

Theology Matters

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Created, Loved, & Called: Looking at the Issues of Life From the Perspective of Christian Faith

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This curriculum is based on the reformed conviction that faith and practice are and ought to be related. All of our lives we are busy developing our view of the world—of what we regard as reality and truth. Often that development takes place without our conscious involvement. Because we Christians live our lives immersed in messages from a wide variety of sources, we often adopt both beliefs and practices without careful scrutiny. And, without a thorough knowledge of Scripture and careful application of it to our modern situations, we are often unaware that some of the beliefs held by Christians are not necessarily Christian beliefs.

Becoming increasingly like Christ, the goal of the Christian life, includes a matter of replacing false beliefs and understandings with true beliefs and understandings, and replacing practices that do not comport with the will of God with those that do. Becoming disciples of Jesus Christ is basically a matter of living increasingly repentant lives, of becoming increasingly obedient to Jesus.

That is why this series begins with an exploration of how we go about developing a worldview and how we can consciously begin to have our view of the world and of truth shaped by the Scriptures, so that our minds better conform to Christ and we know what obedience requires.

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Session One Believing, Seeing and Doing

An Outline of Session #1

A. What we believe to be true affects how we see things and how we respond to them.

1. Monet's painting
2. Alternate confessions of faith
Carl Sagan: "The cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be."

The Apostles' Creed: "We believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth . . ."

B. Sources of beliefs, worldviews, convictions

C. Being intentional in deciding what we believe and why

Convictions underlying this series:

1. The relationship between God and humanity is central to understanding important issues
Calvin
2. Truth is revealed to us
Truth is objective, not a matter of our experiences
Role of personal experience
Role of Scripture
Role of historic confessions
3. Our lives are an integrated whole

D. Christian faith, revealed in Holy Scripture, provides a framework for and answers to the issues of modern life.

E. Developing a worldview consistent with Scripture

1. We must be clear about our beliefs
2. We must examine our beliefs by asking, "Are they biblical?"

Introduction

What we believe to be true affects how we see the world around us, how we respond to it, and how we feel about it.

Philosopher Bertrand Russell noted, "Man is a credulous animal and must believe something,"¹ and whatever those beliefs happen to be they have significant consequences in the way we live. Author C.S. Lewis said it this way: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I can see it, but because by it I see everything else."

What we believe, whether true or false, whether Christian or not, becomes the lens through which we view, interpret, understand, and respond to life and reality. Here's an example.

Seeing—and believing—in an art museum

Take this famous painting by artist Claude Monet entitled, "Still Life with Pheasants and Plovers." It depicts four dead birds; two pheasants and two plovers, spread out on a white cloth, lying on a table. As an Impressionist, Monet was interested in the play of light and color, which can be seen here in the way he renders the birds' feathers and in the delicate texture of the tablecloth.

Now, imagine two people walk up to view Monet's work. Both enjoy and happen to like the painting a great deal, but they also happen to hold passionately to some very different beliefs and values. The first admirer is an avid hunter, and the second is a committed animal-rights activist.

Imagine what each would see as they stood, side-by-side, looking at this canvas.

Both would tell you that they love nature, but because of their very different convictions about nature, they would probably interpret the meaning of the painting differently. One might see this painting as a trophy, the record of a healthy and successful morning's hunt; the other might see it as a harsh and unfortunate reminder of man's cruelty to his fellow creatures.

Our two visitors are looking at the same painting, but they are coming to very different conclusions about its meaning. Neither needs glasses. Rather, a whole series of unspoken but deeply felt beliefs become the context in which they interpret, understand, and respond to Monet's painting. What our museum visitors believe to be true affects how they see, feel, and behave.

Two very different statements of belief

To really understand the significance and implications of different belief systems on a large scale, let's consider two very different confessions of faith. The first is the opening line from Carl Sagan's TV series and book, *Cosmos*. He states, "The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be." This belief is built on certain assumptions. It assumes that no reality beyond the material world exists. If the universe is simply made up of the material—what we perceive with our five senses—then there is no place for the existence of God.

Now compare Sagan's view of reality with one based on a very different assumption of reality. This ancient statement of belief of the Christian Church is known as the Apostles' Creed. It states, "We believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." This confession of faith affirms our conviction that the cosmos is not all there is. We are declaring the unseen reality of a Creator God who is separate and distinct from his creation, a God who is personal, who has entered into a relationship with us and invited us to call him Father. This faith, this system of belief, is essential to our view of life as Christians and to how we know, interpret and respond to the world.

“Christian belief,” Anglican theologian John Stott says, “supplies the true perspective from which to view...the vision of God working out his purpose. It gives us a framework in which to fit everything, a way of integrating our understanding, the possibility of thinking straight, even about the most complex issues.”²

Not all of our beliefs are held consciously, of course. Daily we are bombarded with a variety of beliefs and belief systems not only through television, newspapers and magazines, but also through school, committee meetings, community associations, church groups, and conversations with friends and family. We may hold some beliefs quite intentionally after considering all our options, but we may have picked up other beliefs like a virus, simply by being around them. Either way, we are convinced at some level that some things are true and some things are false. And these beliefs influence how we see things, how we make decisions, and how we live our lives. Each of us has a worldview, a set of convictions and values, a system of belief that governs the way we respond to the world.

Three important assumptions of this study

This series of studies is designed to help us step back a bit and examine what we believe and why, particularly concerning some beliefs we may hold unconsciously. We’ll also look at some alternative views of reality and explore how they lead to conclusions about life and death and the human condition that are in contrast to God’s Word. There are three basic but very important convictions on which our ongoing discussions will be based.

First, the issues of greatest importance under debate in our world today are, ultimately, about the relationship between God and humanity. They are issues to which historic, biblical Christianity has much to say.

Sixteenth century reformer John Calvin is a principal figure in the history of the Church. Calvin argued that we only really know ourselves when we understand and know God. He said that only by a full understanding of the One who created us, sustains us, and redeemed us by the life, death, and resurrection of his Son can we know our place in the universe. The questions of life and death now under such fierce debate—issues of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia—cannot be answered rightly unless we approach them within this context of the relationship between human beings and God.

We bring a second conviction to this inquiry as to what we believe and why. It is that truth is revealed to us and is objective. Truth is not merely a product of our imagination or our personal experiences. In our culture today, there is increasing acceptance of the idea that nothing is absolutely true. Instead, it is common in our culture to think that some things may be “true for me” but the opposite may be “true for you—or someone else.”

Today it is popular to argue that personal experience is the basis of all truth, that individuals must determine what is right and wrong themselves. Taken to its logical conclusion, this subjective, personal-experience approach to truth means that opposite moral views must be equally acceptable, and that there is no external standard to which we are all accountable. This would be ethical anarchy, as in the book of Judges where “People did what was right in (their) own eyes.”

