

# OpenTheo

## Q&A#47 To What Extent Should We Approach Scripture With Completely Open Minds?

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Today's question: "Should we come to the text with completely open minds, or should we hold some ideas and convictions with certainty? This may be a poor example to help illustrate my question, but in Ephesians 2, Paul speaks about Christ abolishing the law. Christ himself says he came to fulfill the law and the prophets. Is it cowardly, faulty, and/or problematic in some way to be committed to analyzing and studying from the perspective that Paul cannot be contradicting Christ who cannot be contradicting the Old Testament writings? Or should we be willing to explore openly and to accept whatever conclusions our analysis leads to, which in this scenario could be something like Paul is actually saying something Christ would not."

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### Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, should we come to the text with completely open minds, or should we hold some ideas and convictions with certainty? This may be a poor example to help illustrate my question, but in Ephesians 2, Paul speaks about Christ abolishing the law. Christ himself says he came to fulfill the law and the prophets.

Is it cowardly, faulty, and or problematic in some way to be committed to analyzing and studying from the perspective that Paul cannot be contradicting Christ, who cannot be contradicting the Old Testament writings? Or should we be willing to explore openly and

to accept whatever conclusions our analysis leads to, which in this scenario could be something like Paul is actually saying something Christ would not? Again, this may be a poor example, but I hope the gist of my question comes across. When we're reading the Bible, we need to realize that we're not to come to this text with completely open minds to whatever hypothesis might present itself. Rather, we are invited to come to the text with trust.

We're called to come to the text with trust. And that trust is not closing off of our minds to any other possibility. It's not that.

It's not the arriving at a settled hypothesis from the very beginning. Rather, it's an opening of ourselves to the possibilities of the text that would not be possible to, that we would not realize otherwise. When a child is growing up, for instance, there are points early in their life where they must exercise radical trust in their parents.

That radical trust is the sort of trust that is required for them to grow up and to arrive at a point where they can exercise a far more considered and responsible trust in their parents. But at a certain point, they're just thrown upon their parents and they have to trust their parents, that their parents have their best wishes, their best interests at heart and these sorts of things. And that trust is something that over time should be vindicated.

It's not always vindicated, but it should be vindicated. When we're reading scripture, there are certain points at which we must exercise radical trust. And that trust is not the same thing as having a completely settled conviction and set of ideas that are all formed.

But it's a trust that scripture will prove. It's a trust that is extended to scripture in the conviction that scripture will prove trustworthy to us. And as we exercise that trust, there's a lot that we don't know.

And we should readily admit that we don't know. We don't know how certain things fit together. But we exercise trust because we believe that scripture is trustworthy and we believe it's trustworthy, not just on the basis of a leap of faith.

This is something that we have strong testimony for over many years of church history. It's something that we have the testimony of lives that have been lived according to this text. It's something that we have scripture's own truths that we see within it.

Those are testimony to its trustworthiness. And as we go through our lives and we develop on our knowledge of scripture, our trust in scripture is further grounded in a justifiable faith. So when we're reading scripture, we're not just throwing our faith out there, trusting something willy nilly, but we're trusting something with good grounds for that trust.

And as we grow in our faith and as we grow in our knowledge of scripture, those grounds become more and more certain and secure. And so we don't come with the same sort of questions that we did at the beginning. We have different sorts of questions.

But we also have patience with the text when situations where we don't know how everything fits together, where we have a sense of cognitive dissonance. That's part of what it means to approach the text with trust. But what you find is unless you approach the text with that sort of trust, it's very hard to arrive at knowledge.

And so we're not just engaging in a retreat to commitment or in a leap of faith, but we are trusting this text and it is proving trustworthy in response. Now, if we were trusting the text and it constantly proved itself untrustworthy, if we had no reason to believe in its trustworthy nature, it would be a very different sort of matter. But when we're reading scripture, there are good reasons to put our trust in its reliability and there are very good reasons why that will be affirmed and secured over time.

