

# A CONVERSATION ABOUT GENERALIZATIONS

## An informal “workshop” document about generalizations

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### Introduction

The question is provoked, why are generalizations necessary, since they do not appear verbatim in Scripture. This thought might come from the erroneous belief that any particular biblical passage would have meaning only within its historical context. Though historical context is useful, it persistently restricts the production of generalizations. This concept says Scripture has one meaning only, and that, accessed by the historical context. Historical context, thought, is provided by the human mind, and that makes the mind the agent and the Bible the patient. We should not let historical context can become the “control” of the “one true meaning” of a passage.

Historical context, provided by humans, would foster the idea that truth is produced by imposing the historical context on the Text; thus human wisdom would guide the reading. One good example of this is the way that human understanding of the concept of Gnosticism has affected many scholars’ understanding of 1 John.

But historical context has no meaning to offer because the language comes into any historical context and represents that context. Context does not generate meaning; which is determined by the grammatical structure of the Text. Truth in the Bible isn’t developed or produced. It is discovered. It is not just the restating of the words of Scripture, however.

The most concise way to think of a generalization is that it is parallel language, that is, parallel to the words of Scripture. The grammatical structure of the Bible is the control mechanism for this parallel language, and all generalizations are completely dependent upon the Text. It is thus not subjective (originating in the mind) but completely objective since its source is the Text.

A continuum might look like this: God -> language -> Scripture -> human mind -> generalization -> application to the world of things.

Another important aspect of any generalization derived from Scripture is that no valid generalization will ever contradict another valid generalization, parallel to the written Word.

God painted us into a corner as to how we access anything from the world. All such access is through the phenomenon of representations. We can't know anything without representations. We are on an island of representations. The outside world is converted into representations via the function of the central nervous system. These we refer to as natural representations. Such representations yield to the human circumstance. Example: our vision allows us to detect the boulder in the middle of the road. The natural representations in the mind (icons) are generated by the mind's relation to the representations.

For instance, the image of Goliath appeared via natural representations in the brain of David. The mind will represent them as true, reliable trustworthy or not. Outside, on the other side of the island, is the reality of God who forces his non-natural revealed representations onto this island. The mind is going to judge the reliability of these supernatural representations as to their trustworthiness or not.

Representations that we generate with our senses become part of our experience; but a Christian must access ideas generated by the mind of God and not our experience. Scripture is

itself a source of representations of everything outside ourselves. It represents the exact same things that our natural representations represent. “Natural” representations and God’s representations always contradict and conflict with each other. We must understand that natural representations yield to the circumstance and that biblical revealed representations do not yield to human circumstance nor historical conditions. This is because revealed linguistic representations do not yield to the human experience but come to bear upon human circumstance. This is in contradiction to the report of all natural representations.

The contradiction has been put in place by the Almighty Himself; it cannot be reduced nor amended. One must choose which representations will contradict all other representations. The contradiction is irremedial and irreducible and that by God’s design.

In Genesis 3, Eve was faced with the clash between natural representations (not only what she could see, but what she generalized and predicted from what she could see) and she made the type of decision with which we are all faced: which set of representations serve as the baseline of representation for man in his temporal circumstance?

Satan understands well that we are representational creatures, and that’s how he approaches us. He counterposes faith in what God said against what our sense and resultant experience tell us. This is the test of faith, in Genesis 3 and everywhere else in Scripture.

Eve wanted to rely on natural representations and elevated those above revealed representations. That was a choice. Everywhere in Scripture unfaithfulness is presented as the elevation of natural representations above those revealed. In Scripture, unfaithful reproduced the error of Eve.

In Genesis chapter 12, Abram heard from God that he would be the father of a great nation. God asked him to trust Him with this view of the future. But Abram and Sarai saw the

passage of time and their own failing biological status as having only one conclusion: the promises of God had faded and now it was “too late” – a purely natural representation. The supernatural no longer applied -- Even when they thought the promise might still be valid, they thought it was up to them to advance it with “the Hagar option” (Genesis 16). They elevated their natural representations of God’s promise above the direct words of it.

