COGMA

Church of God Mission Academy

STUDY GUIDE 60

1 OF 2

Tradition Versus Truth

STUDY GUIDE 1 OF 2:

When Tradition Replaces Truth

An overview of testing beliefs by the Word of God.



Equipping and empowering for effective service

2 Timothy 2:2

INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE STUDENT

My Study Plan

Preparing a Study Plan before starting this Study Guide will assist you in completing it within a designated timeframe. It also helps in developing the discipline required for studying God's Word effectively.

Proverbs 16:3:

> *Commit thy works unto the LORD, and thy thoughts shall be established.*

My Study Guide Journal

Keep a record as you progress through your Study Guide, including the Personal Responses for each section, for future reference and goal setting.

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Important Points

- COGMA does not claim to be infallible or the authority.
- Infallibility and authority belong only to God and His Word.

COGMA therefore strongly advises that you prayerfully study the content of each Study Guide with the heart of a Berean (**Acts 17:10–12**).

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PREFACE

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Every believer must learn to distinguish between what the Bible actually teaches and what has been accepted because it has been repeated for many years. Religious tradition can become deeply rooted in churches, families and communities, and over time it may be treated as though it carries the same authority as the Word of God. Yet truth is not established by age, popularity, sincerity or familiarity. Truth is established by the Word of God.

Jesus warned that human tradition can make the commandment of God of none effect. This warning remains important because sincere people can hold firmly to ideas they have never carefully tested by Scripture. A teaching may sound familiar, may have been believed for generations and may be supported by respected teachers, yet none of these things proves that it is true. Every belief must be examined in the light of the Word of God.

This module is designed to help the student recognise how tradition develops, how it gains authority and how it can shape the way Scripture is read. The purpose is not to encourage suspicion of every teaching received from others, nor is it to criticise people who sincerely hold traditional beliefs. Rather, the purpose is to develop a disciplined habit of returning to Scripture and asking a simple question: What does the Word of God actually say?

The student has already encountered one clear example in the study of Daniel's seventy weeks. A gap of thousands of years is commonly placed between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks, yet that gap is not stated in Daniel's prophecy. This illustrates how an interpretation can become so familiar that many people no longer ask whether the idea itself is present in Scripture.

The same principle must be applied to every area of doctrine. Teachings concerning a future physical Second Coming of Christ, the commonly repeated account of Satan falling from heaven before the creation of mankind, and the continuation of religious ordinances must all be tested by Scripture rather than accepted because they are widely taught. These subjects will be examined carefully in their appropriate Study Guides and modules. They are mentioned here only as examples of why the distinction between tradition and truth matters.

The aim of this Study Guide is therefore not only to identify traditions, but to establish the Word of God as the final authority for faith and doctrine. The student must learn to approach Scripture with humility, allowing the Bible to correct inherited assumptions rather than forcing the Bible to support them. Where tradition agrees with Scripture, it may be accepted. Where it conflicts with Scripture, the believer must choose the truth of God's Word.

This principle will prepare the student for every Study Guide that follows. A disciplined student of the Bible does not ask first, *"What have I always been taught?"* but, *"What does the Scripture say?"* That question protects the believer from error and keeps faith anchored in the truth revealed by God.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must every inherited belief remain open to correction by the Bible?

Personal Reflection

Which belief have you accepted mainly because it is familiar, and what might need to change when you examine it by the Bible?

Action Step

Choose one inherited belief, examine the verses used to support it, and explain what you will retain or correct in your thinking.

INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION IS AUTHORITY

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Every question of doctrine eventually becomes a question of authority. When two teachings disagree, both cannot be accepted simply because sincere people believe them. The student must determine which teaching agrees with the Word of God because Scripture, not custom, reputation, experience or religious history, must govern what we believe.

Tradition becomes dangerous when it moves from being something people have received to something they are no longer willing to examine. A belief may have been taught by parents, pastors, churches or respected writers for generations, yet its age does not make it inspired. The decisive question is not, *"Who taught this?"* but, *"Where is this taught in the Word of God?"*

Jesus confronted this issue when religious leaders allowed inherited tradition to stand above God's commandment. He said in **Mark 7:7-9**:

> *"Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition."*

The problem was not simply that these people had traditions. Their traditions had acquired an authority that belonged only to God's Word. Once that happens, Scripture is no longer allowed to speak plainly because the reader approaches it already convinced that the traditional explanation must be correct.

This can happen easily. A person may read a verse through the explanation heard since childhood and never notice that the explanation contains ideas the verse itself does not state. Another may assume that a teaching must be biblical because almost every church around them accepts it.

The believers at Berea demonstrated a better approach. **Acts 17:11** says:

> *"These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."*

They did not reject teaching simply because it came from another person, but neither did they accept it without examination. They listened with readiness and then searched the Scriptures to determine whether what they had heard was true. This is the attitude required of every serious student of the Bible.

Testing a teaching by Scripture is not rebellion against teachers, churches or previous generations. It is obedience to God. A faithful teacher should desire students to examine what is taught because genuine biblical truth does not need protection from careful study.

This Study Guide will therefore consider how religious tradition gains influence and why people may defend inherited beliefs even when their biblical foundation is weak. We will consider the influence of popularity, age, sincerity, familiarity, culture and religious identity, and how these things can shape the way a person approaches the Bible.

The goal is not to make the student suspicious of everything taught before. Many truths have been faithfully preserved from one generation to another. The goal is to establish the correct order of authority: every teaching, whether old or new, popular or unpopular, must remain subject to the Word of God.

This principle becomes especially important when familiar doctrines are examined. The student may discover that something long assumed to be stated plainly in Scripture is actually an interpretation placed upon the words of Scripture. When that occurs, the proper response is to return to the Bible and allow God's Word to correct our understanding.

The central question is simple but searching: Who has the final authority? If the answer is truly the Word of God, then no tradition can be protected from biblical examination. Our faith must rest upon what God has revealed rather than upon what people have taught us to expect.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why did the Bereans search the Bible even when they received teaching willingly?

Personal Reflection

Have you ever avoided questioning a respected teacher because you feared appearing disloyal? What should govern your attitude instead?

Action Step

Check one teaching you have heard against the Bible, and explain how you will respond truthfully and respectfully if correction is needed.

WHAT IS RELIGIOUS TRADITION?

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Tradition is something that is handed down from one generation to another. In religion, it may include teachings, customs, practices, explanations of Scripture and accepted ways of understanding doctrine. A tradition may preserve something true, but the fact that it has been handed down does not make it equal to the Word of God.

The Meaning of Tradition

The word tradition does not always describe something false. Paul sometimes used it for teaching that had been faithfully delivered to believers. The question is therefore not simply

whether a belief has been received from others, but whether what has been received agrees with the truth revealed in Scripture.

Paul wrote in **2 Thessalonians 2:15**:

> *"Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle."*

The teaching Paul instructed believers to hold was apostolic teaching. It did not gain authority simply because it had been passed from one person to another. It carried authority because it expressed the truth God had given through His apostles. Any later tradition must still be tested by that same revealed truth.

The Tradition of Men

Jesus also spoke of tradition, but He warned against traditions that displaced the commandment of God. Religious people can become attached to teachings that have been received through generations until those teachings are treated as though they cannot be questioned.

Jesus said in **Mark 7:8**:

> *"For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do."*

The danger was not simply that the people had customs. They had allowed human teaching to take a place that belonged only to the Word of God. Once tradition becomes the controlling authority, people may defend the inherited interpretation even when Scripture points in another direction.

How Tradition Develops

Religious tradition often begins with an interpretation. A teacher explains a verse in a particular way, others repeat the explanation, and eventually the explanation becomes familiar. After many years, people may no longer distinguish between the actual words of Scripture and the interpretation that has been placed upon them.

This can happen without deliberate dishonesty. A person may hear the same explanation from childhood, read books that repeat it and worship among people who assume it is correct. When that person later reads the Bible, the traditional explanation may already be present in the mind before the words of the verse or verses are carefully considered.

