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SCRIPTURAL, UN, OR NON

Words have meaning. If they didn't there would be no reason for their existence. Babies do babble with meaningless syllables, but they could not be called words. We usually refer to their "first word" as the first utterance where they clearly identify a person, place, or concept such as "dada," "mama," or "no." Unfortunately, sometimes what a word means to one person is not what it means to another. This may be due to cultural or educational differences. When this happens it often leads to confusion. Debaters are taught to first define your terms. Sometimes they define something in a way that varies from the norm, but favors their argument. Sometimes the terms seem self-evident, but it turns out that defining them was beneficial.

When we use a word we feel we fully understand without clarifying our meaning we get into conflicts with others who have a different understanding. Many disagreements among churches fall into this category. Some understand baptism to be immersion in water, as in the scriptures, while others believe that sprinkling water on someone may constitute baptism under certain circumstances. Others understand that a "pastor" is another term for one who holds the office of elder in a congregation, while many use the word to mean any preacher.

Perhaps it might be beneficial, then, to define a particular set of words that some see no confusion while others think differently. The words are: scriptural, unscriptural, and non-scriptural.

Scriptural is the easiest to define. It means according to scripture. If the Word of God says to do something, then that something is scriptural. To use an example from our worship practices, the Lord's Supper consists of two elements: bread and the fruit of the vine. (1 Cor 11:23-26) While Paul there uses a word that could mean any bread, we know that when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper it was during a Passover meal, and was, therefore, unleavened. (Matt 26:26; Mk 14:22; Lk 22:19) Therefore, taking the Lord's Supper using bread and the fruit of the vine (fermented or unfermented is not specified) is scriptural; there is specific biblical basis for it.

Unscriptural is likewise easy to define. If there is specific scripture to do or not to do something, then doing the opposite would be unscriptural. It is a violation of scripture. To use the previous example, to take the Lord's Supper using water or apple juice instead of the fruit of the vine would be unscriptural. For Noah to have used teak instead of "gopher wood" would have been unscriptural. (Gen 6:14)

Non-scriptural seems easy as well. If the scriptures do not say anything about something, it is non-scriptural. Contrary to some people's opinion, if the Bible says nothing about a matter, that doesn't make it unscriptural but non-scriptural. That is an easy definition, but not always easy to apply. In congregational worship, the Bible says nothing pro or con about a man standing before the congregation to lead them in the singing. To have a song leader is perfectly acceptable, as also is singing together without a leader. On the other hand, a case could be made that to have a woman stand before the congregation to lead singing is unscriptural. "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man." (1 Tim 2:12) The use of a car or airplane to "go into all the world" (Mk 16:15) is non-scriptural but not unscriptural. The Bible doesn't specify how to go.

There are certain areas where one person believes a practice to be unscriptural (i.e. the use of musical instruments when singing) while another may, because of cultural or educational reasons or personal opinion believe it to be non-scriptural, and thus allowed. It is this (sometimes) grey area that causes division in churches. It behooves us to study the scriptures to determine what they say, as well as what they do not say.

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NON-PSALMS PSALMS

There was a time when Gideons International distributed Bibles to public schools. Usually these were pocket New Testaments. In addition, they often included two books from the Old Testament: Psalms and Proverbs. The thinking, perhaps, was that these two books of Wisdom Literature would have a much wider appeal than the prophets or the histories. In any case, this was often the schoolchild's introduction to the world of the Psalms. The book contains 150, more or less, songs used in the Jewish Temple worship. (Some of the psalms are combined in the Hebrew Bible, or divided at different places, but are generally considered to consist of 150.)

Some of those songs appear in other books of the Bible, particularly in the writings of Moses or the history of King David. For instance, Psalm 18 can also be found in 2 Samuel 22. While some psalms can be found in two places, there are several psalms in the Bible that were

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probably, or definitely, written after the Book of Psalms was compiled. Four psalms come to mind.

The format of psalms

Psalms are songs, and therefore poetry. They can be divided into several types. The number of these types vary by commentator, but there are at least four types: royal, lament, imprecation, and praise.

Royal psalms praise the deeds of the king, usually David. Some of them may also be interpreted to refer to the Messiah (i.e. Psalm 22).

