

Rethinking Scripture

Start with Jesus, Not Doctrine

In the history of Christianity, there have been countless theological debates, denominational splits, and passionate arguments over doctrine. From the Great Schism of 1054 to the Protestant Reformation to modern denominational divisions, Christians have often found themselves separated by what they believe about God rather than united by who God is.

The Question: We all claim to follow Jesus and read the same Scriptures, why do we end up with such different conclusions about what scripture is saying God's character is, and what it means to follow Him?

The Answer: Our starting point matters more than we realize.

The Starting Point Problem

Every hermeneutical approach begins somewhere and that somewhere sets a course direction that shapes the question and assumption that we keep building our understanding and interpretations on. But what if our starting point is shaping our destination more than we understand?

Consider this reality: Two people can read the same Bible, hold the same view of inspiration, affirm the same creeds, and yet come away with radically different pictures of who God is and what He wants from us. One sees a God who cannot stand to look at sinful humanity other than through Jesus; another sees a God who pursues humanity with relentless love.

Same Scriptures. Different starting points. Different destinations.

All Hermeneutics Have Starting Points

The Relational Trajectory Pattern

Your starting point → shapes your expectations → shapes what you look for → what you see shapes your expectations and interpretations

Just as you expect different things from an Uber driver, personal trainer, counselor, and spouse in the same difficult situation, your starting view of Scripture shapes everything about how you interpret it.

All hermeneutics have foundational starting points and assumptions; it becomes the point where we first begin asking “why?” This in turn begins to guide the interpretive process.

It's a little bit like an old sail boat that sets its compass heading on a long journey. A two or three degree difference of heading creates a much greater change played out over a thousand miles than even a greater degree change made for the last fifty miles of the journey. This is why the starting point of a hermeneutic has the greatest impact on how we read and interpret scripture.

The same is true for the driving values underlying any hermeneutic.

For Casas, we hold an underlying value to be 'Honest to the Text' and we see the meta-narrative of scripture starting with Genesis chapter 1 through to chapter 3, not starting at Genesis chapter 3.

Our primary starting point is with Christ, but there can be many starting points with Christ as you will see. How you start with Christ also matters a great deal.

Christological Hermeneutic

There are multiple Christ focused hermeneutics. One of the most common western hermeneutic types is called “Christological.”

Starting Point: The Works of Christ (Death, Resurrection, Ascension, and the doctrine pertaining to the sovereignty of God)

Characteristics:

- Asks "Why?" questions that beg doctrinal answers
- Creates building blocks of doctrine upon doctrine
- Views Scripture as a rulebook and doctrinal textbook
- Classic questions: "Is there a command to obey, sin to avoid, doctrine to believe?"

The Doctrinal Building Process: When you start with the works of Christ, you inherently begin asking questions that demand doctrinal answers. Why did Jesus have to die? This leads to doctrines about sin. How bad was sin that required such a sacrifice? This creates the doctrine of Total Depravity - the belief that there is nothing good in humanity.

But if God is sovereign and humans are totally depraved, how do some get saved? This leads to Unconditional Election - God chooses some to save regardless of their actions. But if God chooses some, did Jesus die for everyone? This creates Limited Atonement - Jesus only died for the elect. Can the elect reject salvation? This leads to Irresistible Grace - God's chosen cannot ultimately resist Him.

Each doctrine creates new contradictions that require more doctrines to resolve. As one theologian writes: "Limited atonement is necessitated by God's justice. If Christ died for all sinners, how could God hold unbelief against anyone? Christ atoned for it, after all." The result: God is not allowed to die for someone He knows will not be saved.