Tradition can also develop through religious practice. A church may continue a practice because previous generations observed it, and repetition may eventually make the practice seem unquestionably biblical. The statement, *"We have always done this,"* can then replace the more important question, *"Does the Word of God require this?"*

Tradition and the Words of Scripture

A careful Bible student must learn to separate what Scripture says from what has been said about Scripture. This requires patience and humility because familiar explanations can feel as certain as the verses themselves. The student must be willing to notice when an idea is assumed, supplied or inferred rather than actually stated.

Several questions are helpful. What words are actually present in the verse or verses? What conclusion do the verses themselves require? Is the interpretation confirmed elsewhere in Scripture? Has an idea been added because a particular interpretation expects it to be there?

These questions do not encourage unbelief. They encourage careful faithfulness to the Word of God. Scripture must be allowed to establish doctrine rather than being made to fit an inherited explanation.

Every Tradition Must Be Tested

The believer is responsible to examine what has been received. Respect for teachers, family members or previous generations does not remove that responsibility. Sincere people can pass on mistaken interpretations just as sincere people can faithfully pass on truth.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:21**:

> *"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."*

To prove something is to test or examine it. The believer is not instructed to reject everything that has been handed down, but neither is the believer instructed to accept everything without examination. What agrees with Scripture should be held fast; what contradicts Scripture must be rejected.

Religious tradition must therefore remain in its proper place. It may preserve truth and may reflect faithful teaching, but it can never become the final authority for doctrine.

The Word of God must judge tradition; tradition must never be allowed to judge the Word of God.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What makes apostolic teaching different from a human tradition that sets aside God's commandment?

Personal Reflection

Have you treated a handed-down religious practice as a command of God without checking its authority? What has this teaching shown you?

Action Step

Examine one tradition you have accepted, then state whether your understanding or practice needs to change in obedience to God's Word.

WHEN TRADITION BECOMES AUTHORITY

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Tradition becomes spiritually dangerous when it moves beyond being something received from others and begins to function as an authority over the believer's understanding of Scripture. At that point, the question is no longer simply whether a person has inherited a particular teaching. The question is whether that teaching is being allowed to control what the Bible is permitted to mean.

Authority Belongs to the Word of God

God alone has the right to determine truth. Human teachers may explain Scripture, churches may preserve teaching and generations may pass beliefs from one to another, but none of these sources possesses authority equal to the Word of God.

Jesus said in **John 17:17**:

> *"Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth."*

The Word of God is not true because a church accepts it or because generations have defended it. It is truth because it comes from God. Every doctrine, interpretation and practice must therefore remain subject to what God has revealed.

When this order is reversed, tradition begins to occupy a position it was never given. Instead of Scripture determining whether the tradition is correct, the tradition begins determining how Scripture must be interpreted.

When the Explanation Controls Scripture

A traditional interpretation can become so firmly established that the reader approaches Scripture already convinced of what the verse or verses are supposed to mean. The words are then viewed through the inherited explanation rather than being allowed to establish their own meaning.

This can result in a person defending an interpretation more strongly than the actual wording of Scripture. When attention is drawn to something the verse does not say, the traditional explanation may immediately be supplied to fill the gap. The explanation has become so familiar that it is treated almost as though it were part of inspired Scripture.

Jesus confronted this problem among the religious leaders of His day. He said in **Mark 7:9**:

> *"Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition."*

Their problem had progressed beyond simply possessing religious traditions. They were willing to reject what God had said in order to preserve what had been handed down among them.

Human Authority Cannot Replace Divine Authority

Religious traditions often gain strength because they are associated with respected people or institutions. A doctrine may be defended because a recognised teacher taught it, because a denomination included it in a statement of faith or because generations of ministers have preached it.

Respect for faithful teachers is proper, but respect must never become unquestioning submission to human authority. The most respected teacher remains capable of misunderstanding Scripture, and the largest religious organisation remains capable of preserving an error.

Paul warned believers against placing their confidence in human personalities. He wrote in **1 Corinthians 3:5**:

> *"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man?"*

Paul refused to allow believers to make servants of God the foundation of their faith. The authority rested in God and His truth, not in the reputation of the person delivering the message.

Tradition Can Become Difficult to Question

Once a belief becomes part of a person's religious identity, questioning it may feel like questioning everything that person has trusted. The issue can become emotional because the teaching may be connected with family, church history, respected ministers and important spiritual experiences.

This helps explain why people sometimes defend a tradition before carefully examining the biblical evidence against it. The possibility that the teaching may be wrong can seem threatening because accepting correction may require a person to reconsider beliefs held for many years.

Yet loyalty to God must be greater than loyalty to inherited understanding. The believer must be willing to acknowledge that sincerity, confidence and long acceptance cannot turn an incorrect interpretation into truth.

Scripture Must Remain Above Every Tradition

The proper relationship is simple. Teachers should serve the Word of God. Churches should submit to the Word of God. Traditions should be examined by the Word of God.

No human authority should be permitted to stand above what Scripture actually teaches.

The people of Berea provide an important example. **Acts 17:11** says:

> *"These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."*

They listened willingly, but they also examined what they heard. Even apostolic preaching was received with a readiness to compare the message with the Scriptures.

This is the attitude every Bible student must develop. Truth does not need protection from careful examination because truth remains true when tested by the Word of God.

Tradition becomes an authority when people stop asking whether it agrees with Scripture and begin assuming that Scripture must agree with it.

The Word of God stands above every teacher, every church, every tradition and every inherited belief.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How does tradition become an authority over the way the Bible is read?

Personal Reflection

When has a familiar explanation shaped what you expected a verse to say? How willing are you to reconsider that explanation?

Action Step

Read the verses supporting one familiar belief without your usual explanation beside them; identify any assumption you need to reconsider.

TEACHING FOR DOCTRINES THE COMMANDMENTS OF MEN

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Jesus gave one of the clearest warnings in Scripture about the danger of religious tradition. His concern was not simply that people followed customs, but that human ideas had been elevated until they were taught with the force of divine doctrine. When that happens, people may sincerely believe they are honouring God while actually giving authority to teachings that God did not establish.

When Human Teaching Is Given Divine Weight

Jesus said in **Matthew 15:8-9**:

> *"This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."*

The problem was not simply incorrect behaviour. Human commandments were being presented as though they were divine requirements. What men had developed was being taught with an authority that belonged only to God.

This is a serious danger because a teaching can sound deeply religious while still lacking biblical authority. It may be expressed with confidence, supported by long-established custom and defended by respected leaders, yet none of these things can transform a human commandment into divine truth.

Religious Language Does Not Make a Teaching Biblical

A tradition often becomes difficult to identify because it is expressed in biblical language. Familiar verses may be quoted, spiritual terms may be used and the teaching may appear to fit naturally within an established interpretation. Yet the presence of biblical words does not prove that the conclusion being taught actually comes from Scripture.

The student must therefore distinguish between quoting Scripture and teaching what Scripture says. A person may quote a verse accurately but attach an explanation to it that the verse itself does not support. If that explanation is repeated often enough, it may eventually become more familiar than the actual wording of the verse.

This is why careful reading is essential. The question is not simply whether a verse has been quoted, but whether the doctrine being taught arises naturally from that verse and agrees with the wider testimony of Scripture.

Adding Requirements God Did Not Give

The commandments of men can also appear when religious requirements are added beyond what God has revealed. People may come to believe that particular practices, customs or expectations are necessary for faithfulness even though Scripture does not establish them as divine requirements.

Jesus confronted this kind of thinking among the scribes and Pharisees. They had developed detailed traditions that surrounded the commandments of God, but those traditions could become more important than the commandment itself. The result was a religious system in which people were expected to obey human regulations as though God had spoken them.

God's people must therefore be careful not to create obligations where Scripture has created none. A practice may be helpful, orderly or meaningful, but it should never be declared necessary on divine authority unless the Word of God establishes it.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does quoting biblical words not prove that a religious requirement comes from God?

Personal Reflection

Have you ever confused a useful religious custom with something God requires? How might that affect the way you treat others?

