



Truth

On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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Reader Questions (6)

Selected Scriptures

ONCE AGAIN WE TURN TO QUESTIONS FROM you, our readers. Such questions are always a joy to receive, and we pray that our answers will be a blessing.

What Do Paul's Words "How Large a Letter" Mean?

Question: I've read several views on the meaning of Galatians 6:11: **Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand.** Which view do you take? (WD)

Answer: Good question. This is, indeed, a tough one. Let's examine the three major views, followed by my own humble contribution.

First, the most common view is that Paul's secretary wrote most of the letter but Paul finished it, as was a common practice. He had to use "large letters," however, because of his poor eye sight. Many have conjectured that the physical infirmity that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 12:7, his "thorn in the flesh," was eye disease. But I simply cannot accept this view for two reasons. For one, it *is* conjecture (see TOTT #49). For another, and most important, this whole idea doesn't fit the context. In the preceding verses (vv. 9–10) Paul admonishes Christians to do good, and in the following verses (vv. 12–15) he again warns them about the Judaizers. This doesn't seem like an appropriate place for him to draw attention to himself by mentioning his own physical affliction.

Second, a much more likely possibility is that the words **large letters** refer to capital letters, called "un-

cial." Such large, block letters were used for public notices because they were easy to see. "Minuscules" (or "cursive," small letters), however, were far more attractive and economical—since writing materials were expensive—so a professional scribe usually used these instead of uncials. So, to emphasize *content* over *form*, it is possible that Paul wrote the entire letter with his **own hand** using uncials for emphasis. In contrast to the Judaizers, who were more concerned about outward appearances—making "a fair showing in the flesh" (v. 12)—Paul's use of the unattractive uncials would have served to show his deeper inward motives.

This view, in fact, fits the context. If it is correct, Paul was saying in effect, "What I have to say is so important and urgent that I want you to have this letter in your hands as soon as possible, with as bold of lettering as possible. I am not like the Judaizers, who have tried to impress you with scholarship, rhetoric, or empty flattery. This letter, therefore, was not written to please the eye, rather to draw attention to the urgency of the Truth."

The *third* possibility, if we accept the translation as here in the AV—**how large a letter** (not "letters," although the Greek allows either rendering)—the verse simply refers to the length of the letter. This was the view of the highly respected John Gill. In other words, because of his love and concern, Paul writes a rather lengthy letter. His desire is to deliver them from error and set forth the correct doctrine. This, too, fits the context.

Whichever of these views is correct (I lean toward the second), the importance of the verse lies in the words **with my own hand**. For one thing, they show the impor-

tance and gravity of the letter. For another, they indicate that Paul normally dictated his letters to a secretary (amanuensis) who did the actual writing. To prove the genuineness of the letter, however, Paul customarily added his own salutation in his own handwriting (see 1 Cor. 16:21; Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17). Forged documents were common in the early years of the church and such forgers would use the names of the apostles to gain credibility. Paul cautioned Thessalonian believers, in fact, about that very practice: “be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand” (2 Thess. 2:2). So, since it is likely that the Judaizers deceitfully claimed to speak for the Jerusalem apostles (Acts 15:1–5), they would have had no scruples in claiming to speak for Paul if that would serve their purpose. Paul, therefore, not only wanted the Galatians to understand clearly *what* he was writing but also to recognize that *he* was, in fact, the one writing it.

Further, after studying the Greek behind this, I am convinced that Paul did, indeed, write the entire letter. The Greek verb behind **I have written** is *egrapha*, which is the aorist active indicative of *graphō* and refers to the past tense, that is, something *already* written, not to something *yet* to be written. In other words, Paul refers here to the letter as a whole, not some small portion he is preparing to add. Paul desperately wanted to get this letter to the Galatians, but perhaps there was no amanuensis available to meet the pressing need. It seems more likely, however, that he wrote it with his **own hand** simply because of the sternness of what he was going to write.

Why Must Blood Be Shed?

Question: Why must there be blood shed? I don’t doubt it. I believe that because the Bible says so. But why? Is there an answer for this? (LT, a blog reader)

Answer: I would first commend you on your comment, “I don’t doubt it. I believe that because the Bible says so.” That attitude demonstrates a life of faith and humility, one untainted by skepticism and unbelief.