In Genesis 22, Isaac was born: a supernatural event. And Abraham had learned to generalize not from his own natural representations, but from God’s word. When God gave him instructions about offering up his only son as a burnt offering, Abraham elevated the representations of God above everything he knew from experience about sacrificial bodies (death is final, they don’t get up and go home with you.) But Abraham generalized from the promise of God that he’d be the father of a great nation. So he reasoned that if he obeyed God, God would somehow put the molecules of his son’s body back together (Hebrews 11:16-19.)

He created parallel language now known by the term Abrahamic faith (Galatians). The promise of God did not depend upon human wisdom but upon the power of God exclusively He didn’t start with his human wisdom or his experience with sacrifices. He elevated the linguistic symbols above his natural representations. It wasn’t easy – this was not just a life or death situation (though he knew Isaac would die without the intervening power of God) but also had to do with the future of the world.

We see this kind of danger throughout the Bible – at Sinai, at the Sea of Galilee, other places where God tested faith.

Remember that interpretation/hermeneutics start with the human mind and use it to analyze the Text. The human mind will provide parameters of what is and is not “possible,” and thus many interpreters just pass over such things as miracles or statements of Jesus that don’t

seem to make sense to them. But the Almighty and His Word have stood the test of time, showing the superiority of revealed representations over natural ones. Revealed linguistic representations do not yield to human circumstance, situations nor historical conditions nor to human lived experience. Ever.

But even great heroes of faith can falter in this. When Abram and Sarai made the decision to try to “help” God by involving Hagar, it wasn’t because they lost all confidence in God. They used unconstrained logic and reasoning to come to the conclusion that they needed to use natural means to further His purposes. It’s true that some “natural” representations (about when to plant a crop, for instance) are helpful, but should always be weighed against anything we know God has commanded.

We have to be careful that we don’t use human wisdom when we face crises like cancer or other trials. Romans tells us that we have to live by faith. When we were baptized, we made an announcement that we were going to follow the representations of God about our lives and deaths. It’s hard, though, to always elevate Scripture above the reports from our central nervous system.

Scholars have said that Scripture doesn’t contradict human logic and reason. Well, of course it does! What is logical and reasonable about a body being resurrected? Or walking on water? Scripture contradicts natural representations everywhere. But this can anger people.

In the case of David in the Valley of Elah where he faced Goliath (1 Samuel 17), we see these principles played out. There was “no chance” according to experience that a young boy with rocks could defeat a much-larger and well-armed professional soldier. David’s brothers were angry when David suggested someone should go up against Goliath. David believed that the fulfillment of the will of God would come from the power of God. He had the prior

representation of his coming kingship and the fact that he would live to be king because Samuel had anointed him king: therefore he would survive the situation with Goliath. David put full confidence in revealed representations in spite of the human lived experience. That is the act of faith.

None of the material “facts” of the situation had anything to do with the eventual outcome. That’s because the outcome was the outcome of God’s own symbols and promises. The unseen God would produce success in a very tangible world. David’s faith was this: he elevated the promises of God above his own natural representations, the report of his central nervous system in iconic symbols.

The same was true of the women who went on the first day of the week to anoint the supposedly-dead body of Jesus. The angels rebuked them in Luke 25:4-8 – didn’t you believe the representations of Jesus when He told you He would be raised from the dead? The women hadn’t elevated those representations above their own logic; and the men were no better when they thought the women’s words were “nonsense.”

You can generalize from the story of David that “material circumstances don’t determine outcomes.” Remember, a generalization has to be true to the scriptural passage it comes from, but it also has to be true everywhere else in the Bible. Thus, the material circumstances of the Red Sea didn’t determine the outcome. The iconic information brought back by the spy mission of the Israelites didn’t determine any outcome—the promise of God did. “If the Lord is pleased with us,” Joshua and Caleb pleaded, “He will give us the land!” (Numbers 14:8-10.)

