

Scripture and Sound Teaching—God's Method

Dear Friends,

In this week's study, I explore a lesson from Acts 8, Philip and the eunuch. This lesson teaches a neglected truth in today's Christian culture. In one section of this culture, we encounter sincere believers who say they believe in "The inspiration and authority of Scripture," in "Scripture alone." However, when confronted with 2 Timothy 3:16-17, they insist that "All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God" should be altered to "All scripture *was* given by inspiration of God." They believe the Holy Spirit was directly involved in the writing of Scripture, but they do not believe the present tense of the verb in this lesson, Paul's point that the God who inspired the writing of Scripture remains involved in the preservation of that writing for believers in future ages.

Jesus gives us a powerful example of this truth. Despite the Book of Exodus being written some 1500 years earlier (And who knows how many times copied and handed down to future generations), when challenged on life after death and a literal bodily resurrection, He quoted one verse from Moses' writings, Exodus 3:6, building His rejection of errant Sadducee disbelief on Moses' use of present tense verbs, "I am," not "I was." Paul likewise (In Galatians 3:16) argues from Genesis and God's promise to Abraham (The singular "Seed," not the plural "Seeds"). So these dear contemporary believers reject the vital Biblical doctrine of God's ongoing preservation of His inspired Scripture.

Despite reading a passage, many other contemporary, and equally sincere believers wholly ignore the teaching of Scripture in favor of their own ideas, thinking that sincere belief is as reliable as inspired Scripture.

In healthy contrast, our study passage this week teaches us that a faithful believer who desires to be sound in the faith and to live a godly faithful life to the glory of God needs *both* an unreserved respect for and belief in Scripture and the aid of an equally Bible-believing and sound-in-the-faith teacher to guide them to sound Bible truth.

Contemporary Christians need this lesson. Just one example. A growing trend, especially among "Conservative" and supposedly Bible-believing Christians is the idea of "Home Church." If you become disenchanted with the teachings or activities of your home church, just disappear from their culture and "Do church in your home with you and your family alone." This idea could not be more opposite to the example we read in the lesson of Philip and the eunuch. The eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53, one of Bible studying believers' most precious lessons/prophesies of Jesus' sufferings and successful atonement for the sins of His people. If "Scripture alone," as it would be studied in the "Home Church" setting, is sufficient, why didn't the eunuch readily understand that the prophecy was of Jesus? He read the lesson, understood the gravity of the lesson, but was confused regarding its teaching. However, when Philip "*at the same scripture*" preached Jesus to the eunuch, he understood, believed, rejoiced, and obeyed Philip's teaching.

An old man's sad personal "Prophecy." The "Home Church" idea will grow confused, closed-minded believers full of odd and unsound ideas. It will not grow faithful, sound believers.

One of the New Testament's strongest teachings regarding sound, God-honoring faith is that it exists, grows, and remains sound and healthy *only* in faithful contact with a community of faithful, Bible believing people. Lord guide us, in the company of godly, faithful, Bible-believing people, to His Word

and to His lifestyle of faith and faithful obedience to Him and to His ways, not our opinions and imaginations.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

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Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him. The place of the scripture which he read was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his mouth: In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation? for his life is taken from the earth. And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. (Acts 8:29-35 KJV 1900)

The New Testament consistently teaches the necessity of both Scripture and sound, faithful Bible teaching to guide seekers to Biblical truth. Isn’t the Bible enough? We talk often—and rightly—about the sufficiency of Scripture. As the final word for truth, Scripture alone is indeed sufficient. However, **reading Scripture alone in isolation from godly, Bible based sound teaching is not the Bible pattern.** Personal observance of very sincere people who tried to learn the Bible in a vacuum, with no teaching or guidance from godly teachers affirms this point. There is no iron to sharpen iron in their thinking. (Proverbs 27:17 KJV) They typically adopt odd ideas and interpretations of Scripture, along with a stubborn “I’m right. If you don’t agree with me, you are wrong” attitude. No surprise; they try to discover Biblical faith apart from the Lord’s “pillar and ground of the truth.” (1 Timothy 3:15 KJV) **The Bible pattern of sound and healthy faith always appears in a community of healthy faithful believers.** Constantly rub shoulders with unfaithful people, and you will pick up some of their habits and bad ideas. Constantly choose wise godly, and sound believers as your companions, and you shall also pick up some of their sound godly faithfulness.