Action Step

Identify one religious requirement, test it by the Bible, and explain what you should stop imposing or start recognising as a matter of choice.

Tradition Can Hide Behind Good Intentions

Human commandments are not always introduced with a desire to deceive. Many traditions may have begun because people wanted to protect truth, encourage devotion or preserve order. Good intentions, however, cannot give divine authority to something God has not commanded.

A practice introduced as a helpful aid may later become an expectation. The expectation may then become a rule, and the rule may eventually be defended as though obedience to God depends upon it. What began as human judgement can slowly become religious law.

This is one reason traditions must continually be tested by Scripture. The question is not whether those who began the tradition were sincere, but whether the teaching itself has authority from the Word of God.

God's Commandment Must Not Be Set Aside

Jesus showed that the danger becomes even greater when tradition does more than add to Scripture and actually causes people to set aside what God has said.

He declared in **Mark 7:13**:

> *"Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye."*

Tradition had become so powerful that it prevented people from responding properly to the Word of God. The inherited interpretation was not simply sitting beside Scripture. It was interfering with obedience to Scripture.

This can still occur whenever a traditional teaching causes people to dismiss, explain away or overlook the plain meaning of biblical verses. Instead of allowing Scripture to correct the tradition, the reader begins searching for ways to protect the inherited belief.

The Difference Between Doctrine and Tradition

Biblical doctrine is teaching established by the Word of God. Religious tradition is teaching or practice handed down by people. A tradition may agree with biblical doctrine, but it does not become doctrine simply because it has been accepted for a long time.

The distinction must remain clear. Doctrine requires biblical authority. Tradition requires biblical testing.

Paul warned that human ideas can appear impressive while lacking true spiritual substance. He wrote in **Colossians 2:8**:

> *"Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ."*

The final contrast is important: *"and not after Christ."* The believer's faith must be centred in Jesus Christ and governed by the truth revealed in Him. Any teaching that draws authority from human tradition rather than from the Word of God must be examined carefully.

Truth Must Govern What We Teach

Those who teach the Bible carry a serious responsibility. They must not present personal opinion, inherited interpretation or religious custom as though God Himself has spoken. The distinction between *"the Bible says"* and *"this is how we understand the Bible"* must never be carelessly ignored.

Every teacher must therefore remain willing to have their teaching examined by Scripture. Every student must remain willing to test what is heard. No tradition should be protected from examination simply because it is familiar, respected or widely believed.

Jesus' warning remains clear: worship becomes vain when the commandments of men are taught as divine doctrine.

What God has spoken must remain above everything that people have added, inherited or assumed.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why can good intentions not give divine authority to a human commandment?

Personal Reflection

Could a well-intended rule be controlling your conduct or your expectations of others without biblical authority? Explain.

Action Step

Examine **Mark 7:13** *alongside one religious rule, and decide what change is needed so God's Word, not human pressure, governs your response.*

HOW INHERITED TEACHING BECOMES UNQUESTIONED

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Most people begin learning about God from others. Parents, pastors, teachers, churches and books often shape a person's understanding long before that person begins examining doctrine independently. This is not necessarily wrong, but inherited teaching can become dangerous when familiarity replaces examination.

What We Receive Can Feel Certain

A belief heard repeatedly from childhood can feel self-evident. Because the person cannot remember a time when the teaching was unfamiliar, it may never seem necessary to ask where it came from or whether Scripture actually teaches it.

This is one reason inherited beliefs can be difficult to examine. They are often connected with trusted people and meaningful experiences. Questioning the teaching can therefore feel like questioning the people who first taught it, even when the real purpose is simply to test the doctrine by the Word of God.

The believer must learn to separate respect for people from submission to truth. A parent, pastor or teacher may have taught sincerely and faithfully according to what they understood, yet every teaching still remains subject to Scripture.

Repetition Creates Familiarity

Repeated teaching has great influence. When the same explanation is heard in sermons, Bible studies, books and conversations, it gradually becomes familiar. Familiarity can then be mistaken for biblical certainty.

A statement may eventually be repeated so often that people assume it must appear somewhere in Scripture. When asked where it is written, they may remember the teaching clearly but struggle to identify the verse that actually states it.

This does not necessarily mean the person has been careless. It demonstrates how strongly repetition can shape understanding. The Bible student must therefore learn to distinguish between remembering a teaching and remembering what Scripture actually says.

Assumptions Can Pass from Generation to Generation

One generation may inherit an interpretation from the generation before it and then pass it on without examining its foundation. The next generation receives the same explanation, and over time the original assumption may become deeply embedded in religious teaching.

Eventually, people may defend the interpretation because it has always been part of their church or movement. The length of time it has been believed can then become part of the argument for accepting it.

Scripture warns against placing confidence in inherited ways simply because they have been received from previous generations. Peter wrote in **1 Peter 1:18**:

> *"Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers;"*

Peter recognised that people can inherit ways of life from those who came before them. What is received from previous generations must still be measured against the truth of God.

Familiar Teaching Can Shape What We Expect to See

Inherited teaching does more than influence what a person believes. It can also influence what that person expects to find when reading Scripture.

If someone has been taught that a verse or group of verses must refer to a particular event or doctrine, the mind may immediately supply that explanation when the Scripture is read. Words and ideas that are not actually present in Scripture can seem to be there because the interpretation has become so familiar.

This is why careful Bible study requires attention to the actual wording of Scripture. The student must be willing to ask whether a conclusion comes from the verse or verses themselves or from an explanation already carried into them.

Jesus repeatedly challenged people to consider what was written rather than rely upon assumption. He asked in **Luke 10:26**:

> *"He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?"*

Both questions matter: What is written? How are we reading it? A person may have the Scriptures before them and still understand them through an inherited framework that controls the meaning.

Questioning an Interpretation Is Not Rejecting Truth

Some people become uncomfortable when long-held teachings are examined because they fear that questioning an interpretation means questioning the Bible itself. The opposite may be true. Careful examination can demonstrate a greater commitment to Scripture because the student is willing to allow God's Word to correct human understanding.

The Bible does not require believers to defend inherited explanations. It requires them to believe and obey the truth.

When an interpretation is correct, examination will strengthen confidence in it. When it is incorrect, examination gives the believer an opportunity to abandon error and receive a clearer understanding of Scripture.

Truth Must Be Chosen Deliberately

Every generation must personally return to the Word of God. Truth cannot remain only something inherited from previous believers. It must be understood, examined and embraced because it is established by Scripture.

Paul instructed Timothy in **2 Timothy 3:14-15**:

> *"But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus."*

Timothy had received teaching from others, but his confidence was anchored in the Holy Scriptures. What he had learned could be continued in because it agreed with the Word of God.

Inherited teaching should therefore never become unquestionable simply because it is inherited. The believer should be thankful for every truth faithfully received from others, but every belief must remain open to examination by Scripture.

What we have always been taught must never become more authoritative than what God has actually said.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How can repeated teaching become confused with the actual words of the Bible?

Personal Reflection

Which trusted influence has made you reluctant to test a familiar belief? What attitude would help you examine it fairly?

Action Step

Write down one teaching received from someone you respect, examine the supporting verses, and identify any correction you must accept without rejecting the person.

POPULARITY DOES NOT ESTABLISH TRUTH

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A teaching may be accepted by many people and still be wrong. Large numbers can create confidence because people naturally assume that a widely held belief has already been tested and confirmed. Yet Scripture never teaches that truth is determined by majority agreement.

Many People Can Believe the Same Error

History repeatedly shows that large groups of people can accept ideas that are false. Religious belief is no exception. A doctrine may spread widely through preaching, books, schools and churches until it becomes the normal explanation within a particular generation.

Once a teaching becomes dominant, people may stop asking whether it is biblical. They may simply assume that so many believers could not all be mistaken.

Jesus warned that the majority is not always walking in truth. He said in **Matthew 7:13-14**:

> *"Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it."*

The number of people following a way does not determine whether that way is right. Truth must be measured by God's Word rather than by the size of the crowd.

