history, Hittite treaties, Josephus, 2 Maccabees), there is nothing like sitting down with God's correspondence to understand God. There is nothing like understanding the covenant God has made with man in history in order to understand what Paul meant by "the righteousness of God" in his letter to the church in Rome.

As should be evident by now, this chapter is a call for Roman Catholics and Protestants to begin reading their Bibles differently, not through the lens of church tradition, or through a particular doctrine like justification by faith alone, nor through Calvin's Institutes. God Himself has provided the interpretational framework by which we are to understand His inspired writings. My hope is that by the time the reader has reached this point in the book and has seen how God's covenant does not change in its structure and logic from Adam to Jesus, and that the documents themselves reflect this consistent logic, that this

proposal would not seem radical and outlandish, but obvious. Yes, it makes sense that to understand individual dogs, you must have experience with dogs. In order to understand how we are justified within the covenant, we must understand how that covenant functions. What this amounts to, is a call away from traditions of all kinds, which function as unquestioned authorities by which the Scriptures are distorted. It is a call to be truly reformed according to the Word of God.

Someone at this point may object, “Wait a minute, we evangelicals stand on Scripture alone just as you have said, so how can you be calling us away from tradition?” This book is an attempt to show how evangelicals are wrong to teach and believe in justification by faith alone. Far too many *assume* this doctrine to be correct and are unwilling to question it.<sup>40</sup> Far too many resort to biblically incoherent arguments, or authoritative scare tactics and theological bullying, in order to defend what they think is necessary for the church to be faithful to God.<sup>41</sup>

This doctrine has become the *assumed* guardian of evangelical orthodoxy. At the level of interpretation, it now functions as the unquestioned lens that “unlocks the Bible” in the same way that tradition does for the Catholic. This is true because of the evangelical refuses to allow Scripture to modify doctrine in the same way that the Catholic refuses Scripture to modify tradition. You can’t have two masters. The church will be a slave to God in submission to His will as revealed in the Scriptures, or the church will enslave the Scriptures to her own ideas and values. The way of humility is to *always* be willing to be instructed by the Word of God. This is the true evangelical way as reflected in those who came before us. The way of stiff-necked pride is to stand your ground and shut your ears to new encounters with the Word of God that challenges “what we have always believed.” This is the way of idolatry and death.

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40 I have had many interactions where faith alone was considered by pastors to be a “non-negotiable” of their creed. In other words, they would not even begin to entertain that they might be wrong. I have been rejected from evangelical communion on the basis of the statement “that is not what we have always believed” and by that fact that I am out of line with their confession. When attempting to discuss this crucial doctrine with my deacons in a church I was confronted with a stack of Protestant creeds as evidence for the fact that I was wrong. These encounters serve to illustrate the problem.

41 See my paper “Smoke and Mirrors: Refuting Fallacious Arguments for Justification by Faith Alone.” This is a response to the book *Justification by Faith Alone*, with contributions from John MacArthur, R.C. Sproul and John Gerstner among others. This can be found on [www.covenantofchrist.org](http://www.covenantofchrist.org).

The way of life is the way of humility. The way of humility wants to hear God and is willing to change and repent of any article of doctrine that is shown to be out of step with His Word. We must remember, God is our judge, not the Pope, nor Luther or Calvin. God's standard will not be the Second Vatican Council, or the Westminster Standards. It will be the covenant He has made with us. We will be judged according to the covenant of God.

