

Who or What Is Really Leading You?

Light + Life Group Conversation and Study Guide

Based on the [article](#) of the same title by Bishop Emeritus Matthew Thomas in Light + Life Magazine, June 2021



Open your group gathering in prayer.

Regardless of who we are or our life experiences, we are all led by persons, places, influences, advertisers, heroes, and public figures. Who leads you? Consider to what degree Scripture truly leads you.

It is safe to assume everyone has heard the word “disciple” because it is a common word used in both traditional and contemporary ways. Most have a grasp of its essential meaning — to follow, emulate or serve someone. Most Christians have a good idea whom it is we should follow, emulate and serve — Jesus. The only way to follow Him is to know Him, His words, expectations, commands and priorities. How is that possible? The safest and most objective way to know the historical Jesus and what following Him means is through the Bible. There we discover God’s will, His Son and His plan for our lives. The Bible is or should be the textbook and ultimate authority for our faith and practice.

That is why John Wesley, though a voracious reader and learned scholar of books from [patristics](#) to the contemporary literature of his day, [wrote](#):

“I want to know one thing — the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. For this very end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be homo unius libri” (a person of one book).

His concern was not about the importance of being well-read and informed on many subjects. The chief matter was how to live a life worthy of the Lord (see [Colossians 1:10](#)) leading to eternity with God. There was only one book speaking with compelling authority on that matter — the Bible. That is why as far as discipleship is concerned, the Bible has no equal.

1. Do you resonate with John Wesley to be a person of one book? Considering your interaction with Scripture honestly for a moment, do your actions say you are a person of one book — the Bible?

2. Paul says in Colossians 1:10, “...so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God...” Share your thoughts as to what it means to you to “live a life worthy of the Lord” and describe how you would “measure” that.

That is one of the reasons that so much painstaking work has been poured into the publishing, translation and distribution of the Bible. Historically speaking, it has no equal among other religious writings. Many scriptures of religions other than Christianity either lack historical context or they are historically questionable. [Dr. Nelson Glueck](#) was the president of Hebrew Union College and a highly respected archaeologist whose reliance upon the historical accuracy of Scripture led to the discovery of 1,500 ancient sites. Regarding the Bible and archaeology, he [wrote](#) the following: “It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible. And, by the same token, proper evaluation of biblical description has often led to amazing discoveries.”

The Bible points the way to Jesus and does it over nearly 1,500 years of introduction by more than 40 authors and scribes from three continents. The Bible is truly unique. It is more widely published, translated, distributed, read and quoted than all other books in the world. It has been used as an archeological aid, has been proven to be unique in its historical veracity, and

has explained and revealed much about cultural and social changes spanning three millennia. It has been written in multiple literary forms such as narrative, story, parable, history, poetry and legal to name a few. It has influenced kings and queens and the formation of constitutions and systems of justice around the world. The Bible is filled with prophetic utterances that have been fulfilled in unparalleled ways. It claims authority and has given good reason to deserve it. No book can claim the Bible’s influence or match the Bible’s authoritative nature. It is natural then to consider it the chief authority in our discipleship (following of Jesus Christ). All orthodox movements have regarded it with the weight it deserves.

However, we are living in unusual times where authority is far less objective and precariously far more subjective. Many read the Bible for inspiration and comfort only. Far fewer are reading it for wisdom and direction as we “follow after” Jesus. In the Bible’s place are the larger community’s opinions that are easily accessed through social media and the 24-hour information cycle where authority is constantly challenged and defined — every voice seeking our agreement. For others, personal relationships seem to hold unquestioned final authority on most matters.

1. Bishop Thomas describes how archaeologist Nelson Glueck found that the Bible is historically accurate. To what degree is historical accuracy important to you as a believer?

2. The Bible is also a prophetic book. One simple definition of prophecy is to “speak under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.” Prophecy reveals hidden things and speaks to future things. Why do you think the prophetic nature of the Bible is important to a life of faith and belief in God?

3. How has the shift from objective authority to subjective authority changed the way most people relate to the Bible?

What are we to do about this and how are we to respond as believers? How is this fleshed out in real time? Why does social authority supplant something more timeless and objective? The process is no doubt more sophisticated than this summary offers. Yet I will attempt a simplified overview.

First, the authority of self (humanism) and culture and opinion (social influence theory) usurp biblical authority. Here is how this works. Matters that would normally hold great sway in our thinking due to the overwhelming preponderance of attention given in the Bible only receive minor attention (if any at all) if the social enterprise is not expressing interest or concern. What should be considered relevant to all people at all times in all places and hence addressed in the Bible gets little attention if it is not centered in the matters gaining swirling attention with *these* people, at *this* time, in this place. Truth-telling and its cognate virtues (integrity and transparency) and vices (hypocrisy, lying and suppression of truth) fill the pages of the Bible — both Old and New Testaments. They are of seminal importance there and should be to any disciple desiring to follow Jesus and the God of the Bible. Yet, in contemporary society, truth-telling is often subordinate to subjective ideals (my truth) and self-advancement (utilitarian use of facts) that would help us achieve personal goals rather than kingdom fruit.