This does not mean that we approach every text in this way. Not every text is worthy of our trust in the same way. If you're given to a random set of people on the street, it would not be reasonable to put your trust in them in the same way as you would put your trust in your parents.

And when we approach scripture, that trust is not an absolute trust that allows for no revisions in our understanding of what that means. Rather, it's an opening of ourselves up to the text and a willingness to put weight upon it. And that weight is something that allows the scripture to prove itself.

It's one of the things I found particularly significant when we deal with questions like the one that's raised in this particular question, the one about Ephesians 2 and Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. There would seem to be on the surface of things a contradiction between these two texts. And when you see that contradiction, the temptation is to say, OK, we're going to step back from this text.

There's a contradiction. It's an impasse. And obviously, these two texts are at odds with each other.

But if you have approached the text with trust, in the trust that God is trustworthy, that he reveals himself consistently and that God is not at odds with himself, then we'll read these two texts in a different sort of way. And that way is one that can vindicate itself over time. Now, if you read these texts instantly, just see a contradiction.

And as you read further, you might find that that contradiction is unsettled. For instance, if we read in Romans 8, we find the verse, the verses, There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the spirit. For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me

free from the law of sin and death.

For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son. In the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin, he condemns sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the spirit. And there we see Paul himself would seem to be at odds with his teaching about abolishing the law.

Or is he? Is he just saying something that suggests that he has a deeper and a broader and a more complicated understanding of the law's part within the drama of redemption? I think as we read Paul, that will clearly be proved to be the case. There is a sense in which the law has been abolished. The law as this system of requirements that brought a curse upon us.

The law as a body of commandments that divide Jews from Gentiles. The body, the law as a sacrificial system that provides access to God. All of that has been abolished or removed in some sense.

But the law is also fulfilled. The law is written on our hearts of Jew and Gentile as the law is fulfilled in us in its righteous requirement, that its intent, its intent to form a renewed humanity. That is fulfilled in us.

And again, that's the sort of thing that Christ is talking about. Christ talks about the focus upon the heart. The work of the spirit within is that which fulfills the law in that sense.

And so these things are not at odds with each other. But to understand that they are not at odds with each other requires an extension of faith, an initial extension of faith. In that initial extension of faith, we are willing to suspend our doubts.

We're willing to extend patience and to put effort into understanding how these things can be reconciled. And without that exercise of patience, without that exercise of trust, without putting weight upon the text and saying, wait, wait it out, let's let the text prove itself trustworthy. Unless we do that, there's no way that we will easily arrive at the sort of position to see the reconciliation of these texts.

Because so often we abandon faith very easily. At that point, there's very little for us to discover. What I've found perhaps more important than anything else in my study of scripture has been my conviction that we should trust the text.

And as I have trusted the text, there have been all sorts of fascinating things that have been revealed to me that would not have been revealed otherwise. Because for most people who come to scripture, they're not prepared, for instance, to put trust in the fact that certain details were put there for a reason. But if you're not paying attention to the details, you're missing much of the point.

If you have an idea of the Old New Testament use of the Old Testament and say, oh, they're just using it randomly. You're not putting any trust in it. You're not prepared to put weight on it.

And then what happens is you never actually learn just how much weight is put upon that and how much the trust of those who believe that the scripture authors were genuinely inspired. And that when they wrote, they weren't wasting words. Unless you believe that, you will find these texts just won't open themselves.

There needs to be a certain degree of patience and a wrestling with the text and a willingness to ask it tough questions and to persevere with it. And I found that that has opened up so many parts of the text that would not have been opened up to me had I just been someone with a light faith in the text. Who believes that's fundamentally contradictory, that it uses the Old Testament as used in the New Testament in an inconsistent and random manner.

And if I were to believe that there are all these different voices, a cacophony of voices at odds with each other throughout the biblical text. If I believe that, there would be a great many things that I have discovered in scripture that I never would have discovered. Because what was needed was that initial extension of faith and trust and a growth in that faith and trust as it is justified and as the text proves itself trustworthy.

