

The Message and its Source:
Foundational Principles for Research and Information Management

Writer: D. Lance Revenaugh

Abstract

The Lord determines the course of world events;
he removes kings and sets others on the throne.

*He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the scholars.*

Daniel 2:21 (NLT)

This paper seeks to assist the reader in exploring God's principles for how we as Christians should be handling the information that continually floods into our lives. Specific focus is given to the importance of the *message* (or information) compared to the importance of the *source* of the message. Of course, God is the ultimate source of all information, as He created it.

The paper begins with discussing the purpose of research as well as some foundational principles of how Christians may approach research. Two working models for handling information a) from a highly credible source, and b) from an unknown source are then offered for consideration and discussion.

The paper then concludes where it began. God is the source for all truth (see Prov. 1:7 and 9:10). The reader is left to wrestle with what this means in how we as Christians handle information related to our research, our teaching, and our own lives.

The Message and its Source:
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Introduction

The Lord determines the course of world events;
he removes kings and sets others on the throne.

*He gives wisdom to the wise
and knowledge to the scholars.*

Daniel 2:21 (NLT)

Do not let any unwholesome talk [writing]
come out of your mouths [pens],
but only what is helpful for building others up,
according to *their* needs,
that it may benefit those who listen [read].

Ephesians 4:29 (NIV)

Information from multiple sources continually floods into our lives. More authors than ever before in history are having their words published. New technologies have made the dissemination of this information easier than ever. With this exponentially increasing amount of information and the ever increasing access to the same information, how should we handle it?

Answer: In the spirit of Daniel 2:21 (quoted above), God and God alone reveals that to each person. Therefore, any words contained in this paper are absolutely and 100% unimportant of themselves. They only have value if they encourage and help you the reader in seeking your answers about information from your Father himself.

Purpose of Research

As stated, the purpose of this paper is to explore God's principles for how we as people should properly handle the information that continually floods into our lives. It is important to first consider the following foundational principles:

- God is our Father.
- God made us.
- He loves us more than anyone we know or can imagine.
- He is always with us.
- He has unlimited resources.
- He has unlimited and perfect knowledge; He knows everything.
- He knows *everything* about business.
 - He knows exactly how every business process works.
 - He perfectly understands every type of employee and every culture.
 - He knows how to perfectly fix every business problem.
 - He understands everything about information and information technology (IT)---past, present, and future.

With these foundational principles ever present in our minds, the question can be properly asked, "what is the purpose of research?" As we answer this question, it logically follows that we can then gain insight into the purpose of research specific to business and IT.

Consider the following three facts:

- 1 – **Jesus said only what His Father told Him to say.** Jesus made it clear that it was not His purpose on earth to do his own will. Jesus said, "I do *nothing* on my own but speak *just* what the Father has taught me. (John 8:28b).
- 2 – **Christians (disciples of Christ) do not live for themselves.** Add to this that we as Christians also do not live for ourselves. Paul states it this way, "I have been crucified with Christ and *I no longer live*, but *Christ lives in me.*" (Gal. 2:20)
- 3 – **We (Christians) have the mind of Christ.** "We have the mind of Christ." (I Corinthians 2:16b). Scripture does not say that we "aspire" to or "increasingly have" the mind of Christ. It says we have it, 100%, now.

We have the mind of Christ. Christ spoke nothing on His own. He spoke only what His Father taught Him. His Father is our Father. Question: Should we be speaking (and writing) *only* what the Father desires to say through us?

This writer believes the answer is clearly “yes!” Remember, God knows everything . . . including the most detailed technical information we can dream of. We *can* walk out of every class, regardless of subject, and say “I only spoke what the Father wanted me to say to the class today.”

In terms of research, the same principle applies. We should be researching and writing *only* what *God* desires to communicate to others through us.

Research Methodologies

If the purpose of research and writing, then, is to be God’s instrument for communicating what *He* wants to say, how do we carry this out? God uses many methods as He works with His children; this is the glory of having an individual and personal relationship with our loving Father. However, let us consider four scenarios for doing research that are open to us.