The lesson of Philip and the eunuch is only one of many passages in Acts, all of which include both the writings of Scripture and the teaching of men who build their faith on that same Scripture alone. The eunuch was obviously a devoted man. He had traveled from North Africa to Jerusalem to learn more about God. He had a copy of Scripture, at least the Book of Isaiah. He was reading a familiar passage, Isaiah 53. Did he come to a thorough understanding of this chapter all by himself? No, he was more confused than enlightened. When Philip asked if he understood what he read, he honestly replied. He understood that Isaiah wrote of something monumentally important. But was he writing of a personal experience, of someone he knew, or was he writing a prophecy of someone else, present or future? If God intended for His children to learn all they need to know by themselves in a vacuum, why didn’t the eunuch come to a clear and sound understanding of this key prophecy of Jesus?

The Biblical model of godly and right knowledge appears in distinct details in this lesson. The Holy Spirit gives us every detail of the process. Prior to Philip’s teaching, the eunuch manifests a strong sense of God and a hunger to know more about Him. He is not an evil unsaved sinner. He is a child of God who longs to

know more about his God. The Lord directs Philip to travel an odd path, but a path He knew would intersect this hungry confused child of the King. The eunuch doesn't respond to Philip with "No, I don't understand, but I trust God to give me the knowledge I need to know about the text. I don't need you." He is warmly receptive to Philip's question. Consider the setting. They are traveling through a desert region, not a bustling metropolis. A stranger to the eunuch approaches him in the middle of the desert with a question about what he is reading. And the eunuch is anxious to learn more. He seems to sense that this stranger who asked if he understood has some answers that he needs.

And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other man? Instead of engaging Philip in a vain exchange of personal philosophy, the eunuch honestly confesses his ignorance and also his interest in knowing more about this Scripture.

Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. Both observation and Scripture affirm a unique behavior. When a person is truly enlightened to the truth of the gospel, which is always Jesus, first, last, and always, they want to talk about Jesus to others. When a person, however religious, substitutes their own ideas, or, in Peter's inspired words, their "private interpretations," instead of Jesus, they want to talk about their ideas, or their "another gospel" and "another Jesus," not the Jesus of Scripture. Several years ago, I received an e-mail message from a man who lived in another region who had heard my messages on the internet. Clearly by the content of his message, the man believed in salvation by works, or, at best, a hybrid view of salvation, part man and part Jesus. He wanted to engage me in a discussion. I responded with a few passages of Scripture and my thoughts from those passages. He replied with his philosophical reasoning, but not a single Bible verse. After two or three exchanges, all with this same pattern, I reminded the man. In all his e-mail messages to me, he had not cited or reasoned from a single Scripture, only his personal opinions. I suggested that the only basis for a beneficial dialogue was to reason from the Scriptures, not ignore them and debate personal philosophy and opinion. He agreed and assured me that he would get back to me shortly with his thoughts from Scripture. That was several years ago. He never replied after that day. How often in our culture do people adopt their own ideas, learn a few Bible passages and terms, but spend all their time flourishing their own ideas, not truly ever reasoning from the Scriptures. This man likely was regarded as a strong believer and stalwart member of his church, but, like the Galatians, he invested his mental and spiritual energy in another gospel and another Jesus, not the gospel and Jesus of Scripture.

The eunuch didn't want to discuss personal philosophy or his own ideas about religion or God with Philip. He wanted to learn more about what Scripture taught in the passage he read. If a person wants to debate opinions and personal philosophy, I will not spend much time with him. Why? He has an opinion based on private ideas. He isn't interested in building his faith on Biblical teachings alone. Why argue with his opinion? After we both tire of talk, he will still have his opinion, and that opinion will be as much as he wants to know.

Does this lesson compromise the thought of "Scripture alone"? No, not at all. Both the eunuch and Philip respected Scripture as God's personal revelation to His people. The eunuch had spent time in Jerusalem specifically to learn more about Scripture, in this case Old Testament Scripture. His time there failed to answer his need. Upon leaving Jerusalem, he was reading a rich Old Testament prophecy of Jesus, but he had no idea what the lesson taught. A right view of the New Testament comfortably holds that the New Testament builds on and completes the Old Testament. There is no conflict between them. Philip understood the rich truth of Isaiah 53 and readily taught the eunuch the truth of the lesson.

Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus. As the lesson unfolds, we quickly learn that this truth regarding Jesus resonated with the eunuch. He believed it and was baptized before continuing his journey back to his native Ethiopia.

