

Part 2: A Search for Truth: Commonsense Hermeneutics and Diverse Sexuality

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Let's pretend that you grew up in a culture that lovingly provided a set of values by which everyone lived. As you develop a healthy reasoning capacity you begin to wonder if what you have been taught holds true under all circumstances. You notice glaring discrepancies in the way the rules are applied. While most people seem comfortable with these inconsistencies something inside of you is uneasy and you begin to quietly, and in safe settings, raise disturbing questions. You know that you don't have the answers to your questions so you seek out highly respected leaders and well-regarded experts who scoff at your questions and make you question your own questions. Maybe I'm the problem, you conclude.

Over time you stuff the questions and settle in with the majority. Amazingly, they reward you with positions of power and influence. Now what seemed not right gets murky in the comfort of people not bothered by such issues. The questions do not go away. You build a library of resources and gain expertise in those areas of concern. You secretly respond to others who look to you for advice, but you do not share publicly the secrets you have discovered. The uneasiness remains, but you become adept in publicly avoiding the issues.

As you bask in the approval of the highly regarded the cost of questioning the system in which you are deeply invested becomes too high a risk for the losses you know you will suffer. There are others depending on you by now, people who would be harmed if you found the courage to rock the boat, and still others who would suffer losses they didn't ask for. But in your quiet moments you wonder. You feel disconnected internally with the inner voice that once challenged the cultural norms.

As you hear your own voice publicly endorsing the system that has nurtured and promoted you up the ladder of success there remains a *dis-ease* internally that will not let go. Finally, when you feel you can no longer live with the intensity of the dissonance within you pull away from the vortex of confusion in which you are drowning to see if you can find the source of truth. You go to an old familiar setting where you first began to question the world around you—a quiet place where nature and silence abounds. Here in solitude you search for the one you trust above all others, the one who will listen and help you sort out the truth, but you are terrified of the possible implications of that truth.

Answers do not come quickly, but over the years you keep returning, and you keep on knocking. You continue asking and searching relentlessly. The burden has become unbearable. You know you cannot continue to return, picking up your life again and again, without confirmation and affirmation of the pathway you feel you must take. And, what do you get from your trusted counselor who's seen you through more crises that you can recall? More and deeper questions.

Your friend tells you to simplify your life, to practice the art of silence and solitude so that you are able to truly listen above the clutter of self-talk. You begin to attune yourself to the subtle messages you were unable to hear in the noise of ordinary life. You are discovering the secret of listening. You are amazed at the many ways the truth is seeking you. You begin to understand why the truth would not let you rest. Among the many voices clambering for your response you find the truth in the voice worthy of your attention. The voice not influenced by the petty issues of power and praise. You begin to sense that the inner conflict was there for a reason. The search is creating a new you, a humble you, and it is shaping

you into the person you were meant to be. Something was wrong and it was not your imagination. You humbly surrender to that voice whatever the cost.

The late Henry Nouwen, the Dutch Catholic priest who gave up his life as an internationally respected professor at Harvard in order to serve the mentally challenged, was heard to have said, “That which is most personal is most universal.” I invited you into the above hypothetical journey because I have found a growing number of believers who identify with what, as you suspect by now, is my own personal story. I agree with Father Nouwen that when we reveal our most intimate struggles we often are opening a dialogue with fellow strugglers longing to know they are not alone.

The fact that you are reading these words reflects my decision to acknowledge publicly the questions and answers I have found from listening to that voice—the same one Jesus promised would be available to us in our search for his truth. This is the still, quiet voice that must be heard above the noise of the world, even above the religious majority who sometimes does not recognize or listen to this voice. I found that this voice affirms and often brings new meaning to biblical texts we have long studied and recited as our authority on life, death and the hereafter.

Where My Questions and Answers Led Me

I am a believer, a follower of Jesus Christ, trying to grasp the full implications of discipleship. I accept the promise of Jesus to be available to us after his departure from this world through the “Spirit of truth.” Jesus describes this Spirit as one and the same with him and his Father and declares his desire for the believer to be a part of this unity so that we may be guided “into all truth.” He continues, “All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:2-15)

I believe when at Jacob’s well Jesus said to the biracial woman (who admitted she had five husbands, and the one she was currently with was not her husband) that *whoever* drinks of the living water will never thirst again, and will become themselves a spring of water, welling up to eternal life, actually means *everyone*. (John 4:13) When the Samaritan woman tried to digress from her personal failures to ask where the correct place of worship might be, Jesus replied, “The day is coming, and now is, when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.” (John 4:23)

Later, Jesus said, “I am the bread of life; *whoever* comes to me will no longer be hungry, and *whoever* believes in me shall never thirst.” (John 6:35) “For this is the will of my Father, that *everyone* who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life . . .” (John 6:40) Again, I read this to mean *everyone*!

As a believer I had to examine carefully what the Bible had to say about homosexuality. What did I find? Not much. You read in the Bible about polygamy as an accepted practice of God’s people in ancient times. You discover family practices governed by laws foreign to our twenty-first century mind. But homosexuality is not mentioned in the Ten Commandments or the Summary of the Law. The prophets were silent on the subject. Jesus never mentioned it. Not much of a concern about homosexuality as we know it today in the churches served by Paul and his successors.

If you are determined to find any mention of homosexuality in the Bible you are in for a lengthy search, and likely to find it only in a modern day user-friendly concordance. Why? Because the word didn’t exist until the late nineteenth century and is not mentioned in any of the original manuscripts used in translating them into English. No extant text or manuscript, Hebrew, Greek, Syrian or Aramaic. None of these languages ever contained a word corresponding to the English word, “homosexual”. . . according to historian, John Boswell, in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western*

Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1980).

