

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine the four characteristics of the Bible represented by the acrostic SNAC, which stands for sufficiency, necessity, authority and clarity. We've examined sufficiency and necessity in our last two sessions. So, Dr. Spencer, are we moving on to authority today?

Dr. Spencer: Not right away. I'm going to cover clarity first because authority is a longer topic and will lead into some other things.

Marc Roby: Alright. When we say that the Bible is clear. What do we mean?

Dr. Spencer: Perhaps we should start with what we don't mean first. We do not mean that all of Scripture is easy to understand.

Marc Roby: I'm glad to hear that!

Dr. Spencer: So am I. And we are in good company, because in 2 Peter 3:16 the apostle comments on some of the writings of Paul and says, "He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction."¹

It's important to take note of two things in Peter's statement. First, he concedes that some of the things Paul was written, which are part of the Bible, are hard to understand. And secondly, he notes that people have distorted them, along with other Scriptures, which results in their own destruction.

Marc Roby: That certainly emphasizes how important it is for us to interpret the Scriptures properly. But, at first blush this verse also seems to argue against the clarity of Scripture.

Dr. Spencer: You're right. It does seem to, but only, as you put it, at first blush. That's why I thought it would be best to address this point first. When we say that the Bible is clear, we do not mean that everything in it is easy, nor do we mean that you can read it like you might a novel or a newspaper and expect to understand it properly. We will get into proper methods of interpreting the Scriptures in a later session, but suffice it to say at this point that we must read the Bible carefully. Let me give an illustration.

Marc Roby: Please do.

Dr. Spencer: The main point I want to make is that when we are reading something that is challenging to understand, in any field, we can't expect to read it once or twice and understand it fully. We need to do some more work.

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For example, you can't expect to understand the prophet Jeremiah if you don't know at least a general outline of the history surrounding the writing of the book. You need to know when he was writing, to whom he was writing, and what was going on at the time.

Marc Roby: I always find it helpful to re-read the introduction to a prophetic book and go over the historical situation in my mind before I read it.

Dr. Spencer: I do the same thing. It's important to take Bible reading seriously. You can read other things casually, but the Bible is the most important thing you will ever read. We need to *study* the Scriptures, not just *read* them. And that is true of every book in the Bible, not just Jeremiah. As you mature in your faith you will continue to learn more and more from commentaries, sermons and so on, so that you gain an understanding, for example, of some of the peculiarities of Hebrew writings and thought. You also become more and more familiar with the different people in the Bible so, for example, you will understand the impetuous nature of the apostle Peter. And you become more familiar with the historical situations and you know more about what happens before and after the section you're currently reading. All of these details help you to pick up more and more each time you read through the Bible.

Marc Roby: I can certainly agree with that. I've been reading the Bible for over 40 years now and I learn more each time I go through it.

Dr. Spencer: I am confident that anyone who approaches the Word of God with a serious desire to know what God is saying will gain a deeper understanding every single time they read through it. We must remember that even though God used human authors, ultimately, the Bible was written by the Almighty, Sovereign Creator and Judge of the universe and it speaks about how to be saved from his eternal wrath. We need to keep that in mind as we read. It is way more serious than learning what you need to know to pass some test in college, or even to pass a medical board exam, or a CPA exam, or whatever. So, get some help. A good study Bible is a reasonable place to start, for example, in Session 23 I recommended the ESV Reformation Study Bible. I would also recommend that you follow a systematic plan to read through the whole Bible. And if you haven't done it before, I would recommend reading all of the study notes. I also keep a timeline that I've made for myself handy that shows me the different kings of Israel and Judah, the different prophets, a few major events in world history and so on so that I can keep things straight in my mind as I read. I also fairly frequently refer to a good Bible Atlas, for example the Zondervan Atlas of the Bible² is pretty good. A good Bible dictionary is also valuable. Again, I have found the Zondervan dictionary to be very useful.³ I also take notes every morning, which I think helps to organize my thoughts and to be sure that I have something to take away from the reading each day.

Marc Roby: Very well, you've made the point we can't just read the Bible like our daily newspaper, we need to be serious about learning what it teaches and study the Word of God. I

² Carl G. Rasmussen, *Zondervan Atlas of the Bible*, Revised Edition, Zondervan, 2010

³ Either the *New International Bible Dictionary*, Zondervan, 1987; or for a much longer version, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (in five volumes), Zondervan, 1976

think it is now apparent that when we say the Bible is clear, we don't mean it is easy to understand. So, what *do* we mean when we say it is clear?

Dr. Spencer: When we say that the Bible is clear, what we mean is that the basic message of the gospel, that which must be understood to be saved, can be understood by a child, or someone with very little education, or someone who isn't very bright.

Marc Roby: When you say it can be understood by a child, surely you don't mean a very young child?

Dr. Spencer: Clearly there is a limit to how young the child can be. I wouldn't want to speculate on a specific age, but obviously a toddler who can only say a few words is not able to understand the gospel. But a normal 10-year old certainly can. I don't know where to draw the line between those points, and I'm certain it varies a lot from person to person. But, the point is that you don't need to be a very bright, well-educated adult to understand the gospel, the basic message isn't that complicated.

Marc Roby: Speaking about young children raises an interesting and important question, which I'd like to address even at the risk of throwing us off topic for a minute or two. What happens to a very young child who dies? Is it possible for a that child to be saved?