Personal experience contributes to our understanding and helps us form opinions about the world, but as Christians we believe experience by itself is not an infallible guide. Like all ways of knowing, personal experience is subject to error, and without an objective standard of measure it is never fully reliable.

Either the God of the Bible exists or he doesn’t. Chance as an explanation of the universe and human beings is either true or it isn’t. Our challenge as Christians is to discover what God says is true and base the way we think and live on those principles. God’s Word can shape our thinking, give us direction and mold our beliefs concerning the foundational issues of life and death. This truth, given in the Bible and summarized in the Creeds and Confessions of the Church, is the foundation upon which we inquire into matters pertaining to faith and life.

The historic Confessions of the Church state that human reason plays a role in understanding God’s truth.³ Many issues are a matter of prudence rather than a direct reference from the Bible. Nevertheless all our human judgments ought to conform to Scripture. No use of human reason or interpretation of personal experience that conflicts with Scripture can be valid or trustworthy. Truth is not divided.

The Apostles’ Creed and Carl Sagan cannot both be right about the ultimate nature of reality. The Scripture speaks to our modern situation; it speaks as objective truth from outside the limitations of our knowledge and experience. As Christians, Scripture is the final measure of reality in every sphere of life. All truth claims, no matter how right they seem, must be examined in the light of Scripture.

A third conviction on which this series is based is that our lives are an integrated whole. That means that the truth we learn from God’s Word has application to every sphere of life. As we approach the Scripture, our search ought to lead us to answers for living our daily lives and not just what we regard as our religious lives.

Here’s a simple example. We’ve all known people who claim honesty as a virtue. Sometimes those very same people engage in petty larceny, regularly pilfering items from the office for their own personal use. Something inside allows them to rationalize their behavior. If we take the time to re-examine our beliefs and their practical application, we give ourselves an opportunity to more clearly identify and embrace the truth.

Many Christians have given little thought to applying the Bible to their lives beyond the walls of the church. Reality for the Christian should not be divided into “religious” and “secular” – Christ is Lord of all, and the Word of God calls us to live faithfully before God in everything we do. Faith is a matter of knowing what we believe and applying that belief to our everyday lives.

The gospel of Christ is Good News for our modern world, and the truth of God’s Word gives us the only adequate perspective by which to address the most vital issues of our day. So, we begin our inquiry with the conviction that Christian faith, revealed in holy Scripture, provides a framework for, and answers to, the issues of modern life.

Sorting out the true from the false

The tricky part of all this, however, is that we have no automatic sorter as various belief systems and values bombard us day by day. False ideas don’t come flagged as “untrue,” and false values don’t have trumpets announcing their arrival. We need to develop a worldview of our own that is consistent with the revealed faith of Scripture. We have to develop the ability to sort the true from the false and distinguish that which belongs to the Christian faith from that which is foreign to it. For this to occur, we must be willing to do two things.

First, we must be clear about what we believe. Second, we must examine our beliefs by asking, “Are they biblical?” Do they conform to the plain teaching of the whole of God’s revealed truth in Scripture? There are guides to protect us from understandings of Scripture that express our own biases, or the biases of one group, or even of a period in history. Here we can receive help from the church.

Through the ages the Church has expressed in the historic creeds and Reformed confessions of faith clear summaries of what the Scriptures teach. The confessions have stood the test of time and help us understand the Scriptures in our own day by bringing a perspective affirmed by the Church over the centuries. We aren’t discounting the discovery of truth in the natural world or in the various disciplines of study. Romans 1 says, “since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made....”

God’s sovereignty over all of life leads us to recognize a bond between biblical truth and what can be learned from the natural world. For Christians, Scripture, historic confessions of the Church, and human reason do not carry equal weight in the discovery of truth. Nonetheless, we can expect a great deal of unity between these three areas. We would expect that what is revealed in Scripture will be confirmed in the historic creeds and confessions of the Christian faith and will be in harmony with our experiences in the world that God has made. But where there is confusion or conflict, Scripture, rightly interpreted, is our authority.

This study will allow you to begin the process of identifying your beliefs and examine them in light of the Scriptures. We’ll also explore some of the implications of those beliefs for our life and for the decisions we make. This process of inquiry is intended to help us see whether we are actually living in conformity to what we profess to believe. We will discover that differing worldviews have far more serious real life implications than how we interpret a beautiful painting by Monet.

Summary

As we conclude this segment, let’s summarize the ideas that have been presented. What we believe to be true affects how we see things and how we respond to them. Our beliefs—our worldview—determine how we perceive life and reality, and how we choose to live from day to day in the world.

We may hold some of our beliefs quite consciously, and others unconsciously. And it is quite possible for us to hold conflicting views of reality, especially if we have never dealt with those views on a conscious level.

For us Christians, the message of the Scriptures, and the help we get from the summary of them in the great Creeds and Confessions of historic Christianity, is the essential framework for thinking through the important questions of life and death.

Our task and our joy as Christians is to bring our minds, hearts, and actions into conformity with the truth of God’s revealed Word. Or, as John Calvin put it, we are to see the world through the “spectacles” of God’s Word. Exactly how we begin using Scripture as a lens through which to view life is the subject of the next session.

Endnotes

1. Quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations* by Tony Augarde (New York, NY: Oxford; 1991) p. 187, from “Outline of Intellectual Rubbish” in *Unpopular Essays* (1950).
2. *Involvement (I): Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society* by John R. W. Stott (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell; 1984, 1985) p. 61.
3. The Bible and the Confessions also teach that we understand the Scripture properly only with the illumination of the Holy Spirit (see The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1, paragraph 6).

Questions For Reflection And Discussion

Question 1

A basic premise of this series is expressed in the first session when the narrator says,

“What we believe to be true affects how we see the world around us, how we respond to it, and how we feel about it.... Each of us has a worldview, a set of

convictions and values, a system of belief by which we view and respond to the world. This series of studies is designed to help us all step back a bit and examine what we believe, particularly some of the beliefs we tend to hold unconsciously.”

A. Like the two visitors to the art museum, can you think of a conversation you’ve had in which differing beliefs or values led to quite different conclusions?

B. What personal example can you give that illustrates how what we believe to be true affects our perceptions, choices, affections, and behavior? Can you give an example from the church or society?

Question 2

There are a number of ways by which people come to hold the convictions and beliefs that are most dear to them. Sometimes we make a careful study of the alternatives, and then make a clear choice of what to believe. In some cases we simply grow up—and into—our beliefs, assuming some things to be true without much reflection. Sometimes we believe what feels good or right to us at the moment. And from time to time some of us experience a conversion, after which our convictions and beliefs are altered, sometimes dramatically.

A. Can you think of other ways in which people come to adopt their beliefs? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the various ways of developing beliefs?

