

In Search Of A Theological Center

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THIS ARTICLE will explore the process of examining our interpretive work on a passage and discerning the truths that it offers believers in any age and context, including our own. It corresponds to the “connect” section of our model.

Why do Christians find an ancient book like the Bible meaningful today? For starters, we believe that when Scripture speaks, God does. And in that sense, what we’re hearing “today” is a “living and active” Bible (Heb 3:7; 4:20). Paul tells Timothy that besides being “inspired by God,” Scripture “useful” for teaching, training, and correcting (2Tim 3:16-17). Clearly, he has in mind at least the Old Testament Scriptures, but he’ll later allude to New Testament ones as well (1 Tim 5:18, cf. Luke 10:7).

Beneath our reading and applying of Scripture is the assumption that God still speaks through his Word. It meant something to Israel or the church in Corinth, forming them and accomplishing his purposes, and it means something to us as God forms us. So, we’ll focus on **continuities**, those realities that endure through changes and development in God’s story of salvation. We’ll focus on who our triune **God** has revealed himself to be, the commonalities we share with God’s **people**, how God’s work is depicted in **redemption**, and how his people are intended to **love**.

Of course, there are **discontinuities** in Scripture, realities that don’t endure as God’s story unfolds from Creation to the New Creation. Some are tied to social or cultural differences, but significant discontinuities surface because of covenantal progression and fulfillment. I’m not named Abraham, nor do I sacrifice animals for religious purposes. We’ve never lived in cosmopolitan Corinth. We’re not Roman citizens and have not experienced the pain of Herod’s infanticide. For this class, though, we’re focusing primarily on the continuities, since God is addressing us today through his living and active Word.

Our approach takes seriously the context of each passage, chapter or book in its original setting, requiring our patience, humility, and careful reflection. It would be a mistake to reduce passages to nothing but “principles” encrusted with cultural barnacles, or divine corn needing to be shucked. We’re not dissecting a lifeless specimen.

God is inviting us to encounter him through the pages of Scripture.

The work we do identifying an author's big idea (ABI) grounds our understanding of a passage and tethers its implications and application. We're in a great place to look deeply at passage's realities and continuities, hearing God speak to us and catalyzing our imagination, so we begin to envision our own response.

Meditate and circle around the passage, considering the continuities mentioned above: God's character, people's nature, redemption, and ethics. If writing an ABI is like biting a piece of a book or letter, this reflection is like chewing it, with the goal of savoring and digesting it, so that it becomes part of us, nourishing and strengthening us to love God and neighbor.

What we've termed the theological center (TC) is a collection of theological continuities that are core to the passage. The TC could be captured in a few sentences, but at least one of those should highlight an attribute of God, who acts or intervenes according to his nature.

Let's take a look at Ephesians 1:15-23.

This prayer follows Paul's praise of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who marked believers with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit (1:3-14). We begin by circling around the prayer and looking for various continuities (central or not). In doing so, we might notice some things about the following subjects:

Continuities: Our Triune God

- The Lord Jesus is the object of Christians' faith and worship.
- Prayers and thanksgiving are directed to God.
- God is seen as the Father; requests are directed at him, so he must be great enough to answer.
- God gives the Spirit, who himself is the source of wisdom and revelation.
- God initiates and calls believers to himself to be included in his love and to fill them with himself.
- He greatly values his people, receiving them for himself as his inheritance.
- The Father's great power is able to overturn.

death, raising Jesus and placing him over all creation.

Continuities: People

- Christians are relational and love others/one another, appreciating one another as seen in thanksgiving.
- Believers are able to approach and communicate with God, making requests.
- People require divine aid to see spiritual realities or the spiritual realm.
- Believers are intended to know God deeply.
- Believers together are recipients of God's provision: to be his glorious inheritance, of a blessed future, of indescribable power.

Continuities: Redemption

- God clearly takes action and is responsible for promises made and kept.
- Restoration and reconciliation are at least hinted at by the notes of personal knowledge between believers and God, and seen in a permanent glorious future of God with his people, who seemed to have been separated or at least unable to experience God as intended without his aid and power.
- Jesus comes to people as divine human so that people can come to God.
- There is a sense of salvation's unfolding or completion as Jesus is now seen to be head over everything, having previously (and temporarily) been dead.
- Death seems to be necessary and a hinge point.

Continuities: Ethics/Love

- Clearly, love is highlighted and here seems to be the main reason for giving thanks, which seems to be a natural response to seeing/hearing/ experiencing that love.
- Implicit in Christ's placement over all things is the idea that believers ought to live submitted to his lordship.

After noting all these truths, we return to look at the passage as a whole. Which statements are most central to the message of the text? Checking our ABI

(which focuses on a central idea) and the subjects and verbs of the sentences can help, but they don't always equal theologically central ideas. Are there truths in our lists of continuities that the passage seems to emphasize more than others? Chew on it carefully for a bit.

With all that in mind, and adjusting a few of my statements to sit closer to the center of the passage, I'd include these points in my TC:

1. People require divine aid.
2. God grants spiritual enlightenment through the Spirit's revelatory work so that his people are able to know him deeply.
3. Faith in God (evidenced by thanksgiving) and love for his people are tied together, even increasingly cyclical.

You might see particulars of Paul's prayer points or even the supremacy of Jesus' lordship as important. I do, too. But those points seem like they develop from these more central ones. And the second point demonstrates God's character and action (remember, that's something you want to be sure to include). He provides what is lacking, ensuring that we can enjoy him and love each other, which moves us into "apply" and "respond."