And the condition of Jesus’s body in the tomb didn’t determine any outcomes!

All of this can be traced back to Genesis 3. The first couple in their encounter with the serpent elevated iconic representations of the garden above the revealed stipulations of the world of God. This is the case for faithlessness and otherwise faith failure.

It's a shock to realize that up against the will and power of God, nothing we do is determinant! A farmer can plant crops (and it's fine to use his knowledge of how to do that), but he will do it with the understanding that God will produce an outcome affected by His power over rain, drought, insects, and other circumstances; immediately contradicting human lived experience.

Anybody can learn to generalize; but "common sense" must be abandoned as the starting point for the reading and understanding of Scripture.

Mind of God -> Revelation -> shapes human language (generalizations) by means of the Holy Spirit.

And this will certainly by means of the words of the Holy Spirit contradict human wisdom because it requires faith in what is revealed, and a circumscription of human experience. In other words, human lived experience is controlled by the revealed Word of God. We develop parallel language and then force it into our natural experience.

What is obedience? It is when you take the Word of God and force it into your experience and behavior. There will be consequences. God says, "I will see your faith and I will do things for you." We have to hold our ground, stand, wait on the Lord.

The concept of time passing and making things no longer naturally possible is a great hindrance to faith. Abram and Sarai learned this. The women at the tomb learned this. Paul and Silas in Acts 14 didn't think it was too late to sing and worship. And what do songs and praise

words have to do with the outcome, that chains and shackles would fall off, and locked doors would open? Nothing! Because material circumstances don't determine outcomes!

We run risks when we generalize from Scripture and force those truths into our own lives. But under-dimensioned faith is not tested until we put something valuable to us on the line. The power of God is uncontrollable. We await His decision determining outcomes in our personal circumstances. Abraham was right to believe in a resurrection from the dead no matter how improbable or impossible. .

We have to take a stand on the Word of God in things like the world's view of homosexuality. We can't compromise with natural or human representations; whether in health, money, relationships or other matters. God sees our faith, and He will act.

This is seen in the Phases of Faith. Phase 1 is revelation – God making known what could only be known by man because He decides to make it known. Phase 1 is the revealed absolutes. The inevitable Phase 2 is the domain of conflict between absolute representations of God, and natural representations. One or the other will define the situation. Often the passage of time makes moving away from God's representations seem more logical, safer, and more “reasonable.”

So what is the role of generalizations in Phase 2? You don't have the promise of being a king that sustains you in going out to a valley to fight a nine-foot giant. But you can know that material circumstances – everywhere and with every believer—don't determine outcomes!

In 1 Corinthians 10, the people of Israel had received supernatural representations, not of this world, but of the eternal. The weakness is never to be found in the Word of God, but in us. The reason is that we are reluctant to violate the dicta of common sense or the logic of human lived experience.



The Lord has chosen to trust us to generalize from His revelation. He gives us free will, and when we exercise it wrongly, it costs Him the blood of His son. But we don't have to disappoint the Lord. We can't lean on legalism, because good deeds don't access that blood. Grace overrules our failures, and we show gratitude by obeying. We have to prove our faith.

With the example of Abraham, God knew the outcome, but He had to let Abraham know how costly it was. We can't guarantee with our obedience any particular outcome, but we can trust Him. The Word of God always trumps circumstances. We trust Him to create the outcome that corresponds to revealed truth and eternal purpose.

We undergo trials so we can prove our faith. Lackluster faith will fail! But remember, in a situation dominated by God, nothing has to be as it is! Our job is to please Him. He will make distinctions, and He promises to be with us. The Psalmist in Psalm 119 spoke of an appellate universe, which responds to our appeals to God to change things. We watch and pray in the night. Prayer does create results. It does change things. We have a different cause-to-effect basis, transcending lived experience. Appearances literally mean nothing in a world ruled by God. There's no such thing as being "on the right side of history" (a Marxist idea.) The power of God determines outcomes.