- 1) Secular
- 2) Christian/Secular
- 3) Authoritative
- 4) Pure Authoritative

Rather than list a definition for each scenario which could then easily lead to a debate about the appropriateness of each label above, let us first consider definitions via an example. Many of us have gotten out to the yard on a Saturday morning and become frustrated when the lawnmower wouldn’t work properly (i.e. wouldn’t start). Desiring to get the problem fixed quickly and correctly, we might do one of the following:

Secular solution:

- 1) Ask other people for their ideas.
- 2) Take it apart starting with whatever part seems best to me.
- 3) Repeat steps 1 and 2 until lawnmower is fixed (or I throw it away in exasperation!)

Christian/Secular solution:

- 1) Ask other people for their ideas.
- 2) Take it apart starting with whatever part seems best to me.
- 3) Periodically check with the manufacturer to see if the manufacturer agrees with what I am finding out.

Authoritative solution:

- 1) Contact the manufacturer to see how the lawnmower was made and what troubleshooting suggestions they have.
- 2) Apply what the manufacturer tells me, doing additional/more detailed things that make sense to me.

- 3) Check for additional ideas from other people.
- 4) Check back with the manufacturer regularly.

Pure Authoritative solution:

- 1) Contact the manufacturer to see how the lawnmower was made and what troubleshooting suggestions they have.
- 2) Carefully follow the manufacturer's directions as they walk me through step-by-step instructions.
- 3) If I become confused, I ask for clarification while continuing to carefully follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Assuming the manufacturer was:

- continually available (open 24/7),
- had perfect knowledge of the product, and
- was eager to help me solve the lawnmower problem,

which scenario makes the most sense?

Holding on to that question, let us now look at the four scenarios in the research context.

Secular Research. Secular research methodology is by far the most familiar methodology to modern researchers. The general process of secular research includes the following:

- 1 – Literature review (what other people think)
- 2 – Formulate one's own hypotheses
- 3 – Test the hypotheses using the best human methods available (case study, survey, statistical analysis, etc.)
- 4 – Write up results and conclusions in a form useful to others.

Christian/Secular. Christian/Secular research has many similarities to Secular research but can vary in at least two ways?

Alternative 1: Research is conducted in the same manner as Secular research except that periodically during steps 1 and 2 (literature review and hypothesis formulation) the researcher asks, "Does the Bible have anything to say about the issue being studied?"

Alternative 2: The researcher comes up with his/her own "truly Christian" theory as the foundation for research. He/she then may perform a focused literature review followed by steps 2, 3, and 4 of the Secular methodology.

Authoritative. As Christians, we should continually be abiding in Christ. As we live our daily lives, God chooses to reveal to us a topic or issue that He wants us to study.

- 1 – God reveals topic or issue to study. In the lawnmower example, this step would equate to the manufacturer (God) telling us what part of the lawnmower (people) to look at.
- 2 – Find out as much as possible about the issue "directly" from Him.
 - a) Biblical principles.
 - b) Prayer; pray about what God wants you to know/discover *and when*.
 - c) Listen for and follow Holy Spirit's guidance.

- 3 – Literature review in secular and possibly Christian sources.
- 4 – Write up results, linking into other’s opinions (found during the literature review) whenever possible.

Pure Authoritative. Again, as Christians, we should continually be abiding in Christ. Pure Authoritative research methodology differs from Authoritative research in that it would not automatically include a literature review (discovery of what other people think). Results from this type of research would also likely be written up differently than either of the three other methodologies. The model looks like this:

