Inspiration alone, however, is not sufficient for communicating what the prophet’s brain has received and processed. That requires expiration. The vocal cords don’t work well with inspiration alone; it is expiration that permits communication of a message to the community of eagerly waiting believers.

Expiration is no longer 100-percent pure Heaven’s air of just nitrogen and oxygen. The expiration through the vocal cords now has carbon dioxide from the blood, traces of the five loaves and two fishes eaten for lunch!

Professor Timm obviously prefers the “high” view of inspiration. And frankly, who among us couldn’t be enthusiastic about the pure unpolluted (shall we say “infallible”) heavenly air inspiring all holy prophets, including those born in Gorham, Maine.

It is not the question of “high” inspiration, but of “low” expiration when we point out that what went into the prophet’s nostrils as pure Heaven’s air, comes out through the prophet’s vocal cords or pen with the unmistakable scent of barley and fish.

If you try to convince my children and grandchildren that the output of Ellen White did not contain factual and contextual errors or other fallibilities, you will only convince them of your blindness. If you hold that the inspiration of Bible prophets means that those inspired/expired words are not a mixture of the pure divine and the fallible human, then you end up forbidding women to speak in church, preferring celibacy to marriage, and denying God the freedom to speak through the book of Nature about the details of creation events.

Over time, the more thoughtful, honest, and educated believers will surely come to see the obvious—what was inspired by our inerrant God is expired by His fallible prophets in a useful, reliable, dependable, but not unmixed or infallible form.

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**BY JOHN WESLEY TAYLOR, V**

**IS TRUTH OF CONSEQUENCE?**

There is a very shiny lining to the last-day clouds amassing on humanity’s horizon.

The clatter of a mob shattered the morning calm. An accused man, noble and serene, stood before the Roman magistrate. It was the moment for judicial action. Pilate faltered. The verdict became a question: “What is truth?” (John 18:38).¹

Pilate’s query has echoed through the corridors of time. It has become increasingly relevant in a world of growing confusion, a world steeped in strife and stereotypes, a planet concerned with relevance and rubbish. The questions reach us: How do we, as Christians, delineate truth? How do we identify and ascertain truth? How do we establish a biblical foundation for our encounter with truth?

These are particularly relevant in the postmodern world—a decentered, pluralistic society that has proposed the death of objective truth, preferring to think of “a diversity of truths” or simply “truth for me.” Michel Foucault, a philosopher and sociologist whose contributions figure prominently in the postmodern shift, suggests that even the concept of truth itself is dangerous—that “truths” are merely the agendas of special-interest groups with eco-

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In essence, truth is vital, directly influencing our lives. We act upon what we believe to be true, thus shaping the way we live. Truth also affects how we see ourselves. The belief in the divine creation of humankind, for example, joined with the doctrine of the Incarnation, provides a basis for human status and worth. At the end of the day, truth is what matters, judging what we experience and what we do.

In sum, the Christian worldview holds that God is trustworthy and that His revelation of truth is objective and reliable. Human beings must therefore interact directly with the divine repositories of truth, revealed through Scripture, through God’s creation in all of its dimensions, and in the person of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we are to communicate confidence in the trustworthiness of the divine revelation of truth—a “word confirmed, which we do well to heed” (2 Peter 1:19).

Tenets in the Christian Perspective
When one accepts that God is the very essence of truth, what does this suggest? What might be the ramifications of this perspective? There would seem to be, in fact, a number of implications (see Figure 1).

1. For the Christian, truth is anchored in the supernatural. Truth begins with God, not with human beings. The Creator is ultimately the Source of all truth. Consequently,
1. For the Christian, truth is anchored in the supernatural.

2. Truth is eternal because it resides in God.

3. Because God is the ultimate origin of truth and God does not change, truth is unchanging.

4. All truth possesses unity because it comes from the same Source.

5. Truth is infinite because God is infinite.

6. The Christian understanding of truth must be progressive.

7. Because God is the Source of all truth, all truth is ultimately God’s truth.

2. Truth is eternal because it resides in God. Psalm 117:2 states that God’s truth “endures forever.” What does this mean? Because truth is eternal, it existed before the mind of humankind, and hence the mind can neither create nor destroy truth. We can only choose to accept it or to reject it, to abide in the truth or to abandon truth to reside in error.

As Christians, we should remember that nothing can be done “against the truth, but for the truth” (2 Cor. 13:8). Human beings simply cannot obliterate truth. The world had its best chance at Calvary and failed miserably.

Our role, then, as Christians is invitation-al, rather than confrontational. We do not have to so much “defend truth” from annihilation, as to extend the invitation to accept God’s eternal truth.

3. Because God is the ultimate origin of truth and God does not change, truth is unchanging. God-centered truth is absolute and universal in scope—stable across time, place, and person. In contemporary culture, relativism is pervasive, with many individuals maintaining that truth is in a state of perpetual flux—a matter of opinion or social convention. While circumstances do change, and brokenness and fragmentation are evident in many aspects of life, the Christian worldview is able to provide a framework that offers stability and security.

As Christians, we can help postmodern individuals find foundations for their lives, enduring ideals that can provide a basis for living. We can share with them an understanding that the solidity of truth contributes to a personal sense of identity, direction, and belonging.

4. All truth possesses unity because it comes from the same Source. Since God is one, truth is one, for God is truth. Truth, therefore, will always be in harmony with itself wherever and whenever it is found. Anything that contradicts truth is error or reveals a problem with finite human understanding.

There are, perhaps, several implications: (a) To know God is the key to seeing life as a meaningful whole. (b) Though there is always the danger of starting with a false premise or of forcing the evidence, the greater the scope of evidence and the better its fit, the more adequate its justification as truth. (c) We should avoid creating false dichotomies within God’s truth. These could include the severance of mercy and justice, the disconnecting of piety and action, or the partition of faith and learning.

5. Truth is infinite because God is infinite. Our circle of knowledge is surrounded by the vast universe of our ignorance. The endless extent of God’s truth lies as yet virtually undiscovered.

Just as the perimeter of a circle (i.e., our contact with the unknown) increases as the area of that circle enlarges, so the more Christians learn of God’s truth, the more they realize how much there is yet to know—and the more humble they will be (see Figure 2). It’s when the circle is small and our contact with the unknown is reduced that we are tempted to think that we know everything.

How presumptuous, then, it
In examining the biblical paradigm of truth, it seems evident that certain principles are foundational. Truth, in essence, begins with God and not with humankind. It is revealed and not constructed. It is discovered and not determined by a majority vote. It is authoritative and not merely a matter of personal preference. It is feeling that should conform to truth, rather than truth to feelings.

would be for us to declare, at any time, that we have now arrived, that we now possess all the truth. Christians do not have “all the truth,” but ultimately all they have will be truth.

6. The Christian understanding of truth must be progressive. It is not enough to stand in the truth—we are to walk in the path of truth (2 John 4). This concept of “walking” implies new horizons. It is a call to learning and to growth. Though truth does not change, our relationship to truth should develop. We recognize that our understandings of truth are but “works in progress”—that new dimensions of truth should continually open before us.

7. Because God is the Source of all truth, all truth is ultimately God’s truth. Scripture states that “every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17). This suggests that human beings are to view each dimension of their lives—work, study, relationships, recreation, etc.—as an extension of God’s truth.

It also reminds us that we should beware of exclusivity in the claim of truth. While Christians have truth, they do not, in the Christian worldview, have a monopoly on truth. Rather, because God makes His sun shine on the evil and on the good and would have all come to a knowledge of the truth, non-believers also discover truth.

What is the difference, then, between the Christian and the non-Christian? Non-Christians stumble across concepts of truth in their journey through life, while Christians recognize the Source of that truth.

Christian education, for example, recognizes that truth can be discovered and expounded by secular minds and that these explanations can form viable components in the curriculum. At the same time, students should be brought into direct contact with the Source of truth, there discovering personal insights into God’s character and His plan.

In examining the biblical paradigm of truth, it seems evident that certain principles are foundational. Truth, in essence, begins with God and not with humankind. It is revealed and not constructed. It is discovered and not determined by a majority vote. It is authoritative and not merely a matter of personal preference. It is feeling that should conform to truth, rather than truth to feelings. Ideas are not true solely because they are practical; rather, they will ultimately be of value because they are true. In the final analysis, divine truth influences each dimension of our lives as we recognize that all truth is indeed God’s truth.

Receiving the Truth

A biblical perspective of truth, however, implies not only principles, but also process. How do we obtain God’s truth? Through reason? Through revelation? Through a combination of these? What is the role of faith, of inquiry, and of reflection? What is the place of experience? These matters seem to be particularly relevant for the Christian (see Figure 3).

Divine revelation. God desires to reveal truth continually to humankind. Knowing would be unattainable, were it not for the self-initiated, self-revealing nature of God.
complement each form with richer meaning. In the Christian worldview, for example, we recognize that the intrusion of sin has distorted our understanding of the truth revealed through God’s works, both in nature and in human society. Consequently, the Scriptures portray in detail the truth about the untruth.

Ultimately, however, truth is a person. Christ is the fullest revelation of truth: “the express image” (Heb. 1:3) of the divine. This revelation through Christ, anchored in Scripture and expanded through a personal relationship with God (Luke 24:27; John 5:39; 17:3), responds to the human condition in a way that surpasses any other presentation of truth.

Consequently, we, as human beings, must come into personal contact with divine revelation, exploring and examining God’s truth revealed in nature and in human society. We should also see the Holy Scriptures as foundational in clarifying the contours of God’s truth and discern its relevance for our lives. Above all, we are personally to encounter Jesus Christ and experience with Him a vibrant, truth-affirming relationship.