Doctrinal Trajectory: Works of Christ → Original Sin & Sovereignty → Total Depravity → Unconditional Election → Limited Atonement → Irresistible Grace → Preservation of Saints

Results:

- Heavy emphasis on sin management
- Focus on correct beliefs over right relationships
- Views humanity in service to Scripture
- Can lead to doctrines like double predestination

Christocentric Hermeneutic

Starting Point: The Person of Christ

Characteristics:

- Flows outward from Jesus' personhood rather than building upward
- Views Scripture as story compelling us to trust God in faith and love
- Focus on knowing, trusting, and loving God
- Views Scripture as serving humanity

A Christocentric Hermeneutic begins with the person of Christ. By starting with the person of Christ the natural trajectory begins with "who" and relational questions. Who was He as a historical figure? Who did He interact with? What was He like? How did He treat people? This starting point leads the reader to a different set of expectations that leads us to look for something different than doctrine or rules. We more naturally look for God's heart, how to relate with people, or what it means to have life. By starting with Jesus the hermeneutic does not discount the works of Christ, rather sees them through a relational lens involving God's heart. A Christocentric lens assumes that the point of scripture leads to Jesus and focuses on the important aspects. What did Jesus model, what did He teach, and what image of God does He give us.

Three Aspects of Starting with the Person of Christ

Scripture Points to Jesus

Jesus' Teaching: "You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life (zoe). These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

Key Insight:

- Scripture's purpose is to point us to Jesus for zoe
- **Bios** ['bi.os] = biological life (blood pumping, breathing)
- **Zoe** [zo'i] = life worth living, fullness, shalom (Tree of Life's fruit!)

Meta-Narrative Connection: Jesus invites us to have life in Him (John 10:10). The Pharisees were stuck in Part 3 (People Choose What They Want) - trying to move toward God through knowledge and control rather than accepting God's invitation to a relationship of faith.

Two Trees Application:

- **Tree of Knowledge approach:** "If I study enough Scripture, I'll have life"
- **Tree of Life approach:** "Scripture points me to Jesus, who IS life"

Application: If our interpretation doesn't point toward Christ, we need to reconsider our approach.

Example:

- Luke 24:27 - "Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained what was said concerning himself"
- Luke 24:44 - "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms"
- John 5:46 - "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me"

1. Jesus as Model

As a historical figure who lived on earth and interacted with people, what did he model?

"Take My Yoke Upon You": In rabbinic tradition, a "yoke" was a rabbi's interpretation and application for how to live Torah (scripture). In rabbinic tradition, disciples literally followed their rabbi to model how he lived. Jesus invites us to model our lives after Him as a way of understanding scripture.

Two Perspectives for application:

Disciple's Perspective: Read as if looking over Jesus' shoulder

- "What can I learn about life from watching Jesus?"
- "How does Jesus engage with people?"
- "In what ways can I imitate Christ?"

Person Being Ministered To: Read from the perspective of those Jesus encounters

- "What does this teach me about how God sees me?"
- "What do I learn about God's heart toward humanity?"

Example: Jairus and his dying daughter (Luke 8:40-56)

- *Disciple view:* Jesus cares about people, even religious leaders who might oppose him (Part 4: God meets people where they are)
- *Jairus view:* Jesus won't let me walk home alone after receiving the worst news of my life (God's pursuing love, even in tragedy)

Meta-Narrative Application: Here we see into 4 part pattern of God's story - we see God's dream (caring for hurting people), God's choice (Jesus going to help), people's choice (Jairus choosing to trust despite circumstances), and God meeting people (Jesus walking with Jairus through his darkest moment).

Example:

- Matthew 7:28-29 - "The crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority"
- 1 Peter 2:21 - "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps"
- 1 John 2:6 - "Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did"

2. Jesus' Teachings

Matthew 7:24-27 What is the rock?

