Plain Main Approach Explained
A Methodology of Biblical Understanding
The Core of Christianity

Introduction: We are celebrating and recognizing this month of October the 16th century Reformation and the biblical truths that the Reformation re-discovered. I believe that the church in every generation must make the same discoveries for their own day. One of the great truths that the Reformation embraced and taught (it was not a new truth, but indeed an old truth) is BIBLICAL AUTHORITY. Biblical authority means that the Bible is God's special revelation to the human race. God's revelation is reflective of who and what God is. His communication to us is God-centered, clear, understandable, authoritative, and sufficient. To hear from God means that we go to God's Word, the Bible. This understanding of the Bible leads us to adopt a PLAIN/MAIN approach to the Bible. The essential meaning of PLAIN/MAIN is that the main teaching of the Bible is the plain teaching of the Bible. Tonight we will explore in more detail the meaning of the PLAIN/MAIN approach to the Scriptures and its teachings.

Presuppositions and Scope of Plain/Main Biblical Thinking

1. God has spoken, and what He has to say to the human race is in Scripture.
2. What God wants people to understand is made plain in the text of the Scripture.
3. There is one main metanarrative in Scripture, which is the redemptive work of God for the salvation of sinners and the restoration of the fallen order. The Old and New Testaments are unified in a progressive sense centered on redemption fulfilled in Jesus Christ and His saving work.
4. The plain/main teaching of the Scriptures centered on Christ and redemption are consistently and repeatedly made known in the gospel, which is taught in the New Testament.
5. The plain/main moral teaching of the Scriptures also reflects the holiness of God and the moral will of God for human life. The canonical moral teaching reflecting God's holiness and is fundamental to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is rooted in the moral law of the Old Testament and applied specifically in the New Testament to the human race and especially to believers.
6. There is more to truth than revealed truth in Scripture, and there is more to revealed truth that cannot be revealed at the present time. In addition, human epistemology is such that no human could ever know all truth there is to know in any truth.
7. However, God demands that we read the Bible to know the mind of God concerning those matters (theological and moral) that God wants us to know. The Christian faith and life require discipleship, which means that Christians are learners and teachers of the God's truth. Christian churches, ministry, and fellowship must center on the plain/main biblical teaching that we might pass on the main true truths to another generation.

Why the Plain/Main Biblical Approach?

1. The Bible presents its main teachings in a way that is understandable.
2. The plain/main approach best explains the biblical language concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ, the salvation of sinners through faith in Christ, and Christian discipleship.
3. The plain/main approach honors biblical inspiration and the clear teaching in the Scripture; it puts the spotlight on the text of Scripture and not the interpreter of the text.
4. In human history the devil attacks the Bible in many ways; often this takes the form of "specialists" or "scholars" being presented as the only ones able to understand the Scripture. Our conviction is that God wants everyone to read and know His Word in the Bible, and that God has revealed His clear truth in such a way as to be understandable by Christians.

5. The plain/main approach seeks to rightly understand the Bible in the way that God gave it, and it asserts that we can understand it by rightly pursuing a right understanding of the plain teaching of the text, which is also consistently presented in the canon of Scripture.
6. We confess that there is no contradiction in God's Word, but there is the utmost consistency in Scripture if rightly understood.
7. We also confess that the only way the gospel can be understood is in the light of the teaching of Scripture as it presents gospel truths concerning Christ and His saving work in the text of the New Testament.
8. The Holy Spirit's ministry in the lives of Christians includes both inspiring the text for understanding and illuminating the text for those who give themselves to reading, studying, and understanding the Word of God.

Doesn't a plain/main approach overly simplify the teachings of the Scripture?

1. Plain/Main doesn't imply or suggest that truth is not complicated, nor does it assert that there are not complicated concepts in the Scripture.
2. Plain/Main does argue that the main teachings of the redemptive will and plan of God accomplished in Christ are clearly taught and portrayed in the text of Scripture. The Old Testament prepares the way for Jesus the Messiah, and the New Testament explains how Jesus as the Messiah, Savior, and Lord fulfills God's redemptive will.
3. Plain/Main also asserts that the moral teachings of God's holy will are presented in a consistent fashion in the text of the Scripture of both the Old and New Testaments.

Are there teachings in Scripture that cannot be reduced to plain/main approach?

1. Yes, there are places in the text where truth is presented in a more complicated way, that is in a literary category that is more difficult to understand. In such cases we must apply the principles that govern the interpretation of that literary genre. The literal approach to interpreting Scripture respects all the genres of literature and interprets each in its own category.
2. There are also concepts and teachings in the Scripture that give limited light and measurable understanding. The Lord in His sovereign wisdom determines what we can understand and what we need to leave for the timing of His will to reveal. We must be willing to let unclear things remain in the dark; if God did not make it clear, we should not try to improve on His revelation.