The question of Scripture alone or Scripture accompanied with a faithful gospel preacher raises the question of epistemology. This word defines one's source of authority and knowledge for his world view. The word refers to the foundation one chooses for what he regards as justified knowledge versus personal opinion. Few studies are more needed among contemporary Christians than this. Many sincere believers cloud and compromise their faith by confusing authentic Biblical truth, based on clear and repeated New Testament teaching only, with either their opinions about Scripture or someone else's opinion, often stated as fact when it is not. I recently heard a friend tell a personal experience that makes this point. A work associate of this pastor attended a church that strongly emphasized, as many modern denominations do, that eternal and final salvation depended on the individual's choice and act of faith in "Accepting Jesus." For several discussions, the pastor repeatedly reminded his friend that Scripture never admonishes lost sinners to "Accept Jesus," that every passage in the New Testament which uses the word "Accept" refers either to acceptance between individuals or to Jesus offering Himself to the Father for our sins and the Father's "Accepting" us in Jesus. Not one passage can be found that states the contemporary human acceptance idea of salvation. The fellow argued, but, like the man who wrote me, didn't take the time to check his Bible. Eventually he asked my friend to meet with his pastor. My friend replied, "If you can find one passage in the New Testament that teaches us to accept Jesus for our salvation, I'll meet with your pastor." Wise challenge. He sent his friend to Scripture. A week or so later the fellow engaged my friend in a different conversation. He was shocked that he had not found a single passage with his salvation idea or use of "Accept" in it. In this case, a very devoted and sincere believer had made his church's beliefs and his pastor's teachings his ultimate "Epistemology." When challenged to go to Scripture alone, the man realized that he was following the wrong "Epistemology." ***Scripture and a faithful preacher/pastor will agree.*** The pastor will direct believers to Scripture and, like Philip, provide Biblical answers that enlighten the person's understanding of Scripture, not wrest the Scriptures to teach his—or another person's—personal opinions.

As this example sadly illustrates, many contemporary Christians have great faith in their own faith, but they have far less faith in Jesus and His finished work. They form a sincere opinion that, since they must work for everything worthwhile in life, they think they must do something to gain their eternal life. In many circles, the personal act of faith is required with the explanation, "Faith is not a work, so requiring faith for salvation is not the same as salvation by works." Can they offer a passage that specifically states that faith is "Not a work"? New Testament Scripture on this point is as silent as it is on human acceptance of Jesus for salvation. If they read a Scripture that stated that faith is a work, would they believe it? Let me offer just such a passage in Jesus' own words.

*Then said they unto him, What shall we do, **that we might work the works of God?** Jesus answered and said unto them, **This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.** (John 6:28-29 KJV)*

Jesus could not have stated the point more simply. The people asked a direct question regarding their own works, works that God commanded. And Jesus answered simply and specifically. The single

work they could do that would most honor God and His commandments for His people is what? To believe on Jesus! Believing on Jesus is an act of faith, and Jesus specifically referred to it as a "Work." Only a wresting of words and their meaning can conclude anything different from Jesus' words in this lesson. He gave the simplest possible answer to the question. The question did not ask about what God does in us, but what we can do, literally, what works we can do, that are taught and commanded of God. Jesus didn't twist the question in His answer. He answered that question. An honest reflection on the nature of believing the supernatural events in Scripture, especially relating to Jesus Himself, will clearly affirm that truly believing the testimony of Scripture regarding, for example, Jesus' death and resurrection three days later, validates Jesus' point. Active faith that believes on Jesus requires serious mental and spiritual "Work." But it is the noblest and most God-honoring of all works! The father who prayed, "*Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief,*" (Mark 9:24b KJV) fully understood Jesus' words that believing in the face of life's difficulties is sometimes one of the most difficult "Works" we can face. Abraham's twenty to twenty-five year sojourn with the Lord's promise of a son required hard work for Abraham to believe the Lord would fulfill that promise, a point often overlooked in the Genesis account of Abraham's time before Isaac. Yes, he did believe, but the record indicates that he also struggled with the idea at times. (Genesis, end of Chapter 11 through Chapter 15. Consider Genesis 15:2 as one example)

We need this teaching from Jesus no less than we need the lesson of Philip and the eunuch to guide us, as Philip guided the eunuch, to sound Biblical teaching. Lord help us to seek it from sound and Biblical teachers who affirm Scripture rather than supplant it.

Elder Joe Holder