Reason. While revelation, in each of its forms, is God’s channel for truth, it does not replace human thought, nor does it bypass reason. Divine revelation is to be studied, accepted, and applied. Reasoning power is, therefore, a gift from God to help us understand truth. The fact that such a revelation is entrusted to fallible but rational human beings is eloquent testimony to God’s confidence in the rational powers He gave us and in our ability to make reasoned judgments.

As Christians, we are to be prepared to give a reasoned explanation of the beliefs that we hold (1 Peter 3:15). In the early church, the Christians in Berea were commended for not blindly accepting Paul’s teaching, but rather they “searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Throughout His ministry, Christ encouraged His listeners to engage in analytical thinking (Matt. 16:13-15; 18:12; 21:28-32; 22:42-45; Luke 7:24-26; 13:2-4). Even the prophet Jeremiah was not always certain when he had received a revelation until he had checked it against the evidence (32:6-8). Divine revelation thus informs our reason, which in turn evaluates the authenticity and the meaning of that message. In short, reason is a God-given tool to assess the validity of the messages we receive and to interpret their significance. In so doing, the goal of reason is understanding, rather than proof. Reason is not omnipotent—the beguiling allure of rationalism and the Enlightenment project. Rather, human reason can be trustworthy, but only within limits.

Reason is not omnipotent—the beguiling allure of rationalism and the Enlightenment project. Rather, human reason can be trustworthy, but only within limits (Job 11:7; Prov. 30:18; Rom. 11:33). This recognition keeps us from enthroning intellectual pride and safeguards us from deifying reason.

Faith. Faith is also a gift from God (Eph. 2:8). Though neither a source nor channel of truth, faith is an openness to God’s revelation of truth. In so doing, faith performs a key role in the acquisition of truth (James 1:5, 6). Faith, however, goes beyond the mere discovery of truth. It is also a sincere and wholehearted commitment to live the truth (Rom. 2:7, 8; James 2:17).

Contrary to popular perception, faith and reason are not antagonists. Faith is not merely an emotion; rather, it incorporates both cognitive and volitional elements. Faith, for example, is linked to trust, and trust rests on evidence of trustworthiness (Ps. 40:3). Such evidence is clearly found in Scripture—“faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Further confirmation of God’s faithfulness is provided in the natural world and through His involvement in our lives (Matt. 6:25-30; 16:8-10).

Regardless of the source, however, this determination of credibility and dependability involves a careful examination of the evidence.

Faith thus takes the known and responsibly extends belief toward the unknown. It thinks not merely in terms of probabilities, but of possibilities. In that sense, faith bridges the gap between evidence and certainty: “I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him” (2 Tim. 1:12).

Note, however, that faith requires an object. It is confidence in something, trust in someone. But you cannot trust someone you do not know. In order to trust an individual, you must get to know him or her personally; and in order to get to know someone, you need to spend time together—talking together, doing things together. The basis then for understanding and accepting
Christians should be encouraged to question, to probe beneath the surface. They should understand that truth loses nothing by investigation. Rather, both reason and faith are strengthened by the scrutiny of research and refined in the crucible of analysis. At the same time, however, we should recognize that inquiry has its limitations and that even a careful application of scholarship or of scientific methodology is not a guarantee of truthful conclusions.

God’s truth is to spend time with God.

In essence, all must live by faith. Atheists, for example, cannot prove that God does not exist. Their very laws of science do not allow them to prove the non-existence of anything. They choose to believe that there is no God. The question is simply, “Where will you place your faith?”

Inquiry. Faith cannot bypass difficult questions. Rather, faith is exploratory. It both informs and motivates inquiry. It is true that we see dimly (1 Cor. 13:12), but just because the glass may be imperfect doesn’t mean that we should not strive to discover all the truth that it is possible for us to learn.

Inquiry is a divine directive. “If you seek her [wisdom] as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God” (Prov. 2:4, 5). Scripture, in fact, abounds with individuals of faith who exercised the spirit of inquiry (Job 29:16. Ps. 77:6, Acts 17:11, 1 Peter 1:10). The intent is to identify truth—to “hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21).

Christians should therefore be encouraged to question, to probe beneath the surface. They should understand that truth loses nothing by investigation. Rather, both reason and faith are strengthened by the scrutiny of research and refined in the crucible of analysis. At the same time, however, we should recognize that inquiry has its limitations and that even a careful application of scholarship or of scientific methodology is not a guarantee of truthful conclusions (Job 11:7; Ps. 64:6).

Reflection. In order to understand truth, we must seek out opportunities for reflection. Although truth, in the Christian perspective, is neither an internal construction nor relative, it is nonetheless personal. “‘Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good’” (Ps. 34:8). God’s truth is to be individually recognized, understood, and applied. “You desire truth in the inward parts, and in the hidden part You will make me to know wisdom” (Ps. 51:6). This internalization of truth requires time, however, for thought and for meditation.

Scripture encourages us to set aside space in our hectic lives for reflection (Ps. 63:6; 77:6; 119:15, 27, 148; 145:5). Philippians 4:8 reminds us: “Whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.” In His own ministry, Christ valued quiet time for reflection and urged His disciples to do likewise.

Experience. Truth is not merely an abstract entity, a theoretical construct. Rather, truth is to be personally experienced. It must be lived. The concept of “present truth” (2 Peter 1:12) suggests that truth is to be made relevant to our circumstances. It should influence our attitudes, our priorities, and our actions.

Truth is not only descriptive, but also prescriptive—providing both meaning and direction. There is a distinct difference between knowing or believing the truth, and desiring and doing the truth. The devils, for example, know and believe (James 2:19), but they do not love or live the truth.

Christ’s followers, however, must have a love for the truth (2 Thess. 2:10). We should be passionately concerned about truth. We are to yearn for fuller understandings of truth. We are to be convinced that God’s revelation of truth is but the portal to a more abundant life (John 10:10). Then we can declare, “I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:8).

We are also to apply God’s truth to our lives. Truth is more than words; it is action (Matt. 25:34-36; John 17:19; 1 John 1:6; 2:4). Indeed, it is the personal acceptance and application of truth that makes the Christian different from the unbeliever. Living God’s truth serves to open new understandings of truth. “If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God” (John 7:17). We know the truth as we live the truth. Perhaps the question is not so much, “How long have you been in the truth?” but rather, “Is the truth in you?” Are you living the truth?

Thus, while we recognize that God’s truth is not individually relative, it is to become individually relevant. As Christians, we should help
find ourselves forever searching yet “never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7).

2. Though God’s truth is absolute and objective, our perspective on truth is constrained, our knowing is context bound. Our perceptions and understanding depend on our point of view and our focus, as well as on our prior knowledge, experience, and expectations. When Peter received the vision of the unclean animals, for example, he did not at first understand its meaning. Only upon arrival at Cornelius’ house did Peter discern God’s truth. Context would consequently seem to be a key factor in receiving and sharing truth.

Our Fallenness. Though some error is the result of human finiteness, sin and unbelief are also implicated. “Just as in the problem of evil we identify both moral causes and natural causes, and thereby distinguish moral evils like crime and war from natural evils like earthquakes and cancers, so in the problem of error we must distinguish the moral causes of error from its natural causes.”

In the beginning of this world’s history, Eve was not satisfied with her finiteness—she wanted to know like God. This rejection of her status as a created being led to moral rebellion and ultimately to believing a lie. In a similar manner, our acceptance of a secular, humanist worldview warps our perception of God’s truth and results in false conclusions about God and about our role as His creation. In essence, our fallenness leads us to distort and misuse truth in self-serving ways. Our minds are easily blinded by “the god of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4). In this condition, we see only the here and now, and leave God and eternity out of our reckoning.

Satan’s Distortion. There is, however, a more subtle scheme. When Paul was evangelizing in Philippi, a slave girl, “who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling” (Acts 16:16), followed after Paul and his companions, calling out, “These others discover that truth is deeply meaningful on a personal level. They should come to see truth as relational, forming a living link with Christ and with the community of believers. In essence, to “know the truth” is not merely a detached, cognitive process, but a personal experience with God, an encounter that radically transforms our life.

The Problem of Error

As we have seen, God, the Source of truth, communicates truth of His own initiative to human beings (Dan. 2:47; Rev. 1:1). Nevertheless, while God desires all “to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7), He does not lock in human thought or free will. Men and women must still interpret and apply truth to the contexts of their lives. In this process, it is indeed possible to arrive at false conclusions, to exchange God’s truth for a lie.

This problem of error raises important issues. How is it that men and women can receive facts and principles from God and then come to false conclusions? Why does error haunt our quest for truth? What is the remedy for this distressing state?

First, we should recognize that the problem seems to reside in our finitude, our fallenness, and in Satan’s intentional distortion of God’s truth (see Figure 4).

Our Finitude. “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out” (Rom. 11:33). “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9). While God and His truth are infinite, we, as created beings, are finite, with inherent limitations in our perceptions and understanding.

The reality of human finiteness would seem to lead to certain implications:

1. A fixation on empirical certainty does not seem to be suitable for human beings, due to our sensory limitations, the inherent complexity of the world around us, and the impracticality of always suspending judgment until all the facts are in. Apart from God, we would

As Christians, we are to work in concert to unmask the diabolic misrepresentation of God’s truth, helping others to see God as He truly is and to understand the contours of God’s plan for their lives. We are to highlight the consequence of truth—that it is relevant to our lives, influencing our beliefs, values, decisions, and actions.

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We should understand the relationship of truth and freedom. We do not so much need freedom in order to discover truth, as we are to reside in truth in order to experience freedom. Truth, in fact, offers the only freedom. “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation”’ (vs. 17). After she continued doing this for many days, Paul rebuked the evil spirit in the name of Jesus Christ and commanded it to come out of her.

