



EQUIPPING CHURCH LEADERS
• EAST AFRICA •

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

by

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A description and explanation of the principles of how to understand and interpret the Bible truly and accurately. Included are the nature of the Bible, theories of biblical translation, descriptions of the major biblical genres, principles of hermeneutics and exegesis, and a focus on applying the biblical text today. Examples of the principles of interpretation and application are liberally provided.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. <u>The Bible and the Need for Interpretation</u>	3
A. <i>The Holy Bible is God’s special revelation to mankind</i>	3
B. <i>One’s view of the Bible implicates one’s view of Christ</i>	3
C. <i>Several factors necessitate principles to properly understand and interpret the Bible</i>	3
II. <u>Definitions, Requirements, and Purposes of Biblical Interpretation</u>	4
A. <i>Form and meaning</i>	4
B. <i>The relationship between form and meaning in the interpretation of the Bible</i>	4
C. <i>“Essentially literal” versus “dynamic equivalence” Bible translations</i>	4
D. <i>Hermeneutics and exegesis</i>	5
E. <i>The purpose of understanding the Bible is to submit to its authority and do what it says</i>	5
III. <u>General Hermeneutical Principles for Understanding the Bible</u>	6
A. <i>The Bible itself is the final authority for faith and life</i>	6
B. <i>The Bible interprets itself</i>	6
C. <i>Context is key for interpreting and understanding any biblical passage</i>	7
D. <i>Description versus prescription</i>	10
E. <i>The above principles show the importance of knowing the Scriptures well</i>	12
IV. <u>Biblical Genres</u>	12
A. <i>Narratives</i>	13
B. <i>Poetry</i>	14
C. <i>Wisdom literature</i>	15
D. <i>Prophecy and apocalyptic</i>	15
E. <i>Parables and allegory</i>	23
F. <i>Epistles</i>	25
V. <u>Principles for Exegeting a Biblical Text</u>	25
A. <i>Preliminary considerations for beginning the exegesis process</i>	25
B. <i>Correct exegesis and understanding of any biblical passage are based on three component parts—observation; interpretation; and application</i>	26
C. <i>Understand the context</i>	26
D. <i>Outline the book, section, and passage</i>	28
E. <i>Read in an inquisitive way</i>	29
F. <i>Pay attention to historical and cultural details</i>	29
G. <i>Pay attention to the literary aspects of the passage</i>	29
H. <i>Pay attention to grammatical details</i>	32
VI. <u>Word Meanings and Figures of Speech</u>	34
A. <i>Interpret words according to their time and context</i>	34
B. <i>Interpret words according to their idiom or figure of speech</i>	35
VII. <u>Application of the Text</u>	39
A. <i>Biblical application is inherently related to biblical understanding</i>	39
B. <i>Application ultimately is rooted in the goal of Christ-likeness</i>	39
C. <i>Good application is related to good hermeneutics and exegesis</i>	39
D. <i>Bad application is related to bad hermeneutics and exegesis</i>	39
E. <i>Biblical ideals, doctrine, and examples</i>	40
F. <i>Biblical law, commands, and rules</i>	42
G. <i>There is a “specificity and issue gap” between the issues the Bible addresses and the issues we face, since the Bible does not deal directly or specifically with every conceivable issue</i>	44
H. <i>There is a “cultural gap” between the cultures of the Bible—including the laws, commands, and rules based on those cultures—and the different cultures and situations we live in today</i>	44
I. <i>Factors that help us determine which biblical texts are culturally bound, or are otherwise limited, and which are transcultural</i>	46

J. Five steps to bridge the issue and cultural gaps when biblical laws, commands, and rules CAN be applied analogously to contemporary situations.....	51
K. Applying a “redemptive movement/redemptive spirit” hermeneutic to bridge the issue and cultural gaps when biblical laws, commands, and rules CANNOT be applied analogously because they were not God’s ultimate or best prescriptions for all people and cultures	53
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>.....	56
<u>THE AUTHOR</u>.....	59
<u>APPENDIX A:</u> Gregory Koukl, “Never Read a Bible Verse”.....	59
<u>APPENDIX B:</u> Interrogative Bible Study For Biblical Preaching.....	63
<u>APPENDIX C:</u> J. Daniel Hays, “Applying the Old Testament Law Today”.....	65
<u>APPENDIX D:</u> T. Wayne, Dye, “Culture and Conscience: Biblical Absolutes and Cultural Variation”.....	72
<u>APPENDIX E:</u> Dig and Discover Hermeneutical Principles: The Core Principles.....	82

BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

I. The Bible and the Need for Interpretation

A. The Holy Bible is God's special revelation to mankind

1. The writers of the Scripture testify that the Bible is God's special revelation which they have spoken and written (see, e.g., **Exod 17:14; 20:1; 24:4, 7; 34:27; Neh 9:13-14; Jer 1:4, 9; Luke 3:2-4; 1 Cor 7:10; 11:23; 1 Thess 2:2-9; 2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21; 3:14-16**).

2. The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI) in its "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" (1978: n.p.) summarizes the nature of the Bible as follows:

"1. God, who is Himself Truth and speaks truth only, has inspired Holy Scripture in order thereby to reveal Himself to lost mankind through Jesus Christ as Creator and Lord, Redeemer and Judge. Holy Scripture is God's witness to Himself. . . .

2. Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by His Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms: obeyed, as God's command, in all that it requires; embraced, as God's pledge, in all that it promises. . . .

4. Being wholly and verbally God-given, Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching, no less in what it states about God's acts in creation, about the events of world history, and about its own literary origins under God, than in its witness to God's saving grace in individual lives."

B. One's view of the Bible implicates one's view of Christ

Disbelief in the Bible amounts to disbelief in Christ. Failure to properly understand the Bible amounts to failure to properly understand Christ.

1. Christ Himself believed all of Scripture (John 10:35). He believed in the OT historical events and characters as real and not fictional (**Matt 12:39-41; 19:4-5; 24:37; 24:37-39; Luke 10:12; John 3:14**). He believed in OT miracles (**Matt 12:39-40; Luke 4:25-27; John 6:49**). He taught that OT prophecies were genuinely from God (**Matt 24:15; Luke 24:25-27, 44-45; John 5: 39**).

2. Jesus cited the Bible as authoritative (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13; John 17:17). He confirmed that the Bible was verbally inspired right down to individual words and tenses of the verbs (**Matt 5:17-19; 22:31-32, 43- 45; Luke 16:17**). He affirmed that God spoke through men (**Matt 22:43; 24:15**); at the same time he distinguished the Bible from men's traditions (**Matt 15:6; John 5:46-47**).

3. He said that everything he himself spoke was the word of God (John 8:28-29; 12:44-50). He said that the Bible must be fulfilled in himself (**Matt 5:17; 26:56; Luke 4:21; 22:37**).

4. He criticized men's failure to understand the Bible (Matt 22:29; Luke 24:25; John 3:10).

C. Several factors necessitate principles to properly understand and interpret the Bible

The Bible is God's revelation to mankind, and is meant to be read and understood by us. However, there are several reasons why we need sound principles to help us accurately understand and interpret what the Bible is telling us. These factors include the following:

1. The Bible is an accommodation of divine truths to human minds. God who is infinite is communicating with human beings who are finite. He has chosen to use approximately 40 human authors who wrote over a period of approximately 1300-1500 years (c.1400-1200 BC-AD 70 or 95). In revealing himself to mankind, God has used the medium of human languages. Therefore, we need to understand how languages work.

2. Human sin, including the power of indwelling sin in believers, has darkened and corrupted people's minds and understanding (see **Gen 5:1-3; Ps 51:5; John 8:31-34; Rom 3:9-18; 6:6, 20-21; 7:14-25; Eph 2:1-3; Titus 3:3; 2 Pet 2:18-19**).

3. There is a cultural distance between the people and events recorded in the Bible and the many cultures of the world today. Many customs, manners, social norms, religious practices, holidays, and other events were commonplace and well-understood by the people to whom the Bible was written. However, they are very different from, or not understood by, people today.

4. There is a historical distance between the people and events of the Bible and people living today. The historical records, societal organizations, people, wars, political, social, and economic concerns were well-understood by the people to whom the Bible was written. However, they are very different from, or not understood by, people today.

5. There is a geographical distance between the places and events of the Bible and most people who

read the Bible today. Being able to visit the places of the Bible might help our understanding. However, many of the cities or other places of the Bible no longer exist or do not look like they did when the events recorded in the Bible took place.

6. There is a language distance between the Bible and us today. The OT primarily was written in Hebrew (and some Aramaic); the NT primarily was written in Koine Greek (and some Aramaic). Those languages changed through the centuries. They also contain words, idioms, expressions, and nuances which have no exact parallel in modern English or other modern languages.

7. There is a literary distance between the biblical writings and contemporary writing. The writers of the Bible used multiple genres, as well as figures of speech, idioms, and styles of writing that were common in their cultures. Some of those literary features are unlike our figures of speech and ways of writing.

II. Definitions, Requirements, and Purposes of Biblical Interpretation

A. Form and meaning

1. The form level of language (also known as the “surface structure”) deals with grammar (the structure of words, phrases, and clauses) and syntax (the arrangement of words in sentences).

2. The meaning level of language (also known as the “semantic” level or “deep structure”) is the substantive message which the form of a writing expresses. Biblical interpretation ultimately is about discerning the meaning of what the Bible says. But that meaning is derived from the form.

B. The relationship between form and meaning in the interpretation of the Bible

In determining what any biblical passage means, we must consider three things:

1. The author. To rightly understand the Bible—or any other important document or work of literature—the first question we must ask is: “What did *the author* mean when he wrote this passage?” Geisler comments about this as follows: “What a passage means is fixed by the author and is not subject to change by readers. This does not imply that further revelation on the subject cannot help one come to a fuller understanding, but simply that the meaning given in a text is not changed because additional truth is revealed subsequently. Meaning is also definite in that there are defined limits by virtue of the author's expressed meaning in the given linguistic form and cultural context. Meaning is determined by an author; it is discovered by the readers.” (ICBI 1982: Art. VII)

2. The original recipients. “God did not communicate in a vacuum but always to specific people in a specific context. The written communication was in their own language, using expressions known to them and written in a format acceptable to them.” (Wolvaardt 2005: 19) Since the books of the Bible were originally intended for specific people in particular circumstances, we must ask: “What did the text mean for the original recipients?”

3. The text itself. Beyond the author and the readers, there is “the even more decisive role that the text itself plays as a determiner of meaning” (Ryken 2002: 116). The reason is, “We do not have the human authors of the Bible to explain what they actually meant with a specific passage. Neither do we have the original receivers available to explain what they actually understood from a specific passage. For this reason we are forced to accept the text in front of us as a true portrayal of what the author intended to say and also of what the original receiver would have understood.” (Wolvaardt 2005: 47) Thus, “literary critics have wisely warned us against the intentional fallacy, the error of supposing that a writer meant something other than he has actually written” (Caird 1980: 61).

4. Summary.

- a. The meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed.
- b. The only proper control for meaning in a text is the meaning of that text in its original context.
- c. The *meaning* of any biblical passage is dependent and based on its *form*.

C. “Essentially literal” versus “dynamic equivalence” Bible translations

Since the text is primary in our search for meaning, the version of the Bible we are using (assuming we are using a translation) is very important. There are two basic theories of biblical translation: (1) “essentially literal” translations such as the NASB, ESV, NKJV, and RSV; and (2) “dynamic equivalence” translations such as the NIV, NRSV, Good News Bible, New Living Translation, and Contemporary English Version.

1. The theories behind Bible translations (Ryken 2002: 85-91).

- a. “*Essentially literal*” translations focus on the *form* level of the biblical text. They primarily do *linguistic interpretation* (i.e., decisions regarding what [English] words best express the

Hebrew and Greek words of the original biblical text).

b. *“Dynamic equivalence” translations* also deal with form but focus on the “thought” or *meaning* level. They engage in *thematic interpretation* of the text (i.e., *theological interpretations* of the meaning of the original text). That results in the use and order of words and phrases that do not correspond to the original Hebrew and Greek words, although one cannot tell where the substitutions have been made. In effect, the dynamic equivalence editors have done the biblical interpretation for the reader, although the reader will not be able to tell where that occurs. The NIV and NRSV are more “conservative” (i.e., closer to essentially literal) translations than are the Jerusalem Bible or the Good News Bible.

c. *Paraphrases*. On the far end of dynamic equivalence (i.e., away from literalness) are paraphrases, such as the Living Bible. A paraphrase “translates in a dynamic equivalent way but at times goes a bit further by also bridging some of the cultural and historical differences between ourselves and biblical times” (Wolvaardt 2005: 54). Thus, “the reader receives to a certain extent a theological interpretation from the translator (and it should be viewed as such)” (Ibid.). Such versions may be helpful in giving us insight into the meaning of a biblical text, but caution should be used, and they should be compared with more literal versions if one has access to them.

2. Potential problems with dynamic equivalence translations. All dynamic equivalence translations stress the “readability” of the translation for the modern reader over the actual text that the author wrote. Consequently, they change the original text in ways that no one would tolerate if done to a classic novel or play. They tend to eliminate many important theological words used by the original authors. Thus, accurate biblical interpretation actually may be made more difficult—particularly in understanding the nuances and subtleties of the text, seeing overall themes based on certain words, phrases and concepts, and comparing different passages with each other—when one uses a dynamic equivalence translation instead of a more literal one. Accurate biblical interpretation can ultimately only be based on what the original authors actually said (i.e., “linguistic meaning”), instead of what modern editors think the original authors meant (i.e., “thematic meaning”) (Ryken 2002: 117, 147).

D. Hermeneutics and exegesis

1. Hermeneutics describes the principles people use to understand what something means and what it implies for our lives.

2. Exegesis then applies those principles in the careful, systematic study of Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning.

3. Hermeneutics and exegesis are related like this: “[Hermeneutics] stands in the same relationship to exegesis that a rule-book stands to a game. . . . The rules are not the game, and the game is meaningless without the rules. Hermeneutics proper is not exegesis, but exegesis is applied hermeneutics” (Ramm 1970: 11).

4. Hermeneutics and exegesis “reverse” the process of the author. “When we interpret a passage we start with the words and sentences in front of us and end with understanding what it means. We actually move in the opposite direction which the author took when he wrote the passage. The writer started with what he wanted to communicate (meaning) and then put it into form, that is into words, sentences, paragraphs and combinations of paragraphs.” (Wolvaardt 2005: 46)

E. The purpose of understanding the Bible is to submit to its authority and do what it says

1. The proper purpose of understanding and interpreting the Bible is to apply what it says. Submitting to the Bible’s authority and obeying its teachings are both the goal of understanding and are necessary requirements for true understanding (see **Ps 111:10; 119:98-100; Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49; John 7:16-17; Rom 2:13; 1 Cor 13:2; 1 Tim 1:5; Heb 4:12-13; Jas 1:22-25**).

2. Even though the Bible was written originally to specific people on specific occasions, it was recorded to serve as a message to be applied by all people at all times (see **Deut 31:9-13; Neh 8:1-8; John 17:20; Rom 15:4**). Thus, Osborne describes biblical interpretation as a “spiral” that proceeds “from text to context, from its original meaning to its contextualization or significance for the church today” (Osborne 1991: 6). Even though each passage has a single *meaning* or *interpretation*, it nevertheless may have a variety of *applications* (see ICBI 1982: Art. VII). After we have first interpreted a passage and understood its meaning it is therefore necessary to ask, “How does this passage apply to me?” Perhaps more importantly, we should ask, “What does this passage say *against* me?”

III. General Hermeneutical Principles for Understanding the Bible

The following principles of hermeneutics always apply when one is reading and interpreting any portion of the Bible. Eight basic hermeneutical principles are summarized at **APPENDIX E: Dig and Discover Hermeneutical Principles: The Core Principles**.

A. *The Bible itself is the final authority for faith and life*

Since the Bible is the Word of God, it is the final authority. The church as an entity, church tradition, church history, respected scholars, personal experience, and reason all are important and should be listened to and respected. However, the Bible has authority over all of those things. If man, his reason, experience, institutions, or traditions has authority over the Bible, then man has set himself over God. That is why sound rules of hermeneutics and exegesis are so important—only by soundly interpreting God’s word can we best understand what God is saying to us.

B. *The Bible interprets itself*

The Bible is a unity which reveals the story of redemption through faith in Christ (see **Luke 24:27, 44-47; John 5:39**). Nevertheless, God’s revelation is *progressive*—i.e., it unfolds throughout the Bible. A number of important principles flow from these facts.

1. Scripture will never contradict Scripture.

a. *The Bible is a coherent whole.* Therefore, two passages which appear to contradict each other will be found not to do so when they are closely analyzed. One passage may modify or qualify the other, but will not contradict it.

b. *Sometimes two or more truths are both clearly taught in the Bible, yet they appear to be in conflict.* For example, God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility are hard to reconcile, yet the Bible clearly teaches both. In such cases, remember that the Bible is an accommodation of divine truths to finite, human minds. “When two or more truths that are clearly taught in the Word seem to be in conflict, remember that you have a finite mind. Don’t take teaching to an extreme that God doesn’t in order to reconcile it in your understanding! Let God say what He says without trying to correct or explain Him. Remember, He’s God—you’re man. Simply humble your heart in faith and believe what God says, even if you can’t understand or reconcile it at the moment.” (Arthur 1994: 62)

2. Both the stage of redemptive history and “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27) must be taken into account in order to rightly understand any particular passage. The Bible is a unity which tells one coherent story. However, the truths of the Bible are not revealed all at once, but are progressively revealed over time. The **OT** is the preparation of the gospel; the **Gospels** are the manifestation of the gospel; **Acts** is the expansion of the gospel; the **Epistles** are the explanation of the gospel; and **Revelation** is the consummation of the gospel. The full meaning of any particular passage may not be clear unless the whole Bible and the stage of redemptive history are taken into consideration. “To read the Bible contextually *as the Word of God* must include the completed canon as the ultimate context of any particular passage” (Johnson 2007: 156).

3. The NT interprets the OT. It is said that “the New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed.” “The coming of our Lord radically altered the understanding of the Old Testament. The apostles understood the canon in the light of Jesus’ ministry, message, and exaltation. The traditional understanding of Moses’ words and the Prophets had to undergo a radical transformation in view of the coming of our Lord.” (VanGemeren 1990: 83) Jesus and the NT authors all saw the OT as in some way a book about Jesus. He is its central person and integrating theme (**Luke 24:25-27, 44-45; John 5:39-40, 46; Acts 3:18, 24; 10:43; 26:22-23; 2 Cor 1:20; Heb 1:1-3; 1 Pet 1:10-12**). Understanding the OT helps us to understand what Jesus says about himself. OT Israel and its laws, ceremonies, and other practices, were “types,” “shadows,” or “examples” of NT realities (**1 Cor 10:1-6; Col 2:16-17; Heb 8:1-10:22**). OT laws, ceremonies, and other practices have been fulfilled and superseded in Christ (**Matt 5:17; 2 Cor 3:12-16; Gal 3:23-4:7**). There is both continuity and discontinuity between the OT and the NT. The NT builds upon OT concepts, often in surprising ways. Therefore, “always read the Old Covenant Scriptures through the lens of the New Covenant Scriptures” (Lehrer 2006: 177).

Examples of this include the following:

a. *Food laws.* **Lev 11:1-23** prohibits the Israelites from eating many different types of animals. In **Mark 7:19, Acts 10:9-15, Col 2:16-17, and 1 Tim 4:1-5** those prohibitions no longer apply. (A nuance or qualification regarding meat offered to idols is given in **2 Corinthians 8**.)

b. *The deeper or true meaning of OT covenants, prophecies, and other matters only becomes*

apparent in light of NT teaching. The “New Covenant” announced by Jeremiah in **Jer 31:31-34**, which on its face appears to apply only to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, in fact finds its true fulfillment in Christ and those who are followers of Christ (see **Luke 22:20**; **1 Cor 11:25**; **2 Cor 3:6**; **Heb 8:6-9:15**). Similarly, on the Day of Pentecost, in **Acts 2:29-36**, Peter made clear that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was ultimately what had been meant in **2 Samuel 7** (i.e., the “Davidic Covenant”) when God swore to David to seat one of his descendants upon his throne.

4. Clear passages should interpret obscure or unclear passages.

a. *Some texts may be ambiguous and require other texts to clarify.* In **Isa 7:14** the Hebrew word translated “virgin” may also legitimately be translated “young woman.” However, when Matthew quotes this verse in Greek and applies it to the birth of Jesus (**Matt 1:23**), the Greek word he uses has only one meaning, “virgin.”

b. *Some texts appear clear on their face, but are not complete; other texts are necessary to fully understand the subject.* For example, **Matt 21:22** says “*everything you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.*” Some have used this verse to argue for a “name it and claim it” theology—i.e., believers can have whatever material possessions they ask for, and the only reason they don’t receive them is lack of faith. However, other passages supplement our understanding of prayer. James says, “*You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures*” (**Jas 4:3**). **1 John 5:14-15** tells us that effective prayer is conditioned on asking “*according to his will*” (not our own will). Further, God refused to grant the requests of both the Apostle Paul (**2 Cor 12:7-9**) and the Lord Jesus Christ himself (**Luke 22:41-42**)—yet neither of them suffered from a “lack of faith.”

c. *An obscure passage is one in which the meaning is not clear or easily understood.* Obscure passages typically are isolated statements—i.e., they may occur only once, and there is little elaboration by the biblical writer about what he specifically meant. Because the meaning is obscure, we should not create doctrines based on such statements.

(1) In such cases we should consider two things:

(A) *Look for clear passages on the same subject in the “broad context” of the rest of the book, testament, or Bible as a whole.* Try to harmonize the unclear passage consistent with the clear passages. Clear passages may at least tell us what the obscure passage does *not* mean.

(B) *Consider the “logical flow” and basic purpose of the “immediate context.”* The context in which the unclear statement occurs may itself provide some limits as to what it may or may not mean.

(2) Obscure passages may remain obscure. By bearing in mind the rest of Scripture, those things that *are clear*, and the fact that Scripture does not contradict itself, we can at least say what an obscure passage does *not* mean. We may also be able to say what an obscure passage probably, or at least possibly, means.

(3) For example, one obscure passage is **1 Cor 15:29** which refers to people being “baptized for the dead.” No other statements pertaining either to “baptism” or the “dead” hint at such a practice. The clearest thing that helps to elucidate the statement is the *context* in which the statement occurs. Paul’s statement clearly is *not an imperative* (i.e., he is not commanding people to be baptized on behalf of dead friends or relatives). The context of **1 Corinthians 15** is that Paul is arguing against people who claimed there was no resurrection (**1 Cor 15:12**). Although the nature and meaning of “baptizing for the dead” are unclear, the force of Paul’s argument is clear: “If there is no resurrection, if the dead are not raised, what is the point of the rite in which people are baptized on their behalf? Will not those who undergo this ritual look like fools if in fact there is no resurrection? . . . The core of this apologetic is of course the contradiction between their belief and their practice. They believe that there is no resurrection; yet their practice belies that belief.” (Kaiser, et al. 1996: 617)

C. Context is key for interpreting and understanding any biblical passage

Context is the most important factor for understanding and interpreting any passage of Scripture.

Context means “that which goes with the text.” There are, in fact, *two types of context* which affect any particular passage: the *literary context* and the *historical (cultural) context*. The literary context may be studied from the Bible alone. The historical context requires the use of information outside of the Bible.

1. Literary context.

- a. *The literary context is “the words, sentences, paragraphs, or chapters that surround and relate to a text” (Dorani 1996: 31).* The literary context shows us how a paragraph or some other unit fits into a larger portion of Scripture. It gives us great insight into meaning, even if we know nothing about the writer or his original audience.
- b. *The Bible’s chapter and verse numbers were not part of the original texts.* The current chapter divisions did not appear until the 1200s; verse numbers for the OT were not introduced until the 1400s; the current NT verse divisions were introduced in 1551 (Metzger and Coogan 1993: 105-07). Because chapter and verse numbers were developed primarily to aid reference, *“they do not always agree with the natural development of thought in the text” (Ibid.: 105).* Verse numbers give the illusion that each verse “stands alone” in its meaning, but they do not.
- c. *The “thought-units” in the Bible are paragraphs, not verses.* “The key to the meaning of any verse comes from the paragraph, not just from the individual words” (Koukl 2001: n.p.). The reason for this is that “the context frames the verse and gives it specific meaning. . . . This works because of a basic rule of all communication: Meaning always flows from the top down, from the larger units to the smaller units, not the other way around.” (Ibid.) Further, “the paragraph is based around a specific theme. Although this theme can be made up of different elements, these will nevertheless link together to deal with the theme.” (Wolvaardt 2005: 99) Words are simply the tools in which the author expresses the larger idea and theme that he has in his mind. A word “is never used on its own but with others to form sentences (except in one word sentences where it is completely dependent on the surrounding sentences to indicate its meaning)” (Ibid.: 48).
- d. *Although individual words and verses are very important, to interpret the Bible properly the basic thrust is to go from the larger units to the smaller units.* Words need to be understood in the context of the verses in which they appear; verses need to be interpreted in light of the paragraphs in which they occur; paragraphs need to be interpreted in light of the paragraphs that surround them; all of these things need to be understood in the light of the theme(s) of the chapters, sections, and book as a whole. This is so important that Koukl puts it this way: the “basic rule” is, *“Never read a Bible verse. Instead, read a paragraph, at least. Always check the context. Observe the flow of thought. Then focus on the verse. . . . It’s the most important practical lesson I’ve ever learned . . . and [the] single most important thing I could ever teach you” (Koukl 2001: n.p.; this article is attached as APPENDIX A).*
- e. *The literary context is like a ladder of ideas.* “Biblical texts present their teachings one step at a time, in an orderly way, as each idea leads to the next. Just as it would be absurd to try to climb a ladder by leaping from the first to the seventh rung, then down to the third and up to the eighth, so is it foolish to leap about in the Bible, paying no attention to its ‘ladder’ of ideas and events.” (Dorani 1996: 32)
- f. *The literary context is also like a pond.* One should take into account both the “broad” literary context (i.e., the section, book, and testament in which the passage occurs), and the “narrow” or “immediate” literary context (i.e., the sentences and paragraphs immediately surrounding the passage in question) when determining what the purpose and meaning of a passage is. “When someone throws a pebble into the pond, a series of rings surrounds the spot where the stone fell. The point of impact corresponds to the passage you are studying, and the radiating rings correspond to the rest of the book. The closer the circle is to the center (your text), the more it influences your passage.” (Dorani 1996: 33)
- g. *It is best to read an entire book all the way through before you begin studying a particular passage.* “Because the author communicated his message as a whole in one book, our exegesis of a particular passage must be in the context of the book from which it comes” (Wolvaardt 2005: 90). By reading the entire book you get the “big picture.” Follow the author’s flow of thought as it develops from the beginning to end of the book. Try to ignore the chapter and verse divisions. Particularly in shorter books you should read the entire book through, preferably in one setting. In fact, reading the book through more than once is very beneficial. You begin to see the themes and issues the author is concerned with. You begin to see how the paragraphs themselves fit together. In short, you begin to see both the immediate and the broader literary context of the passage you are studying.
- h. *Virtually any verse demonstrates the importance of interpreting in light of the surrounding literary context.* Sometimes the meaning of a verse is obvious, but sometimes the context gives

more subtle clues of the true meaning. Here are two examples:

(1) Often Christian friends, or a pastor in a benediction, may quote **Gen 31:49** as words of care and friendship—“*May the Lord watch between you and me when we are absent from one another.*” However, the context shows that the statement was made by Laban to Jacob. The broader context of **Genesis 29-31** reveals Laban’s treachery to Jacob, and distrust between the two. The immediate context of **31:22-55** shows that the statement was made as a result of hostility and distrust. In effect, what Laban is saying is, “May God keep his eye on you and strike you down if you cross this line or harm my daughters.” Thus, the context demonstrates that Laban’s statement has almost the *opposite* meaning from the way it is usually used (when taken out of context).

(2) In **Luke 17:5** the disciples say to the Lord, “*Increase our faith!*” On its face that seems like a very worthy request. However, the context paints a different picture. In **17:3-4** (the immediately preceding context) Jesus had told them to forgive one another seven times in one day. In this context “Increase our faith” could mean “We want to and try to obey you, so please help us by giving us more faith,” or “We cannot and will not obey you unless you give us more faith.” Jesus’ answer in **17:6-10** (the immediately following context) shows that they were guilty of the second attitude. His statement about the mustard seed (**17:6**) implies that they already have enough faith. His parable about the servant (**17:7-10**) implies that the act of forgiving a brother is not extraordinary service—it is not a great act of faith, but simply a servant’s duty. Thus, *in this context* “the cry, ‘Increase our faith,’ far from being commendable, is rather an excuse for disobedience. . . . Although some texts encourage us to pray for faith, Luke 17:5 is not one of them. If anything, it warns us not to hide our disobedience behind pious words.” (Dorani 1996: 34)

i. *OT quotations or allusions in the NT.* “There are at least 257 quotes and over 1,100 allusions (according to the Nestle-Aland Greek text) of the Old Testament in the New” (Osborne 1991: 277). The allusions [i.e., implied or indirect references] “may actually have had greater emphasis because the writer was presupposing his readers’ knowledge” (Ibid.: 135). Such quotations and allusions should be found and evaluated. Such quotations or allusions *often, but not always, presuppose the original OT context behind the quotation or allusion itself.* The OT context may add depth or richness to the NT text. In evaluating an OT quotation or allusion in the NT, and whether the OT context behind the quotation or allusion is applicable, “we should seek to determine (on the basis of the interaction between the Old and New Testament contexts) both the aspect of meaning highlighted in the New Testament setting and the way in which the New Testament writer understood the Old Testament passage” (Ibid.: 136).

2. Historical (cultural) context.

a. *The historical (or cultural) context is “the culture, customs, languages, beliefs, and history of the author and his original audience” (Dorani 1996: 31).* The historical context gives us insight into how a portion of the Bible fits into its world. It provides us with background information that may explain the significance of words, phrases, customs, people, places, and events that the biblical author refers to.

b. *The more we know about the world of the Bible, the better we can understand the Bible itself.* The life and times of the peoples and cultures of the Bible can give us valuable information that helps us understand the meaning of biblical statements. The historical context is often not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, because the cultural norms and historical circumstances were well-known by the Bible’s authors and their original readers. That is why materials from outside the Bible itself, such as commentaries, atlases, Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference books, may have to be consulted.

c. *Look for historical context clues within the Bible itself.* When we read with an inquisitive mind, verbal clues within the Bible may cause us to wonder about what the cultural or historical circumstances were. This can prompt us to do further research or study. Also, the Bible itself might shed light on an ancient historical fact.

d. *Historical context can deepen, or even change, our understanding of a passage.* The following examples show how knowledge of the historical context helps our understanding:

(1) Knowledge of Palestinian clothing and customs deepens our knowledge of some passages. Clothing was very expensive, and most people owned very few garments. Thus, when Jesus said “*If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have*

your cloak as well” (**Matt 5:40**), he was requiring quite a painful sacrifice. Even used garments were valuable. Executioners got the clothes of the dead as a “benefit” of their job (see **Matt 27:35**; that verse and extra-biblical information also tell us that Jesus was crucified naked, not with a loincloth as he is often depicted). Additionally, in the parable of the prodigal son (**Luke 15:11-32**), “in tucking up his robes to run, the father would have exposed some of his undergarments. But the father cared more for his son than for propriety. When the father gave him the robe, ring, and sandals, the original hearers knew he was in the family again.” (Dorani 1996: 46)

(2) Knowledge of Israelite and Roman history deepens our understanding of some passages. In Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (**John 12:13-15**), the people waved palm branches, and Jesus rode on a donkey, not a horse. Palm branches were an Israelite national symbol. They were even included on coins struck by insurgents during the Jewish wars against Rome in AD 66-70 and 132-35. Thus, when Jesus entered Jerusalem, the people’s waving palm branches “may well have signaled nationalist hope that a messianic liberator was arriving on the scene” (Carson 1991: 432). However, Jesus “does not enter Jerusalem on a war horse . . . which would have whipped the political aspirations of the vast crowds into insurrectionist frenzy, but he chooses to present himself as the king who comes in peace, ‘gentle and riding on a donkey’” (Ibid.: 433). This historical information also heightens the contrast between Jesus’ first coming and his second coming. The Bible uses symbolic language to say that when Jesus returns he will come, not on a donkey, but on “*a white horse*” along with his armies “*on white horses,*” to “*judge and wage war*” (**Rev 19:11-14**). In ancient Rome, victorious generals in major wars sometimes had a public “triumph” in which they entered Rome in a chariot pulled by four white horses, with their victorious army following behind them (Ramsay 1875: 1163-67).

(3) Knowledge of ancient geography helps to correct misconceptions about some passages. In **Rev 3:15-16** Jesus refers to the church at Laodicea as “*neither cold nor hot,*” and says that “*because you are lukewarm . . . I will spit you out of my mouth.*” “The image of the Laodiceans being ‘neither cold nor hot’ but ‘lukewarm’ has traditionally been understood to be metaphorical of their lack of spiritual fervor and halfhearted commitment to Christ. One problem with this is that Christ’s desire that they be either ‘cold or hot’ implies that both extremes are positive. The traditional view, however, has seen “cold” negatively, the idea apparently being that Jesus either wants the readers to be either zealous (‘hot’) for him or completely uncommitted (‘cold’), but not middle-of-the-road. But it is unlikely that Christ would commend that extreme of complete disloyalty (though cf. 2 Pet. 2:21). A more recent interpretation takes the metaphor differently. The picture of hot, cold, and lukewarm water is seen as a unique feature of Laodicea and the surrounding region in the first century. The hot waters of Hierapolis had a medicinal effect and the cold waters of Colossae were pure, drinkable, and had a life-giving effect. However, there is evidence that Laodicea had access only to warm water, which was not very palatable and caused nausea. Indeed, Laodicea had grown as a town because its position was conducive for commerce, but it was far from good water. When the city tried to pipe water in, it could manage only to obtain tepid, emetic water. ‘The effect of their conduct on Christ was like the effect of their own water’—Christ wanted to ‘spew them out of his mouth.’” (Beale 1999: 303)

D. Description versus prescription

Description is an example or statement that reports about someone, something, or an event that has happened. *Prescription* is a command (an “imperative”) that tells us what we should do or how we should live. Biblical examples generally do *not* act as commands unless they are supported by a command. Distinguishing between description and prescription is particularly important when it comes to the issue of *application*.

1. Types of discourse. All writing is either in the form of *prose* or *poetry*. Once the author decides on the form of writing, he then must organize his writing according to the purpose he has in mind. This will lead to the selection of the four major types of discourse (a discourse is an extended discussion of something): narrative; procedure; exposition; and exhortation (there generally is overlapping or blend of different discourse types in the Bible, so they are not generally “pure” forms). These discourse types are based upon the combination of two characteristics: *chronology* (events proceed in a sequence over time)

and *prescription* (the discourse explicitly says what should be done) (see Wolvaardt 2005: 87-88):

	Non-prescriptive	Prescriptive
Chronological framework:	<i>Narrative</i>	<i>Procedure</i>
Non-Chronological framework:	<i>Exposition</i>	<i>Exhortation</i>

2. Examples of the four basic discourse types are as follows:

- a. *Narrative*—The book of **Ruth**. It has a chronological framework (it describes events one after the other in the lives of Naomi and Ruth), but it is non-prescriptive (even though it has a message for us, it does not explicitly give instructions to the reader). Narrative typically deals with the past, and focuses on specific people, their actions, places, and objects.
- b. *Procedure*—**Num 8:5-14**. God gave Moses instructions on how to set apart the Levites. It is prescriptive (because God was explicitly instructing Moses on what to do), and is also chronological (because one step had to be done after another). Procedures typically are step-by-step instructions of how to do or accomplish something.
- c. *Exposition*—**Col 1:1-2:5**. Even though there is a *logical* order to what Paul is saying (i.e., he is building one doctrine upon another), his comments are not in a chronological (time sequence) order (hence, it is non-chronological). Further, in this part of the book Paul is not giving explicit instructions regarding what to do or how to live (hence, it is non-prescriptive). Exposition typically deals with explaining an idea, theory, or argument.
- d. *Exhortation*—**Col 2:6-4:6**. In this part of the book Paul gives explicit instructions about how the Colossian Christians are to behave (hence, it is prescriptive), but it is not in a chronological framework (i.e., his instructions do not have to be followed in a particular order). Exhortations typically are logical discussions about applying moral and spiritual principles.

3. One very common error is to turn biblical descriptions into prescriptions, or to claim that a biblical example or practice necessarily should be the norm for the church today. That error usually occurs when one takes a biblical example, and then does one or more of the following:

- a. *Fails to take into account the “discourse type” of the passage* (see above).
- b. *Fails to see the theme of the passage in which the example occurs, or otherwise lifts an example out of its context.* For example, many people give God conditions—which they call “putting out a fleece”—to try to discern God’s will. They base that on **Judg 6:36-40**. However, the Bible never instructs us to put out fleeces or set up our own conditions or rules that God must meet in order for us to act a certain way or discern his will. Further, the theme or issue in **Judges 6** was *not* “how to find the will of God.” Indeed, in **Judg 6:1-24** God had specifically appeared to Gideon, told him what he should do, and told him “surely I will be with you.” Thus, Gideon’s fleece actually demonstrated his *lack of faith and obedience*.
- c. *Selects only some examples, or some aspects of an example, but ignores other examples or aspects of the example that are contrary to the alleged “universal truth” or norm.*

(1) In drawing lessons from examples that occur in biblical narratives, we must look for clear patterns, not isolated examples. For example, some groups state that being “filled with the Spirit” means that you must speak in tongues. Such groups typically refer to what happened in **Acts 2:3-11**. However, such groups arbitrarily select only a certain manifestation of the Spirit (tongues), but disregard other manifestations occurred. They do *not* insist that the *other signs* present then—the noise from heaven “like a violent, rushing wind”; the “tongues of fire” which rested on each person; the fact that the “tongues” were recognizable human languages—must also be present today. Additionally, such groups *ignore other examples* of people being filled with the Spirit where there is no statement that speaking in other tongues was the result (see **Acts 4:31; 8:17; 9:17-19**).

(2) We must also compare the examples with any didactic teaching on the subject. In turning the example of “tongues” into a universal truth or prescription, many also *ignore Paul’s teaching* on the gifts of the Spirit and being filled with the Spirit. *All believers* have a manifestation of the Spirit (**1 Cor 12:7**—“to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”). According to **1 Cor 12:7-11, 28-30**, the Spirit decides who will get what gift or manifestation. No one has *all* of the gifts or manifestations. Not everyone has *any particular* gift or manifestation. Indeed, **1 Cor 12:30** explicitly indicates that *not* everyone speaks in tongues. Further, in **Eph 5:18-21** Paul commands believers to “be filled with the Spirit.” He then lists four manifestations of being filled with the Spirit, but none of them includes speaking in tongues.

d. *Fails to distinguish between what was merely a cultural practice and what is true for all people or all occasions.* Our goal as believers is to become “conformed to the image of [Jesus]” (**Rom 8:29**). However, even the example of Jesus does not mean that every aspect of his life is “normative” (i.e., the required standard of correctness) for all of our behavior.