- 1 – God reveals topic or issue to study. In the lawnmower example, this step would equate to the manufacturer (God) telling us what part of the lawnmower (people) to look at.
- 2 – Find out as much as possible about the issue “directly” from Him.
 - a) Biblical principles.
 - b) Prayer; pray about what God wants you to know/discover (and when?).
 - c) Listen for and follow Holy Spirit’s guidance. Of course, the Holy Spirit may choose to direct us via other people and their writings. However, we must be careful that it is the Holy Spirit directing us rather than our own desire to follow the “easier process” of literature review.
- 3 – Repeat step two until God directs you to write something.
- 4 – Write up.
 - a) Write up God’s thoughts that He has chosen to reveal to you about the issue or problem.
 - b) Focus writing on building others up (Eph. 4:29). The writing should assist others in getting information from the Lord *themselves*. The reader should be left thinking of God, not the writer’s thoughts.
 - c) Be content with what God has revealed to you. Write no more and no less than what you are confident He desires to communicate through you.

Does this mean that the researcher using the Pure Authoritative methodology has no use for research done by other people? Possibly, but not necessarily. Using information obtained from others is helpful in so far as God has chosen to guide me partially through them. On the other hand, God does not need to use anyone to guide me. Thus the real question is not how or through whom God chooses to direct us, but who is our primary authority/source for our research?

The four methodologies described above can also be linked to the researcher’s relationship to God. Figure one describes four “categories” of a person’s relationship to the Father. On one end of the scale, pure secular research clearly would not acknowledge God in any way. On the other end of the scale, the researcher that has an intimate relationship with his all-powerful, all-loving, all-knowing Father has no *need* for any

people or organizations. The recent exponential growth in the use of the World Wide Web (WWW) for information has made this proposition particularly acute. Often sources on the web are either not identified, listed as anonymous, or identified only at an organizational level (e.g. “Gartner group recently released survey results . . .”). Considering that there is no legal penalty for putting intentionally false information (lies) on a web page, the potential for being deceived/mislead is very high.

Research Methodology Used

Over the two years of this project, three of the methodologies described earlier in this paper were used. Originally, Christian/Secular Alternative 1 was used beginning with a secular literature review and then a Christian literature review of information sourcing. While I had not labeled the methodology as yet, it was a natural evolution from the Secular model that I had employed since my doctorate days. I was leaving a public university arena where I had taught for eight years, taking a new position at a Christian college that encouraged consideration of God’s viewpoint.

It was quickly realized in my literature review that hardly anything was written on assessing the quality of information received from a source. Much was written on the importance of proper citation, good format, and accuracy of communication, but virtually nothing on the truth of the information received.

I then migrated to the Christian/Secular Alternative 2 model. An extensive study of Biblical principles and examples related to the relative importance of the message, the messenger, and the source (which was usually God) was conducted. My desire was to develop a framework to test using some type of survey. The result of this work was the beginnings of two diagrams (figures 2 and 3) describing how we can deal with information from both a highly credible source and from an unknown source.

The third evolution in methodology occurred as I began to feel that I was constructing “my” model, even though it fit with Biblical principles. I laid the project aside for a while and committed myself anew to be about God’s purposes alone. Over those few months many of the concepts presented in the paper were written down in the middle of morning quiet times. These were not “research quiet times” at all. Many days there would be nothing related to this paper. Other days, I might end up writing an hour or two, usually on the empty space of a church bulletin. Thus the evolution to Pure Authoritative research occurred.

While we as Christians will be hesitant to say that we only spoke or wrote what the Father wanted us to speak or write, it should certainly be, at a minimum, our desire and goal. Only God knows to whatever degree this was accomplished in this paper, but it was and is the focused desire of the writer.

Information Sources

During the study of Biblical principles and examples, it became increasingly apparent that what was most important in the messenger—message—source consideration was the source. When Moses gave the ten commandments to Israel, Moses and the ten commandments were not nearly as important as the fact that the commandments came from God Almighty. Moses was simply who *God* chose to accomplish His purpose.