And I still often find myself just trusting that the text will reveal itself. I trust, I don't have the certainty yet of how these things are going to work out. But I have good reason for trust because it's proved itself so many times to me in the past.

It's not just the faith of the very young child who's thrown upon their parents. But it's the faith of the older child who knows their parents well, who knows their character and who knows that they haven't let them down in the past and doesn't expect them to do so now. And so when I come to scripture, that trust is important.

That trust enables me to discover. And so when we think about faith and doubt, we can often talk about them as if they were ambivalent things, as if faith and doubt were that you could operate with faith as easily as doubt. They're just two different things that you can come with at the world with a radical suspicion or faith.

And yet these things are not symmetrical. All of our discovering on some level or other involves faith. We must trust people.

We must trust the medical research when we take a pill, for instance. We must trust the engineering of our car when we drive in it. We must trust the design of our computers.

We must trust the certain aspects of the government. We must trust all these different ways. There are things and people and things, truths that we must trust if we are to just live.

If we are to move out into the world, we have to exercise trust. We have to exercise trust in other people. Now, that trust is not something that's untempered by suspicion, by doubt and these other things on occasions.

But the trust is fairly fundamental because without that, you can't make any progress. You can't make any headway and you can't actually arrive at any real understanding of the truth. If you didn't trust your senses, if you didn't trust your mind, if you didn't trust the world around you, if you didn't trust other people's testimony, if you didn't trust the reportings of science, all these sorts of things, you would eventually end up in a position where you couldn't know anything.

And so we need to exercise trust in order to discover anything. And there are certain things that call for more trust than others. And scripture is one thing that calls for our trust, but also rewards our trust in ways that other things do not.

So when I'm approaching scripture, I approach it with a position of fundamental trust. And that position of fundamental trust actually allows me to ask tougher questions and more searching questions than I would be able to if I approached it with no trust at all. If I didn't approach it with any trust at all, I wouldn't expect it to have answers for the tough questions.

I wouldn't expect it to reveal itself to have consistency in the fine details. But when I do exercise a trust in it, it will reward that trust, even when it comes to those really tough questions. And so the questioning and the doubts and the uncertainties, as they find themselves within a context of deep trust, they can be fruitful.

They can help us. And there are many ways in which my initial trust in scripture has been refined and changed and honed. So I had initial faith in scripture that was expecting it to reveal itself in particular ways.

And the Bible didn't always reveal itself to me, its truth to me in those particular ways. There were other ways and other ways in which it showed its consistency. And so I had to be open to that.

It wasn't just coming at the text with a complete preconcept of every way in which it will prove itself to be true or not. Rather, there was an expectation that God is truthful on the basis of his character. And then as you read the text, the text proves itself to be true, though not always in the way that you expect.

Certain, for instance, of the texts that we see in the gospels would seem to be at odds with each other. And our consistent concern often is to try and get them to fit together just as mere historical testimony. And what we miss often is that they are about evoking certain typologies and that the distinctions between them are significant.

Now, they can be reconciled, I believe, on a historical level, but that's not the point. The

point of these texts is that they're evoking different typologies that complement each other. And so in that sort of way, we can develop a richer understanding of what it means to trust the text, what the text actually requires of us and how it proves itself to be trustworthy.

We don't always leave the text with the same shape of trust as we did when we first came to it. And that's not a bad thing. That's a way in which our faith and our trust in God's voice is refined and honed.

And we come to a clearer understanding of what it involves and why it doesn't. But if we do not exercise this trust on any level, if we do not come to the text expecting it to be a site of God's revelation, then we're not going to find it to be such. There are ways in which we can, if you do not want to believe the teaching of scripture, scripture is not going to force you.