Second, if a truth is hard to observe or seems odious to others, it must be ignored or altered to remove difficulty or offense. A simple reading of the Gospels in the Bible would leave any attentive reader to the conclusion that Jesus said many hard things requiring discipline and commitment leading to obedience of

His followers. This is often off-putting to those who prefer to hide their sin and shield themselves from criticism. Evidence of this is that church attendees are often better disciples of the culture than Jesus. They follow that which is easiest, offends the least, and is doable with or without faith.

I remember, as a young Christian armed with little if any biblical mooring, yearning to know what the Bible suggests or demands that I do. In attending a Bible study one day, I ran across the Ten Commandments where I read a commandment to honor father and mother ([Exodus 20:12](#)). I had left home more than a year earlier in my high school years as a result of a serious rift between my parents and me. At age 15, the situation deteriorated and resulted in my departure three times — the final time for good. I had not spoken to either parent in more than one year. After reading that verse, I committed to my fellow Bible students that I had no choice but to humble myself, re-engage my parents, and seek forgiveness, which would lead me to a journey of lifelong honor of them.

My friends knew how that resolution might come at a great cost. They tried to dissuade me. Their logic was “it is important that you know these truths, but not that you sacrifice your health and safety by carrying them out.” I was shocked. I could not see my comfort or the myriad of possibly negative outcomes as justification for disobeying what God commanded and what eventually turned out to be my best step of obedience and reclaiming a meaningful and loving relationship with my parents. When society or close relationships hold supreme authority, we tend to moderate difficulty and regulate challenge to our own detriment.

1. Bishop Thomas says, “First, the authority of self (humanism) and culture and opinion (social influence theory) usurp biblical authority.” Do you agree or not? Why?
2. Thinking only within the church for a moment, how has cultural authority or self-authority begun to shift views of biblical authority?
3. Bishop Thomas also says, “Second, if a truth is hard to observe or seems odious to others, it must be ignored or altered to remove difficulty or offense.” How have you seen this at work in the church today?
4. Bishop Thomas took the biblical command to “honor father and mother” at face value, even though it may have come with a cost. Do you believe we take such commands at face value today or do we view them as suggestions? What is the difference and how does either approach change our lives of faith?

Third, it is all too common to confuse pleasing or mollifying people with loving them. Acceptance is a powerful authority for many, and culture influences that authority. People join and remain loyal to gangs for acceptance. Parents turn a blind eye to things that will harm their children for fear of disappointing them. People will act with unbelievable cruelty if that cruelty or bullying will help them find favor with the right crowd. In each of these cases and many others unmentioned, pleasing or mollifying others does not lead to their happiness, maturity or salvation. Books and articles have been written to address when “helping” others actually hurts them. As the power of a relationship holds ultimate authority, then the Bible becomes ignored or distorted on the most important matters in life.

Individual authority, subjective truth, cultural persuasion, avoidance of truth, people-pleasing and acceptance are all powerful forces that often stand in opposition to biblical authority. So how has this affected the church in current society?

People change their theology not on the basis of the authority of Scripture, but on a more fluid and

seductive authority — the crowd or *herd* as it is called in psychological terms. I have seen it often. People form views and opinions about human sexuality and change their theology, not on the basis of new revelation from the Bible, but on the implication for their loved ones. I hear mostly something like this: “Yes, I know what the Bible says, but I love my son and so ...” In other words, the timeless truths of Scripture are less formational than my loved one’s current decisions. Whole denominations have changed their position on Scriptural authority simply because of their deference to social authority.

The same can be said of indefensible positions on racism, sexism, justice, human trafficking/slavery, immigration and how we treat the foreigner. When emotions and social connections reign supreme and hold the greatest weight of authority over our lives, we sadly ignore or distort that which should be our first line of reason and theological sanity. This can lead to becoming followers of *no one* or *everyone* rather than *The One*. If we are going to be disciples of Jesus, then we must be aware of the pull of cultural influences as we hold them against the authority of Scripture.

The Bible must hold authority and our attention. It must inform our beliefs and practices. Then we will rise above the shifting tides.

When something is authoritative, then other ideas or competing arguments are subordinated to the authority. In this regard, when the Bible makes claims of truthfulness in an area, it offers precedence and demands elevated respect and consideration over all other competing interests. Living our lives and doing

things with the highest regard for the authority of the Bible results in the best outcomes for all concerned, whether they know it or not. The only way to be a true and fruitful disciple of Jesus is to follow the historical Jesus recorded in His historical record. After all, we are to be less like the world and more like Jesus. Ironically, then we will be of more use to the world for Jesus, the One to whom all authority has been given in heaven and on earth.

1. In this final segment of Bishop Thomas' article, he touches on matters of the heart. The desire to please people often is confronted with biblical truth and authority. Where have you experienced conflict in relationships due to biblical commands and authority?
2. How do we continue to love people when they have clearly decided to live in ways that are contrary to Scripture? Does love equate to overlooking sin or condoning sin?
3. In *The Free Methodist Way, God-Given Revelation* describes how our culture must be interpreted by Scripture, not the other way around. As a group, describe how we can do this well. Choose a cultural trend and discuss how/where Scripture speaks to it. Discuss how Scripture "interprets" that cultural trend and how we as Christians should live and respond to it.

Close in prayer.