The King James Version of 1611, so popular in my early years of theological education that it was jokingly referred to as “the Bible Jesus used,” does not mention it. It was first used in the Revised Standard Version in 1946, according to Peter Gomes, minister at the Memorial Church at Harvard where he was professor of Christian Morals. You may refer to his New York Times bestseller, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (p. 149) for a comprehensive discussion of biblical passages used by people erroneously to defend their beliefs regarding homosexuality. Likewise, you may go to my website to secure a copy of Dr. Warren Carter’s discussion of “Same Sex Texts and the New Testament.” He is professor of New Testament at Brite Divinity, Texas Christian University.

In summary, based on what can be learned from the biblical authors themselves, they never conceived of a loving, same sex, monogamous, committed-for-life relationship in which the partners sought to follow the teaching of Christ in the same fashion of devout, married heterosexual couples. Apparently, what was referred to as same sex behavior in their own environment was prostitution, pederasty, lasciviousness and exploitation—similar vices which plague heterosexual behavior today.

Just as Jesus re-introduced a broader interpretation of Jewish law found in the Old Testament . . . just as the apostles, under the guidance of God’s Holy Spirit, continued to interpret and apply his teachings to different cultures and settings, so must we seek what is sometimes called “the mind of Christ,” the “Spirit of truth,” in interpreting God’s truth and applying this truth in the twenty-first century.

The Role of Contemplative Prayer* in My Search for Truth

What I will share with you today did not show up uninvited in these so called “golden years” of my seventieth decade. There were distinct traces of a contemplative life in my childhood, adolescence and young adult life as a minister. I did not discuss it with anyone that I can recall but I practiced it in the beautiful mountains of my north Georgia youth and the grand Colorado Rockies (where I am at the time of this writing) of my middle adult years. I found in solitude and silence a God far greater than language could convey in the dynamic equilibrium of the cosmos and the microorganisms within my own body.

Eventually, I came to recognize more than the reality I could see, touch, smell, taste or hear.

1. **Reality of the Physical** (about science at the micro and macro levels—crucial to our physical survival) Some begin and end their search for truth here.
2. **Reality of the Psychological** (about emotions, thoughts and behaviors, increasingly understood as a systemic part of the physical) Some rely almost entirely on feelings, which often produce their thoughts and behaviors.
3. **Reality of the Social** (plays a critical role in our formation individually and, in turn, defines the ways in which we shape our environment; increasingly understood as a broader view of physical/psychosocial) For some their search is exclusively for opinions and perspectives of others.
4. **Reality of the Spiritual** (drives the human need for meaning—accessible only by faith and becomes the reality out of which the follower of Jesus Christ lives) These recognize there is a dimension beyond all other realities.

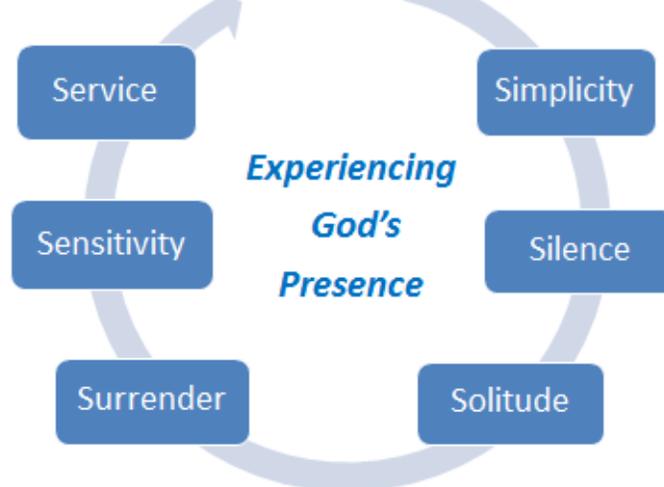
As a human being experiencing life out of control and as a researcher studying the world of stress-prone individuals I discovered the importance of homeostatic balance. My research identified psychological stress as the “mismatch between an individual’s coping skills and the demands of the

environment.” As my knowledge of the body’s alarm system grew I learned that this was not so much a definition of stress as a description of the conditions under which the human stress response occurs.

In 1989 I was invited to join a group of people doing this kind of research in Boston at a seminar sponsored by Harvard-affiliated McLean Hospital entitled, “Advances in Behavioral Medicine.” Here I learned from renowned Harvard cardiologist, Herbert Benson, the incredible potential of the mind/body for harm or healing. As I applied this knowledge in inpatient and outpatient settings in the years to follow I began to understand better the connection between two of the body’s most important neurological functions found in the autonomic nervous system: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic systems. Indeed, this process led to insight into how well integrated the mind/body is with the spiritual reality of the believer.

Outline of the Reality of the Spiritual

The Cycle of Spiritual ReFormation



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- A. Contemplative Prayer is about focus; “being still and knowing. . .”
 - 1. External: blocking out the overstimulation of the outside world which has us in its grip and so often influences or controls our thoughts and decisions; it is about shutting down input in order to focus on the Reality of the Spiritual
 - 2. Internal: gaining control of self-talk, the incessant chatter that is fed by our need to make sense of everything and ends up exhausting and depleting our creative energies. Using the mind/body’s own resources as a pathway to contemplative prayer
- B. Contemplative Prayer is about listening; “ears that hear. . .”
 - 1. Attuning to God’s Spirit
 - a. In “praying the scriptures”
 - b. In the tradition of *lectio divino*