As we know, Hebrews 9:22 declares: “without shedding of blood is no remission.” Now, the reason for that is rooted in Leviticus 17:11, one of the key verses of the book, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.” The principle behind atonement is life for life, and it is blood that is the critical symbol of life.

There is some fascinating history here that illustrates all this. In his 1628 book, *On the Motion of the Heart and Blood*, English physician Dr. William Harvey (1578–1657) was the first person to describe in detail the systemic circulation and properties of blood being pumped to the body by the heart (although others had

similar ideas before him). “It is the fountain of life,” he wrote, “the first to live, and the last to die, and the primary seat of the animal soul; it lives and is nourished of itself, and by no other part of the human body.” He did, in fact, fully revive the Mosaic principle of the vitality of the blood. This principle was later adopted by the celebrated Dr. John Hunter (1728-93), professor of anatomy in London, who fully established the reality of this through experimentation. Later, the eminent French zoologist Milne Edwards (1800-85) made this amazing statement:

If an animal be bled until it falls into a state of syncope, and the further loss of blood is not prevented, all muscular motion quickly ceases, respiration is suspended, the heart pauses from its action, life is no longer manifested by any outward sign, and death soon becomes inevitable; but if, in this state, the blood of another animal of the same species be injected into the veins of the one to all appearance dead, we see with amazement this inanimate body return to life, gaining accessions of vitality with each new quantity of blood that is introduced, eventual beginning to breathe freely, moving with ease, and finally walking as it was wont to do, and recovering completely.

So, as the ancient rabbis expressed it, the sacrifice offered life for life, soul for soul, an innocent victim atoning for the guilty party. That is what Christ did for us. He was the ultimate blood sacrifice. As we were dead in sin (Eph. 2:1–3), it was His blood that gave us life. It was that “blood transfusion” that saved us.

What Does “Covet Earnestly the Best Gifts” Mean?

Question: First Corinthians 12:31 says, **But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way.** The word “covet” can be translated either in the indicative (“you are coveting”), stating a fact, or the imperative (“covet”), as in giving a command. Most commentators insist that we should view it as an imperative. But in light of verses 11 and 18, as well as the rhetorical questions in 29 and 30, how can the imperative be correct? Commanding the Corinthians to covet gifts they do not have seems to defeat the whole argument Paul so painstakingly developed in verses 4–30. I lean toward the indicative. Paul first points out their error (“You are earnestly coveting the best gifts”) then shows them a better way to live (the principle of love). Am I the only one in the whole world who believes that the correct translation is “you are coveting”? I would like your insight into this. (JB, Bible teacher and former pastor)

Answer: Well, I hope I *can* add something here since

your case is well presented.

First, to answer your question, No, you actually are *not* the only one who believes that the correct translation is “you are coveting,” although this is very much the minority view. Most commentators, in fact, as well as many Bible translations, treat it as an imperative.

Second, let’s consider the language more closely. The Greek root verb behind **covet** is *zēloō* (English “zealous”), to be zealous, filled with zeal, zealously affected. Depending upon the context, the word can be used in either a good way (1 Cor. 14:1; 14:39; Gal. 4:17–18) or a bad way (Acts 17:5; 7:9; 1 Cor. 13:4; Jas. 4:2). The specific form of the verb here is *zēloute*, which is present tense (continuous action), active voice (subject doing the action), but can be rendered either in the imperative mood (command) or indicative mood (statement of fact).

In favor of the imperative mood (command), we find the exact same word in 14:1—“Follow after charity, and desire [*zēloute*] spiritual gifts”—where it is obviously a command. The same is true of 14:39—“Brethren, covet [*zēloute*] to prophesy”—another obvious imperative. It is argued, therefore, that these two instances of the word being rendered as a command strongly indicate that 12:31 should also be treated as an imperative.

On the other hand, however, 12:31 is in a different context. How a word is used in one context does not necessarily dictate how it should be viewed in another context. While all three verses, of course, deal with the same subject (spiritual gifts), Paul’s point in each verse is obviously different.