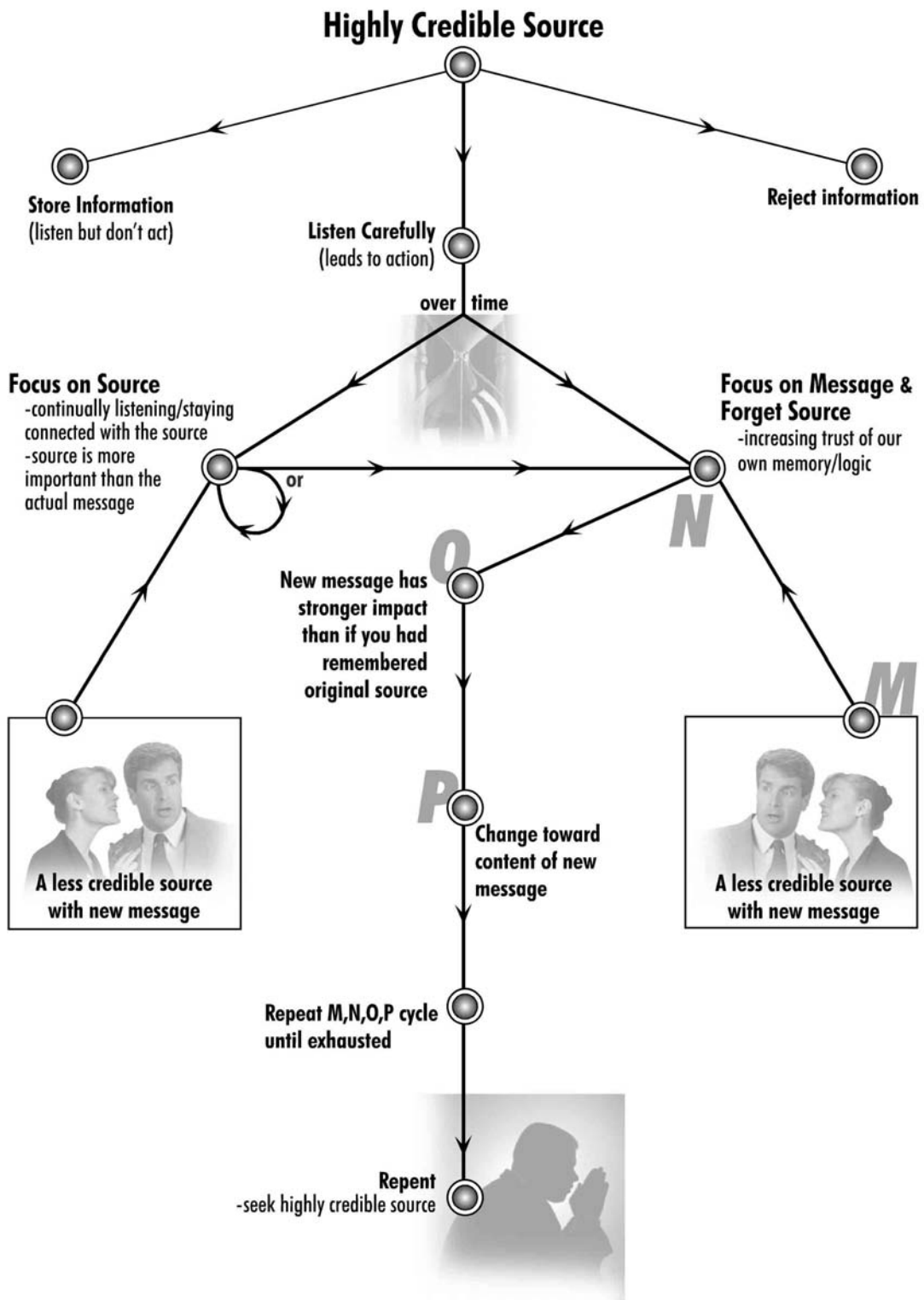


Figure 2. Receiving Information from a Highly Credible Source (HCS)

This fact is particularly sobering when one thinks of college professors as messengers, but that is something to consider outside of this paper.

If, then, the source of information is most critical, how do we handle information from a) a known, highly credible source (HCS), and b) an unknown source. First, let us consider information from an HCS. Figure 2 describes the process.