Why would Paul do this? After all, what the girl was proclaiming was true! Simply, the people of Philippi knew the girl and her trade of divination and sorcery. As the girl seemed to know Paul and was providing free publicity, the onlookers would conclude that both were from the same league. In essence, Satan had mutated God’s immortal truth into an immoral lie.

Depicting the cosmic conflict between good and evil, John describes a great red dragon, the devil, that employed its tail to ensnare “a third of the stars of heaven” (Rev. 12:4). Isaiah 9:15 suggests that this tool was Satan’s tale of lies—his misrepresentation of God’s character and His plan for the universe, which he has adeptly marketed to the human race.

As Christians, we are to work in concert to unmask the diabolic misrepresentation of God’s truth, helping others to see God as He truly is and to understand the contours of God’s plan for their lives. We are to highlight the consequence of truth—that it is relevant to our lives, influencing our beliefs, values, decisions, and actions.

Here, then, is the essence of the problem: While God imparts truth to men and women, our finiteness, our fallenness, and Satan’s manipulation of God’s truth can lead us to false understandings (see Figure 5). Faith, reason, inquiry, reflection, and experience are all necessary, but insufficient. The problem, of course, is that we then tend to impute the truth of the data to the truthfulness of our conclusions, and frequently we are not even aware of our error.

Remedies

Is the situation hopeless? The answer to the problem of error appears to reside in humility, in cross-checks, and, most significantly, in the role of the Holy Spirit.

Humility. Given our finite and fallen condition, we are admonished

Figure 5.

![Figure 5](image-url)
we rely on God’s Spirit to help us perceive truth and interpret information correctly. “We have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God” (1 Cor. 2:12).

3. As Christians, we need to formulate means through which the presence and influence of the Spirit may be enhanced in the church, in our homes, and in our lives, identifying attitudes and activities that help us be open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Though our finitude, our fallenness, and Satan’s intentional distor- tion of God’s truth can indeed lead us to false conclusions regarding God, His character, and His plan for our lives (see Figure 6).

There could be a number of im- plications.

1. The Holy Spirit enables us to receive the “mind of the Lord” (1 Cor. 2:16), seeing life as God sees it.

2. We should not engage in intellectual activities independently of God. Regardless of the topic studied, we should be aware of the risk of “group think” and of a “herd mentality,” recognizing that even consensus is not a guarantee of true interpretations. Clearly, something more is required.

The Holy Spirit. According to Christ’s words, the Holy Spirit performs a crucial role in a correct understanding of truth: “‘When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth’” (John 16:13). It seems that God has given His Spirit as a shield to insulate us from the warped interpretations of a secular worldview, to deflect Satan’s manipulative attacks on truth, and to enable us in our finitude and fall- enness. This function of the Holy Spirit as guide and guardian of truth is vital in helping us to arrive at correct understandings of truth—true conclusions about God, His character, and His plan for our lives.

Figure 6.

REFERENCES

1 All biblical passages in this article, unless otherwise indicated, are quoted from the New King James Version.

2 Nearly half of the references to “truth” in Scripture place it in parallel with love, obedience, mercy, or righteousness. Truth, therefore, incorporates a moral, life-transforming dimension.

3 Arthur Holmes, All Truth Is God’s Truth (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977), pp. 52, 53.
iblical hermeneutics and human socialization are a significantly uncomfortable pair. Indeed, it is only natural for culture and hermeneutics to be in constant contention, yet they are forever in company with one another. They seem to claim the same level of authority for determining human behavior. While a believer may hold that God and His Word are everything, that very same believer, as anthropologist or sociologist, knows that culture is everything. This is because, despite our faith in the Holy Scriptures as authoritative, infallible, and prescriptive of conduct, no one has ever experienced Scripture outside of a human social context.

Defining Culture

Biblical hermeneutics refers to the science, such as it is, of the interpretation of Scripture. But what is meant by “culture”? What does the idea of culture embrace? It could also be appropriately asked: What does culture not embrace?

Culture has been defined as, “The study of people’s beliefs about the meaning of life and about what it means to be human.” It is “the world of human meaning, the sum total of a people’s works that express in objective form their highest beliefs, values, and hopes—in short, their vision of what it is to be fully human.”

Culture is everything. It is “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man’s capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.”

Culture may also be described as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” Hence, culture as concept embraces what we believe, how we behave, and what we possess.

The Scope of the Problem

Because of distinctive practices demarcating the global phenomenon of Seventh-day Adventism (worship, diet, and even dress), this particular denomination provides a particularly intriguing context for the discussion of culture. Everything a conventional Seventh-day Adventist does seems to be dictated by some fundamental belief of the church, all of which, it is claimed, is founded on Scripture. Yet, despite the all-encompassing nature of this theology, any one of the foregoing definitions helps to show that our faith in Scripture’s transcendence is itself only part of our total social milieu.

Our spiritual instincts may not take kindly to such an acknowledgment. We may object on the conviction that God’s Word should be more, rather than less, than something else as human as culture. So we wonder aloud: Could Scripture, as a part, be greater than the whole called culture? Is there a single scriptural interpretation that may be determinative for all behavior, when interpreters and “beavers” come from and operate in cultural contexts as varied as New Delhi, New Guinea, New York, and New South Wales? The question seems legitimate even within Adventism’s unified church body. Given its representation from hundreds of cultures, whose criteria should define the social forms that are truly typical of Seventh-day Adventism? Whose theorizing unifies and harmonizes the distinct philosophical outlooks born of this plurality of mental sets?

These several questions are all varieties of a single, urgent query. Stated in just three words, it asks: Whose biblical hermeneutics? In an earlier time, theological open-mindedness already signified sensitivity to the existence of Latin American, African-American, South Korean, Indian, and other theologies, national, ethnic, or gender based. Neither the misguided but resilient idea of race nor the notion of distinct denominational identity may effectively protect us from the issue raised in these three words: Whose biblical hermeneutics?

Nevertheless, worship practices at the local level suggest that the ques-
tion is even more open today. C. Ellis Nelson accurately labels the individual congregation as “the primary society of Christians.”6 Similarly, Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney observe that “individuals sharing a common outlook or behavioral style increasingly cluster around those institutions . . . of which they approve.”7 Not a few denominational leaders have already confirmed, by personal observation, what many contemporary believers know by continuous experience: The local congregation, at least as much as national or international church headquarters, is the true theology-defining, perception-shaping, conscience-defining, identity-giving, culture-establishing agent in their lives.

Thus, as “conservatives” cluster together to reinforce their “culture of reverence,” their psychological or chronological opposites, labeled perhaps as “more enlightened liberals,” assemble elsewhere to establish and affirm their own worship code. Through this ongoing process, the faith and practice of two Seventh-day Adventist congregations of similar ethnic or racial composition within North America may now differ as widely as between one congregation from North America and another from West Africa.

John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene’s paradoxical vision in Mega-trends 2000, in letter if not in spirit, is now reality, as crowds seek religion while, simultaneously, the individual self finds fuller vindication than ever.7

Cultural and Interpretive Fragmentation

The chance or choice of psychological makeup is hardly the only factor influencing trends toward theological fragmentation and cultural pluralism.8 There are others.

1. Changes in history. Changes in history, alterations of time and place, matter a great deal, so much so that it is at least probable that the same individual, if he or she were to live at different times or places, like some Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s court, would have different reactions to, and beliefs about, the world around him or her.

2. Difficulty of objectivity. Besides the protean nature of the factors of time and place, the objectivity of the subject, as observer, is perpetually open to question. As Huston Smith puts it, “Perception is a two-way process. The world comes to us, and we go to it—with inbuilt sensors, concepts, beliefs, and desires that filter its incoming signals in ways that differ in every species, every social class, and every individual.”9

As he goes on to state, Smith is here concerned with how “our concepts, beliefs, and desires—that it is ideas we already hold that decide, in the end, what we will believe about the world. In this sense, worldviews are the result of our preconceptions. On this, Stephen B. Bevans is categorical: “Reality is mediated by . . . a meaning we give it in the context of our culture or our historical period, interpreted from our own particular horizon and in our own particular thought forms.”10

3. Presuppositions. The positions of Smith and Bevans signal the existence of a mental status quo, a belief-determining disposition, which anticipates the interplay between our eyes and what they will see, between our ears and what they will hear, between our faculties of observation and what they will interpret.

Because of this mental status quo or mindset, people either believe or disbelieve based on what they observe. Particularly among biblicists, the end result of that interplay between observing faculties and the realities of the biblical text is spoken of as truth. Whether among biblicists or otherwise, components of the mental status quo, which conditions the observations that lead to truth (conclusions about reality) are called presuppositions.

Presuppositions are the columns that support the chosen platform from which the individual launches the independent interpretation of data. They are the foundation of our philosophy of fact, the support for the worldview that governs values and determines possibility.

Because presuppositions are the basis for our observations and conclusions, Robert L. Reymond notes that disagreements between believer and unbeliever about “biblical facts” are not a discussion about facts at all. The unbeliever is often so labeled precisely because she rejects the Bible as a reliable source of facts.11

Presuppositions and Biblical Hermeneutics

In biblical interpretation, the role of presuppositions can hardly be ex-
The influence of ahistoricist presuppositions in the recent world of hermeneutics is easily documented. Their proponents include some who dismiss the discovery of authorial intention as impossible, as well as others who think we can do no better than focus attention "on the final form of the text itself." For this reason, it seems appropriate, both from a hermeneutical and a cultural perspective, to discuss the role of historicism and its proper relation to our subject.

Important of Historicism in Biblical Hermeneutics

"An essential aspect of hermeneutics," Grant Osborne states, "is the effect of cultural heritage and world view on interpretation." Earlier comments on the prevalence of an ahistoricist mindset in the field of literary criticism permit us to acknowledge ahistoricism as not only an influential factor with literary theorists, but also an important element of the culture of our times.