The Vine and Branches Parable: (John 15:1-12)

- God is the gardener who prunes/cleanses even Jesus (the vine)
- We are branches that receive life from the vine
- **Jesus' command:** "Love one another as I have loved you"
- Jesus models this command. He first obeys the Father accepting the Father's love. Then turns and loves His disciples.
- **The process:** Let God love you → receive that love → love others with received love

Two Trees Insight:

- **Tree of Knowledge approach:** "I must love God and others through willpower and duty"
- **Tree of Life approach:** "I receive God's love first, then love flows naturally from that"

Meta-Narrative Connection: This represents Part 2 (God Chooses What He Wants) - God initiates the love relationship, and Part 4 (God Meets People Where We Are) - He provides the very love we need to love others.

Key Insight: Obedience starts with receiving Jesus' love, not trying to generate love for God or others through willpower.

3. Jesus as Image of God

Scripture is clear in saying Jesus is our best picture of who God is and what He is like. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Colossians 1:15-19, and John 14:9)

Hermeneutical Principle: Jesus becomes the lens we use to understand who God is throughout scripture. Often there is tension or conflicting views. Always start with Jesus to interpret the other conflicting passage.

Application:

- If an Old Testament passage seems to show God as vindictive or genocidal
- And Jesus shows care, mercy, and love even in difficult moments
- We interpret the unclear passage through the lens of Jesus' character
- Jesus reveals what God is truly like

Meta-Narrative Connection: Jesus embodies the ultimate expression of God's pursuing heart (Parts 1-2) and God's response to human failure (Part 4).

Two Trees Application: Jesus consistently demonstrates Tree of Life living - receiving identity from the Father, offering life to others without condition.

Example:

- John 14:9 - If you have seen me you've seen the Father.
- Colossians 1:15 - "The Son is the image of the invisible God"
- Hebrews 1:3 - "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and exact representation"
- 2 Corinthians 4:4 - "Christ, who is the image of God"

Christ in you

"Christ in you, the hope of glory": The essence and Spirit of Jesus abides in believers' hearts. Scripture invites us to seek, trust, and relate with Christ in us.

Practical Implication:

- Jesus is our ultimate compass for life
- The Bible guides us in understanding who Jesus is and how to walk with him
- We avoid substituting Scripture for the person of God
- Jesus, living within us, provides ongoing relational guidance

Meta-Narrative Application: This is the fulfillment of God's dream from Part 1 - intimate relationship where God dwells with His people.

Example:

- Colossians 1:27 - ...glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.
- Galatians 4:4-7 Because you are sons. God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts
- John 14:17 - "The Spirit of truth... lives with you and will be in you"
- Romans 8:9-11 - "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ"

Jesus Sets Scripture's Role in Our Lives

Three Foundational Principles:

1. Jesus Has Authority Over Interpreting Scripture (Matthew 5:17)

"I have not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it"

- Jesus boldly claimed interpretive authority over Scripture
- The same Jesus lives within believers
- Scripture interpretation becomes an ongoing relationship with Christ

Question: How does this change your approach to difficult passages? _____

2. Scripture Is a Gift in Service to People (Mark 2:23-28)

"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath"

- Scripture exists to serve humanity, not the reverse
- The Law was meant to help people understand how to follow Jesus
- Scripture helps us, rather than being a substitute for God

Question: In what ways might we put ourselves in service to Scripture rather than Scripture serving us?

3. Scripture's Agenda Is Clear (Matthew 22:37-40)

Dual Purpose:

- **Point us to Jesus** (John 5:39)
- **Teaches us to love** ("All the Law and the Prophets hang on this: Love")

Warning Sign: If we use Scripture to shame, weaponize, or prove ourselves right in ways that don't demonstrate love, we may be misusing it.

Question: How can you tell if you're using Scripture to point toward love or toward control?