Majority Agreement Can Create False Security

When most people around us believe the same thing, questioning it can feel unnecessary or even unreasonable. A person may think, *"Surely all these churches, pastors and teachers cannot be wrong."*

This kind of reasoning places confidence in agreement rather than Scripture. Agreement may be comforting, but agreement alone proves nothing.

The important question is not how many people believe a doctrine. The important question is whether the doctrine is established by the Word of God.

Paul warned that people can gather around teaching that suits what they want to hear. He wrote in **2 Timothy 4:3-4**:

> *"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables."*

Many teachers and many hearers can therefore agree together and still move away from truth.

Popular Teaching Can Become Difficult to Question

A widely accepted doctrine often develops social strength. Once it is regarded as normal Christianity, anyone who questions it may be viewed as unusual, troublesome or even dangerous.

This pressure can discourage careful examination. People may remain silent because they fear being misunderstood, rejected or accused of departing from the faith.

Yet faithfulness to God sometimes requires standing apart from the majority. The believer must not allow social acceptance to become more important than biblical truth.

Scripture Records Minority Faithfulness

The Bible often records situations in which the faithful position was not the popular one. Noah obeyed God when the world around him did not. Elijah stood against widespread false worship in Israel. The prophets repeatedly spoke God's Word when rulers and people preferred another message.

Popularity did not make false worship true, and unpopularity did not make God's message false.

Elijah challenged Israel in **1 Kings 18:21**:

> *"And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? if the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word."*

The issue was not which side had more followers. The issue was who was truly God.

Truth Does Not Need Majority Approval

God's truth remains true whether it is believed by many or by few. A doctrine does not become stronger because millions accept it, and it does not become weaker because only a small number recognise it.

This does not mean that an uncommon interpretation is automatically correct. Being different from the majority proves nothing by itself. Minority opinion must be tested by Scripture just as carefully as majority opinion.

The standard remains the same in every case:

What does the Word of God teach?

The Student Must Resist the Power of Consensus

A disciplined Bible student must be willing to examine popular teaching without prejudice. The fact that a belief is widespread should neither prove nor disprove it.

Popularity may explain why a teaching is familiar, but it cannot establish its truth. The student must return to Scripture and allow the Word of God itself to determine what should be believed.

The safe position is neither to follow the majority nor to oppose the majority simply for the sake of being different. The safe position is to stand where the Word of God stands.

Truth is not established by how many people believe it. Truth is established by what God has revealed.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why can neither majority agreement nor minority opinion establish truth?

Personal Reflection

Do you ever assume a teaching is right because many people accept it, or wrong because few accept it? What needs to change?

Action Step

Test one popular belief using the Bible rather than its following; record how the evidence should change your judgement or attitude.

AGE DOES NOT ESTABLISH TRUTH

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A belief can be very old and still be wrong. The fact that a teaching has been accepted for centuries may give it great influence, but age does not turn human interpretation into divine

truth. Every doctrine, no matter how ancient or respected, must still be tested by the Word of God.

Old Does Not Mean Inspired

People often feel more secure with a teaching when they know that previous generations believed it. An old interpretation may seem trustworthy because it has survived for a long time. Yet longevity is not the same as inspiration.

Only the Word of God carries divine authority. A teaching from the first century after the apostles, the fourth century, the sixteenth century or the present day must be judged by the same standard. Its age does not determine whether it is true.

Isaiah wrote in **Isaiah 8:20**:

> *"To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."*

The standard was not how long a teaching had existed. The standard was whether it agreed with what God had spoken.

Error Can Be Preserved for Generations

Tradition can preserve truth, but it can also preserve error. Once an incorrect interpretation becomes established, one generation may pass it to the next without examining its biblical foundation.

Over time, the belief can become stronger simply because it is older. People may reason that if the teaching had been wrong, surely someone would have corrected it long ago. Yet this assumes that every generation has carefully tested what it received.

Scripture shows that false religious practices can continue for long periods without becoming acceptable to God. Josiah discovered this when the book of the law was found during repairs to the temple.

2 Kings 22:11 says:

> *"And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes."*

Practices had continued in Judah, yet the rediscovered Word of God exposed how far the nation had departed from what God had commanded. Long-standing practice had not made disobedience right.

Returning to Scripture May Challenge Long-Held Beliefs

When the Word of God exposes an old error, the believer must be willing to change. This can be difficult because ancient traditions may carry great emotional and religious weight.

People may say, *"Christians have believed this for hundreds of years,"* as though the length of belief settles the question. But the proper response remains: *"What does the Scripture say?"*

A teaching should not be rejected simply because it is old. Neither should it be accepted simply because it is old. Its truth must be established by Scripture.

Church History Is Not the Final Authority

Church history can help us understand how beliefs developed and how Christians in previous generations interpreted Scripture. It can also show how established interpretations, practices and controversies arose.

However, church history is a record of what people believed and did. It is not an inspired standard of truth. Early writers could be correct, mistaken or inconsistent, just as later writers can be.

Their closeness in time to the apostles does not make every conclusion they reached authoritative. The believer may learn from history, but doctrine must ultimately rest upon the Word of God.

Ancient Tradition Can Still Add to Scripture

One of the dangers of an old tradition is that familiarity can hide what has been added to Scripture. If an interpretation has been repeated for centuries, people may assume that its details come directly from Scripture.

When Scripture is examined carefully, however, some of those details may not actually be present. They may have entered through later explanation and then become part of the accepted story.

This is why the student must keep asking what Scripture actually states. A thousand years of repetition cannot place words into a verse that God did not put there.

Truth Is Older Than Every Human Tradition

There is also an important distinction between ancient human tradition and eternal truth. God's truth does not become true because people have believed it for a long time. It was true before any human system, institution or tradition existed.

Jesus said in **John 17:17**:

> *"Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth."*

The believer therefore does not need to choose between something old and something new. The real choice is between what agrees with the Word of God and what does not.

A new interpretation can be wrong, and an ancient interpretation can be wrong. Both must stand before the same authority.

Age may explain why a tradition is respected, but it cannot establish that tradition as truth.

No teaching becomes biblical simply because generations have believed it. The Word of God alone determines whether it is true.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What does Josiah's response to the book of the law show about long-standing religious practice?

Personal Reflection

Which long-standing belief have you regarded as dependable mainly because it is old? What does Josiah's example challenge you to do?

Action Step

Examine the biblical basis of one old practice and state whether you need to maintain it, change it or stop treating it as a command.

SINCERITY DOES NOT ESTABLISH TRUTH

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A person can be completely sincere and still be mistaken. Sincerity describes the honesty of a person's belief, but it does not prove that the belief itself is true. For this reason, doctrine must never be established by how deeply, confidently or earnestly someone believes it.

Sincerity Can Exist Without Truth

People often assume that a sincere person must be trustworthy in matters of doctrine. Sincerity is valuable, but it cannot replace truth. A person may honestly believe something because it was taught by trusted people, accepted by their church or reinforced through years of repetition.

Paul himself provides a powerful example. Before his conversion, he sincerely believed that opposing the followers of Jesus was service to God. His zeal was genuine, but his understanding was wrong.

Paul later said in **Acts 26:9**:

> *"I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth."*

Paul did not describe himself as deliberately resisting something he knew to be true. He genuinely thought his actions were right. His sincerity did not make his conclusion correct.

Zeal Does Not Guarantee Understanding

Strong religious commitment can also exist without accurate knowledge. A person may pray earnestly, study diligently and defend a doctrine passionately while still misunderstanding Scripture.

Paul wrote concerning Israel in **Romans 10:2**:

> *"For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge."*

Their zeal was real, but zeal by itself was not enough. Religious enthusiasm must be governed by truth.

This principle is important because strongly held beliefs can appear convincing. Confidence may make a teaching sound certain, but confidence does not prove that the interpretation is biblical.

Experience Must Also Be Tested

People sometimes defend a teaching because of personal experience. They may say that something must be true because they felt deeply affected, received comfort, witnessed a dramatic event or believed that God confirmed the teaching to them.

