

## PRESUPPOSITIONAL INFLUENCE

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Whether a person consciously; or unconsciously realizes, no one reads or studies the Bible or indeed any other book, or written material, without presuppositions. Presuppositions shape one's overall understanding of everything we read or study

So what is a presupposition? A web dictionary offers this simple definition; To suppose or assume in advance: take for granted in advance. For example when a reader picks up a mystery novel they quickly make an assumption that Mr X is the likely killer but the chances are that they will be wrong for the role of a mystery writer is to have their reader constantly changing their presuppositions before the plot is revealed in a way that will surprise most.

But whenever we read the God inspired Bible we still seek meaning through a set of presuppositions but in contrast to the novelist the aim of its authors is for the readers to base those presuppositions on a truth that never changes. Provided the assumption is sound it will develop into a belief with further understanding. That may sound simple enough but in reality it is so easy to add that 'little bit of me' before a truth is properly understood.

Having said all this, God remains a mystery writer in his own right. Although we vaguely see the final outcome, mystery will always surround the ways in which he will bring it about, not to mention the magnitude of the fulfilment of his promises.

As shown in the following example any deviation from the truth will produce a very different outcome to what was intended. Some believe that the Old Testament must be literally fulfilled (i.e., an exact correspondence between what is promised and what is fulfilled) in the New Testament. If this is the case, then one's reading and study of the Bible leads to the conclusion that God's promise to Abraham of many descendants along with the land of Canaan will ultimately be fulfilled by the return of Israel to Palestine and a rebuilt temple in a restored Jerusalem with the reinstatement of animal sacrifices.

However, the problem with such a presupposition is that it fails to take into account Christ's place in Scripture. As Graeme Goldsworthy has pointed out in his book, *According To Plan*, the problem with rigid literalism is that Christ, apart from a rather obscure reference, is nowhere to be found in the promises. Add the riches of his grace arising from his finished work and the fulfilment of the promises far exceed the original promises made to Abraham and Isaac.

Although the principle of the promise, the restoration of all things, remains unchanged the dynamics of bringing it about are as different as chalk is from cheese. The number of recipients of the promise has grown from the tiny nation of Israel to all the people to have ever inhabited the earth. Canaan, the inferior representation of Garden of Eden, will be extended to encompass the entire earth.

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Because of the once for all sacrifice of Jesus to atone for every sin ever committed, animal sacrifices will never again be required. The temple in very different form, is in the process of being rebuilt by the Holy Spirit. As for grubby old Jerusalem, the glory of its replacement remains beyond human comprehension. Every change enhances, rather than detracts from, the original promises.

Overall our language lacks the words to describe the complete makeover but 1 Cor 2:9 gives a preview of what to expect,

**“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.”**

Even our wildest dreams will fall far short of the reality. Last week during fellowship we raised this issue and had a range of views on what it will be like. The scripture just quoted makes it clear that we will all be wrong.

But the outlook for those who leave Christ out of the equation remains bleak. Even if they profess belief in Jesus but fail to factor him into their Bible reading and study, their understanding of it, will at best be faulty, and by definition, even unchristian.

Even in pre-Christian times Psalm 14:1 highlights the danger of leaving God out of the picture,

**The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.**

That is the fruit to be expected of their works.

King Solomon is generally regarded as the wisest man who ever lived but much of his wisdom was learnt the hard way, in the school of hard knocks. He had the resources to taste all of what the world had to offer. Rather than taste, he feasted, and at the end of a long life had drawn the following conclusion. In Eugene Peterson’s Message version, it is summed up like this, Ecclesiastes 12:13,

**But regarding anything beyond this, dear friend, go easy. There’s no end to the publishing of books, and constant study wears you out so you’re no good for anything else. The last and final word is this: Fear God. Do what he tells you.**

Compare the conclusion reached by Solomon with the twin commandments that Jesus left with us as he confronted those who were to soon put him to death. Mark 12:29:31,

**”The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this; ‘Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this; ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”**

Here are two versions of the recipe for a successful life. The only difference is that the second version is much better than the first.

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God loves us, not sometimes but always, despite the things that we may do. At times, when he has a corrective lesson to teach, it may appear that he has deserted us but that is a fallacy, in fact, as illustrated in that inspiring poem, *Footprints in the Sand*, such times serve to intensify his love, although it may not be evident at the time. Such things we can only vaguely understand. We can understand that if nations go to war against each other it is inevitable that young lives will be lost; but at this time we cannot understand why young innocent children are either born deformed or taken from us at an early age.

Already we have two basic presuppositions or assumptions on which to base Biblical reading or study. First, although we cannot conclusively prove it, we must assume that God really exists and secondly that he cares for us. That is the base on which we build as understanding grows. A careful study of the Apostles Creed and our churches Statement of Beliefs will outline much more that we can readily embrace. At first, there may be certain reservations that will be clarified as understanding grows. Growth will be maintained by taking aboard ongoing revelations through the Holy Spirit that resonate with the truth of the Bible.