(1) Some aspects of Jesus’ life were culturally-determined. Jesus lived in Palestine, rode a donkey, wore a seamless one-piece tunic, and spoke Aramaic; however, we are not under any biblical obligation to do those things. On the other hand, Jesus never drove a motor car, wrote a thesis, ate pizza, or used a computer; however, we are not prohibited from doing those things. All of those are merely cultural matters.

(2) Some aspects of Jesus’ life were not culturally-determined. Jesus never married, although most people even within his culture did. Therefore, some groups today require that believers who want to follow Jesus seriously must not marry. However, turning that *description* of Jesus’ life into a *prescription* for believers today is not biblical. There is no biblical command that forbids marriage. Jesus affirmed marriage (**Matt 19:1-9**). **1 Corinthians 7** allows and encourages marriage. **1 Tim 4:3** further says that to forbid marriage is false teaching, a “*doctrine of demons*.”

E. The above principles show the importance of knowing the Scriptures well

We can do several things to develop a broad and deep knowledge of the Bible, including:

1. Read and meditate on Scripture regularly, and take notes on what we read.
2. Survey Old and New Testaments to capture the flow of Biblical history and revelation.
3. Understand the major characters, their settings and their part in God’s redemptive plan.
4. Understand the time line of major events of the Bible and grasp their progressive relationship to one another.
5. Understand the time line of the various books of the Bible—i.e., what was written when and by whom.
6. Develop our own charts, diagrams, outlines, cross-references, and commentary.
7. Develop our own biblical reference library, including such helpful aids as a concordance, Bible dictionary, good biblical commentaries, and other study aids.

IV. Biblical Genres

Interpretation should be consistent with the literary devices and genre of the passage. A “genre” is a distinctive literary type of book or writing, recognizable by certain formal criteria (style, tone, patterns of using language, content, etc.). The Bible contains multiple literary genres (e.g., histories, poetry, proverbs, prophecy, narratives, epistles [letters], wisdom literature, genealogies, apocalyptic). The books of the Bible indicate, essentially, the following genres: **Genesis-Esther** and **Acts** are historical narratives; **Psalms** and **Song of Solomon** are poetry; **Job, Proverbs**, and **Ecclesiastes** are poetic wisdom literature; **Isaiah-Malachi** are prophecy; the **Gospels** are biographical narratives; **Romans-Jude** are epistles; **Revelation** is of a mixed genre: epistle, prophecy, and apocalyptic.

Even though a book may be predominantly of one genre, most books have a number of subgenres (or “forms”) within them, e.g., miracle stories, speeches, conversations, parables, law codes, genealogies, virtue and vice lists, allegories. Genre is important because it raises certain expectations. To an extent genre indicates function. That is because certain conventions tend to dominate or define different genres. Thus, conventions or rules that apply to one genre may not entirely apply to another genre.

Further, all writers of nonfiction, drama, poetry, and virtually every other genre except perhaps various technical instruction manuals, use literary devices (i.e., the means by which authors create meaning, emotion, attitude, etc., through language). Such literary devices include such things as flashback, “poetic justice,” alliteration, allusion, foreshadowing, and many other such techniques. Being aware of literary devices can enhance one’s understanding and appreciation of the Bible. Each genre has its own conventions. To interpret poetry as if it were law could lead to serious doctrinal error. The biblical writers also frequently use figures of speech. Consequently, one has to be aware of the different forms and styles of the biblical writings, and take a common-sense approach to reading and interpreting them. The ICBI puts it this way in the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics” (1982: n.p.):

1. “WE AFFIRM that awareness of the literary categories, formal and stylistic, of the various parts of Scripture is essential for proper exegesis, and hence we value genre criticism as one of the many disciplines of biblical study” (Art. XIII). Geisler comments on this article as follows: “The awareness of what kind of literature one is interpreting is essential to a correct understanding of the text. A correct

genre judgment should be made to ensure correct understanding. A parable, for example, should not be treated like a chronicle, nor should poetry be interpreted as though it were a straightforward narrative. Each passage has its own genre, and the interpreter should be cognizant of the specific kind of literature it is as he attempts to interpret it. Without genre recognition an interpreter can be misled in his understanding of the passage. For example, when the prophet speaks of ‘trees clapping their hands’ (Isa. 55:12) one could assume a kind of animism unless he recognized that this is poetry and not prose.”

2. “WE AFFIRM the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text” (Art. XV). Geisler comments on this article as follows: “The literal sense of Scripture is strongly affirmed here. To be sure the English word literal carries some problematic connotations with it. Hence the words normal and grammatical-historical are used to explain what is meant. The literal sense is also designated by the more descriptive title grammatical-historical sense. This means the correct interpretation is the one which discovers the meaning of the text in its grammatical forms and in the historical, cultural context in which the text is expressed. . . . This should not be understood as eliminating typology or designated allegory or other literary forms which include figures of speech.”

Major genres and subgenres are the following:

A. Narratives

A narrative (sometimes called “dramatic history”) is a story: an account of people and events moving over time and space. It is a recital having a beginning and an end. It includes those elements that the author deems important to the message he is conveying. Narrative reveals God’s action in history. Narrative makes what is abstract (i.e., theological ideas, doctrines, and propositions) concrete and personal—it helps us to “see” the truth applied in ways that a mere statement of truth does not do. Narratives exist in the Bible for a purpose, to communicate a message, even though the narrative itself is not explicitly prescriptive.

1. In the Bible, all narrative plots are grounded in a worldview that sees history based on creation and God’s providence. Nothing just “happens” in the Bible. Whenever you read a biblical narrative you must think theologically (because biblical narratives ultimately are about God). In fact, the history recorded in the OT (and in the **Gospels** and **Acts**) might properly be called “narrated or historicized theology.” The reason is that, the Bible consistently presents theological truth as intrinsically bound to true, historical events. Thus, God himself is central to all biblical narratives. Narratives help to “flesh out” biblical doctrines and commands.

2. What the Bible records is historically true, but biblical history is highly selective for theological reasons. For example, the 335 years between Jacob’s death and Moses’ birth are omitted, whereas the 40 years in the wilderness cover the books of **Exodus-Deuteronomy** (125 chapters). What may be important to secular historians may not be important to the biblical writers, and *vice versa*.

3. Genealogies in the Ancient Near East, including but not limited to the Bible, functioned to legitimate claims to position, authority, and power; they also served didactic or instructional purposes. Ancient genealogies display two features: *depth* (they are usually limited to five or ten generations); and *fluidity* (they are flexible in which names are included—they tend to omit names from the middle of a genealogical history). Thus, the genealogy in **Ruth 4:18-22** is limited to ten generations. It performs the didactic function of highlighting Boaz by placing him in a favored seventh position, and helps to legitimate David’s claim to the throne of Israel.

4. The main forms of biblical narratives are:

- a. *Reports* (brief records);
- b. *Speech stories* (a report mainly about what someone said in an historical setting; the main event is the speech); and
- c. *Dramas* (the longest and most complex narratives). Dramas typically involve: (1) characters; (2) a temporal, spatial, and social setting; (3) conflict; (4) crisis and climax; (5) resolution; and (6) following action or narration. Be aware of the following in biblical dramas:
 - (1) Details in biblical narratives tend to be minimal. Therefore, those that are given tend to be significant (characterization is mainly achieved by speeches and actions).
 - (2) In biblical dramas characters are key. There are three main character types: *protagonists* (central characters who are most indispensable to the plot); *antagonists* (the main adversaries or forces against the central characters); and *foils* (characters who heighten the central character by providing contrast or occasionally a parallel). For example, in **1 Samuel 25** David is the protagonist, Nabal the antagonist, and Abigail the

foil. In **2 Samuel 11-12** David is the protagonist while Uriah serves as a foil; although Bathsheba is important to the story, her role is minor. In **Genesis 38** Judah is the central character and Tamar is the foil; everyone else plays a minor or supporting role.

(3) Dialogue is very important, and may demonstrate the author's theme. The author's main point is often seen at the point of crisis and resolution. In the action following a resolution, a character or the narrator may also explain the significance of an event.

(4) Plot structure. Dramatic narrative plots tend to structured along three basic lines (although there may be combinations):

(A) *Plan-execution*—a plan is laid out and the narrative describes how it unfolds and is executed. For example, in **Acts 1:1-8** Jesus instructs his disciples to be witnesses to the ends of the earth; the rest of the book describes how this was done.

(B) *Mystery-explanation*—a question is posed, and then answered. An example is Samson's riddle which was later explained (**Judg 14:12-18**).

(C) *Problem-resolution*—A problem is presented and the narrative describes how it is solved. This is the most common form of dramatic narrative.

Examples include David's threats to Nabal and how Abigail solved the problem (**1 Samuel 25**), and the healing of the lame beggar (**Acts 3:1-10**).

5. Just as the paragraph is the basic unit for analyzing most prose, in a dramatic narrative the episode is the basic unit for analysis. An episode is a chain of events which are related, having the same location, time, and major participants. A break in the events, place, participants, or time often indicates the beginning of a new episode. The exception to this is in a drama involving a journey, where the location may continually change, but that does not necessarily indicate a new episode. Episodes can be compared with the different scenes in a play, television program, or movie.

6. Many narratives on their face may be ambiguous as to their meaning, and the point may not be explicitly explained. All narratives have been included in the Bible to make a point or convey a message. To distinguish between what is being *described* (e.g., when a character tells falsehoods) versus what is being *prescribed* is vital to correct understanding of the narrative. Repetition is often important to seeing a narrative's main point or theme. We must remember not to confuse the message with a summary of the story itself. The message is what the story is designed to teach the reader.

7. In some narratives the author or narrator makes explanatory remarks. When the *narrator* of a story explains things, he is always reliable, and is an important pointer to the purpose of the narrative.

Examples of such narrator's remarks are seen in **Gen 39:2; Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25; Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20.**

B. Poetry

Poetry occurs throughout the Bible. The main books of poetry are **Psalms** and **Song of Solomon**. Poetry is the major literary genre for expressing emotion. Poetry is not the language of objective observation, but is the language of imagination. As Ryken says, "the first principle of poetry is the primacy of the image. . . . Poets speak a language of images because they want readers to *experience* the content of their utterance *as image and concretion*, not simply as an idea" (Ryken 2002: 247). Poetry helps us to "feel" God's truths, and see them with our "mind's eye," in ways that simply reading doctrinal propositions does not convey. In order to communicate in this way, poetic expression is terse or concise. Time, place, and feeling may change abruptly. Poetry is characterized by the use of figurative language. Poetry does not only express emotion or imagination—poetry does contain doctrinal propositions, but might be said not to "major" in them (unlike, for example, the epistles). Poetry represents interplay between carefully crafted human speech and artistic effect, and is one of the ways the Bible addresses all aspects of our being—our mind (knowing), our emotions (feeling), and our will (doing).

1. A poem, like a paragraph, is limited in its meaning. It revolves around a central, integrated theme. "Biblical poetry is not just a random series of lines, but it has a beautiful, complete meaning structure" (Wolvaardt 2005: 153).

2. Just as the basic unit for analysis of prose is the paragraph, the basic unit for analysis of poetry is the strophe. A strophe is a grouping of lines that form a unit within a poem. For example, in **Psalms 1** verses 1-3 form one strophe; verses 4-5 another; and verse 6 the final one.

3. The primary indicator of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. The form this typically takes is a relatively short sentence that consists of two clauses [A and B, called a "bicolon"], with the second clause being related in some way to the first (sometimes Hebrew poetry will use single lines [a "monocolon"], or three lines in parallel [a "tricolon"]). Major types of parallelism include:

- a. *Synonymous* (i.e., lines A and B are very similar, virtual synonyms)—A: *The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer*, B: *My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge* (**Ps 18:2**).
 - b. *Antithetical* (i.e., the second line contrasts the first)—A: *For the Lord knows the way of the righteous*, B: *But the way of the wicked will perish* (**Ps 1:6**).
 - c. *Synthetic* (the second line develops further the idea of the first)—A: *For the Lord is a great God*, B: *And a great King above all gods* (**Ps 95:3**).
 - d. *Emblematic* (i.e., one line conveys the truth and the other an emblem or illustration)—A: *It is well with the man who is gracious and lends*; B: *he will maintain his cause in judgment* (**Ps 112:5**).
4. Parallelism is characteristic of most Hebrew psalms, proverbs, laments, blessings, curses, prayers, and even many laws and speeches. Consequently, it is not limited to the “poetic” books. See, e.g., **Isa 64:8**—A: *But now, O Lord, Thou art our Father*, B: *we are the clay, and Thou art our potter*, C: *and all of us are the work of Thy hand* (note that this is a tricolon).
5. Since parallelism is a characteristic Hebrew literary form, it is also found in the NT. See, e.g., **Matt 7:17**—A: *Even so, every good tree bears good fruit*; B: *but the rotten tree bears bad fruit*. **Matt 11:30**—A: *For my yoke is easy*, B: *and my burden is light*.
6. Psalms is not just a haphazard collection of psalms:
- a. *Psalms is organized into five “books”*: Book I—**Psalms 1-41**; Book II—**Psalms 42-72**; Book III—**Psalms 73-89**; Book IV—**Psalms 90-106**; Book V—**Psalms 107-150**. Each section is recognizable because a short doxology (praise to God) closes each book.
 - b. *The psalms have been classified by subject or type, including psalms of*: lament (e.g., **Psalms 3-7; 9; 12-13; 17; 22; 25-28; 31; 38-40; 42-44; 51; 54-58; 60; 69-71; 79-80; 90; 94; 120; 130; 137; 139; 142**); thanksgiving (e.g., **Psalms 18; 30; 32-34; 40; 65-67; 75; 92; 103; 107; 116; 118; 124; 129; 135-136; 138**); praise (e.g., **Psalms 8; 19; 66; 100; 103-104; 113; 117; 146-150**); wisdom (e.g., **Psalms 1; 36-37; 49; 73; 119; 127-128; 133**); royal (e.g., **Psalms 72; 89; 93; 95-100**); imprecatory (e.g., **Psalms 7; 12; 35; 40; 52; 55; 57-59; 69-70; 83; 109; 137; 140**); messianic (e.g., **Psalms 2; 22; 69; 110**).

C. Wisdom literature

1. The “wisdom literature” of the Bible (**Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes**) talks about the practical realities of life, but looks at life in a way contrary to “cultural wisdom.” Cultural wisdom begins with *power*—rights, freedom, position, and privilege. Biblical wisdom begins with *God*—focus on and trust in God as providing the way to life. Biblical wisdom is designed to provide us with a transcendent dimension in our life: there is a practical orientation to the wisdom literature, but that practical orientation is based on seeing our lives in relation to, and dependent on, God. Wisdom literature is to be transcultural (which may make it hard for us to apply if we are too enmeshed in our own culture). It is to be an aid to transform our lives. In the wisdom writings we have to first and foremost deal with our *soul*, not our knowledge. Wisdom literature expresses the experiences and emotions of people, usually from a “first person” perspective. In both the OT and NT, doctrine is always joined to growing in wisdom. Wisdom literature helps us grow in commitment, in character, and in community.
2. **Proverbs** is “wisdom literature” in poetic form. Proverbs are wise sayings that express what is *generally* true in life. They are not promises, prophecies, guarantees, or laws. A common interpretive error—*because genre is not taken into account*—is to view proverbs as absolute promises from God to believers today. For example, **Prov 22:6** says, “*Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.*” That good result often happens, and parents should train up their children in the ways of the Lord. However, many times people end up going wrong even though they have been trained up “in the way they should go.” Unfortunately, **Prov 22:6** does *not* guarantee a good end (it is simply a proverbial saying). Most of the proverbs use one or another form of parallelism. Further, they are not just haphazardly arranged, but are grouped according to theme or even verbal or sound links. Identifying the themes, groups, and arrangements of the proverbs, instead of just looking at them as disconnected sayings, can aid our appreciation and understanding.

D. Prophecy and apocalyptic

Prophecy can be one of the most challenging areas of biblical interpretation. Two main reasons for that difficulty are failure to apply the principles of biblical interpretation which have been discussed throughout this outline, and misunderstanding the genre of prophecy itself.

1. The context and nature of biblical prophets.

a. *Israel lived in a pagan context.* All pagan religion is essentially *manipulative*. It is people's system to explain the world, define their place in the world, and live with purpose. *Divination* is the attempt to know the future; *magic* is the attempt to gain advantage over others by following prescribed rituals. In contrast to the nations' religions, God gave Israel his *revelation*, and established his *covenant*. In this context, God instituted the prophets through Moses. Through God's revelation, Israel was to live *counter-culturally*.

b. *The nature of the OT prophets.* The prophet was to be: a man of God; the voice of and witness for God; a servant of God; and committed to God. He was to speak the voice of God, in contrast to the people's listening to the voice of the people. Likewise, he served as a critic of culture, in contrast to the people's succumbing to power-politics.

c. *Historical/Cultural Context.*

(1) God's prophets applied God's word during crises in the covenant relation between God and his people. The main activity of OT prophets was *not* predicting the future. Rather, the prophets all had essentially a two-fold message and ministry: (A) They warn God's people of the consequences of disobedience to the Lord's ways by *oracles of judgment*; and (B) They call God's people back to faithfulness by *oracles of hope and salvation*. (VanGemeren 1990: 78-79) Thus, OT biblical prophecy was as interested in the present as in the future.

(2) All OT prophets were concerned with changing people's behavior. Their message was, "if you do this, judgment will come; if you follow the Lord, blessings will come." As such, much of OT prophecy was "conditional" on people's repentance and behavior, even when a prophecy appeared to be unconditional (see **Jonah 3**).

(3) Historically one can see a shift in prophetic emphasis after Israel's exile in Babylon. Before the exile the prophets tended to stress Israel's rebelliousness. After the exile the emphasis shifted toward the responsibility of God's people to prepare for the full establishing of God's kingdom. (VanGemeren 1990: 213-14)

d. *Literary Perspective.* The prophets primarily were oral communicators; the prophetic writings were secondary. The prophetic books often contain many collections of spoken oracles that are not always presented in their chronological sequence. The metaphorical language they often used was grounded in imagery meaningful to their own culture.

2. The emphasis is on the person of God, not on specific events. Prophetic messages are more the "forth-telling" of God's word, than the *foretelling* of event-oriented predictions. The focus of prophetic messages is on God. Thus, the *fulfillment* of prophecy lies in a *person* (God), not in an event. Since fulfillment lies in a person, God is free as to fulfill his word *however* and *whenever* he chooses. God does not conform to human expectations. For example, the prophets never talked about God coming in the flesh, but rather of David or his descendant (e.g., **Isa 11:1**; **Jer 30:9**; **Ezek 37:24**). Nevertheless, God actually came in person, and the kingdom of God became manifested in the person of Jesus in ways that the OT prophets could not conceive (see **Mark 1:15**; **Luke 17:21**; **Matt 16:19** [cp. **Isa 22:22**]). "It was the literalists of Jesus's day who found it hard to recognize in him the fulfillment of their expectations. Those who looked for a military and political Messiah, the natural counterpart to David, failed to see that Jesus had more, not less, to offer. Those who accused him at his trial could not get beyond a literal understanding of his prediction that within three days he would rebuild the ruined Temple (Matthew 26:61; cf. John 2:18-22)." (Travis 1982: 139) We do not know how God's promises will specifically be fulfilled in the future. "If we acknowledge that ancient prophecies may be fulfilled in ways we do not expect, it follows that we cannot employ prophecies as detailed blueprints of the future. We may see general parallels between the prophet's situation and our own; however, we must leave room for unforeseen variations." (Green 1984: 105)

3. The emphasis is on patterns and themes. "Old Testament end-time predictions commonly are connected by themes and key words rather than by a strict chronological order (for example, see Dan 7:8-27; 8:9-26; Rev 16-19)" (Oropeza 1994: 195n.10). Because of their two-fold message (judgment and salvation), even though the prophets spoke about specific crises, similar themes run throughout the prophets. Those themes include: God's covenant with his people; the presence of God; God as king; God's Messiah; the Day of the Lord; the kingdom of God; the Spirit of the Lord. The NT writers saw the OT prophetic writings primarily as *patterns* that were fulfilled in the NT. Thus, just as Rachel wept when going into exile (the context of **Jer 31:15**), so Rachel weeps again when Herod killed the children (the context of **Matt 2:18** in which Matthew quotes Jeremiah's prophecy). We need to look for these themes and patterns. In them we begin to see the mind of God.

4. “Contingency” in prophecy. As oracles of judgment and salvation, prophecy has an underlying moral purpose. The implication of this is: “The biblical view of prophecy is that a forecast is not necessarily a prediction to be fulfilled at all hazards. Rather a prediction of disaster is a hint in order that proper steps might be taken to avert the evil. Similarly a prediction of blessing is an encouragement, that there might be perseverance in the right course.” (Ford 1979: 99n.72) God is not a static, impersonal force. Rather, to use anthropomorphic language, God reacts to the choices made by people in response to his decrees which have been articulated by his prophets. We see this, for example, in God’s “changing his mind” in response to Moses’ intercession on behalf of Israel after God had threatened to destroy Israel (**Exod 32:9–14**), and in his not destroying Nineveh after it repented (**Jonah 3:1–10**). J. Barton Payne puts together God’s unchangeable nature and the responses of people as follows: “It is not that God’s standards, His decrees, or His nature are changeable; it is, in fact, the very immutability of the character of deity which necessitates the application of differing aspects of His fixed principles, in accordance with such changes as may be exhibited by fickle men. Prophecy in particular has been designed by God for moral ends so as to motivate men into conformity with divine holiness. Should men, therefore, seek to take advantage of its holy assurances . . . change becomes then not only possible but inevitable.” (Payne 1980: 62)

God announced this principle in **Jer 18:6-11; 26:12-13; Ezek 18:1-32; 33:10-20**. Sometimes the conditional nature of a prophecy is explicitly stated: e.g., **Jer 38:17-18; 42:7-17; Acts 27:21-44; Rom 11:17-24**. Sometimes a prophecy is unconditional on its face, but the character of God and the responses of people provide unstated conditionality to the prophecy: e.g., **Exod 32:9-14; Isa 38:1-5; Jonah 3:1-4:2; Matt 19:27-28** (the promise by Jesus to the Twelve that they would judge the twelve tribes of Israel included *Judas*). Modern readers who have a “fatalistic or predestinarian outlook often take as absolute, Semitic pronouncements which in their own day would have been considered as less than absolute” (Ford 1979: 75). However, the people in the Bible did not regard God’s pronouncements with an attitude of fatalistic resignation. Actions taken in response to a prophecy might either postpone or hasten its fulfillment (**2 Kgs 22:14-20; Hab 2:2-3; 2 Pet 3:8-12**). In **1 Sam 23:10-14** David avoided entirely the consequences that God had revealed to him by taking prudent action. In **Acts 21:10-14** “Paul’s Christian friends did not regard the prophecy [of Agabus] as of inevitable fulfillment. Instead they treated it as a kindly warning whereby the disaster might be averted.” (Ford 1979: 99n.72)

5. Prophets build on earlier prophecies. God’s covenants grow and develop through the prophets who develop and transform them through their proclamations of judgment and salvation. The following are two examples of prophetic development within the OT itself:

- a. *The promise of the land in the Abrahamic Covenant* (see **Gen 12:1-3**). All of the elements of God’s covenant with Abraham (the “Abrahamic Covenant”) were refined over time. Regarding the promise of “land,” the land initially was undefined (**Gen 12:1**). It was first defined as what Abram could see (**Gen 13:14-15**), then was geographically described (**Gen 15:18-21; 17:8**), and finally was included in the comprehensive statement that “your seed shall possess the gates of their [lit., ‘his’] enemies” (**Gen 22:17**). The OT indicates that the promise of land was physically fulfilled at least twice (in the days of Joshua [**Josh 21:43-45**] and during the reign of Solomon [**1 Kgs 4:20-21**]). However, because of Israel’s disobedience, it was dispossessed from the land, so the promise was never ultimately fulfilled during the OT. The land was still longed for and restoration was promised during the exile (see **Ezek 20:1-44**). The promise was, again, partially fulfilled physically after the exile.
- b. *The Davidic Covenant* (**2 Sam 7:12-16**). Jeremiah recalled Nathan’s promises to David concerning a Davidic king and Levitical priesthood, in order to assure the exiles that God would restore them to their land (**Jer 33:19-22**). Jeremiah also built on Isaiah’s prophecy that a righteous branch would come from David’s line, and adds that the Levitical priests will never lack a man to offer sacrifices before the Lord (**Jer 33:14-18; cf. Isa 11:1**).

6. Prophetic idiom. The OT prophets spoke within the framework, and used the terms, that they were familiar with and that made sense to their hearers. The OT prophets spoke of Messiah’s eternal kingdom using the language and limited frame of reference of their own physical, Israelite context. E. F. Kevan correctly observes that “in all of their statements about the kingdom of God, even when uttering the most spiritual and glorious truths regarding it, the vocabulary which the prophets employ is always that of the kingdom of God in the forms in which they knew it in their own day” (Kevan 1954: 24). Thus, they used the imagery of the temple, and Zion, and spoke of the kingdom in terms of a literal king from the line of David, sitting on a throne in a palace in Jerusalem. This is sometimes called “prophetic idiom” (Irons, “Prophetic Idiom,” audio mp3).

Even in the NT, when God revealed the fulfillment of OT prophecy and when the NT writers point forward to the consummation of God's plan, they use the language that their contemporaries would understand. As Steve Lehrer describes it, "when God used the prophets to explain the spiritual fulfillment of God's plan in the New Covenant era, God decided to use the language of types and shadows. He was describing the New Covenant in the language of the Old Covenant. He pointed toward the spiritual goal of God's plan in the brightest and clearest way that the physical types and shadows would allow." (Lehrer 2006: 85) Examples of this include: Jesus describes his body as the "temple" (**John 2:18–22**); the church as a whole is called the "temple" or the "tabernacle" in **1 Cor 3:9, 16–17; 2 Cor 6:16–7:1; Eph 2:21; 1 Pet 2:5; Rev 3:12; 13:6**; Paul uses OT language of burnt offerings to describe money given to assist his ministry (**Phil 4:18**; see **Exod 29:18**); in Revelation the leaders of end-time nations are referred to as "kings" (e.g., **Rev 16:14; 19:18**); and the bringers of catastrophe are compared to horses whose riders are equipped with ancient armor and weapons (e.g., **Rev 6:2, 4, 5, 8; 9:7, 9, 17**).

7. Non-literal fulfillment. Because God's purposes develop in interaction with human choices and events, prophecies are not always fulfilled "literally." Stephen Travis gives examples of this: "Jeremiah and Isaiah predicted that Babylon would fall to the Medes (Jeremiah 2:11, 28; Isaiah 13:17), and Isaiah described graphically the total destruction of Babylon and the merciless killing of its people (Isaiah 13:14–22). But in fact Babylon fell to the Persians, who had gained control of the Medes before capturing Babylon. And Babylon surrendered without a struggle. The city was not destroyed, and continued to be inhabited. So, the prophecy of Babylon's fall was fulfilled substantially, but not literally. Similarly, Isaiah 10:28–34 prophesied the Assyrian invasion, vividly describing how the Assyrian army would come from north to south, city by city along the hills through Ai, Geba, Gibeah, Anathoth and Nob to Mount Zion itself. In fact, when Sennacherib came with his invading force he followed the sea coast and approached Jerusalem from the west." (Travis 1982: 137–38)

8. Changed circumstances and the manner of fulfillment. Prophecies were based on specific historical situations; therefore, changed circumstances affect the way in which the prophecies are fulfilled. There have been momentous geopolitical changes that have altered the social landscape since the OT prophecies were given. More importantly, the coming of Jesus Christ altered the "theological landscape" in profound ways. This means that, although similar themes and principles run throughout the prophets, and God's character remains the same, we cannot expect apparently unfulfilled OT prophecies to be fulfilled exactly as the people (or even the prophets themselves) may have envisioned. Travis explains: "Because prophecy is tied to a particular historical situation, it uses terms appropriate to those times. Abraham is promised land. Exiles from a ruined Jerusalem are promised a new Temple (Ezekiel 40–48). . . . And it is because the prophecies address one particular situation that, once they are fulfilled (for example, in the return from exile), we cannot apply them in detail to another, later historical situation (for example, the Middle East today). At most we can draw general parallels, as the New Testament does, between the situation addressed by the prophet and the situation of today's 'Israel', the church. . . . Because the form of a prophecy reflects the conditions of the time when it is uttered, we should not be surprised to find it being fulfilled substantially but not literally. A moment's reflection will confirm how inappropriate it is to envisage a literal fulfillment of some prophecies. For instance, there is Isaiah's prophecy of a time when Assyria, Egypt and Israel will live in harmony and be a blessing to the world (Isaiah 19:19–25). Today Assyria does not exist as a nation, and most of the inhabitants of Egypt are racially quite different from the Egyptians of Isaiah's day. Such a prophecy can hardly be fulfilled literally, though it could be a picture of the peace between Jew and Gentile made possible by Christ (cf. Ephesians 2:11–22), or the ideal relations between people of all nations in God's ultimate kingdom." (Travis 1982: 136, 138)

9. The profound effect of the NT on OT prophecy. The full meaning of any particular passage or prophecy may not be clear unless the whole Bible and the stage of redemptive history are taken into consideration. Dennis Johnson makes this point clearly: "To read the Bible contextually *as the Word of God* must include the completed canon as the ultimate context of any particular passage" (Johnson 2007: 156). The NT profoundly affects OT prophecy. In fact, one may say that the NT transforms OT prophecy and is the best interpreter of OT prophecy. Prophecy is an important area in which "the New [Testament] is in the Old [Testament] *concealed*, and the Old is in the New *revealed*." Thus, it is "illegitimate to approach the Old Testament text as though the New Testament had not been written" (Walker 1996: 313).

a. *Progressive revelation.* Graeme Goldsworthy states an important hermeneutical point, "It is impossible from the Old Testament alone to understand the full measure of God's acts and

promises that it records” (Goldsworthy 1991: 54). The reason why the OT alone does not convey its full, underlying meaning is the doctrine of progressive revelation, i.e., the truths of the Bible were not revealed all at once but were progressively revealed over time.¹ Thus, the OT is the preparation of the gospel; the Gospels are the manifestation of the gospel; Acts is the expansion of the gospel; the Epistles are the explanation of the gospel; and Revelation is the consummation of the gospel. Jesus and the NT authors understood this. They saw the entire OT as in some way a book about Jesus. He is its central person and integrating theme² and is “the final and the fullest revelation of what the promises are really about” (Goldsworthy 1991: 64).

Because the Bible ultimately is the story about Jesus Christ, who is explicitly revealed only in the NT, the NT writers generally look at the OT in a “typological” way (Ramm 1970: 260–69; Goldsworthy, 1991: 67–69). The NT reveals that OT Israel as a nation, and all of its laws, ceremonies, and institutions, and the OT prophecies concerning it, were “types,” “symbols,” “shadows,” “copies,” or “examples” of NT realities that were fulfilled and superseded in Christ and his church.³ Willem VanGemeran points out, “The coming of our Lord radically altered the understanding of the Old Testament. The apostles understood the canon in the light of Jesus’ ministry, message, and exaltation. The traditional understanding of Moses’ words and the Prophets had to undergo a radical transformation in view of the coming of our Lord.” (VanGemeran, 1990: 83)

Edward Young describes the transformative significance of Christ’s coming with respect to the issue of how to approach OT prophecies hermeneutically: “The revelations granted to the prophets had somewhat of the obscure about them. They are characterized as dreams and visions, and probably, enigmatic sayings. . . . Since the revelation granted to the prophets was less clear than that given to Moses; indeed, since it contained elements of obscurity, we must take these facts into consideration when interpreting prophecy. We must therefore abandon once and for all the erroneous and non-Scriptural rule of ‘literal if possible.’ The prophetic language belonged to the Mosaic economy and hence, was typical. Only in the light of the New Testament fulfillment can it properly be interpreted.” (Young 1952: 54, 215n.21) As Steve Lehrer says, we must “always read the Old Covenant Scriptures through the lens of the New Covenant Scriptures” (Lehrer 2006: 177). How the NT fulfills the OT “types” and promises is not self-evident. Goldsworthy points out, “It was not self-evident that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament promises. Those Jews who looked for a literal fulfillment of the Old Testament promises failed to recognize Jesus as the fulfillment.” (Goldsworthy 1991: 65–66)

b. *The form of prophetic fulfillment.* Because of the transformative nature of the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the New Covenant, the *form* in which OT prophecies are fulfilled in the New Covenant era are likely to be different from the Old Covenant *form* in which the prophecies themselves were originally given. The NT builds upon OT concepts, often in surprising ways. This has an important corollary or effect with respect to the form and content of the fulfillment of OT prophecy. David Holwerda explains, “When fulfillment happens, the institutions that were types or symbols of that reality are no longer necessary. They are displaced by the reality they symbolize.” (Holwerda 1984: 74–75) Goldsworthy adds, “This means that the form and the content of the fulfillment exceeds by far the form and content of the promises themselves. . . . *Literalism* involves the very serious error of not listening to what the New Testament says about fulfillment. It assumes that the fulfillment must correspond exactly to the form of the promise.” (Goldsworthy 1991: 65, 67)

Although the original OT audience may have understood a prophecy in one way, where the NT either explicitly or implicitly interprets the OT prophecy, it is not proper “to attempt a mediating position whereby the New Testament critique of [the OT prophecy] is acknowledged, but the Old Testament understanding of the [prophecy] is somehow allowed to stand, unaltered and unscathed” (Walker 1996: 313). E. F. Kevan notes, “Examples of the transmutation of the prophecies may be seen in the Davidic Kingship, the Servant, the Chosen People, the Hill of Zion, the institution of worship through Priest and Sacrifice, and the Messianic hope. . . . Our Lord himself transmuted many of the Old Covenant conceptions, such as the Sabbath,

¹ “Progressive revelation means that God’s revelation was not given all at once in the beginning, but was revealed by stages until the full light of truth was revealed in Jesus Christ” (Goldsworthy 1991: 64).

² Luke 24:25-27, 44-45; John 5:39-40, 46; Acts 3:18, 24; 10:43; 26:22-23; 2 Cor 1:20; 1 Pet 1:10-12; Heb 1:1-3.

³ See Matt 5:17; 1 Cor 10:1-6; 2 Cor 3:12-16; Gal 3:23-4:7, 21-31; Col 2:16-17; Heb 1:1-2; 8:1-10:22.

Ceremonial Defilement, the Temple, and the Davidic Kingship. It was because of His transmutation of the last that the Jews drove Him to His death.” (Kevan 1954: 27)

c. *NT reinterpretation of OT prophecy.* The NT demonstrates that the ultimate meaning and fulfillment of OT prophecies go far beyond the “physical” aspects of ancient Israel. In fact, as George Eldon Ladd states, “the Old Testament did not clearly foresee how its own prophecies were to be fulfilled. They were fulfilled in ways quite unforeseen by the Old Testament itself and unexpected by the Jews. With regard to the first coming of Christ, *the Old Testament is interpreted by the New Testament.*” (Ladd 1977: 27, emphasis in original) While some might say that the NT “spiritualizes” much of OT prophecy, it is probably more accurate to say that the NT *reinterprets* or *reapplies* OT prophecy. In the NT, prophetic fulfillment is played out in the physical realm but in a new, spiritual key. The “land” promise in the Abrahamic Covenant and the prophecies of a king and Levitical priesthood in the Davidic Covenant, discussed above, show how the NT radically reinterprets OT prophecies:

(1) The promise of the land in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3). The NT reinterprets the OT physical Canaan as a figure of the true “land”: the earth in its entirety (**Rom 4:13**); the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem (**Heb 11:8-16; Revelation 21-22**). Further, the heart of the land promise was Israel’s “rest” from all of its enemies, and full provision for all of its needs (see **Deut 12:9-11; 25:19; Josh 1:23; Ps 95:10-11**). That also has been transformed into the believers’ salvation or spiritual rest (**Heb 3:12-4:11**). Thus, in **Rom 10:1-10** Paul quotes from **Deut 30:12-14**, which in the OT context dealt with obeying the Law of Moses and God’s promise to return repentant Israel to the land. He reinterprets those OT promises as promises that faith in Christ will result in salvation.

(2) The Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:12-16). Jeremiah’s prophecies concerning the king and Levitical priesthood in the Davidic Covenant (**Jer 33:19-22**) are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Unlike what Jeremiah says, Christ’s reign is from heaven as Lord, not from an earthly throne as a political/military king (**Acts 2:22-36; Heb 1:3**). Further, Jeremiah’s prophecy of a permanent Levitical priesthood cannot be reconciled with the NT reality if one only seeks to find “physical” fulfillments of OT prophecies. The reason is that the Levitical priesthood was only a “type” or “shadow” which has been set aside by Christ under the New Covenant (see **Hebrews 7**). The NT makes clear that it is Christ and the church which now constitute the everlasting priesthood (**Heb 4:14-15; 7:11-8:2; 1 Pet 2:5, 9**). Thus, “When Jeremiah speaks of a restoration of the nation of Israel and the city of Jerusalem, an eternal dynasty sitting on the throne of David ruling Israel and keeping them safe, and an eternal and exceedingly numerous Levitical priesthood continuously making sacrifices, he is using the language of the picture to describe God’s New Covenant fulfillment; one that is far better than the Old Covenant pictures” (Lehrer 2006: 91).

10. Prophetic language and the fulfillment of prophecy. We must be careful in our use of language—do not confuse “literal” with “physical.” Garlington correctly affirms that: “‘Literal’ is a convenience term. We note B. Ramm’s qualification that the ‘literal’ meaning of a text is that which is ‘natural,’ ‘proper,’ ‘obvious,’ and ‘normal.’” (Ramm 1970: 119-23) In some cases, therefore, the “literal” meaning is a metaphorical meaning” (Garlington n.d.: n.p.n.27; see also Poythress 1993: 48-52). In other words, the “literal” way to interpret poetry is “poetically”; the “literal” way to interpret symbols is “symbolically”; the “literal” way to interpret metaphor is “metaphorically.”

a. Many contemporary “prophecy interpreters” do not understand how the NT applies OT prophecies, because they look at OT prophecies as if they stand alone and must be fulfilled in a literal, physical way in the modern nation of Israel. Their view is something like that of the Pharisees who failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, because he did not conform to their limited, “physical” ideas of what Messiah would be (i.e., a military and political ruler of Israel). They also miss the theological truth that the OT forms were “a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (**Col 2:17**). For example, although many think that what is “literal” can only be physical, and what is non-literal must be non-physical, the author of **Heb 8:1-10:1** “gives precisely the opposite definition: the literal sanctuary is the heavenly one and the figurative sanctuary is the earthly” (Beale 2004: 295).

b. The problem for such interpreters is that they wrongly think that “literal” means the same as “physical,” and that the opposite of “literal” is “spiritual.” In fact, the opposite of “literal” is

“metaphorical,” not “spiritual”; “spiritual” is the opposite of “physical” (see Tegtart 1999: n.p.).