Francis Schaeffer’s practical proposal confronts the ahistoricist mindset on its own ground. According to Schaeffer, human beings contradict their own claim that life is irrational by attempting to live in an organized manner, follow programs, and rely on public transportation schedules.

And Osborne shows how this respect for comprehensibility may be applied to reading, specifically, to understanding the message and intention of an author through his text, however distant the author himself may be from the reader: “You, the reader,” he writes, “do not know me, the author. The text of this book does not truly reflect my personality. That is, of course, obvious; the question, however, is whether it adequately reflects my thoughts on the possibility of meaning. Can you as reader understand my opposition to polyvalence, or is this text autonomous from my views? At this moment I am writing in the library of the theology faculty of the University of Marburg. Certainly many of the professors here, schooled in the existential or historical-critical approaches and having grown up in the German culture, will read these arguments from a quite different perspective. The question is not whether they will agree but whether they can understand my arguments. I will not be around to clarify my points, so certainly this written communication lacks the dynamic of oral speech. Moreover, those readers without the necessary philosophical background will definitely struggle with the concepts herein.

However, does this mean that no amount of clarification can impart the meaning that I seek to communicate in these paragraphs? I think not? Osborne’s tongue-in-cheek remarks not only settle the argument of intentionality and confirm the reasonableness of historicist hermeneutics, but also demonstrate the ef-

aggerated. By way of example, famous 20th-century New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann made clear that his biblical studies depended upon a specific and indispensable presupposition. He maintained that "the one presupposition that cannot be dismissed is the historical method of interrogating the text."

Though Bultmann’s use of the term presupposition deserves further examination, his message is clear: To judge by his categorical language, biblical hermeneutics at least involves some convictions on the part of the interpreter. These convictions range from a conservative faith that the message of the text’s historical author can be recovered, to a deconstructionist insistence that this is impossible, as well as others who think we can do no better than focus attention "on the final form of the text itself." For this reason, it seems appropriate, both from a hermeneutical and a cultural perspective, to discuss the role of historicism and its proper relation to our subject.

This skepticism about historicity in the Bible and other literary texts (particularly ancient texts) may be referred to as an ahistoricist hermeneutic. The words of Hollywood filmmaker John Ford open a window on the reasoning behind this hermeneutic that characterizes so much of our modern literary culture: “When faced with the fact or the legend, print the legend.” Not that myth and legend are inherently immoral. Within reasonable boundaries, expressions of fantasy honor the God who endowed human beings with powers of imagination. But applied to the Bible, an ahistoricist hermeneutic disallows the possibility that in Scripture we have access to propositional truth, given to humanity by God.

The influence of ahistoricist presuppositions in the recent world of hermeneutics is easily documented. Their proponents include some who...
Transcultural Truth: The Bible as Textbook
The Bible itself has much to say about truth’s comprehensibility and proper interpretation across cultures. The better our hermeneutics can relate to the culture of Scripture, the better we may apply our biblical hermeneutics to today’s cultures.

Bible stories of human beings who successfully access, comprehend, accept, practice, and transmit divine truth are a testimony to the most dramatic transcultural communication of all. However axiomatic, it bears restating that the distance between the culture of heaven and any human culture since the Fall is infinitely greater than that between any two human cultures. Analysis of these stories bears instruction for those who seek to understand the “how” of sound interpretation and effective transmission of God’s Word. They are divinely documented narratives of just such a process, preserved for our study, for our extraction of principles, for our encouragement toward success in the divine program of which both they and we are a part.

The work of Eugene Nida and William Reyburn offers us a valuable complement to this recommendation on the Bible as a textbook of stories guiding us in the method of gospel interpretation and transmission. These respected Bible translators contend that the many striking differences between biblical culture and that of other societies has led to a misguided exaggeration of the diversities. In listing a number of “cultural universals” of constant biblical recurrence, they state compellingly: “In a sense the Bible is the most translatable religious book that has ever been written, for it comes from a particular time and place (the western end of the Fertile Crescent) through which passed more cultural patterns and out from which radiated more distinctive features and values than has been the case with any other place in the history of the world.”

A comparison of the culture traits of the Bible with some 2,000 significantly different people groups in 1981 would have shown, claim Nida and Reyburn, “that in certain respects the Bible is surprisingly closer to many of them than to the technological culture of the western world.”

The Bible is a scarcely mined treasure of case studies on valid interpretation and transcultural communication of God’s Word. It may yet be the best source of insights into how a proper interpretation of God’s message is accessed and transmitted from culture to culture.

Besides its revelation of “the culture of heaven,” the Bible’s value in such study relates to its remarkable closeness to so much in so many of the cultures of earth. Particularly, in relation to the times of its own composition, it is forever wedded to local culture. The languages of Scripture reflect the language of daily life in Bible lands during the biblical epoch.
It is well to acknowledge that Bible truth may, for a while, have constituted something of a non sequitur to some of the participants in the Bible narratives. Yet, in the end, it is clearly possible to know what God means.

Equally, Abraham’s response, as described below, clearly shows that for some it is not only possible, but important to know what God means.

ather signals his own royal home training, the discipline of Nebuchadnezzar’s court school, or a combination of both. Ezra’s usages occur because at the time of his writing, Aramaic was the lingua franca of the Persian Empire. Beyond his readiness as Jewish priest and scholar of the Torah, Ezra was versed in the language of his society. New Testament Greek is the language of first-century A.D. love letters, bills of payment, receipts, and other everyday transactions of the heart and the marketplace.

Indeed, this basic linguistic commonality with its local environment, represents only one step of a multileveled affinity between the Bible’s ancient authors and their cultural associates and neighbors. Below and above the level of language were common geography, clothing, housing, social organization, modes of travel, and a multitude of mores and folkways that are reflected in surviving law codes, literary conventions, wise sayings, etc.

At the same time, divine revelation is clearly hostile to much of the culture to which it is wedded and in which it is embedded. Despite its entanglement with local culture, the saving truths of revelation differ unmistakably from many of the ideas prevailing at the time of its divine revelation and in our time. Yet for all this, human beings, grounded in the cultures of their times, were able to access and understand, accept and transmit Scripture’s message, providing us with an opportunity to study not only the truths of Scripture, but also the contexts of their disclosure. By scrutinizing these intersections between God and ancient people, we may see them for what they are: documented interconnections between human culture and divine revelation. Our scrutiny may well improve our response to the question of sound biblical interpretation as it relates to culture, specifically as sound interpretation relates to cross-cultural access to saving truth.

Familiar ideas, settings, and actions in Ancient Near Eastern life yield results quite out of keeping with societal norms or even the expectations dictated by the narratives’ human participants. Analyses of milieu need not be out of place. More often than not, recognizable local culture sets the stage for biblical narrative, and local color casts its hue on that narrative. However, recovery and understanding of settings in local life, sensitivity to the nuances of local color—these do not explain resultant revelation, which, more often than not, contradicts their expectations.

It is well to acknowledge that Bible truth may, for a while, have constituted something of a non sequitur to some of the participants in the Bible narratives. Yet, in the end, it is clearly possible to know what God means. Equally, Abraham’s response, as described below, clearly shows that for some it is not only possible, but important to know what God means. It should produce better preparation to address the issue of truth’s transcultural interpretation in our own time.

Cultural Grounding, Supernatural Difference

Abraham is a proper choice for this study because he is “the father of all who believe” (Rom. 4:11, NIV). Also, because, more explicitly than Ruth the Moabitess turning to the God of Naomi, or Peter, Paul, and other New Testament gospel preachers persuading Gentiles to become Christian, Abraham, the south Mesopotamian, seems to present to history a case study on God’s specific and successful infusion of a human culture.

Both Noah’s son Shem and Esau’s twin brother Jacob, later called Israel, hold some claim to being the original ancestor for whom God’s special people were named. Remembering them as Semites, we credit Shem. If as Israel, we acknowledge Jacob. But it is with Abraham, rather than with either of these, that the story of salvation seems to resume after the Flood.

Two common stories from the Ancient Near East turned to uncommon endings by God’s active participation find their historical setting in the call of Abraham. Study of the first, of Abraham, a primary character in salvation history, answers two major questions: (1) Is it possible to know what God means? (2) Is it important to know? It illustrates God’s commitment to reveal Himself equally to all cultures. Further, that His Word is comprehensible in, transmissible to, and useful for any culture.

Abraham’s Call From God

“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in
Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, “Leave your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you.” Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living” (Acts 7:2-4, NASB).

When, in answer to God’s call, Abraham left Chaldean Ur, he did not travel alone. Nor did he journey directly to his stated destination. Nor was he recognized as the leader of his caravan. The Bible reports that “Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram’s wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans” (Gen. 11:31, NASB).

When Terah led the exodus from Ur of the Chaldeans toward Haran in the north, he could hardly have acted from the same pure motivations as did his son Abraham. For one thing, Joshua names Terah as an example of Israel’s heathen ancestry (Joshua 24:2). Also, the accounts of Abraham’s call involve a separation between son and father, through the death of the latter, before Abraham moves on to Canaan in accomplishment of his original assignment. There can be little doubt of the impact of Abraham’s spiritual commitment on his father’s life. At a minimum, Abraham’s wishes were initially acknowledged: Genesis 11:31 cites God’s specified destination as the caravan’s stated objective. But whatever the importance Terah may have attached to his son’s supernatural summons, the biblical account shows Abraham as settling in Haran (vs. 31; Acts 7:4). Whether journeying or settling, Abraham lived under his father’s aegis.

