

**Scripture-Engaged!**

***North American Forum of Bible Agencies  
December 3, 2015***

***Philadelphia, PA***

***By***

***Dr. Eugene B. Habecker  
President, Taylor University (2005-2016)***

## **Introductory Comments.**

This afternoon I want to focus on what I believe to be a very important subject, especially for those of us involved in professional Bible work. I begin with a question for each of us to ponder: **Am I scripture engaged?**

If you're like me, I engage with lots of different things; read books, watch sports, read or listen to the news, watch movies, interact with social media, blogs, devotional readings, the web, and a host of other stuff. So all of us are engaged with something. But again the question – **are you engaged with the Scripture?**

Why is this important? Stated another way, is it possible to live life as Christ desires without our engagement of Scripture or without Scripture engaging us? Take the mission of the ABS, for example: "To make the Bible available to every person in a language and format each can understand and afford so that all people may experience its life changing message." This represented an expansion from the ABS's historic mission of translation, publication, and distribution. Why? Because the ABS was clearly interested in moving in the direction of having people engage the scriptures for themselves. The mission of Taylor University is: "To develop servant leaders marked with a passion to minister *Christ's redemptive love and truth* to a world in need." Simply put, how can we know Christ's redemptive *love and truth* apart from engaging scripture?

We all know that there is a battle raging for the minds, and the hearts of everyone, everywhere. That battle is fierce and intense. It is not being fought with guns and ammunition, but with tweets, advertisements, e-mail, blog sites, and various other forms of media. It's a battle for our attention and mind-set, to shape who we should become, to influence our choice of values and beliefs, what we should do with our life, and even what we should wear. The battle is relentless, 24/7, and its focus is on you and me – our mind, our hearts, and yes our money. Clearly, ever-present, pervasive technology is part of that battle.

To illustrate, in early July, I inadvertently dropped my I-phone in a lake. It was a personal crisis! I called 911. Not really, but within the hour I was in my car to the local AT&T hospital to see a phone doctor. The recommended treatment? "Remove the SIM card and keep it smothered in rice for 48 hours." That wasn't just a crisis for me! How many of you, for example, could place your mobile device in a drawer, turned off, for a couple of days? A week? See what I mean?

***How we spend our time, with whom, and with what, will not only shape our day, but ultimately will mark our hearts, our minds, and our lives. So what shapes you?***

How do our engagements or involvements with all of these daily realities nourish our spiritual lives? How do they help provide the opportunities for people to engage with Scripture's "life-changing" message, or for us at the university, to define "love and truth?"

Are these the kinds of things that bring us closer to the Savior or do they push us further away?

Asked another way, ***how are you building time into your lives on a daily basis to hear God's voice and to engage His Word?***

Is it His Truth, His voice, through His Word, that is shaping your life, or is it someone or something else that is doing so? All of us are being shaped by someone or something.

This afternoon I want to begin with two preliminary observations:

***First, we will remain centered and focused on who Christ calls us to be - "let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil.2.5) - in direct proportion to our investment of time in engaging the Word.***

***Second, we will reflect wholesome, winsome lives in the world to the degree that we let God's Word engage us.***

All of this comes in the context of our need to be scripture engaged.

### **A. Engage Scripture – Why?**

There are multiple reasons why we need to engage the Scriptures.

Often, as professional Bible workers, we sometimes see the Bible as just ink on paper or pixels on a screen, competing for our time with every tweet, or blog, or message, or any other book that you want to read. The Bible, however, presents itself as different, something indispensable for life, and for living, as necessary for our survival as is eating food, drinking water, and breathing air.

**So why engage Scripture? Reason One:** For us Christ-followers, ***Scripture is our source, our plumb line, for determining truth.***

***It is both a mirror for evaluating truth in my life, and yours, and it is a window for framing life itself.*** Without it, truth devolves, personally, to the standard of how *I feel* about truth, leading sometimes to misguided self-definition, or looking out, I fall prey to the shifting sands of cultural preferences and the political realities of the moment. A couple of days ago Princeton University Professor Dr. Robert George spoke at Taylor University and noted that the age in which we are living has been called "the age of feelings."