2. Attuning to God's Spirit
 - a. In silence
 - b. In all forms of God's creation
 - c. In recorded narratives of people of faith
- C. Contemplative Prayer is about "*experiencing*" God's Presence
 1. By experiencing solitude
 - a. Physically separating from the world
 - b. Experiencing *solus* of the heart
 2. By "adoration" of God
 3. By "resting" in God
 4. By being "graced" and "embraced" by God
- D. Contemplative Prayer is about *surrender*
 1. To what is revealed by God's Spirit
 2. To whatever change is needed
 3. To whatever actions are required
- E. Contemplative Prayer is about living a Contemplative Life
 1. In Sensitivity to God's world
 2. In Service that emerges from God's Presence
 3. Through the disciplines of spiritual "re-formation"

Is the contemplative life for everyone? I don't know. Experiencing God's Presence is essential, and it is my opinion that God is at work in the heart of everyone, inviting us, and drawing us towards him. Are we always aware of God's Presence? Are we listening? Contemplative prayer became the process by which God got my attention long before I knew it by this name. The contemplative *life* is my focus as it emerges from the practice of contemplative prayer. I must admit that due to my own ignorance regarding "mystics," people who retreated into solitude as a spiritual discipline, I was uncomfortable with the term when applied to my own journey. Yet, whatever one chooses to call this discipline it has become so integrated into my daily life that I can't imagine having arrived here or going from here any other way.

It's not within my power to know by what means God chooses to draw one to him. How arrogant would it be of me to think I'm privy to the mystery of God's interaction with another? I remain a novice among novices. I can only say that for me it has been a lifelong process of quiet celebration and noisy pain. Henry Nouwen described this kind of solitude as "the furnace of transformation . . . the place where God remodels us in his own image." I described it in my book as "the crucible of our spiritual re-formation, where we bring our broken selves for healing . . . a place where God's vision for us stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing culture." I no longer have the option of merely listening in these quiet times to the Voice I've chosen to follow. When action is called for, however, there is less and less fear and more and more peace.

When my colleagues and I (Center for Christian Leadership, BGCT) began inviting Christian leaders to participate in spiritual formation retreats that embraced these and other disciplines we made a discovery. People are not standing in line to jump into the fiery furnace. Indeed, there seems to be a huge reality check at the front door. The biggest obstacle we found was that people are not willing to get involved in spiritual disciplines until they "hit the brick wall." As long as we think we are adequate—that our religious traditions and practices will get us there, that we just need to try harder, then we will not push the envelope. The unknown is always scary, but so is living in our own strength.

There has to be a deep hunger for God's Presence—a longing for intimacy with God—a restlessness that will not let us go (Jacob's ladder episode) until we are blessed by God's Presence. We don't really know what we are asking of God, we just know we are miserable. We have done it all right,

by the book so to speak, burned ourselves out. We fall exhausted trying to find what God stands ready to give. . . once we are in a place to listen.

Because spiritual formation in reality seems to be a recycling process, a journey of continuous rediscovery, I refer to it as “spiritual re-formation.”

*“Spiritual Re-formation” is not merely
prioritizing. It is reordering our lives to a consistent
search for intimacy with God.*

*It comes from a hunger,
a thirst that is never satisfied.*

*It is nevertheless fulfilling in the sense that the
ever deepening search for closeness with God
is in itself a reward.”*

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What Jesus Said About the Search for Truth

At the outset of this writing I shared with you the breadth (everyone) of the Jesus invitation to eternal life. Next I discussed spiritual reality, the lens through which followers of Jesus view the world. I followed up with my own story of how God used this lens as a pathway to experience spiritual reformation through the discipline of contemplative prayer. Now I’d like to take a close look at what Jesus said regarding our search for truth. As you read the words of Jesus, recorded by the one human believed to be his closest friend, consider the unity Jesus describes between himself, his heavenly Father, and the Holy Spirit. Then consider the One to whom he points us in our search for truth.

John 1:1 The beloved disciple introduces the Jesus he knew:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 14:9 Jesus speaks plainly about his relationship with the Father:

He who has seen me has seen the Father.

John 14:15-21 Jesus introduces the Holy Spirit:

If you love me you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.

So where is the confusion as to interpreting the Word of God? Is there any doubt that Jesus re-interpreted, expanded upon and illuminated the scriptures that were the bedrock of Jewish law, that which is known to us as the Old Testament?

Is there anyone who can read these words of Jesus presented in John's Gospel and miss the point that Jesus, "the Word," present in the creation as the Creator himself, will continue to be present after his ascension in the form of God's Spirit, the Counselor, or Spirit of truth who resides or "abides" within those who love him and genuinely attempt to follow his teachings?

Then why is there doubt that we are to listen to that Spirit of truth, the Counselor, who is both in the Father and Jesus and us? Why do we cling to *some* archaic texts in ancient Jewish history and not others? Do we use them as defenses for specific prejudices we hold? Why do we *not* pay attention to biblical references found in Leviticus, chapters 17-20 regarding animal sacrifice, wearing clothes made of two materials, or restrictions regarding sowing a field with two kinds of seed?

Or, why do we pretend that a convoluted story of an attempted gang rape of male angels in the Sodom and Gomorrah passage is relevant to a loving same sex relationship today? To say nothing of Lot's horrendous offering of his virgin daughters to prevent the rape of the angels in his home?

In addition, why is it that when Paul references some specific practices like slavery, cultural gender roles in the early church, or refers to a kind of same sex practice (pederasty, older males with young male prostitutes), unrelated to what we today know as homosexuality . . . why do we not seek the illumination of the Spirit of truth, the Counselor, the One who is obviously in God, to guide us in understanding God's Word for us today?

Why is seeking the guidance of God's Holy Spirit not acceptable in understanding today's complex moral questions? Because (a) we do not believe we are capable of discerning and distinguishing God's Spirit from our own human thoughts and the influence of other voices; (b) we fear listening to God's Spirit would undermine the written Word which we trust more than we do the *living* Word; (c) listening to God's Spirit could pose risks in our relationship with official positions of the church we love; (d) listening to God's Spirit could lead to changes in our behavior that might impact our culture and put our position in it at risk. In other words, the fear of listening and surrendering to God's Spirit, the *living* Word, could be costly.