Personal experience can be meaningful, but it cannot become the final authority for doctrine. Experiences must be interpreted, and people can misunderstand what they have experienced. Scripture therefore remains the standard by which spiritual claims are tested.

John wrote in **1 John 4:1**:

> *"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world."*

The believer is not instructed to accept every spiritual claim because it appears sincere or powerful. What is presented as spiritual must still be examined.

Sincere Teachers Can Pass On Error

A teacher does not need to be dishonest in order to teach something incorrect. Many errors are passed from sincere teacher to sincere student because neither has carefully examined the underlying assumption.

This should produce humility rather than suspicion. The purpose of testing doctrine is not to accuse teachers of bad motives but to recognise that every human teacher can misunderstand Scripture.

A sincere minister may faithfully repeat what was learned from another sincere minister. If the original interpretation was wrong, sincerity can preserve the error just as effectively as it can preserve truth.

Respect the Person but Test the Teaching

Recognising that sincerity does not establish truth allows the believer to examine doctrine without attacking the character of those who hold it. Someone may be deeply devoted to God and still be mistaken about a particular teaching.

The student should therefore avoid reasoning that a doctrine must be correct because a faithful or respected person teaches it. Respect for the teacher and examination of the teaching are not opposites.

The believers at Berea listened readily to Paul's message but still searched the Scriptures. **Acts 17:11** says:

> *"These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so."*

Their willingness to test the message was not disrespect. It demonstrated a proper commitment to truth.

Truth Must Be Established by Scripture

Sincerity should accompany truth, but sincerity cannot create truth. A sincere mistake remains a mistake, just as an insincere statement does not become true simply because someone speaks it confidently.

The believer must therefore resist the temptation to judge doctrine by the character, emotion or confidence of the person presenting it. The question remains the same: Does the teaching agree with the Word of God?

This principle also protects us when examining our own beliefs. We may sincerely hold an interpretation for many years and still discover that Scripture teaches something different. When that happens, faithfulness requires us to accept correction.

God does not ask us only to be sincere. He calls us to walk in truth.

Sincerity is valuable, but sincerity must always remain subject to the Word of God.

Personal Response

Key Truth

What does Paul's earlier opposition to Jesus show about sincerity and truth?

Personal Reflection

Have you confused someone's sincerity, including your own, with evidence that a belief is true? How does Paul's example challenge you?

Action Step

Read **Acts 26:9** *and* **Romans 10:2***, then test one sincerely held belief and explain how you will remain humble if correction is needed.*

FAMILIARITY, CULTURE AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

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Religious beliefs are rarely formed in isolation. They are often connected with family background, national culture, church life and the community in which a person has been raised. These influences can be powerful because they shape not only what a person believes, but also what feels normal, safe and unquestionably true.

Familiarity Can Feel Like Truth

What is familiar often feels trustworthy. A teaching heard repeatedly over many years can become so deeply settled in the mind that it no longer appears to require examination.

The danger is that familiarity can be mistaken for biblical certainty. A person may recognise an explanation immediately, remember hearing it many times and therefore assume that Scripture must teach it plainly. Yet familiarity proves only that something has been heard often. It does not prove that the teaching comes from the Word of God.

The student must therefore learn to recognise the difference between a familiar explanation and the actual words of Scripture. The fact that an interpretation feels natural may simply mean that the mind has been trained to expect it.

Culture Can Shape Religious Understanding

Culture also influences the way people understand religious ideas. Different societies develop customs, assumptions and expectations that can affect the way Scripture is approached.

Some practices may become closely associated with Christianity simply because they have been observed for generations within a particular culture. People may eventually find it difficult to separate what is culturally familiar from what Scripture actually requires.

Jesus confronted this problem when religious customs were treated as though they carried divine authority. He said in **Mark 7:7**:

> *"Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."*

The problem was not that people belonged to a particular culture. The problem arose when human customs and teachings were elevated into religious obligations. Every culture must therefore remain subject to the Word of God.

Scripture is not required to conform to our customs; our customs must be examined in the light of Scripture.

Religious Identity Can Make Examination Difficult

A person's beliefs may also become closely connected with religious identity. Someone may think of themselves as belonging to a particular denomination, movement or church tradition, and certain doctrines may become part of what that identity represents.

Questioning those doctrines can then feel like questioning one's entire spiritual history. The issue may no longer appear to be simply, *"Is this interpretation correct?"* but, *"What will happen to my identity if this interpretation is wrong?"*

This can create strong emotional resistance to biblical examination. A person may defend the inherited position before carefully considering the evidence because changing that belief feels like leaving something important behind.

Yet the believer's primary identity must be found in Jesus Christ rather than in a religious system. Loyalty to Jesus Christ and His truth must stand above loyalty to any organisation, tradition or inherited label.

Following Christ May Require Leaving Familiar Ideas

Jesus repeatedly called people to place obedience to Him above other loyalties. Following truth can sometimes require a person to reconsider ideas that have been accepted for many years.

This does not require contempt for family, culture or previous teachers. It requires recognising that no human relationship can become the final authority for faith.

Jesus said in **John 8:31-32**:

> *"Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."*

The disciple is called to continue in Christ's Word. Freedom is connected with truth, not with preserving every inherited assumption.

A believer should therefore never fear truth because it challenges something familiar. If a teaching is biblical, careful examination will confirm it. If it is not biblical, discovering the error is a gain rather than a loss.

Group Loyalty Can Protect Error

Religious communities often develop shared beliefs that help define who belongs within the group. These beliefs can become difficult to question because disagreement may be treated as disloyalty.

This pressure can cause people to remain silent even when they recognise problems in an interpretation. They may fear rejection, criticism or the loss of valued relationships.

Paul warned against shaping the message according to the approval of people. He wrote in **Galatians 1:10**:

> *"For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ."*

Truth cannot be determined by what preserves acceptance within a group. The servant of Christ must be willing to follow the Word of God even when doing so is uncomfortable.

Scripture Must Define Our Belief

Family, culture and religious community can provide valuable support and instruction, but none of them can establish doctrine. They remain human influences and must themselves remain subject to Scripture.

The student must therefore become aware of the assumptions brought to the Bible. We should ask whether a belief comes from Scripture itself or from the culture, church tradition or religious environment in which we learned to understand it

This kind of examination requires humility. None of us approaches Scripture without previous influences, but we can become more conscious of those influences and allow the Word of God to correct them.

Familiarity, culture and religious identity can strongly shape what we believe, but they cannot determine what is true.

The believer's final loyalty is not to what feels familiar, but to Jesus Christ and the truth of His Word.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why must loyalty to Jesus Christ stand above religious identity and cultural custom?

Personal Reflection

Has loyalty to a community or custom ever made biblical correction uncomfortable? How can you honour people without compromising truth?

Action Step

Test one familiar cultural or religious custom against God's Word and describe how you will act with both faithfulness to Christ and respect for others.

WHEN TRADITION SHAPES THE READING OF SCRIPTURE

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Tradition becomes especially powerful when it begins to influence not only what a person believes, but also how that person reads the Bible. A reader may approach Scripture already expecting it to support a familiar doctrine, and that expectation can quietly control the meaning taken from the words. In this way, an interpretation can be read into Scripture rather than drawn from Scripture.

Reading Scripture or Reading an Interpretation Into Scripture

Every Bible student brings previous knowledge and assumptions to the Scriptures. This is unavoidable, but those assumptions must never be allowed to govern Scripture. The student must be willing to recognise when an expected meaning has come from previous teaching rather than from the actual words before them.

A traditional interpretation can become so familiar that the reader no longer notices the difference between what Scripture says and what has been supplied by the interpretation. A verse may mention one event, yet the reader may mentally add another. A prophecy may present a continuous period, yet the reader may assume an interruption because a familiar prophetic interpretation requires it.

Jesus repeatedly directed people back to what was actually written. He asked in **Luke 10:26**:

> *"He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?"*

Those two questions remain important: What is written? How are we reading it? The written Word is fixed, but the reader's understanding can be influenced by tradition, expectation and inherited teaching.