There are many ways in which you can twist the scripture to say what you want it to say. If you want to approach it with a hermeneutic of suspicion or radical doubt, it's not going to contradict you. It's not going to prevent you from arriving at the conclusions that you're aimed at.

But if you approach it with an approach of trust, you will find it trustworthy, not just as a confirmation of what you originally came with, your preconceived ideas, but as a rewarding of them. With certainty, with validation from the text. So it's not just that you are reinforced in your preconceptions, but those preconceptions can be refined and honed and changed and you're rewarded with a text that has proved itself trustworthy.

And so I don't think that it is cowardly. I don't think it is faulty or problematic to approach scripture with this sort of trust. This sort of trust is important for understanding what scripture is, for it to reveal itself to us.

I think there's a sort of epistemic responsibility in approaching things with trust. Certain things call for more trust than others. Scripture calls for a very strong level of trust.

And that trust that we exercise, that trust originally, we have to do that responsibly. And we do that through the counsel of others, through the support of and the testimony of the church on the basis of its witness, all these sorts of things that may lead us initially to trust in this text and to extend a measure of trust that maybe grows in time. And many people will extend an initial degree of openness towards the text and find that actually it rewards that and then put more faith within it.

And so there is a responsibility, if we are to arrive at discovery, to exercise that sort of trust. Any sort of discovery involves this sort of trust. If we're talking about science, the belief that things work in the same way to particles on this side of the universe to the other side of the universe.

There's a certain element of trust that has to be exercised. But that trust gets rewarded. And the reward of that is technologies and other things like that that enable us to act effectively and powerfully within the world.

And this need not be cowardly. It is something that requires a significant degree of bravery. You have to be willing to live with a sense of cognitive dissonance for a while on occasions.

You have to be willing to live with unanswered questions. You have to be willing to put a lot of effort into things. That effort will be rewarded.

That cognitive dissonance can be resolved. Not always. There are some cases in which minor cases within scripture where I'm not certain how things go together.

But there are so many cases where those uncertainties and the doubts that I have had have been resolved that those things don't trouble me in the same way anymore. I trust that scripture has an answer for these things and that it will be revealed as I'm patient with it. And so it's not cowardly.

There is a certain sort of bravery required that you're willing to put weight on it. This is going out on what some people might think to be thin ice, examining the small details of the text and expecting them to hold weight. And when you find that they do, you're able to do so much more.

But if you're not prepared to do that, if you're untrusting, there's a certain cowardice there. Unwillingness to accept the invitation to say when Christ says come out on the waters to Peter that he's willing to step outside of the boat and not just lose his faith at that point and be a certain bravery that you're called to take that step into a position where you're not entirely certain. You exercise trust.

And that trust is not in the end. It proves to be a justifiable trust. And it's very important that we prove this to be a justifiable trust.

Presenting arguments for the truthfulness of scripture, presenting arguments that these things can be resolved. That is very important because it shows that our trust is a reasonable trust. And having a reasonable trust is absolutely necessary if we're going to avoid just becoming people of random convictions, people who have just made a retreat to commitment or people who have just made a leap in the dark.

We're not that. We're exercising a reasonable trust, a trust in something that has proved itself to many others to be trustworthy. It's a trust that will prove itself to a scripture that will prove itself to be trustworthy to us in time as we exercise our trust in it.

So it is a reasonable thing to do. And it's not cowardly. It's not faulty because I believe that this is something consistent with our form of epistemic responsibility more generally



that we live by exercising trust.

And we exercise trust responsibly. And as we exercise trust in this text and that trust increases, it will be proved to be a responsibly exercised trust. We've exercised it on the basis of other people's testimony, on the basis of the witness, on the basis of the fruit that is produced by this text.

And that trust, I think, will vindicate, be vindicated. It is a responsible trust at the outset, but later on it proves to be a trust that has real weight to it, that has a trust, that that trust is matched with a deeper surety of the trustworthiness of its object. So if you have any further questions about this, there's a lot more that I could say.

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