B. Can you think of beliefs or values which you have come to hold that you adopted via any of these methods?

C. How have you come to hold Christian convictions?

D. What role do our minds have in developing Christian convictions? What role do our hearts have?

Question 3

This session quotes Carl Sagan and the Apostles’ Creed on the nature of the universe. The statements are so diametrically opposed that both cannot be true.

A. What is the process by which you will conclude one to be true and the other false?

B. What part does science have in the two statements? What part does faith have in the two statements?

Question 4

This study series is based on three basic and important assumptions. Let’s reflect on each in turn:

(1) historic Christianity has something vital and important to say to our modern world;

(2) truth is revealed to us and is not merely a product of our imaginations or of our personal experiences;

(3) for the Christian, Scripture is the final measure of reality in every sphere of life, that all truth claims can be

examined in the light of Scripture, so that we can hold to what is true in confidence, and with the same confidence reject claims of truth that conflict with Scripture.

How do these statements relate to your understanding of Christian faith and the purpose of Scripture?

Question 5

This series is exploring how Christians come to a knowledge of the truth on matters of faith and life. We have not discussed at any length matters that are decisions of prudence, taste, preference or individual choice.

How would Christians go about making the distinction between these areas of decision making and decisions on matters of faith and life?

Further reading if you want to dig deeper

The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog, by James W. Sire (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997) third edition.

Involvement (I): Being a Responsible Christian in a Non-Christian Society, by John Stott (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984, 1985).

Discipleship of the Mind: Learning to Love God in the Ways We Think, by James W. Sire (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?, by Harry Blamires (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1963; 1978).

Recovering the Christian Mind: Meeting the Challenge of Secularism, by Harry Blamires (Downers Grove, IL, InterVarsity Press, 1988).

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Session Two

Seeing Through the Spectacles of Scripture

An Outline of Session #2

A. Introduction to the role of Scripture

B. *Sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”). Scripture is our highest authority for what we believe and how we live. Consider:

1. the claim of Scripture to be the “Word of God;”
2. Jesus’ teaching and example in submitting to the authority of the Old Testament;
3. the authority Christ gave to the apostles, the authors of the New Testament;
4. the reliability of biblical documents, including large numbers of manuscripts, early dating, meticulous copying process, accuracy of translations.

C. How all Christians can rightly make the connection between what Scripture says and how we are to live.

1. Distinguish true interpretation from false. One part of Scripture, rightly understood, does not conflict with another part.
2. Westminster: study Scripture with “diligence, preparation and prayer” and “receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.”
3. Overcome ignorance with consistent and diligent reading of Scripture.
4. Commit ourselves to study (develop skills of observation, interpretation, and application).
Observation: What does the text say?

Interpretation: What does it mean? What style of literature is it (parable, historical narrative, letter)? Context in which written? What did it mean to the people for whom it was written? What does it mean in context of all of Scripture? Search for full scope of Scripture’s teaching on matters we study. Let Scripture interpret Scripture. Need for guidance from Holy Spirit.

Application. What does it mean for every area of my life? What does it mean for our life as a church? What am I going to do about it? Allow Scripture’s truth to transform every facet of our lives.

Introduction and review

What we believe to be true affects how we interpret the world around us and the decisions we make.

In this series we are examining two questions. First, what does it mean to be human? Second, how are we as Christians to understand issues of life and death? But before we consider those specific matters we will explore more general questions of how our faith relates to our lives.

How do we go about discovering the will of God, particularly in matters of morality? How do we know what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong?

We noted in the first session that the Reformer John Calvin said the Scriptures were the “spectacles” or “lens” through which we are to see life and the world. The second letter to Timothy points to the ways Scripture

shapes our worldview, and equips us as people of God. The book of Second Timothy says, Scripture is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” In this session we want to examine that idea.

The application of Scripture to our spiritual lives—our worship and devotion—seems much clearer than its application to the rest of our day-to-day living. Exactly how the Scriptures help us is far from clear to many modern Christians. In our study of life issues we need to take the time to examine the truth of God’s Word and how it can affect our lives outside the time we spend in church. To do that we will consider a series of questions:

How do we know the Scriptures should be our highest authority? Why should we trust the Bible? How are we to understand and make use of Scripture reasonably in modern life? How is it to be interpreted correctly? And finally, since we’ve already said the Creeds and Confessions are resources for our inquiry, where do they fit in? What does it mean to claim the scriptures are our authority?

What does it mean to claim the Scriptures are our authority?

One of the defining points of the Reformation was *Sola Scriptura*, “Scripture alone,” meaning Scripture is our ultimate authority for what we believe and how we live. How do we know we should claim the Scriptures are our authority? What gives Scripture that authority?

One evidence of Scripture’s authority is that Old and New Testament believers revered the Scriptures as the oracles of God.¹ The phrases “thus says the Lord” and “the Word of God,” reverberate throughout the pages of the Old Testament. They are found in every section of its literature: history;² prophecy;³ and poetry.⁴

Paul, in the New Testament, said the Jews had “been entrusted with the very words of God.”⁵ Jesus confirmed the absolute authority of the Old Testament for others and submitted to it unreservedly Himself.⁶ Throughout his public ministry Christ quoted it as authoritative, saying the “Scriptures must be fulfilled”⁷ and that they “cannot be broken.”⁸ It was his ministry, in fact, to fulfill the Scriptures,⁹ and to open the meaning of them to his followers.¹⁰

Jesus appealed to Scripture in making his arguments,¹¹ and chided the religious leaders of his day for their ignorance of its meaning.¹² After his resurrection, when his disciples doubted that he was alive, Jesus used the Old Testament to explain what had taken place. “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” he said to them. “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”¹³

The apostles grasped their Master's teaching about Scripture and about himself, and they proclaimed Christ as the fulfillment of Scripture. They preached with authority because Jesus gave that authority to them as his apostles.

The apostles argued from Scripture, quoting its words as the speech of God.¹⁴ Even a simple reading of the epistles in the New Testament, the letters the apostles wrote to individuals and churches, reveals how often they quoted the Old Testament as authoritative for their lives and teaching, just as Jesus did.¹⁵

Similarly, New Testament writers were eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life and ministry, and claim that authority of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Peter stated that he and the other apostles "did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty." As a result, he concludes, we have a sure witness to the truth in the teaching of the apostles, "and you would do well to pay attention to it as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."

The Scriptural authority of the apostolic writings has been a constant in the history of the Christian Church. Polycarp, for example, who was bishop of Smyrna until his martyrdom in 156 AD, wrote a letter to the Christians living in the city of Philippi. It consists almost totally of quotations from or clear allusions to the apostolic writings.¹⁶

John Calvin, writing in the midst of the Reformation, said that our faith will remain "pure" only by subjecting ourselves to God's Word, "and by putting a bridle on ourselves, so as not to introduce anything except what he commands and approves."¹⁷

The authors of the Westminster Confession were very clear that the authority of Scripture is derived from God as its author. "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the Author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God."¹⁸

We have reason to trust the Scriptures as authoritative, because the Old Testament claims the authority of God. Jesus himself used the Old Testament as his authority and taught his followers to do the same. He then gave authority to his apostles, which they passed on to the Church in the New Testament scriptures.