The Difference Between What Scripture Says and What We Expect It to Say

A careful student must learn to slow down and observe the actual words of Scripture. What events are mentioned? What time expressions are present? What connections does the writer make? What details have been added by the interpretation rather than stated in Scripture?

This discipline is especially important when studying familiar doctrines. The more often an explanation has been heard, the easier it becomes to assume that the explanation is part of Scripture itself.

The student should therefore resist the urge to make Scripture fit an interpretation already accepted. Doctrine should arise from Scripture. Scripture should not be forced to conform to doctrine.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How can an expected interpretation add details that are absent from the Bible?

Personal Reflection

Which explanation comes so readily to mind that you may be overlooking what the verses actually say? What must change in your reading?

Action Step

Re-examine one familiar group of verses, separate their actual statements from your expectations, and correct any assumption you have carried into them.

When Separate Verses Are Made Into One Story

Another way tradition can shape interpretation is by joining separate verses or portions of Scripture together until they appear to describe one continuous event. Each portion of Scripture may have its own subject, setting and purpose, yet familiar teaching can connect them so closely that the reader begins to assume they are all describing the same thing.

Comparing Scripture with Scripture is necessary for sound Bible study, but separate verses should not be joined simply because they contain similar words or images. Before combining them, the student must first understand each verse within its own context. Who is speaking? Who is being addressed? What subject is being discussed? What do the surrounding verses establish?

When these questions are overlooked, details from several portions of Scripture can gradually be assembled into a narrative that no individual verse or group of verses actually gives. Once that narrative becomes familiar, readers may return to each verse expecting to find the complete story there, even though some of its details have been supplied from elsewhere.

This principle will become important in later Study Guides. The commonly taught account of Satan's fall, for example, is often constructed by bringing together verses from different books and contexts and treating them as though they describe one event. That subject will be examined carefully in its proper module.

The principle must be established here: Scripture should interpret Scripture, but this does not give us permission to remove verses from their contexts and combine them into a story the Bible itself never presents.

Before separate verses or portions of Scripture are joined to establish a doctrine, each must first be allowed to speak according to its own context.

When Context, Audience and Time Statements Are Overlooked

Every portion of Scripture was given within a context. Words were spoken or written to particular people, concerning particular circumstances, and often with clear indications of time. Sound interpretation must respect these details rather than allowing a traditional interpretation to move the meaning somewhere else.

The student should therefore ask who was speaking, who was being addressed and what circumstances surrounded the statement. A promise, warning or prophecy given to a particular audience should not automatically be removed from that setting simply because a later interpretation applies it elsewhere.

Time statements also deserve careful attention. Expressions such as *"at hand," "shortly,"* and *"this generation"* communicate something to the people who originally heard them. These words should not be treated as unimportant simply because their natural meaning creates difficulty for an inherited interpretation.

Jesus said in **Matthew 24:34**:

> *"Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."*

Whatever conclusions are eventually reached about the surrounding prophecy, the words *"this generation"* must be taken seriously. The interpreter should not begin by assuming that they must refer to people living thousands of years later simply because an established interpretation requires a future fulfilment.

The same principle applies throughout Scripture. Context, audience and time expressions are part of God's inspired Word and therefore belong to the evidence from which doctrine is formed. They must not be pushed aside when they conflict with what we have previously been taught.

This will become especially important in later Study Guides dealing with Christ's coming, the kingdom and related subjects. Those doctrines must be established by allowing the relevant verses and portions of Scripture to speak within their own historical and grammatical settings.

Tradition must never be permitted to silence the audience, context or time statements that God placed within His Word.

When Inference Is Treated as Explicit Teaching

Bible study sometimes requires conclusions to be drawn from what Scripture says. Such conclusions may be sound when they arise naturally from the verses and are confirmed by the wider testimony of Scripture. The danger comes when an inference is presented as though the Bible explicitly states something that it does not actually say.

There is an important difference between saying, *"These verses lead us to conclude,"* and saying, *"The Bible says."* The second statement carries greater authority and should be used only when the teaching can genuinely be established from Scripture.

An interpretation may begin as a possible explanation. As it is repeated through generations, however, the distinction between the words of Scripture and the conclusion drawn from them can disappear. Eventually, people may speak confidently of details that are never directly stated in Scripture.

The student must therefore learn to identify the steps between what the verses actually say and the doctrine being presented. Does the conclusion necessarily follow from Scripture? Is it confirmed elsewhere in God's Word? Have assumptions been introduced along the way?

This does not mean that every biblical conclusion must be contained in one sentence or verse. Scripture must be compared with Scripture, and truths may be established through the combined testimony of several verses or portions of Scripture. Yet every conclusion must remain accountable to what those verses actually teach.

When an inference is treated as explicit revelation, human reasoning can quietly acquire the authority of God's Word.

We must distinguish carefully between what Scripture states, what Scripture establishes through its wider testimony, and what an interpreter has assumed.

When an Established Interpretation Controls Scripture

An established interpretation can help shape how people understand a subject, but it becomes dangerous when it is allowed to control the meaning of Scripture. Instead of allowing each verse or portion of Scripture to speak within its own context, the reader may begin with the assumption that the interpretation must be correct and then understand every verse according to it.

When this happens, verses that appear to support the interpretation are emphasised, while verses that challenge it may be redefined, moved to another time period or explained in ways that protect the established framework. The interpretation is then treated as fixed, while Scripture is made to adjust around it.

This reverses the proper order of Bible study. Doctrine should be formed from Scripture; Scripture should not be forced into a doctrine already decided.

The student must therefore be willing to examine the framework itself whenever a verse or portion of Scripture does not fit naturally within it. The first question should not be, *"How can I make this verse agree with what I already believe?"* but, *"Does this verse reveal that my understanding needs correction?"*

This principle is especially important when several doctrines depend upon one another. If one assumption is incorrect, other conclusions built upon it may also need to be reconsidered.

Sound doctrine should summarise what the Bible teaches, not determine beforehand what the Bible is allowed to mean.

The Word of God must shape our understanding; our understanding must never be allowed to reshape the Word of God.

Daniel's Seventy Weeks Provide a Clear Example

The student has already seen this principle in the study of Daniel's seventy weeks. Daniel's prophecy gives a period of seventy weeks and describes events within that appointed period. Yet a widely accepted interpretation places a gap of thousands of years between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks.

The gap is not stated in the prophecy. It must be supplied by the interpreter because the prophetic interpretation requires the seventieth week to be moved into the future.

This is an important example because it shows how tradition can shape the reading of Scripture. Once a person has been taught that the seventieth week belongs to a future

tribulation, the gap may seem obvious. When Daniel's prophecy itself is examined, however, the supposed period between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks is not there.

The lesson extends beyond Daniel. Whenever an interpretation requires a detail that Scripture does not state, the student should stop and examine the assumption carefully. An idea does not become part of Scripture simply because it is necessary to support a familiar interpretation.

Familiar Doctrines Must Be Examined in the Same Way

The same principle applies to other widely accepted teachings. A doctrine may be familiar throughout much of Christianity and still require careful biblical examination.

One example is the commonly taught future physical Second Coming of Christ. Many readers approach verses about Christ's coming with the assumption that they must refer to a future physical return to the earth. That assumption can determine the interpretation before the context, audience and language of the verses have been fully considered.

The subject will be examined carefully in its proper Study Guide. The present lesson is simple: the interpretation must come from Scripture rather than from what tradition has taught us to expect.

Another example is the familiar account of Satan falling from heaven before the creation of mankind. Many people have heard a detailed story in which Satan was once a righteous angel who rebelled against God, was cast out of heaven and became the devil. Yet the student must ask where Scripture actually gives that narrative.

Verses commonly used to support this teaching must be examined in their own contexts rather than interpreted through a story already assumed to be true. This subject will also be considered fully in its proper module.

The continuation of religious ordinances provides another example. Practices such as water baptism, communion and feet washing may be accepted as continuing Christian requirements because they have been observed for generations. The important question, however, is not how long Christians have practised them, but whether the New Testament establishes their continuation after their fulfilment in Christ.