More on what Jesus said about God, himself, and the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives today:

John 14:25

These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But, the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

Impact of Intimacy with God and Implications for You and Culture

John 15:1-6

Summary of references to Christ as the true vine: The Father as the vinedresser; Christ, the vine; the believer as the vine branches; importance of the vine branches abiding in Christ, and Christ in them and abiding in the love of the Father and Christ. (The obvious desire of Jesus for an intimate, ongoing relationship between the living Word and the believer.) Verse 6 refers to what happens when this

intimate relationship does not exist: the branch is cut off, withers, is gathered with other dead branches and burned.

Psalm 1:3, Jeremiah 17:7-8

References to the tree planted by the water that produces fruit in the good and bad times; symbolism of God as the water, tree as God's follower, and its roots the source of life by virtue of its proximity to the water)

John 15:11-17

These things I've spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. . . .love one another as I've loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants (or slaves), for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you. . . .that you should bear fruit and that your fruit should abide. . . .love one another.

John 15:20-27

Consequences of an intimate relationship with God: *If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. They hated me without a cause.* (Jesus quoting the scriptures.)

The Promise: *But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning.*

John 16:2-4

More Consequences: *They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. And they will do this because they have not known the Father, nor me. But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you of them.*

John 16:2-15

More Promises:

. . . it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness . . .

I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (underlined by author)

John 16:16-30 The Physical vs. the Spiritual Reality (paraphrasing summary)

Disciples to each other: *What is he talking about, going to the Father? We are confused. What does he mean? Is he speaking figuratively or in the real world?*

Jesus: *For now, I'm figuratively speaking. I am leaving to return to the Father. Like a woman in childbirth, you will be in anguish when I leave, but like the mother after the birth you will rejoice. But when the time comes I will no longer physically be with you.*

Disciples to Jesus: *Oh, now we get it! We believe! You really did come from God!*

John 17

Read what is called the “intercessory prayer” of Jesus for his disciples then and now (the most emotionally intimate and powerful recorded words of Jesus, in my opinion).

Words of Caution

Who to believe? While “soul competency,” the individual’s God-given capacity to know God and his will, is an important part of my own theological education, it does not remove the responsibility we have individually or collectively to critically examine one’s claim to biblical truth. Of critical importance is the *integrity* of one who claims to have an interpretation of scripture in *apparent* contrast to truths consistently found therein. Hermeneutics is the word theologians use to describe the process of textual interpretation, yet those with expertise in hermeneutics frequently disagree among themselves about the meaning of a given text. This is why we describe *any* attempt to access textual meaning as an “interpretation.” Some attempt must be made to carefully examine the texts from which claims are made.

We are aware that not everyone who claims to represent God’s truth does. There is ample evidence of those claiming to know the voice of God whose lives and the lives of their followers ended in tragedy and still contribute to confusion about the Bible and the mistrust of religious leaders. Jesus himself warned that not everyone who called him “Lord” was a true follower. Throughout history selected and misunderstood Bible passages have become the foundation for what more likely emerged from mental illness or an obsession for power by the one providing the interpretation. When rage, hate and revenge fuel messages of prejudice under the guise of biblical truths you can be certain the messenger has no spiritual credibility and no comprehension of the words and behaviors of Jesus. Look to the “fruits” produced by their lives as evidence of their claim to be a follower of Jesus. Such is the yardstick of spiritual integrity and credibility.

What about the “slippery slope?” Following the reading of an article I wrote on sexual diversity a fellow minister offered, “Dan, you are on a slippery slope. Once you accept homosexuality what do you do about promiscuity?” While the question reflects, in my opinion, a prejudicial assumption that there is a difference in Christian homosexual and Christian heterosexual spiritual integrity, I replied that in my affirmation of same sex orientation (as I believe Jesus would today) I am not affirming sexual irresponsibility.

There seems to be a surprising assumption among many Christians that the support of same sex relationships somehow is an endorsement of sexual promiscuity. Having spent my professional career counseling, writing, leading conferences and teaching about the psychological and spiritual value of heterosexual fidelity in marriage, why would I view homosexual relationships differently? If there were no other reasons for supporting a civil recognition of same sex marriage than that of family and social stability and encouragement of sexual fidelity, indeed such would be sufficient reason for legalizing marriage within a gay union. Obviously, a marriage license itself does not prevent affairs or divorces, but it is a binding civil recognition of a legal commitment between two individuals. And, it hopefully removes the discrimination suffered by committed gay couples who are willing and eager to take on the responsibilities of marriage.

This article, however, is not about the pros or cons of same sex marriage. It is about how my exposure to spiritual disciplines, specifically contemplative prayer, led me to examine my unexamined prejudices towards marginalized people whom Jesus clearly included in his “whosoever will” invitation. It is about overcoming my own immature need for acceptance by fellow Christians who make this issue a litmus test of orthodoxy. I know from clinical experience that many who have sought the inclusion Jesus

promised have been hurt deeply by rejection based on a distorted theology and psychology practiced by well-meaning people. Furthermore, I believe that the same kind of textual legalism Jesus fought is alive and well among Christians today and becomes an inappropriate defense for discrimination and abuse of non-heterosexuals. If nothing else, the body of Christ must examine its own contribution to cultural discrimination against those whom we know had no choice in their sexual orientation. We must examine our silence when extremists quote the same passages we quote in defense of hate crimes.