Let's look at a couple of scriptures that speak to truth as a mirror and as a window.

1. Hebrews 4.12 describes scripture this way: ***"For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between***

***soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires.”***

- 2. 2 Timothy 3.16: “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.”***

The scripture has this wonderful capacity, guided by the Holy Spirit, laser-like, to identify for me in my life, and yours, when I am out of alignment with God’s standards. This verse is saying that apart from the teachings of scripture we will be unable to know truth or to have clarity about what is right and wrong.

This, I believe, is what the prophet Amos had in mind when he used the image of a plumb line.

***Amos 7:7-8a: “Then he showed me another vision. I saw the Lord standing beside a wall that had been built using a plumb line. He was using a plumb line to see if it was still straight. And the LORD said to me, “Amos, what do you see?” I answered, “A plumb line.”***

***And the Lord replied, “I will test my people with this plumb line.”***

So how do you determine truth for yourself? What is your plumb line for evaluating right and wrong? The scripture proclaims that this is one of its purposes. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the scripture can speak for itself.

***Why engage Scripture? Reason Two: The example of Jesus Himself. He actively engaged scripture.***

We need to remember that He is the living Word of God.

***John 1.1-5, 14: In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He existed in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. <sup>4</sup> The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. <sup>5</sup> The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.***

***<sup>14</sup> So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unending love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son.***

Before there was our Bible, there was the living word of God. That living word of God said things like: “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father. I can do nothing apart from my Father; my Father and I are one.” In other words, if you want to know what God is really like, study the life of Jesus of Nazareth. And how did the Living Word engage the written Word? Reference Luke 4.1-13. (Also in Matthew 4)

All of us face temptations of all kinds and in this passage Jesus faced temptation. How did He respond? Here are the kinds of temptations Jesus faced:

1. ***He faced the temptation of food; (v 3)***
2. ***He faced the temptation to have power, position, and authority; (vs. 5, 6) in exchange for worship of something other than the Lord God. (v.7)***
3. ***He faced the temptation to be spectacular, to use His power foolishly, to take risks with his physical well-being and safety; (vs. 9-11)***

***The temptation of food.*** How did He respond?

Jesus responded to this first temptation with Scripture: ***“It is written, people must not live on bread alone.”***

***The temptation to have power, position, and authority in exchange for worship.*** How did He respond?

Jesus was shown all the kingdoms of the world. “Their splendor can be yours, if you worship me.” Power, position, authority, the human accolades. We face these temptations as we pursue additional responsibilities or we climb the corporate ladder, manipulating for C-suite prestige. The perks, the prestige feel good. It is not that power, position, and authority in themselves are wrong. The problem comes when, in the words of Tim Keller, we make good things into ultimate things, which we then worship and find indispensable in our lives.

Jesus’ response to this temptation? ***“It is written, worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.”*** Again, note the use of scripture and Jesus’ full declaration that nothing should be given greater prominence in our lives than the worship of the Lord God.

*There was a 3<sup>d</sup> temptation:*

***The temptation to be spectacular, to use His power foolishly, to take risks in terms of the caring for His physical well-being.***

This was the last temptation – the temptation to be foolish or spectacular, the belief that you will always be safe, physically, no matter what. Here, jumping off of a high place without injury. Maybe this is also the temptation to take unnecessary chances with our health and well-being?