When information comes to us from an HCS (God would, of course, have the highest credibility) we can respond in one of three ways. We can reject the information, store the information, or listen and apply the information. When we listen to the information, we then begin to focus in on either the message itself or the source. Over time it appears that we have a natural tendency to focus on the content of the message and forget the source. Over time we also increasingly trust our own memory and interpretation.

At this point, we receive new information from a less credible source (less credible than the original HCS). As we rely on our own memory, logic, and intellectual capabilities, the new information has more influence over us than if we would have remembered our original source. We then are exposed to a second round of new information (from a less credible source) and again, we are influenced by the new information to a greater degree than if we had remembered the original source. This process (labeled M-N-O-P in Figure 2) continues to repeat itself until we are confused, frustrated, and/or exhausted. We repent and refocus our attention on the original HCS (i.e. God).

Alternatively, after we listen carefully to the highly credible source, we can choose to focus on the source as primary and the message as secondary. A Biblical example of this would be that the information/message contained in the ten commandments is important, but not nearly as important as the fact that *God* wrote them. We also might think of this as abiding in the source, e.g. abiding in Christ.

New information will also come to the “abiding” person from a less credible source. It is evaluated in light of the HCS. Does the new information fit with or support what one already knows (from the HCS) to be true? If yes, the new information is used. If not, the new information is discarded.

Crossover from “Focus on Source” to “Focus on Message” can occur, however. A person must *continue* to abide in the source (i.e. Christ). When the new information comes to the person who is abiding in the source, he/she can begin to focus on the message. When the message becomes primary and the source slips to secondary, crossover has occurred and the M-N-O-P cycle begins.

When we receive information from an unknown source things get messier. The model shown in Figure 3 serves as beginning point for assessing how we handle information from an unknown source.

All human beings filter information. With information coming at us in a multitude of ways (people, phone, TV, radio, computer) we would quickly become overwhelmed if we

did not filter it. As shown in Figure 3, when we receive new information we quickly run