Additional insights from Scott's dissertation (*A DEFINITIONAL STUDY OF  
BIBLICAL REPRESENTATIONAL RESEARCH AND ITS CURRENT  
APPLICATIONS*):

Representational Research differs from the exegetical process in what might be called "the power tool of representational research," the skill of generalizing. When I was teaching

exegesis, I used the steps outlined by Fee and McDonald in *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth*,<sup>i</sup> a book I greatly respect. But while once the steps were followed, you would have a more profound understanding of what the original authors and the Holy Spirit wanted to say about a situation; but not so much information about what you should do with that knowledge.

Oh, that is where having your mind trained by Scripture would lead to application to your everyday life, one might say. And that is absolutely true. But what representational research can help anyone do is something that people in Scripture have been doing for thousands of years.

Briefly defined, someone who generalizes will be able to look at a passage, extract a principle from it: a principle that is true throughout Scripture, a principle that will help with specific situations in life. Biblical generalization has safeguards built into it: If a principle is a generalization for one situation, the generalization has to be consistently true throughout Scripture.

Let's look at the story of David in the Old Testament.

When David goes into the Valley of Elah to fight Goliath, he does so with complete confidence that he will be victorious—so confident that he refuses Saul's armor and takes only a sword and some rocks to defeat the giant. He gives his reasoning: that the same God who had saved him from a lion and a bear could save him from a man mocking God and threatening his brothers. Now, if you are going to stick just with application, you might have to say that you, too, could be saved from ten-foot giants if you have been saved from other physical dangers in the past.

But here is where our children, who are less sophisticated and much more honest than we are, would object. "I don't know any giants," a child might say. Oops. Great lesson, but that application fell flat.

Well, that is an analogy, one might say. Goliath symbolizes anything bigger and “badder” than you. But can we really teach that a Christian can always oppose something or someone with greater strength? You would be pressed to say that if you use David’s case as an analogy.

Strawn uses this Bible passage often to demonstrate the extraction of a generalization that “physics and physiology do not determine outcomes.”<sup>ii</sup> What does determine an outcome of such an “impossible” situation, Strawn would say, is the will of God.

We can go even further with this story. We find that David himself went out to fight Goliath because *he himself was operating on generalizations*. David’s conclusion that he would defeat Goliath because of the same God that saved him from the lion and the bear is itself a generalization, based on a previous revelation to him by God. Before he went out into the valley to meet the giant, David had been anointed king. Now, Saul was still alive and David was just a shepherd boy, but he knew the word of God about his life—he was going to be crowned king of Israel, and no giant was going to stop that because God had pre-determined the outcome. The same God who had represented his future had guaranteed it in the past by saving him from other physical dangers.

So David had generalized something like this: When God promises something specific to an individual, no power on earth can deter it.

In summary, we might generalize from this whole story: No physical obstacle can stand in the way of God’s clearly-expressed will. (This is true throughout Scripture, right? So this generalization is valid.) We could then take that generalization and “put it into our pocket,” so to speak, and take it out in any situation where it would seem that any physical factor was standing in the way of something God had authorized.

Consider the passage in James 5:17-18 to see another generalization:

“Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.”

This passage is a little simpler. To be true to the context of the passage, we would have to first see that this passage occurs in the middle of a discussion about the function of prayer in the life of a Christian. And what would an *application* be? Perhaps, “I should pray more and give God a chance to make things happen in my life.” Or, “Prayer was important in the life of the first-century church, and it should be important to me too.”