When you say you are a Bible-believing Christian, whose interpretation of the Bible are you basing your claim upon? Whether or not we recognize it we have made biblical assumptions throughout our lives based on someone's interpretation of God's truth. Have you approached the record God's revelation of himself with a mind open to the Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised would be our interpreter of truth? Unless you allow God's Spirit a word in this uncomfortable conversation and unless you have carefully examined your claim as a follower of Jesus . . . you may find yourself an uncomfortable guest among his friends at the banquet table.

Finding Interpretive Balance

As I have often said and written, balance is fundamental to the survival of the cosmos, the human body, the planet upon which we depend, as well as, and more painfully, the politics of any culture. But nowhere is balance less evident and more important in the spiritual life of the Christian than in the interpretation of the Bible.

One of my favorite quotes, from an unknown source, is "Meanings are in people, not in words!" In the context of biblical interpretation I must follow up with the questions, "Which people? The author of the text? The one the author is quoting? The experts interpreting the author, the text and the setting? Or, the reader as she/he approaches the text?"

Among the many forms and shapes in which the Bible is known to have existed historically, could it be that the "meaning" of the text has existed in any or all of the above to the extent that God's Spirit, the Spirit of truth, was actively at work? *Could it be that the common interpretive denominator in the text, the author and reader is and always will be the Spirit of God?* Certainly history abounds with "interpretations" of biblical texts designed to justify or defend actions that seem not to be the work of God's Spirit. But who gets to say when it is God's Spirit at work in one's interpretation of a biblical text and when it is not? By what standard may we ascertain God's Presence in such an interpretation? Who is objective enough to make such a determination? Who among us is qualified to judge when God's Presence was or is active in the interpretation of a text?

We may understandably point out that God gave us a brain for such determination. Yet as a student of human behavior and the brain's perceptive functions for well over thirty years I have far too often observed that the brain is not that reliable. It is in fact a complex organ, far too easily influenced by its own past and its present need to be socially accepted. Subjectivity abounds even among the most objective of us. Jesus made it painfully clear that our predisposition to judge others will and does come back to haunt us.

We may learn upon careful examination of the text that we don't even know for certain the identity of the author. What if manuscripts vary in identification of the author? What if the author's name was attached to the writings at a much later date? What if the author is quoting God? How can we know that these were not merely the author's opinions or interpretation of events attributed to God? Did the

gospel writers quote Jesus precisely or determine over time that this must have been what Jesus meant? What do we do with texts found in some but not all of the manuscripts?

We know that writers differ among their reports of the words and behaviors of Jesus and that some included certain events that others did not. And, many, many years passed before they were written down, copied and circulated. As years passed a group of devout human beings to whom we owe a great debt attempted to determine the use and credibility given them by the faithful followers of Jesus Christ. The result of this challenging process is what we call today the Bible.

This “canon” has become the foundation and source of guidance for untold millions of Christians for hundreds of years. Yet, as difficult as it is for those who interpret the Bible literally, and insist on its infallibility and absence of error in any form, the true meaning of the text is found in the God to whom the text refers. That being the case, we cannot assume the same kind of legalistic view of the text that our Jewish forefathers taught, about whom Jesus used his harshest words of condemnation. I believe that the true meaning of any text depends upon the degree to which God was present and active in what is known as the “interpretive triangle” adapted below.

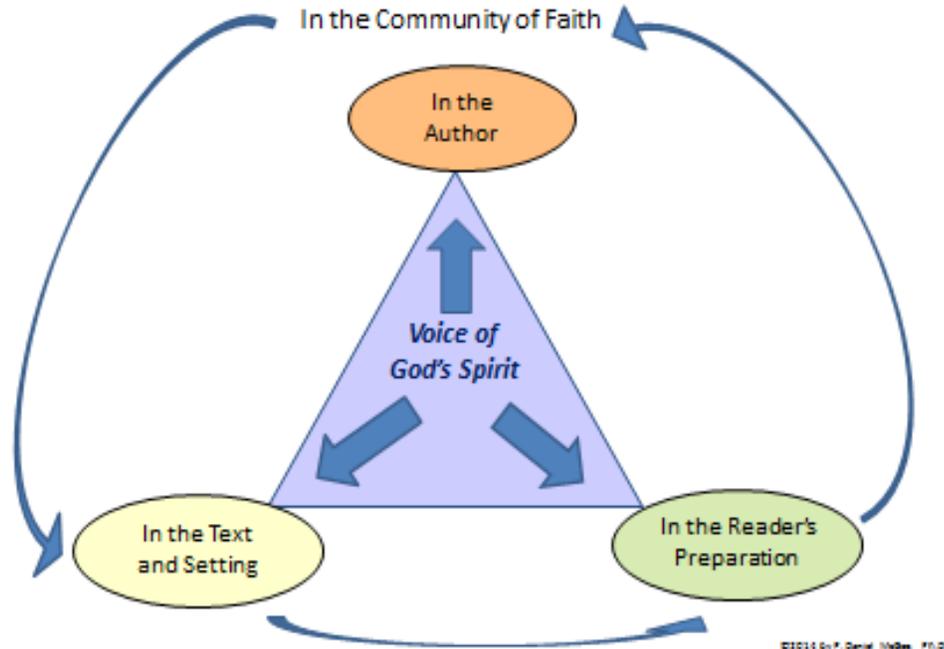
What I find intriguing is what documents were not included in the Bible. The beloved apostle, John, admitted that it would be impossible to have recorded everything Jesus said and did. Jesus told the disciples before his ascension that he had many more unspoken truths to share with them, but that they were not able to handle them. Ever wonder what truths Jesus was referring to?