The devil did two things in throwing this last temptation at Jesus. As with the first temptation, he brought up the temptation for Jesus to declare His identity – “if you are the Son of God” - but this time he added a new twist – Satan also began to quote the scripture. You can take risks like this because “God will send His angels to protect you”. Jesus of course didn’t fall for it because He knew the full record of the scriptures, the whole counsel

of Scripture, not just a proof text here or there. Jesus' response: ***“The scriptures also say, you must not test the Lord your God.”***

The temptation of Jesus, and His response, illustrates at least three things for us:

- 1. The Scripture is Truth – the Biblical plumb line;***
- 2. The Scripture provides a basis for discernment: right & wrong (see also Hebrews 5)***
- 3. The Scripture provides a basis to help with Biblical application***

**Why engage Scripture? Reason three: *Scripture provides practical guidance for daily living.***

For instance, I don't know how Marylou and I would get through our day without the guidance of the Holy Spirit, through the scriptures. There are days that we miss, or course, but those are also the days when we feel more vulnerable to either doing or saying something that is not Christ-honoring. Thousands of verses influence our daily choices.

Look at Proverbs 1.2-7, as but one of literally thousands of examples:

***Their purpose is to teach people wisdom and discipline, to help them understand the insights of the wise. Their purpose is to teach people to live disciplined and successful lives, to help them do what is right, just, and fair. These proverbs will give insight to the simple, knowledge and discernment to the young. Let the wise listen to these proverbs and become even wiser. Let those with understanding receive guidance by exploring the meaning in these proverbs and parables, the words of the wise and their riddles. Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.***

Scripture helps define His truth for our world in terms of how we should live, day to day.

Christ's desires for us should take precedence over any other agenda, all other arguments as to how we should live. It's not that other voices or literature or reading material doesn't matter, they do. That's especially true on a university campus such as at Taylor University where we expect students to take their studies seriously, to read widely, and to pursue their academic work with great vigor.

But the ultimate validator of truth, the plumb line for how we live, the truth test for those who follow Christ is not what our culture or the government, or the courts say about Biblical truth, but rather the reverse - what the Bible says – including what it says about righteousness and justice. And that often makes us uncomfortable; it often makes us unpopular.

**There is a fourth reason to engage Scripture: *Scripture reminds us that there is more to life than just the here and now.***

Our agenda for living is fueled by faith, a faith informed by scripture that tells us that God is in control, and that there is more to this life than simply the here and now. And our source for our faith?

***“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing comes from the Word of God.” (Romans 10.17)***

Hebrews 11 illustrates this. This marvelous chapter describes people who lived life this way, believing that there was more to life than what they were experiencing in the moment. The last five verses of Hebrews eleven talk about their willingness to be tortured and persecuted rather than to be set free, because “they placed their hope in a better life after the resurrection.”

Previously I referenced Princeton University professor Robert George and his visit to the Taylor University campus. One of the toughest questions he asked our students, and reflecting this Hebrews 11 passage, was this: “How are you preparing for your own martyrdom?” He then went further and discussed the various ways Christians might have to suffer for their faith in the days, not unlike other believers already doing so in other parts of the world.

As a result of living life with a recognition that there is more to my life than only “the here and now,” my life in the market place will also be informed by an upward agenda, an agenda that means I’m more interested in knowing whether my life is pleasing to Christ than I am in knowing whether I will be popular as a result of the choices I make.

As I internalize this Biblical agenda, through Scripture Engagement, I begin to influence the culture, more than it influences me. This of course doesn’t mean I should live my life in an obnoxious way. Jesus Himself told us that we should live our lives in this way:

***“Let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” Matthew 5:16.***

That’s modeling “love and truth” by how I live. Col 2.7 says it this way:

**“Plant your roots in Christ and let Him be the foundation for your life.”**

**There’s a fifth reason for engaging scripture – scripture engagement is the expected standard for effective leaders.**

When Moses was going through his list of instructions about serving God, he ultimately came to the subject of the standards a king should follow in their leadership. Foremost in his instruction was that the king should be inextricably engaged with scripture:

**“When he sits on the throne as king, he must copy for himself this body of instruction on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. He must always keep that copy with him and read it daily as long as he lives. That way he will learn to fear**

**the Lord his God by obeying all the terms of these instructions and decrees. This regular reading will prevent him from becoming proud and acting as if he is above his fellow citizens. It will also prevent him from turning away from these commands in the smallest way.” Deuteronomy 17:18-20a (NLT)**

## **B. Excellence.**

So how do we relate the theme of this gathering – excellence - to the issue of Scripture Engagement? There are at least three ways these themes can be connected.