For someone who is making an application (as contrasted with a generalization), if the Scripture on which that application is based is treated as a patient instead of an agent, then our human experience will get in the way. Someone who lets his or her personal experience be the agent and Scripture the patient will say, “Well, I’ve never seen anyone healed because of prayer nor do I know anyone today who has been able to stop a drought with prayer, so I’ll have to conclude that this passage couldn’t be literal. Therefore I’ll have to make applications to my life that will take into account my own experience with such things.”

How different a generalization derived from this passage would be! A generalization would first of all accept that the Bible is agent on the mind and experience of the reader. So all human experience would be categorically excluded from the agential role. Working from the text, one would have to draw conclusions that could be proven throughout Scripture as being true. No matter how they would conflict with personal experiences, (in fact, most generalizations from Scripture are counter-intuitive), one would have to elevate the representations of Scripture above one’s own.

Thus one might generalize: Prayer is more powerful than meteorology (the way weather functions) or physiology (the way the human body functions); and therefore results in these areas do not depend upon any pre-existing human condition.

Consequently, a generalization is far more useful for life than trying to draw parallels between one's own situation and that of somebody in Scripture. If we understand that everybody has access to the same mental power from God, specifically, the power to generalize from Scripture, then we truly can say that we have the mind of Christ.

It is sometimes difficult to get started making generalizations because most of the time in Scripture, they are implied, not stated. For instance, in the example of David confronting Goliath, he does not state the generalization, he just tells about how it played out in his life in the past, and that he would rely on it in the future. We do not know what Abraham generalized about the birth of Isaac; we just know that when later he had to act on his conclusions about the outcome of offering him as a burnt offering, he knew how to reason about it (Heb 11:19).

On the other hand, Scripture contains generalizations throughout that we do not recognize as being generalizations. Mordecai, for instance, looked at all of God's promises to His people throughout history up to that point, and was able to give this generalization to Esther: "Relief for the Jews will arise..." before giving application: "...who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esth 4:14). Many others in the Bible have generalized and then acted on those generalizations. Their value to us, though, is enhanced if we can verbalize the generalizations they acted upon.

Because some people can understand things visually, I offer to you another way of thinking about a generalization. In the words of Mike Strawn, a generalization is a linguistic

continuum. It is words that are the end result of a sequence, one that originates in the mind of God, a sequence that is in one sense actually an ordering of the intentions of God.

Our “first contact” with this sequence is when we read the grammatical structure —the words—of a passage. But we would have to understand that this passage has something underlying it, something upon which it is dependent.<sup>iii</sup>

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Our language (the generalization that is derived from what is beneath)

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human intelligence that is made dependent upon revelation

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revelation—language that has been harnessed for God’s purposes

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The eternal: the Godhead and His intentions

Thus we can see that no generalization is “self explanatory.” A valid generalization would be dependent upon human intelligence that sees itself as a patient, not an agent; which in turn is dependent upon revelation; which in turn is dependent upon the mind of God.<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

<sup>ii</sup> This generalization is true to other texts that deal specifically with the concept. For instance, Zechariah 4:6 (“Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,” says the LORD Almighty”).

<sup>iii</sup> Even more specifically, Strawn would argue for what he calls a “Law of Biblical Syntactics.” Whereas Eco (*Belief or NonBelief?* 89-102) would argue that the basis for the structure of secular ethics is based on a physical order (beginning, Eco would say, with a perception of where our bodies are in space, deriving from that a sense of up, down, comfort, discomfort; and moving on to ethics based on not making other people physically uncomfortable, then to governmental structures that preserve our collective “rights” to lack of discomfort), and would be contexted thus: physical order contexting language which would context the mind. But a Biblical Syntactic would have as the ultimate context God, who would context Scripture, which would context all language and meaning, which would context the mind, which would context the world which that mind represents. The “logical result,” Strawn contends, of a Biblical Syntax is enlightenment and understanding.

<sup>iv</sup> Briggs would add what he would call a type of universal generalization: If God says something, and I appropriate it in my life as true, He instantiates it in my life. (Private correspondence: Briggs to Scott.)