There is no unanimity on the biblical chronology, even among those who fully trust the Bible’s historicity. Options for Abraham’s birth range from 2166 to 1952 B.C. Paradoxically, one reason for this uncertainty is the appropriateness of the patriarchal narratives to a specific ANE social setting that prevailed for several centuries. Still, some insight into this part of Abraham’s life story may be drawn from the times of Mesopotamia’s Isin-Larsa period, at the collapse of Ur III in 2004 B.C. At that time, diminished political order at the level of the city-state fueled increased political and economic independence among the populace, who could now own land and cattle instead of themselves being owned by temple and king. A desire to escape the political confusion in his homeland and the negative impact of salinization on wheat and barley crops offer realistic explanations for Terah’s exit from Ur at the head of the caravan bearing Abraham, his wife, and others toward the land God had assigned.

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Their stopover in Haran may also have been motivated by material considerations. Haran was an important caravan city in the north, in a valley of fertile pastureland, likely of sparse population, and offering “fine possibilities for increasing the wealth of the family before they proceeded on to Canaan.” Socio-economic considerations, along with Terah’s advancing age, may have played their part in his move.

Terah’s leadership of the clan, including Abraham, Haran’s economic importance as a caravan city, its greater political stability relative to Ur, and Terah’s advancing age combined to detain Abraham in the land of his earthly father’s choice, while his heavenly Father’s call waited for final answer.

Information derived from Mari, a city south of Haran, but still part of the northern Mesopotamian region, may further illuminate the context of Terah’s immigration. The city of Mari prospered during the patriarchal period until its destruction in the first half of the 18th century B.C. From excavations there, we learn of a “social structure and daily manners of the time, which are reminiscent of a number of phenomena described in the book of Genesis.”

Both Genesis and the Mari documents attest the presence of royalty, on the one hand, and, by contrast, semi-nomadic agriculturists and raisers of livestock. The society “seems to have been subdivided, organized into households . . . , clans . . . and tribes, where the traditional authorities, the elders . . . played an important role.” Consistent with this picture from Mari, Terah, in Genesis 11, wields his own authority over son Abraham, daughter-in-law Sarah, and grandson Lot, leading his
Given the economic decline in southern Mesopotamia, contrasting prosperity in the north, and familiar religious rituals, Terah’s migration to the north may well have made more sense to relatives and acquaintances than Abraham’s subsequent travel from Haran to Palestine. Haran’s principal god, Sin, was the same moon god Terah would have worshiped in Ur.

clan out of their homeland, and settling them, even against the best wishes of his adult son, in the spreading pastur euplands of Haran.

Only after his father’s death did Abraham begin to function as head of his own independent family unit. At this time, in obedience to God’s wishes of his adult son, in the

Further Implications of Abraham’s Call

Given the economic decline in southern Mesopotamia, contrasting prosperity in the north, and familiar religious rituals, Terah’s migration to the north may well have made more sense to relatives and acquaintances than Abraham’s subsequent travel from Haran to Palestine. Haran’s principal god, Sin, was the same moon god Terah would have worshiped in Ur. Also, Haran was at the border of northern Mesopotamia. Due west was Anatolia, to the southwest, Syria and Palestine. Continued migration would take Terah beyond his comfort zone. And because he is said to have settled in Haran, is tempting to believe it was an act of choice rather than of coincidence.

For the rest of his family, if not for the aging Terah, Haran was a choice for the status quo instead of for the new, for comfort instead of for sacrifice, for self instead of for God.

In addition to subjection to the multiple economic, political, sociological, and other elements of Abraham’s time, his polytheistic father would have lived in fear of a world swarming with menacing supernatural agents, demons that could attack on the incitement of his neighbors’ witchcraft. To the extent he reflected the norm, his house would have been protected and his property secured by figurines like those Rachel later stole from Laban (Gen. 31:19). He may or may not have emulated his neighbors in offering daily food to his household god, visiting the temple prostitutes to ensure fertility, and giving attention to the messages of dreams and omens.

Abraham’s message from Yahweh would likely have occurred to him as one more such message. Whatever the means Yahweh employed to speak to Abraham, for Terah it would be neither the first nor the last sign or omen from the gods. Later attitudes on the part of the clan that followed Terah out of Chaldean Ur make clear how countercultural it was for Abraham’s choice to be Yahweh’s vassal. Nothing in the preceding genealogy predicts Abraham’s acceptance of a way so different from and hostile to the prevailing practice and customs of his tribe.

Learning From Abraham’s Call

Abraham’s call involved considerable challenge. It also illustrates the comprehensibility of transcultural communication between God and lost humanity. Too, it implied the promise of boundless success that would, inescapably, attend a positive response to the divine initiative. The distance between all human cultures and the culture of heaven is infinitely greater than that between any two human cultures. A model featuring God in the role of communicator most clearly demonstrates the potential success of transcultural gospel communication. Added to this, God as model presents the perfect ideal.

Abraham’s call exemplifies both ideal and non-ideal responses to the presentation of the divine Word. It shows how one may either fail or succeed in the peculiar enterprise of hermeneutical sharing. Talk of potential failure should not be read as pessimistic. It does not refer to some inevitable rejection of truth by the perverted many who would seek the broad way. Success and failure here address the matter of comprehensibility. Persuasion is an altogether separate issue. The question is not of agreement, but of understanding.

Quoting Paul Tillich: “The question cannot be: How do we communicate the Gospel so that others will accept it? For this there is no method. To communicate the Gospel means putting it before the people so that they are able to decide for or against it. The Christian Gospel is a matter of decision. It is to be accepted or rejected. All that we who communicate this Gospel can do is to make possible a genuine decision . . . based on understanding.”

Failure, then, would be failure of the exegete to properly understand, or of the communicator to properly transmit, such valid understanding. The present discussion is concerned with avoiding such failure.
Analyzing the Story

In the story of Abraham's call, at least three different groups of individuals remain within the cultural fold, while two groups violate those norms and their own natural expectations to become a part of a new, separated group of God's followers.

Some relatives of Abraham probably choose to remain in Ur. Nahor, for example, is not mentioned as journeying with Terah's caravan, though he is later named in that locale. A second group migrates to Haran but goes no further. A third group is exposed to Abraham's teaching while he lives in Haran, but finds it unacceptable.

Over against these three groups are (1) the group that leaves Ur and persists until it reaches Canaan in obedience to a divine order; and (2) those from Haran who learn of God's command through Abraham and Sarah's witness during their sojourn in Haran and join them in their southern pilgrimage after Terah's death.

The variety of attitudes reflected in these individuals and groups again brings to the fore the questions on understanding: Is it possible to know what God means? Abraham believed it is. Is it important to know what God means? Abraham believed it is. His response of faith, and its contrast with other responses, also demonstrates that not everyone responds identically to revelation. Human nature complicates response to truth. Ignoring this fact may sometimes lead us, despite our sincerity, to make a farce of the gospel, out of eagerness to be relevant or appreciated.

Those who seek to overcome culture barriers to gospel communication must beware of judging success by apparent acceptance. Human acceptability, lists of converts, establishment of Christian beachheads—these are no guarantee that saving truth has been communicated and comprehended. Higher principles should govern such a conclusion.

Abraham's Covenant With God

Enlightening insights from excavations at Nuzi, in northern Mesopotamia (1925-1931 B.C.), are instructive for our second story, despite the fact that its tablets date to the Late Bronze period (15th century B.C.), several hundred years after Abraham's death. In the world of the Bible, custom dies hard. Dated political realities suggest the time of Abraham's movement across the Fertile Crescent, but the normal behaviors encoded in society's laws persist for centuries and millennia. Twenty-first to 20th century B.C. political disruptions suggest the particular historical context for Abraham's migration. On the other hand, legal norms of long duration suggest his social behaviors in a number of eras.

His intention that his servant Eliezer be his heir (Gen. 15:2, 3) illustrates how closely the patriarch's thinking followed prevailing norms. In Abraham's time, continuing the family's name and wealth were imperatives, to be accomplished, if necessary, through adoption. The adoptee would inherit the adopter's possessions, in exchange for which he would care for them until the end of their lives and be responsible for their burial when they died.

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When God promises Abraham that he will become a great nation, Abraham assumes that God will effect this through Eliezer. But he learns a crucial spiritual lesson in choosing to rest his future in the guarantee of God's promise: "He believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (Gen 15:6, NKJV).

Here for the first time in Scripture, explicit mention is made of the saving truth of imputed righteousness, humanity's only source of hope for virtue or salvation. Perhaps the chief instruction of this dialogue in Genesis 15 lies in its evidence of how God discloses Himself to humanity within the awkward framework of our culture-bound thinking.

A second incident from Genesis 15 (vss. 7-21) complements and expands the first episode's instruction. The account features God engaged in a treaty-making action with His vassal people in the person of Abraham. In the normal ritual that established such a treaty, a number of animals were slaughtered, cut in pieces, and the portions arranged in two rows with an aisle between. Parties to the treaty passed down the aisle between the rows "while taking an oath invoking similar dismemberment on each other should they not keep their part of the covenant." The biblical account differs from all known accounts in that God alone
passes between the pieces, pledging His own dismemberment should the covenant be breached. In the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) He dramatizes His offer of a substitute for those slaughtered animals and invokes His own dismemberment for the violation of a covenant He never breached.

Principles for the Interpreter and Communicator

In this context, God is simultaneously text and communicator, comprehensible message and competent messenger. Humans who accept the gospel commission are simultaneously exegete and missionary. The roles of interpreter and communicator, while distinct, both involve the same agent and an identical set of operating rules.

These rules derive from observing the divine self-revelation in call and covenant. In Genesis 12 and 15, God is the text’s explication as well as its communicator. Similarly, the biblical exegete cannot distinguish between some theoretical communication of ideas and an experience of shared life. Whether in the most cerebral or the most affective of cultures, communication is self-sharing. However well conceived an interpretation, interaction with another culture is imperative if that understanding is ever to be communicated.

The following principles, exemplified by God, apply to the process of interpretation as well as to the experience of sharing.