The Bible isn't simply the word of mortals; it is God's Word. It is not merely a record of revelation, but it is a medium of revelation in its own right. The Scriptures are more than a historical source, a testament of religion, and a means of comfort and encouragement. They are primarily and essentially God's revelation of himself to us. They teach us the truth about the nature and order of the universe; they lead us to knowledge of God and they

reveal God's will to us. They are the means by which we come to a true knowledge of our Savior Jesus Christ.

We have very good reasons to be confident that the Scriptures we have today are reliable in conveying the message of the original documents. There are literally thousands of manuscripts and fragments of the New Testament documents available to scholars today. Some are dated to within a generation of the original writing.¹⁹

Copying of the manuscripts was done with extreme care, because those who performed the work placed very high value on the words before them. Meticulous checks were performed as a part of the copying process to ensure accuracy. Biblical scholars have helped Christians gain insight into the subtle nuances of the original languages. They have studied and compared usage of words in various written sources from that time to help us to have accurate translations of the original documents today.

Some textual difficulties exist, of course, and questions remain. But these difficulties are not about crucial matters. We acknowledge that some passages have obscure meanings. Nevertheless, the Westminster Confession says 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, that not only the educated, but also the uneducated can gain sufficient understanding."

The study of God's Word isn't just for scholars. It is the means by which all of us may come to a sufficient understanding to know God and his will for living godly lives.²⁰ God has not revealed himself and his will for us in a manner intended to confuse us; he means to be clear.

Throughout history God's people have always held a high view of biblical revelation and submitted themselves to the Scriptures, as if there the living words of God were heard.²¹ For reformed believers in particular, the Scripture is the ultimate authority for faith and life.

Dealing with disagreements over the meaning of Scripture

We seem to have a lot of disagreement in the church today over what the Scriptures teach. And this is not the first time in history that there have been arguments in the Church over Scripture's meaning. The religious leaders of Jesus's day had serious disagreements about the teaching of Scripture.²²

It should be no surprise that some people feel that there are as many interpretations of Scripture as there are readers. Who is to say which interpretation is correct, they ask? And, if the Holy Spirit guides our understanding of the Bible, isn't it possible that he will lead different people to different interpretations of the same passage because of the different circumstances of people's lives? How can we understand the Bible rightly, and should we even hope to resolve our disagreements about its meaning?

Jesus told some prominent religious scholars of his own time that they misinterpreted God's will because they knew neither Scripture nor the power of God. He obviously meant there was a true and a false way of interpreting the Scripture. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Christians can and often do hold views that are inconsistent with the plain meaning of Scripture.

The confessions teach that "the Scriptures are not of private interpretation," and that not all interpretations are legitimate.²³ If two people come to opposing conclusions about the meaning of a particular passage that deals with basic doctrine or morality, they cannot both be correct. And it's possible that both may be in error.

God speaks to us in Scripture with truth and consistency. One part of Scripture, rightly understood, does not conflict with another part. Some disagreements over Scripture's meaning arise because someone first draws a conclusion and then uses only the Scripture passages that support that conclusion. Some disagreements arise simply because people have not sought help from other parts of Scripture to bring clarity to the one under study.

A common cause of differing views is to plunge directly into the question, "What does this passage mean to me?" without first understanding what the text is really saying, leading to applications that have nothing to do with the content and meaning of the passage.

Interpreting rightly

How should we go about understanding the Scriptures rightly and making proper application of its teaching for our lives?²⁴ The Westminster Catechism teaches that in order for the Word of God to become effectual to salvation, we must study it with "diligence, preparation, and prayer." In addition, it says we must "receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives."

The catechism is instructing us to be thorough and consistent in our study, seeking the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. It is warning us against using the Scripture as a tool to support our own notions or to rationalize sin. It is admonishing us to make biblical teaching an integral part of our thought life—to get it into our very bones, as one Bible teacher puts it—and to apply the Word so that our lives reflect its truth.

There are several keys to correctly grasping the meaning of Scripture. The first hurdle we need to overcome is simple ignorance of the Bible's content. The cure is simple, but not especially easy.

We need to plan a regular diet taking in the spiritual milk and solid food it offers.²⁵ We need to read it not just in tiny bite-fulls, but often as a feast, many chapters at a time. Then we can begin to grasp its themes and the way it amplifies and elaborates on the main points of faith.

Another key to grasping Scripture's meaning is committed study, which includes developing skills of observation. Observation means that in addition to grasping the sweep of the biblical record we are paying careful attention to the details of the passage we are studying so that we may discern its plain meaning. Observation asks the question, "What does the text say?" It consists of asking basic questions related to the historical and biblical context of the passage. It also deals with details of language and definitions, and the ideas or events being conveyed.

In addition to good observation we must faithfully interpret each passage in the context in which it was written. Parables are to be interpreted as a story-telling teaching technique. Historical narratives are descriptions of what occurred and not necessarily instruction in what should have been done. They may or may not provide examples for us to follow. New Testament letters were written to particular churches with specific needs in their own time and culture.

It is important to understand as much as we can about why a text was written and what that text would have meant to the original recipients. We need to determine which instructions were intended specifically for that particular time and situation, and which are universal instructions for the Church in every place.

Another important key to understanding Scripture is that Scripture is its own interpreter. The light shed on a passage from other places in Scripture is the Christian's best aid to "the true and full sense" of its meaning.²⁶ The Reformers taught that proper interpretation of Scripture was a matter of understanding the meaning of a particular passage in the context of the whole of Scripture. The question we should be seeking to answer is not, "What does this text say to me?" The question is "What does this particular scriptural passage mean in light of the entire biblical record?"²⁷ This is essential for a correct interpretation.

This principle of using Scripture to interpret scripture not only helps correct our own misconceptions, but is an invaluable aid in resolving differences between parties.

Finally, we ought to depend on the help of the Holy Spirit to "guide us into all the truth."²⁸ However, the Holy Spirit has to be distinguished from our feelings. While that is sometimes difficult to do, we can be sure that the Holy Spirit will not speak or lead us in ways that contradict the revelation of God in Scripture. It is his role to help our understanding of and obedience to the Scripture. As the confessions teach, there are no "new revelations of the Spirit."²⁹

The Bible teaches that not all spirits are of God.³⁰ This principle of consistency between Scripture and the enlightening of our minds by God's Holy Spirit is essential to a right interpretation of Scripture.³¹

In summary then, there are five basic principles for developing a knowledge of Scripture and learning God's will for faith and life. First, is a consistent and diligent reading of God's Word. Second, we must search the Scripture for the full scope of its teaching, especially on matters where we disagree. Third, we must faithfully interpret each passage of Scripture in the context in which it was written. Fourth, we should test our understanding of one passage with other places in Scripture that speak to the same subject. And fifth, we need to recognize that the understandings that the Holy Spirit opens to us to meditate, pray over and discuss will always be consistent with the plain meaning of the whole of Scripture.