The elephant in the room of this discussion is the similarity between the rigidity of textual interpretation among religious leaders of Jesus’ day and that of many religious leaders today. Both represent a strict form of legalism found in “literalism” that devalues our personal and communal access to God’s Spirit and makes us slaves to an impossible and inflexible standard of religious life and practice. Jesus was enraged at this practice which he compared to swatting at a gnat and swallowing a camel. Given the promise of Jesus for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the search for God’s truth, how does God’s Spirit get a word in edgewise?

I will resist the temptation to launch into a psychosocial observation as to why so many religious leaders practice literalism, and why so many religious people follow them. In a sentence, because we humans need structure to provide a sense of security and are reluctant to forfeit the belief system that supports that structure—until that system fails us miserably. Structure supported by a healthy belief system is an inevitable necessity but it must constantly be examined in light of the revolutionary teachings of Jesus and an attentiveness to the Spirit of truth. As Christians we are obsessed with changing lives, so long as it’s done without leaving our institutional comfort zones. Jesus challenged us to a new dimension of faith based on intimacy with God and the risk of loving each other unconditionally.

I like the literary trade’s use of the “interpretive triangle” as well as the description of the encircling “community of interpretation” with which the triangle must interact and to which it must respond (Peter Gomes, 1996). With apologies to the literary community, below is my perspective of how God might attempt to reveal himself through the author, the text/setting, and the prepared reader.

The Presence of God



In my adaptation (above) I place the *Voice of God's Spirit* at the heart of the interpretive triangle. If we believe (a) that God was engaged in revealing himself to the heart and mind of the author of the text and (b) was active in the original application of the text to its setting, does it not make sense that (c) the same God is available and indeed seeking to interpret his own meaning to the heart and mind of today's reader?

Of course! But there is serious preparation required of the reader, as was the case for the original author. Only if the reader is prepared to listen at a level beyond his/her preconception of the truth. It is at this crucial juncture that the reader must have the capacity to listen to God's Spirit interpret God's truth. I humbly submit that it is my belief and experience that this capacity emerges from years of practicing spiritual disciplines. I outline my own journey with the six disciplines of Simplicity, Silence, Solitude, Surrender, Sensitivity and Service in *Experiencing God's Presence: A Personal Guide Through Six Spiritual Disciplines*, published by DMA originally in 2011 and now being edited for a second edition.

The reader is seeking and the Interpreter is interpreting. It is at this point that the Creator implores the reader to join him in the continuation of God's grand creation. Eternal truth then lies within the grasp of the reader as he/she allows God to do the interpretation, and there is no intermediary needed. It is not the text but the God of the text that is important. It is not the author of the text but the Author of the truth that is important, and only the Author of truth can enlighten and bring fresh meaning to the reader. Only the reader consenting to God's Presence in the moment of the textual encounter is able to surrender to its application in the reader's own world. Where there is no Presence there is no truth! Where there is no

authentic truth we are risking misrepresentation, misinterpretation, misapplication and vulnerability to the trends and mischief of both well-intended and ill-intended people.

Do not be discouraged over the apparent textual contradictions in the Bible, even those difficult words of Jesus we struggle to comprehend. His direct instructions as well as the stories he chose to illustrate God's truths were sometimes confusing to his disciples. Jesus became impatient with their inability to get the message. It took the apostles many years to grasp and apply the truths he invested in them. Still, in the church's infancy, the most devout of his apostles disagreed and argued over the meaning of some of his instructions to them. Only as they sought and listened to the voice of God did clarity emerge and the gospel surge.

Surely it comes as no surprise that today's theologians differ significantly over some of the most important themes in the message of Christ. Within the two millennia since the birth of Christianity devout followers of the way have struggled to comprehend the meaning and application of the Good News, and yet the custodian of his teachings, the church, continues to spread across continents as it has centuries. From the rich and powerful to the poor and unheralded the gospel continues to be embraced in every major language and culture on the planet.

If we believe that Jesus was God in human form who came to bring eternal life (qualitative as well as quantitative in nature) to *anyone* who accepts by faith his invitation to discipleship—if we believe that Jesus promised that God's Spirit of truth would remain after his departure to serve as our interpreter of truth—then should we not seek the guidance of God's Spirit to understand and apply his words in our daily lives? So then, what is left to interpretation?

Ingredients Involved in Reader Preparation

1. Truth perceived and discerned in the *Voice of God's Spirit* emerging from spiritual disciplines and God's voice as it continues to reinforce that truth in encounters with others as well as his creation surrounding us. It is through these disciplines and one's engagement in the "community" that God provides a pathway for understanding and service.
2. The sometimes difficult work of assessing *consistency between a given text and the recorded words and descriptive actions of Jesus*. Even the text provided by the gospel writers must be read with openness to God's Spirit in the moment as we read it. We must interpret the entire collection of biblical literature through the eyes of Jesus. His words and behaviors are at the core of biblical truths. It is the God to whom the Bible points that I worship and seek to follow. Jesus continually points to God the Father and the Holy Spirit as promised by him and the Father. The text is important and revered, but not idolized or worshiped. Indeed, the promise of Jesus upon his departure was that his and the Father's Spirit of truth would be there to guide us as we seek his truth.

In summary, I believe that truth as revealed by God's Spirit to one immersed in God's Presence remains the dominant factor in interpreting the text of the Bible. It is God who breathes life into the Bible, but we must be "one" with him to actually hear and discern its truths.

Progressive Revelation: Alive today?

I find it interesting that those who accept the concept of "progressive revelation," that the God of creation revealed himself "progressively" to humans over vast periods of time, hiding the deeper aspects of his eternal truths from ancient civilizations, apparently choosing to speak to specific issues in ways

relevant to the setting and culture of the day, *but not today*. As the notable biblical characters, Abraham, Noah, Moses, David and the prophets emerged we believe God used these who enjoyed a more intimate relationship with him to speak to the people on his behalf. The culmination of this progressive revelation is believed to be revealed in Jesus, the Christ, the promised Messiah.