1. Mutuality. This is a presumption of participation. Whereas coercion is alien to God’s nature, participation in the salvific enterprise, whether in interpretation or in transmission, requires a mutuality to which God Himself is committed, and which His initiative is perpetually making possible. In the phrase, “The Lord said to Abram” (12:1, NASB), the Lord as speaker hints not only at His interest in a shared undertaking, but also, the value placed on Abraham as object of His initiative, respect for his intellectual faculties, and assumption of Abraham’s interest.

When Stephen Bevans speaks of “contextual theology,” he is referring to this mutuality which takes both speaker and hearer, preacher and audience, missionary and “native,” into responsible and respectful consideration. So is Leonora Tubbs Tisdale when she speaks of preaching that not only exegeses texts, but gives “equally serious attention to the interpretation of congregations and their sociocultural contexts.”

Preachers who disregard the sociocultural realities of their congregations are not practicing the principle of mutuality. They are not listening. And preachers who cannot listen ought themselves to be kept silent.

Nida and Reyburn’s warning against “noise” in translation also addresses this principle. The biblical exegete, as much as the gospel communicator, must believe in mutuality. As exegetes, students respect both God’s mind and their own, both their scholarly inclinations and the divine initiative of revelation. As communicators, preachers and teachers value equally their message and their congregation, their culture and that of their audience, their experience and the experiences of those with whom they wish to share that which to them is precious. Divine incarnation and human adaptability, physical relocation and every other evidence of sensitivity, are expressions of this mutuality whose counterproductive antithesis is encountered in inflexibility and arrogance.

2. Authority. God’s speech in Genesis 12 gives expression to the principle of authority. As the historical nature of the critical method has undermined authority in biblical interpretation, so cultural anthropology has dealt some blows to the concept of missiological authority. Darwinian evolutionary thinking led to a theory of Scripture as “a collection of historical documents whose truth could not be understood apart from such matters as authorship, dating, circumstance of writing, and relationship with previous oral and written material.”

Much of biblical scholarship came to see the collection as expounding a variety of ideas not necessarily consistent or compatible with each other. Bevans writes, “The Bible literally means ‘books’ (biblia), and the Bible is a library, a collection of books and consequently of theologies. These theologies are all different, sometimes even contradictory of one another.” The Bible
cannot be a source of much authority for those who see in it such a confused plurality.

A similar decline of authority is observable in gospel communication. Commenting on this phenomenon, Robert J. Priest traces the influence of such celebrated authors as Herman Melville (Typee, Omoo), Somerset Maugham (“Rain”), and James Michener (Hawaii) upon current popular attitudes to biblical authority. The cited works contrast tolerance for the “social other” (South Sea Island innocents), with images of life-denying missionaries, “pinned like butterflies to the frame of their own morality.”

Similar sentiment dominates the discipline of cultural anthropology, sentiment clearly expressed in the words of Walter Goldschmidt’s presidential address to the 1975 American Anthropology Association: “Missionaries are in many ways our opposites; they believe in original sin.”

The work of their professional colleagues is not lost on evangelical anthropologists. Priest, himself a Christian anthropologist, explains: “We are culturally ethnocentric. We do judge in terms of our own cultural norms. Crossing cultural lines with a gospel implying judgment and condemnation makes it all too easy for the missionary to confuse his or her own culture with the gospel. As a result of anthropological warnings about ethnocentrism, the missionary now feels nervous, and rightly so, when using sin language to speak to people of another culture.”

Lest Priest’s references to “another culture” and traditional concepts of the missionary cloud the issue, it must be remembered that experiencing cultural pluralism no longer requires passports and border crossings. Specifically, Carson’s third definition of pluralism, with its mandated relativism, brings another culture home, producing a new kind of missionary steeped in “respect,” the primary lesson of cultural anthropology.

As Priest puts it, we now have two kinds of missionary: “One kind has learned the anthropological lesson well, that we must respect culture and try to understand it, but feels uneasy using the biblical language of condemnation and a call for repentance from sin. . . . And then there are those who reject the anthropological lesson, who unflinchingly speak with the concepts of Scripture, but whose insensitivity and refusal to seek cultural understanding are destructive of genuine moral and spiritual change.”

Priest is unequivocal. Evangelical anthropologists must “give the concept of sin back to the missionary.” When the concept of sin is returned to the missionary, then the biblical exegete has returned to God His rightful authority, the supernatural is accorded its rightful transcendence, and miracle is legitimized over the finitude of natural logic.

Working such miracles, the Spirit of God is free to bring conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8). Scripture’s interpreters and transmitters must never forget that the weapons of our warfare are spiritual (2 Cor. 10:4), that the strongholds they seek to pull down are not cultural differences, but obstacles that separate humanity from God. Their confidence is that—the humility of mutuality notwithstanding—those who speak for God speak within a context of supernatural authority.

3. Integrity. Even in combination, a commitment to mutuality, along with a position of authority, is inadequate to effect the change transforming sinners into saints and children of darkness into children of the Light. The God who speaks in Genesis 12 and 15 does not hedge on His investment in Abraham. In promising as He does, He makes His integrity the condition for His command and invitation.

Even in combination, a commitment to mutuality, along with a position of authority, is inadequate to effect the change transforming sinners into saints and children of darkness into children of the Light. The God who speaks in Genesis 12 and 15 does not hedge on His investment in Abraham. In promising as He does, He makes His integrity the condition for His command and invitation. Those who are privileged to transmit God’s message to their own and other cultures need an equal commitment to integrity.

Priest reminds us of the importance of this ingredient with his critique of well-known recruitment strategies focusing most often on situations of need in the mission field. Preferable, according to Priest, would be “regular intellectual discourses . . . designed to inform, instruct, and stimulate the minds of colleagues or others.”

Charades of sacrifice, flippancy about unfulfilled promises, and the cautions of convenient commitment decidedly militate against the credibility of both God and witness, for they undermine the principle of integrity. They also counteract the previous principle of authority. For all such proofs of our natural selfish-
The call of Abraham teaches lessons both about God and about humanity. Its lessons on interpretation and communication benefit those who must play a part for God in the study and dissemination of the Word. Its lessons on humanity may teach how to respond to God. They may also suggest the kind of individual who is more positively disposed toward the gospel.

Principles for the Respondent

The call of Abraham teaches lessons both about God and about humanity. Its lessons on interpretation and communication benefit those who must play a part for God in the study and dissemination of the Word. Its lessons on humanity may teach how to respond to God. They may also suggest the kind of individual who is more positively disposed toward the gospel.

Alternatively, the actions of Abraham and others around him suggest what kind of behavior might be expected from those who may make an affirmative response to the gospel.

1. Mutuality. All of God’s sharing with fallen humanity is an expression of undeserved grace. It is nevertheless true that God’s call to Abraham produced results because, in Abraham, God found one who would be His friend (James 2:23). The open-mindedness of mutuality permitted Abraham to be the friend of God and of strangers everywhere. It enabled him to settle with his father in Haran, far north of his original homeland (Gen. 11:31), and later to uproot again and move beyond his cultural comfort zone, to sojourn in the land of Canaan (12:5). It is the kind of relocation that may require adaptations in dress, grooming, diet, and even some aspects of social order. Mutuality enabled him to share his home with individuals from a variety of cultures and to see nothing but good in bequeathing his riches to the Syrian Eliezer (15:2). It endowed him with the grace to give the best of his land to Lot, his nephew and junior (13:5-11).

2. Respect. Despite the material blessings to which he was privy in the region, Abraham’s days in Haran could not have been entirely serene. God had ordered him to move to Canaan. Subsequent action suggests a continuing intention on his part to carry out that order. It seems somewhat awkward to conclude that it was reluctance or disobedience that kept him back. It appears that at the time of his original call he had already been found faithful. Why else would he be called to be the father of God’s people?

Again, not only did he leave home in response to the call, but once detained in Haran, he persuasively witnessed for his convictions (as indicated by Ellen White’s comments on Genesis 12:5): “He was departing from the land of his fathers, never to return, and he took with him all that he had, ‘their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran.’ Among these were many led by higher considerations than those of service and self-interest. During their stay in Haran, both Abraham and Sarah had led others to the worship and service of the true God. These attached themselves to the patriarch’s household, and accompanied him to the land of promise.”

Then, at his father’s death, he resumed and completed his journey. Evidently, Abraham’s stay in Haran related more to respect toward his heathen father than to any reluctance to obey God. Most likely, Abraham did not interpret his deference toward his earthly father as incompatible with his role as inheritor of the sacred legacy bequeathed by Adam’s line through Seth, Enoch, Methuselah, and Noah, in antediluvian times, and through Shem’s lineage thereafter.

The possible validity of this interpretation does not elevate Abraham’s conduct toward his father to the stature of universal paradigm. It should first be seen as the heritage of his own culture. Still, modern gospel communicators should not overlook this principled action by “the father of all who believe” (Rom. 4:11, NASB). It may already have been too long overlooked.

One may wonder how much more might be done for proclaimed truth through a better understanding of the significance of traditional family units in some cultures and the divine preference for preserving rather than destroying them. Abraham’s continuing devotion to his father suggests that total commitment to God’s will does not presuppose that every man be against his father-in-law, every daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and that internal hostility reign in every household (Luke 12:51-53).

3. Sincerity. Just as divine mutuality finds its complement in human mutuality, and divine authority finds its complement in human respect, so divine integrity must be complemented by human sincerity.

God’s authority relates to human respect in the same way that divine integrity relates to human sincerity.

ness mock our claims to supernatural authority, converting them to pathetic posturing.