Laments are songs of sorrow. Many of them were written after the fall of Jerusalem and desire the return to former glory.

Imprecations are the psalms, usually by David, asking God to revenge himself on his enemies. On the surface they sound like David is asking that his own enemies be punished, but usually end with the idea that David's enemies are so because they are God's enemies.

Praise psalms give God the glory directly. Unlike the royal psalms, they don't involve the king as a middle man between the psalmist and God.

There may be other types, and are often mixtures of types. Some are historical, others are prophetic. Some tell of God's goodness and ask that he punish evildoers.

Habakkuk 3

The third chapter of the book of Habakkuk is one of those songs of mixed type. It is primarily a praise of God's power. "His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. And his brightness was as the light. (Verse 3, 4) But it is also a prophecy of God's revenge against the nations that opposed Judah.

Before him went the pestilence, and burning coals went forth at his feet. He stood, and measured the earth: he beheld, and drove asunder the nations; and the everlasting mountains were scattered, the perpetual hills did bow: his ways are everlasting. I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction: and the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. (Verses 5-7)

The psalm contains language typical of many songs. It personifies God's anger as being against nature. "Was the LORD displeased against the rivers? was thine anger against the rivers? was thy wrath against the sea?" (Verse 8) Compare that with Psalm 114:3-4. "The sea saw it, and fled: Jordan was driven back. The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs."

In addition, it contains one of the finest examples of Hebrew parallelism. Hebrew poetry does not rhyme. Instead it uses a variety of literary techniques, including saying something in one way, and then repeating it in different words. In the following passage note the parallels of fig/fruit/olive, flock/herd, joy/rejoice, or Lord/God.

Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. (Hab 3:17-18)

If there is any doubt that this was intended as a psalm, look at the first and last verses of the chapter. The first verse specifies the type of psalm, a *Shigionoth*. Psalm 7 is also of the same type. Then the prophet concludes with "To the chief singer on my stringed instruments." (Verse 19) This has its parallel in the introduction to many of the psalms.

Jonah 2

Many of David's psalms express his emotion in times of extreme duress. Few people were in such distress as Jonah in the belly of the fish. When we hear the story of Jonah, usually we hear of his flight from God, the storm and the fish, being vomited up, his preaching to Nineveh, and maybe his argument with God because the city was not destroyed as he had prophesied. Most of the time, we

tend to ignore chapter 2, Jonah's prayer, and yet it is one of the finest psalms in scripture.

This is a psalm of extreme emotion. Although Jonah never directly mentions his sin, he does admit his repentance. "Yet I will look again toward thy holy temple." (Verse 4) "When my soul fainted within me I remembered the LORD." (Verse 7)

Like David's prayer in Psalm 51, after his sin with the daughter of Sheba, Jonah's prayer stands as an example to us of how we should approach God when we have sinned. In this psalm Jonah acknowledges that God is the one who brought punishment on him. He uses a picture of nature being against him. "The weeds were wrapped about my head. I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me for ever." (Verses 5-6) Then he promises the Lord that he will correct his actions. "But I will sacrifice unto thee with the voice of thanksgiving; I will pay that that I have vowed." (Verse 9)

Jonah's sincerity and his prayer had the desired effect. The fish vomited Jonah out on the dry land. Some commentators even say that this happened on the coast nearest to Nineveh, and the reports of a man coming out of a great fish to preach to the city may have helped them listen to his prophecy.

Luke 1

The first chapter of Luke contains two psalms: one of praise by Mary, and one of prophecy by Zechariah. Many people don't think of them as psalms, but the format, language, and emotion all characterize them as such.

The psalm we know as the Magnificat is Mary's response to Elizabeth, John the Baptist's mother, telling her that even in the womb John recognized the Messiah. It is generally a psalm about the good God does to his followers and the punishment he brings on unbelievers.

In a time when prayers often consist mainly of requests to God, we might find it different that Mary asks for nothing. She has already been blessed with being the mother of the promised Messiah; what more could she ask for. Instead she magnifies (declares to be great) the God who blessed her.