Third, let us now consider what Paul is saying in the context and then in this verse. It should always be kept in mind when one studies 1 Corinthians that the tone of the entire letter is *corrective*. Virtually everything the Corinthians had touched they had in some way perverted, and spiritual gifts were no different. In fact, so confused and out of balance were they on this issue that Paul spent three chapters on it. This is all the more significant when you view chapter 12 as it leads up to this final verse. Paul’s repeated emphasis has been that it is not we who choose the gifts, or even seek them. It, therefore, seems totally out of place for him to reverse himself in the final verse and command them to seek certain gifts. This seems all the more odd in light of verse 25: “That there should be no schism in the body.” *Schism* (*schisma*, “split, tear, division”) is exactly what the abuse of the gifts had created, so it again seems anomalous that Paul is commanding them to do one of the very things that had contributed so dramatically to such division. We are not commanded to seek spiritual gifts, regardless of popular teachers who insist otherwise. God gifts who He wishes and how He wishes (vv. 11, 18).

In contrast, it seems far more appropriate that Paul is saying here, “But you earnestly desire the greater gifts” (which you shouldn’t be doing), “and yet show I unto

you a more excellent way.” And what way is that? He goes on to tell them in the very next chapter, that great “Love Chapter.” They would be (and we will be) far better off when we are seeking love for one another over what gifts we have or want.

Fourth, let’s consider a moment how this is usually translated. This is one of those rare anomalies in the Greek New Testament and most translations do, in fact, view it as an imperative. I admit it is hard to argue with the genius of Tyndale, who viewed this as an imperative in his 1534 translation, as did the translators of the KJV (which retained 90% of Tyndale’s work), the NKJV, and many others.

It is extremely interesting, however, that the Syriac versions render this verse: “Because you are zealous of the best gifts, I will show to you a more excellent way.” The reason this is significant is because of the importance of the Syriac versions. As Acts 2:9–11 outlines, there were many languages present on the Day of Pentecost (which was why the gift of “tongues” was necessary for the proclamation of the Gospel; see TOTT 3 & 4). Syriac—a dialect of Aramaic that differed from the Aramaic of the Palestinian Jews, including Jesus and the Apostles—was a common language not only in Syria (such as in Antioch, Acts 11:26) but all across the Fertile Crescent and became a major literary language throughout the Middle East from the 4th- to the 8th-centuries. So, the Syriac versions of Scripture were (and remain) extremely important translations. Hundreds of copies have been discovered and have become highly revered by textual critics. It would seem, then, that this rendering in the Syriac is significant. Is it possible that we have missed something in the English?

Fifth and finally, while the commentators who view this verse as a statement instead of a command are in the minority—and I usually don’t like to be in the minority in such things—they are at least not alone. After all, let’s be honest, it is by far the minority of greater “Christendom” that believes in *grace alone*, right? So, while I had a few days of struggle on this question, I am compelled to join the minority. This view seems to be more consistent with the *sense* of the letter and the *sin* of the Corinthians.

Why Just Female Donkeys?

Question: Why does Job 42:12 refer only to *female* donkeys, not male? (LM)

Answer: This verse recounts how God blessed Job after his ordeal by giving him twice as much as he had lost, including: **fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand [female donkeys]**. It’s interesting to note that God gave Job only ten more children to replace the 10 he had lost (v. 13). Why not double this number? Because Job hadn’t really *lost* the first 10, since they were

obviously in Heaven.

The reason for the emphasis on female donkeys is that they were far more valuable than males. In general donkeys were greatly preferred over horses because they were gentler and could survive on much less food. In turn, females were preferred because they could furnish milk to travelers in the desert.

Was the Burnt Offering Really Burnt?

Question: Was the Old Testament “burnt offering” literally *burnt*, or is this just figurative language. (AB)

Answer: Actually, yes, it was literally burnt, as the sacrifice was totally consumed. The word usually translated “burnt offering” is *ōlāh*. Interestingly, it is derived from a root (*ālāh*) that while sometimes rendered “to burn,” as in the burning of a lamp (Exod. 27:20), actually means “to go up, to ascend,” or “to move from a lower place to an upper.” Its first occurrence (Gen. 2:6) is most interesting, where we read that in the Garden of Eden “there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground.” Other images include the flight of an eagle (Isa. 40:31, “mount up”) and plants coming up (34:13, “come up”).