(1) The senses of the words are as follows:

(A) *Literal*—the normal, straight-forward sense of the text; “*literal*” allows for figurative language, but in such cases refers to a “literal reality.”

(B) *Metaphorical*—the characters, events, and objects are not intended to be taken “literally,” but represent something else and point to another meaning.

(C) *Physical*—tangible, made of matter; “physical” is not to be confused with “literal,” because symbols, parables, and allegories usually contain “physical” objects, and spiritual reality “literally” exists but is not physical.

(D) *Spiritual*—non-physical objects or concepts, or the spiritual domain; “spiritual” is not to be confused with “metaphorical” even though a metaphor may contain “spiritual” elements.

(2) The four terms may be combined in the following ways:

(A) *Literal and Physical*—e.g., earth; mortal man; the kingdom in **1 Sam 14:47**.

(B) *Literal and Spiritual*—e.g., heaven, God; angels; truth; justice; love; the kingdom in **Mark 1:15** and **Luke 17:20-21**.

(C) *Physical and Metaphorical*—e.g., the pilgrim in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*; Hagar, Sarah, Mount Sinai, and present Jerusalem as interpreted in **Gal 4:21-31**; the key, chain, and abyss in **Rev 20:1**.

(D) *Spiritual and Metaphorical*—“Screwtape” in C. S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*; the “dragon” of **Isa 51:9**; **Rev 12:9**; **20:2**.

11. Visions and symbolic language. Much biblical prophecy, and most of the book of Revelation, was given in visions and is couched in symbolic language. Visions and symbolic language are *not like* the didactic prose of the Epistles or the narrative stories of the Pentateuch, the historical books of the OT, the Gospels, or Acts. The OT prophets typically prophesied in the form of *visions, parables, and “dark sayings”* (see **Ps 78:2**; **Ezek 17:2**; **20:49**; **24:3**; **Hos 12:10**; **Matt 13:35**). Similarly, the broad context of **Revelation** as a whole, beginning with **Rev 1:1**’s use of *sēmmainō* (“communicate by symbols”) and *deichnumi* (“show”), together with the repeated formula “I saw” (or similar expressions) that is used to introduce symbolic visions throughout the book (see **Rev 4:1**; **12:1-3**; **13:1-3**; **14:1**; **17:1-3**), denote “the general symbolic nature of the communication,” as opposed to the merely general conveyance of information (Beale 1999: 973; see also *ibid.*: 50-53).

a. *The meaning of visionary terms is not “self-evident.”* Visions and symbols are more like pictures or editorial cartoons. The visionary and symbolic language used in much of prophecy requires that we consider and distinguish four levels of communication: (1) *the linguistic level* (i.e., the textual record itself); (2) *the visionary level* (i.e., what John actually saw; his “visual experience”); (3) *the referential level* (i.e., the historical reference of the various particulars in the description); and (4) *the symbolic level* (i.e., the interpretation of what the symbolic imagery actually connotes about its historical referent). (Poynthress 1993: 41-42)

b. *This is hermeneutically and exegetically significant.* The concept that one should interpret “literally” except where one is forced to interpret symbolically by clear contextual indications “should be turned on its head” in connection with the interpretation of **Revelation** and other prophecy (especially apocalyptic) since, although parts are not symbolic, “the essence of the book is figurative” (Beale 1999: 52).

c. *An example of this is seen in Rev 20:1-6.* In that passage, John: “employs the words ‘one thousand years,’ ‘resurrection,’ and ‘life’ because he saw, at the *visionary* level, people who were resurrected and given life for one thousand years. Because the objects he sees and what he hears and seen and heard in a vision, they are not *first* to be understood literally but viewed as symbolically portrayed and communicated, which is the *symbolic* level of the vision. That this vision is shot through with symbols is apparent merely from the obvious symbolic nature of such words as ‘chain,’ ‘abyss,’ ‘dragon,’ ‘serpent,’ ‘locked,’ ‘sealed,’ and ‘beast.’ Therefore, the words ‘resurrection’ and ‘life,’ for example, do not by themselves give a clue about whether the visionary, symbolic portrayal has a one-to-one (literal) correspondence to its historical referent together with a figurative meaning or only an indirect figurative relation. Thorough exegesis must decide in each case.” (Beale 1999: 973-74) The same could be said for the phrase “1000 years” in that passage. To hold to a “literal” 1000 years requires, to be consistent, that the “key” and “chain” held by the angel in **Rev 20:1** are a physical key and chain, and that the

“abyss” of **Rev 20:3** is an actual pit in the earth which has a physical lock and physical “seal” (Waltke 1988: 273; Jackson 2001: n.p.). In fact, the abyss is not spatial, but “represents a spiritual dimension existing alongside and in the midst of the earthly, not above or below it . . . The abyss is one of the various metaphors representing the spiritual sphere in which the devil and his accomplices operate.” (Beale 1999: 987) Thus, most commentators, including premillennialists Ladd (Ladd 1972: 262) and Osborne (Osborne 2002: 701) agree that the “1000 years” is a symbolic or figurative term. Osborne observes, “Multiples of tens were commonly used in Jewish writings symbolically, and it is likely that this refers to an indefinite but perfect period of time” (Osborne 2002: 701).

12. Final guidelines for interpreting prophecy. Given the significance of the change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant for the interpretation of prophecy, our focus should be on the general spiritual principle or idea that is latent in the “form” of the prophecy, rather than focusing on some supposed “predictive event.” The following are suggestions for interpreting prophetic symbolism (Green 1984: 74-79; Oropeza 1994: 181-83):

- a. *Approach symbolism with humility.* We must approach prophecy in a spirit of humility. This is particularly important since much prophetic language is both ambiguous and figurative. Even Daniel found his vision beyond his understanding (see **Dan 8:27**). It should therefore not surprise us that biblical prophecy may be hard to understand.
- b. *Recognize the primacy of imagination over reason.* Prophecy is not like straight-forward didactic teaching such as is contained in the epistles. The nature of prophetic language allowed prophecies to be applied to different time periods, circumstances, and manners of fulfillment which were not apparent when the prophecies were originally uttered. Further, logical analysis does not unlock fantastic symbolism. Rather, we must “train ourselves to think in pictures.”
- c. *Find the meaning in context.* Imagery in the book of **Revelation** can be found in the OT. That establishes a context, but we must then ask how did *John* use the symbol?
- d. *Look for the prophet’s pastoral concern.* For example, in **Rev 2:10; 13:9-10; and 14:12** John calls his readers to steadfastness and perseverance.
- e. *Look for the main point.* Details serve to reinforce the main point the prophet is making.
- f. *Avoid sensational prophetic materials.* Those who claim to have discovered some “hidden” truth about the end times, or who have deciphered a biblical “code” are usually proved false.
- g. *Realize that many OT and some NT prophecies have already been fulfilled.* “Less than 2 percent of Old Testament prophecy is messianic. Less than 5 percent specifically describes the New Covenant age. Less than 1 percent concerns events yet to come. The prophets *did* indeed announce the future. But it was usually the immediate future of Israel, Judah, and other nations surrounding that they announced, rather than *our* future.” (Fee and Stuart 1982: 150).

13. Apocalyptic. During and after Judah’s exile in Babylon, a subgenre of prophecy arose called “apocalyptic.”⁴ This genre flourished from about 250 BC until AD 200 in Jewish and then some Christian literature. It is found in several extra-biblical writings. Apocalyptic writing in the Bible is primarily represented in the books of **Daniel** and **Revelation** (**Isaiah**, **Ezekiel** and **Zechariah** also contain apocalyptic elements). Common themes include history and the end of history, cosmic cataclysm, the battle between cosmic powers, and the righting of wrongs and the consummation of God’s plan and kingdom.⁵

- a. *Apocalyptic and prophecy.* Apocalyptic is a particular form of prophecy. Beale states that apocalyptic “contains a heightening and more intense clustering of literary and thematic traits found in prophecy” (Beale 1999: 37). Thus, all of the above considerations for understanding prophecy apply to the apocalyptic form of prophecy. As Joel Green summarizes, the essential differences between the apocalyptic versus the non-apocalyptic forms of prophecy concern apocalyptic’s dependence on symbolism and imagery and its concentration on the end or consummation of history: “In distinguishing apocalyptic from prophecy, the most obvious difference concerns the means by which the message is communicated. The prophetic ‘word of

⁴ The word “apocalyptic” is used both as an adjective and as a noun. Some researchers suggest that “apocalyptic” describes as certain kind of eschatology and “apocalypse” denotes a particular literary genre. See Carson and Moo 2005: 714. Most writers, however, use “apocalyptic” to signify both a literary genre and a type of eschatology. The term will be used in its broader sense here.

⁵ A good three-part series of audio lectures by D. A. Carson concerning the nature and function of apocalyptic, with special emphasis on the book of Revelation, entitled “Preaching Apocalyptic,” which can be listened to or downloaded for free, are available at: <http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library?utf8=%E2%9C%93&query=carson+preaching+apocalyptic>.

the Lord' gives way to revelation through a vision or dream. Symbolism, imagery, numbers—seen already in prophetic texts—come to the fore with greater elaboration in apocalyptic. Apocalyptic texts sometimes reinterpret earlier prophecies; for example, Daniel refers to Jeremiah's 'seventy years' in Daniel 9:2. Most important, though, is the difference in focus of the message. The prophets proclaimed God's working in and through the course of history. The apocalyptists anticipated a radical intervention by God at the end, beyond history." (Green 1984: 62)

b. *Apocalyptic and history*. Although apocalyptists focused on the end of history, contemporary historical events were significant: "In the apocalyptic perspective the contemporary scene is the stage on which God's purpose is worked out. In this sense there is continuity between the 'here' and the 'hereafter.'" (Green 1984: 62) Apocalyptists viewed God as sovereignly in control of history. He is moving history to his ordained end. In the consummation, God's faithful will be delivered and rewarded. This is particularly true in a Christian apocalypse such as Revelation. Ulfsgard points out, "A significant fact separating it [Revelation] from Jewish apocalypses and of the greatest importance for all exegesis is its affirmation that the turning-point in history has already taken place. After God's decisive act of salvation in Christ, the destiny of the world is in the hands of God and the Lamb." (Ulfsgard 1989: 11) Thus, although much apocalyptic writing features great conflict and what, to our eyes, may seem like bizarre imagery, apocalyptists remained people of hope.

E. Parables and allegory

1. Both parable and allegory may be seen as extended, narrative similes or metaphors—i.e., narratives or stories in which characters or other elements stand for something else, generally to illustrate a moral or spiritual truth. To the extent they may differ, a parable may be shorter, more formulaic, less complex, more didactic (intended for instruction), and linked, explicitly or implicitly, with some application.
2. The major OT parable is Nathan the prophet's confrontation of David in 2 Sam 12:1-10 (see also Judg 9:1-21; 2 Kgs 14:8-10; 2 Chron 25:17-19). Although an allegory typically is a *fictional* story told to illustrate a physical or spiritual truth, Paul applied the account of Sarah and Isaac versus Hagar and Ishmael (see **Gen 17:15-21; 18:9-15; 21:1-21**) as an allegory for Christian believers versus Jewish unbelievers (see **Gal 4:21-31**).
3. The central theme uniting Jesus' parables is the kingdom of God, which is both present now but will have a future culmination. The kingdom is "the dynamic power of God's personal revelation of himself in creating a human community of those who serve Jesus in every area of their lives" (Blomberg 1990: 326). The kingdom involves both personal transformation and social reform. In his parables, "Jesus clearly has three main topics of interest: the graciousness of God, the demands of discipleship and the dangers of disobedience" (Ibid.).
4. Jesus used parables to "elicit a response from the listener, either positive or negative" (Osborne 1991: 241). One way he did this was to reverse people's expectations or have plot twists in his parables: "The hated Samaritan, not the priest or Levite, is the one to bind the wounds of the robbery victim (Lk 10:30-37); normally the Samaritans were the muggers not the saviors!); the profligate son is the one given the banquet (Lk 15:11-32); the poor and the crippled sit at the great feast (Lk 14:15-24); the steward who alters the master's credit sheet is lauded (Lk 16:1-13). By doing so Jesus can force the hearer to take a new look at God's kingdom realities." (Osborne 1991: 243)
5. Jesus' used parables both to reveal and to conceal, largely depending on his audience (see Matt 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-13).
 - a. *Jesus revealed by:* (1) illustrating something in a memorable way; (2) inviting further reflection by those to whom the meaning was not immediately clear; and (3) endeavoring to win the audience to accept a particular set of beliefs or to act in a certain way.
 - b. *Parables conceal when:* (1) the hearer simply fails to grasp the meaning of one of the story's metaphors; or (2) even though he may understand the meaning, the hearer rejects the appeal to bring about some kind of transformation of his life. Thus, in **Mark 12:12** the Jewish leaders understood that Jesus had told the parable of the wicked tenants against them, but they were unwilling to change their ways and, instead, redoubled their efforts to destroy him.
6. Jesus explicitly interpreted only two of his parables, the parable of the soils (**Matt 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20**), and the wheat and the tares (**Matt 13:24-30, 36-43**). However, sometimes Jesus ends a parable with a short statement (**Matt 20:16; Luke 12:21**) or a question (**Luke 7:42; 10:36**). Such statements or questions focus us on the main thrust of the parable.

7. The key to interpreting the parables lies in recognizing what a small handful of major characters, actions, or symbols stand for.

a. *The basic principle of interpreting parables is “one main point per main character.”* “Each parable makes one main point per main character—usually two or three in each case—and these main characters are the most likely elements within the parable to stand for something other than themselves, thus giving the parable its allegorical nature. . . . At the same time, elements other than the main characters will have metaphorical referents only to the extent that they fit in with the meaning established by the referents of the main characters, and all allegorical interpretation must result in that which would have been intelligible to a first-century Palestinian audience.” (Blomberg 1990: 163)

b. *The major characters represent various aspects of the kingdom of God—they generally relate to God, God’s people, and those who are not God’s people.* An example is the parable of the prodigal son (**Luke 15:11-32**). Blomberg interprets it as follows: “(1) Even as the prodigal always had the option of repenting and returning home, so also all sinners, however wicked, may confess their sins and turn to God in contrition. (2) Even as the father went to elaborate lengths to offer reconciliation to the prodigal, so also God offers all people, however undeserving, lavish forgiveness of sins if they are willing to accept it. (3) Even as the older brother should not have begrudged his brother’s reinstatement but rather rejoiced in it, so those who claim to be God’s people should be glad and not mad that he extends his grace even to the most undeserving.” (Blomberg 1990: 174)

c. *The central theology or teaching of Jesus’ parables includes the following:*

(1) Teaching about God. God is sovereign. He commands his servants as he chooses. He is patient. He takes great pains not to destroy evil where good might be destroyed as well. He is generous and merciful beyond all expectation. He does not reward based on merit. He goes to great lengths to save the lost. He entrusts all people with the tasks of stewardship, and will judge them according to their faithfulness.

(2) Teaching about God’s people. Those who would truly follow Christ must be prepared to abandon whatever might stand in the way of whole-hearted discipleship. They acknowledge their utter unworthiness to earn God’s favor. They commit themselves to a life of stewardship, obeying God’s commands, and showing concern for the oppressed and afflicted. They bring their needs boldly to God in prayer. They must not begrudge God’s generosity to others, and must realize that their disobedience and faithlessness can lead to their forfeiting privileges which should be theirs. They look forward to the growth of the kingdom, and those who persevere to the end will be rewarded with everlasting fellowship with God and the company of all believers.

(3) Teaching about those who are not God’s people. Professions of allegiance to God or Christ are not enough; a life showing the fruits of repentance must follow. Positions of status in organized religion are no substitutes for true repentance and deeds of mercy. Now is the day of repentance; and no sin or degradation is so vile that God will refuse to forgive the repentant heart. All excuses for remaining outside the kingdom are remarkably flimsy. There will come a day when it will be too late to repent; then those who have spurned God will face a fearful judgment and eternal separation from all things good. (Blomberg 1990: 293-96).

d. *The forms of Jesus’ parables.*

(1) Eleven of Jesus’ parables exhibit a simple three-point form. They have three main characters from whom three main lessons may be derived; the characters include a master and two contrasting subordinates, who symbolize God, his people, and those who reject him. These include: *The Prodigal Son* (**Luke 15:11-32**); *The Lost Sheep* (**Luke 15:4-7**); *The Lost Coin* (**Luke 15:8-10**); *The Two Debtors* (**Luke 7:41-43**); *The Two Sons* (**Matt 21:28-32**); *Faithful and Unfaithful Servants* (**Luke 12:42-48**; **Matt 24:45-51**); *The Ten Virgins* (**Matt 25:1-13**); *The Wheat and the Tares* (**Matt 13:24-30, 36-43**); *The Dragnet* (**Matt 13:47-50**); *The Rich Man and Lazarus* (**Luke 16:19-31**); and *the Children in the Marketplace* (**Matt 11:16-19**; **Luke 7:31-35**).

(2) Ten of Jesus’ parables exhibit a complex three-point form. Although they appear to have additional characters or a more complicated structure than the above eleven, they ultimately disclose three main points based on three main characters or groups of characters. These include: *The Talents* (**Matt 25:14-30**; cf. **Luke 19:12-27**); *The*

Laborers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16); The Soils (Matt 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20); The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37); The Great Supper (Luke 14:15-24; cf. Matt 22:1-14); The Unforgiving Servant (Matt 18:23-35); The Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13); and The Wicked Tenants (Mark 12:1-12).

(3) Nine of Jesus' parables have two points. They have only two main characters or elements and teach only two lessons. They either have no master figure, or one master and one subordinate. These include: *The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14); The Two Builders (Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49); The Unprofitable Servant (Luke 17:7-10); The Seed Growing Secretly (Mark 4:26-29); The Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21); The Barren Fig Tree (Luke 13:6-9); The Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8); The Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8); and The Householder and the Thief (Matt 24:43-44; Luke 12:39-40).*

(4) Six of Jesus' parables have only one central character and make only one point. These include: *The Hidden Treasure (Matt 13:44); The Pearl of Great Price (Matt 13:45-46); The Mustard Seed (Luke 13:18-19); The Leaven (Luke 13:20-21); The Tower Builder (Luke 14:28-30); and The Warring King (Luke 14: 31-32).*

F. Epistles

Epistles are letters written to specific churches or groups of churches, or to specific individuals. They are “occasional” letters, which means that they were written as a result of, and deal with, some particular problem or circumstance that occasioned them.

1. First century epistles typically began with a “prescript” in the form of “From A, to B, greetings.”

Biblical writers often expanded this greeting. Epistles were written about matters that were concerns of, and expected to be understood by, the readers. The fact that **Rev 1:4** is an epistolary prescript shows that the book of **Revelation** was an epistle, as well as prophecy (**Rev 1:3; 22:18**). That means that the book of Revelation is not limited to some future “end times,” thousands of years in the future, but concerns the present as well. Also, its imagery was expected to be understood by the first century readers (see also **Rev 22:7**).

2. Epistles are a primary didactic genre. They teach us not only what to believe, but why to believe it, and how to apply what is believed. Epistles are, in many ways, more “systematic,” or based on rational and logical argumentation, than other genres. However, they are not purely systematic, logical, theological treatises. Instead, they contain elements of all the other genres as well.

V. Principles for Exegeting a Biblical Text

The above hermeneutical principles always apply whenever one is attempting to understand and interpret the Bible. This section begins to describe how to use those principles when exegeting and interpreting a particular passage of Scripture.

A. Preliminary considerations for beginning the exegesis process

1. Begin with prayer, and keep a prayerful attitude throughout the time you are reading, studying, and seeking to understand the passage. Remember **1 Cor 2:12-14**: ¹²*Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God,* ¹³*which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.* ¹⁴*But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.*

2. Let the Bible speak to you, rather than your dictating to it. This means that you must beware of your preconceived ideas of what a passage “must mean.” We must resist “reshaping our observations” so that they fit our preferred theology. We should respect the wisdom of biblical teachers and scholars. Their insights can greatly assist our understanding. However, God’s Word still speaks to us, in our own circumstances, today. Therefore, we must hear what God is saying to us even when (or especially when) it challenges or is painful to us. “If we ‘know’ what a passage *must* say, and allow that to overrule our observations, how can we learn what it *does* say? If we are too committed to a certain theology, it becomes impossible to correct any flaws in the system. It becomes harder and harder to learn anything new. Eventually, if we refuse to let the Bible speak for itself, our theological system can become a tradition whose authority supersedes that of the Bible itself.” (Dorani 1996: 17)

3. Be aware of your culture and your traditions when you approach the text. In addition to our own

theological views, we tend to take our own culture and traditions for granted—we accept them as “right” and “normal.” We often are blind to how our culture and traditions shape our thinking and our perceptions. In many respects the Bible was meant to challenge how we think and act. “Traditions are dangerous if (1) we immediately reject anything that appears contrary to them, (2) we quickly reinterpret new ideas to make them fit our tradition, or (3) we are so immersed in our traditions that we cannot see them” (Dorani 1996: 25). We need to let God change us through his Word, rather than “reshaping” his Word to conform to our own cultures, traditions, prejudices, and presuppositions.

B. Correct exegesis and understanding of any biblical passage are based on three component parts—*observation; interpretation; and application*

Observation, interpretation, and application will be considered as three distinct components of exegesis. Observation is *logically prior* to interpretation and application. However, in practice the three components overlap to a very large degree.

1. Observation answers the question “What does this passage say?” Observation is the foundation you must lay if you want to accurately interpret and apply the Bible. *Accurate interpretation and application depend upon accurate observation.*
2. Interpretation answers the question “What does this passage mean?” Much interpretation will be obvious and will flow naturally if one carefully *observes* what the text actually says its *context*. You cannot explain what a text means until you first clearly understand what it says. As you explain a text, you must make sure that your explanation fits your observations.
3. Application answers the question “How does the meaning of this passage apply to me (and to others) today?” Application “takes place as you are confronted with truth and decide to respond in obedience to that truth” (Arthur 1994: 11).

C. Understand the context

As was previously stated, *context is the most important factor for understanding and interpreting any passage of Scripture*. Context means “that which goes with the text.” Remember, there are *two types of context* which affect any particular passage: the *literary context* and the *historical context*. The *literary context* is the words, sentences, paragraphs, or chapters that surround and relate to a text. The *historical context* is the culture, customs, languages, beliefs, and history of the author and his original audience. As you are reading, you will find that literary context and historical context issues will become intertwined.

1. Get an overview of the entire book in which your passage is located. “Because the author communicated his message as a whole in one book, our exegesis of a particular passage must be in the context of the book from which it comes” (Wolvaardt 2005: 90). Follow the author’s flow of thought as it develops from the beginning to end of the book. Getting a good overview of an entire book is well worth the effort. Understanding the book as a whole makes the exegesis of all passages in that book much easier.
2. The overview should include the historical and the literary context. The overview should include the historical context (e.g., who was the author; who were the original recipients; what was the relationship between the author and the recipients; when was the book written; why was the book written), as well as the literary context. With respect to the literary context and “flow” of the book, pay particular attention to the sections and paragraphs leading up to the passage you are most interested in, and those that immediately follow the passage in question.
3. Discern how the book is structured. Most biblical books divide into major sections, which may or may not correspond to certain chapter divisions. There tend to be subsections within each major section. The more you study a book, the more you can see the book’s logical, literary divisions and subdivisions. Identifying how a book is structured into different sections helps you to understand the book’s major *themes* and *purpose*. Discerning those themes and purpose, and how the author develops them, is the primary task of the interpreter.
 - a. *Books might be divided into sections based on many things.* Sections may be based on subjects, doctrines, major characters, major events, reigns of kings, dates, places, etc. For example, **Genesis 1-11** focuses on global events, but within those chapters are subdivisions pertaining to creation, the fall of man into sin and God’s judgment, the flood, and the tower of Babel; **12-50** focuses on a particular people—Abraham and his descendants—but within that section are subdivisions pertaining to Abraham and the covenant God made with him, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Many of Paul’s epistles begin primarily with doctrinal emphasis, and end with practical emphasis (e.g., **Romans 1-11** are primarily doctrinal; **12-16** are practical;

Galatians 1-4 are primarily doctrinal; **5-6** are practical).

b. *The structure of individual books represents a hermeneutically significant design of the author.* Thus, the location of a particular passage may itself be significant. You can ask (if it does not seem apparent), “Why is this text here, and not elsewhere?” Three examples indicate the significance that the location of a passage may have:

(1) The story of Judah and Tamar in **Genesis 38** might seem to be out of place since **Genesis 37-50** otherwise focuses on Joseph. However, the placement of the story at that point heightens the moral contrast between Judah and his line and Joseph, who flees immorality, in the story concerning Potiphar’s wife (**Gen 39:7-12**).

(2) The story of David’s kindness to Mephibosheth in **2 Samuel 9** occurs within **2 Samuel 6-10** which portrays David’s reign at its moral, economic, and military height. David’s actions toward Mephibosheth reflect that goodness. The kingdom’s decline then begins in **2 Samuel 11**. This decline is reflected in David’s rashly rescinding much of his favor to Mephibosheth (**2 Sam 16:1-4; 19:24-30**).

(3) The parable of the prodigal son (**Luke 15:11-32**) owes much of its power to its location. **Luke 15** occurs in a major section of the book (**Luke 9:51-19:28**) in which Jesus is heading to Jerusalem. Several times Jesus is confronted by the Pharisees. In **Luke 15:2** the Pharisees complained that Jesus received and ate with sinners. So Jesus told three parables (lost sheep, lost coin, and prodigal son), all of which answer the Pharisees’ complaint. They all speak of God’s attitude toward people who are lost. The parable of the prodigal son is the climax. It engages the Pharisees themselves. The older brother in the third parable represents the Pharisees. Jesus is challenging them to “welcome restored sinners and join the kingdom celebration” (Doriani 1996: 36), not be left out while others are received by the Father.

4. Determine the author’s purpose and the unifying theme(s) of the book. Before you focus on an individual paragraph or verse, you need to understand how that paragraph fits into the purpose and theme of the book as a whole and the section of the book in which it appears. Remember: the context reveals the meaning of the words and verses. Try to state the theme of the book, section, and passage in your own words. *Clarity of articulation is related to clarity of thought and understanding.* Being able to clearly and accurately articulate the theme in your own words will help you to understand the theme. Inability to articulate the theme indicates a lack of clear understanding of the theme, and means that you need to read, study, and reflect on the book, section, or passage more. In doing that, prayer, good commentaries, and other resources, can be very helpful. A number of things will help us clearly see the author’s purpose and the theme of the book, section, or paragraph:

a. *Explicit statements by the author of the purpose for, or theme of, the book, section, or paragraph.*

(1) Often the author will make a statement that will tell you explicitly why he is writing. Such statements may be an introduction at the beginning of a book, may be a conclusion at the end of a book, or may be a thematic statement in the middle of a book. For example, in **Luke 1:1-4** Luke tells us why he wrote his gospel; **Jude 3** tells us the reason Jude wrote his epistle; **John 20:30-31** summarizes why John wrote his gospel; and **1 Tim 3:15** states why Paul was writing to Timothy.

(2) Sometimes an author also will make an explanation of a smaller unit within the book, or will explain what someone else meant. For example, in **John 2:21** John explicitly tells us what Jesus meant when he said, in **John 2:19**, “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*” In **Mark 7:19** Mark states one implication of Jesus’ discourse in **Mark 7:14-19** that otherwise might have been missed. At the end of **John 4:9** John adds a parenthetical comment to explain for his readers (who obviously were primarily Gentiles, not Jews [or they would have understood without an explanation]) why the Samaritan woman asked the question that she did.

b. *Thematic statements which are developed by, or summarize, what is in the rest of the book, section, or paragraph.* Sometimes the author may not explain why he wrote the book, or interpret what something means. However, the book may make a statement which is then developed, or which summarizes what has previously been said. Sometimes a statement may both end one line of thought and simultaneously transition to the next line of thought. Consequently, look for *key verses* that best express or summarize the author’s theme. For example, **Gen 1:1** says, “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*” That

statement both introduces and summarizes the creation narratives of **Genesis 1-2**. **Judg 17:6** and **21:25** both say, “*In those days there was not king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.*” Those statements summarize the decline of Israel after the death of Joshua. During the period of the judges there was no physical king but, more importantly, there was no spiritual king. Consequently, although the nation was supposed to have the Lord as its ruler (see **Judg 8:23**), it did not obey the Lord. As a result, it degenerated from fighting against external enemies (**Judges 1**) to internal civil war (**Judges 20-21**). **James 1** sets forth all the major themes of the book. **Jas 1:26-27** provides a summary of what true religion means, which is then explained in the rest of the book.

c. *Key concepts, subjects, words and phrases will indicate the theme of the book, section, and passage.* Look for the author’s logical flow of thought. Ask “how is this being developed?” Even without an explicit statement of purpose, or a clear thematic statement, key words and phrases (which often may be repeated) will disclose the important concepts or subjects which reveal the author’s theme.

5. Benefits of an overview of the book in which your passage is located.

- a. You see the message of the book as a whole, in its entirety.
- b. You gain an understanding of the author’s purpose for writing.
- c. You identify the main theme(s) of the book.
- d. You become aware of the structure of the book.
- e. You understand how each passage relates to one another and to the book as a whole.
- f. You have a sound basis for accurate interpretation and correct application. (Arthur 1994: 26)

6. Get an overview of the passage you are studying. “The most difficult thing for the novice to learn is how to skim each paragraph and summarize its main point. People seem to get bogged down in details and never surface for air. We need an overview here, and the student should try to write a six- to eight-word summary for each paragraph. When we read the paragraph in too detailed a way, the summary statement often reflects only the first couple of sentences early in the paragraph rather than the paragraph as a whole. Such an error can skew the results of the entire study.” (Osborne 1991: 23) Osborne reminds us, however, that “this is a preliminary overview and will be subject to correction if the detailed exegesis so warrants” (Ibid.: 24-25).

7. Knowing the structure of a sentence or passage is as important as knowing the structure of a book or section. It is often helpful to *chart or diagram* a sentence or passage, or use *color coding* to make clear the relationships between the various parts of the sentence or passage, so you know what is modifying what. That is particularly helpful when studying Paul’s writings, since he often uses long and complex sentences. Three examples indicate this:

- a. **Rom 5:12** marks the conclusion of a line of thought (the word “*Therefore*” indicates that). That verse also begins with the *first half of a comparison* (the words “*just as* through one man sin entered” indicate that Paul will be comparing that with something else, using the words like “*so also*” or “*so then*” [which typically complement “*just as*”]). However, Paul does not immediately make the comparison, but instead begins explicating the effects of sin. He does not resume his original line of thought and comparison until **5:18** (“*so then* as through one transgression”).
- b. **Eph 2:11-22** begins a line of thought in which Paul discusses what Christ has done in eliminating the distinction between Jew and Gentile for those who are in Christ, and creating “one new man.” **2:11-12** describes the former condition of the Gentiles. The phrase “*But now,*” which begins **2:13**, contrasts that condition with the current condition of Gentiles, as a result of the blood of Christ. **2:14-22** all modify and explain **2:13**—**2:14-18** explains what Christ has done; and **2:19-22** explains what Christ is doing (**2:19** picks up, in effect, where **2:13** left off).
- c. **Eph 3:1-19** continues Paul’s line of thought concerning the Gentiles. **3:1** begins “*For this reason,*” which refers back to what he has just been discussing. Then **3:2-13** forms a very long digression; Paul does not resume his main line of thought again until **3:14**.

D. Outline the book, section, and passage

1. A very useful technique for understanding the logical “flow” of a book, section, or passage is to outline that book, section, or passage on paper. Outlining helps us to graphically “see” how a book, section, or passage is structured. Outlining helps the clarity of our thought and understanding by forcing us to wrestle with a book, section, or passage, in order to determine what the author is saying and how the parts relate to the whole. Outlining also helps to clarify our understanding because in outlining we

have to put *in our own words* the main ideas of the biblical text.

2. Many Bibles contain subject headings inserted by the editors. Many commentaries will suggest outlines of books, sections, and passages. These can be helpful. However, if you are able to consult more than one Bible translation or commentary, you will find that different Bible versions and commentators see the sections and subsections within a book somewhat differently. You should not simply follow what someone else has said, but wrestle with these issues yourself.

3. Outlines may be either short or detailed. The important thing is to capture the logical flow of the author. The basic principles of outlining are:

- a. *The central ideas of the text* form the main topics of the outline.
- b. *Subdivisions of the outline* clarify, explain, give examples, illustrate, or list further details of a previous larger subdivision (see Arthur 1994: 119-28).

E. Read in an inquisitive way

As you are studying a passage and the surrounding context, pay attention to both the literary and historical/cultural *details* of the passage. “Make note of any details that are for any reason especially striking” (Doriani 1996: 18; see **APPENDIX B: Interrogative Bible Study For Biblical Preaching**). Ask questions (which can relate both to the literary and to the historical/cultural aspects of the book or passage). They will help to focus your understanding:

1. Who?—e.g., Who wrote it? Who are the major characters? To whom is the author speaking? About whom is he speaking?
2. What?—e.g., What genre is this? What is going on here? What are the main events? What are the main themes and teachings? What is the author emphasizing?
3. When?—e.g., When was it written? When did the events take place? When will it happen?
4. Where?—e.g., Where was this done? Where was this said? Where will it happen?
5. Why?—e.g., Why was this written? Why was something mentioned? Why was so much or so little space devoted to this particular event or teaching? Why should people act in a particular way?
6. How?—e.g., How did something happen? How is this truth illustrated? How are people supposed to do something?

F. Pay attention to historical and cultural details

1. The historical and cultural details in a passage may help to illuminate the passage. A detail is essential if the story could hardly stand without it. A detail is not essential if it plays little or no role in the text. It may not be immediately clear how essential a historical or cultural detail is to the interpretation of a passage.

2. For example, in Gal 2:11-13 Paul states that in Antioch he opposed Peter to his face for not eating with Gentile believers, and that even Barnabas had been carried away by hypocrisy. On one hand, it doesn’t matter where the event occurred—the issue was a matter of Christian doctrine and practice that is the same everywhere. On the other hand, the story gains poignancy when we recall that Jewish believers first came to Antioch because of persecution (**Acts 11:19**). Further, the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch when they learned that large numbers of Gentiles were coming to the Lord. Barnabas rejoiced and brought Paul with him to Antioch. They both encouraged and taught the new (Gentile) believers there (**Acts 11:22-26**). Disciples were first called “Christians” in Antioch (**Acts 11:26**). The Gentile believers in Antioch even sent a contribution to help the Jewish believers in Judea who were suffering from a famine (**Acts 11:27-30**). Consequently, that one historical detail of the place where Peter’s and Barnabas’ hypocrisy occurred takes on added significance. It underscores how shameful and hurtful not eating with fellow believers of a different background can be.

G. Pay attention to the literary aspects of the passage

The literary aspects of a passage are vital to the passage’s meaning. The following applies both to your overview of the book as a whole and your study of a particular passage in its more immediate context.

1. Key concepts. Key words and phrases are important for understanding the main themes and points of a biblical book or passage. However, key words primarily are important because they are pointers to the underlying *concept* or *subject*. We must be careful to distinguish between the *concept* and the biblical *term* or *terms* that describe it. Thus, instead of “word studies” we should think of “meaning studies.” “A specific meaning may very well be expressed by different words. If we do a strict “word study” by indiscriminately following the same word throughout the Bible, we can very well end up grouping sheep and goats together as the same things! In addition, we are most likely going to miss quite a few passages

where the same subject is treated, but with other words used.” (Wolvaardt 2005: 62)

a. *Two examples demonstrate the importance of identifying concepts, not just words:*

(1) When studying the concept of being “born again,” that phrase is actually found only three times: John 3:3, 7; and 1 Pet 1:23. However, the subject of the regeneration of the believer is actually found in many other places, but with various words that express the same concept. Thus, the believer is called a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15), is “created in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:10), is “born of God” (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1), is “united with Christ” (Rom 6:5), etc.

(2) Similarly, the Bible uses several different words to describe the concept of “money”—e.g., “wealth,” “riches,” “Mammon,” and “money.” 2 Corinthians 8-9 is Paul’s longest and most detailed discussion of giving money, but in that lengthy passage he never once uses the term “money.”

b. *Distinguishing between a concept and the words that describe it enables us to understand in depth.* No one word may give a complete depiction of the concept; but all the words together do. For example, consider the concept of “salvation.” The Bible uses several words to describe what the cross of Christ accomplished for us; together they all flesh out the concept:

(1) “Blood; lamb, sacrifice” are the language of OT sacrifices. They indicate that we had been guilty, but now have been forgiven.

(2) “Reconciliation; brought near” are the language of personal relationships. They indicate that we had been alienated from God, but now have been brought back into intimate fellowship with him.

(3) “Propitiation” is the language of holy process (i.e., the means by which reconciliation is achieved). It indicates that we had been under God’s holy wrath, but that now that wrath has been satisfied.

(4) “Redemption; ransom” are the language of the marketplace. They indicate that we were enslaved, but now have been set free.

(5) “Justification” is the language of the law court. It indicates that we had been condemned, but now are pardoned and counted as righteous.

(6) “Victory; deliverance; rescue” are the language of the battlefield. They indicate that we had been facing deadly enemies, but have been delivered and are triumphant in Christ.

2. Key words and phrases. Key words and phrases are those which are vital to understanding the meaning of a text. If they were removed, the meaning of the passage would also be removed. “It is imperative that you observe key words and phrases because they reveal the author’s intended message, his intended emphasis, and how he will accomplish his purpose” (Arthur 1994: 37). Note what the passage or chapter itself says about the key word or phrase. For example, 2 Timothy 1 lists the following facts about the key word “God”:

a. God made Paul an apostle by His will (v.1)	f. God does not give the spirit of timidity (v.7)
b. God gives grace, mercy, and peace (v.2)	g. God gives the spirit of power, love, and discipline (v.7)
c. God is the Father (v.3)	h. God gives power for suffering (v.8)
d. God is thanked and served (v.3)	i. God saved us (v.9)
e. God gives gifts (v.6)	j. God called us (v.10)

3. Repetition of words, phrases, and concepts. Typically, when a word, phrase, or concept is repeated, it is repeated in order to emphasize its importance. Therefore, one indication of importance is that a word, phrase, or concept is repeated.

a. *Repetition of key words or phrases may occur in a particular passage, a chapter, a section of a book, or an entire book.* For example, in 1 John the words “love,” “sin,” “abide,” and “know” are repeated throughout the book, but “fellowship” is repeated only in chapter 1.

b. *Taking note of which words and phrases are repeated is important for discerning the main message of the passage or book.* “The more a word is repeated, the more obvious it becomes that the word represents a subject. The more that subject is repeated, the more obvious it becomes that the subject represents a theme in the book.” (Arthur 1994: 37)

c. *Repetition at the beginning and end of a passage adds even further emphasis.* When an author says something both at the beginning and end of a passage (or section, or book), it is like putting “bookends” around the passage to show the importance of the concept. For example, Paul begins 1 Timothy by charging Timothy to “fight the good fight” (1 Tim 1:18), and ends the book with the same exhortation (1 Tim 6:12). Emphasis is further heightened when the author

also repeats the concept in the middle of the passage, section, or book. In **1 Tim 4:11-16** Paul lists ten imperatives about how a church leader should discipline his life and ministry. “Teaching” is mentioned at the beginning (**1 Tim 4:11**), the middle (**1 Tim 4:13**), and the end (**1 Tim 4:16**) of that list.

d. *Concepts may be repeated to indicate their importance, even though not with identical words.*

(1) Repetition may occur within a passage, chapter, section, or entire book. By watching for this, the depth of our understanding of the Bible will be greatly increased. For example, in **2 Timothy** the concept of “suffering” recurs, although different words describe it—“chains” (**1:16**); “hardship” (**2:3, 9**); and “persecutions” (**3:11**).