Common Mistakes: When Christocentric Hermeneutics Go Wrong

Red Flags - Tree of Knowledge Creeping Back In:

1. Using Jesus to Build Excessive Doctrine

- **Sounds like:** "Jesus teaches us that we must believe these 15 specific things to be saved"
- **Problem:** Turning Jesus' person into systematic theology building blocks
- **Christocentric approach:** Jesus calls us into relationship, not doctrinal perfection

2. Making Jesus Into a Rule-Giver

- **Sounds like:** "Jesus said love your neighbor, so here are 47 ways you must show love"
- **Problem:** Turning Jesus' teachings into Tree of Knowledge performance metrics
- **Christocentric approach:** Jesus models love so we can receive and give love naturally

3. Weaponizing "What Would Jesus Do?"

- **Sounds like:** "Jesus would never [insert behavior you disapprove of]"
- **Problem:** Using Jesus to judge others rather than examine our own hearts
- **Christocentric approach:** Ask "How is Jesus meeting this person where they are?"

4. Spiritual Bypassing Difficult Emotions

- **Sounds like:** "Just trust Jesus" without acknowledging real pain or struggle
- **Problem:** Using Jesus as escape from human experience rather than companion through it
- **Christocentric approach:** Jesus walked with Jairus through his darkest moment

Watch Out For These Mindsets:

"I've Got the Right Hermeneutic, So I'm Right"

- **Warning:** Pride in having the "correct" interpretive method
- **Reality check:** Even good hermeneutics can be used from Tree of Knowledge motivations
- **Heart check:** Am I using this approach to feel superior or to love better?

"This Means I Can Ignore Difficult Passages"

- **Warning:** Using "start with Jesus" to dismiss challenging Old Testament texts
- **Reality check:** Christocentric hermeneutics help us wrestle with difficult texts, not avoid them
- **Heart check:** Am I using Jesus to escape hard questions or to engage them more faithfully?

Beyond Bible Study: Living for a Christocentric Lens

Parenting Decisions

Tree of Knowledge Approach: "What does the Bible say about screen time/discipline/education?"

- Searches for specific rules, focus on compliance over relationship
- Creates anxiety when Scripture doesn't directly address modern issues
- Leads to rigid rule-following or rule-breaking guilt

Christocentric Approach: "How can I reflect Jesus' heart toward my children in this situation?"

- **Meta-narrative lens:** How can I demonstrate God's pursuing love?
- **Jesus' character:** How did Jesus treat children? What did he prioritize?
- **Result:** Decisions flow from love and relationship rather than rule compliance

Question: What parenting decision are you currently facing where this shift might help?

Work Conflicts

Tree of Knowledge Approach: "I need to find the biblical principle for dealing with difficult coworkers"

- Searches for workplace behavior rules
- Often leads to either legalistic responses or feeling unequipped
- Creates separation between "spiritual" and "secular" life

Christocentric Approach: "How can I embody Jesus' character in this workplace tension?"

- **Meta-narrative lens:** How can I be part of God meeting this person where they are?
- **Jesus' modeling:** How did Jesus handle conflict? What was his agenda?
- **Result:** Responses flow from love rather than self-protection or rule-following

Financial Stress

Tree of Knowledge Approach: "What does the Bible say about money/debt/tithing?"

- Focuses on financial rules and obligations
- Creates shame about current financial state
- Leads to behavior modification rather than heart transformation

Christocentric Approach: "How does Jesus see me and my financial situation?"

- **Meta-narrative lens:** God meets me where I am, not where I should be
- **Jesus' character:** How did Jesus treat people facing material needs?
- **Result:** Financial decisions made from trust rather than fear or religious obligation

Comparison Chart: Two Approaches

Christocentric	Christological
Person of Christ	Works of Christ
Story about God's desire for relationship	View bible as a textbook on doctrine
Focus on right relationships (love)	Hyper focus on correct beliefs
Views Scripture as serving humanity	Views humanity in service to Scripture
Focus on knowing, trusting, loving God	Focus on sin and condemnation of man
Trust the story of the Tree of Life	Feeds hunger for Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil

Hermeneutical Application

Christocentric Questions for Bible Study:

1. In what ways do I see God in a new or different way?
2. What is Jesus' agenda in this story?
3. What story is Jesus asking someone to trust?
4. How does this passage reveal God's heart toward people?
5. Does my interpretation align with who Jesus is?
6. Is my application leading me to exemplify Christ's qualities?
7. What is Jesus modeling about how to live?
8. Does my interpretation align with Jesus' approach and cares?