The burnt offering is the first offering mentioned in the Levitical system (Lev. 1:3–17; cf. 6:8–13), no doubt because this type of offering is the first mentioned (excluding Cain and Abel’s) in the biblical record (cf. Gen. 8:20; 22:2). The meaning in the Levitical system, of course, went deeper. Its purpose was “to make atonement” for the sin of the offerer (Lev. 1:4) and to demonstrate—as illustrated by the term “whole burnt offering” (Ps. 51:19)—his complete consecration, his total dedication to God.

All this demonstrates the true nature of the OT burnt offering, which we could even call the “ascending offering.” As the animal was consumed by the flames, the offerer could watch the smoke and sparks ascend heavenward and know that God had accepted him as he identified himself with the sacrificed animal.

The first application we see in all this is in the Lord Jesus. His complete dedication is evident as He prayed in Gethsemane, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39). Knowing what lay ahead, namely, the ultimate burnt offering that He would become, our Lord was willing to be that sacrifice (vv. 39–44; cf. Phil. 2:5–11).

The second application is that this again illustrates for the NT believer that we each are a “living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1), that all we do ascends heavenward to God. “By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name” (Heb. 13:15).

[The preceding taken from the author’s book, *A Hebrew Word for the Day* (AMG Publishers, 2010), 110.]

What About the Daily Defilement of Sin?

Question: The notes in my Study Bible say we are cleansed through the blood of Christ, but then go on to add: “There remains a defilement of sin that comes through daily living and is cleansed by the washing of the Word of God.” Then they give the reference John 13:10. I wasn’t exactly sure if that sounded exactly correct. (AC)

Answer: Good question, one that takes us to the issue of our two-fold sanctification (or holiness).

First, there is *positional* sanctification; that is, since our position is “in Christ,” we are positionally holy. This does not mean we are perfect, nor does it mean we are absolutely righteous. On occasion we will sin because of the “flesh” that remains (Rom. 7), the “defilement of sin” your Study Bible mentions. But sin is no longer the rule of life. Holiness is the new rule. We are now a new creature, in which all the old things have passed away and all things have become new (2 Cor. 5:17). We have been “created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24).

Second, there is *practical* sanctification (holiness), which simply means we live out our position; since we *are* holy in Christ, we, therefore, *live* like it. The chief tool in that holiness of life is, indeed, the “cleans[ing] by the washing of the Word of God.” As Paul declared, “That he might sanctify and cleanse [the church] with the washing of water by the word” (Eph. 5:25).

The mention of John 13:10 in your Study Bible is also appropriate: “He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all.” The imagery here is taken from a man returning to his home after visiting the public bath. While his whole body would not need washing again, his feet would need cleansing after the dusty walk. Likewise, we who have been cleansed from sin “once for all” (Heb 10:1–12) need not think we have been totally defiled just because we walk through this life. Rather, when sin does taint us, we need only confess that sin to be entirely clean again (1 Jn. 1:9).

What About “90 Minutes In Heaven”?

Question: I am so frustrated with the church we go to. Have you ever heard of a book *90 Minutes in Heaven*, by Don Piper? He says he is a pastor of a Baptist church and states he died and spent 90 minutes in Paradise. Huh? He says the first person he saw was his grandmother, and all his saved friends. He never says a word about seeing Jesus or the Father. AND dead for 90 minutes and in Paradise? Our preacher brought him to the church and let him have the pulpit for two Sunday morning services. Wow, did I get in trouble when I questioned it! The next Sunday our pastor got up and said he never felt so close to Heaven. I lined up scriptures to

verify my statements, but no one wants to hear it. What are your thoughts? (PS, former pastor)

Answer: Yes, I've heard of the book, read some excerpts, and visited Piper's website. I completely agree with your comments. Who is to say that this is any different than people who have claimed to see blood dripping from statues of Christ's crucifixion, statues of Mary weeping, or visions of Jesus at their bedside? Such things are suspect at the very least.