(2) The repetition of key concepts may not be obvious on the first reading of a book. For example, in **Acts** only two events are repeated three times: (1) Peter’s vision of the unclean animals (**Acts 10:16; 11:10**); and (2) the story of Paul’s conversion (**Acts 9:1-19; 22:1-13; 26:1-18**). That indicates the pivotal role those events play for the nature and growth of the church.

e. *Two special instances of repetition are: (1) parallel passages; and (2) OT quotations in the NT.*

(1) Parallel passages are different passages that record the same event, make similar statements, or discuss the same subject. For example, **Matt 24:1-51**, **Mark 13**, and **Luke 21:5-36** are all parallel accounts of the same event—Jesus’ Olivet Discourse; **Luke 17:22-37** is another discourse by Jesus on the same subject. Similarly, **Eph 6:5-8**; **Col 3:22-25**; **1 Tim 6:1-2**; **Titus 2:9-15**; and **1 Pet 2:18-25** all discuss the responsibilities of slaves to masters. Parallel passages should all be consulted, because each account may provide details or nuances not contained in the other accounts.

(2) OT quotations in the NT occur frequently. The OT source itself should be consulted for the context and historical background. Often the wording of the NT quotation may differ from the OT passage being quoted. That may occur because the NT writers usually quote from the Septuagint (LXX) version of the OT, which was a Greek translation from the Hebrew original.

4. Word order and other stylistic features of a passage or sentence.

a. *Often that which is stated first (for example, in a list) is done for emphasis.* For example, in **Gal 5:22-23** the “fruit of the spirit” begins with “love.” Indeed, the fruit of the spirit is *singular*, not plural (i.e., “the fruit of the spirit *is*,” not “the fruit of the spirit *are*”). Thus, the fruit of the spirit all go together. One might see all the manifestations of the fruit as manifestations of “love” (cp. **1 Corinthians 13**).

b. *Omissions may be significant.* For example, in **Ruth 1:14-18** Ruth makes a great profession of loyalty to Naomi, and leaves her own land and people for Naomi’s sake. In **Ruth 1:19-22** Naomi and Ruth return from Moab to Bethlehem. The women cry out “*Is this Naomi?*” But Naomi answers, “*Do not call me Naomi* [i.e., “pleasant”]; *call me Mara* [i.e., “bitter”], *for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.*” In her answer, Naomi completely overlooks Ruth. Her bitterness and depression at losing her husband and sons have turned her thoughts to focus only on herself. They have blinded her to the fact that the Lord has *not* brought her back “empty,” but that Ruth is with her.

c. *Two common stylistic patterns of repetition are parallelism and chiasm.*

(1) Parallelism is when two or more concepts are repeated in a pattern: A-B-A-B, or A-B-C-A-B-C. In **1 Cor 1:22-23** the repetition of “Jews” and “Gentiles” is in parallel form:

A—*Jews* ask for signs
 B—*Greeks* search for wisdom
 but we preach Christ crucified,
 A—to *Jews* a stumbling block
 B—and to *Gentiles* foolishness

(2) Chiasm is when at least two concepts are repeated in inverted order, i.e., in the pattern: A-B-B'-A', or A-B-C-C'-B'-A'. The first four groups mentioned in **Col 3:11** are in chiastic order:

A—There is no *Greek*
 B—and *Jew*,
 B'—*circumcised*
 A'—and *uncircumcised*

(3) Chiasm may include an unpaired central element around which the other elements are arranged; that central element may be the point of emphasis. **Eccl 11:3-12:2** is an example:

A—Clouds and rain
 B—Light and sun
 C—Consider the days of darkness
 D—All that comes is breath
 E—Enjoy your youth
 F—But know, God will bring you to judgment
 E'—Enjoy your youth
 D'—All of youth is breath
 C'—Consider God before the days of judgment
 B'—Sun and light
 A'—Clouds and rain

(4) Such patterns are not be limited to the repetition of words or phrases in a few verses, but may include the repetition of concepts that include an entire book (see Woolvaardt 2005: 222 [the events of Samson's life in **Judges 14-16** appear to be arranged in parallel fashion], 258-62 [the entire book of **Amos** as well as subsections and chapters of that book all appear to be arranged chiastically]).

(5) Parallelism and chiasm may serve a number of functions: (A) they create balance and beauty; (B) they help us to focus on the topic; (C) they help us to clarify the meaning; (D) they emphasize the point and help us to follow the theme with greater ease; (E) they help us to see new connections or contrasts between things.

H. Pay attention to grammatical details

Exegesis is all about discerning how one statement is related to other statements. Particularly important grammatical details that point the way to a correct understanding of the passage include the following:

1. Connecting words (conjunctions). The “small words” that connect the parts of sentences, or connect sentences and paragraphs to each other, are key to the author's train of thought. Connecting words establish the *context* in which a particular word, phrase, or verse appears. Connections show us how the phrases, sentences, and thoughts fit together. The author may be *joining* two or more things (e.g., **1 Tim 3:1-7** sets forth the qualifications to be an overseer in the church; even though the word “and” is not used until **3:7** to link the various qualifications, the *context and wording alone imply* that an overseer should possess *all* of the qualifications, not just some of them). He may be *contrasting* things (in **1 Tim 3:3** “*being addicted to wine or pugnacious*” is contrasted with being “*gentle, uncontentious*”). He may be *comparing* things (in **1 Tim 3:4-5** being an overseer in the church is compared with managing one's own family; in **1 Tim 4:1-2** Paul compares the hypocrisy that comes from accepting false doctrine to being seared with a branding iron). He may be *giving a reason or purpose* for, or *result* of, something (in **1 Tim 3:6** Paul states a reason why a new convert should not be made an overseer, and the result that can happen if that is done). In all of these ways the author establishes and makes vivid the true meaning of the text. Important connecting words include the following:

- a. *Words indicating connection or continuation*—e.g., and; also; in addition to; then.
- b. *Words indicating contrast*—e.g., but; even though; much more; nevertheless; yet; although; then; otherwise.
- c. *Words indicating comparison*—e.g., too; also; as; just as; so also; likewise; and; like.
- d. *Words indicating correlation*—e.g., as . . . so also; for . . . as; so . . . as.
- e. *Words indicating reason or purpose*—e.g., because; for; for this reason; for this purpose; since; that; so that; in order that; to; lest.
- f. *Words indicating result*—e.g., so then; therefore; as a result; thus; then.
- g. *Words indicating condition*—e.g., if; if . . . then.
- h. *Temporal or time connectors*—e.g., now; until; when; before; after; while; since; then.
- i. *Geographical or spatial connectors*—e.g., where; there.
- j. *Prepositions*—e.g., direction (to; from; toward; away from); position (on; under; over; beside;

through; in; among; with; into; out of; as far as; by); agency, time, and other (before; because of; concerning; throughout; on account of; after; for; about; in behalf of; against; according to; during).

2. Other grammatical details. Many interpretive questions will be made clear if we simply pay close attention to *what* the author is saying, and *how* he is saying it. That is largely determined by the grammar the author uses. Important things to consider are:

a. *The type of sentence.* A sentence may be: (1) a statement (“declarative sentence”—i.e., “They work hard.”); (2) a question (“interrogative sentence”—i.e., “Do they work hard?”); (3) a command/directive (“imperative sentence”—i.e., “Work hard.”); or (4) an exclamation (“exclamatory sentence”—i.e., “How hard they work!”).

b. *Sentence structure.* Sentences consist of: (1) a subject (typically a person or thing that is doing something and everything that modifies the subject); and (2) a predicate (a verb and everything that is governed by or modifies the verb [i.e., the “complement” of the verb]). Thus, in the sentence “John reads the book,” “John” is the subject and “reads the book” is the predicate (“reads” is the verb and “the book” [a direct object] is the complement of the verb).

(1) Most sentences are far more complex than “John reads the book”; they may have more than one clause. The *main clause* is the core of the sentence; it carries the main thought, and typically consists of a subject, verb, and object. *Subordinate clauses* include a verb (often in the form of a participle), and modify the main clause.

Subordinate clauses may indicate such things as cause, comparison, location, time, purpose, result, explanation, or conclusion. Subordinate clauses are often signaled by such words as: if, because, although, who, which, when, where, why, and how.

(2) Words or clauses may also be modified by words or phrases (a phrase is a number of related words but does not include a verb). For example, nouns may be modified by adjectives (“the tall boy”—“boy” is the noun; “tall” is an adjective), and verbs may be modified by adverbs (“pray without ceasing”—“pray” is the verb; “without ceasing” is an adverbial phrase). Modifying clauses, phrases, and words all add the grammatical details which indicate what is really going on, and the precise meaning of the sentence.

c. *The words within the sentence.* The primary types of words that make up a sentence are prepositions and conjunctions (see above), nouns, pronouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs.

Some of the more important considerations regarding words are:

(1) Nouns—singular or plural (**Gal 3:16** turns on the fact that “seed” is singular, not plural).

(2) Pronouns—e.g., this; these; who; whose; which; that; I; you; we; he; she; us; they; his; our; your; their. The pronouns themselves, or shifts between different pronouns, may be significant. For example, in **Luke 15:30** (parable of the prodigal son) the older brother doesn’t call the prodigal “*my brother*,” but rather “*this son of yours*”; that shows his state of mind, and heightens the drama and climax of the parable. In **Eph 2:11** Paul’s use of “you” denotes Gentiles, but his use of “our” in **2:14** and “we” in **2:18** indicates that Gentiles are now fully-equal with Jewish believers in Christ.

(3) Verbs—tenses (past; present; future); active or passive. Often a passive indicates a “divine passive,” i.e., that it is God who is causing a certain condition to occur. See, e.g., **Col 3:1**—“*If then you have been raised up with Christ*” (it is God who raises us; we don’t raise ourselves up).

3. Four semantic categories (Wolvaardt 2005: 67-74).

a. *When we look at language from the level of meaning (i.e., the “semantic” level), all words signify one of the following, depending on its context:*

(1) Things. This category refers to all things or objects (man; horse; kettle), including invisible objects (angel; spirit), and imaginary objects (dragon).

(2) Events. This category includes all actions, processes, happenings (eat; worship), including all movements, both voluntary and involuntary (run; fall), and mental processes (think; feel).

(3) Relations. This category contains the expression of the relationships between different kinds of terms. Relations are expressed by prepositions or conjunctions (in; at; after), or the use of a possessive suffix (’s—the *boy’s* dog) or use of a genitive construction (the dog *of the boy*).

(4) Attributes. This category gives the qualities, quantities, and degrees of things,

events; relations, and other attributes (e.g., green, good, many—describing things or relations; quickly, seldom, twice—describing events; too, very—describing other attributes).

b. *The same word or type of word (i.e., noun, verb, etc.) can belong to different semantic categories depending on the context in which it is used* (i.e., “table” can serve as an event—“He decided to table the motion”; an attribute—“The top of the mountain is table flat”; or a thing—“The boy cleared the table”).

c. *There is not necessarily a 1:1 correspondence of nouns with things, verbs with events, and adjectives and adverbs with attributes.* For example, in **Heb 13:1** “brotherly love” (Greek = *philadelphia*) is a noun (“Let brotherly love continue”—RSV; “Let love of the brethren continue”—NASB), which is expressing an attribute of the relationship of believers with each other, or an event (“Keep on loving each other as brothers”—NIV).⁶

VI. Word Meanings and Figures of Speech

A. Interpret words according to their time and context

1. Context determines word meaning. Standing in isolation individual words can stand for nothing other than themselves. However, “as a rule, a word signifies one and only one meaning in the specific context that it is used” (Wolvaardt 2005: 63). Consequently, *the fundamental unit of meaning is not the word*, but the sentence and paragraph which give that word context and meaning. Thus, “you should always ask the question: what does this word mean in this context?” (Ibid.) For example, both **Rom 8:39** and **1 John 5:3** include the phrase “love of God.” However, the context shows us that the first case refers to God’s love for us, but the second one refers to our love for God.

a. *To think that one word means the same thing every time it is used in the Bible, regardless of its context, may lead to serious error.* That is true because most words have a “semantic range” (i.e., a range of meanings). The same word may be used in more than one sense even by the same biblical writer. E.g., in **Acts 27:20** “saved” refers to being saved from physical death; in **Titus 3:5** the same word refers to spiritual salvation. In **1 Tim 5:17** “honor” refers to payment, but in **1 Tim 6:1** it refers to respect.

b. *Likewise, different words may have the same or similar meanings.* In **Matt 20:21** and **Mark 10:37** the words “kingdom” and “glory” have the same meaning. In **Matt 12:28** and **Luke 11:20** “Spirit of God” is the same as “finger of God” (both refer to the Holy Spirit). These also are examples of how *parallel passages* can throw additional light on a particular concept.

c. *A good concordance, particularly one keyed to the original Greek and Hebrew words, will show where and how words are used in the Bible.* A good biblical dictionary or a technical commentary also will discuss the different senses in which words are used.

2. A word can have only one sense or meaning in the particular context in which it appears. Even though most words may have a range of meanings, and may be used in different ways in different parts of the Bible, to try to import the entire range of meaning of a word in any given use may result in serious error. Thus, in **Acts 27:20**, the context clearly indicates that physically surviving a storm on the sea is the context for, and gives the meaning to, the word “saved.” Even though that same word often means spiritual salvation, to say that “saved” implies both meanings in **Acts 27:20** would wrongly imply that the pagan sailors were engaged in theological reflections while they were battling the storm, and even that Paul doubted his own saving relationship with Christ.

3. Be careful of a word’s etymology. Words change in meaning over time. The study of a word’s historical development of meaning is called “etymology.” Biblical words need to be interpreted according to their usage *at the time when they were written*. The entire history of a word is *not* present when an author uses a word in a particular text. Looking at a modern, non-Hebrew, non-Greek, dictionary may not be particularly helpful to determine the meaning of biblical words. The study of a word’s etymology may be helpful if one has the resources, but one must be very careful. A word’s “original meaning” may be completely irrelevant to what the word meant when it was used by the biblical writers. Indeed, most writers are entirely unaware of a word’s etymology.

⁶ Note that the NIV has changed “love” from a noun to a verbal participle, and added “each other,” based on its thematic, rather than strictly linguistic, interpretation of the verse, and its opting to see “love” as an event, not an attribute. This interpretation is not necessarily wrong. In fact, when we are interpreting a passage, changing the form of a word to match the semantic category to which its meaning belongs can help us see the meaning of a passage more clearly. However, this example exemplifies the nature of “dynamic equivalent” translation, discussed above in section II.C.

4. Do not assume that the meaning of a compound word is based on its two halves. A compound word is a word made up of two separate words. Such a word's meaning is not necessarily related to its parts (e.g., "butterfly" has nothing to do with either "butter" or "fly") (Carson 1984: 28).⁷ The clearest indications of meaning are *context* and how a *particular author* uses a word. A common example of the compound word fallacy is the Greek word for "church"—*ekklesia*: "The Greek word *ekklesia* (church) is sometimes explained as 'ek' + 'klesia'; 'out' + 'called'. According to this explanation the church is the people called by God. This definition of *ekklesia* is not supported either by the meaning of the word in the New Testament, nor by its earlier usage and can more correctly be defined as 'a congregation of Christians, implying interacting membership.'" (Wolvaardt 2005: 65)

B. Interpret words according to their idiom or figure of speech

1. All people speak and write using idioms. An idiom is an expression familiar to a particular culture whose meaning may not be predictable from the usual meanings of the words that compose it—as in the American idioms "kick the bucket," "bite the dust," and "croak" for "die." Different cultures have their own idioms. The biblical writers often use idioms. For example, "seed" (**Gen 22:17**) is an idiom meaning "descendants"; "the Law and the Prophets" (see **Matt 5:17; 7:12; 22:40; Acts 24:14**) refers to the OT Scriptures (both "seed" and "the Law and the Prophets" are instances of metonymy [see below]).

2. All people, regardless of culture or language, speak and write using figures of speech. A figure of speech is a word or phrase that departs from straightforward, literal language. Figures of speech are often used for emphasis, freshness of expression, or emotional impact. They establish connections between things that may have been hidden to us. Figurative expressions instill certain attitudes towards the things they describe, cause us to look on the world with new eyes, and lead us to contemplate the truth and application of the subjects described in ways we might not otherwise have done.

3. The Bible employs all of these literary techniques. Such literary forms need to be looked for and appreciated. Error will result if an idiom or figure of speech is interpreted "literally" in the sense of "physically." Indeed, the "literal" way to interpret metaphor is to interpret it "metaphorically"; the "literal" way to interpret hyperbole is to interpret it "hyperbolically."

4. Among the more important non-literal uses of language and figures of speech which affect what something means are the following:⁸

a. *Language of approximation.* The Bible sometimes uses numbers the way normal human beings use them, rather than the way mathematicians, statisticians, or scientists might use them. Two ways the Bible does this are the following:

(1) Phenomenological language. Phenomenological language is describing things as they appear to the naked eye, even though the actual or scientific fact may be different. For example, reference to the sun's rising (**Mark 16:2**) or setting (**Gen 15:12**) is how things appear to the eye, even though the apparent "rising" and "setting" are caused by the rotation of the earth. Likewise, **Ps 104:5**, which refers to the earth being established "*upon its foundations, so that it will not totter*" is phenomenological language.

(2) Round numbers. Biblical authors use estimates and round numbers from time to time. For example, the census numbers of Israel in **Num 1:20-46** are rounded to the nearest 50. **Matt 14:21** indicates that the "5000" men who ate is an estimate. There may have been exactly 4000 men who were fed in **Matt 15:32-38**, but a high view of Scripture does not require it—that figure may well be an approximation.

b. *Figures of comparison, representation, and substitution.* Very frequently the biblical writers will compare one thing to something else; or will represent something as something else; or will describe something by substituting terms that come from something else. Again, this is how people talk in everyday life. Important figures of speech of this kind are:

(1) Simile and Metaphor.

(A) *A simile is a comparison of two different things or ideas using words of*

⁷ D. A. Carson's book, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984; 2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996) includes common word-study, grammatical, logical, presuppositional, and historical fallacies. It is a short book, and well worth reading by all those who desire to avoid misinterpreting and misapplying Scripture.

⁸ The longest and most comprehensive analysis of figures of speech in the Bible is E. W. Bullinger's *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968 [reprint]). That book is over 1000 pages long. Also very useful is the much shorter *A Dictionary of Bible Symbols* by Owen, Grist, and Dowling (London: Grace, 1992), which lists most of the Bible's figures of comparison, representation, and substitution (similes, metaphors, personifications, metonymies, synecdoches, symbols, and types).

comparison such as: “like,” “as,” or the word pair “as . . . so.” E.g., **Ps 42:1** (“As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God”); **Rev 1:14-15** (“His head and his hair were white like white wool, like snow; and His eyes were like a flame of fire; and His feet were like burning bronze, when it has been caused to glow in a furnace, and His voice was like the sound of many waters”); **Gen 22:17** (“I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore”). Note that the examples of multiplication in **Gen 22:17** not only are similes, but are also examples of hyperbole, inasmuch as there are probably hundreds of billions or trillions of stars and grains of sand).

(B) A *metaphor* is a comparison of two things without using words of comparison such as “like” or “as.” See, e.g., **Ps 18:2** which contains seven metaphors for God—“rock, fortress, deliverer, refuge, shield, horn, and salvation”; **John 15:5** contains two metaphors—the first compares Jesus to a vine; the second compares his audience to branches.

(C) When analyzing similes and metaphors it is helpful to remember that each one has three elements: (1) the topic (i.e., the actual person, thing, or event being talked about); (2) the illustration (i.e., the thing to which the topic is compared); and (3) the point(s) of similarity (the components of meaning which the topic and illustration have in common). “The correct understanding of any simile or metaphor depends on correctly identifying the point of similarity between the topic and the illustration. The topic and the illustration are not similar in all aspects of their meaning, but only in *one particular component* of their meaning.” (Wolvaardt 2005: 138) Thus, in “*Benjamin is a ravenous wolf*” (**Gen 49:27**): Benjamin is the topic; ravenous wolf is the illustration; and being fierce and destructive is the point of similarity.

(2) Personification.

(A) *Personification* (also known as *anthropomorphism*) is a form of metaphor in which a non-human (God, an animal, an object, a concept or other abstract notion) is described as if it were a human or had its own personhood. For example, God is described as having hands (**Isa 49:16**) and eyes (**Hab 1:13**); rivers are told to “clap their hands” (**Ps 98:8**); hills “hear” and mountains “listen” (**Mic 6:1-2**); “Wisdom shouts in the street, she lifts her voice in the square” (**Prov 1:20**); “Mammon” (i.e., wealth) is personified as a god in **Matt 6:24** and **Luke 16:13**.

(B) Related to anthropomorphism is a *zoomorphism*, which is a form of metaphor in which God is said to have attributes of an animal. See, e.g., **Ps 17:8** (“Hide me in the shadow of Thy wings”).

(3) Metonymy. Metonymy is a figure of substitution when one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated, as in the use of *Washington* for the United States government, or the *sword* for military power. E.g., **Isa 22:22**—“the key of the house of David” refers to the concept of authority or control of the royal house; **Amos 7:9**—*Isaac* is used for the people of Israel; **Mark 1:5**—“all the country of Judea was going out to him” substitutes “country” for the *people* in the country (note that the phrase “all the country” also is an example of hyperbole [see below]).

(4) Synecdoche. Synecdoche is a similar figure of substitution in which a part is used for the whole (as *hand* for *sailor*), the whole for a part (as *the law* for *police officer*), the specific for the general (as *cutthroat* for *assassin*), the general for the specific (as *thief* for *pickpocket*), or the material for the thing made from it (as *steel* for *sword*). E.g., **Acts 5:9**—“the feet of those who have buried your husband [i.e., “the men” (part for whole)] are at the door”; **2 Sam 17:24**—“And Absalom crossed the Jordan, he and all the men of Israel [i.e., “many men,” since David had his followers, too (whole for part)] with him” (that is also an example of hyperbole); **Judg 12:7**—Jephthah was buried “in the cities [plural for singular] of Gilead.”

(5) Merism. Merism is when the whole of something is expressed by two contrasting parts. E.g., **Ps 139:2**—“You know when I sit down and when I rise up” (i.e., “You know every move I make”); **Isa 45:6**—“That men may know from the rising to the

setting of the sun” (i.e., “That men may know all day long” or “all the time”).

(6) **Symbol.** A symbol is when a material object or act is substituted for and represents a moral or spiritual truth; that truth may be in the past, present, or future. E.g., **Isa 42:6**—God appoints his Servant “*as a light to the nations*” (i.e., as an example, as God’s representative; note also that “as a light” is a simile); **Rev 20:1-3**—An angel had “*the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand,*” with which he bound Satan and threw him into the abyss and shut it and sealed it (those are all symbols of Satan’s activities being restricted; they cannot be “literal” physical things, since Satan is a spiritual, not a physical, being; note, however, that literal, physical things may also have symbolic importance—e.g., a throne symbolizes authority).

(A) *Prophets often used physical objects or acts to symbolize some truth.* E.g., **Hos 1:2; 3:1** (Hosea takes a prostitute as a wife to symbolize Israel’s lack of faithfulness to God, and God’s unfailing love for them in spite of their disobedience); **Acts 21:11** (Agabus bound his feet and hands with Paul’s belt to symbolize how Paul would be taken prisoner).

(B) *The same object can symbolize more than one thing.* For example, a serpent symbolizes Christ’s death on the cross in which he bears people’s sins (**John 3:14**), but also Satan (**Rev 20:2**).

(C) *Numbers may be used in a symbolic way.* For example, Jesus’ choosing twelve disciples/apostles (see **Matt 10:1; Acts 1:12-26**) connotes the twelve tribes of Israel (see **Gen 49:28; Rev 21:12, 14**). Thus, Jesus is the fulfillment of what OT Israel was meant to be, and brings the fulfillment of the OT covenants. The symbolic effect of numbers must be approached very carefully. Often the symbolic number does not correspond to an actual number in “physical reality.” In the case of the disciples there were, in fact, twelve of them, but the use of that number had a *symbolic connotation*.

(D) *The best guides for the interpretation of symbols are:* i. How the Bible itself interprets a symbol, if it does so explicitly; and ii. The context. If neither of these makes the meaning of the symbol clear, one should avoid arbitrary speculation, but simply admit that the matter is unclear.

(7) **Type.** A type is an OT illustration which was designed by God to correspond to a higher NT reality and application of the OT type (the NT reality is called the “antitype”). Thus, the type in some way is parallel to or represents the antitype. In order for something to be a true “type,” the Bible needs to clearly indicate that, and also indicate what the “antitype” is. Some cases are explicit: **Rom 5:14** explicitly calls Adam a type of Christ. Other cases may not use direct quotation, but NT allusions to OT texts may reveal a type. In **John 3:14** Christ’s clear comparison of his own manner of death with the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness (**Num 21:9**) renders the bronze serpent a “type.” Other cases may be more ambiguous. The use of similar words, themes, and patterns may establish a type. “Joseph, for example, was instrumental in preserving the covenant line from starvation during drought and famine, and his undeserved suffering was integral to his role as savior. Yet, the only Old Testament quotation pertaining to Joseph in the New Testament concerns Jacob’s blessing of Joseph’s two sons (Heb. 11:21). [Nevertheless] we do have warrant for seeing Joseph’s ordeal and its beneficial outcome, at least in broad outline, as foreshadowing the suffering of Jesus and the rescue that flows from it. Joseph is a key figure in the covenantal history traced by Stephen in Acts 7. First in Joseph, then in Moses, then in the prophets generally, and finally, climactically, in the Righteous One himself, a repeated pattern appears.” (Johnson 2007: 214-15) In trying to determine typological relationships, one must be careful to avoid over-allegorizing Scripture where there is little basis, such as was common in medieval Christianity, as exemplified by Origen’s view of the parable of the Good Samaritan: The man who was going down is Adam, Jerusalem is paradise, Jericho the world, the robbers are the hostile powers, the priest is the law, the Lévitte represents the prophets, the Samaritan is Christ, the wounds represent disobedience, the beast the Lord’s body, the inn is the church, the two denarii are the Father and the Son, the innkeeper is the chairman of the church, the Samaritan’s promise to return points to the second coming of the Savior. (Roukema

2004: 62) On the other hand, Christ and the Apostles saw the entire OT as in some way a book about Jesus (**Luke 24:25-27, 44-45; John 5:39-40, 46; Acts 3:18, 24; 10:43; 26:22-23; 2 Cor 1:20; 1 Pet 1:10-12; Heb 1:1-3**). Because of this, “The performance of *every* covenantal mediator and participant—patriarch, prophet, priest, judge, king, husband, father, son, parents, children, servant—ultimately is to be interpreted in light of the ways it reflects (or falls short of reflecting) the perfect covenant obedience to be offered by Jesus as the Lord of his people—in sum, the consummate mediation that would be achieved by Jesus the Son of God and brother of his people. . . . Thus the mixed behavior of covenantal leaders makes each, by virtue of his office, in one way or another, typological of the Coming Deliverer, in whom the roles of prophet, priest, and king would be perfectly fulfilled.” (Johnson 2007: 216) Johnson concludes: “A conscientious, Christ-focused reading of the Old Testament demands rigorous attention to each passage’s original literary and historical contexts. . . . Our identification of typological similarities (as well as contrasts between type and antitype) must be warranted by evidence in the text of Scripture, not merely the product of our own hyperactive imaginations. Literary or linguistic correspondences, as well as thematic resonance and broader contextual factors, are important evidence demonstrating a divinely intended connection between Old Testament persons, events, or institutions and an aspect of New Testament fulfillment, which is centered in Christ and encompasses his church.” (Ibid.: 329, 214)

c. *Figures of mental, emotional, and argumentative effect.* All figures of speech are designed for a certain effect, often to emphasize something. The figures just discussed might be called “representational” figures, because they are used to represent some entity or concept, using terms borrowed from something else. The following figures might be called “non-representational” figures, because are more related to emphasizing an effect or attitude in the mind of the hearer or reader. They tend to be more common in speech than in writing.

(1) Hyperbole. Hyperbole is an intentional, obvious exaggeration used to emphasize a point. E.g., **Ps 119:136** (“*my eyes shed streams of water*”); **Matt 5:29** (“*if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it away*”).

(2) Meiosis (Litotes). Meiosis (also called litotes) is to belittle one thing in order to magnify something else. E.g., **Num 13:33**—“*we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight*” (this way of speaking, by ten of Moses’ twelve spies, magnifies the size and strength of the Canaanites; note also that “like grasshoppers” is a simile); **1 Sam 24:14**—“*Whom are you pursuing? A dead dog, a single flea?*” Related to meiosis is *tapeinosis*, which is lessening something in order to increase it. E.g., **Ps 51:17**—“*A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise*” (i.e., God will “gladly receive” a broken and a contrite heart); **Rom 1:16**—“*I am not ashamed of the gospel*” (i.e., “I have full confidence in and count it my highest honor and glory to proclaim the gospel”).

(3) Irony. Irony conveys the opposite of what is said or expected. It may be found in two ways:

(A) *Irony is the expression of a thought which is designed to convey the opposite of what is actually said.* E.g., **Job 12:2**—“*Truly then you are the people, and with you wisdom will die!*” **26:2-3**—“*What a help you are to the weak! . . . What helpful insight you have abundantly provided!*” (Job’s friends did not give him any help or insight); **1 Cor 4:8**—“*You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us*” (the Corinthian church was, in fact, full of factions, disputes, and sin).

(B) *Irony may also be found in the larger context, not just in the words that are used, and in such cases conveys the opposite of what is or might be expected.* For example, in **Jonah 1:1-14** we find irony in that God’s prophet is disobedient to God and demonstrates no concern about the life or safety of other people, but pagans show concern for the life and safety of others and are earnest in their prayers to God.

(4) Euphemism. Euphemism substitutes an inoffensive or mild expression for an offensive one. E.g., **1 Sam 24:3**—“*cover his feet*” means “evacuate his bowels”; **1 Cor 7:3, 5**—“*fulfill his duty*” and “*come together*” are euphemisms for “have sexual

intercourse.”

(5) Rhetorical questions. In both the OT and NT frequently questions are asked. In the NT alone about 1000 questions are asked. About 300 of these are “real” questions which ask for information. The remaining 700 are known as “rhetorical questions” because they are not uttered to ask for information but are designed to give information, including information about the speaker’s attitude and opinions. Rhetorical questions express certainty and highlight a point the speaker is making. The answers to rhetorical questions are obvious. God’s response to Job in **Job 38-41** consists mainly of rhetorical questions. Jesus asked a series of rhetorical questions in **Matt 5:46-47; 7:3-4, 9-11**; and **Luke 12:25-26, 28**. Paul did the same thing in **1 Cor 1:13**; and **6:15-19**.

VII. Application of the Text

A. *Biblical application is inherently related to biblical understanding*

Biblical understanding is incomplete if it is not applied. “The process of interpretation is incomplete if it stops at the level of meaning” (Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard 1993: 401). The Bible never was meant to be studied simply to gain “head knowledge.” Rather, the Bible was intended to be God’s revelation for us to apply in our lives (e.g., **Deut 6:1-3; Psalm 119; John 13:13-17; 14:21-24; 2 Tim 3:16-17; Heb 5:11-14; Jas 1:22; 2:19-20**). “Failure to apply usually includes a failure to understand *fully*. That includes a failure to respond to God, who represents himself in Scripture. If we cannot understand or heed *it*, we do not understand or heed *Him*. . . . If a congregation has a flawless ecclesiology but ignores visitors from other social and ethnic groups, they do not truly understand the church. If a couple memorizes Ephesians 5 but the husband attempts to domineer the wife who resists him at every turn, they do not ‘know’ the passage.” (Doriani 2001: 22, 76) In fact, to know the Scriptures but *not* apply them is sin (**Jas 4:17**; see also **Jas 2:19**). On the other hand, as we apply the scriptures, our theological understanding deepens and develops, by being confirmed or changed (see **Ps 111:10**).

B. *Application ultimately is rooted in the goal of Christ-likeness*

1. Application of God’s Word is not merely external conformity to a set of rules. Applying the Bible is a means of *transforming our lives*. Paul said, “*I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*” (**Rom 12:1-2**)
2. Transformation of life is grounded in God’s grace which redeems us, opens our minds to the Scriptures, and gives us a new relationship with him through Christ. The goal of that transformation is that we know God and become like him—“*conformed to the image of His Son*” (**Rom 8:29**; see also **Matt 5:48; John 17:3; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 1:3-6**). Transformation is to demonstrate our “new selves” in Christ (see **Eph 4:17-24; Col 3:9-10**). Therefore, it should be “from the inside out” and should affect all aspects of our lives (thoughts, words, and deeds). It should be “a life that reflects the values, principles, and truths of the Bible” (Stanley and Jones 2006: 95). It is a holy life, based on a renewed inner self, that expresses itself in love toward God and other people (see **Matt 15:15-20; Mark 7:14-23; Matt 7:17-18; 12:33-37; 2 Cor 7:1; 1 Pet 1:13-17; Matt 22:35-40; John 13:34-35**).

C. *Good application is related to good hermeneutics and exegesis*

Good hermeneutics and exegesis lead to sound understanding of the text which, in turn, makes possible sound application of the text. We have seen a number of examples of that so far, including:

1. Looking to other texts to get a more complete understanding of a topic. Doing this helps us avoid believing in the heretical “name-it-and-claim-it” or “health, wealth, and prosperity” teachings, and helps us to pray in a God-honoring way (see section III.B.4.b., above).
2. Distinguishing between description and prescription. By doing this we learn not to set arbitrary conditions on God (see section III.D.3.b., above).
3. Taking account of genre. By doing this we do not accuse God of failing to keep his promises when our children go wrong even though we raised them right (see section IV.C.2., above).

D. *Bad application is related to bad hermeneutics and exegesis*

1. Treating the Bible as if it were a “magic” book. Sometimes people who are looking for God’s guidance for decisions open the Bible at random and accept the verse that their eyes fall on as God’s word to them for the decision they are making. That is treating the Bible as if it were a “magic book” or

even an occult charm. Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard (1993: 404) report a case of a young man considering whether to go to college. He opened the Bible at random and his eye fell on **Ezek 27:25** which talks about people coming from Tarshish to Tyre in ships. Although the passage contains no command for anyone to go anywhere in a ship, and has nothing to do with the armed forces, the young man interpreted the text as a call for him to join the Navy! God has never indicated that he will give us guidance in that way. Even the idea that “the first verse I see I will take to be God’s direction to me” is setting an arbitrary condition on God.

2. False spirituality—“interpreting” the Bible by “the Spirit” instead of exegesis of the Word. Some people cite **1 Cor 2:14** (“*the things of the Spirit . . . are spiritually appraised*”) and **2 Cor 3:6** (“*the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*”) out of context, to say that spiritually alive people don’t need to use their minds to do the work of serious exegesis, but need only use their “spirit” to receive illumination about what the Bible means. First, neither of those verses is contrasting the work of the Spirit with the process of exegesis. **1 Cor 2:14** is saying that only Christians can understand “*the things freely given to us by God*” (**1 Cor 2:12**). Unregenerate people do not understand these things, because if they had they would not have crucified Jesus (**1 Cor 2:8**). **2 Cor 3:6** is contrasting the New Covenant with the old one which some false teachers were holding onto even though Jesus had come. Second, this “false spirituality” method of “biblical interpretation” results in the Bible saying different things to different people. Any basis for an objective meaning of the text is thereby eliminated. The Bible can then be used to justify all sorts of unchristian and immoral practices.

3. Failing to take into account the literary or historical context. Many people misapply the Bible by failing to take into account the literary or historical context of the verses they rely on. For example, many people rely on **Phil 4:13** (“*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me*”) to reassure others or themselves that they will succeed at whatever business venture or other matter they “feel led” to do. However, the literary context (especially **Phil 4:11-12**) indicates that the application of that verse relates to *contentment regardless of one’s economic circumstances*. Paul was facing economic hardship and affliction, yet he was rejoicing in the provision he had received, and continued to preach the gospel despite all opposition.

4. We need to be careful when receiving “personal guidance” or “sense” that God is speaking to us in a direct, personal way through an otherwise non-applicable scriptural passage. **Hag 2:19** says, “*From this day on I will bless you.*” Someone who is praying about his personal needs may sense that God is using that verse to reassure him that He will take care of his needs that day. A spiritually mature believer will realize that the context of the passage is really talking about the blessings that God started to bestow on the returned exiles from Jerusalem as a result of their obedience in rebuilding the temple, and that there is no cross-cultural “absolute” in the passage that says that God will meet his personal needs that day. God may indeed speak to us in a personal way through his Word. However, many people have wrongly thought that God was speaking personally to them in this way even though He was not, with tragic consequences for themselves and others. Wolvaardt wisely cautions us: “Treat any impression that comes to one through a non-applicable biblical passage in exactly the same way as an impression that has come from a non-biblical source. This distinction between personal guidance based on Bible passages that do not have applicable absolutes and those which do have applicable absolutes, should always be made. When we are dealing with an absolute, we should present it as such because God wants to speak with authority through his Word. If it is personal guidance, not based on an absolute, then it should be regarded as such and with humility because I could perhaps have misunderstood God’s guidance! Not doing so could lead to the impression that the Bible is not trustworthy or that personal guidance is infallible.” (Wolvaardt 2005: 37)

E. Biblical ideals, doctrine, and examples

Application is similar to interpretation in that, just as *meaning* flows from the “top down” (i.e., the theme of a section and paragraph determines the meaning of a verse and word), so also there is a hierarchy of application from the general to the specific. Application all flows from the *goal* which is our transformation to become like Christ. To that end, the Bible gives us a hierarchy of sources of application:

1. Ideals. Ideals are the basic principles of Christian life. As sources of application ideals are closest to the goal. As such, ideals are the most general source of application. They “guide a wide range of behavior without specifying particular deeds” (Dorani 2001: 84). Ideals include such concepts as: “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind*” (**Matt 22:37; Mark 12:28-30**); “*you shall love your neighbor as yourself*” (**Lev 19:18; Matt 19:19; 22:39; Mark 12:31, 33; Luke 10:27; Rom 13:9-10; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8**); “*treat others the same way you want*

them to treat you” (**Matt 7:12; Luke 6:31**); “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (**Matt 6:33**); “to whom much has been given, from him much shall be required” (**Luke 12:48b**); “lay aside the old self and put on the new self” (**Eph 4:22-24**); “we have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him” (**2 Cor 5:9**); “the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (**1 Tim 1:5**); “do not store up treasure on earth, but store up treasure in heaven” (**Matt 6:19-20; Luke 12:21**). Note that these ideals are not all commands. Ideals give us a basic framework or mindset by which we order our lives. Ideals do not discuss specific actions. They are applied as we pursue those things and do those acts that are consistent with the ideals, and avoid those things and acts that are not consistent with the ideals.