As the New Testament writers began to emerge (we have only copies of their original documents) God continued to reveal truths interpreted from the teachings and behaviors of Jesus. Some of these new truths affirmed and reflected valued and revered truths from the law and prophets, yet others revealed entirely new perspectives of what God expects of his people. A logical continuation of progressive revelation, although not likely acceptable to literalists, would be that over time we gain from God more and more insight into the nature and purpose of God, and God's truths, as they relate to today's world. The *eternal* truths, God's desire for an intimate and loving relationship with us and his challenge that we love each other in the same manner we love ourselves, do not change, but the implications and applications must be continuously reinterpreted.

How does this continuing self-revelation of God occur, and to whom? We know very little about *how* and nothing about *why* God chose to reveal his nature and will to our ancient biblical heroes of the faith. Nor do we know *why* Jesus chose such ordinary and humanly flawed people with whom to share his life and teachings. A part of what I've learned in my lifetime journey with God, however, is that God is always seeking intimacy—communion with those open to his Presence. Perhaps this indeed is the *why* and *how* of God's self-revelation to us.

Imagine that! God wants to reveal more of himself to you. The more you experience God's Presence the more you *know* God and the more you want to know him. As brazen and bold as it sounds for me to say this, the more closeness you experience with God the more you will take on God's nature and characteristics in your world and relationships. Humanly flawed as you are, you will find yourself more sensitive to his Presence in others and more likely to allow his voice to guide you in your service to others day to day. God wants to be connected to us, not by an occasional prayer or periodic church attendance when weather permits, but by an ongoing relationship, a state of communication and interaction with him. Perhaps it is obvious why I choose the word "intimacy" to describe this divine/human union with God.

By the process of simplifying our lives, learning to be still—practicing silence, recognizing and listening to his voice, experiencing unhurried solitude with him, so that we are able to discern his voice and not only understand his will but act on it in surrender—this is how we participate in the continuing creation of God's world. Perhaps this is what the writer of Genesis, believed to be Moses, meant by the words, "Let *us* create man in *our* own image . . ."

When you are experiencing God's Presence it will surprise you how easily you begin to recognize the Spirit of God in the written words of the ancients, those who walked and talked with Jesus, those whose words have miraculously been preserved in the gospels and letters of the New Testament. You begin to feel "connected" through God's Spirit to the lives and writings of the community of saints who've gone before you—those recognized by historians and those whose names you will never know in this life. But, as you read and "listen" with a new set of ears you identify with the voice of God you hear in their lives and writings. And, not least of all, you will encounter the most unlikely people in whom you sense God at work and you will feel God's prodding to reach out to those unnoticed and hurting all around you. Sounds like Jesus, right? Yes it does. I wonder why?

God's Self-revelation Then and Now

Very significant questions surface and must be addressed by the reader: If progressive revelation is a valid interpretive concept does it make sense that it all came to a screeching halt once the biblical canon was agreed upon? Did God revoke a self-revelation process, initially an oral one, followed by thousands of years of written documents, once theologians determined we had the final revelation in what today is known as the Holy Bible? Or, does God continue to reveal his nature and message in the same manner today? The protestant reformation certainly led many followers of Christ to reinterpret what the institutional church had established as God's truths and how they should guide our lives.

In 1970 Alvin Toffler used the term "Future Shock" (the title of his book) to describe the psychological reaction to the accelerated pace of social change experienced in the twentieth century. In the forty-plus years since we have learned that he was describing the tip of the iceberg. In my study of the human stress response in the years since Toffler's alarming observations I discovered that the mind/body continues its struggle to adapt to an unprecedented level of hyper stimulation in a global culture on the brink of technological self-destruction.

I leave you to ponder why God found it important to progressively reveal himself to ancient cultures over thousands, if not millions of years, but not to those of the past two thousand years, and more amazingly, not to those facing the complexities of the twentieth-first century?

Biblical Interpretation and the Scientific Process

Some Christians view the biblical text as a literal transcription of God's message and struggle with textual references that appear to be in conflict with today's scientific knowledge. A part of discernment of truth is the use of what God has enabled us to discover about our world by means of scientific exploration. Science is always an emerging, unfinished process building upon its discoveries and revealing new frontiers of knowledge. It is a part of our stewardship of God's creation. It enables discovery to build upon scientific reality, and sometimes replace it.

Biblical writers had not yet been exposed to knowledge of the earth's orbit around the sun, the shape of the planet, the microorganisms at work within the body or the functions of neurotransmitters in the brain. Yet, the capacity to seek and discover the *physical* reality is one of the unique gifts of God to humankind.

The Bible has a revered place in the heart of the believer because it is an inspired treasury of eternal truths and a history of God's relationship with humankind. Within its pages we find the stories of our successes and, more importantly, our failures to live in relationship with God, yet the Bible was never intended to be a guidebook of scientific knowledge. Biblical truths are eternal and lie in a dimension beyond the scope of science as it stretches to bring comprehension of our incredible physical environment. Scientific knowledge which we take for granted in our daily lives must be incorporated in the continuing understanding of the creation. *God expects us to seek and maintain an intimate relationship with him and use our growing knowledge of his complex creation in exploring and applying biblical truths to our world today.*

Let's be clear about what I believe occurs when God's Spirit reveals God's truths in contemplative prayer and the reading of the text. The brain (an organ of the body) or the mind (a function of the brain) is not *assaulted* by some unrelated, external alien known as the Spirit of God. As a Christian I believe, by means of a process fully known only to the Creator, God is the creator of all there is, including the brain and its functions. Science, the means by which humans attempt to learn about the

creation, reveals that the unique biophysical characteristics of each person exist at conception. We now know that within these embryonic nerve cells are contained all of the instructions necessary for the development of that organism.