Application

Application is the process of becoming obedient disciples of Christ. It is taking the teaching we have come to comprehend in the context of the full biblical message and asking questions about its relevance to our faith, our life, and our culture.

Applying God's Word to our lives goes beyond our personal devotional lives. Because God is the creator, sustainer and ruler of every area of life, Scripture reveals truth that applies to every facet of life. Scripture speaks to every aspect of our being including issues of family: marriage, sexuality, and life and death. It also speaks to our responsibility as citizens in society. Nature, history, government, science: every part of our life is governed by God and the teaching of Scripture applies to them all.

As we read the Scriptures we can compare our understanding of them with the interpretation held by the community of believers through the centuries. This brings great freedom, for we know we can study God's Word with passion, without being paralyzed by the fear that we will swerve off into error or heresy. We don't need to engage in trying to make isolated passages support preconceived ideas. Instead, we can seek to have a mind renewed by God's work, and as a result live a life transformed by the truth.

A sound study process with the guidance of the Holy Spirit will distinguish, over time, between error and orthodoxy, and allow us to understand and live faithfully in the light of God's Word. When we apply God's Word to our lives we find ourselves asking the question, "Since this is God's Word, what is He saying to us as his children, to me as an individual, and what exactly am I going to do about it?" To enable the Scripture to affect our thinking, decisions, and behavior, we have to ask how it applies to our circumstances and to the surrounding culture.

Application is not only a way of examining ourselves, which is important, but also is a way to examine the ideas and philosophies we encounter. Because the Scriptures give us a view into a reality that is not fully visible to our senses, we may at times feel that we are out of step with those in the world around us. The most difficult part of applying God's Word to our lives is that it requires us to

develop a mature faith that is able to withstand the pressure and practices of the culture around us.

In this session, we have looked at why Scripture has authority in every aspect of our lives. We have considered the basis for that authority and how we can make a correct connection between what the Bible says and how we are to live. In our next session we will look at what it means to be human in God's eyes.

Endnotes

1. See, for example, Exodus 31:18; Habakkuk 1:1; 2:2.
2. See, for example, Exodus 7:17; 1 Samuel 3:17-18.
3. See, for example, Isaiah 22:15; Jeremiah 6:16.
4. See, for example, Psalm 18:30.
5. Romans 3:2.
6. "Fundamentalism" and the Word of God by J. I. Packer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 1958) p. 55. There are examples of Jesus's apparent refutation of the Old Testament law, such as his breaking of the Sabbath law in Matthew 12, and the several examples of his healing on the Sabbath. Those incidences are confrontations between Jesus and the rulers of his own day who twisted the law to their own advantage and neglected its clear purpose. See, for example, Matt. 23:1-4, and Mathew 22:29 and following.
7. Mark 14:49.
8. John 10:35.
9. Luke 4:17-21.
10. Luke 24:32,45.
11. Matthew 19:4f.
12. Mark 12:24; Matthew 12:3,5; 19:4.
13. Luke 24:25-26.
14. See, for example, Acts 4:25; Romans 1:2;9:17; Galatians 3:8.
15. Acts 17:2-3.
16. *The Apostolic Fathers* edited by Jack N. Sparks (Minneapolis, MN: Light & Life; 1978) pp. 123-151.
17. From Jeremiah IV:543, quoted in *Calvin's Wisdom* edited by Graham Miller (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth; 1992), p. 21.
18. Westminster, Chapter 1, para. 4.
19. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* By F.F. Bruce (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1943) pp 16-17. See also "Are the New Testament Documents Still Reliable?" By F.F. Bruce in *Christianity Today* (October 20, 1978) pp. 28-33.
20. See the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 7.
21. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press), I.vii.1., p. 74.
22. See, for example, Mark 7:1-13 and Mark 12:18-27.
23. II Helvetic Confession, Chapter II, paragraph 1.
24. Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question #90.
25. See 1 Cor. 3:2f and Hebrews 5:12-14.
26. "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly." (Westminster Confession, 6.010). The footnotes for this teaching are Matt. 4:5-7 and Matt. 12:1-7 which show how Jesus used the breadth of Scripture to correct false understandings of a single passage.
27. Theologian Richard Lints points out, "the Reformers held that the proper interpretation of the text is not the subjective interaction between a particular passage and a particular person but rather the interaction of a given passage with the whole of

Scripture itself, the essential unity of which is established by its divine origin....” Richard Lints, p. 93.

28. John 16:13.

29. “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequences may be deduced from Scripture; unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” Westminster Confession, 6.006.

30. 1 John 4:1.

31. For Jesus’ instruction of the role of the Holy Spirit, see John 14:16-17, 26; John 15:26; and John 16:13.

Questions For Reflection And Discussion

Question 1

What do you think modern people rely on most for an understanding of the world around us? What are the primary influences that are shaping our values in our society?

Question 2

What influences are most effective at helping you understand the world from a Christian perspective? What influences are most detrimental?

Question 3

To better develop your understanding of the world as a Christian, which influences might you choose consciously to affect your thinking or behavior? Which might you choose to lessen or eliminate? How could you do that?

Question 4

Reformer John Calvin said the Scriptures were the ‘spectacles’ or ‘lens’ through which we are to see life and reality. The Bible, in other words, is meant to form our worldview—mold our assumptions, set our values, and define our beliefs—so that how we see and live life conforms to the truth of God’s word.

We’ll be looking at two passages from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. The Ten Commandments are given to God’s people in Deuteronomy 5. The meaning of the title of this book of the Bible is “Second Law.” In this chapter God is explaining the importance of obedience in the relationship between his people and himself, that keeping the law preserves their right relationship of love toward God and of blessing for themselves. They are encouraged to keep the commandments foremost in their minds and lives.

Read Deut. 6:4-9

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind

them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Also read Deut. 11:18-25

You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul; and you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates, that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth. For if you will be careful to do all this commandment which I command you to do, loving the LORD your God, walking in all his ways, and cleaving to him, then the LORD will drive out all these nations before you, and you will dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourselves. Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours; your territory shall be from the wilderness and Lebanon and from the River, the river Euphrates, to the western sea. No man shall be able to stand against you; the LORD your God will lay the fear of you and the dread of you upon all the land that you shall tread, as he promised you.