2. Doctrine. Doctrines are the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. Doctrine is not a separate genre of Scripture, but emerges from all of Scripture. All genres of Scripture are instructive and have theological and doctrinal implications. Christian doctrine describes the nature of true reality—the nature of God, of human beings, spiritual truths and their implications. Doctrines include such things as: the God of the Bible is the one true God; God is Trinity; God created the world, and created human beings in his image; all humans have fallen into sin, and the power of indwelling sin is at the core of our being; God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ; we cannot save ourselves from the power and consequences of sin, but can only receive salvation by God’s grace through faith in Christ; the Holy Spirit indwells believers; Christ calls us to live lives of faithfulness and obedience to him by living lives of love and service to others; Christ is coming again, and will judge the living and the dead; all people have an eternal destiny, either eternal death in hell for unbelievers or eternal life on the new earth for believers.

a. *Doctrine is applied by asking such questions as, “If doctrine X is true, what follows?” and “How would my behavior change if it came into conformity with my professed beliefs?”*

(Doriani 2001: 85-86). We then apply that doctrine by living in conformity with it.

b. *Because doctrine gives us a true picture of the world, it redirects our minds.* As our beliefs change, so should our attitudes and our actions. For example:

(1) One implication of the doctrine that God is Trinity. God is Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). That means that God is a *relational* being. Each person of the Trinity is in a perfect and loving relationship with the other persons of the Trinity. God has created us in his image. We should therefore be relational and loving. We should not withdraw from people, but should strive to be in loving and harmonious relations with others.

(2) One implication of the doctrine of humanity’s innate sinfulness. Because of the Christian doctrine of the nature of humanity’s sinfulness, the power of indwelling sin that exists in everyone, and people’s separation from God, we should not be surprised when people lie, cheat, steal, act immorally, and betray us. We should not be surprised when people magnify themselves and their own achievements. We know that they do not have the inner peace, security, and significance that can only come from a relationship with Christ. Therefore, they are trying to achieve peace, security, and significance in other ways. As we truly understand these things—which stem from Christian doctrine—our attitudes toward others will change, and we will not respond to hurts and problems the way others do.

3. Examples. Both the OT and NT narratives provide examples to us for our instruction (see **Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:1-6**). Jesus cited biblical examples in responding to Satan and to the Pharisees (see **Matt 4:4, 7; 12:1-7**). Paul told believers to “be imitators of me” (**1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17**). The Bible is honest about the sins even of believers (e.g., Noah’s drunkenness, **Gen 9:21**; Abram’s lie and instruction to Sarai to lie, **Gen 12:10-20**; David’s adultery and murder, **2 Samuel 11**). Thus, examples can be positive or negative, good or bad.

a. *Biblical narratives invite us to evaluate the characters and their acts, and to identify with characters to find spiritual direction or warning.* When a series of faithful acts creates a pattern, especially if God blesses the actions, it guides us today. Isolated acts are not normative, especially if God does not bless them and they do not correspond to some prescribed standard of behavior. When a narrative does not commend or condemn a character or his acts and there is no pattern, we should hesitate to draw ethical lessons from the narrative example.

b. *Even biblical songs and prayers shape us as we meditate on them and make them our own.* “People value what they praise. If we praise God for his justice, we prize justice. If we praise him for his loving-kindness, we cherish loving-kindness. By praising God for such qualities, we treasure them and are drawn to them ourselves” (Doriani 2001: 92).

c. *We must be very careful not to turn examples into commands.* It is *vital* that we remember the important distinction between description and prescription (see section III.D., above). Drawing on biblical examples presupposes that we know the goal, biblical ideals, and Christian doctrine. Examples should more properly be seen as evidence for or against applications we propose to make from other types of texts.

F. Biblical laws, commands, and rules

Laws, commands, and rules are more specific than ideals, doctrines, and examples. In any era law has two essential functions: (1) it condemns unbelievers; and (2) it functions as a guide for believers in how to show their love for God (Lehrer 2006: 122). Like the rest of biblical revelation, divine law progressively unfolds throughout the Bible.

1. Overview of biblical law.

a. *Human beings are made in the image of God, and knowledge of God and of right and wrong are written into the nature of all people.* That was true even before God gave the Ten Commandments and the rest of OT law to Moses (see **Rom 1:18-23; 2:14-16**). Mosaic law was given in order to formally state principles of divine law, but also to mandate specific rules and applications for the nation of Israel which stood in a distinct covenantal relationship to God. Thus, “the law of God exists quite independently of Mosaic legislation. There is indeed overlap, but not exact duplication.” (Wells and Zaspel 2002: 143) Mosaic law reveals the character and holiness of God (the phrase “*I am the Lord your God*” is repeated throughout the Mosaic law and ordinances). The law also was designed to reveal sin (**Rom 3:19-20; 7:7-12**); “increase” sin (**Rom 4:15; 5:13-14, 20**); and imprison under sin (**Rom 7:23; 8:2-3; Gal 3:10-13; 5:1; Col 2:14**). It thereby led people to Christ (**Gal 3:15-4:31**; see also **Rom 7:24-25**).

b. *Jesus fulfilled the law on our behalf on the cross* (**Matt 5:17-20; John 19:30; Rom 10:4; Eph 2:14-15; Col 2:13-15**). Jesus said he came to “fulfill” the law (**Matt 5:17**). That word normally means “to bring to its intended meaning” (Hays 2001: 29). “Jesus was not stating that the Law is eternally binding on New Testament believers. If that were the case, Christians today would be required to keep the sacrificial and ceremonial laws as well as the moral ones, and that would clearly violate other portions of the New Testament” (Ibid.). Instead, Jesus’ work on the cross brought the *purpose* and the *binding nature* of OT (Mosaic) law to an end. Thus, Christians are not subject to or bound by the OT law and its laws, commands, and rules (**Rom 6:14; 7:6; Gal 3:1-4:7; 5:18**; see also **Col 2:8-17**). “Accordingly, we should not expect the Old Covenant to be the ultimate expression of the believer’s rule of life under the New Covenant” (Wells and Zaspel 2002: 149).

c. *Christ’s coming began the New Covenant and, with it, the new era of “the law of Christ”* (**Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 9:19-21**; see also **Rom 7:4; 8:2**). With the coming of Christ there has been “a change of law” (**Heb 7:11-12**). The Old Covenant is “*obsolete*” (**Heb 8:13**). “*He takes away the first in order to establish the second*” (**Heb 10:9**). Instead of being subject to the Old Covenant, we are now subject to the New Covenant—the “*law of Christ*” (**Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8-13; 9:15**). The “*law of Christ*” is not only the teachings of Jesus but also that of the NT writers (see, e.g., **John 14:24-26; 16:12-15; 17:8, 18-20; 1 Cor 14:37; Gal 1:11-12; Eph 2:20; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Thess 2:15; 3:6, 14; Heb 2:3; Rev 1:11**). With that background, we may consider the application of OT and NT laws, commands, and rules.

2. OT laws, commands, and rules. No one is *directly* under *any* of the OT laws, commands, and rules today since we are in the New Covenant era and the law of Christ. Nevertheless, we may still gain insight from them for our lives. “Jesus is to Moses what the butterfly is to the caterpillar. . . . In Christ Moses reaches maturity and emerges in full bloom. Moses’ law still has relevance, but only as it comes to us from the hands of the Lord Jesus. Christians today must still read Moses, and for great profit, but when they read him they must wear their Christian lenses” (Wells and Zaspel 2002: 157). The way to look at OT laws, commands, and rules is essentially two-fold.

a. *View OT laws, commands, and rules as specific applications or examples of universal or general principles, and apply them analogously.*

(1) OT laws, commands, and rules: “supply inspired examples of the way to embody broad principles. *Rules incarnate, illustrate, and clarify principles.* The legal sections of the Mosaic code seem comprehensive at first, but closer inspection reveals them to be case laws that illustrate general principles. These rules are culture-specific, making them hard to translate from one culture to another. Yet they supply the particularity, the

detailed embodiment of biblical rules, that we need.” (Doriani 2001: 246)

(2) OT laws, commands, and rules only apply today to the extent that they are truly analogous both to New Covenant principles and to our contemporary circumstances.

Because the change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant resulted in a “*change of law*” (**Heb 7:12**) to the extent that either the OT law, or the circumstances on which it was based, are *not* similar to the NT law of Christ or to the contemporary circumstances in which we find ourselves, any analogy between the OT law or situation and our situation is weakened and rendered less valid (or even invalid).

b. *See how the NT treats the OT laws, commands, and rules.*

(1) Our task as interpreters is to know how the NT deals with OT law. “Finding how a given law from Moses receives treatment by Jesus and/or the NT writers demands attention to detail. But this is the interpreter’s task exactly—he must use his entire Bible. He must read his entire Bible as a Christian, from his New Covenant perspective, to be sure, but he must use his entire Bible. The law of Moses finds its fulfillment in the law of Christ, and we must look to see *how* this is so in any given case.” (Wells and Zaspel 2002: 160)

(2) Many times Jesus and the NT writers altered OT laws by:

(A) *Changing their basis*—honoring parents relates to believers on the earth, not Israelites in the land of Canaan, and is evidence that a child’s “profession of faith is genuine . . . [and if] they persevere in this they can be secure that they really are believers and will spend eternity with the God they love” (Lehrer 2006: 137-46, **Eph 6:3**).

(B) *Restricting them*—divorce (**Matt 5:31-32**).

(C) *Abrogating them*—food laws (**Mark 7:19**); circumcision (**Gal 5:1-2**).

(D) *Extending them*—murder includes hatred (**Matt 5:21-22**); adultery includes lust (**Matt 5:27-28**).

(E) *Abrogating and extending them at the same time, or otherwise changing them*—we should not make vows at all, but be truthful in all circumstances (**Matt 5:33-37**); instead of “an eye for an eye” we should voluntarily do good to people whether they are good or bad to us (**Matt 5:38-42**); loving our neighbor includes loving our enemies (**Matt 5:43-47**).

c. *Three examples show how OT laws, commands, and rules were looked at as specific applications of universal principles in the NT, and applied analogously.*

(1) The OT Mosaic law in general. Jesus and Paul both quote OT laws as examples of a greater principle—the law of love (**Matt 22:36-40**; **Rom 13:9**).

(2) The OT Sabbath laws. Jesus cites the Sabbath laws as pointing to himself and to the principle of compassion (**Matt 12:1-8**; **Mark 2:23-28**; **Luke 6:1-11**). He held that even this most basic of OT laws could be violated when adhering to it would violate the underlying principle.

(3) **Deut 25:4**—“*Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain.*” On two occasions (**1 Cor 9:9**; **1 Tim 5:18**) Paul quoted the law regarding oxen. Both times he looked to that law *as example or application of a broader principle*. Paul quoted the law in support of the principle that *those who lead in the church and teach the word of God should be paid*. Note that neither the literary nor the historical context of the OT verse indicates anything about paying spiritual leaders. As with prophecy, the NT sometimes applies OT passages in new ways. That is why we must look at the OT through NT eyes (not the other way around).

d. *Jesus’ example of the Sabbath law and Paul’s example of the ox should give us both encouragement and caution.* They both looked to the underlying principles of the law, not to the letter of the law itself. However, we are neither Jesus nor Apostles. Paul was able to see a principle apart from the literary or historical context of **Deut 25:4**. That principle appears to be related to an obligation to treat everyone with fairness since all people are made in the image of God, and a “how much more” obligation of Christians: i.e., “if the Lord protected oxen’s rights to fair compensation as they threshed Israel’s grain, how much more does he expect his redeemed people to supply the material needs of those who plant in their hearts the life-giving seed of the gospel!” (Johnson 2007: 282) We may legitimately look to the principles underlying OT law, but we should arrive at those principles by applying the rules of hermeneutics and

sound exegesis.

3. NT laws, commands, and rules.

- a. *NT laws, commands, and rules (i.e., the “law of Christ”) may be directly applicable to believers today in a way that OT laws are not.* Examples of many NT laws that apply directly today include: **Rom 12:9-21; 1 Cor 6:18; Eph 4:25-32; 1 Thess 5:16-18; and Heb 10:23-25.**
- b. *NT laws, commands, and rules do not deal directly with all the issues that are relevant to us in today’s societies and cultures.* The NT books were addressed to specific churches and individuals, and deal with particular issues that those churches faced, in the context of the specific cultures that then existed. Consequently, even with NT laws, commands, and rules, we may need to look for the *principles* behind those rules, and apply them *analogously* to our own circumstances. In some cases, particularly where culture has changed, we may even have to go beyond the words of the NT laws, commands, and rules to apply their redemptive “spirit.”

G. There is a “specificity and issue gap” between the issues the Bible addresses and the issues we face, since the Bible does not deal directly or specifically with every conceivable issue

1. The Bible does not deal specifically with every issue that is relevant to us in today’s society. The Bible is a sufficient guide for what we are to believe and how we are to live. It deals specifically or directly with particular issues that people faced when it was written. Technological advances have raised questions it was not possible to ask at the time when the Bible was written (e.g., genetic “cloning”). The cultures we live in may be vastly different from the cultures of Bible times. Thus, the issues the Bible deals with may not be identical to the specific issues we face or the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Further, the Bible does not necessarily deal exhaustively or in detail with each situation that it does discuss.
2. When we are faced with an issue that is not directly or specifically addressed by the Bible, we need to look for the biblical ideals, doctrines, examples, laws, commands, and rules, that are relevant to our situation, try to discern the *principles* and redemptive “spirit” that underlie those ideals, doctrines, examples, laws, commands, and rules, and apply them *analogously* to our own circumstances. An “analogy” is a similarity between two things on which a comparison may be based (e.g., there is an analogy between the heart and a pump). When we face a situation that the Bible does not specifically address, we apply the Bible analogously by: a. identifying the biblical situations and passages (including ideals, doctrines, examples, laws, commands, and rules) that appear to be similar and relevant (i.e., analogous) to our situation; b. finding the biblical principles and redemptive “spirit” behind those biblical situations and passages; and c. applying those principles and that spirit to our situation.
3. An analogy is only as good as it is similar to the situation that we face today. Applying biblical ideals, doctrines, examples, laws, commands, and rules analogously is akin to applying legal precedents to new situations in a court of law. To the extent that the biblical situation or circumstances behind the ideals, doctrines, examples, laws, commands, or rules which we think are relevant to our situation are *not* similar to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, the analogy is weakened and rendered less valid (or even invalid). The Bible is a sufficient guide for what we are to believe and how we are to live. Thus, we will find that all ethical issues we face are, in fact, related to cross-cultural biblical principles, a redemptive biblical spirit, and biblical absolutes. However, since the Bible does not deal directly or specifically with every issue we may face, we can discern those principles, spirit, and absolutes only if we have good biblical knowledge and understanding, and can perform fair and accurate exegesis.

H. There is a “cultural gap” between the cultures of the Bible—including the laws, commands, and rules based on those cultures—and the different cultures and situations we live in today.

1. God’s communication (the Bible) was given on specific occasions, in specific cultures, to specific people, who were facing specific circumstances. However, God’s communication was recorded to serve as a message for all people afterwards. As a result, “The great intellectual challenge to the application of Scripture is *to bridge the gap between the cultures of the Bible and current cultures*” (Dorani 1996: 143). “It would be a travesty to proclaim to our world a theological position without exploring its cultural/transcultural status” (Webb 2001: 24). That cultural gap is why the principles of hermeneutics and sound exegesis are necessary for application—even of NT laws, commands, and rules. Further, in many cases biblical prescriptions are meant to be *counter-cultural* in order to change the culture and free people from enslavement to their culture. As a result, even NT laws, commands, and rules cannot be applied “mechanically,” but may be modified, consistent with the broader underlying principles, to fit the existing circumstances. This has profound importance for Christians as we respond to changing

cultures: we need to *challenge* our culture where it departs from kingdom values, but *identify with* our culture on culturally-relative “non-absolutes.”

2. Not all laws, commands, and rules can be applied by analogy in the form in which they were given because not all laws, commands, and rules were proclaimed as God’s ultimate or best prescriptions for all people and cultures.

a. *Many people, including many pastors and Bible teachers, do not understand that “many aspects of the biblical text were not written to establish a utopian society with complete justice and equality” (Webb 2001: 41).* Thus, another difficulty in simply applying all NT laws, commands, and rules in a direct, literal, straightforward way is that, “Scripture itself adopts what we might call ‘kingdom values’ (those which transcend any culture and time) as well as ‘cultural values’ (those which are locked into a particular place and time)” (Webb 2001: 23). It is part of our interpretive and applicational task to distinguish between the two.

b. *It is only the presence of cultural change over time, and the fact that our cultures differ from the biblical cultures, that help us to see that not all of the Bible’s laws, commands, and rules are proclamations of transcultural kingdom values.* “Within the text of Scripture we find portions that are transcultural (e.g., love for one’s neighbor) and portions that are cultural, or more accurately, portions that contain significant cultural components (e.g., slavery texts). For the original readers these two entities—cultural and transcultural—were not necessarily antithetical. In all likelihood, the distinction between the two would have gone unnoticed for the original readers. Only in the context of a different culture would the distinction be readily seen, due to the principle of contrast.” (Webb 2001: 24)

c. *Examples of culturally-limited rules proclaimed in the Bible.* The slavery texts, primogeniture, texts that talk about government as a monarchy or based on the rule of a man rather than the rule of law, texts that imply male ownership of or superiority over females, and other such matters have high culturally limited aspects.

3. Reasons why the Bible proclaims culturally-limited values and rules. There are several reasons why the Bible—including direct pronouncements from God himself—proclaims culturally-limited values as well as transcultural kingdom values. They include the following:

a. *The values proclaimed by the Bible had to relate to the existing cultures in order to be relevant and understandable.* “The ancient world in its agricultural focus, monarchical structures, extended families, survival issues, and so on, contributes significantly to the formation of Scripture within a redemptive grid. Many things true of the ancient world are simply not a part of our modern world. . . . As a wise father, God sometimes talks to his children in language, perception and reality that correspond with the world they actually see and experience. Many statements within Scripture reflect this type of cultural-component social perspective.” (Webb 2001: 64, 65)

b. *People do not change entrenched social patterns easily, so they often had to be moved “step-by-step” toward a higher set of values.* “Pastors should especially recognize this pastoral component within Scripture. In moving people toward a particular goal, wise pastors gently and lovingly shepherd their people along at a pace that they can handle. A well-seasoned pastor understands that one cannot change another person’s worldview overnight. . . . Both the divine and human authors function together in a gentle, pastoral relationship to the covenant community. Biblical texts often represent pastoral letters, written with the tenderness of a pastor’s heart. Their words are designed to ‘stretch’ the covenant people as far as they could go, like an elastic band, but not cause them to ‘snap.’ Change is always difficult. People do not alter their social patterns easily. God brings his people along in ways that were feasible adaptations and in ways that recognize the nature of humanity.” (Webb 2001: 59, 58) This methodology has a teaching component as well as a pastoral component. “Scripture, as with a good teaching methodology, is designed to take people from where they are (the known) and help them move to a foreseeable future (the unknown) that has enough continuity with the present so that they can actually find their way into the preferred future” (Ibid. 60). To a large degree this reflects the tension that exists in all of our lives between idealism and realism.

c. *Within the existing biblical cultures, even the less redemptive, culturally-bound values and social structures contained within them good, kingdom-oriented values.* “For example, slavery functioned as something of a social welfare net in ancient cultures. Particularly the one form of debt slavery in Israel provided a way of assisting those who were in great financial need. It served a good and noble purpose.” (Webb 2001: 64) Thus, even where the Bible proclaimed

“cultural values,” relative to when and where the Scripture was first read, it still *spoke redemptively to the people of those cultures*.

d. *To keep the focus on that which ultimately is of greatest importance meant that some other good values had to take a secondary position.* God has priorities, even among things that he commanded his people to do and that are, of themselves, good. Thus, faithfulness and a contrite heart are more important than sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22; Ps 51:17; Hos 6:6). Justice, kindness, and walking humbly with God are the essential requirements (Mic 6:8). The greatest commandments are to love God with all of our heart, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-34). Justice, mercy, and faithfulness are “*the weightier provisions of the law*” (Matt 23:23). In addition to a hierarchy within God’s own commands, the overriding value of spreading the gospel also meant that other worthy projects would have a lower priority. “Quite often the instructions of Scripture do not reflect an ultimate ethic simply because they are absorbed with the greater good of facilitating the mission. The accomplishment of Christian mission frequently calls upon believers to sacrifice their personal best for the sake of winning others. Or, it assumes the status quo in many areas of life, with only modest improvements, in order to place its central focus on the mission.” (Webb 2001: 63)

4. Failure to distinguish between what are culturally-specific “relatives” and cross-cultural “absolutes” is a prime cause of the applicational errors of liberalism and legalism. “We do not want to make something that is transcultural into something that is culturally bound. On the other hand, we do not want to make that which is a cultural non-absolute into an absolute for every culture.” (Webb 2001: 24)

a. *Liberalism* in large part amounts to taking biblical “absolutes,” which apply to the original receivers and everyone else, and viewing them only as “relatives” that only apply to the original receiver but may be disregarded by everyone else. Liberals tend to view virtually everything as culturally-bound.

b. *Legalism* is the opposite. Legalists take those parts of the Bible that are “relatives” meant only for the original receivers, and view them as “absolutes” which apply to everyone. Typically, legalists look only to the *form* of biblical commands, but never consider the cultural context or the underlying principle behind the form.

5. Doing biblical cultural analysis is necessary in order to justify our own practices and be able to give a reasoned account of the less-than-ultimate portions of scriptural ethics.

a. *Biblical cultural analysis is necessary to justify our own practices.* “Most of the Western church no longer practices what Scripture says (at a nonabstracted, concrete level) about head coverings, holy kisses, foot washings, hair styles, slavery, and so on. But we have not been particularly clear in explaining why we have discontinued certain practices yet continued others. The lack of explanation and consistency has often left thorny problems for the next generation of Christians.” (Webb 2001: 246)

b. *Biblical cultural analysis is necessary to be able to give a reasoned account of the less-than-ultimate ethics found in Scripture.* Unless we can account for the impact of culture on the formation of Scripture, we will be unable to answer the criticisms of those who rightfully find abhorrent or regressive (from today’s perspective) some of the practices, laws, commands, and rules found in the Bible. Many critics of the Bible call the Bible repressive or sexist regarding slaves or women. However, “that is to talk about Scripture in a vacuum, devoid of its original social context or cultural backdrop. Such is an anachronistic [i.e., representing someone as existing or something as happening in other than chronological, proper, or historical order] reading of the text! Relative to when and where the words of Scripture were first read, they spoke redemptively to their given communities.” (Webb 2001: 254) Thus, our failure to analyze the impact of culture in the Bible harms our evangelistic efforts and puts up roadblocks to people’s faith.

I. Factors that help us determine which biblical texts are culturally bound, or are otherwise limited, and which are transcultural

Doing biblical cultural analysis—i.e., trying to distinguish between biblical texts that state transcultural “absolutes” or “timeless truths” (i.e., those which apply to all people in all times and places), and those that are “relatives” or “culturally specific” (i.e., those limited to the particular biblical culture and situation the biblical writer was addressing), or have limited applicability for other reasons—can be very difficult. That is why good application, like good exegesis, is an art as well as a science. It requires skill. The following questions and factors, from Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard (1993: 411-21), Doriani (2001: 249-50), Webb (2001: 69-235), and

Tiessen (1993: 189-207), can help us determine whether a biblical principle or imperative is applicable in all times and places, or is limited to the specific culture or situation that was being addressed in the Bible. We must remember, however, that no one of these factors may be definitive. Not all may apply in any particular case. Some may tend to point in one direction, and some in another. Nevertheless, by asking the following questions, we should be able to determine, in any particular case, which of the factors seem to be most significant, and the general thrust of whether the original text was culturally limited or transcultural.

1. Does the passage itself, or the larger context of the book in which the passage appears, condition or limit the application in any way, or does it promote a more universal application? Conditional promises are valid only if the conditions are met. Thus, Jesus' statement in **Matt 7:7** ("Ask and it will be given to you") is conditioned by the larger context of **Matt 6:1-15** that our prayers are not to be self-centered and self-glorifying, but are to hallow God's name, are to desire his kingdom, and are to put ourselves in his hand and his good will. Jesus' warning to Peter that he would have to die for his faith (**John 21:18-19**) is limited by Jesus' statement to John about his future (**John 21:20-23**). Both are specific to those individuals. However, other passages help us to see that Peter's example was not entirely unique, but is an example of the broader principles that "a servant is not greater than his master" (**John 13:16**), and "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (**2 Tim 3:12**). Even general commands of Jesus may be qualified by other passages and principles. Thus, in **Matt 5:39** he said we are not to resist him who is evil; however, in **Matt 10:23** he said to flee when persecuted.

2. Does subsequent revelation limit the application of a particular passage even if the book in which it appears does not? This question must be asked of every OT text, but also occurs in the NT. In **Matt 10:9-10** Jesus commanded his disciples to take no money or provisions with them, but to rely solely on the generosity of those to whom they ministered. In **Luke 22:35** Jesus revoked that command, and told his disciples to take a purse and bag with them. In **Luke 10:1** Jesus told his disciples to go out "two by two," but in **Acts 20:4** Paul was accompanied by seven others. More generally, in **Matt 5:41-42** Jesus says we should go two miles with whoever forces us to go one mile, and are to give to whomever asks of us. However, to apply those statements without taking into account other circumstances and scriptures (e.g., **Ps 37:21** regarding the money) would be wrong. "If, for example, I am a heart surgeon on the way to do a transplant, I must not go a second mile with someone. I must say no and leave at the end of the first mile with best wishes and a hasty farewell. I have other things I know I must do, and I must make the decision. . . . If I owe money to a shopkeeper whose goods I have already consumed, I am not at liberty to give *that* money to 'someone who asks of me'—unless, once again, there are very special factors involved. . . . In every concrete situation we have to ask ourselves, not 'Did I do the specific things in Jesus' illustrations?' but 'Am I being the kind of person Jesus' illustrations are illustrations of?'" (Willard 1997: 179-80)

3. Is the specific teaching "contradicted" elsewhere in ways that show it was limited to exceptional situations? God's commands to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (**Genesis 22**) and to Hosea to marry a harlot (**Hosea 1:2**) are two examples of this. Not murdering (see, e.g., **Exod 20:13; Rev 21:8**) and sexual purity (see, e.g., **1 Cor 6:16-20**) are fundamental tenets of biblical and Christian morality. Nevertheless, those examples also are illustrations both of faithfulness to God in very difficult circumstances, and of God's faithfulness to them.

4. Was the original application given to a limited recipient? A component of a text is more likely to be limited if it was given to limited recipients. Either the immediate context or another passage may show that the original application was limited and not necessarily transferrable to all people in all times and places. For example, Jesus' told the "rich young ruler," an individual, to "go and sell all you possess and give to the poor" (**Mark 10:21**; see also **Matt 19:21; Luke 18:22**). However, in **Luke 19:1-10** Zaccheus was not commanded to sell all that he had and give to the poor, even though Zaccheus, like the rich young ruler, was a rich man. Instead, Zaccheus voluntarily chose to give half of his possessions to the poor, and was commended by Jesus for doing so. That indicates that the requirement to sell everything you possess in order to follow Jesus was limited. Similarly, in **1 Tim 5:23** Paul told Timothy to "No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." That is clearly a prescription, not a description. Is this a "theology of alcohol"? Are all Christians now required to drink wine? The answer is "no." "Your" is singular, indicating that Paul is addressing Timothy specifically, not the church in general. Also, **5:23** is an "aside" (a brief comment unrelated to the subjects of the surrounding texts). The rest of the verse gives the reason for Paul's comment, which is based on the underlying principle of stewardship of, and care for, one's body. Evidently there was some problem with the water where Timothy was, which was causing his stomach problems. The properties in wine might be able to help his ailments. "For the sake of" indicates that

Paul was prescribing the wine for medicinal reasons. Paul's "aside" to Timothy is based on the more general concern over Timothy's health and the stewardship of the body. There is no attempt to detail a "theology of alcohol" here. The NT deals in many other places with that subject, both by description and prescription (e.g., **John 2:1-11; Rom 13:13; 14:1-23; 1 Cor 5:11; Eph 5:18; Col 2:16; 1 Tim 3:3; 8; Titus 1:7**). All of those passages (and more), together with what the OT says on the subject, would have to be studied to develop a biblical theology of alcohol.

5. Does the text itself present a broad theological or moral principle, or does it appear to be a specific manifestation or illustration of a broad principle? A component of a text may be culturally relative if its specific instructions appear to be at odds with the general principles of Scripture, or if it appears to be the specific application of a more general principle. Specific statements are more likely to be cultural than general statements. For example, the gleaning laws (**Lev 19:9-10; 23:22**) appear to be a specific application of the general principle of caring for the poor. Thus, the gleaning laws appear to be cultural, whereas the underlying principle is transcultural. In **Luke 7:46** Jesus mildly rebukes his host for not anointing his head with oil, but commends a woman for anointing him with perfume. Anointing appears to be a culturally-specific way of demonstrating the transcultural principle of showing respect to others.

6. Does the reason for doing something appear to be a "limited cultural rationale," or be based on pragmatic factors that are not transferrable across cultures, or are cultural conditions mentioned in Scripture or assumed by its authors that make it inappropriate always to apply a given text in the same way? One way to look at the issue of whether particular practices were culturally limited or are transcultural is to consider whether they appear to be "moral" imperatives or more pragmatic. This is similar, but not identical, to the preceding question. A morally-based imperative would tend to be transcultural. A pragmatically-based imperative would tend to be cultural. If the rationale behind a biblical text appears to be based on the culture or local situation at the time, then the application is more likely to be culturally limited. Similarly, if the pragmatic basis for a biblical imperative cannot be sustained when moving from one culture to another, then the lack of a sustained pragmatic basis indicates that something might be culturally bound. For example, the references in **1 Cor 11:2-16** to women's hair length, such as the mention in **11:5-6** that short hair is a "disgrace," appear to be culturally-specific. The historical context indicates that short hair or a shaved head signified that a woman had been tried and convicted of adultery, or was the more "masculine" partner in a lesbian relationship. Those culturally-specific factors do not apply in most cultures today. Head coverings and hair length vary from culture to culture. Therefore, the imperatives in the passage do not apply in the same way today. However, Paul's argument is more complex than that. In **11:3, 7-12** he appeals to the original creation and primogeniture (which, itself, may be cultural), makes a cryptic reference to the angels, and then affirms the equality and mutual dependence of the sexes. At the very least, we should not obliterate distinctions between the sexes, but should do so in culturally-appropriate and sensitive ways. Similarly, the gleaning laws (**Lev 19:9-10; 23:22**) arose in the pragmatic context of a high percentage of the population involved in farming and close proximity between the population and farms. In many settings today, the only neighbors of farmers are other farmers, and the poor live in urban areas. Thus, the pragmatic basis for such laws does not cross all cultures. Jesus' statement that the disciples "ought to wash one another's feet" (**John 13:14**) makes far more pragmatic sense in the original setting than in many places today, since it assumes: transportation by foot; barefeet or sandals as footwear; lack of running water; a hot climate; and dusty paths.

7. Does practicing the text today in the same cultural form as it was given continue to fulfill the original purpose or intent? A text may be transcultural, or at least transferrable to our cultures in its biblical form, if continuing to practice it in our cultures continues to fulfill the original purpose. On the other hand, a text may be culturally bound if practicing the text no longer fulfills the original intent or purpose. In some cases the same cultural form still exists, but what it signifies or connotes has changed. In such cases, the original form may have to be modified or discontinued. For example, **Rom 16:16** tells us to "greet one another with a holy kiss." In many cultures, men greet one another with a kiss. In other cultures doing that suggests homosexuality. In some cultures women kiss one another, but do not kiss men. In yet other cultures it is acceptable for men and women to greet each other with a kiss. Thus, the form of greeting with a kiss still exists, but in some cultures its meaning is different from the meaning it had in the Bible. In cultures where greeting with a kiss connotes homosexuality or sexual promiscuity, to greet with a kiss similarly would not continue to fulfill the original purpose. In such cultures, greeting with a hug or handshake is consistent with the principle of the verse which indicates that we should acknowledge our brothers in Christ with true affection. In the "gleaning laws" example (**Lev 19:9-10; 23:22**), in settings today where the only neighbors of farmers are other farmers, and the poor live in

urban areas, for farmers to not harvest the edges of their fields in accordance with the gleaning laws would not help the poor, but would cause the unharvested crops to rot. Thus, strict adherence to the “letter of the law” would defeat the purpose of the law. Several texts urge “submission” (of slaves to masters, **1 Tim 6:1; Titus 2:9-10**), (of citizens to governing authorities, **1 Pet 2:13-15**), (of wives to husbands, **Titus 2:4-5; 1 Pet 3:1**), *for the purpose of making the gospel attractive to others*. In most modern contexts, to argue for a unilateral, servile or slavery-like “submission” in employment, civil, or marital relationships no longer serves the purpose of making the gospel attractive to those to whom “submission” is rendered. Employment, government, and marriages in most cultures today have a much greater element of mutuality than was the case in the ancient biblical cultures. Slavery is illegal. Employees have rights that slaves did not possess. Nations, including the leaders, are now bound by the rule of law. People living in democracies have the right to disagree with their leaders. Wives have legal rights, education, and opportunities they did not possess in ancient cultures. Thus, while showing honor, deference, and respect to all is transcultural (see **Matt 20:25-28; Eph 5:21**), “submission” *in the same form as was true in Bible times* is not. We must take our changed circumstances into account, so that we do not fall into the error whereby we actually are doing what the text says, but thereby no longer doing the intent or purpose of the text.

8. Is the biblical command or application contrary to the cultural norms of its own day? “When Scripture speaks directly against a particular practice within the ancient setting, the dissonance with the original context generally ensures its transcultural status. . . . The converse idea might be stated as follows: the probability of a component of a text being cultural increases at points where certain components of a text go along with the cultural norms of the ancient world.” (Webb 2001: 158) Both aspects of this principle are illustrated with respect to the institution of slavery. “Inasmuch as Scripture does not openly challenge slavery *as a social institution*, it increases the likelihood of the social structure itself being a cultural casting within the text. On the other hand, where Israel markedly departs from the surrounding cultures is in the softening or bettering of conditions within slavery. . . . This carries tremendous potential for conveying transcultural implications, not in terms of the static/isolated words (i.e., designating cities of slave refuge for today) but in terms of the redemptive spirit (i.e., reapplying the spirit of the text toward an even better treatment of human beings and eventually eliminating slavery). The countercultural components within the slavery materials continue to speak louder today than those that simply reflect the cultural norms.” (Ibid.) Similarly, the biblical condemnations of homosexual practices and heterosexual sin were contrary to their own cultures. Thus, it is unlikely that the Bible’s view of sexual behavior was intended to be limited to ancient Palestinian or first century Roman cultures. As another example, Christ’s prescription that leaders are to be servants (**Matt 20:20-28**) was contrary to his own culture. That indicates that Christian “servant leadership” is to be transcultural. In many respects the Bible calls on Christians, like the OT prophets, to live counter-culturally. Christianity may be expressed in any culture, but is not bound by any culture. We are slaves to Christ, not to our culture. We are to put him, not our culture, first in our lives.

9. Are issues that are closely related to the biblical text in question themselves culturally bound or are those closely related issues transcultural? A component of a text may be cultural if closely related issues to that text/issue are also themselves culturally bound. “The related matter must be *intrinsically linked or logically related* to the issue at hand . . . and (most importantly) have a close and substantive correlation to the issue at hand” (Webb 2001: 163, 171). For example, with respect to the social norm of patriarchy found throughout the Bible, the following are some, but by no means all, related issues which all have a high cultural aspect: (1) an attitude that women are property (**Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21; Judg 5:30**); (2) a woman is transferred from the authority of her father to her husband (**Num 30:1-16; Deut 22:19, 28-29**); (3) ownership and inheritance of property was generally restricted to males except in extraordinary circumstances (**Num 27:5-8; 31:1-9; Deut 21:16-17**); (4) there is great emphasis on female, but not male, virginity (**Lev 21:13; Deut 22:13-21**); cases of adultery or extramarital sex were treated differently between husbands and wives (**Lev 20:10; Num 5:11-31; Deut 22:22-24**). The fact that the closely and intrinsically-related issues are cultural suggests that the type of patriarchy found in the Bible, if not patriarchy itself, is cultural. One aspect of the “closely related issues” criterion is the use of *lists or groups* found throughout the Bible. One component of a list or group is likely to be transcultural if the other components are transcultural, and is likely to be cultural if the other components are cultural. Thus, the “mixture” texts (**Deut 22:9-11**) appear to be highly cultural, but the virtue and vice lists appear to be transcultural (e.g., **Jer 7:9; Hos 4:2; Mark 7:21; Gal 5:22-23**).

10. Is the basis of the biblical text rooted in the original creation? Because God called his creation “*very good*” upon its completion (**Gen 1:31**), and sin had not yet entered the world, a component of a text

may be transcultural if its basis is rooted in the original creation material. Monogamous marriage, which is based on **Gen 2:24**, and was reaffirmed by both Jesus (**Matt 19:4-6**) and Paul (**Eph 5:22-33**), is one such example (even though divorce and polygamy were tolerated in rare cases). Similarly, women equally bear the “image of God” and are the subjects of God’s mandate to rule over creation with men (**Gen 1:26-28**). However, the fact that something is rooted in the original creation is no guarantee of its transcultural nature. The facts of creation and of the creation order before the Fall do not themselves constitute commands, but are simply descriptive. Not every aspect of the original creation order was established the way it was in order to constitute a moral imperative for all generations to follow. For example, although Adam and Eve were monogamously married, marriage is not binding on all men and women (see **Matt 19:10-12; 1 Cor 7:7-8**), and will not occur on the new earth (**Matt 22:30**). Even the original creation, and statements made to Adam and Eve before the Fall, were in the context of a particular Edenic “culture.” Thus, such creation-related things like the original vegetarian diet, farming as an occupation, and keeping the Sabbath day were all cultural or limited. The statement “*be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth*” (**Gen 1:28**), was made in circumstances in which there were no other people at all in the earth. Today, mankind *has* “filled the earth.” There are billions of people. In some places conditions are too crowded, and parents have many children whom they are not able to take care of. Consequently, “Our world differs significantly from the garden. In this instance, the creation pattern must be heavily modified.” (Webb 2001: 125)

11. Is the biblical text rooted in the Fall or Curse? “There is one sense in which the curse is transcultural (as an indicative, ‘what is’) and another sense in which it is not transcultural (as an imperative, ‘what we should do’)” (Webb 2001: 121). It is not part of Christian mission to perpetuate the curse, but to fight against it. Pain in childbirth, weeds, and death are all universals (**Gen 3:16-19**). Nevertheless, we properly use modern medicine to fight illness and death, and modern technology to fight weeds.