Aren't there areas where Christians disagree? How are we to think about this in the plain/main approach in such cases?

1. Yes, Christians do disagree on some doctrines and teachings governing the Christian life.
2. Where disagreement exists among Christians about biblical teaching, it MAY be that the topic is not clearly presented in the text.
3. There are also disagreements among Christians regarding secondary issues. It is a mistake when Christians and churches take secondary issues and raise them to primary issues. If God did not make a teaching primary, it is wrong and sinful to make a secondary issue primary. However, it is equally wrong to take a primary issue and treat it as secondary.
4. Christians should seek to be unified in the plain/main issues given in Scripture. Christians and churches should leave secondary matters in the less important category and concern themselves primarily with primary issues and teachings that form the core of biblical teaching.

Principles Applied to Determine Plain/Main Biblical Teaching

1. We begin by acknowledging the metanarrative in covenantal redemption fulfilled in Christ and the gospel. This is the heart and core of biblical teaching. This is the center of revelation, and it must be treated as such.
2. Our approach to understanding the teaching of the Bible must be textually focused and canonically compared – The focus on the text of Scripture recognizes classic passages that are obvious in their import to a topic and comparing Scripture with Scripture (the Reformers called this "The Analogy of Faith", or Scripture interpreting Scripture). The best commentary on Scripture is Scripture.
3. The New Testament interprets the Old Testament: this is what we mean by progressive revelation.
    1) The Old Testament establishes a foundation for moral teaching and an understanding of redemption through the Messiah.
    2) Christ interprets the Old Testament in His incarnate life and saving work.
    3) The Epistles of the NT interpret the OT by explaining Christ and His saving work.
    4) The gospel of Jesus Christ codifies the center of revelation.
4. Context, consistency, and repetition are vital to following the scriptural train of thought on any specific topic and teaching.
5. The use of words, terms, and ideas in context will govern the meaning of the word and expression.
6. Literary clarity; the use of literary study of the Scriptures – Each text should be kept in its literary form and understood by those principles that guide the interpretation of that form.
7. Historical narrative and broad narratives take precedence over poetry and prophecy.
8. Apocalyptic literature (prophecy, symbolism, etc.) must defer to narrative and didactic passages.
9. Context regarding commands and promises must be applied in keeping with logical consideration and contextual application of each.
10. The use of sanctified logic and common sense is important: when the common sense makes sense, we seek no other sense.
11. We must focus on the certain and clear meaning of the Scripture, leaving the unexplained and undiscussed questions for God to clarify in His own time and way.

What problems are to be avoided in this matter?

1. Problem of disregarding the Bible as our authoritative source and guide
2. Problem of imposing our views onto the Bible in a way that makes us become the filter
    1) Personal views and interpretations defer to plain/main teaching
    2) Cultural and familial preferences defer to plain/main teaching
    3) Personal convictions cannot be coercively applied without plain/main teaching
    4) The more interpretation required to understand a passage, the less weight the passage has in plain/main teaching
    5) The application of a passage cannot be turned into a plain/main teaching
3. The problem of wrongly linking ideas together and improperly connecting ideas to the core
4. Problem of applying certainty where there is ambiguity and vagueness
5. Problem of following feelings over logic
6. Problem of following preferences over clear truth
7. Problem of complicating the obvious
8. Problem of simplifying the complicated
9. Problem of going beyond the "light" that Scripture gives on a topic
10. Problem of assuming that we know it all

Conclusion: I want to re-iterate a few key ideas in closing tonight's talk.

1. The plain/main approach to the Scriptures does not imply that the only truth that exists is the plain/main truth revealed in the Scripture.
2. The plain/main approach to the Scriptures does not imply that the revealed truth in the Scriptures is all there is to know about that revealed truth.
3. The plain/main approach does not imply that our understanding of these teachings becomes the authoritative understanding and explanation about the scriptural teaching. The authority always rests in the text and teaching of the Scripture, not our understanding of the same. Another way of saying this is: authority always rests in God and His revelation, not in our understanding of His revelation.
4. It is very, very important for God's people and the church to rightly understand the Bible, rightly use the Bible as God intended, have right convictions relative to primary and secondary categories of biblical teaching, and teach the PLAIN/MAIN method of studying the Bible. In this way we pass on the teaching of the Scripture for another generation.