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If God will offer all, then humans must respond with all. Abraham’s sincerity permitted him to act “as the Lord has spoken” (Gen. 24:51, NASB), rather than as he chose to represent the Lord as speaking. Abraham’s tarrying in Haran could easily be interpreted as proof of lack of full sincerity. So interpreters who seek to share what they have heard of God’s voice may encounter frustration when hearers do not respond in precisely the way hoped for. But this gives no license to discredit anyone’s sincerity. In the final analysis, sincerity, like everything else in salvation, is a matter between God and an individual. Spiritually minded representatives of God will show patient respect for the mystery of the Spirit’s working in the lives of their hearers.

4. Trust. The principle of trust closely resembles but differs from sincerity. It is one of the two polar options sincerity permits: skepticism and faith. Trust is the willingness to believe rather than the sincere suspicion of all belief. Trust allows for growth. In the end it is a better option than a skepticism that prevents gullibility or the disinterested benevolence of a friend.

God, as our friend, puts His credibility on the line. His integrity is no theoretical abstraction. God opens Himself to criticism by making an invitation and offering guarantees pledged in blood. Yet the rewards of those promises depend on human trust. If we will not trust enough to surrender to His will and power, then He cannot act on our behalf. Trust counts as evidence of things not seen. Without trust it is impossible to please Him.

Two Major Challenges to the Gospel Today

Effective gospel sharing across cultures today is challenged by ahistoricist hermeneutics and the tyranny of cultural relativism. The ahistoricist mindset prevents the reader from accessing an author’s original intention because he or she does not believe it is possible to do so. With regard to Scripture, this means it is not possible to know what God meant when He spoke, if indeed He did speak, as reported in Scripture. Relativist presuppositions do not privilege one people’s self-expressions above another’s. But human dissemblng notwithstanding, an author’s intentions, whether to be factual or fictitious, stern or silly, cerebral or emotional, can be known. Notions of scholarly disagreement and rejection of an opponent’s point of view support the belief that a literary text can reveal its author’s intention and function as disseminator of his or her ideas.

The Bible, with God as author, is such a text. In it, He has revealed Himself and set forth in comprehensible fashion His will for humanity.

In the story of Abraham’s call and covenant, God presents Himself as the ideal model of the communicator who understands the truth about salvation and must share that truth with a culture incompatible with his. Abraham’s response to God’s call illustrates several principles of attitude and conduct facilitating divine success in the business of transcultural gospel communication.

It is also a valid historical record of how God has bridged the gap between the two most alienated cultures of all, those of earth and heaven.

In the story of Abraham’s call and covenant, God presents Himself as the ideal model of the communicator who understands the truth about salvation and must share that truth with a culture incompatible with his. Abraham’s response to God’s call illustrates several principles of attitude and conduct facilitating divine success in the business of transcultural gospel communication. His response also supports belief that obstructive presuppositions notwithstanding, God’s Holy Spirit, the Author of sacred Scripture, is ever present and committed to making Scripture both available and comprehensible to alien cultures. Principles of attitude and conduct include mutuality, authority, and integrity on the part of God and His representative exegetes and missionaries. Respondents who follow Abraham’s example will be guided by principles of mutuality, respect, sincerity, and trust.

Regarding mutuality, the student of the Word must be willing to share with the God who has shared Himself in revelation. Then, as communicator, the speaker must value the hearer as God values Abraham and all humanity, enough to share with them the treasure of Himself. Such communication finds the hearer where he or she is. The God who knows Abraham’s name, identity, and location would guide those who speak on His behalf, that they may know who and where their hearers are. Hearers, when they listen, give evidence of the same spirit of sharing, the same mutuality that moves God to reach out to humanity and led Abraham to respond positively to God.

Regarding authority, God is not altogether like humanity. Listening and the multiple expressions of mu-
tuality are not all. God still is authority. When He speaks, humanity hears the voice of authority. The Spirit who gave the Word is uniquely authorized to express its meaning. And we speak with authority when we speak in His name. Those who yield to the Spirit’s impressions choose the path to a saving knowledge of truth.

Integrity on God’s part requires sincerity and inspires trust in respondents. Abraham’s sacrifice of his son revealed most clearly of all the totality of his sincerity and the depth of his trust. God’s passing between the pieces (Gen. 15:17) and provision of a substitute for Isaac (22:13, 14) prove for all time and for all peoples, that human sincerity will never surpass His own integrity, and that His integrity is worthy of absolute trust.

Those who speak on behalf of God and who have already sworn total allegiance may be assured that through their life and voice, as through that voice which Abraham heard 4,000 years ago, He will continue to breach the barriers of alien cultures.

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Sight is one of the most fundamental abilities and is crucial to the survival of most mammals. Without this ability it would be impossible for these creatures to find food, negotiate the terrain in which they move about, or properly choose a mate.

Sight is no less fundamental to human life. In fact, the way in which we communicate and entertain ourselves revolves around our ability to see.

The specific details of how sight occurs within the eye are intricate and complex, to say the least, but a sufficiently detailed overview of the process by Professors Rachel Casiday and Regina Frey shows that light (photons) acting on chromophore 11-cis-retinal in the membranes of rod or cone cells causes the chromophore to change shape and thus sets off a biochemical cascade that results in an electrical impulse sent to the brain. The irreducible complexity of this biochemical process has often been used as an argument for Intelligent Design.²

It has, therefore, been troubling for proponents of Intelligent Design that the very argument of design has been turned on its head and used to attack one of its most prized examples of design, the eye. The argument against Intelligent Design put forward by Richard Dawkins and others is as follows: The eye is designed back to front. It so happens that the nerve cells that take the impulses from the rod and cone cells to the brain travel over the surface of these cells. In fact, a whole network of blood vessels that services the light-sensitive cells lies between these cells and light coming from the lens. In other words, it is like designing a camera in which the wires pass in front of the photosensitive cell. This would surely obscure the image. Most people would conclude that the camera was poorly designed.

Since the eye is in fact arranged in such a back-to-front way, Dawkins argues, no intelligent being would have designed it so poorly. Therefore the eye must be the product of blind evolution.

No scientific data was found to undermine this argument until 2007, when Kristian Franze et al. proved that there was indeed a structure in the eye that took light from the surface of the retina directly to the rod and cone cells through the mesh of nerves and blood vessels without causing the light to become distorted. They discovered that Muller cells, which had long been known to science, had an additional function in that they acted much like optic fibers, channeling the light in a much more sophisticated way to the photocells than could have been imagined.

Franze et al. performed experiments on the living retinas of guinea pigs to measure their ability to transmit light. They looked at the retinas under a modified transmission microscope and found that while most of the retina reflected the light, there were distinct dark holes that didn’t reflect much light at all. Further experiments showed that when light was shone onto the top of the retina, bright spots on the other side correspond in frequency and pattern to the dark spots seen before. This led them to believe that these dark and bright spots were the result of light being transmitted, in a highly efficient way, through the retina by a structure within it.

Continuing research showed that in fact it was the Muller cells in the retina that were transmitting the light. More testing disclosed that Muller cells are funnel shaped and act as optical fibers. As such they have a significantly higher refractive index (1.380) than the surrounding tissue (1.358). This difference is analogous to the difference in refraction between the core and the cladding of an optical fiber, which gives the optical fiber the ability to keep light waves within its core. The low scattering ability of the Muller cells is enhanced by the fact that highly scattering organelles such as mitochondria occur at low rates and are sometimes absent.

The light-transmitting property of Muller cells overcomes the counterintuitive structure of the mammalian retina. It also provides a definitive rebuttal to the Dawkins
argument about the origin of the eye. Some may argue that this function of the Muller cells, though fascinating and elegant, is nature’s improvement on a previously less-than-perfect evolutionary step.

Though a human intelligence might have designed the eye differently, however, it turns out that the design found in nature is the best for the job. Exposing the delicate photoreceptor cells to the highly energetic light of the sun is a dangerous thing. Not only does the metabolic process that turns light into an electrical impulse produce a lot of heat, but the light itself produces heat, which can damage the cone and rod cells. The layer of tissue under these cells, called the choroid, is full of capillaries in such a concentration as to give it the highest blood flow per gram of any tissue in the body. The choroid provide for the cooling needs of these cells and prevent their overheating by acting as a heat sink. It is therefore necessary that the rod and cone cells come into direct contact with this tissue to allow for maximum conduction of heat away from the rod and cone cells. The so-called backward orientation of the retina allows for this necessity.5

Though the discussion of whether the world around us is the product of random chance or an all-powerful Creator still continues, this discovery of the fiber optic function of Muller cells strengthens people of faith in their conviction that God made this world and puts yet another crack in Darwin’s increasingly fragile macro-evolutionary theory.

Thanks to Jonathan Burnett for further discoveries regarding this topic and for his assistance in the writing of this column.

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2 See, for example, Michael Behe, Darwin’s Black Box (New York: Free Press, 1996).
Here is a bizarre but true story told to Joseph Bates, the early Adventist pioneer, while he was traveling on a ship. Bates introduces the story:

“Among our passengers to New York was a Mr. Loyd, chief mate of a Philadelphia ship that was detained in London. He, in a very serious manner, related a very singular incident that occurred some few years previous, while he was a sailor from Philadelphia. He said that he never had dared to tell his mother or sisters of it. I will try to relate it in his own words.

“Said he, ‘I was lodging away from my home one night in another part of the city, when the house was beset by the police. For fear of being identified with those that were disturbing the peace, I fled from my bed into the street with nothing but my night-dress on, and finally secreted myself in the market place, while a friend that was with me went back to obtain my clothes.

“About midnight a gang of men, passing through the market place, discovered me, and after a few inquiries of who I was, etc., they said, ‘Drive this fellow on before us.’ My pleading was in vain; they continued to keep me before them until we entered the Cemetery, about two miles out of the city. We here came to a large flat stone with an iron hook in it. They placed a stout rope in the hook, which they brought with them, with which they swayed the stone up.