12. Is the biblical text rooted in redemption and the new creation? A component of a text is likely to be transcultural if it is rooted in new-creation material. We should therefore consider where in God’s plan of redemption a biblical prescription or application arises. “Just as universal moral norms have a relationship to God’s perfect moral nature, so also they bear a relationship to his redemptive work. . . . Universal moral commands will be harmonious with this general direction in God’s program.” (Tiessen 1993: 203) Further, “If any patterns should be granted ongoing significance, it should be those found within the new-creation material. The original-creation patterns, as foundational as they are, simply do not have the same potential for reflecting transcultural features as do new-creation patterns. Conversely, original-creation patterns are far more likely to have culture-locked components within them. . . . It is not so much that humans change in their created being, as it is that relationships between humans change. Relationships are to be perfected and re-ordered according to Christ’s perfecting love. Essential aspects of the original creation such as race and gender are not obliterated in the new creation humanity. They remain and are transfigured, sanctified and celebrated. The new humanity must use the differences to bless and raise up instead of destroy and disadvantage.” (Webb 2001: 147-49) Thus, the “*one new man*” created “*in Christ*” (**1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; Eph 2:15; Col 3:11**), whereby old racial, ethnic, sexual, and economic divisions are superseded in Christ, forms a new, redemptive basis for human relationships.

13. Were there valid competing options to the position stated in the Bible in the cultures of the time? A component of a text is more likely to be transcultural if presented in a time or setting when other competing options existed in the broader cultures. Conversely, a component of a text is more likely to be cultural if alternatives would not have been readily imagined by the original writer. For example, in all biblical cultures monarchy or imperial rule were virtually the only forms of government; democracy was not even an option. Similarly, slavery was an accepted way of life for the people in ancient societies; no cultures were abolitionist in their perspective. Those societal institutions—monarchy and slavery—were both cultural, not transcultural, and both were part of the cultural context in which the biblical writers lived and wrote.

14. Is a statement in a biblical text contrary to clear scientific or social-scientific evidence? A component of a text may be cultural, or may be using phenomenological language, if it is contrary to present-day scientific evidence. For example, **Isa 3:12** makes a caustic remark about women leaders, implying that women make poor leaders, comparing them to children who are oppressors. Since Israel was not being ruled by women or children, Isaiah was clearly using hyperbolic, culturally-based language to shame the nation. Given the limited education that females could receive and limited roles that women could play in that culture, there may even have been some social-scientific basis to Isaiah’s observation. However, today in many cultures women receive the same education as men, and can fulfill

all societal roles and offices. Research indicates no innate inferiority or inability on the part of women compared to men in terms of ability to learn or lead. Women make valuable contributions at all levels of society, and many women are justly recognized as great leaders. Consequently, “while the specific gender component of the Isaiah text is cultural, the broader underlying transcultural principle remains in force today: childish or immature persons make poor leaders” (Webb 2001: 224).

J. Five steps to bridge the issue and cultural gaps when biblical laws, commands, and rules CAN be applied analogously to contemporary situations

The following methodology is based on Doriani (1996: 146-47) and Hays (2001: 30-35) (see also

APPENDIX C: J. Daniel Hays, “Applying the Old Testament Law Today” and **APPENDIX D: T. Wayne, Dye, “Culture and Conscience: Biblical Absolutes and Cultural Variation”**).

1. Determine the original meaning and application. This requires us to use our hermeneutical and exegetical skills.
2. Identify the cross-cultural principle behind the specific command. Determining what was only “relative” to the people to whom the biblical command was given versus what is “absolute” (i.e., applicable not only to the original recipients but to all people or all believers at any place and time) is the heart of the issue. This may require us to distinguish between the *form* of the command and its *substance* (i.e., the meaning, point, “absolute,” or principle behind the command). “When we are in doubt as to whether something is culturally relative or absolute, it is helpful to place it in the context of the wider biblical message” (Wolvaardt 2005: 300). Doing that requires us to have a solid knowledge of the biblical story as a whole, and the ideals, doctrine, and examples that compose it. “The better one’s understanding of the broader message of the Bible, the easier it would be to make a distinction between absolutes and relatives” (Ibid.: 28). In many cases (but by no means all) both the form of the command and the principle behind it may be clear, and may be applied exactly as they are stated, particularly with respect to NT imperatives. However, we must be careful not to “overstate” the command, the principle, or the application. We must determine the level of certainty we have concerning the principle we have identified and our proposed application.
3. Discover a similar situation today. This requires us not only to know the above two things, but to be good exegetes of our own culture. In doing this we need to determine relevant differences that may exist between the original audience and believers today. We need to think deeply about *why* a particular situation today is similar to the biblical situation. All OT laws, commands, and rules, and many NT imperatives, *apply by analogy, if they apply at all*. Application is appropriate only to the extent that the biblical and the contemporary situations are, in fact, analogous.
4. Propose appropriate applications that embody the broader principles. In making applications, in some cases we might legitimately:
 - a. *Extend biblical commands.* For example, not coveting your neighbor’s donkey (**Exod 20:17**) has extended applications (i.e., don’t covet your neighbor’s car).
 - b. *Change biblical commands that are based on different cultural circumstances.* For example, instead of greeting one another with a “holy kiss” (**Rom 16:16**) a sincere handshake or hug might be employed.
 - c. *Limit biblical commands.* For example, instead of drinking a little wine for stomach problems (**1 Tim 5:23**) we might use antacid medicine or bottled water or other available drinks.
 - d. *Even reverse biblical commands if a strictly “mechanical” application of the command would be contrary to the reason or principle behind it.* For example, in **1 Tim 5:3-16** a widow over the age of sixty with no children or grandchildren, although technically falling within Paul’s requirements, might not be assisted if she received an inheritance, has a pension, or receives government assistance. On the other hand, a younger widow with children might properly be assisted if her children cannot support her (they may be too young, or her family may have disowned her, for example, if she had converted to Christianity from Islam), if she has no prospects of marriage (for example, if she has HIV/AIDS), or for other reasons.
5. Compare our proposed application to other Scriptures, particularly with NT teaching. If our application is consistent with several biblical passages, we gain confidence in it. We should be cautious when we encounter a biblical command that seems far removed from any contemporary situation. Biblical examples may confirm, or disconfirm, our proposed application.
6. OT and NT examples illustrate the above points:
 - a. **Gen 22:1-2**—*God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.* In its *form*, this was a “specific” command given to Abraham, not a “general” command given to all believers or Israelites. That

is one clue that the specific form of the command was “relative” to Abraham, not a cross-cultural “absolute.” Comparison with other Scriptures reveals no other similar commands, and also shows that God is opposed to and prohibits the shedding of innocent blood (see **Exod 20:13; Prov 6:16-17**). However, even this unique passage illustrates a general, cross-cultural principle of “be prepared to serve God with what is dearest to you,” not “go stab your children.”

b. **Exod 22:19; Lev 18:23; 20:16; Deut 27:21**—*The Mosaic laws that prohibit bestiality*. Those commands are *not* repeated in the NT. That does not mean that bestiality is now permissible in the New Covenant. How do we know that? The answer is that we can look to what the NT does say about sexuality. In **1 Cor 7:2** and **Heb 13:4** the NT writers prohibit all sexual activity outside of marriage. Further, **1 Cor 6:18** and **1 Thess 4:3-5** prohibit “immorality.” The NT principle is clear. The OT laws prohibiting bestiality are an application of that principle.

c. **Deut 22:8**—“*When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, that you may not bring blood-guilt on your house if anyone falls from it.*” “First, we determine the original sense. Because they worked, entertained, and even slept on their roofs, the Israelites readily understood why they had to place walls or parapets around them [the *historical context* shows us the reason for and importance of the law]. . . . Second, we seek principles. Because Westerners rarely climb onto their roofs, we do not require parapets today. But we must determine the original principle and its transferability. The law incarnates love for neighbor [a biblical *ideal*] and preserves life by requiring precautions that prevent accidental injuries. Thus, Moses authorizes safety regulations. We apply the principle most closely today when we install safety railings on flat roofs and place banisters by staircases. We extend the principle if we install speed bumps in residential neighborhoods.” (Doriani 2001: 242-43)

d. **Rom 16:16**—“*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*” In comparing this with other Scriptures we find that a similar instruction was given in **1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; and 1 Pet 5:14**. However, none of those verses gives any explanation as to the significance of particular *form* of greeting or why that particular practice is to be done as opposed to some other form of greeting. That at least raises the question as to whether the form of greeting is to be put on the level of a cross-cultural “absolute” or is a culturally-specific “relative.” When we consider the broader message of the rest of the Bible, “Regarding the mode of greeting, it should be clear that an instruction that the form of kissing is an absolute for Christians of all times, does not fit into the general message of the Bible—the message of unmerited salvation and moral purity as the response to such a salvation” (Wolvaardt 2005: 28). Although kissing was culturally acceptable in Roman culture, and in some cultures today, in other cultures doing that suggests homosexuality or sexual promiscuity, both of which the Bible condemns. Consequently, it would be odd for this practice to be seen as an “absolute.” There does appear to be a clear principle behind this command, namely, to greet fellow-believers in such a way as to express your love and respect in the Lord to one another. That can be done by a kiss, a hug, a handshake, or some other appropriate greeting. “The point is that the absolutes [greeting each other with true affection] will be the same for all cultures, but the practical outworking (for) will differ according to the practices of the specific culture” (Ibid.: 29).

e. **1 Tim 5:9**—“*Let a widow be put on the list [to receive financial assistance from the church] only if she is not less than sixty years old.*” On its face, the “60 years old” age requirement is a general requirement. Many churches, therefore, apply this age requirement “mechanically,” as a clear command to all churches today. However, understanding the *historical and cultural context* gives us a better picture. Sixty was the recognized age in the ancient world when a person was considered “old” (Knight 1992: 223). Sixty “probably reflects that maximum age in antiquity at which individuals could reasonably be expected to work and provide for themselves” (Blomberg 1999: 209). In the first century fewer than 4% of women lived even to age 50 (Lysaught 2005: 67n.18). They were among the most marginalized of people, and had few resources to rely on. By contrast, today, at least in most Western countries, 60 years old is not considered particularly “old,” and there are many government and other resources to care for the aged. Consequently, the “sixty years old” requirement implied something far different to Paul’s culture than it does in many cultures today. Further, the *broad literary context* of the rest of the Bible does not suggest that sixty years of age has any particular significance (but cf., **Lev 27:1-7** where there was a sliding scale of the cost of redeeming people who had made difficult vows; the cost went down at age sixty). That suggests that the age 60 requirement need not be applied universally as a “law,” but may be changed as local circumstances warrant.

K. Applying a “redemptive movement/redemptive spirit” hermeneutic when biblical laws, commands, and rules CANNOT be applied analogously because they were not God’s ultimate or best prescriptions for all people and cultures

1. A “static hermeneutic” often cannot adequately deal with the “cultural values” that are proclaimed in the Bible, especially those in the NT. “Those who use the static approach are reluctant to examine our contemporary landscape and ask the hard questions. For example, they are afraid to ask, Where does the ethic of our contemporary setting *surpass* Scripture’s unrealized ethic, as seen in the isolated words on its pages (i.e., where the ethic of the contemporary setting *goes beyond* Scripture’s unrealized ethic)?” (Webb 2001: 254-5)

a. A “static” hermeneutic “understands the words of the text aside from or with minimal emphasis upon their underlying spirit and thus restricts any modern application of Scripture to where the isolated words of the text fell in their original setting” (Webb 2001: 30-31). If we have a “static hermeneutic” that simply tries to apply the words of Scripture, as written, to contemporary circumstances, without taking into account the “spirit” behind the words, or the movement of culture, or the movement of Scripture itself over time, we will be forced to pick-and-choose which texts to cite, or disregard entire passages of Scripture that are too “troublesome” (e.g., many of the slavery texts). That can result in misapplying even NT laws, commands, and rules in our new cultural contexts.

b. *Applying culturally limited texts according to a “static” hermeneutic.* “Imagine taking the words of Peter and advising modern employees to accept physical beatings by their employers for the sake of the gospel (1 Pet 2:18-25). Or, think about instructing contemporary employers from the Pentateuch that, should they limit beating employees to within a hairbreadth of their life, they would not be guilty of legal reprisal (Ex 21:20-21). Or, maybe our modern world should consider handing out lesser penalties for sexual violation against an employee (= slave) than in the case of sexual violation against an employer or self-employed person (= free) (Deut 22:25-27; cf. Lev 19:20-22). These examples, of course, show the utterly ridiculous nature of a static hermeneutic.” (Webb 2001: 36-37)

2. A “redemptive movement” or “redemptive spirit” hermeneutic can deal with the presence of both “cultural values” and “kingdom values” within the Bible. Particularly in the area of human social, governmental, and societal relationships, it may be necessary to look to the “redemptive movement” or “redemptive spirit” underlying a particular biblical law, command, or rule, and reapply that redemptive spirit to our new cultural condition. In both **Matthew 5** and **9** “Jesus’ approach to Scripture goes beyond focusing on its isolated words to meditate deeply on its underlying spirit. With great ease, Jesus captures the spirit of the Old Testament text and so engages his audience in specific ways of ‘improving upon’ the words of their sacred tradition. Along with an emphasis on internal application, he teaches them a redemptive-spirit approach to reading the Bible.” (Webb 2001: 62) On the other hand, if we become “gridlocked with the isolated words of the text,” we might miss reapplying in our different cultures “the redemptive spirit that produced the text in the first place. . . . To neglect reapplying the redemptive spirit of the text adds a debilitating impotence to a life-transforming gospel that should be unleashed within our modern world.” (Webb 2001: 33, 50) Thus, a “redemptive movement/redemptive spirit” approach to applying Scripture encourages movement beyond the original application of the text in the ancient world, so that the implications of the movements that were made in the Scripture, but were not brought to their fullest logical conclusion, can come to fulfillment in the modern world.

3. Assessing redemptive “movement” in the Bible. In assessing the redemptive movement and redemptive spirit of the Bible, we need to assess the relationship of the biblical laws, commands, and rules within their cultural contexts. Sometimes Scripture makes a “preliminary movement” to modify the *original* cultural norms in such a way that suggests further movement is possible and even desirable in a *subsequent* culture. Scriptural movement is a crucial factor for determining the direction that further movement should take, if further movement is appropriate. Thus, the *direction* of that movement must be assessed relative to the broader culture. Three measures of movement give us an understanding of the underlying spirit of the text. When these measures consistently point in the same direction, they suggest that the final position in which the subject was left in the NT may not be the *ultimate* ethic that God intends for all times, places, and cultures. In other words, the spirit of the text may suggest that further movement should be made today in our cultures, in light of the movements already made in the Bible. The three measures of movement are (Webb 2001: 73-83):

a. *Foreign movement*—i.e., change relative to the surrounding Ancient Near East and Greco-Roman cultures. Unlike in the surrounding cultures, all Hebrew slaves were to be set free in the

year of Jubilee (**Lev 25:39-42**).

b. *Domestic movement*—i.e., change compared to what was currently happening within the covenant community itself. Christian masters were exhorted to treat their Christian slaves in the same way, from the heart, that Christian slaves treated their masters (**Eph 6:5-9**).

c. *Canonical movement*—i.e., change across broad redemptive epochs, such as from the OT to the NT. *Discontinuity* between the NT and OT fairly reliably indicates that the OT component was culturally bound. For example, all of the OT forms of worship (temple, priesthood, animal sacrifices, etc.) were abrogated in the NT, as were such important OT matters as circumcision and the food laws. Further, by the time of the NT, husbands were to love and sacrifice themselves for their wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (**Eph 5:25**). Those epochal changes between the Testaments show that the OT practices were cultural.

d. *Two other biblical and cultural factors suggest that further movement may be made when applying the spirit of the Bible in contemporary settings.* The following factors, of course, have to be consistent and in the same direction relative to culture as the foreign movement, domestic movement, and canonical movement discussed above:

(1) Seed ideas. “Seed ideas” within Scripture, which affect social relationships, may suggest and encourage further movement on a particular subject when later readers draw out the implications. The concept of equality “*in Christ*” is one example (e.g., **Gal 3:28**). That concept has theological implications, but it also has social or sociological implications which may be worked out over time.

(2) Breakouts. A component of a text may be culturally confined if the social norms reflected in that text are completely “broken out of” in other biblical texts. “While a seedbed idea is subtle and quiet due to its unrealized form, a breakout is a much more pronounced deviation by Scripture from the cultural norms” (Webb 2001: 91). For example, both the OT and NT talk in terms of right-handed superiority (see **Gen 48:18; Exod 15:6; 1 Chron 6:39; Ps 110:1; Matt 22:44**). Nevertheless, in a breakout from cultural norms, God used the left-handed Ehud to slay Eglon (**Judg 3:12-30; 20:16**). “This breakout text gives us a hint that Scriptural affirmation of right-handed superiority and left-handed inferiority is culturally relative” (Ibid.: 93). Similarly, although **1 Cor 11:4** speaks about long hair on men as being a disgrace, other biblical texts (for example, regarding Nazarites) showed that men actually honored God by not cutting their hair (**Num 6:1-21; 1 Sam 1:11**). There are many “breakouts” regarding female roles throughout the Bible, including: Huldah who was sought out by the king and priest, and who authoritatively proclaimed the word of the Lord to them (**2 Kgs 22:14-20; 2 Chron 34:22-28**); Priscilla, who taught Apollos and is even named ahead of her husband Aquila (**Acts 18:24-26**); and equality of sexual rights and authority in marriage (**1 Cor 7:3-5**).

e. *Continuity between the OT and NT, or reaffirmation by the NT of an OT practice, does not necessarily demonstrate that the OT matter that has been affirmed thereby is transcultural.* The reason is that the NT may fail to abrogate some aspect of the OT *because of cultural aspects common to both Testaments*. Thus, cultural analysis must always be done when we are considering the question of whether a particular practice should be applied today, particularly in the form that it existed in Bible times. For example, on one hand the NT reaffirms the underlying moral values of the 10 Commandments, which are transcultural (except the 4th commandment regarding Sabbath observance, which it reformulated or abrogated). On the other hand, the NT did not expressly abrogate either slavery or monarchy. Further, the “holy kiss” finds support in both the OT (**Gen 27:27; 29:13; Exod 4:27; 18:7; 1 Sam 20:41**) and the NT (**Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Pet 5:14**). Nevertheless, all of those practices are culturally based and limited, not transcultural.

4. The “redemptive movement”/“redemptive spirit” hermeneutic described.

a. Webb, who developed this model, describes it as “*The X=>Y=>Z Principle*” (Webb 2001: 31): “The *central position* (Y) stands for where the isolated words of the Bible are in their development of a subject. Then, on either side of the biblical text, one must ask the question of perspective: What is my understanding of the biblical text, if I am looking from the perspective of the *original culture* (X)? Also, what does the biblical text look like from our contemporary culture, where it happens to reflect a better social ethic—one closer to an *ultimate ethic* (Z) than to the ethic revealed in the isolated words of the biblical text?”

b. *Finding the underlying “redemptive spirit” of a biblical text.* “Finding the underlying spirit of a text is a delicate matter. It is not as direct or explicit as reading the words on the page. In order to grasp the spirit of a text, the interpreter must listen for how the text sounds within its various social contexts. Two life settings are crucial: the broader, foreign ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman (ANE/GR) social context and the immediate, domestic Israelite/church setting. One must ask, what change/improvement is the text making in the lives of people in the covenant community? And, how does the text influence the larger ANE/GR world? Through reflecting upon these social-setting questions the modern reader will begin to sense the redemptive spirit of the text. Also, a third setting permits one another way of discovering the redemptive spirit, namely, the canonical movement across various biblical epochs. The movement between the Old and New Testaments is perhaps the most familiar epochal shift.” (Webb 2001: 53)

5. The difference between the “redemptive spirit” and the “principle” underlying the text. “One might compare the principle to the sails on a boat. . . . The redemptive spirit, however, is another matter—it is more like the wind that catches the sail to move the boat forward. When applying the slavery texts to modern employment, a static hermeneutic will generally move . . . to the principle ‘submit to/obey those in authority in the workplace,’ thinking that this sufficiently covers both worlds. With respect to principle, the static hermeneutic fails to push high enough . . . to account for the difference between ownership (their world) and contractual relationships (our world). The submit/obey language should be dropped in our application. The principle should be one of honoring God in the way one relates to authority/management in the workplace and the contemporary application in the modern world should construct an imperative along the following lines: Fulfill the terms of your contract to the best of your ability, that is, in a manner that glorifies God and brings unbelievers closer to the kingdom.

With respect to the redemptive spirit, the static approach often fails to let the winds of Scripture advance its slavery portrait. . . . The underlying spirit/movement of the slavery texts . . . certainly includes an employee at times choosing to go beyond what the contract calls for. It also takes into consideration the incredible movement of Scripture, compared to the ancient world, in that it betters the working conditions and treatment of slaves. This aspect of redemptive spirit eventually leads to the abolition of slavery altogether. Yet, when reapplied in our modern context, the same biblical spirit voices a concern for improving the plight of the modern worker. . . . It speaks to issues such as benefits, a family-supportive environment, people-first values and meaningful motivation, as well as bottom-line issues.” (Webb 2001: 54-55)

6. Examples of the redemptive movement/redemptive spirit hermeneutic applied.

a. *Slavery and employment.*

(1) Employing a “static hermeneutic” to slavery texts. The Israelites were to provide safety to slaves fleeing harsh treatment from a foreign country (**Deut 23:15-16**). Thus, even though slavery was still permitted, the OT’s position on slavery was *redemptive* relative to the Ancient Near East. The NT took this “redemptive spirit” even farther, with Paul telling Philemon to receive back a runaway slave as “*a beloved brother*” (**Phlm 15-16**). However, neither the OT nor the NT explicitly called for the abolition of all slavery. “A static hermeneutic would apply this slavery-refuge text by permitting the ownership of slaves today, provided that the church offers similar kinds of refuge for runaway slaves. . . . Such an approach to applying the Bible stays very close to the words of the text—at least the words of the text when understood without their crucial component of spirit-movement meaning. . . . Even more tragic is that, in arguing for or in permitting biblical slavery today, a static hermeneutic takes our current standard of human rights and working conditions *backwards* by quantum leaps. We would shame a gospel that proclaims freedom to the captive, a gospel with both spiritual and social implications.” (Webb 2001: 33-34) In the context of modern employment, “One might be able to persuade a modern congregation into believing that employees should ‘obey’ and ‘submit to’ their employers based on the slavery texts” (Webb 2001: 37).

(2) Employing a “redemptive movement/redemptive spirit” hermeneutic to slavery texts. The movement in both the OT and the NT compared to their surrounding cultures, was greater freedom. The movement between the OT and the NT continued that direction. Thus, a redemptive movement/spirit hermeneutic argues for the complete abolition of slavery. That was what was done by Christian abolitionists in the UK and US in the 19th century. When applying the slavery texts to modern employment,

redemptive movement does not stop at the point of advocating “submission to” one’s employer based on the slavery texts. “Such application not only neglects the element of movement to a more fully realized ethic but overlooks fundamental differences between slavery and modern employer-employee relations. The most crucial difference is that of ownership compared to a contractual basis for working relationships. In the modern contractual setting we should not preach obedience and submission, but that Christian employees should fulfill the terms of their contract to the best of their ability in order to bring glory to God and enhance the gospel witness. In addition, a redemptive-movement hermeneutic seeks to reapply the spirit or movement component of the slavery texts relative to the surrounding cultures. Scripture sides heavily with the plight of the slave, the poor and the oppressed. This life-breathing spirit, which bettered the conditions for slaves in the ancient world, should also influence the application process today. Contemporary Christian employers, then, should not abuse their power in pursuit of bottom-line production but advance their businesses in ways that value their employees as people and encourage their productive contribution in humane and just ways. Working conditions, levels of income, and disparity between the rich and poor are all issues that the redemptive spirit, evidenced in scriptural movement, ought to impact as we bring these texts to bear on our modern world.” (Webb 2001: 37-38) The biblical “redemptive movement” or “redemptive spirit” looks like this:

X (original culture)	=> Y (Bible)	=> (our culture)	=>Z (ultimate ethic)
slavery with many abuses	slavery with better conditions	slavery eliminated and working conditions improved	slavery eliminated; improved working conditions; wages maximized for all; harmony, respect and unified purpose between all levels in organization

b. *Homosexuality*. “If we talk about the homosexuality texts within an X=>Y=>Z model, we discover a different kind of movement, namely, an absolute movement from X to Y. Scripture evidence a redemptive spirit when it moves the people of God to a complete ban on same-sex activity. . . . Our modern culture [at least in the West] could either be placed along the continuum at X (equivalent to where the original culture was) or perhaps even to the left of X in what might be viewed as a ‘W’ position. In order to capture the same redemptive spirit today, the Christian community must continue its negative assessment of homosexual behavior and restrict such activity within the church, even if society at large does not.” (Webb 2001: 40) The biblical “redemptive movement” or “redemptive spirit” looks like this:

[W] (our culture)	=> X (original culture)	=> Y (Bible)	=> Z (ultimate ethic)
almost complete acceptance and no restrictions of homosexual activity	mixed acceptance and no restrictions of homosexual activity	negative assessment and complete restriction of homosexual activity	negative assessment and complete restriction of homosexual activity and greater understanding and compassion; utilization of a sliding scale of culpability; and variation in the degree of negative assessment based on type of same-sex activity

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APPENDIX A

<http://www.str.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5466>

Never Read a Bible Verse, Gregory Koukl

If there was one bit of wisdom, one rule of thumb, one single skill I could impart, one useful tip I could leave that would serve you well the rest of your life, what would it be? What is the single most important practical skill I've ever learned as a Christian?

Here it is: *Never read a Bible verse*. That's right, never read a Bible *verse*. Instead, always read a paragraph at least.

My Radio Trick

When I'm on the radio, I use this simple rule to help me answer the majority of Bible questions I'm asked, even when I'm totally unfamiliar with the verse. It's an amazingly effective technique you can use, too.

I read the paragraph, not just the verse. I take stock of the relevant material above and below. Since the context frames the verse and gives it specific meaning, I let it tell me what's going on.

This works because of a basic rule of all communication: Meaning always flows from the top down, from the larger units to the smaller units, not the other way around. The key to the meaning of any verse comes from the paragraph, not just from the individual words.

The numbers in front of the sentences give the illusion the verses stand alone in their meaning. They were not in the originals, though. Numbers were added hundreds of years later. Chapter and verse breaks sometimes pop up in unfortunate places, separating relevant material that should be grouped together.

First, ignore the verse numbers and try to get the big picture. Then begin to narrow your focus. It's not very hard or time consuming. It takes only a few moments and a little observation of the text.

Begin with the broad context of the book. What type of literature is it history, poetry, proverb? What is the passage about in general? What idea is being developed?

Stand back from the verse and look for breaks in the narrative that identify major units of thought. Ask, "What in this paragraph or group of paragraphs gives any clue to the meaning of the verse?"

There's a reason this little exercise is so important. Words have different meanings in different contexts (that's what makes puns work). When we consider a verse in isolation, one meaning may occur to us. But how do we know it's the right one? Help won't come from the dictionary. Dictionaries only complicate the issue, giving us more choices, not fewer. Help must come from somewhere else close by: the surrounding paragraph.

With the larger context now in view, you can narrow your focus and speculate on the meaning of the verse itself. Sum it up in your own words.

Finally and this is critical see if your paraphrase makes sense when inserted in the passage. Does it dovetail naturally with the bigger picture?

Here is an excellent example of how effective this paraphrase technique can be.

Jesus, the Uncreated Creator

In John 1:1 the writer states plainly that “the Word was God.” In verse three he provides backup support for this claim. John writes, “All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.”

John says the same thing in two different ways for emphasis and clarity: Everything that ever came into being owes its existence to the Word, Who caused it all to happen. If the Word caused all created things to come into existence, then He must have existed *before* all created things came into existence. Therefore, the Word could not have been created. Jesus is the uncreated Creator, God.

Those who deny the deity of Christ offer this rebuttal, though. “Wait a minute, Greg. You didn’t read the verse carefully. You missed something in the text. Notice the phrase ‘apart from Him.’ The apostle excludes Jesus from the count. If you said, ‘Apart from Billy, the whole family is going to Disneyland’ you wouldn’t mean that Billy wasn’t part of the family, just that he wasn’t included in the count. Every member of the family is going to Disneyland *with the exception of* Billy. In the same way, every created thing was created by Jesus *with the exception of* Jesus Himself. Jehovah created Jesus first, then Jesus created everything else. Jesus is not God.”

Note that this rebuttal turns on the ability to replace “apart from Him” with the phrase “with the exception of Jesus.” Allegedly they’re synonymous. Okay, let’s try the replacement and see what happens. The verse then looks like this: “*With the exception of Jesus*, nothing came into being that has come into being.”

If your brow is furrowed trying to figure this out, I’m not surprised. The reconstructed phrase is nearly nonsense. Strictly speaking, it means that Jesus is the only created thing that exists. Read it again and see for yourself. Obviously, the phrase “apart from Jesus” can’t mean “with the exception of Jesus.” These phrases are not synonymous.

“Apart from Him” means something entirely different. It means “apart from His agency.” It’s the same as saying, “Apart from me you’ll never get to Disneyland. I’ve got the car.” Apart from Jesus’ agency nothing came into being that has come into being. Why? Because Jesus is the Creator. He is God. That makes perfect sense in the context.

Let me give you some other examples.

Having a “Peace” about It

Colossians 3:15 is a text that is constantly misunderstood by well-meaning Christians. Paul writes, “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” Some have accurately pointed out that the Greek word for “rule” means to act as arbiter or judge. They see this verse as a tool for knowing God’s will for our lives.

The conventional thinking goes something like this. When confronted with a decision, pray. If you feel a “peace” in your heart, go ahead. If you don’t feel peace, don’t proceed. This internal sense of peace acts like a judge helping you make decisions according to the will of God. A paraphrase might be: “And let feelings of peacefulness in your heart be the judge about God’s individual will for your life.” Is this what Paul means?

This is a classic example of how knowledge of the Greek can be dangerous if context is not taken into consideration. The word “peace” actually has two different meanings. It could mean a sense of inner harmony and emotional equanimity. Paul seems to have this definition in mind in Philippians 4:7: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” This is the subjective sense of peace.

The word also has an objective sense. It sometimes means lack of conflict between two parties formerly at war with each other. This definition of peace is what Paul intends in Romans 5:1: “Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Note the distinction between the peace *of* God and peace *with* God in these two verses.)

What sense of peace did Paul have in mind when writing to the Colossians? The Greek gives us no indication because the same word is used in all three cases. Once again, context is king. The specific meaning can only be known from the surrounding material.

In verse 11, Paul says that in the Body of Christ there are no divisions between Greek and Jew, slave and free, etc. He appeals for unity in the body characterized by forgiveness, humility, and gentleness. He then adds that harmony (“peace”)

should be the rule that guides our relationships.

Paul has the objective sense of peace in mind here lack of conflict between Christians not a subjective feeling of peace in an individual Christian's heart.

This becomes obvious when we join the suggested paraphrases with the context:

Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let feelings of peacefulness in your heart be the judge about God's individual will for your life, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

vs.

Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. And beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. And let harmony, not conflict, be the rule that guides you, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

The first is completely foreign to the context; the second fits right in with everything that comes before and after. In the context of Colossians 3, there is no hint of using internal feelings as a divine stamp of approval on our decisions. Personal decision-making is not the point of the paragraph. Harmony and unity in the Body is.

“If I Be Lifted Up”

John 12:32 is another case where a phrase can have two widely divergent meanings. It's not uncommon for worship leaders to quote this statement of Jesus: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.”

We “lift up” the Lord when we exalt Him and declare His glory. If we focus on Jesus and ascribe glory to Him, the power of Christ is released to transform the hearts of those listening and they are drawn to Him. This is the meaning the worship leader has in mind, but it isn't what Jesus is talking about.

When we apply our paraphrase test by adding the very next verse, the results look like this: “‘And I, *if I be exalted before the people*, will draw all men to Myself.’ But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die” (John 12:32-33).

Oops. Praising Jesus will kill Him? I don't think so. No ambiguity now. In this instance, being “lifted up” clearly means to be crucified.

Understanding this phrase in context sheds light on another familiar passage, John 3:14-15: “And as Moses lifted up [raised in the air] the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up [raised in the air] that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.”

Our paraphrase looks like this: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be *crucified* that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.”

This makes perfect sense. Jesus had to be crucified before salvation could be offered, an appropriate lead-in to the verse that comes next, the most famous salvation verse in the world: John 3:16.

Let's try another.

“My Sheep Hear My Voice”

Many have taken this statement by Jesus in John 10 to refer to the Christian's acquired ability to “hear” God's personal instructions to him. “Hearing God's voice” is advocated as a very useful skill that aids optimal Christian living. Allegedly, this is a learned ability one gains as he matures in Christ. It enables him to sense Jesus' will in any given situation as he “hears” Jesus' voice.

Jesus has nothing like this in mind, though. I know because of the context surrounding the verse and a key clarification John himself gives early in the chapter. In verse six, John explicitly states that when Jesus speaks of His sheep “hearing His voice” He is using a figure of speech.

The word “voice,” then, can’t actually mean some kind of inner voice because a thing is never a metaphor of itself. It’s a picture of *something else*. Jesus must be referring, in a figure, to something else that the phrase “hear my voice” represents. What is it?

The context tells the story. Jesus says, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me,” and then adds, “and I give eternal life to them” (27-28). Note the sequence: His sheep hear His voice. They follow Him in response. He then gives them eternal life. Hearing Jesus’ voice is a figure of speech for the inner working of the Holy Spirit that leads to our salvation. It results *in* salvation; it’s not the result *of* salvation. It’s applied here to non-believers destined for the Kingdom, not believers already in the Kingdom.

This makes perfect sense in the broader context of the chapter. The Jews have no trouble *hearing* Jesus’ words. They know what Jesus is *saying*. Their problem is that they don’t *respond with belief*. Why don’t the Jews “hear” Jesus by responding with belief? Jesus tells us plainly. They don’t “hear” because God is not “speaking” to them. They are not among the sheep the Father has given to the Son (26).

The voice being referred to here is not the still, small voice of private direction given by God to Christians, but the effective call of the Holy Spirit bringing non-Christians to salvation.

Our paraphrase test comes to our aid once again:

You do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. Mature Christians have the ability to sense My personal direction for their lives and obey it, and as a result I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all....

vs.

You do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. The ones that the Father gives me my sheep are the ones that respond to my message and believe in me, and as a result I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all....

The first view actually makes salvation dependent on the ability to get personalized communications from God. The second makes salvation dependent on the Father, which is Jesus’ point in the passage.

To Jesus, “hearing” God is not an advanced skill one must develop to open lines of communication to the Father. It’s a figure of speech. Hearing Jesus’ voice is not getting individual, personalized direction. It’s getting saved. It’s the result of the Father drawing the non-believer into Jesus’ arms.

Daily Bread?

This raises legitimate questions about daily devotionals that build a short message from a single verse. In my view, such quiet-time helps can be inspirational, but they come with an obvious drawback.

Fortunately, the liability can be overcome by remembering our basic rule: *Never read a Bible verse*. Instead, read a paragraph, at least. Always check the context. Observe the flow of thought. Then focus on the verse.

Remember, meaning always flows from the top down, from the larger units to the smaller units. A reflection on a Bible passage from a sermon or a devotional may be edifying, encouraging, and uplifting. If it is not the message of the text, though, it lacks biblical authority even when the quote comes right out of the Word of God.

If you will do this one thing if you will read carefully in the context applying the paraphrase principle you will begin to understand the Bible as God intended. Without the bigger picture you’ll be lost.

Only when you are properly informed by God’s Word the way it is written in its context can you be transformed by it. Every piece becomes powerful when it’s working together with the whole.

It’s the most important practical lesson I’ve ever learned...and thing [sic] single most important thing I could ever teach you.

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APPENDIX B

INTERROGATIVE BIBLE STUDY FOR BIBLICAL PREACHING

Greg Scharf, Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School⁹

“Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no truths.”

Assumptions:

- Careful study of the text is an essential prerequisite to faithful preaching. How we study will shape how we preach.
- Accurate observation can be facilitated by incisive questions of the text. Many questions will aid our understanding of a text; some will be especially helpful in preparing to preach a text.
- We cannot faithfully preach a text until we know more than what it is saying. We must try to discover what it is attempting to achieve and how it is to achieve it.

Suggested questions (including two pivotal ones Haddon Robinson asks) to supplement those you may already be asking:

1. What have we here? (What is this text functionally?)

- command
- report of an event, conversation, prayer
- recitation of God’s deliverance
- warning
- oracle, “Thus saith the Lord”
- divine explanation
- example
- testimony
- confession
- plea
- interlude
- a link in the history of redemption
- a lament
- an encouragement or exhortation
- a genealogy
- a greeting or benediction
- a hymn

2. What is this passage about?¹⁰ (What is the dominant subject of this text?)

For instance, this passage is primarily about:

- prayer
- faith
- obedience
- doctrine
- rebellion

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¹⁰Haddon Robinson in *Biblical Preaching: The Development*.

- idolatry
- fear
- joy
- government
- God's ways
- or a host of other subjects

3. What is the author saying about this subject?

In answer to this question we will:

- Observe what else (in addition to what we consider the subject) is mentioned in the text.
- Summarize the context of the passage as it relates to the subject of the passage.
- Discern how other matters mentioned in the text are related to what you consider the subject.

4. What responses might the Holy Spirit want from believing readers of the text? (Why did the Holy Spirit see fit to include this text in the canon?)

For instance, the Holy Spirit might want to elicit:

- repentance
- trust in God
- confession of sin; confession of Christ
- any number of specific forms of obedience.

5. How does this passage move the reader to make the intended response?

This question focuses our attention on the way the text before us seems to be designed to achieve its purpose.

Armed with that insight we craft our message to make use of the elements the passage itself uses to achieve the purpose for which it was written. For instance, we may notice:

- rhetorical devices
- argumentation
- examples, both positive and negative
- godly fear of unhappy consequences mentioned
- display of benefits of faith that leads to obedience
- editorial comments, e.g., **1 Kings 12:15**
- direct appeal
- use of some feature of a specific genre. So for instance, poetry may use an image or memorable phrase to move the consciousness of the listener, e.g., **Ps 84:3**, which speaks of the sparrow nesting near the altar of God.