First, we need to focus on excellence in the quality of the preparation of those who lead that charge. Elton Trueblood, a former Stanford philosophy professor, said it this way: “Holy shoddy is still shoddy.” Those who work in this important field need the best of preparation. At Taylor University and in our Center for Scripture Engagement, I want what we do to be effective, from the perspective of the user, but also to stand the test of favorable review by the best of journals and research in this field. The Scripture calls us to excellence in every endeavor, and our work in scripture engagement ought not to be an exception.

Second, we need to focus on the excellence of the outputs of our efforts. To illustrate, I’m drawn here to Jesus’ parable (Matthew 13.3-8) about the sower and the quality of the landing place of the seed, or the soil. Since the quality of the seed – the Word of God was never in doubt, what impacted the harvest was the quality of the soil. Not rocky soil, or soil with thorns, or the seldom existent soil on a well-trodden footpath, which produced only marginal results, but rather fertile soil, which produced a crop 30, 60, even 100 times.

Ought not our focus be continually on ensuring the production of excellent seed, that is, high quality translations and related materials, even as we focus attention on also finding and cultivating fertile soil of this generation, this culture? This too can be an area of excellence in our Scripture Engagement focus. Not all of our efforts will produce the same results. But I believe that when well-prepared persons of faith, guided by the Holy Spirit, who through the power of prayer, link high quality preparation to an equally high quality work effort, a productive harvest will result.

Third, let’s remember that the results for our scripture sowing efforts always belong to our Lord. Isaiah 55.11:

“It is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it.”

Thanks be to God, what He accomplishes will always be excellent!

## **C. Summary.**

It's time to wrap up. Perhaps I'm preaching to the proverbial choir here, nevertheless, I want to encourage all of us, to build scripture engagement into our lives – to make it first a discipline, but ultimately a habit.

- 1. *Christ is our example for engaging Scripture – The Living Word engaged with the written Word.***
- 2. *Scripture needs to be our key source for determining Truth. If it is not, then what is?***
- 3. *Scripture reminds us to live always with an eternal perspective – now & then.***
- 4. *Scripture engagement provides practical guidance for daily living.***
- 5. *Scripture engagement is expected, especially of those in leadership.***

I leave you with two challenges. Here's the **first** one. As I have already noted, I retire from 35 years as a president/CEO, and specifically, the Taylor presidency, later this academic year. I was reviewing this scenario with one of my sons over lunch – both the apprehension that comes with this kind of change but also the anticipation. At the end of the conversation, and as we were getting ready to leave, he said this: “Dad, in addition to what we were discussing, I hope you are looking forward with anticipation at the new vision Christ will give you of Himself for this next phase of your life!” That stopped me dead in my tracks as that is something I had not been praying. I have been praying for a new vision for what this next phase of life looks like but not asking for a new vision of Christ Himself. What a challenge! I want to encourage you to pray for the same thing in your lives – **a new vision of Christ Himself for you**, not your ministry but for you. That leads me to the **second** challenge.

I want to encourage you to pray for a new vision for the mission and ministry He has entrusted to you. Too often we get our organizations started and then put them on cruise control. That's not what I'm calling for here. We have to be constantly revisiting the organizational vision lest we get caught up trying to place new wine in our old wineskins.

You can see of course how this second challenge will be informed by the first challenge, and how both of these challenges will be impacted by our engagement with scripture. May God give you guidance in all of these matters in the days ahead. Amen!

PS. One more thing. Following is a link to the (co-branded with Bible Gateway) Taylor University Center for Scripture Engagement.

**<https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/scripture-engagement/>**