As the extent of our assumptions increase, so too does our faith, that despite the heartbreaks of this life, we can be confident that in time scriptures like Romans 8:28, will become established fact,

**And we know in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**

Then it will be apparent that God saw the future opportunities and obstacles that we did not. Until that happens we continue to assume that it will.

If the starting point, that is the presuppositions, assumptions, premises or what else you like to call them, are not Christ centred, then we will miss much of what the Bible has to say. So, the question of presuppositions in relation to one's Bible reading and study is crucial. So says Graeme Goldsworthy in his book, *According To Plan*,

***The key presupposition that unlocks the message of the Bible is this: Every word in Scripture points to Jesus and finds its meaning in him,***

In his writings Karl Barth expressed the same conclusion in a slightly different way  
***It is all about God and the God of the gospel.***

That God, is of course, Jesus Christ

The disciples found little meaning in the life and death of Jesus until he overtook two of them on the road to Emmaus, Luke 24:27

**And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.**

For the first time they had found the key to understanding.

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Goldsworthy goes on to say,

*“The significance of this is worth repeating: Jesus Christ in his life, death and resurrection is the fixed point of reference for the understanding of the whole of reality. We must apply this fact to our doing of biblical theology. The gospel is the fixed point of reference for understanding the meaning of the whole range of biblical revelation. Thus, in order to do biblical theology we must start with a dogmatic basis, a presupposition or set of presuppositions that come to us from revelation,”*

Not by the wisdom of man but through divine revelation.

Thus, the New Testament interprets the Old Testament. This doesn't make the Old Testament worthless for the Christian. On the contrary, it enables the believer to have a proper framework in which to understand the progressive unveiling of the message of the Bible.

Thus, Goldsworthy writes,

*“As Christians, we must return to the principles of Old Testament interpretation dictated by the New Testament. When Jesus says that he gives the Old Testament its meaning, he is also saying that we need the Old Testament to understand what he says about himself. Jesus drives us back to the Old Testament to examine it through Christian eyes, teaching that it leads us back to him. In doing biblical theology as Christians, we do not start at Genesis 1 and work our way forward until we discover where it is all leading. Rather we first come to Christ, and he directs us to study the Old Testament in the light of the gospel. The gospel will interpret the Old Testament by showing us its goal and meaning. The Old Testament will increase our understanding of the gospel by showing us what Christ fulfils,”*

John 1:1;

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

Should any doubt of identity remain John removes it in verse 14;

**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.**

The book of John is totally Christ centred and is summarised in John 20:30-31;

**Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.**

During his physical ministry on earth Jesus plainly told the Jews that he was the promised Messiah and of his pending death and resurrection. John 10:18,

**“No one takes it [ that is his life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.”**

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He had previously been more specific, John 2:19,

**“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it up again in three days.”**

These two verses are then drawn together to a logical conclusion by Paul in Romans 1:3;

**“And through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead; Jesus Christ our Lord.”**

It all fits together so neatly like a hand in a glove.

This can be expected because the whole Bible can be, and is, described as the written Word of God. But is it the final Word of God? Let Hebrews 1:1-2 explain;

**“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.”**

Before Christ came, the prophets wrote of him, then for a time his disciples added to the story but Jesus has elected to personally write the closing chapters. In doing so he continues to reveal the One who sent him, so that the “Little Children” may better understand why they are deemed worthy of adoption.

This never ending revelation is referred to as the Living Word and is as trustworthy as the Bible itself. That is, if it complements, rather than attempts to replace what has already been written. The word of the Bible stands without being the absolute truth and the purpose of the Living Word is to build upon the true foundation already laid.

Sadly down through the centuries many have claimed to have had direct revelations from God on a multitude of issues but when put to the test they are clearly shown to be nothing more than the product of a vivid imagination. The test question is simple, does it harmonise with, and add meaning to, what has already been written or is it an attempt to replace it?

From the earliest days anti Biblical teaching has crept into the church. As Paul established churches and preached that belief in the finished work of Jesus fully met the demands of salvation, others followed closely in his footsteps declaring that not to be valid, until the believer compliments the sacrifice through his own good works. Such erroneous teaching only serves to demean the work and glory of Christ, whereas the truth has the opposite effect, by continuing to assure us that with God, **All things are possible.**

And so it has been throughout the history of the church. Those claiming to have new knowledge have proclaimed their enlightenment and in many instances have attracted strong followings, only to fall at the final obstacle by daring to challenge the truth of the written word. The truth prevails for ever, whereas sooner or later, liars will fall on their own sword. Divine revelation will always pass through the sieve of the Bible but sooner or later error will be recognised for what it is, and be cast aside as scum.