6. How does this passage contribute to the larger picture of redemption?

- How does it point to Christ?
- Where is it in the Biblical story line?
- How did it impact original hearers/readers?

APPENDIX C

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_law_hays.html#top—*Bibliotheca Sacra* 158: 629 (2001): 21-35

Applying the Old Testament Law Today, J. Daniel Hays^a

[p.21]

How should Christians apply the Old Testament Law? Obviously commands in the Mosaic Law are important, for they make up a substantial portion of God's written revelation. Yet the Old Testament contains many laws that seem strange to modern readers (e.g., "Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk," Exod. 34:26; "Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material," Lev. 19:19; "Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear," Deut. 22:12).¹

Christians violate a number of Old Testament laws with some regularity (e.g., "A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing," Deut. 22:5; "Rise in the presence of the aged," Lev. 19:32; "The pig is also unclean; although it has a split hoof, it does not chew the cud. You are not to eat their meat or touch their carcasses," Deut. 14:8).

Furthermore, while believers tend to ignore many Old Testament laws, they embrace others, especially the Ten Commandments, as the moral underpinnings of Christian behavior (e.g., "Love your neighbor as yourself," Lev. 19:18; "You shall not commit murder," Exod. 20:13; "You shall not commit adultery," Deut. 5:18).

Why do Christians adhere to some laws and ignore others? Which ones are valid and which are not? Many Christians today make this decision based merely on whether a law seems to be relevant. Surely this haphazard and existential approach to interpreting the Old Testament Law is inadequate. How then should Christians interpret the Law?

[p.22]

Traditional Approach

Many evangelical scholars interpret the Mosaic Law by emphasizing the distinction between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws. They define moral laws as those that deal with timeless truths regarding God's intention for human ethical behavior. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is a good example of a moral law. Civil laws are those that deal with Israel's legal system, including the issues of land, economics, and criminal justice. An example of a civil law is Deuteronomy 15:1, "At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts." Ceremonial laws deal with sacrifices, festivals, and priestly activities. An example is in Deuteronomy 16:13, which instructed the Israelites to "celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress."²

In this traditional approach the distinctions between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws are critically important because this identification allows believers to know whether a particular law applies to them. Moral laws, according to this system of interpretation, are universal and timeless. They still apply as law to Christian believers today. Civil and ceremonial laws, on the other hand, applied only to ancient Israel. They do not apply at all to believers today.³

However, the traditional approach has numerous critical weaknesses, and does not reflect sound hermeneutical methodology.⁴ This approach is inadequate for the following reasons.

The Distinctions Are Arbitrary

The distinctions between the moral, civil, and ceremonial laws are arbitrary, imposed on the text from outside the text. The Old Tes-[p.23]tament itself gives no hint of any such distinctions. For example "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) is followed in the very next verse by the law "do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material" (19:19).⁵ Should verse 18 be applied as binding, while verse 19 is dismissed as nonapplicable altogether? The text gives no indication that any kind of hermeneutical shift has taken place between the two verses. On what basis can one decide that one verse is universal and timeless even for believers in the Christian era, while the commandment in the very next verse is rejected? Many of the so-called moral, civil, and ceremonial laws occur together like this without any textual indicators that there are differences between them.

In addition it is often difficult to determine into which category a particular law falls.⁶ Because the Mosaic Law defined the covenant relationship between God and Israel, it was by nature theological. All of the Law had theological content. Can a law be a theological law but not a moral law? For example Leviticus 19:19 commands, "Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material." One of the central themes running throughout Leviticus is the holiness of God. The discourse by God in Leviticus 19 is prefaced by the commandment, "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy." Part of this theme is the teaching that holy things must be kept separate from profane things. While the significance of these commands against mixing seed or mixing cloth material may not be fully understood, it is clear that they relate back to the holiness of God. In fact all of the levitical laws regarding separation seem

to relate to the overarching principle of God's holiness and the separation required because of that holiness. How then can this law not be moral?⁷

[p.24]

Even the Ten Commandments, the clearest examples of so-called moral laws, present problems for the moral, civil, and ceremonial distinctions. For example is the Sabbath law moral or ceremonial? If content is the criterion, then the Sabbath law, which was clearly part of Israel's worship system, is a ceremonial law and not a moral one. But if content is not the criterion for distinctions, then what is? If location within the Ten Commandments becomes the litmus test for moral law, then there exists a simple system with only two categories: (a) the Ten Commandments, which are universal and timeless and which apply to Christians as moral law, and (b) all the rest of the Law, which is not applicable today. Of course this is likewise unacceptable for it does not allow believers to claim Leviticus 19:18, "love your neighbor as yourself," which Jesus identified as the second greatest commandment. To pull Leviticus 19:18 away from the verses that surround it and to identify it as a moral law requires that content play the major role in the distinction. If content becomes the criterion, then the Sabbath law ought to be classified as ceremonial.

Furthermore, although many Christians claim that the Sabbath law is a moral law, practically none of them obey it. Going to church on Sunday, the first day of the week, can hardly be called obedience to the Sabbath law. Moses would not have accepted the first day of the week as a substitute for the seventh day. Also obeying the Sabbath regulations was much more involved than mere church attendance. In the Book of Numbers a man was executed for gathering wood on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32–36). So the distinctions between civil, ceremonial, and moral laws appear to be arbitrary and not textually based. Should Christians use these arbitrary distinctions to determine such a critical applicational issue?

The Legal Material Is Embedded In Narrative Texts And Must Be Interpreted Accordingly

The Old Testament legal material does not appear in isolation. Instead, the Mosaic Law is firmly embedded in Israel's theological history. It is an integral part of the story that runs from Genesis 12 through 2 Kings 25. The Law is not presented by itself, as some sort of disconnected but timeless universal code of behavior. Rather it is presented as part of the theological narrative that describes how God delivered Israel from Egypt and then established them in the Promised Land as His people.

For example the main legal material in Exodus is recorded in chapters 20–23. This section also contains the Ten Commandments. However, the narrative context of these chapters must be noted. The first nineteen chapters tell the story of the Israelites' [p.25] bondage in Egypt and their deliverance by the mighty works of God. This section describes the call of Moses and his powerful encounters with Pharaoh. It presents the story of the plagues on Egypt, culminating in the death of the Egyptian firstborn. Next Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and through the Sea. The narrative describes their journey in the desert until, in the third month after the Exodus, the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, where God called them into covenant relationship (Exod. 19). The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and the laws that follow in Exodus 21–23 are part of this big story.⁸

The Book of Leviticus is also painted on a narrative canvas against the backdrop of the encounter with God at Mount Sinai (Lev. 26:46; 27:34). The Law in Leviticus is presented as part of a dialogue between God and Moses. Such use of dialogue is a standard feature of narrative. The book begins, "The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting." The phrase "The Lord said to Moses" occurs repeatedly throughout the book. In addition Leviticus includes numerous time sequence phrases,⁹ an indication of storyline time movement, another characteristic of narrative.

The Book of Numbers picks up the story in the second year after the Exodus (Num. 1:1) and describes the Israelites' journeys and wanderings for the next four decades (33:38). Central to the book is Israel's rejection of the Lord's promise in chapters 13 and 14. This disobedience resulted in the years of wandering recorded in the book. At various points during the story God presented Israel with additional laws. As in Exodus and Leviticus the laws in Numbers are firmly tied into the narrative material.

The narrative setting for the Book of Deuteronomy is the eleventh month of the fortieth year of the Exodus (Deut. 1:3), just before Israel entered Canaan. The place is specified—just east of the Jordan River (1:1, 5). Israel had completed the forty years of wandering as a punishment for refusing to enter the land. Now a new generation had grown up and God gave them a restatement of the covenant that He had made with their parents forty years earlier. Most of Deuteronomy consists of a series of speeches that Moses delivered to the Israelites on God's behalf. These speeches are connected to the narrative because they refer to the same time, place, and main characters as the narrative does. Also the end of the book contains some nonlegal, narrative material: the appointment of Joshua as leader (31:1–8), the song of Moses (32:1–47), a blessing of Moses on the tribes (33:1–29), and the death of Moses (34:1–12). Furthermore the events of Deuteronomy flow into the Book of Joshua, where the story continues without interruption.

The Law, therefore, is clearly part of the Pentateuchal narrative and is firmly embedded into the story of Israel's exodus,

wandering, and conquest. One's interpretive approach to the Law should take this into account. Connecting texts to their contexts is a basic tenet of proper interpretive method. The Law is part of a story, and this story thus provides a critical context for interpreting the Law. The method for interpreting Old Testament Law should be similar to the method used in interpreting Old Testament narrative, for the Law is contextually part of the narrative.

Does this diminish the force and power of the text? Do Christians have to put themselves under the Law before they feel called to obey the Scriptures? Is not narrative in the Scripture as authoritative as Law? To give the Mosaic Law a greater authority over the Christian's moral behavior than that of the other parts of the Old Testament narratives is to create a canon within a canon. Likewise to say that the legal material should be interpreted in the same manner as the narrative material certainly does not diminish the divine imperative of Scripture. When the disciples picked grain on the Sabbath, the Pharisees accused them of violating the Sabbath Law (Mark 2:23–28), for reaping on the Sabbath was prohibited in Exodus 34:21. However, Jesus justified this apparent Sabbath violation by citing a *narrative* passage in 1 Samuel 21:1–9. In essence the Pharisees criticized Him with the details of the Law, but Jesus answered them with principles drawn from narrative.

The Traditional Approach Overlooks The Law's Theological Context

God clearly introduced the Law in a covenant context, saying, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession” (Exod. 19:5). The people agreed to keep the terms of the covenant (24:3), and Moses sealed the agreement in blood (24:8). [p.27] A critical part of this covenant was God's promise to dwell in Israel's midst. This is stressed several times in the latter half of Exodus (25:8; 29:45; 33:14–17; 40:34–38). Associated with God's presence are the instructions for constructing the ark and the tabernacle, the place where God would dwell (Exod. 25–31, 35–40). Leviticus is thus the natural sequence to the latter half of Exodus, for it addresses how Israel was to live with God in their midst. How should they approach Him? How should they deal with personal and national sin before a holy God who dwelt among them? How should they worship and fellowship with this holy, awesome God in their midst? Leviticus provides the answers to these questions, giving practical guidelines for living with God under the terms of the Mosaic Covenant.

After Israel refused to enter the Promised Land (Num. 13–14), God allowed that disobedient generation to die. He then led the people back toward Canaan. Before they entered, however, He called them to a covenant renewal. Deuteronomy describes this renewed call to covenant that God made with Israel just before they entered the Promised Land. Deuteronomy describes in detail the terms by which Israel would be able to live in the Promised Land successfully and be blessed by God.

Obviously, then, the Law is tightly intertwined as part of the Mosaic Covenant. Several important observations about the Mosaic Covenant, therefore, merit discussion.

First, the Mosaic Covenant is closely associated with Israel's conquest and occupation of the Promised Land. The Mosaic Covenant is neither geographically neutral nor universal. It provided the framework by which Israel was to occupy and live prosperously with God in the Promised Land. The close connection between the covenant and the land is stressed repeatedly in the Book of Deuteronomy.¹⁰ This connection between Law and land cuts across the distinction between so-called civil, ceremonial, and moral laws. Furthermore the loss of the land in 587 B.C. has profound implications for the way the Law is to be viewed, precisely because the Law defined the terms for blessing *in the land*. In addition, when Israel was taken captive to Babylon, the Israelites lost the presence of the Lord in the temple (Ezek. 10). Possession of the land and the presence of the Lord in the tabernacle and temple are two critical aspects of the Mosaic Covenant. When the exiles returned to their [p.28] land, they did not return to the way things had been. The blessings described in Deuteronomy 28 were never again realized in any significant fashion - political independence, regional economic domination, regional military domination, and so forth—nor is there any statement about God's returning to the temple, in contrast to earlier passages that focused on His presence in the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–38) and the temple (1 Kings 8:9–10; 2 Chron. 7:1–2). Things were certainly not the same as they were before the Exile.

Second, the blessings from the Mosaic Covenant were conditional. In Deuteronomy God informed Israel that obedience to the covenant would bring blessing, but that disobedience to the covenant would bring punishment and curses. Deuteronomy 28 is particularly explicit regarding the conditional nature of the Law. Verses 1–14 list the blessings for Israel if they obeyed the terms of the covenant (the Mosaic Law), and verses 15–68 spell out the terrible consequences for them if they did not obey the terms of the covenant. Also the association of the covenant with the land and the conditional aspect of the covenant blessings are often linked in Deuteronomy (30:15–18).

Third, the Mosaic Covenant is no longer a functional covenant. The New Testament affirms the fact that the Mosaic Covenant has ceased to function as a valid covenant. Hebrews 8–9 makes it clear that Jesus came as the Mediator of a covenant that replaced the old one. “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete” (Heb. 8:13). Thus

the Mosaic Covenant is no longer functional or valid as a covenant. This has important implications for one's understanding of the Law. The Old Testament Law specified the terms by which Israel could receive blessings in the land under the Old (Mosaic) Covenant. If the Old Covenant is no longer valid, how can the laws that make up that covenant still be valid? If the Old Covenant is obsolete, should not also the laws in that Old Covenant be seen as obsolete?

Paul stated repeatedly that Christians are not under the Old Testament Law. For example in Galatians 2:15–16 he wrote, "A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." In Romans 7:4 Paul stated, "You also died to the law through the body of Christ." In Galatians 3:25 he declared, "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law." Paul argued vigorously against Christians returning to the Old Testament Law. If there was a distinction between civil, ceremonial, and moral laws, it was unusual that Paul ignored it. Furthermore, if the moral laws were to be understood as universally applicable, one would expect Paul at least to use them as the basis for Christian moral behavior. However, as Goldingay points out, [p.29] Paul "does not generally base his moral teaching on this foundation but on the nature of the gospel, the guidance of the Spirit, and the practice of the churches."¹¹

How, then, should Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17 be understood? He said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them." Did Jesus and Paul contradict each other? Not at all. First, the phrase "the Law and the Prophets" refers to the entire Old Testament. So in this verse Jesus was not speaking of only the Mosaic Law. Also the antithesis is not between "abolish" and "observe," but between "abolish" and "fulfill." Jesus did not claim that He came to observe the Law or to keep the Law; rather He came to fulfill it. The word *plēroō* ("to fulfill") occurs numerous times in Matthew, and it normally means, "to bring to its intended meaning." Jesus was not stating that the Law is eternally binding on New Testament believers. If that were the case, Christians today would be required to keep the sacrificial and ceremonial laws as well as the moral ones, and that would clearly violate other portions of the New Testament.

Jesus was saying that He did not come to sweep away the righteous demands of the Law, but that He came to fulfill its righteous demands. As the climax of this aspect of salvation history, Jesus fulfilled all the righteous demands and all the prophetic foreshadowing of the Law and of the Prophets. In addition Jesus was the final Interpreter of and Authority over the Law and its meaning, as other passages in Matthew indicate. Jesus restated some of the Old Testament laws (19:18–19), but some He modified (5:31–32). Some He intensified (5:21–22, 27–28), and others He changed significantly (5:33–37, 38–42, 43–47). Some laws He abrogated entirely (Mark 7:15–19). Jesus was not advocating the continuation of the traditional Jewish approach of adherence to the Law. Nor was He advocating that the Law be dismissed altogether. He was proclaiming that the meaning of the Law must be interpreted in light of His coming and in light of the profound changes introduced by the New Covenant.¹²
[p.30]

Conclusion

The Law is tied to the Mosaic Covenant, which is integrally connected to Israel's life in the land and the conditional promises of blessing related to their living obediently in the land. Christians are not related to that land, nor are they related to the conditions for being blessed in the land. Also the Mosaic Covenant is obsolete, having been replaced by the New Covenant. Therefore the Mosaic Law, a critical component of the Old Covenant, is not valid *as law* over believers in the church age.

So the traditional approach to the Mosaic Law, which divides it into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories, suffers from three major weaknesses: It is arbitrary and without any textual support, it ignores the narrative context, and it fails to reflect the significant implications of the change from Old Covenant to New Covenant. This approach, therefore, is inadequate as a hermeneutic method for interpreting and applying the Law.

A Suggested Approach

What approach should believers follow in interpreting the Old Testament Law? In accord with sound hermeneutical method, it should be an approach that (a) is consistent, treating all Old Testament Scripture as God's Word, (b) does not depend on arbitrary nontextual categories, (c) reflects the literary and historical context of the Law, placing it firmly into the narrative story of the Pentateuch, (d) reflects the theological context of the Law, and (e) corresponds to New Testament teaching.

The approach that best incorporates these criteria is referred to as *principlism*. A number of evangelicals have employed this approach on a regular basis as the method of choice in interpreting the Old Testament.¹³ The advantage of this approach is that it enables Bible students to be consistent when interpreting Old Testament passages. There is no need to classify the laws arbitrarily into applicable and nonapplicable categories.
[p.31]

This is not a theoretical approach, but rather a practical method that can be used by scholars, lay people, and students alike. Its strength is that it is fairly simple and consistent. As for a weakness it may tend to oversimplify some complex issues. Is

there room to refine and improve this approach? Absolutely. Nonetheless it is a step forward from the traditional division of Law into arbitrary moral, civil, and ceremonial categories.

Principlism, an alternative approach to applying the Law, involves five steps.

Identify What The Particular Law Meant To The Initial Audience

Identify the historical and literary context of the specific law in question. Were the Israelites on the bank of the Jordan preparing to enter the land (Deuteronomy) when the law was given, or were they at Mount Sinai soon after the Exodus (Exodus, Leviticus)? Was the law given in response to a specific situation that had arisen, or was the command describing requirements for Israel after they moved into the Promised Land? What other laws are in the immediate context? Is there a connection between them? How did this particular law relate to the Old Covenant? Did it govern how people were to approach God? Did it govern how they were to relate to each other? Did it relate to agriculture or commerce? Was it specifically related to life in the Promised Land? What did this specific law mean for the Old Testament audience?

Determine The Differences Between The Initial Audience And Believers Today

Delineate the theological and situational differences between Christians today and the initial audience. For example believers in the present church age are under the New Covenant, not the Old Covenant. Thus they are not under the laws of the Old Covenant. They are not Israelites preparing to dwell in the Promised Land, nor do they approach God through the sacrifice of animals. Also Christians live under secular governments and not under a theocracy, as did ancient Israel. In addition Christians face pressures not from Canaanite religions but from different non-Christian worldviews and philosophies.

Develop Universal Principles From The Text

Behind the Mosaic commands for the original audience lie universal, timeless principles. Each of the Old Testament laws had a meaning for its first audience, a meaning that is related to the Old Covenant. But that meaning is usually based on a broader, universal truth, a truth that is applicable to all God's people, regardless [p.32] of when they live and under which covenant they live. In this step one asks, "What universal principle is reflected in this specific law? What broad principle may be applied today?"

The principle should be developed in accord with several guidelines: (a) It should be reflected in the text, (b) it should be timeless, (c) it should correspond to the theology of the rest of Scripture, (d) it should not be culturally bound, and (e) it should be relevant to both Old Testament and current New Testament believers. These universal principles will often be related directly to the character of God and His holiness, the nature of sin, the issue of obedience, or concern for other people.

Correlate The Principle With New Testament Teaching

Filter the universal principle through the New Testament teaching regarding that principle or regarding the specific law being studied.

Some of the Old Testament laws, for example, are restated in the New Testament as commandments for New Testament believers. When the Old Covenant was abrogated, the Old Testament Law ceased to be a Law for Christians. However, when the New Testament repeats a law it thus becomes a commandment for believers, to be obeyed as a commandment of Christ. But this validity and authority as a *command* comes from the New Testament and not the Old Testament. In addition occasionally the New Testament qualifies an Old Testament law, either modifying it or expanding on it. For example for the command in Exodus 20:14, "You shall not commit adultery," the universal principle relates to the sanctity of marriage and the need for faithfulness in marriage. As this principle is filtered through the New Testament, Jesus' teaching on the subject must be incorporated into the principle. Jesus said, "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt. 5:28), thereby expanding the range of this law. He applied it not only to *acts* of adultery but also to *thoughts* of adultery. Therefore the commandment for Christians today becomes "You shall not commit adultery in act or in thought." But Christians should seek to obey this command because it reflects a universal biblical principle reinforced by the New Testament, and not simply because it is an Old Testament law.

Apply The Modified Universal Principle To Life Today

In this step the universal principle developed in the previous step is applied to specific situations in believers' lives today. Evidence of principlism can be found in the New Testament. As noted earlier, [p.33] Jesus' citation of 1 Samuel 21 to rebut the Pharisees follows a similar pattern. In 1 Corinthians 9:9 Paul cited Deuteronomy 25:4 ("Do not muzzle an ox while it is

treading out the grain”) in defending his right to receive material support from the Corinthians (1 Cor. 9:4, 11–12). In the traditional approach this deuteronomic law would probably not be classified as a “moral” command, yet Paul cited it as applicable. Since Paul clearly emphasized elsewhere that Christians are not under the Old Testament Law (Rom. 6:14–15; 7:1–6; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 2:15–16; 5:18; Eph. 2:15), he was not citing Deuteronomy 25:4 as a law that was binding on the Corinthian church. Instead he used this law paradigmatically or analogically.¹⁴ The apostle cited a command whose principle can be applied to situations other than that of the initial, historical incident.

Leviticus 5:2 provides an example of how the method of principlizing can be used by believers today to apply legal passages without being under the Law. The verse reads, “Or if a person touches anything ceremonially unclean—whether the carcasses of unclean wild animals or of unclean livestock or of unclean creatures that move along the ground—even though he is unaware of it, he has become unclean and is guilty.” The action required to correct one’s ceremonially unclean status in this verse is described a few verses later. So verses 5–6 should also be included: “When anyone is guilty in any of these ways, he must confess in what way he has sinned and, as a penalty for the sin he has committed, he must bring to the Lord a female lamb or goat from the flock as a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.” The traditional approach simply classifies these verses as a ceremonial law that no longer applies to believers today. However, using the principlizing approach, one can interpret and apply this text in the same manner as one would narrative.

1) *What did the text mean to the initial audience?* The context of Leviticus discusses how the Israelites were to live with the holy, awesome God who was dwelling in their midst. How were they to approach God? How should they deal with sin and unclean things in light of God’s presence among them? These verses are part of the literary context of 4:1–5:13 that deals with offerings necessary after unintentional sin. Leviticus 4 deals primarily with the leaders; Leviticus 5 focuses on regular people. Leviticus 5:2 informed the [p.34] Israelites that if they touched any unclean thing (dead animals or unclean animals), they were defiled ceremonially. This was true even if they touched an unclean thing accidentally. Being unclean, they were unable to approach God and worship Him. To be purified (made clean), they were to confess their sin and bring the priest a lamb or a goat for a sacrifice (5:5–6). The priest would sacrifice the animal on their behalf and they would be clean again, able to approach and worship God.

2) *What are the differences between the initial audience and believers today?* Christians are not under the Old Covenant, and their sins are covered by the death of Christ. Also because they have direct access to God through Jesus Christ, they no longer need human priests as mediators.

3) *What is the universal principle in this text?* The central universal principle in these verses relates to the concept that God is holy. When He dwells among His people, His holiness demands that they keep separate from sin and unclean things. If they become unclean, they must be purified by a blood sacrifice. This principle takes into account the overall theology of Leviticus and the rest of Scripture. It is expressed in a form that is universally applicable to God’s people in both the Old Testament and the New Testament eras.

4) *How does the New Testament teaching modify or qualify this principle?* According to the New Testament, God no longer dwells among believers by residing in the tabernacle or temple; He now dwells within believers by the indwelling Holy Spirit. His presence, however, still calls for holiness on their part. He demands that they not sin and that they stay separate from unclean things. However, the New Testament redefines the terms “clean” and “unclean.” “Nothing outside a man can make him ‘unclean’ by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him ‘unclean.’ ... What comes out of a man is what makes him ‘unclean.’ For from within, out of men’s hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man ‘unclean’” (Mark 7:15, 20–23). Believers under the New Covenant are not made unclean by touching dead animals. They become unclean by impure thoughts or by sinful actions.

The New Covenant also changed the way God’s people are to deal with sin and uncleanness. Rather than bringing a lamb or goat to atone for sin, a believer’s sins are covered at the moment of salvation by the sacrifice of Christ. The death of Christ washes away sin and changes the believer’s status from unclean to clean. Confession of sin, however, is still important under the New Covenant (1 John 1:9), as it was under the Old Covenant. [p.35] So an expression of the universal principle for today’s New Testament audience would be, “Stay away from sinful actions and impure thoughts because the holy God lives within you. If you do commit unclean acts or think unclean thoughts, then confess that sin and experience forgiveness through the death of Christ.”

5) *How should Christians today apply this modified universal principle in their lives?* There are many possibilities, but one specific application relates to Internet pornography. Many Christians now have easy access to pornographic material in the privacy of their homes or dormitory rooms. This text teaches that the holiness of God, who dwells within believers, demands that they lead clean lives. Viewing pornography clearly falls into the category that the New Testament says is unclean. Such action is a violation of God’s holiness and it hinders one’s ability to worship or fellowship with God. Therefore believers are to stay away from Internet pornography, realizing that it makes them spiritually unclean, offends the

holiness of God, and disrupts fellowship with God. However, if one does fall into this sin, he must confess it, and through the death of Christ he will be forgiven and fellowship with God will be restored.

Conclusion

The traditional approach of dividing the Mosaic Law into civil, ceremonial, and moral laws violates proper hermeneutical method, for it is inconsistent and arbitrary, and the Old Testament gives no hint of such distinctions. This approach errs in two ways. On the one hand it dismisses the civil and ceremonial laws as inapplicable. On the other hand it applies the so-called moral laws as direct law. In addition the traditional approach tends to ignore the narrative context and the covenant context of the Old Testament legal material.

Principlism, an alternative approach, seeks to find universal principles in the Old Testament legal material and to apply these principles to believers today. This approach is more consistent than the traditional one, and it is more reflective of sound hermeneutical method. It also allows believers to see that all Scripture is “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

References

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¹ Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

² Christopher J. H. Wright suggests five categories: criminal, civil, family, cultic, and charitable (*An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983], 152-59). Wright does not consider any of these as a universal, moral category.

³ Using this distinction as a guide to moral behavior dates back to John Calvin. He distinguished between moral and ceremonial laws, arguing that while the gospel has nullified the ceremonial laws, the moral laws, on the other hand, continue as law for the Christian (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge [reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 2.7-8). For a current defense of this approach see Willem A. VanGemeren, *The Law Is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective*, in *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian*, ed. Wayne C. Strickland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 1358.

⁴ Other evangelicals have become uncomfortable with the traditional approach as well. For example see David Dorsey, *The Law of Moses and the Christian: A Compromise*, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991): 321-34.

⁵ The arbitrariness of the distinction between moral and civil law is reinforced by the arrangement of the material in Leviticus. Love of neighbor immediately precedes a prohibition on mixed breeding; the holiness motto comes just before the law on executing unruly children (19:18-19; 20:9) (Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 34).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷ Another good example of a law that is difficult to classify with this system is in Numbers 5:11-31. This passage describes how a woman suspected of adultery is to be tried by the priest. Surely adultery is a moral issue. Is this law then a timeless universal law for today? Should suspected adulterers in America be tried by the method described in this passage? To determine her guilt or innocence, the priest was to make her drink some bitter water. If she became sick, then she was guilty. If she did not become sick, then she was innocent. Should this be practiced today? Obviously not. On the other hand, if it is not practiced, does this mean it is not a moral law, that adultery is not a moral issue?

⁸ For example the Ten Commandments are listed in Exodus 20:1-17, but the text flows immediately back into narrative in verse 18, which reads, When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. Likewise God presented numerous laws to Israel in Exodus 21-23, but these too are part of the narrative, for they are part of the dialogue between God and Israel. The people responded to God's presentation of the Law by saying, Everything the Lord has said we will do (24:3).

⁹ “Then Moses took” (Lev. 8:10), “He then presented” (8:14), “Moses then said” (8:31), “On the eighth day Moses summoned” (9:1), “So Aaron came to the altar” (9:8), “So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them” (10:2), “The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron” (16:1).

¹⁰ The Hebrew word for “land” occurs almost two hundred times in Deuteronomy. A representative selection of passages that directly connect the terms of the covenant with life in the land include 4:1, 5, 14, 40; 5:16; 6:1, 18, 20-25; 8:1; 11:8; 12:1; 15:4-5; 26:1-2; 27:1-3; 30:5, 17-18; and 31:13.

¹¹ John Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 103.

¹² For similar views on Matthew 5:17-47 see D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:142-44; R. T. France, *Matthew: Evangelist and Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 194-95; and Donald Hagner, Matthew 1-13, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 104-6.

¹³ See Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1991), 286-89; Goldingay, *Models for Interpretation of Scripture*, 92; and Robert Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 223-24, 255. Wright uses the term paradigmatic instead of principlism, but he describes the same basic approach (*An Eye for an Eye*, 16263). William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard Jr. cite Wright and state that the Law serves as a paradigm of timeless ethical, moral, and theological principles, and that the interpreter therefore must strive to discover the timeless truth beneath its cultural husk (*Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* [Dallas: Word, 1993], 279). A similar view is taken by Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, 3335; and John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1992), lxxiii.

¹⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 408. See also the discussion on this verse by Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 263-65.

APPENDIX D

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[p.5] *Culture and Conscience: Biblical Absolutes and Cultural Variation*, T. Wayne Dye

The Issue

While cross-cultural disagreements about what is morally right have long been a staple of daily life for missionaries everywhere, people back home are increasingly faced with similar disagreements and the questions they raise. Such conflicts on moral issues cause inter-personal misunderstanding and friction, and often contribute to our society's claim that ethical decisions are matters of personal taste.

As my wife, Sally, and I have wrestled with these issues over many years, we have come to believe there are basic scriptural answers that alleviate many of these conflicts. In her article in this issue of the *IJFM* (pp. 15–25) “Cultural Variation in Conscience: Part of God's Design,” Sally has written about how culture and conscience affect the way a Christian needs to obey God. The present article explains why fully mature Christians do not all obey biblical commands in the same way.

For years we thought there was only one way to obey the commands—the way we were first taught to do it.¹ As Bible translators, we had to give a people group the whole Bible. Once they had it, they would surely obey the plain meaning of its words by living as we tried to live. Although missionaries and college teachers have often taught their way as the only right way (and expected everyone to obey the commands in that way), there is considerable variation in how the commands should be followed.

One problem is that we Westerners don't obey all commandments in the same way. We take some passages literally and obey them carefully, while ignoring other passages. We don't literally “greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16, NIV²). We don't drink wine to help our digestion (1 Timothy 5:23). We don't pray each day at 3:00 p.m., the “time of prayer” (Acts 3:1). We don't wash the feet of others, except on rare and very special occasions (John 13:14). My wife does not wear a head covering in church while in the United States (1 Corinthians 11:2–16).³ Indeed, there are many such commands in the New Testament.⁴

[p.6] This “selective obedience” is not only a characteristic of American churches. All the Christians that we have encountered around the world have been selective at some point. This raises the question: are we following a biblical selection principle or making a mistake?

Such inconsistencies are more obvious when we look at the Old Testament, which was the “Bible” of the New Testament church. When Jesus and the Apostles quoted Scripture it was always the Old Testament. The New Testament explicitly teaches that the Old Testament is to be obeyed. 2 Timothy 3:16–17 says:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

When Paul wrote this about the Old Testament he was agreeing with the Old Testament itself. Its commands are clearly stated, and the importance of obeying them is strongly emphasized. For instance, Deuteronomy 10:12–13 says:

And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

There are many such passages. Yet when we turn to the Pentateuch, we find commands that apparently were for everyone everywhere thoroughly mixed in with commands that few follow today. Leviticus 19 provides some examples. Verse 13 says, "Do not defraud or rob your neighbor." Surely that should be followed today. The verse then goes on to say, "Do not hold back the wages of a hired man overnight." No Christian organization in my country obeys that. Verse 18 says, "... love your neighbor as yourself," surely a universal commandment. The very next verse says, "Do not mate different kinds of animals.... Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material." What would we tropical missionaries do without our polyester and cotton clothing?

Verse 26 says, "Do not practice divination or seek omens." We would like to teach that to our animist friends. But what if they go on to read the next verse? It says, "Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard." Rarely do male Christian missionaries follow this command. There are many such commandments, about leaving food for gleaners, providing loans with no interest at all, leaving land lie fallow, and selling land back to its original owner after fifty years; we do not follow any of these literally today.

Key Passages on the Nature of True Obedience

We have now come to believe that the approach of Christians through the ages has been right for them. Christians of most denominations have read the Bible from their own cultural perspective and interpreted its commands in ways appropriate to their own cultures. This intuitive understanding was reasonably good in mono-cultural situations. It only fails to work when people from two different cultures interact. The missionary problem has come because we did not really understand the host people's basis for making decisions, and so we often applied biblical teachings as if the believers in other cultures were just like us. In the pages that follow, I hope to enable us to see how we evangelicals intuitively interpret the Bible in our own cultural situations. Once we understand the process, we can make it clear so Christians in other cultures and sub-cultures can use it in their own situations.

Can People Obey the Same Command Differently?

In two remarkable passages in the epistles, Paul showed that truly obedient Christians from different cultures would, in some cases, do quite different things. 1 Corinthians 8–10 and Romans 14 are worth careful study for cross-cultural ministry today.

Corinth was a center of idol worship. The worshipper in this context paid for an animal sacrifice, then took part in eating the meat. The rest of the meat was sold, either in the temple court or in the market place. Now the average person in that pre-industrial society could not often afford meat. With so many sacrifices being offered each day, it is likely that meat sacrificed to idols would fulfill most of the community's demand for meat.

This situation raised a problem for believers who wanted to eat meat without taking part in idol worship. Mature Gentile believers (or believers from Jewish backgrounds) argued that eating such meat made no difference. Others, especially those newly converted from idolatrous backgrounds, felt guilty about eating such meat. For this reason, believers in Corinth asked Paul to speak to the issue. His answer was complex, and followed a discourse structure not often used today, so the steps in his reasoning are sometimes missed.

Idols Are Not Real So Eating Meat Is OK

Paul began by emphasizing love over mere knowledge, then went on to say that idols are not really supernatural beings at all.

So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that [p.7] "There is no God but one." For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. (1 Corinthians 8:4-6)

Paul agreed that this gave freedom to those with "strong faith," those who had a truly Christian worldview in this matter. He even said in his later summary instructions to go ahead and eat any food bought in the market or served by an unbeliever. It is clear from this that there is nothing inherently wrong with eating such food, nothing that would hurt a mature Christian.

But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. (1 Corinthians 8:8) Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it." If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. (1 Corinthians 10:25-27)

If Someone Believes the Idol Is Real Then Don't Eat the Meat

There is another aspect to consider, however. Paul said that those who had a “weak conscience,” i.e., did not have a biblical understanding of idols, were sinning if they ate meat offered to idols.

But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.... Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall. (1 Corinthians 8:7-13)

Paul saw this conflict as so critical that he urged mature Christians to be aware of who was watching and how others might interpret their actions. Cross-cultural witnesses must seek the good of others, and this includes avoiding any actions that might lead them to sin if they uncritically made the same choice.

“I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but not everything is constructive. No one should seek their own good, but the good of others... But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience I am referring to the other person's conscience, not yours.... So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. (1 Corinthians 10:23, 28-29, 31-33)

Not One Right Way But Two

Here is a remarkable teaching. A specific activity (eating meat offered to idols) is right—and even encouraged—for those with one worldview and therefore a certain understanding of right and wrong. For people with a different worldview, however, that activity is a sin that can destroy their faith in Christ. Furthermore, no one has a right to judge the actions of others.

For why is my freedom being judged by another's conscience? If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for? (1 Corinthians 10:29b-30)

To be sure, believers have a responsibility not to be a “stumbling block” by influencing another to do what is wrong for him. Yet, that just emphasizes the point; what is right for one can be wrong for another. That is why we can hurt others by doing something we could otherwise do in good conscience. In order to see how this could be, we need to look at just why eating food offered to idols was wrong for some people. 1 Corinthians 10:18-21 provides the clue.

Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.

In both Jewish and Middle Eastern Gentile cultures of that day, one worshipped a god by eating the food that had been sacrificed. Jews and Gentiles worshipped in the same way by eating a sacrifice—but with different objects of worship. When Gentiles worshipped idols they were sinning because they were choosing to worship something other than the true God. Satan and his demons are the true beneficiaries of all such rebellious worship.

Yet Paul made it clear that a Corinthian's actions while sacrificing to an idol [p.8] meant nothing in themselves, because the idol was not a deity at all. As this and all other biblical passages emphasize, an idol is nothing but a piece of dead wood or stone or gold. It is the intent thought of the worshiper that causes a given action to become worship. Worship is a matter of meaning. It is an act intended to give homage to a deity. An atheist who joins in singing in a hymn of praise at a church is not worshipping even though the Christians standing beside him singing the same hymn are. People who still believe an idol is a god when eating meat offered to it are worshipping that idol. However, if they have come to understand that the idol is nothing but a statue, they can no longer worship it because they do not believe there is a god there to worship. When they eat meat they are not sacrificing; they are merely eating meat.

We have taken time with this point because it has profound implications. The Corinthian believers were a test case for the central point of a cross-culturally valid Christian ethic. At some level every human action expresses one's relationship to God and his commandments, either in obedience or disobedience; that is its ethical and spiritual meaning. People with one worldview might be obeying God by their action, since they are not going against any of God's commandments. Someone with another worldview might be disobeying God by doing what appears to be the same thing because at the level of intention the two actions are quite different.

Note that in Paul's test case it is the more mature Christian who is free to eat the sacrificed meat. We recognize that God is gentle with new Christians, but as they mature God shows them more and better ways to obey. One might expect God's patience with new believers to be the explanation of this passage, but in this case the new converts who still believed the idol was real were more restricted in what they could do. The more mature Christians who no longer believed in idols had greater freedom.⁵ Romans 14 provides a more general example.

Doing Right in Rome

The early church at Rome must have reflected the multi-cultural character of the city itself. Jewish and Gentile Christians had come together from many different parts of the empire. They were trying to get along, but in ways important to them they were living quite differently. Some Christians were vegetarians, perhaps to avoid eating meat offered to idols. Others ate everything. Some Christians kept the Jewish holy days; others did not. Paul's answer followed the same reasoning as he used with the Corinthians.

Accept him whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. (Romans 14:1-5)

Each Is to Do What He Is Convinced God Wants Him to Do

Each believer must follow what he thinks is right, being "fully convinced in his own mind." And he must do so without judging others, not looking down on them or condemning them for having different convictions. Those other people are also servants of God, and it is the meaning of their action as an expression of their relationship to God that really counts. In that regard, "...the Lord is able to make [them] stand." Romans 14, verses 6 through 9 make the point more clear.

Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. (Romans 14:6-9)

In other words, each of us is continuously in relationship to God; we are never alone. He is our "Lord," our boss, our commander, the one who has a right to tell us what to do in every aspect of our lives. Every action has this dimension of relationship, and it is in this respect (and no other) that right and wrong are determined. Paul went on to say the food we eat is of no importance in itself. If, however, someone believes that he should not eat a particular food, then he is disobeying by eating that food because he is going against his perception of God's will.