“This was opening a family vault, where a Jewish lady of distinction had been deposited that day. The jewelry upon her person was what they were after. The exciting question now was, who among them would go down into the vault and get the jewels? Said one, ‘Here is the fellow.’ I begged and entreated them, for the Lord’s sake, not to require me to commit such a dreadful deed. My entreaties were disregarded; they crowded me down into the vault, ordering me to go and strip off her jewels…. they bid me hand them up. As soon as they got hold of them, they dashed down the slab and ran away.

“I felt overwhelmed at my hopeless condition, doomed to die a most horrible death, and fearing every moment that the mangled corpse would lay hold of me. I listened to the rumbling sound of these robbers, until all was silent as death. The stone over me I could not move.

“After a little I heard a distant rumbling of the ground, which continued to increase until I heard strange voices over the vault. I soon learned that this was another gang, most likely unbeknown to the first, and they were placing their rope to swing up the same stone slab. I at once decided what to do to save myself. As the slab came up, I leaped out of the vault in my white night-dress, or shirt.

“Horror-stricken, they all fled back toward the city, running with such speed that it was difficult for me to keep up behind them, and yet I feared if they should stop, I should be discovered and taken. Before reaching the city, I had drawn up some nearer the two hinder ones, when one of them cried out to his companion,

‘Patrick! Patrick! the old woman is close to our heels!’ Onward they raced through the market and fled away from me, for I stopped here to hide myself. After a while my friend, having obtained my clothes, found me, and I returned home.”

You think that’s exciting? The Bible tops that story in 2 Kings 13: “Elisha died, and they buried him. Now bands of Moabites used to invade the land in the spring of the year. As a man was being buried, a marauding band was seen and the man was thrown into the grave of Elisha; as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he came to life and stood on his feet” (vss. 20, 21; NRSV).

This was no sailor in his night-
shirt; it was the corpse himself. The dead man who touched Elisha’s skeleton actually came to life! The funeral party must have been stupefied with amazement!

Dead bodies and bones were ritually impure to an extreme degree, even if you washed them. Because bones were so impure, they could be used to desecrate holy places, which is what King Josiah did to illicit places of worship (2 Kings 23:13, 14). But Elisha’s bones were special. Not only did they make a dead body pure; they raised it to life.

Resurrection made possible by the death of another. Sounds like a foreshadowing of resurrection because of the death of Christ! This makes sense because there is a powerful connection between Elisha, whose name means, “My God is salvation,” and Jesus, whose name means, “The Lord is salvation.” Like Jesus, Elisha was used by God’s power to bring a dead person to life (2 Kings 4:32-35), heal a leper (5:9-14), and multiply food (4:42-44).

Elisha’s ministry pointed forward to that of Jesus, just as the ministry of Elijah, his predecessor, pointed forward to that of John the Baptist. Like Jesus, Elisha was a teacher of truth and righteousness to restore his people spiritually, and he healed people physically as well.

The story of Elisha demonstrates three important principles:

1. Purity and life go together.

Elisha’s skeleton made a man pure and alive at the same time, just as Naaman was given new life when he was made pure and healed from leprosy (2 Kings 5). Jesus also gave new life to people he purified, including those whom he raised from the dead (Luke 7; John 11).

Moral purity also goes with life, as God said to the Israelites: “You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live: I am the LORD” (Lev. 18:5; NRSV). By pouring love into our hearts through His Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5), thereby enabling us to live in harmony with His law of morally pure love, the God of love makes it possible for us to continue to live in His universe, where love must rule, or we will ultimately destroy each other.

2. Life and holiness go together.

Life from Elisha’s bones was due to his holy connection with God, who is holy and the Source of all life, as graphically illustrated in Ezekiel 47, where a river of life flows out from His temple. Verse 12 says: “On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing” (NRSV).

This sounds like the tree of life by the river of life in the book of Revelation (22:1, 2!)

Jesus makes the water of life available to each of us individually. He said to the woman at the well: “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14, NKJV).

3. God can use human beings as sources of purity, holiness, and life.

Elisha had no power in himself. He derived it from God. Similarly, apostles such as Peter could perform miracles like those of Christ, including raising the dead, by the power that God gave to them (Acts 3-5, 9, 19).

Not only does Christ make us wells of water springing up to eternal life; in John 7:38, He goes a step further: “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (NKJV). Although God is the ultimate Source, Christ makes His followers into secondary sources of life so that they can emulate Him and carry on His earthly ministry while He is ministering for them in heaven. This promise is for whoever believes in Him, which includes us today.

We will not necessarily perform the kinds of miracles wrought by Elisha and Jesus’ disciples. Yet by God’s grace, we too can be channels of blessing and healing to the world. If the Lord could use Elisha when he was dead, surely He can use us while we are alive!

the Allen Institute for Brain Science in Seattle is currently in the painstaking and tedious process of mapping the brain. All of it.

There have been brain maps from earlier research, some of them dating back to the 19th century. These older topographies of tissue, however, deal with anatomical areas in terms of convolutions and lobes and hemispheres.

Instead, the Allen Brain Atlas is mapping the brain gene by gene. It is an ambitious attempt to describe the entire cortex at the genetic level. Going well beyond a mere comparative cartography of continents and countries, this new Allen project is focusing on acres or hectares.

How? Some have called the process “industrial-strength” or “brute” science. The institute is analyzing thousands upon thousands of frozen slabs of tissue only microns thick, each containing billions of cells. The aim is to determine which snippets of DNA are activated in each cell. Using robots that work 24-7, it is producing more than a terabyte of data per day.

In contrast, the 3 billion chemical base pairs that make up human DNA fit in a text file of only three gigabytes. This data took the Human Genome Project, with thousands of scientists, 13 years to complete. “How many of these base pairs,” posits Francis Collins, former director of the Genome Project, “does it take to provide the information for a human being? If we were to read it out loud, without stopping, it would take thirty-one years. We have all that information inside each cell of our body.”

The intention of the Allen Brain Atlas is to produce a universal map of the cellular structure of the normal human brain. But, of course, each brain is unique. So with only a limited supply of human specimens to draw from, the researchers have early on struggled to define what is “normal.” As one perceptive writer phrased it, “Is it normal to smoke
cigarettes? Is it normal not to drink alcohol? What about a cortex of someone who has taken antidepressants? Or spent years in psycho-analysis? Or committed a violent felony? Is anybody normal? How do you standardize the individual?"

Good questions.

Every now and again, we see the flippant bumper sticker: "Why be normal?" More than anything else, this sentiment probably expresses a declaration of nonconformity. It is not so much a comment on quality as it is on a distaste for sameness.

But the concept of "normal" does relate to some interesting issues. For example, if some consensus could be arrived at as to what is a normal human brain, its definition would almost certainly relate in some fundamental ways to worldview.

Some evolutionists, for example, may consider normal to be a kind of current standard at which human development has arrived in a progression to something even better in the future. And today's normal human brain would perhaps be superior to, say, a 15th-century human brain.

A Creationist would likely agree that today's human brain may be superior to that of 500 years ago, but for other than evolutionary reasons—and certainly inferior to that of the pre-Flood human being.

We are told by inspired writing, for example, that antediluvian peoples were giants, more than twice the size of the people during the early part of the 20th century. And, though physical size of the brain isn't everything, we're informed that these pre-Flood human beings were intellectual giants as well.

Even the Christian who does not recognize the inspiration of Ellen White's writings could certainly assume that the human mind and body in the 21st century would not measure up to its potential at the very beginning—before sin had six or seven thousand years to diminish it. By now, after millennia of the de-humanizing effects of sin, we could almost wonder whether we're truly recognizable physically—or intellectually.

Can it still be said that we are truly created in Imago Dei? Can it still be said that humanity even approximates what it means to be "normal"?

Thinking in yet another direction, a growing number of evolutionists are concluding that the biological aspects of the human condition have pretty much run their course, arrived at a place in our progressive development at which humanity is ready for the next evolutionary step. They think that the human race is on the cusp of a further adaptation as significant as when they say our ancestors supposedly crawled out of the primordial soup for the first time. It's just about time, these transhumanists say, to alter the parameters of the human condition by embracing emerging technologies.

Twenty-first century technology is making available to humankind all new tools of self-improvement such as plastic surgery, cybernetics, steroids, mood-altering and intelligence-enhancing drugs, robotics, genetic engineering. For quite some time, science fiction writers have been exploring the possibilities that these breakthroughs suggest: cyborgs, disembodied brains, and so on. One of the most common themes in these explorations of science fiction is what it means to be human—even basically human.

In a horrifically cosmic sense, Lucifer's bumper sticker might well have read: "Why be normal?" A central part of his rebellion was a rejection of God's created normality.

So, today, we find ourselves wondering what is normal anymore. And, given that sin has brought us to this point, should we be actively trying to do anything about it? Why not just "go with the flow" till Christ returns to put it all right?

The Tower of Babel Construction Company hoped to use the latest in technology to redefine for their time the meaning of "normal." This was pretty much a reiteration of Lucifer's original intention.

In the broken-down, sinful condition in which we find ourselves as human beings today, however, we must strive ever to be as fully human in God's likeness as possible. As we are active participants in the Great Controversy, we should do everything we can to improve the human condition and the world we live in.

"Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31, NKJV). "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might" (Eccl. 9:10, NKJV). The Christian life is hardly that of a slacker!

Presumably this concept of "all to the glory of God" would include the fullest judicious utilization of available technologies. A Christian is not a neo-Luddite.

But as for any other human endeavor, the aim of science and technology should be "all to the glory of God." Certainly any effort like that of the Allen Brain Atlas to understand ourselves better should also help us along to a fuller realization of God's definition of normal.

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4 See The Great Controversy, p. 664; Patriarchs and Prophets, pp. 82, 83.