Dr. Spencer: It is definitely possible for a very young child, or even an infant to be saved. We don't want to limit God. It appears from Luke 1:41 & 44 for example that John the Baptist was regenerated in the womb. And when the son of David and Bathsheba died as an infant, David said, in 2 Samuel 12:23, "I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

But, we are talking about the normal situation, where a person has grown to be sufficiently mature to think about these things, in other words, people like our listeners. And, in that case, the basic gospel message is clear, which is why we are commanded to teach our children. In Deuteronomy 6:6-7, right after giving the people the Ten Commandments, Moses said to them "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." Now, the Bible would not command us to teach them to our children if they were too complicated for a child to understand.

Marc Roby: And yet, even intelligent adults find the Bible's plan of salvation incomprehensible if they are unbelievers.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. We must never forget the point we made in Session 23, that no one can truly understand the Bible, by which I mean understand it unto salvation, unless that person has been born again. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:18 that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The message of the cross is foolishness to the natural man because he has a moral problem, not an intellectual problem. He refuses to recognize the obvious truth that he is a sinful creature deserving of wrath and that God is the Creator of the universe and, therefore, has authority to tell us how we should live and to judge us for our failures.

Marc Roby: We noted before that in Romans 1 Paul actually says the unbeliever *suppresses* that truth.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. The problem is not one of intellectual understanding. There are many very intelligent people, some of them pastors and seminary professors, who know a great deal *about* the Word of God, but don't believe it.

Remember when Jesus was speaking with two disciples on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection? He somehow prevented them from recognizing him and was asking them about what had recently happened in Jerusalem – referring, of course, to his own death and resurrection. They told him what they knew, but it was obvious they didn't understand or believe and he said to them, in Luke 24:25-26, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" Notice that he didn't say they were stupid, or ignorant of the facts, he said they were foolish – which is a moral judgment, not an intellectual one, and he said that they were "slow of heart". In other words, the reason they didn't understand was a moral failure, not an intellectual one.

Marc Roby: In Psalm 14:1 we are told that "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" I think there are many people who praise God that you don't have to be an intellectual giant to be saved.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure there are, and I'm one of them. But, think about it for a minute. If you had to be a nobel laureate to be saved, then you would have a tendency to be proud. We could argue that point of course since whatever abilities and opportunities you have are gifts from God, not something you earned, but nevertheless, there would be something about you that helped to explain why you were saved, and that would lead to pride. So, God makes sure that that is not the case. In fact, he usually chooses people who are not particularly distinguished in the eyes of the world.

Paul tells us about this. In 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 we read, "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."

Marc Roby: That is not a particularly flattering picture of believers.

Dr. Spencer: No, it isn't. But, if all believers were brilliant and accomplished, we would tend to think we have something to be proud of. So, God takes that possibility away. Paul tells us that God chose the "foolish things of the world ... the weak things ... the lowly things ... the despised things ... and the things that are not ... so that no one may boast before him." Now we can all rejoice that there *are* brilliant and accomplished Christians – Paul said "not *many* of you", he didn't say "not *any* of you." These exceptional individuals are a blessing to the church. But, the point is that we aren't saved because of our merit in any way. We are saved by grace *alone*,

our good works are not in any way shape or form the basis of our salvation. And the biblical message of salvation is clear. It is clear, but it will not be received unless, and until the person is born again.

Marc Roby: And, of course, even truly born-again people don't always agree on every detail.

Dr. Spencer: That is certainly true, and the many schisms in church history and the many different denominations in the world bear clear testimony to that fact. Sadly, Christians are still sinners. And, in addition, not everyone who claims to be a Christian is born again. Those two facts guarantee that there will always be troubles and divisions in the church that should not be there. But, even granted those two facts, there remain certain things that are not essential to saving faith about which true Christians can disagree, and there are some things about which the Bible is completely silent.

Marc Roby: Can you give us some examples?

Dr. Spencer: Certainly. The Bible is silent about many details. For example, should we hold our worship services at 9 AM, or 10 AM, or should we have both a morning and an evening service? The Bible says nothing about that. In addition, the Bible is clear that we should not be drunk and should not be controlled by anything, but it is not clear that drinking an occasional beer or glass of wine, or smoking an occasional cigarette or cigar are sins, although some will say that they are. I think we must be mature enough to allow for differences on many issues.

Marc Roby: That sounds reasonable, and more important, biblical! Paul wrote in Romans 14:1 that we should not pass judgement about disputable matters. But, what about the role of pastors and teachers then? If the basic message of the Bible is clear and can be understood by every believer, what role do they have to play?

Dr. Spencer: They have a very important role to play. In Ephesians 4:11-14 the apostle Paul wrote that Christ “gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.” So, pastors and teachers are very important. All Christians have the privilege and responsibility to know what the Word of God requires of them, and the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture says that we can all understand the essential points. But, not everyone has the natural ability or time to become an expert theologian, so pastors and teachers still fill a very important role in God's church. We will talk more about this issue in a later podcast when we get to the reformation idea of the right to private judgment, which argued against the Roman Catholic Church's claim that only the priests could interpret the Bible. However, this idea of a right to private judgment has often been abused. If I think I'm free to interpret the Scriptures however I want to, then I am almost certainly headed for destruction.

Marc Roby: Very well, I look forward to discussing that issue in more depth at a later date. But this concludes our time for today, so I want to remind our listeners to email their questions and comments to whatdoesthewordsay.org.