That question belongs in the module devoted to the ordinances. It illustrates again why inherited practice must not control the reading of Scripture.

A Doctrine Can Become a Lens

Once an interpretation becomes established, it can function like a lens through which many verses are read. Verses that appear to support the interpretation are emphasised, while verses that challenge it may be explained away, redefined or fitted into that interpretation by additional assumptions.

This does not always happen deliberately. A sincere student may simply have learned to organise Scripture according to a framework received from others. The danger arises when the framework becomes so important that Scripture is no longer permitted to correct it.

Paul instructed Timothy in **2 Timothy 2:15**:

> *"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."*

Rightly dividing the Word of truth requires more than collecting verses that appear to support a preferred conclusion. It requires careful attention to context, language, audience and the wider testimony of Scripture.

Scripture Must Be Allowed to Correct Our Understanding

A sound interpretation must be open to correction. If a verse or group of verses does not fit the interpretation we have been taught, the first response should not be to force Scripture into that interpretation. We should examine whether our understanding itself needs correction.

This requires humility because changing an interpretation may affect other beliefs connected with it. One traditional assumption can sometimes support several doctrines, and removing that assumption may require the student to reconsider an entire chain of conclusions.

That process should not be feared. Truth does not become weaker when assumptions are tested. Careful examination removes what has been added and allows the Word of God to speak with greater clarity.

Let Scripture Establish the Meaning

The purpose of Bible study is not to find support for what we already believe. It is to understand what God has revealed. The student must therefore approach Scripture with a willingness to be taught, corrected and, when necessary, changed.

The questions must always return to Scripture: What does Scripture actually say? What does the context require? What is confirmed by the wider Word of God? What have we added because tradition taught us to expect it?

Daniel's seventy weeks have already shown how a widely accepted interpretation can depend upon something absent from Scripture. The future physical Second Coming, the traditional account of Satan's fall and continuing ordinances will each be examined in their proper place. For now, they remind us of one essential principle:

Tradition must never be allowed to decide beforehand what the Bible is permitted to say.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does the unstated gap in Daniel's seventy weeks show the need to test an interpretation's foundation?

Personal Reflection

Would you be willing to abandon a cherished prophetic explanation if its essential claim is absent from the Bible? Explain your response.

Action Step

Test one familiar prophetic claim against its context, audience and time statements, then identify the belief or expectation that must be reconsidered.

THE WORD OF GOD IS THE FINAL AUTHORITY

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Every question raised in this Study Guide leads to one final issue: What has the right to determine what we believe? Tradition, history, respected teachers, personal experience and religious agreement may all influence us, but none of them can occupy the place that belongs to the Word of God. Scripture must remain the final authority by which every doctrine and interpretation is tested.

Scripture Comes From God

The authority of Scripture rests upon its source. The Bible is not simply a collection of human reflections about God. God gave His Word so that His people could know truth and be instructed in the way they should live.

Paul wrote in **2 Timothy 3:16-17**:

> *"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works."*

Scripture is profitable for doctrine because it establishes what should be believed. It also provides reproof and correction, which means that God's Word does not simply confirm what we already think. It exposes error and brings our understanding back into agreement with truth.

If Scripture is permitted to correct us only when it agrees with our existing beliefs, it is no longer functioning as our final authority. True submission to the Word of God includes a willingness to be corrected by it.

Jesus Honoured the Authority of Scripture

Jesus consistently treated the written Word of God as authoritative. When confronted with temptation, He answered from Scripture rather than appealing to human tradition or personal opinion.

Jesus said in **Matthew 4:4**:

> *"But he answered and said, It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."*

The expression *"It is written"* demonstrates the certainty with which Jesus appealed to Scripture. God's written Word carried authority because it expressed what God had spoken.

Jesus also said in **John 10:35**:

> *"If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken;"*

If Jesus honoured the authority of Scripture, His followers must do the same. No inherited teaching should be placed beyond correction by the Word He upheld.

Scripture Must Judge Every Other Voice

Many voices may claim the believer's confidence. A teacher may speak persuasively, a church may possess a long history, a doctrine may be accepted by millions, and an experience may feel deeply convincing. None of these things can become the final test of truth.

Isaiah declared in **Isaiah 8:20**:

> *"To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."*

The message was to be tested by what God had already revealed. The same principle remains essential for Bible students. Whatever is taught must be examined according to the Word of God.

This protects the believer from two opposite errors. We should not accept a teaching simply because it is traditional, but neither should we accept something simply because it is new or different. Old teaching and new teaching must both stand before the same biblical authority.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does the Bible's divine source give it authority to correct every other voice?

Personal Reflection

Do you say the Bible is your authority while protecting any personal belief from correction? What would genuine submission require?

Action Step

Read **2 Timothy 3:16–17***, select one belief you have resisted examining, and explain how you will respond to any correction the verses establish.*

Scripture Must Be Allowed to Say What It Says

Declaring that the Bible is our authority is not enough if we continually make its words conform to an interpretation already decided. Submission to Scripture requires allowing the words of Scripture to establish their own meaning.

This means paying attention to context, language, audience and the relationship between one verse and another. It also means refusing to insert details simply because an established interpretation requires them.

The student must be willing to distinguish between what Scripture states and what has been inferred from it. An inference may prove correct, but it must never be treated as though it were actually written in Scripture.

This distinction becomes especially important when long-established doctrines are examined. If the Bible does not contain what tradition has taught us to expect, the proper response is not to add the missing idea. The proper response is to reconsider the tradition.

Scripture Interprets Scripture

No verse should be isolated from the wider testimony of the Bible. Difficult verses should be understood in harmony with clearer verses, and symbolic language should be examined in the light of the way Scripture itself uses that language.

This protects the student from building doctrine upon a single expression while ignoring other verses that clarify its meaning. God's Word forms a consistent testimony, and sound doctrine must respect that whole testimony.

Paul told Timothy in **2 Timothy 2:15**:

> *"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."*

Careful study requires work. The student must compare verses, examine context and resist interpretations that depend upon assumptions not established by Scripture.

Personal Interpretation Is Not the Final Authority

Rejecting human tradition does not mean that each person becomes their own final authority. The answer to an incorrect tradition is not simply to replace the opinion of others with our own opinion. Our personal interpretation must also remain subject to the Word of God.

Peter wrote in **2 Peter 1:20-21**:

> *"Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."*

Peter's immediate point concerns the source of prophecy. The prophetic Word did not arise from human will or private explanation. It came from God through men who were moved by the Holy Ghost.

That principle reminds the Bible student that human reasoning can never become the authority over what God has revealed. We must approach Scripture with humility rather than assume that a personal conclusion is correct simply because it differs from traditional teaching. Every interpretation must be tested by context, the actual words of the verses and the wider testimony of Scripture.

This is especially important when questioning a long-established doctrine. Discovering weaknesses in a traditional explanation does not automatically prove that every alternative explanation is true. The student must still establish positively what Scripture teaches.

Personal preference, imagination and private reasoning cannot replace biblical evidence. We must be just as willing to question our own conclusions as we are to question inherited traditions.

The standard therefore remains unchanged. We do not move from *"the church says"* to *"I say."* We return to the question that must govern every doctrine:

What does the Word of God say?

Being Different Does Not Make a Teaching True

A teaching does not become true simply because it challenges tradition. Just as age, popularity and familiarity do not establish truth, neither do novelty, originality or opposition to the majority.

Some people assume that an uncommon interpretation must be more spiritual because it differs from what most Christians believe. That reasoning is no safer than accepting a doctrine simply because it is widely taught.

Every interpretation carries the same responsibility:

It must be established from Scripture.

Paul warned in **1 Timothy 1:4** against giving attention to teachings that produce questions rather than godly edification. The believer must therefore resist the attraction of unusual ideas simply because they appear new, hidden or different.

Questioning tradition is valuable only when the purpose is to discover what God has revealed. The aim is not to become known for rejecting accepted teaching or to search constantly for something no one else has seen.