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In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul warned against a divided church where believers followed the lead of humans in preference to Jesus Christ. In verses 10 through to 15 he describes the sad outcome.

**<sup>10</sup> By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. <sup>11</sup> For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, <sup>13</sup> their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. <sup>14</sup> If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. <sup>15</sup> If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.**

We normally examine two aspects of God, his appearance and his nature or character. Whilst human curiosity would like to know more about his appearance, God has decreed that it is far more important to know about his character. Consequently, today we know little more about his appearance than did the early church fathers, but from continuing revelation through the agency of the Holy Spirit, we have a much broader understanding of his nature than those who laid the firm foundation that has withstood the test of time.

The outcome is that we have moved considerably nearer to the meaning that the authors of scripture wished to convey to readers of all ages. The original meaning remains the same although at times influenced by other factors, like audience or context.

If a reader is to appreciate the fullness of any book they must first have a good understanding of who and what, it is all about. To this end, good authors go to great lengths to set the stage in the opening chapters. This often is hard going, often to the point that some readers give up before the real story begins. Thus the enjoyment of the ending is dependent on the endurance of the beginning.

This is never truer than when applied to the Bible; provided that it is understood that it tells one continuing story rather than being two separate books. The following metaphor has been used by a prominent Biblical scholar;

***“A nonbeliever may read the love letter, but without knowing the persons who sent the letter, one reads words and sentences but does not truly understand the message.”***

So if we are to understand the meaning of the Bible we must first learn something about the author and his purposes for writing it. The following pattern could well represent the learning curve of one suddenly realising the need for God in their life.

Initially it may be about **ME** and God. God begins to play his hand, and the seeker begins to see the greatness of God so it may become **GOD** and me. A little further down the track and attention may be drawn to scriptures like 1 John 2:2;

**“He [Christ] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”**

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At this point they may be tempted to think that they know it all. Christ came with the express purpose of dealing with sin. Consequently their presuppositions now become sin based; that the sole purpose of the incarnation is for Jesus to deal with the issue of sin and reconcile sinners to God.

Now of course, that is true but is only part of the gospel message. It occupies but one corner of the big picture and if the attention is limited to one corner, there can be no overall comprehension of God's awesome plan for mankind. Although Jesus' work of salvation is complete, it leaves the impression that Jesus is left with nothing more to achieve. The scriptures leave little doubt that the complete work of Jesus is far from over.

At this point in time, the overwhelming majority of all people of every age, are yet to be convinced that there is only one true God and that their future depends on their acceptance of his plans for them. Salvation is just the first step, to be followed by convincing the now lost, that they have been included in it. Once mankind is restored to what it was created to be, the focus will move to the silent sufferer, the world in which we exist. The pre fall world gave but a small sample, the Garden of Eden, of what the finished creation is to be. All this and more are but parts of the overall plan of God. At best we have nothing more than a blurred, yet necessary, view of what lies ahead. A clearer picture brings with it, a God of ever increasing magnitude.

Contrary to popular opinion, this pictures the real world that will exist for eternity. The one designed, created and perfected by God. Today we struggle to survive in man's creation urged on by the hope of something infinitely better to come. Hebrews 12;2;

**“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”**

With salvation assured, our thoughts should be dominated by what lies ahead.

Another author likens Biblical understanding to a journey through a spiral with the prize at its centre. In many respects a spiral resembles a maze. In both, you start from the outside and work towards the middle. However a spiral does not have the dead ends found in a maze which create a need to back track through repentance and to at times, move away from the target. In a spiral there may also be times when progress grinds to a temporary halt but never, with movement away from the ultimate target. Progress will resume through the revelation of new understanding or upon revision of faulty presuppositions.

As the understanding of the text grows, the reader's presuppositions may be challenged to the point of requiring a complete change.. New answers to new questions only come through a better understanding of the author's original meaning of the text. That may require an intense study of all scriptures relating to the topic concerned. Perhaps too much weight was being attached to a single verse whilst ignoring other references. Overuse of so called “proof texts” can be a dangerous practice.. Our past stands in testimony to that.

World Wide Church of God theology frequently led us to the dead ends of a maze. Backed by the sound aspects of our WCG experience, our shift to Trinitarian theology has removed us from the maze and placed us in a spiral, never again, to take a backward step. There may be some road blocks as we await further understanding, but each step forward takes us nearer to the prize. However, it must always be remembered, that further progress has nothing to do with our already assured salvation, but in our ability to better serve our Lord.

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So today, we open our Bibles with a much clearer and wider set of presuppositions and beliefs than we had a few short years ago. Consequently, it has greater meaning. We better under our God and our future with him. We hunger to participate in his plans, rather than expect him to endorse ours. How could you ever turn away from such a prospect yet people still do.

Sound presuppositions are vital.