The only thought I would add, however, is that there is a very basic biblical principle here. Instead of praising it (or even acknowledging it, quite frankly), the question Christian leaders should be asking is: "*So what?*" Again, what does Scripture say? Our Lord Himself clearly declared: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Lk. 16:31). Everybody is looking for something new and novel, something emotional and mystical. But as Paul states it, "The gospel of Christ [*itself*] is the

power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16), not our methods, programs, testimonies, or experiences. Piper, if I may be so blunt, should just proclaim the Truth. *That* is what God uses to save. Our experiences are totally irrelevant. In fact, if Piper's experience is so powerful, why haven't droves of people come to Christ, especially those on the TV shows he's been on (Today Show, Date-line NBC, ABC's Nightline, and The O'Reilly Factor)? The answer is obvious: people didn't believe our Lord, so why would they believe Don Piper? The same thing happened with the movie *The Passion of Christ*. It was sad, indeed, to hear how many evangelicals actually thought that hordes of people would come to Christ as a result of that movie (a movie based largely upon Roman Catholic mysticism, by the way). But as Scripture demonstrates, such is never the case.

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher

ANNOUNCING

Truth On Tough Texts: Expositions of Challenging Scripture Passages (The Book)

Truth On Tough Texts: Expositions of Challenging Scripture Passages is ready and will be released, Lord willing, in April.

This 550+ page, 6" x 9" format book includes all but five of the 75 articles that have appeared in TOTT since its launch in August 2005. (Issues 60–62 and 64 on the Five Solas and Church History are not included because an expanded book on this subject is planned; Issue 67 on the Top Ten Books is also omitted.) To make it even more useful as a reference, it also includes 28 pages of indexes: Subject, Person, Scripture, and Foreign Words (Hebrew, Greek, Latin).

Once again, we are not asking for *donations*, rather, *advanced sales*, which will help expedite the project and build a foundation for publishing other works through Sola Scriptura Publications.

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We would also ask you to pray for this endeavor. We are excited about this project and hope you will join in the anticipation of what God will do through it. The goal of TOTT remains the same: to further God's wondrous Word and deepen the knowledge of God's people in it.

Soli Deo Gloria

Truth On Tough Texts: Expositions of Challenging Scripture Passages

Was Mathias God's choice to replace Judas (Acts 1:15–26)? What is the identity of those "sons of God" referred to in Genesis 6? Are the "angels" of the seven churches real angels or pastors (Rev. 1:20)? Is there a so-called *call* to ministry (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:1)? Is "deaconess" a valid church office (1 Tim. 3:11)? What is the "sealing" of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13–14)? Is "regeneration" absent from the Old Testament, being a New Testament doctrine only (Isa. 57:15; Eph. 2:1)? What do other terms that appear in Scripture mean, such as: "fall away" (Heb. 6:4–6) "old man" (Rom. 6:6), and "new creature" (2 Cor. 5:17)?

Those are just a few of the "tough texts" we find in Scripture and just a few of those addressed in this book, all of which originally appeared in the monthly publication, *Truth on Tough Texts*, which was launched by the author in August 2005. We hope this book will be a blessing to many. Just fill out the order form on the reverse side and send it along with your check or Money Order to the following address (all orders are postage paid):

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Other recommended blogs: John Calvin for Today (<http://johncalvinfortoday.blogspot.com/>); I Love Theology (<http://ilovetheology.blogspot.com/>); Grace to You (<http://www.gty.org/blog>); 9 Marks (<http://www.9marks.org/blog>).

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This monthly publication is intended to address Scriptures that have historically been debated, are particularly difficult to understand, or have generated questions among Believers. We hope it will be an encouragement and challenge to God's people to carefully examine and discern Truth. While the positions presented here are based on years of careful biblical research, we recognize that other respected men of God differ.

If you have a question that perplexes you, please send it along so we might address it either in a full length article or in a "Reader Questions" issue. Other comments are also warmly welcomed, and letters to the editor will be published.

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