God’s people are learning how to be obedient to his will and live in a way that will distinguish them from the pagan nations around them from whom God has delivered them. God, who has done great things for this people, will continue to care for them. And he wants them and their children to reject influences of the lifeless gods of the surrounding cultures, and learn and practice the particular ways of the one true and living God.

A. What were God’s people instructed to do regarding God’s commandments? (Observation)

B. Why do you suppose they were instructed to spend so much time focused on Scripture? (Interpretation)

C. In these passages, does God offer more than spiritual blessing for individual believers? What other passages do you find to shed light on the relationship between obedience and God’s provision and blessing? (Interpretation)

D. What would this instruction tell us about how we should use Scripture today? (Application)

E. What does it tell us about how to benefit a whole society by our obedience to God? (Application)

Session Three

What Is Human?

An Outline of Session #3

A. Introduction. The Scriptures help us understand the world from God's perspective and live every aspect of our lives in a way that pleases him.

B. Contrasting view of the universe and humanity:

Scripture (Ps. 8:3-9): "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established; what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than God, and crown him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea."

Carl Sagan: "I am a collection of water, calcium and organic molecules. You are a collection of almost identical molecules with a different collective label... I find it elevating that our universe permits the evolution of molecular machines as intricate and subtle as we."

C. Humans in the biblical view

1. What we have in common with the rest of creation: We are created.
2. How we differ from the rest of creation: We are created in the image of God. Human life—of conditions or circumstances—is always different from other types of biological life.

D. How are we to treat other humans?

1. What is forbidden?
God's law, the Ten Commandments, "You shall not murder."

Heidelberg Catechism: "I am not to abuse, hate, injure, or kill my neighbor, either with thought, or by word or gesture, much less by deed, whether myself or through another...."

Westminster Catechism: "protecting and defending the innocent."

Scripture is filled with warnings against killing the Innocent.

2. What is required?

E. Living in a fallen, distorted world

The world we experience now is not as God created it to be.

Death is abnormal, a result of sin and evil, and is the "last enemy" which God promises to overcome (1 Corinthians 15).

The promise of being raised up in Christ is our only hope and comfort, not death itself.

Introduction and review

We began this series by demonstrating that what we believe to be true affects how we live our lives. Our convictions about God are not restricted to just having an impact on our religious or devotional lives. Whether we're aware of it or not, they affect how we understand the world and they affect the decisions we make.

In our last session, we considered how the Scriptures help us understand the world from God's perspective and live every aspect of our lives in a way that pleases him. Now, let's take what we've learned in the first two sessions and apply it to the concept of what it means to be human. From what we have learned so far, we can expect that different people will give different answers to this question.

Remember the Monet painting from the first session? We used that simple example to show that the worldview, through which we examine not only material objects but also ideas, may yield sharply contrasting interpretations. We set forth some guidelines in the second session to help sharpen our ability as Christians to see the world through God's Word. Let's begin then to explore contrasting worldviews that lead to very different understandings of what it means to be human.

The Psalmist said,

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established; what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than God, and crown him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea... O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!"¹

The late astronomer, Carl Sagan, popularized another very different view of our place in the universe. He invited us in his television program, *Cosmos*, to look into the sky and then told us, That's all there is folks: what you see is what you get. His way of communicating with his audience was simple, but his message was quite serious. About human beings, Sagan wrote, "I am a collection of water, calcium and organic molecules. You are a collection of almost identical molecules with a different collective label."² "But is that all?" he asks. "Is there nothing in here but molecules? Some people find this idea somehow demeaning to human dignity. For myself," says Sagan; "I find it elevating that our universe permits the evolution of molecular machines as intricate and subtle as we."

Sagan wasn't just trying to teach us about science in these statements. He was using the language of science to communicate his worldview. It is a view in diametric opposition to that of the Psalmist. It is a view of a closed

universe, whose contents are no more than the physically observable components. In Sagan's view, there is nothing outside or beyond the visible universe. There is no Creator. The make up of the world around us is essentially an accident, a product of time and chance. Human beings, as exalted as they are in this worldview, nonetheless are simply variations of the physical make up of the rest of the world. Sagan's worldview has no basis for a meaning or significance or value that transcends the visible world. And we shall see in this session what a profound difference that makes.

What is human? —Our relationship with God

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.... And God said, Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth.... And God said, Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.... Then God said, Let us make man in our image; after our likeness.... And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.³

When we turn to the Scriptures to learn the biblical view of the universe and what it means to be human, we are immediately introduced to the Creator. The opening chapter of the Bible explains what no human eye ever saw: that out of nothing God created every aspect of the world we live in. When verse 27 of Genesis says that God created man male and female it is explaining what human beings have in common with the rest of creation. Like galaxies, trees, insects and animals, we have been created by God. It is what we share in common with the rest of creation.

But we are also very different from the rest of God's creation. Carl Sagan could describe our human bodies accurately as a collection of water, calcium and organic molecules. But to see that as a full understanding of what a human being is misses the mark completely. Genesis 1:27 continues, "For God created man in his own image." The second part of that statement—that we are created in God's own image—points to what sets human beings apart from all the rest of creation.

A human being is not the equivalent of a tree or a cow. We are different from the rest of creation in a vital sense that helps to define the significance of being human. We alone were made in God's image. God gave purpose to all his creation, but because we are made in God's image, the meaning and purpose of human life is distinctly different from all the rest of creation. To be human, more than anything else, is to be created to live in relationship with God. "Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that

creeps upon the earth."⁴ God has given us dominion over the rest of his creation.

In Scripture, God shows us how we as human beings are related to the rest of creation. For example, Genesis 1:29 states that God has given us green plants for food. Later in Genesis 9:3-4 that is expanded and animals are explicitly allowed as food. In Genesis 1:26 God gives human beings "dominion...over all the earth." That responsibility requires us to exercise godly care for the creation, even while we receive its gifts for our benefit and use.

The view revealed in Scripture is that there is a created order. While our stewardship responsibilities do not allow us to abuse or mistreat our environment, we know that we are allowed to kill and eat animals for food because God has explicitly told us so. You could argue the ethics of using animals for purposes of experimentation, but these complexities do not rest on any biblical view of whether animals ought to be treated as if they were humans.

Human life—regardless of conditions or circumstances—is always different from other types of biological life. We are distinguished from the rest of creation biologically as human from the earliest moment of our existence. The life that results from the union of a human sperm and egg is unquestionably human. Geneticist Jerome LeJeune, internationally recognized for his studies of the chromosome, once said that any student of his who could not distinguish a four-cell human being from a four-cell chimpanzee, would fail his course, because the differences are so clear and obvious.