I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.... So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, [p.9] because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin. (Romans 14:14, 22-23)

Don't Influence Others to Do What Is Wrong for Them

Paul made a further point about the way we interact with those who have a different understanding of what is right. We must be careful not to judge others, for "each of us will give an account of ourselves to God" (Romans 14:12). At the same time, we must not do anything that will lead others astray by doing what is right for us but not for them.

You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.... If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died. Therefore, do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall. (Romans 14:10, 13, 15-21)

If all Christians were required to act alike—what is right for one culture being right for all others—this problem would not exist. It would be impossible to lead others to stumble and fall through imitating behavior that is acceptable for another person in similar circumstances. Paul's key point is that indeed there are proper differences in behavior at some points. The matter of not misleading others follows from those differences.

Paul's argument here is entirely consistent with his whole approach to working with Gentiles. God demands that all people obey the same commandments; however, in some subtle but important ways just how this obedience must be lived out is different for different peoples. How can this be, without the result being chaos? What biblical principles provide for this variation within a framework of universal commandments? In the next section, I attempt to formulate these principles.

The Way to Obey God in Any Culture

Taken together the four basic principles below can account for both the absolute authority of the Bible and the proper role of cultural variation in determining how a given command applies. These four principles lead to a three-step procedure for applying a passage.

Principle 1. All of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, is authoritative over all people, in every age and culture.

All passages are for our benefit. No commandments can be freely disregarded; no examples are to be ignored. Scripture is much more than a guide for action; it is our “Manufacturer’s Handbook” telling us all how to live.⁶

Principle 2. Though all Scripture was written for everyone, it was not written to everyone.

The author of each Scripture passage was communicating a message specifically to the original receptors, and it is this message that is the original meaning of the passage. Everyone else is an onlooker who must deduce from what was said to the original audience what God is saying to him now.

Two New Testament passages, which describe how believers today are to learn from the Old Testament, serve to clarify this principle. 1 Corinthians 10:6–11 tells of Old Testament events, which “occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did.” Hebrews 11 recounts numerous Old Testament examples that should be followed. Present day believers must decide whether the example is one that we should avoid or emulate by determining what each person did in his situation and how the Bible speaks about his actions. We then work out what those actions mean for us in our situations today. It is helpful to see how the early church interpreted the Old Testament, because the various first century churches were not all in the same situations either. They were richer or poorer, had different ethnic traditions, were more or less in danger of persecution, and differed in other significant ways as well.

Principle 3. It is the core meaning, the underlying universal teaching, of every passage of Scripture that is universally applicable in every culture.

Every command and every example has a core meaning. Passages that were originally intended to be universal have a core meaning that is the same as the passage. “You shall not steal” has the same basic meaning everywhere. Most passages, however, describe an unusual situation or provide a set of instructions to particular people that are not necessarily widely applicable. In those passages, the core meaning must be derived from the situation and the passage. The core teaching is always applicable to every human being at every point in history, although the applications will be somewhat different in different situations. It is this universal core meaning which we properly call a “biblical absolute.” [p.10] This point will become clearer from the three-step procedure for discovering and then applying the core meaning.

Because the fourth principle is different in character, we will review the common process for discovering and applying the meaning of a biblical passage before introducing it. The steps are straightforward and simple. They are worth going over carefully, though, because cross-cultural application can sometimes be quite difficult.

A Three-Step Procedure for Discovering and Applying the Core Meaning

Step 1. Determine “What did it say to them?” Who were the intended readers, the original “receptors”? What was their situation, their context? What meaning did the human author apparently intend them to get from the communication?

Step 2. Discern “What does it mean?” What is the underlying universal here? What is the core meaning? How could this be phrased in more general terms? Because humans are alike in important respects (Dye, T. W. 1987, 42-43), their situation is everyone’s situation at some time or another. It is good to try to state this underlying universal meaning in plain words.

Step 3. Ask “What does it mean to me?” How does this universal meaning apply to us and to our hearers, friends, or colleagues here and now? This is where the rubber meets the road. This step is often the easiest to do if we are applying the meaning to ourselves or to someone like us.⁷ If the application is to a different culture, then we will have trouble discerning how to apply it. Cross-cultural workers will have to rely heavily on help from persons inside that culture to do so.

This leads us to the fourth principle.

Principle 4. Biblical commands are there to help us love God and other people.

This principle is both the most important and the one to be invoked last. Paul put its relationship to the other laws this way:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13: 8-10)

The purpose of all of those commandments about inter-personal relationships is to help us know how to genuinely love others. In a sense, there are only two over-riding commandments: love God first and your neighbor as yourself. All the rest are detailed instructions about how to obey these two.

Understanding How to Love Others Is Complicated

We humans are not able to know how to love others in a righteous manner, so it is spelled out for us in the many ethical teachings of the Bible. Paul made it clear what love is in 1 Corinthians 13. Love is patient, kind, rejoices with truth, protects, trusts, hopes, perseveres, and never fails. Love is not envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, recording wrongs, or delighting in evil.

This kind of love must be lived out every day in family relationships and in social interaction with a variety of neighbors. This kind of love is never easy, but comes only from “a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Timothy 1:5). It is a little easier in one’s own culture where one knows the cultural rules for loving others; it is much more difficult in another culture where the customs are different. Indeed, several aspects of love are confusing and often misunderstood.

1. Love as a universal and as a detailed teaching

Actually, there are two kinds of commandments to love others in Scripture: the universal and the detailed. People need both. We dare not delude ourselves that we could somehow simply live in love and ignore the other specific teachings found throughout both Testaments (but especially the New). God knew humans needed them, which is why they are included. We humans live in a complex and often perplexing world; we do not know the right way to love others without the guidance of the many teachings and examples of Scripture.

At the same time, we often do not know how to rightly interpret these detailed teachings, so the principle of love sheds much light on what we should do. When the applications of two commandments seem to conflict, or when two cultures come together so that it is hard to know which application fits, the love principle can show us the way.

2. Cultural variations on what is genuine Christian love

When people in a given society hear the Bible say, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” they have an idea of what that love would look like; their culturally conditioned consciences tell them what they should do. The alternative wording, “do to others as you want others to do to you” is clarifying. It is intended to give one an idea of what another person might desire. Love asks, “What would I want the other person to do for me if I were in his situation?”

That rule provides only limited guidance in other ethnic groups, however. When a person attempts to show love [p.11] to a neighbor from a distinctly different culture, the “as yourself” seldom communicates love. For example, if my wife serves a meal featuring pork to most Americans, they would see her action as love. If she served that same meal of pork to a Jew or a Muslim or a vegetarian, it would be very offensive.

We thought we were showing love to Bahinemos by taking them the twenty miles by boat to the hospital. Although several lives were saved, the hospital seemed like prison to them, especially because of their belief about death. They believed that if a person died so far away from home, the ghost would not be able to find its way back for the important burial procedures, causing catastrophic problems for the whole extended family.

Actions one person sees as loving in a given culture may actually cause harm to a neighbor within another culture. Certain actions can even cause them to stumble and lose faith. It takes research before one can know what local people in another culture would want one to do to show love in that setting. It often takes 1 Corinthians 13 love, which is patient and kind, but not proud, rude, self-seeking or easily angered.

That said, there are Scripture-based limits on how far one can go in adapting one’s behavior. We Christians cannot just do what we think is loving and ignore scriptural teaching. Instead, we must love others in ways that both communicate love and still result in obedience to all the biblical commands. The imperative to love others shows us how to apply the commands: it does not replace them.

Using the Interpretation Steps: Two Biblical Examples

Foot Washing

Before the Last Supper, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and said,

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you should also wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (John 13:14-15)

Few present day churches obey this literally. Even those churches that practice foot washing actually do so under very special circumstances and only as a symbolic act. There is a sensible reason; foot washing as originally commanded would accomplish little in a culture where people wear shoes and socks, walk on pavement, and take frequent showers.

Does this mean the command should be ignored? Of course not! The first principle of interpretation is that all Scripture is for our benefit and is to be obeyed. There is a clear and widely accepted meaning for today, a meaning that becomes obvious when following the procedure.

Let us go through the three application steps.

Step 1: What did this say to them?

Wash each other’s feet. The context of this command was a dusty city without elaborate water and sanitation systems, with many animals in the streets, and people walking barefoot or in sandals. Even if one took a bath before visiting a friend’s home, by the time he arrived his feet were dirty again. Therefore, a good host assigned a servant to wash his guest’s feet before he could comfortably recline to eat (Luke 7:44). It was this lowly, dirty, but practical task that Jesus taught the

disciples to do for one another. This is the meaning to the original set of readers and hearers.

Step 2: What does this mean?

The Biblical absolute might be stated like this, “No matter how important your role in the Christian community, always be willing to do the lowliest, most disagreeable tasks to benefit a fellow believer or fellow human.”

Step 3: What does it mean to me?

The modern world certainly offers plenty of room for humble, loving service. (This is where the fourth interpretation principle fits.) There are a myriad of applications to this command. Sick and dying people, including AIDS victims, need care. Prisoners can be visited and crime victims assisted. Everyday services of cooking, cleaning, caring for babies and the elderly need attention. The list goes on. A church can only keep going because there are ushers, janitors, nursery workers, as well as preachers and teachers. Christians who do their share of these lowly tasks are fulfilling the command whether or not they also take part in the symbolic ritual of foot washing.

Muzzling the Ox

The Apostle Paul interpreted Old Testament passages this way in 1 Corinthians 9:9-10 and 1 Timothy 5:17-18. He was arguing that Christian workers deserved to be paid, and he proved his point by quoting a command in Deuteronomy 25:4, “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.”

How did Paul make this strange jump from oxen to people? Follow the Application Steps. (Step 1: What does it say?) “Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.” In the 1 Corinthians passage he went on to ask, “Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn’t he?” The answer to his question is no, not in the original passage. The intended meaning for the original hearers really was about the fair treatment of animals.

But Paul saw the core meaning (Step 2: What does it mean?) The core of that passage is that one who labors deserves some income for his work. (Step 3: What does it mean to me?) That concept has many applications. [p.12] He applied it to mean that people in Christian communities should pay their pastors. Furthermore, since people are more important than animals, Paul argued that this was the most important purpose of the command. Jesus also said people were the object of the passages about oxen in the Old Testament (Luke 13:15; 14:5).

This is not an obvious application of a passage on treatment of oxen, but Jesus and Paul followed the application steps for us.

Some Less Obvious Examples

Sometimes these four interpretation principles are easy to apply. Christians today sense that they should help with the clean up and do some dirty jobs for other Christians without realizing they are “foot washing.” At other times, the process is difficult. In some cases problems arise from omitting one of the three steps to discover the core meaning. In other cases, a group of Christians feel that a particular application is very obvious. When that happens, the principle and its application become coalesced in their minds, so that the application becomes the meaning. In other words, these Christians have confused a particular cultural application with a true Biblical absolute. As a result they preclude a different application when the situation changes.

Some biblical commands are worded as universals, so the second step is unnecessary. “You shall not steal,” for instance, was a specific command to ancient Israelites, but also a universal command for all people everywhere. New Testament commands such as “be hospitable” or “be kind” were given to particular people, but the wording is already universal. Kindness, hospitality, and theft are all understood in cultures everywhere. Such universal wording leads Christians to the fallacy that the application is also clear and universal when in fact it is affected by culture. We can see this by examining how some commands were obeyed in the New Testament, including the following example from Jesus’ life.

When Is It Stealing?

Let us look at theft, using the Three Step Application Process. (Step 1): What did this say to them? “You shall not steal.” Because it is universally worded, the universal principle is the same as the original statement, “do not take what you do not have the right to take.” Steps one and two are therefore the same. The applications, however, vary with the culture. Had Jesus lived in America and done exactly the same things the Gospels tell us he did, he would have been a thief. He used to walk through orchards that belonged to other people and eat the fruit, and even the Pharisees did not complain.⁸ Yet if I go through an American orchard and pick the fruit I can be arrested for theft. If I defend myself in court by saying Jesus did it, I might get my name in the paper, but I won’t be let off.

The difference is in the application. (Step 3): What does it mean to me? Jesus lived in a culture that, through the Pentateuch, had defined public rights as including picking fruit, as long as it was eaten on the spot. Since his government gave Jesus the right to take the fruit, he was not stealing. My culture does not give a person the right to eat fruit from someone else’s orchard. I would have to ask permission to take the fruit, or it would be stealing.

Some careful research may need to go into understanding what people in a particular culture have the right to take. Many people groups in Irian Jaya have very different rules about what a person has a right to take. *The Pineapple Story* (Gothard and Koning 1978) describes cross-cultural conflict as a result of different rules about the ownership of crops. If the missionary had asked, “Who has the right to take the pineapples?” and believed what he was told, he would have avoided years of misunderstanding that undermined his witness. The Irianese in his story had a clear rule, “The person who plants them eats them.” Garden produce is then used generously to build obligation for future leadership. Owners may put a curse on their garden to protect it from thieves by calling on a higher power, usually an ancestor. The people of that community had no experience or understanding of wage labor. The missionary assumed the protocol of wage labor, “If I pay for the labor, I own whatever is produced by that labor.”

Cultural Definitions of Hospitality

The command to “practice hospitality” (Romans 12:13) is understood everywhere, yet not in the same way. When my daughter and I visited the Tboli people of Mindanao, Philippines in 1974, the Christians provided us with gifts and hospitality which added up to a month’s wages. Their culture sets a very high standard of hospitality, and this is the level of kindness they felt they should show to friends of their beloved translator.

As missionaries we are often the recipient of Christian hospitality in the United States. Many people have opened their homes and shown great kindness to us, though we were strangers. No one, however, has come close to giving us a month’s wages in hospitality. We don’t expect such a thing in North American culture. The universal [p.13] command must have a culturally appropriate expression.

Cultural Standards of Generosity

The biblical command (Step 1) says to “be generous and willing to share” (1 Timothy 6:18). The core meaning is clearly the same (Step 2). But the application is very different for an Isneg villager in the northern Philippines than it is for us (Step 3). If an Isneg came into his village with a basket of pineapples from his garden, and gave away two-thirds of them, he would be considered stingy. The cultural standard is to give away three-quarters. If I returned from the grocery store and gave away two-thirds of my groceries to my neighbors, they would also be concerned—about my sanity.

We live in different cultures, with different standards and systems for sharing. The command is universal, but the application is culture specific. It is best to consistently use the three application steps and teach people in other cultures to do so.

Holy Kisses

Another example of contextualized obedience is the way various cultures follow the instructions to (Step 1) “Greet one another with a holy kiss” (Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, 2 Corinthians 13:12, 1 Thessalonians 5:26, 1 Peter 5:14). (Step 2) Greet one another in a warm, loving upright way. When people of different cultures follow through (Step 3), some cultures actually kiss. Others substitute an embrace, a warm handshake, mutual bowing, or even just a friendly voice and a smile. However it is done, love, respect, and affection are communicated in a wholesome way.

Care for the Elderly—the Western Way

Take another example, the command to “honor your father and your mother” (Steps 1 and 2). The early church clearly saw that honoring one’s parents included taking care of them when they were old. The church cared for old people who had no children to care for them. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for worming their way out of parental obligation by giving to God what should have gone to parents (Matthew 15:1-9). I once heard a Fijian Senator publicly say that Western societies are “primitive” because we typically leave much of the care of the elderly to public agencies. In her view, old people should be cared for by their families, and should live with them. Certainly her approach is closer to what was done by the early church.

We American Christians, including most elderly ones, see the issue differently (Step 3: What does it mean to me?). We see the core meaning as essentially unchanged, but say that by fostering public policies that do provide for social security and community services, we are in fact fulfilling our obligation. As many Americans perceive things, our homes have no room for an extra family member, nor do older people want to be dependent on their families. Only when other arrangements are inadequate do we expect families to take in elderly parents. This is an example of obedience that fits the cultural context of some people in the United States.

Should a Christian Smoke?

In the above examples, a tribal culture has held to a stronger realization of a commandment than Americans. Lest we conclude that the issue is simply an American lack of spirituality, here is a different example. Like many American evangelicals, my wife and I do not smoke. We have taken the command in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 to mean that we should care for our bodies. We know that smoking increases the risk of disease. These days many Americans agree with this, to the point they are willing to make life difficult for smokers in order to get cigarette smoke completely out of offices and public places.

The Bahinemo Christians with whom we spent many years in Papua New Guinea were eager to obey God and his com-

mands. We taught them to go to God's Word rather than to us for the answers to their life questions. We would only be there a limited number of years and wanted them to depend on Jesus for help. Much to our embarrassment among missionary co-workers, they saw no command against smoking in the Bible and had no conviction that it was a sin. This was in a context of God clearly convicting them of other sins in their lifestyle.

Bahinemos knew that the Bible commands us to care for our bodies, but they saw no relationship between smoking and disease. The concept of a slow incremental cause and the statistical concept of risk are totally foreign to their worldview. Unless we could show them a cause and effect relationship, they were not ready to accept our idea that the strange lung diseases and coughs they had were the result of smoking. Furthermore, locally grown tobacco provides one of their few pleasures in a world full of insects and discomfort. It is also one of the few ways they can afford to provide hospitality to visitors, a very high value. Only a few who were very ill from lung diseases quit smoking for medical reasons, despite my efforts to teach on this point.⁹

During the early years of the church we could simply have told them, "You cannot smoke and be a Christian." After all, we were their initial evangelists and the source of all they knew about these new teachings. To do so would not have tied the teaching to Scripture, however. It would have convinced them that there are some things for which you do not go to Scripture at all. The result would have been a lessened willingness to submit to God's Word as the primary source for knowing his will. It might easily have [p.14] increased their susceptibility to every self-styled "prophet" who came along.

Conclusion and Summary

This article has attempted to explain why it is appropriate for Christians to interpret and apply biblical teachings in order to make them more appropriate to their own cultures. Down through the centuries, believers have naturally made such applications without realizing it. Indeed, their perceptions of what Scripture was asking of them were so molded by their own cultures that the principles and their cultural applications were intertwined. The Epistles in particular teach us that a Christian community should come to its own understanding of how the Bible should be applied. Even if believers in every society were fully mature, there would still be differences in how they obey the Bible.

We presented four principles for determining how a command applies.

1. All of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, is authoritative over all people, in every age and culture.
2. There is an original set of readers and hearers to which every passage was addressed.
3. The core meaning, of every command of Scripture is applicable in all cultures; this is the true biblical absolute.
4. The command to love others as you love yourself states the purpose of the other commandments, and thus provides a way to sort out cases of cultural and other conflicts in interpretation.

A Three-Step Application Process helps one find the core meaning and how it applies in any particular situation.

- Step 1. What did this say to them? (Original meaning)
- Step 2. What does it mean? (Core meaning)
- Step 3. What does it mean to me? (Personal meaning or to my friends in another culture)

These Four Application Principles and the Three-Step Application Process reveal the core meaning of a command.

Endnotes

¹ It wasn't that I thought I was succeeding in living righteously, but I thought if I were to succeed it would be by truly doing what I had been taught was right living for everyone.

² All Biblical references in this article are noted from the New International Version.

³ Indians and Africans often insisted that she wear a head covering in church after we let them know we wanted to do what is right.

⁴ The Other Side, Nov-Dec. 1975 for these and other examples.

⁵ Nevertheless mature Christians were being asked to give up that freedom for the sake of some new believers.

⁶ For a more thorough discussion of this concept and its hidden complexities, see Geisler 1989. The approach I am taking could be seen as a variant of "Graded Absolutism" (Geisler, 113-132).

⁷ On the other hand, if it is written to us, and conflicts with something our culture approves of or values, we will have a difficult time seeing the real meaning of that command and applying it.

⁸ Jesus was breaking the law only if he did it on the Sabbath. (Mark 11:12-33). At his trial the Pharisees did not raise this as a problem.

⁹ Recently increasing numbers of the people of this village have come to realize the relationship between smoking and health, with the result that many have stopped smoking.

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APPENDIX E

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Contents

Welcome.....	84
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The Core Principles

Staying on the Line.....	85
Text and Framework.....	86
Genre.....	87
Asking Good Questions.....	88
Traveling Instructions.....	89
Structure	90
Finding the Main Idea and Intended Response	91
Biblical Theology.....	92

Welcome!

You're holding a booklet that contains the "Dig and Discover" hermeneutical principles taught by Leadership Resources International as part of TNT (Training National Trainers), a training program designed to "encourage and equip pastors around the world to teach God's Word with God's heart."

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May God indeed do this in your heart. May He bless your study of His Word, cause you to love Him more each day, and help you live out His Word in thankful, trusting obedience – all in praise and glory and honor to Him.

Staying on the Line*

What Does It Mean to “Stay on the Line”?

- Staying on the line illustrates the task of the teacher or preacher to discover what God’s Word says and to be faithful to it.
- The line itself represents what God actually says in His Word:



- To go above the line means to add something that is not really there – to say more than what God said in His Word. It leads to error, often in the form of legalism.
- To go below the line means to leave something out that is there – to not be wholly true and faithful to the truth of what God’s Word is saying. It often leads to liberalism and license.
- Staying on the line may be compared to the promise witnesses in some courts of law must make: “I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth [not to go below the line], and nothing but the truth [not to go above the line].”

How Important Is This to God?

- Since the time of Moses, God has made it clear that His spokesmen are to say what He has said – nothing more and nothing less (Exodus 4:10-16; Deuteronomy 4:1-2; 1 Samuel 3:1-4:1; Proverbs 30:5-6; Ezekiel 3:1-11; Jeremiah 1:4-19; 23:9-40; John 7:16ff; 8:28-29; 12:29-50; Revelation 22:18-19).

How Important Is This to Our Preaching?

- God’s words are beyond compare. Throughout the Bible, we see His words are powerful, certain, and good; only His words can give life. We want people to hear God’s voice rather than ours – His truth rather than man’s opinions and ideas. We need to experience the transforming power that comes only through His words.

What Does Staying on the Line Require?

- Committing ourselves to God
- Carefully discerning and understanding what God’s Word actually says
- Communicating it faithfully in our teaching, preaching, and living

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Text and Framework*

The Principle: We must let the Bible shape our frameworks rather than letting our frameworks shape our interpretations of the Bible.¹

What Do We Mean by “Text” and “Framework”?

- The **text** is any passage from the Bible that we might study and preach or teach.
- A **framework** is our basic way of understanding things. It affects how we read and understand the text.

More on “What Is a Framework?”

- A framework is a person's basic way of understanding what he knows. It is the underlying thought structure that shapes our understanding about everything. Our framework organizes all of our thoughts and ideas and holds them all together in a way that makes sense for us.
- Everyone has a framework. It develops over time by our parents' teaching, our education, culture, personal experience, and our place in history – even our reading of the Bible.
- During our lives we encounter new information. We have to figure out how it fits in with our previous understanding of things. In the end, we either decide to ignore or reject new information, or we accept it and allow it to reshape our framework.

Frameworks Affect How We Read the Bible.

- When we sit down to study the Bible, we bring our framework with us – including the way we see and understand God, man, sin, Christ, suffering, redemption, and many other important things.
- Frameworks, in and of themselves, are not necessarily bad. They are necessary in the process of reading, understanding, and communicating the Bible. However, they can wrongly influence the way we understand the text.

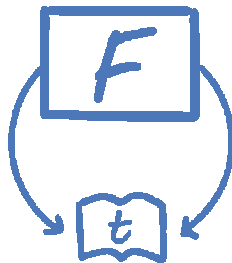
The Text Should Rule Over and Shape Our Framework.

- We believe that the Bible is from God (2 Peter 1:21), inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16a), true and reliable (Matthew 5:17-18), and sufficient for our faith and practice (2 Timothy 3:16b).

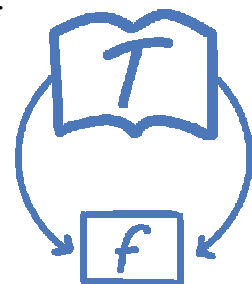
Yet we often do not recognize when our framework overpowers the way we understand the text, and sometimes, even when we are aware of it, we are unwilling to let go of our framework.

- In order to rightly understand God's Word and preach it faithfully, we must let the text rule over and shape our framework.
- Where there is a difference between the text and our framework, we must ask God to help us recognize it and allow the text to shape our understanding.

*What often happens:
Our framework
influences and shapes
our understanding
of the text.*



*What should happen:
The text rules over
and shapes our
framework.*



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¹ The Charles Simeon Trust, “Principles of Exposition,” <http://www.simeontrust.org/media/wbe-principles.pdf>

Genre

What Is Genre?

“Genre” is a word that refers to the type, or kind, of literature, or written material, that we find in the Bible. We know the different kinds of genres by differences in literary features like the style of writing, the form, the content, and the purpose of what is written.

How Does Understanding Genre Help Us?

- Recognizing the genre helps us know the characteristics of the kind of literature we’re reading. And understanding the characteristics of the literature helps us read and interpret it correctly – to understand what the author’s purpose was in writing and what he wanted to convey.

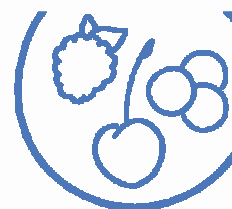
Why Is Genre Important?

- “Genre is the key to understanding what sort of information a Biblical author is trying to convey.”²
- “Until you know the purpose and kind of a text, what it intends to say or convey, you don’t know how to read it properly” (C. S. Lewis).³
- Recognizing the genre and characteristics of a text gives us certain clues, even understood rules, for how to read and interpret the meaning of a text.

Different Genres in the Bible

There are many different literary genres found in the Bible. Below are some of the major genres generally recognized in the Bible. Although whole books of the Bible are usually associated with certain genres, each book of the Bible can contain within itself different genres or even subgenres – more specific classifications of literary genres.

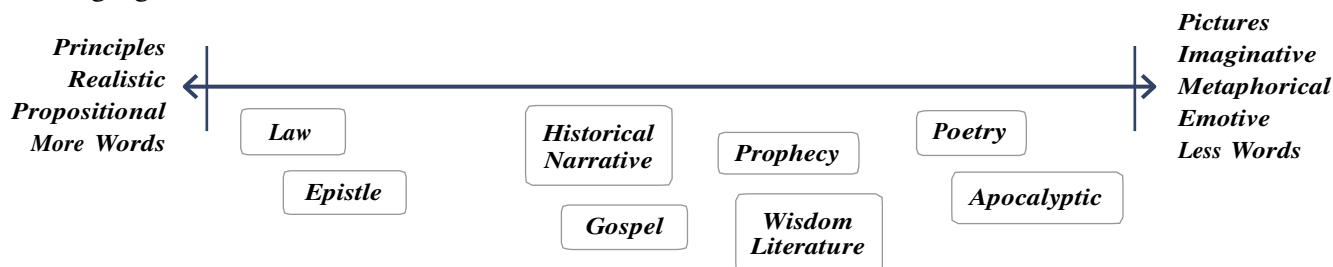
Types of Berries



Understanding and interpreting different genres of Biblical literature is like understanding different varieties of fruit. Imagine finding three different types of berries. One can be eaten, another used as medicine, and another used as a dye. By observing the shape, seeds, leaves, and color of each berry, you can confidently identify each one and use them for the right purpose while avoiding harm.

Distinctive Use of Language

One important difference we see among the genres is the way each one uses language to express its message. Below is a spectrum that compares different genres and general characteristics of the kind of language each one uses.



² A summary by Ben Witherington of a part of a book reviewed in “The Living Word of God (in an Age of Truth Decay)” (October 31, 2007) at <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com>.

³ Quoted indirectly by Ben Witherington, “Hermeneutics – A Guide for Perplexed Bible Readers” (August 21, 2007) at <http://benwitherington.blogspot.com>

Asking Good Questions

The Importance of Asking Good Questions

Asking good questions helps us, first, to observe and understand what the Bible is actually saying. Then, good questions help us dig deeper to discover the heart of the message of God's Word so that we may be faithful to it and transformed by it.



What Is a Good Question?

- A good question asks about something that may not be obvious in the text but is essential for understanding the author's intended meaning.
- A good question is one that leads us down the path the author wants to take us.

How Do We Ask Good Questions?

Begin by asking the basic questions of observation. Then, go deeper with questions that help us understand the intention and meaning of the author's message.

➤ Basic Questions of Observation

Begin by asking questions that open our eyes to what the text actually says:

- What does the text say? (Keep asking this most basic observation question.)
- When did this happen? Who are the characters involved? What places are mentioned?
- What are the important connecting or transition words?
- Are there any comparisons or contrasts?
- Are there repeated words or ideas?

➤ Essential Questions that Go Deeper

Go beyond the basic questions to ask good questions that help us understand why the author wrote what he did.

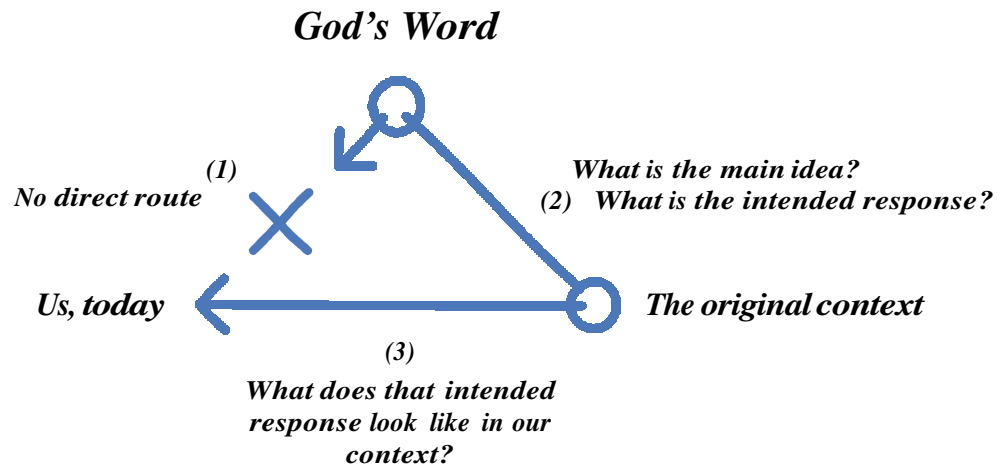
- What does the author say?
- How does the author say it?
- What is the tone?
- Why does he say it here? Why in this way?
- What is surprising about it?
- How does it point to or speak about Christ?
- What is it saying as a whole?
- Why did the author say this? What response did he hope to see from his readers?
- What is the response God is looking for in our hearts and lives today?

The Attitude of the Heart in Asking Questions

Three attitudes of the heart are essential in our pursuit to know what God's Word is saying and in helping us develop the skill of asking good questions.

- **Curiosity.** Ask questions with the curiosity of a child.
- **Discernment.** Learn to ask questions that go beyond obvious answers.
- **Perseverance.** Keep working and asking questions in order to understand.

Traveling Instructions*



The Principle:

- In order for us to understand how to apply God's Word to our lives today, we first need to travel back to understand the message expressed through the author in the original context.

How Does Traveling Instructions Work?

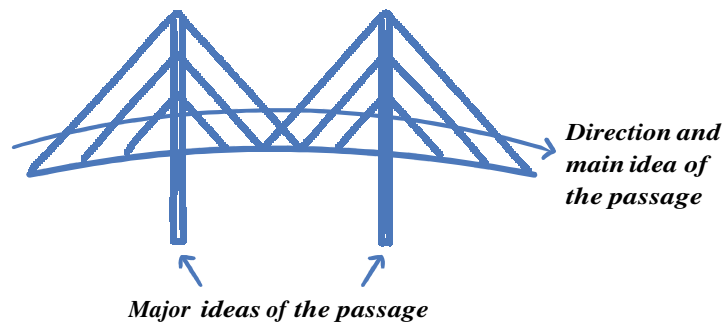
- (1) **Not Taking the Direct Route.** We are often tempted to read God's Word and try to apply what is said directly to our lives. But God first spoke through the heart of an author to readers in a different time and place. And so, instead of taking a direct route from God's Word to our lives today, we first need to travel back to consider what that author was saying to the original readers, and why.
- (2) **Hearing the Intent of the Author.** We must travel back to listen to what God was saying through an author in the original context – the literary context of the message of the book, the historical context of the background situation, and even the biblical context of the overall story and message of the Bible. And while there are many aspects of context which we could explore, we want to focus our attention on those aspects which help us understand what the author was saying, why he said this to these people, and what response he desired from his message.
- (3) **Applying the Message to Us Today.** The end goal of Traveling Instructions is application. After we have discovered the author's intended response to the message he gave, we can then travel to our day and ask how that response would be seen in our lives and in the lives of the people where we live and minister.

Why Is Traveling Instructions Important?

- If we take the shortcut and try to immediately apply God's Word to our lives, we risk misinterpreting what God was saying through His Word, missing the way God intends for us to respond, and misleading the people to whom we minister.
- However, when we do take the time to travel correctly, we discover the wonder of God's heart expressed through the original context, and the transforming power of His Word for our lives today.

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Structure



What Is Structure?

- The structure of a passage (or a book) involves: (1) the **parts of a passage** – the units of thought that contain the major ideas of the passage, and (2) the **connections of thought** that hold the sections and major ideas of the passage together.

Why Is Structure Important?

- Seeing the structure helps us identify the major ideas of the passage as well as how an author has designed the development of thought between them. Seeing the structure helps us see the direction the author's thoughts are taking us.
- Structure is important for our preaching and teaching because we want to make sure that the way we arrange the ideas in our teaching reflects the way the author arranged his thoughts in the passage. An awareness and understanding of structure in the Bible brings a clarifying power to our preaching.

How Do You Find the Structure of a Passage?

1. **Look for patterns and shifts in thought.** As you read the passage, what kind of patterns do you see that point to the major ideas the author is trying to convey? Also as you read, look for shifts in thought or a change in direction. These can be detected by a change in patterns.

Look especially for:

- Repetitions
- Progressions
- Contrasts and comparisons
- How a passage begins and ends
- Key transitions or summary statements

Also look for:

- Commands
- A story's climax and resolution
- Questions asked and answered

2. **Divide the passage.** After seeing the patterns and transitions in thought, divide the passage into sections that contain the major ideas. Write down the verse numbers for each section.
3. **Describe the major ideas.** State the major idea of each section of the passage in one complete sentence.
4. **Find the connections of thought between the major ideas.** How does one major idea connect or lead to the next? How do all of them connect together and reveal the direction of the author's thoughts?

(Seeing the structure leads naturally to discovering the main idea. In light of what you find about the structure, ask, "What is the main idea of this passage?")

Finding the Main Idea and Intended Response

What Is the Main Idea?

- The main idea is the main point or the central message of a passage (or a book).

Why Is Finding the Main Idea Important?

In Scripture:

- It helps us clearly discern the message God intends us to hear through a passage of Scripture.
- It helps us see the focal point around which other ideas in the passage are organized.

In preaching and teaching:

- It helps us remain faithful to what God is saying in His Word.
- It becomes the focal point around which everything in a sermon or lesson is organized.

Finding the Main Idea Involves . . .

- Observing clues in the text. Look for:
 - Connections between the way a passage begins and ends
 - The repetition of important words or ideas
 - A summary verse
 - Conclusions or purpose statements (that begin with words like “therefore” or “so that”)
- Finding the structure of the passage.
 - Consider how the development of thought points to the main idea.
- Asking two summary questions about the passage:
 1. What general idea is the author talking about?
 2. What specifically is he saying about that idea?

Finding the Intended Response

- Looking for the main idea causes us to ask, “What did the author say?” Looking for the intended response leads us to ask, “Why did the author say it?”
- Simply ask: In light of the message of this passage, what response did the author desire to see in the lives of his audience? In other words: What transformation was God seeking to accomplish through the words of the passage in the life of the listener? . . . What was the intended response?

How Do We State the Main Idea?

The main idea can be stated in two different ways:

- A “descriptive” main idea – in terms of what is described in the passage
- A “teaching” main idea – in terms of a timeless principle which reflects the specific message of the passage but also incorporates the transformational thrust of the intended response for our lives today

The statement of the Main Idea should be:

- Complete – not a title, but a complete sentence (with a subject and verb)
- Concise – short enough that listeners can remember it
- Specific – including some of the distinctive ideas of the passage

The Melodic Line

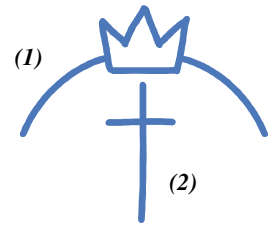


The main idea and intended response of a passage or book can be compared to the melody of a song a composer has written, which we sing or respond to in the way he intended.

Biblical Theology

What Is Biblical Theology?

- Biblical theology is a way of looking at the Bible that helps us see ...
 - (1) the big picture of the overarching story of the Bible and how each smaller piece (the individual passage or book we are studying) fits into that overall story
 - (2) how each part of the story points to Christ, since the overarching story about God and His purposes and plan is fulfilled in Christ



(1) The Overarching Story

- First, Biblical theology helps us see **the connection** between each smaller part (the passage or book we are studying) and the whole.

A Rope



The Bible is like a rope. A rope has many strands, but there is one rope. The Bible has many themes, and Biblical theology helps us to see how each of those themes is woven together into one story with one message.

Biblical Theology

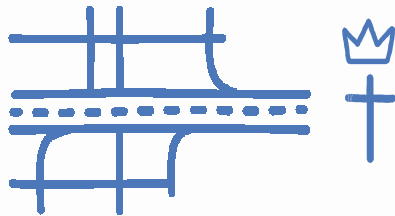
- Biblical theology helps us also see **the development** of the story and message of the Bible, until all is fulfilled in and through Christ.

(2) Fulfillment in Christ

- Biblical theology also helps us to see how every part of the Bible – not just the New Testament, but the Old Testament as well – is focused on its fulfillment in Christ.
- **The Old Testament Points to Christ**
- In Luke 24, Jesus explained that “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (24:44). So when we preach from the Old Testament, we can preach Christ because all of the Old Testament as a whole is **pointing forward** to Christ.

Main Highways on a Map

We may think about the Bible as a map, and on that map we see that all roads in the Old Testament lead to Christ. Not all roads are the main highways. The main highways are those passages from which a direct connection to Christ can be clearly seen. But there are many boulevards, avenues, side streets, and alleys that are not on the main highway, though they eventually connect to it.



We may be studying a passage that is on a side road off of the main highway. The important question to ask is: *How* does this passage get me to the main highway? Or, How does this passage connect with a main theme that points me towards Christ? How does this passage aid my understanding of Christ and what He has done? Questions like these will help us know how the Scriptures point to Christ.

➤ **The New Testament Explains Christ**

- While the Old Testament prepares the way for and points to Christ, the New Testament reveals and explains who He is.
- Ask: Is the New Testament author looking back at an Old Testament promise about Christ? If so, how does the author understand it? How does the author see the implications of Christ's coming and ministry on this side of the cross and resurrection? Is the author pointing us forward to the promise of Christ's return and the future of His kingdom? If so, what does he say about it?