Warning Signs of Misinterpretation:

- Interpretations that increase shame and fear
- Emphasis on behavior modification over heart transformation
- God portrayed as distant or punitive rather than pursuing
- Focus on human performance rather than divine grace

The Central Question: "Am I interpreting the Bible in a way that takes me towards the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or am I seeking to understand any passage in a way that actually takes me towards the tree of life instead?"

Reflection Questions

Easy/Starting Questions:

1. How does starting with Jesus' person rather than his works change your view of God?
2. Can you think of a time when you approached the Bible looking primarily for rules rather than relationship?
3. Which perspective (disciple or person being ministered to) feels more natural to you when reading Jesus stories?
4. How might your current struggles reflect whether you're approaching God through the Tree of Life or Tree of Knowledge?

Deeper Reflection:

1. How has your "starting point" with Scripture shaped what you expect to find when you read it?
2. In what ways might you be using Scripture as a substitute for a relationship with Jesus?
3. How does the concept of Jesus living within you change your approach to daily decisions?
4. What would change in your life if you truly believed Jesus has authority to interpret Scripture?

Application Questions:

1. How can you practically apply the "two perspectives" approach to your next Bible study?
2. What doctrinal beliefs might you need to hold more lightly in favor of following Jesus' person?
3. How can you ensure your biblical interpretation leads to love rather than judgment?
4. In what specific areas of life do you need to let Jesus be your compass rather than trying to find the "right rule"?

Book Recommendation - From Glenn

Spangler & Tverberg (2018) *Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus*. Zondervan

Willard, Dallas (2017) *Living in Christ's Presence. IVP**

*In this book Dallas Willard talks about both faith and knowledge.

The concept and idea of knowledge that he talks about would be different from how we have presented knowledge in terms of the Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil.

When referencing the tree, we are talking about knowledge that is something that gives us certainty and control.

This is a knowledge that removes any need for us to trust God.

When Dallas Willard uses the word knowledge, he is speaking of it as something that is experienced. For him, and for us, knowledge is a positive thing when it is gained through the experience of trusting God.

The following quote is from [Living in Christ's Presence](#) and is one that we would affirm and resonate with deeply.

“John 17:3 is one of the most important verses to understand: ‘And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’ [nrsv]. Now, this knowing is not doctrinal knowledge; it’s a living interaction with God, with his Son and with his Spirit.”

Glossary of Terms

Christocentric: An approach to interpreting Scripture that keeps the person of Jesus Christ at the center, using His character, teachings, and life as the primary lens.

Christological: An approach that starts with the works of Christ (death, resurrection, ascension) and builds systematic doctrine from those works.

Bios: Greek word for biological life - being alive as opposed to dead.

Zoe: Greek word for life worth living - fullness, flourishing, abundant life.

Yoke: Rabbinic term for a teacher's interpretive method and approach to living Torah; Jesus invites disciples to take on his yoke.

Systematic Theology: An approach that organizes Christian beliefs into comprehensive doctrinal systems, often building doctrine upon doctrine.

Hermeneutical Trajectory: How one's starting point shapes expectations, which shapes what one looks for, which profoundly affects interpretation.

Double Predestination: The doctrine that God predestined some people to salvation and others to damnation before creation.

Total Depravity: The doctrine that humans are completely corrupted by sin with nothing good remaining.

Limited Atonement: The doctrine that Jesus died only for the elect, not for all humanity.

Tree of Life vs. Tree of Knowledge: Metaphors representing faith/trust relationship with God versus the desire for control and certainty through knowledge.

Meta-narrative: The overarching story that connects all biblical narratives into one unified account of God's relationship with humanity.