She starts by acknowledging that God has done great things for her. Then she expands her praise. This is also a typical Hebrew literary method. State something, then enlarges upon it. "For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation." (Lk 1:49-50)

Next she uses the opposite technique, contrasting one thing with another. "He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree." (Lk 1:52)

Finally (verse 55), she invokes the name of Abraham, the great patriarch. A couple of the psalms invoke Abraham's name, most notably Psalm 105.

We can identify these characteristics of psalms in what Mary said, but we must never reduce it to mere literary technique. Mary was not merely trying to write a psalm. She was using a familiar literary form to express her inmost feelings. Anybody can use tricks to create a psalm, but it is meaningless without great emotion. At this point Mary was overcome with emotion.

The other psalm in this chapter can be found in verses 67-69. Zechariah has been allowed to speak for the first time in nine months. Like Ezekiel, who was struck dumb except when God wanted him to deliver a specific

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message, the first thing out of his mouth was a prophecy about his child John.

Zechariah begins by stating a reminder of God's promises through Abraham and all the prophets since. "As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world began: That we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us." (Lk 1:70-71) Perhaps this reminder of the prophets of old was intended to add credence to the prophecy he was about to utter himself. He reminds them of the promises of the covenant with Abraham.

Then comes the prophecy about John. In it he uses concepts from Malachi (prepare the way) and Isaiah (those who sit in darkness).

And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; To give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Lk 1:76-79)

God uses Zechariah's psalm to confirm that John is to be the promised forerunner. This psalm doesn't express the emotion of the Magnificat, but it expresses the will of God in a specific manner.

There are psalms outside of the book of Psalms. It is even possible for us in this day to create psalms of praise or imprecation. The thing to remember is that psalms are more than just a bag of tricks. They must speak our inmost feelings to God.

DRIFTING ALONG

If you have seen a movie western, you have probably seen him on the screen. He is probably the most consistent uncredited actor in the movies. And yet he is instantly recognizable. He is one of those actors that you say, "I don't know his name, but I have seen him before." He has been around (and around and around) for probably a hundred years, and is still rolling along. Usually he is on the screen alone, but sometimes with other actors that look like him. He is the epitome of actors making a scene look lonesome and forlorn. You may not know his name, but you know his role. The Sons of the Pioneers even sang about him. He is the tumbling tumbleweed.

Here in the American Southwest we are quite familiar with tumbleweeds. During the late summer they are green and growing, and block our walking or biking paths. Come fall and winter they dry up and become uprooted. That is when they start blowing around. In some parts of the country they have snow drifts up to the eaves of the houses; here we have piles of tumbleweeds keeping us inside. The difference is that a spark of fire means nothing to a snowdrift, but will cause a tumbleweed drift to flare up in seconds.

There is a Hebrew word, *galgal*, that is often translated wheel or rolling thing. Some translations, in some passages, translate it tumbleweed.

"Make them like tumbleweed, my God, like chaff before the wind." (Ps 83:13, NLT, NIV, CSB)

"The nations rage like the rumble of a huge torrent. He rebukes them, and they flee far away, driven before the wind like chaff on the hills and like

tumbleweeds before a gale." (Isa 17:13, same translations)

Other translations use phrases like "a rolling thing" (the literal translation) or "whirling dust." Those may be valid translations. After all, the same word is one of two translated wheel when Ezekiel saw the vision of the cherubim. (Ezek 10:2, 6, 13) To some of us, though, it presents a very clear picture of what God was saying.

In both of these passages, the author is talking about what God will do to those who oppose him. Many a person thinks that God does not exist, or if he exists he will not punish those who reject him. A psalmist put it this way: "They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless; and they say, 'The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive.'" (Ps 94:6-7)

The truth is that God does see. He may act immediately, or he may take his time. He will punish the evil-doers. And that is where the tumbleweeds come in.

Once they are dry, it doesn't take much to get a tumbleweed moving. When the wind catches them, they go wherever the wind moves them. It may be unpredictable; ask anyone who has ended up hitting a tumbleweed with a car. They can travel for miles or come up short against a wall. Often, in this latter case, the wind batters them until they no longer exist. That is what God does to the wicked. They are uprooted from their secure place and blown about. They have no security.

Which would you rather be? A tree planted by the water, or the lonely star of countless movies?

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