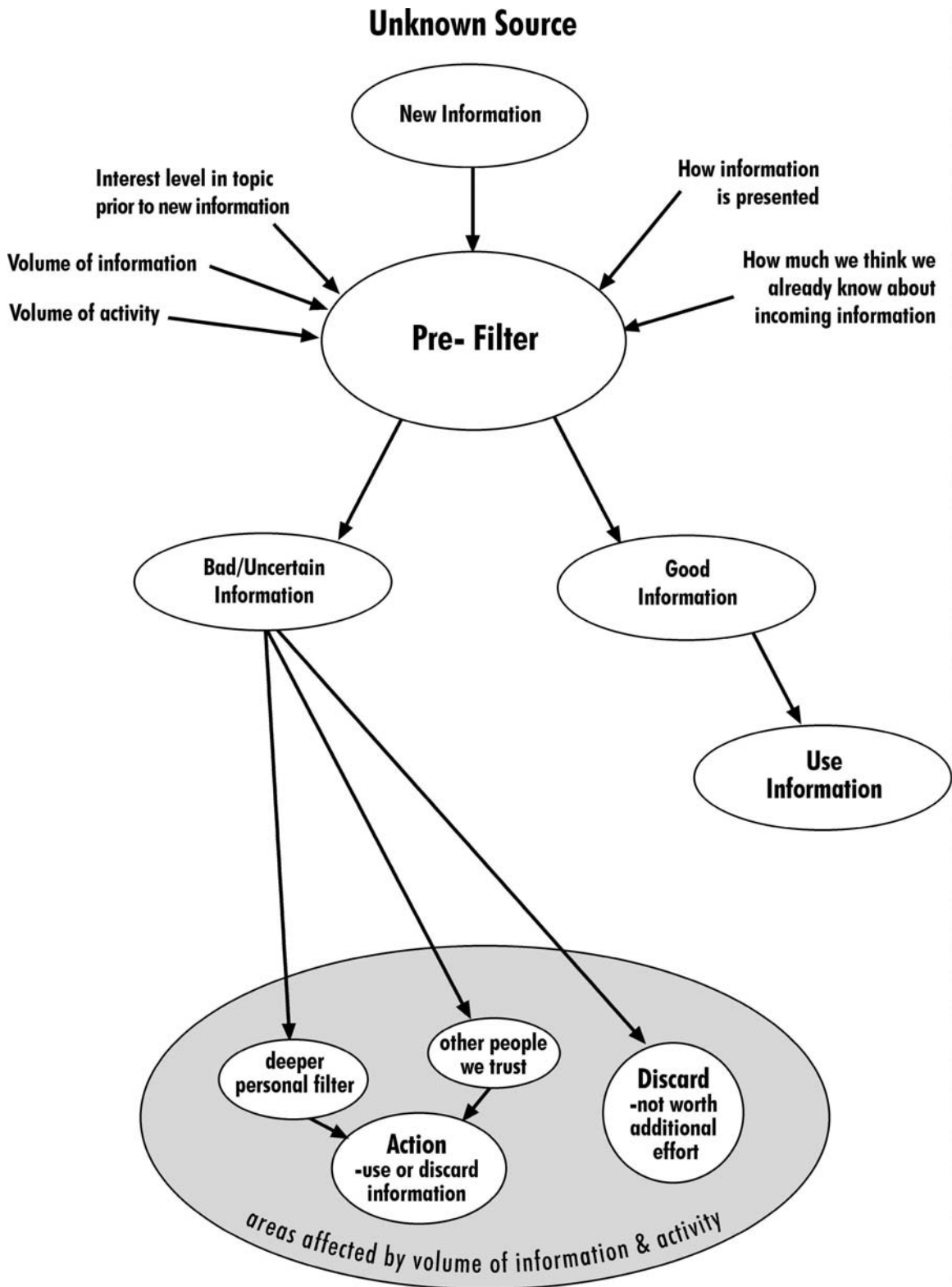


Figure 3. Receiving Information from a Unknown Source

it through our own personal Pre-filter. Some of the factors which influence what we do with the information include:

- Volume of information.
- Volume of activity (How busy my life is right now)
- Interest level in topic prior to new information.
- How new information is presented.
- How much we think we already know about incoming information.

If our pre-filter determines that the information is good, we use it. If our pre-filter determines that the information is of no use (bad) or we are uncertain about its use, we have several options.

- 1) We may simply decide to discard the information because it is not worth the additional effort of further evaluation.
- 2) We can invoke a deeper personal filter, looking at the information with greater private analysis.
- 3) We may discuss the information with other people we trust to get their perspective.

Whether and how we pursue all three options is influenced by the volume of information and volume of activity factors.

The writer openly acknowledges that the model shown in Figure 3 is not comprehensive. It does, however, serve as a beginning point to help us get a handle on the factors that affect what information we listen to and use. Note also, how the volume of information and volume of activity affect both the bottom and top portions of the model.

As stated earlier, when information comes from an unknown source, the process of assessing the value of the information is much messier than if the information comes from an HCS. Needless to say, we should encourage one another to find out the source of information whenever possible. In addition, we must be careful of our natural tendency to place inflated value on the message at the expense of the source, particularly the HCS.

The purpose of this paper was to explore God's principles for how we as people should be handling the information that continually floods into our lives. The frameworks described as well as the research principles discussed in this paper should at least encourage us to consider carefully what information we focus upon and pursue. This in turn should impact how we guide our students and the information we pass on to them.

Conclusions

Conclusions of this research are for you the reader to determine. As stated at the beginning of this paper, the words written here are absolutely meaningless in and of themselves. *God*, and God alone reveals truth to His children.

Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth, Thou hast for me;

Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear
Voices of truth Thou sendest clear
And while the wavenotes fall on my ear,
Everything false will disappear.

Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my eyes, illumine me,
Spirit divine!¹

Reference

¹ Scott, Clara H., "Open My Eyes, that I May See." Part of "The Singing Church" hymnal, Hope Publishing, 1985, #367.

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