I believe that God's Spirit, which exists both within and beyond us in a dimension we cannot comprehend, uses our uniquely created selves in the process of revealing himself in ways that serve his eternal purposes in the continuing creation. *In other words, God uses his creation and creative powers to reveal to the prepared seeker whatever serves God's purposes for that specific moment in time.*

Regardless of what some literalists believe, not every word, sentence, paragraph or "book" in the Bible is equal in importance. Still, because of the significance, relevance and consistency of *certain* truths found throughout the Bible we must seek to discern the truth of God not only through contemplative prayer but also in a disciplined study of the Bible. Because this writer treasures immeasurably the recorded teachings and actions of Jesus it is imperative that I listen to the Spirit of truth whom Jesus promised would "guide us in all truth . . ."

I have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:2-15, again emphasis underlined by author)

Conclusion

You must decide who the authority will be in your interpretation of scripture, and who your model will be as you apply his words in your world. The *core* mission and message of Jesus is abundantly clear in the records we have of his life and teachings. After many years of reading and studying the New Testament there still remains, however, some gaps in my understanding of some of his recorded words. But, I am not alone. The disciples didn't always get the message either, although they were present, on site, with the teacher carefully observing them.

Although we may wish otherwise, it is not possible to resolve all textual issues to our satisfaction in the Bible *or* in scientific writings. The important question is, do we seek intimacy with God and do we practice what we clearly understand to be the lifestyle of a disciple of Jesus? There was no confusion in the message Jesus presented in word and deed regarding what our relationship is to be with those marginalized, rejected, neglected and abused. Not only was his invitation to *everyone* who believed in him, but his behavior repeatedly validated it.

Should there be any doubt remaining in your mind as to who God's Spirit includes in the invitation to the family of faith, read the story of Peter's encounter of the "unclean" Gentiles arriving at Cornelius' house (Acts 10) and the Spirit of God's confrontation with Peter regarding his longstanding rejection of non-Jews who sought to follow Jesus. In verse 34 Peter crosses perhaps the most significant boundary in the history of Christianity by declaring; "Now I am certain that God treats all people alike. God is pleased with everyone who worships him and does right, no matter what nation they come from." And finally, in verse 47, Peter concludes; "These Gentiles have been given the Holy Spirit, just as we have! I am certain that no one would dare stop us from baptizing them." (Contemporary English Version) In the following years the growth of Christianity exploded across the known world as the apostles carried the good news of the "whosoever will" invitation.

Interestingly, when we seek to maintain an intimate relationship with God we do not need to be reminded about how we should treat those God loves. It becomes a God-like pattern of behavior inherent in the life of the Jesus people. And, so may it always be. Amen.

Unless otherwise noted Bible references are from the *Revised Standard Version (RSV)*.

*Notes:

Follow up article: The above article is a follow up to “Part 1: Diverse Human Sexuality: Viewpoint of a Christian Sexologist” by Dan McGee, February 20, 2014, available at www.drданmcgee.com.

Regarding gender-neutral language: I have believed for a very long time that references to God should be gender-neutral since God is neither male nor female. While I generally attempt to speak and write in a gender-neutral style, when it comes to gender-neutral references to God I find this practice awkward and an obstacle to the audiences I’m trying to reach, not so much due to cultural bias as the overwhelming use of the masculine pronoun by Bible translators when referring to God. As I move back and forth between the biblical text and my own message I have chosen to retain gender continuity in references to God. May God’s Spirit of truth be our guide and may the language become an effective tool rather than an unnecessary challenge.

Definition of Contemplative Prayer: Contemplative prayer, in my experience, is not a specific event in time but an ongoing process of openness in communion with God. It is the outcome of experiencing God’s Presence. (*From Experiencing God’s Presence: A Personal Guide Through Six Spiritual Disciplines*, by Dan McGee)

About the author

Dan McGee, Ph.D., is a licensed marriage and family therapist, has been certified as a sex therapist by two national accrediting associations, is board certified in clinical sexology and was named Founding Clinical Fellow of the American Academy of Clinical Sexologists. He is a former psychology professor and director of the family psychology graduate program at Hardin-Simmons University. A graduate of Baylor University, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Texas Woman’s University (Ph.D.) with additional graduate work at the University of Texas at Arlington he has served as an adjunct professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University.

For over a decade Dr. McGee supervised the counseling and psychological services of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, first as director and later as an independent contractor. He was responsible for the assessment of ministry students in nine universities and two seminaries. He co-authored a special format of the renowned Birkman Method® designed for Christian leaders based on a two-year study of effective Christian leaders which he coordinated. He is best known in his profession for the creation of the ABCs of Stress® model designed to reduce emotional stress responses of hostility, anxiety and depression. This model is based on his own original research with stress prone individuals.

In his retirement he works as an independent contractor at the Center for Counseling & Enrichment, a ministry of the First Baptist Church, Arlington, Texas. As CEO of Dan McGee Associates, Inc. he provides consulting and leadership assessment services to churches and non-profit organizations and provides certification for stress management consultants. He is author of *Choosing Balance: The ABCs of Stress Management* and *Experiencing God’s Presence: A Personal Guide Through Six Spiritual Disciplines*, available through the website below.

He and his wife, Sandra, a Certified Family Life Educator, authored the book *Celebrating Sex in Your Marriage* and Dan served as issue editor of a theological journal on sexuality and the church. He is an ordained minister with experience at almost every position in Texas Baptist church life, and has over thirty years of experience in private practice specializing in marriage, sexual and stress-related issues.

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