A traditional interpretation may be correct, and an alternative interpretation may be wrong. Both must be examined by the same standard.

The student must therefore avoid two opposite errors: accepting a belief because everyone teaches it, or accepting another belief because almost no one teaches it.

Truth is not established by conformity or by difference. Truth is established by the Word of God.

The Authority of Scripture Requires Humility

To accept the Bible as final authority requires more than confidence in Scripture. It also requires humility about our own understanding.

None of us begins Bible study without previous ideas. We have all heard teaching, formed conclusions and developed expectations. The question is whether we are willing to allow the Word of God to correct those expectations.

A person who cannot reconsider an inherited interpretation has effectively placed that interpretation above Scripture. The humble student does not assume, *"My understanding must be right."* The student asks, *"Have I understood the Word of God correctly?"*

This attitude is not uncertainty about truth. It is recognition that God's Word is perfect while human understanding can be mistaken.

Truth Must Be Followed When It Is Seen

There is also a practical responsibility attached to biblical authority. Once Scripture makes something clear, the believer must be willing to follow that truth even when it conflicts with long-held tradition.

James wrote in **James 1:22**:

> *"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."*

Bible study is not complete when truth has only been identified. Truth must be received and obeyed.

This may sometimes require changing beliefs that have been held for many years. It may require admitting that respected teachers were mistaken or that a familiar explanation was

based upon an assumption. Such correction should not be regarded as defeat. It is evidence that the Word of God has been allowed to exercise its proper authority.

Stand Upon What God Has Spoken

Tradition can preserve truth, but tradition cannot create it. Popularity can spread a teaching, but popularity cannot prove it. Age can make a doctrine familiar, but age cannot make it inspired. Sincerity can make belief earnest, but sincerity cannot transform error into truth.

Only the Word of God provides the final standard.

The student who understands this principle is prepared to examine every doctrine carefully. Familiar beliefs need not be feared, and unfamiliar conclusions need not be accepted simply because they are different. Everything must be tested by Scripture.

The foundation must therefore remain unchanged:

God has spoken, His Word is truth, and every tradition, interpretation and doctrine must stand or fall according to what He has revealed.

Personal Response

Key Truth

Why does rejecting a tradition not automatically make your own interpretation true?

Personal Reflection

Have you been more eager to reject other people's traditions than to test your own conclusions? What attitude needs correction?

Action Step

Re-examine one conclusion you personally favour, read its supporting and challenging verses, and acknowledge any change you need to make.

CONCLUSION: THE WORD OF GOD MUST STAND ABOVE TRADITION

BACK TO CONTENTS

This Study Guide has established a principle that must govern every doctrine we examine: the Word of God must stand above tradition. Tradition may preserve truth, but it cannot create truth. A belief does not become biblical because it is old, widely accepted, sincerely held or closely connected with our religious identity.

The Final Question Is Authority

Every doctrinal disagreement eventually raises the question of authority. Will Scripture determine what we believe, or will inherited teaching determine how we read Scripture? Jesus warned that human tradition can become so powerful that people set aside what God has said in order to preserve what has been handed down.

Jesus said in **Mark 7:13**:

> *"Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye."*

The danger is not simply possessing traditions. The danger arises when they are protected from examination or given an authority that belongs only to God's Word.

Test Without Rejecting Everything Received

The answer is not to reject everything taught by previous generations. Much biblical truth has been faithfully preserved and passed on. A teaching should not be rejected simply because it is traditional, just as it should not be accepted simply because it is traditional.

Paul wrote in **1 Thessalonians 5:21**:

> *"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."*

This gives the believer a balanced responsibility. We must test what we receive and hold firmly to what Scripture establishes as true.

Allow Scripture to Correct Us

The traditions most difficult to examine are often those we already believe. It is easier to recognise another person's assumptions than our own. The student must therefore approach Scripture with humility and remain willing to discover that a familiar interpretation may need correction.

The study of Daniel's seventy weeks has already demonstrated this principle. A gap of thousands of years has been inserted between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks by a widely accepted prophetic interpretation, yet that period is not stated in Daniel's prophecy. This shows how an interpretation can become so familiar that people assume Scripture contains something supplied by tradition.

The same discipline must be carried into future studies. Teachings concerning a future physical Second Coming, the traditional account of Satan falling from heaven before the creation of mankind, and the continuation of ordinances must each be examined from Scripture in their proper Study Guides and modules. Their truth cannot be decided by familiarity, history or widespread acceptance.

Truth Must Be Followed

Recognising truth creates responsibility. If the Word of God corrects our understanding, faithfulness requires us to accept that correction rather than preserve a familiar belief because change is uncomfortable.

James wrote in **James 1:22**:

> *"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves."*

Following truth therefore requires humility and courage. Changing a belief because Scripture has corrected us is not a loss. It brings our understanding into closer agreement with what God has revealed.

The Principle to Carry Forward

As the student continues through future Study Guides, one question must remain central: What does the Word of God actually say? We must distinguish between the words of Scripture

and the interpretations placed upon them, examine doctrine in context and allow Scripture to interpret Scripture.

The goal is not to reject tradition simply because it is tradition, nor to prefer something because it is new or different. The goal is truth.

Every teacher, church, historical interpretation, personal experience and inherited belief must remain subject to the same authority.

The Word of God must stand above tradition, and every belief must be willing to be tested by what God has revealed.

Personal Response

Key Truth

How do testing what we receive and holding what the Bible establishes belong together?

Personal Reflection

What belief or habit has this Study Guide brought under the authority of God's Word, and why does that matter in your walk with Christ?

Action Step

Identify one truth the Bible has established, make a specific decision in response, and explain how Christ's life within should govern that decision this week.

SUBMISSION TO COGMA FOR APPRAISAL

Instructions

Complete this section after you have finished the Study Guide. It must be completed online.

The link is located at the bottom of the online Study Guide — https://cogma.com.au/study-guides/

Your answers should reflect your understanding, your personal response, and how you intend to live by the truth you have studied. Answer honestly and be specific.

1. Main Truth

How can a tradition preserve truth yet also make God's Word of none effect? Use Jesus' warning to explain when something received from others becomes a rival authority, and why the Bible must judge it.

2. Understanding

Explain how repetition, religious identity and cultural custom can make a belief feel certain before its biblical foundation has been examined. Why is testing that belief different from rejecting the people who taught it?

3. Personal Reflection

Which has most influenced one belief you have held: its popularity, its age or the sincerity of the person who taught it? Explain how the Bible challenges that influence and what attitude you now need to change.

4. Response to Truth

When a helpful religious practice is presented as a command of God without biblical authority, how should you respond? Identify one assumption you would reconsider and explain how your response would honour both Christ's Word and the people involved.

5. Action Step

Choose one inherited belief to examine this week. Which verses will you read, when will you begin, and what personal attitude, expectation or practice are you willing to change if God's Word corrects it?

6. Early Response

Have you begun examining that inherited belief and the personal change it may require? If yes, explain which verses you considered and what attitude, expectation or practice you have corrected or are reconsidering. If not, explain what has hindered you and how you will begin.

7. Ongoing Practice

How will you continue testing both familiar and new teaching without accepting either simply because of its age or popularity? Describe a regular practice that will help you let the Bible correct your own conclusions, and how you will maintain it.

8. Doctrinal Clarity

Why does inserting an unstated gap between Daniel's sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks illustrate the danger of an interpretation controlling the Bible? Explain how you would distinguish a sound conclusion from an added assumption, and why related verses must each retain their own context.

9. Living the Truth

A sincere, respected teacher says a belief must be true because Christians have held it for centuries. How would you answer respectfully? Explain what biblical evidence you would seek and how you would remain willing for that evidence to correct your own belief.

10. Final Response

How do the influence of tradition, the need to test what you receive and the responsibility to obey what the Bible establishes connect? What has become clearer or needs correction in your own understanding? Explain how loyalty to Jesus Christ and His Word will govern your future beliefs and choices.