To be created as God's image-bearer implies both an awesome responsibility and a breath-taking honor. John Calvin said that being "created in the image of God" meant we have "been advanced to the highest degree of honor"⁵ among all of God's creatures. It was impossible, Calvin says, for "God to act more liberally towards man, than by impressing his own glory upon him."⁶

This is a view of humanity that does not deny that we are a collection of water, calcium and organic molecules, but goes well beyond that to give a very special meaning to our lives. That meaning is probably best described as God's intent to be in relationship with each of us and his willingness to purchase us with the price of his own Son's blood.

So, what does it mean to regard human beings as human? The clearest biblical teaching on that is in God's law. Jesus tells us that the Law—the Ten Commandments—contain the summary of what it means to love our neighbor.⁷ Treating humans as humans means that we will honor our parents, that we will not commit adultery, that we will not steal, that we will not bear false witness against another human being and that we will not covet what belongs to others.⁸ One of those laws speaks directly to the issue of life and death, which we are considering in these studies. The text itself is simple, brief, and best translated, "You shall not murder." The Bible ties the restriction against

killing another human being to the image of God in us: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for God in His own image made humankind.”

In the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus referred to the meaning of the commandments, he went beyond the surface meaning to include the thought and the attitudes as well as the actions. The Heidelberg Catechism explains the meaning of the commandment against murder:

*What does God require in the sixth commandment? That I am not to abuse, hate, injure, or kill my neighbor, either with thought, or by word or gesture, much less by deed, whether myself or through another, but to lay aside all desire for revenge; and that I do not harm myself or willfully expose myself to danger. This is why the authorities are armed with the means to prevent murder.*⁹

God’s will, in other words, is to place on us an essential responsibility for the well being of our fellow human beings. We are our brothers’ keepers, and we have a duty to care for our neighbors, particularly for those in need. We are charged to do them no harm. The Westminster Catechism includes in the duties required by the sixth commandment the obligation for “protecting and defending the innocent.”¹⁰

Innocence and guilt are crucial distinctions the Bible makes related to the protection of humans. Christians differ today over whether killing is ever justified in war and capital punishment but it is clear that there is no biblical basis whatsoever for killing the innocent. Quite the opposite: Scripture is filled with warnings against killing the innocent.¹¹

The word *innocent* is used in Scripture not to denote the absence of sin. It is used in reference to those who are not guilty of a crime deserving the punishment prescribed by law.¹² There are many biblical references in which the word “innocent” refers to killing those undeserving of capital punishment. God condemned the Israelites in particular for the sin of King Manasseh, for “he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord would not pardon.”¹³ Proverbs 6, in its familiar list of seven things that are an abomination to the Lord, includes “hands that shed innocent blood.”¹⁴ Inhabitants of Judah engaged in the pagan practice of sacrificing their children to the god Molech and God called it an abomination.¹⁵

God has given us dominion over creation. All of creation is in our service and we are to care for it tenderly. We have been charged as good and faithful stewards to oversee and cultivate God’s creation. But we have no such dominion over each other. Our obligation of love to each other extends only to providing protection and care. It never includes the option of killing the innocent for any reason. The direct commands repeatedly given in Scripture restrain us from choosing death for ourselves or for our innocent neighbors.¹⁶

The people of God are to be characterized as those who love each other, and seek to preserve life, even at cost to ourselves, because of the hope we have in Christ. Our model is our Lord, who was willing to sacrifice all that was precious to him, even his own life, in order to save us from death.¹⁷

In developing a Christian perspective on life and death, the first three chapters of Genesis provide tremendous insight. In the first two chapters of Genesis, God repeatedly calls everything he has created “good.” The man and woman are given their roles and tasks, and the limits of their freedom are defined. They are warned that if they disobey God’s command, they will die. Genesis 3 depicts the first humans choosing sin rather than faithfulness to God. It reveals that the fall had devastating consequences and separated man from God. It distorted what our Father had created life on earth to be and introduced death as a part of the human condition.

Beginning in Genesis 3 and continuing through the rest of Scripture, God gives us instruction for living in a fallen world and reveals his plan for its redemption. While the worldview expressed by Carl Sagan can only see everything, including death, as a natural part of our existence that must be accepted, God’s Word portrays the opposite view. The Bible teaches us that the world we experience now is not as God created it to be. Death is abnormal. It is the result of sin and evil, and is something God promises to overcome.

First Corinthians 15 calls death the last enemy. The purpose of Christ’s death was to overcome death and give life. It is impossible for death itself to be merciful or good. The promise of being raised up in Christ is our only hope and comfort, not death itself.

While the charge to protect and care for the innocent and needy runs as a thread through Scripture, there is not a single place where God regards killing as an act of compassion. There may be times when it appears that taking a life could be considered compassionate. Our Father—who is always good and is the source of all mercy and compassion—has set boundaries for us. He has commanded that we are never to kill innocent human beings.

What is human? —The implications of the worldview you hold

There is a logical difference in ethics depending on the worldview you hold. And this is what makes such a profound difference between the biblical worldview and a worldview like that expressed by Carl Sagan.

A common tendency of modern views of humanness is to reject or ignore the “image of God” and disregard any distinction between humanity and the rest of creation. Adopting a form of a very old belief system, called Naturalism, many people today reject any notion of creation or of a Creator. Though they may recognize

biological differences between animals and humans, those who lack the biblical perspective regarding the image of God find no significance in those differences. Let's look now at the difference a biblical worldview makes in how we regard each other.

Consider a person with Down Syndrome, for example. This chromosomal abnormality produces characteristic physical features and, typically, diminished intellectual achievement. What value shall we place on a person with Down Syndrome? What difference will it make if we hold a worldview that believes that everything exists by chance? How will a biblical worldview affect our judgment about the value of this person?

Contemporary ethicist Peter Singer is an example of those whose moral judgments disregard the image of God. "If," he says, "we compare a severely defective human infant with a dog or a pig, for example, we will often find the animal to have superior capacities, both actual and potential. Only the fact that the defective infant is a member of the species *homo sapiens* leads it to be treated differently from the dog or pig."¹⁸

In this worldview, the line between animal and human is erased. In Singer's view, animals exhibit more human traits than some humans, and therefore have a higher standing. Singer, along with Nobel prize-winner James D. Watson, and Steven Pinker, professor of psychology at MIT, are among those in the mainstream academic community who advocate infanticide. They believe the decision to declare newborns "human" be delayed for days, or even months, to give parents an opportunity to decide whether or not their child should live or be killed. But in the Christian view, no one has to achieve certain characteristics or traits to "qualify" for human status. The Bible has a curious way of even seeming to attach special value to those who are weak and vulnerable and expects us to provide special care and protection for them.

James 1:27, for example, says that the "religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction..." One of the marks that identified Jesus as the promised Messiah was that he fulfilled God's promise to give sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, cleansing to the lepers, healing to the lame and life to the dead.

The modern field of bioethics has developed new terms that tempt physicians and family members to regard their patients and relatives as less than human under certain conditions. One of those terms is Persistent Vegetative State or PVS. The term suggests that illness or coma transforms a person into a vegetable-like state, that they have become something less than a human being.

But the Bible teaches us that vulnerability in a personage, disability, disease, impoverishment, increases the Christian's special duty to love them and to protect them from harm. Jesus taught that what we do to the least of those among us is done to him.¹⁹ That is why Christians

historically have been in the forefront of feeding the poor and of caring for the sick and dying. The Scriptures, which set our standard for living out God's will, are filled with admonitions that repeat the call to minister the cup of cold water in Jesus's name.²⁰

Conclusion

Christian faith teaches us to see beyond the visible, and affirm the presence of God's image not only in the most intelligent, beautiful and healthy of human beings, but also in the most needy and vulnerable. Those who hold the biblical perspective concerning what is human are likely to find themselves radically at odds with modern ideas of humanness.

But what about the unborn? Are the unborn to be viewed as created in God's image when seen through the "spectacles" of Scripture? That is the topic of our next study.

Endnotes

1. Psalm 8:3-9.
2. *Cosmos*, by Carl Sagan (New York, NY: Random House, 1980), p. 127.
3. Gen. 1: 1,11, 24, 26, 31.
4. Gen. 1:26.
5. *Institutes*, II.2.1., p. 256.
6. Calvin's commentary on *Genesis*, I:228 quoted in *Calvin's Wisdom* by Graham Miller (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992) p. 164.
7. Matt. 22:39; see also Rom. 13:9 and Gal. 5:14.
8. See the Westminster Shorter Catechism, Questions #63, #81.
9. Heidelberg, Question #105.
10. See the Westminster Larger Catechism, Question #135.
11. See, for example, Ex. 23:7; Deut. 19:10,13; Deut. 27:25; 2 Kgs. 21:16; 2 Kgs. 24:4; Psa. 10:8; Psa. 106:38; Prov. 6:17; Isa. 59:7; Jer. 7:6; Jer. 19:4; Jer. 22:3.
12. See The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXV (PCUS) and Chapter XXIII (UPCUSA), 6.127-6.129, and The Westminster Larger Catechism, Question #135.
13. 2 Kgs. 24:4
14. Proverbs 6:16-17.
15. Jer. 32:35.
16. Gen 9:6: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for in the image of God did God make man."
17. Philippians 2:7-8: "Christ made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, he humbled himself, and became obedient to death—even death on the cross."
18. Singer's essay in *Pediatrics*, July 1983, was an explicit attack on the "sanctity of life" ethic which he called the "religious mumbo-jumbo" of the Judeo-Christian tradition.
19. Matt. 25:40.
20. See, for example, Matthew 10:1, 8, 29-30, 42; Matthew 25:34-40 (and 41-46); and Acts 3:16.

Questions For Reflection And Discussion

Question 1

A. What are some things about humanness that we cannot know with certainty without the biblical revelation?

B. How is a biblical understanding of humanness confirmed by our experience with the natural world? In what ways, or under what circumstances, might they seem to be contradicted?

Question 2

Have you ever experienced your own feelings doing battle with the biblical teaching as you view a severely retarded, or physically handicapped, or comatose human being? What did you learn from that about the power of feelings? What did you learn from that about the power of other influences on your thinking?

Question 3

This session asserts that our clear guide to treating humans as human is summarized for us in the Ten Commandments. John Calvin said of the Ten Commandments:

God has so divided his law into two parts, which contain the whole of righteousness, as to assign the first part to those duties of religion which particularly concern the worship of his majesty; the second, to the duties of love that have to do with men.

...The Second Table [the last six commandments] prescribes how in accordance with the fear of his name we ought to conduct ourselves in human society. In this way our Lord, as the Evangelists relate, summarizes the whole law under two heads: that we should love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our powers; and that we should love our neighbor as ourselves (Luke 10:27f; Matt. 22:37,39).¹

The Westminster Confession of Faith says,

The moral law doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God the Creator who gave it. Neither doth Christ in the gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen, this obligation.²

The following Bible passages are among those the Confession uses to support its teaching:

Romans 13:9-10

The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Romans 3:31

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Matthew 5:19

Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

James 2:8

If you really fulfill the royal law, according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well.

Joseph Fletcher, an Episcopal priest, wrote a book, published in 1966 called *Situation Ethics: A Guide to the New Morality*. In his book he sets us free from loving our

neighbors within the requirements of the moral law and concludes, "But situation ethics has good reason to hold it as a *duty* in some situations to break [the moral laws], *any or all of them*...[I]n principle, even killing 'innocent' people might be right."

Go back now to what the Westminster Confession of Faith says about the moral law. Compare these two teachings on loving our neighbor. What are the obvious outcomes for relationships between human beings between these two world views? Where do you see one or the other at work in modern life?

Question 4

The following passages deal with the biblical use of innocence. (You may find it helpful to look up the passages in order to read them in their context.)

After you have read them, summarize the meaning of innocence. What do these passages teach about the biblical distinction between innocence and guilt, about good and evil?

Jeremiah 7:6

If you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt....

Jeremiah 22:3

Thus says the LORD: Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.

Ezekiel 22:6-9

Everyone according to his power, has been bent on shedding blood. Father and mother are treated with contempt in you; the sojourner suffers extortion in your midst; the fatherless and the widow are wronged in you. You have despised my holy things, and profaned my sabbaths. There are men in you who slander to shed blood....

Deuteronomy 25:1

If there is a dispute between men, and they come into court, and the judges decide between them, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty....

Deuteronomy 27:25

"Cursed be he who takes a bribe to slay an innocent person." And all the people shall say, "Amen."

2 Kings 21:16

Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin which he made Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.

Psalms 10:2-11

In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the schemes which they have devised. For the wicked boasts of the desires of his heart, and the man greedy for gain curses and renounces the LORD. In the pride of his countenance the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, "There is no God." His ways prosper at all times; thy

judgments are on high, out of his sight; as for all his foes, he puffs at them. He thinks in his heart, "I shall not be moved; throughout all generations I shall not meet adversity." His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under his tongue are mischief and iniquity. He sits in ambush in the villages; in hiding places he murders the innocent. His eyes stealthily watch for the hapless, he lurks in secret like a lion in his covert; he lurks that he may seize the poor, he seizes the poor when he draws him into his net. The hapless is crushed, sinks down, and falls by his might. He thinks in his heart, "God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it.

Psalm 106:36-38

They served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the land was polluted with blood.

Proverbs 6:16-19

There are six things which the LORD hates, seven which are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and a man who sows discord among brothers.

Endnotes

1. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.viii.xi.
2. From "Of the Law of God," Chapter XXI (PCUS), para 5.

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