THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION

Joel James
(adapted from *Expository Studying* by Joel James)

TWELVE PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION

The following principles are twelve of the most important, long-agreed-upon guidelines for careful biblical carpentry. They are the rules that make for wise, thoughtful, cut-it-straight Bible interpretation. The study of these principles is called *hermeneutics* (from the Greek verb *hermeneuo*, to interpret).

These hermeneutical principles have two sources: first, the everyday, sensible rules of language that make communication possible, and second, the character of God. In the Bible, God spoke in human languages; therefore, we follow the rules of language to understand Him. But as we do so, we never forget that it is God who spoke. Considering both those facts, you should embrace the following twelve rules of interpretation.

1) THE CLARITY OF SCRIPTURE

The Bible can be understood because God meant it to be understood.[1]

> I am the Lord, and there is none else. I have not spoken in secret, in some dark land .… I, the Lord, speak righteousness declaring things that are upright (Isa 45:18-19).

> The secret things belong to the Lord our God, *but the things revealed belong to us* and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law (Deut 29:29, emphasis added).

Studying for God starts with the assumption that God revealed His words to be understood and lived. As Moses said, the revealed things—the words of God in the Bible—are ours. That means you study God's word *expecting* to discover a coherent, understandable message. Wayne Grudem writes, "The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by all who will read it seeking God's help and being willing to follow it."[2]

The clarity of Scripture does not mean that every passage of Scripture is easy to interpret. Even the apostle Peter acknowledged that not everything in the Bible is equally easy

to understand (2 Pet 3:15-16). Therefore, when you come across a theologically obscure passage, give precedence to passages where the Scripture addresses that subject clearly. Nevertheless, the interpreter's assumption is always that God spoke the Scripture to be understood—to reveal truth, not to hide it.

2) THE ACCOMMODATION OF REVELATION

To *accommodate* means to adjust something you normally do in order to fit a specific situation. For example, a preacher who typically preaches in Zulu might accommodate English-speaking guests by translating part of his sermon into English. In this case, to preach only in Zulu would be unkind to his visitors; therefore, he graciously accommodates them by delivering part of his sermon in a language they understand.

God does the same thing. He is an infinite spirit being: He could talk in ways that you and I could never understand. But for our benefit, God chose to reveal Himself in terms that we can comprehend.[3] For example, the Scripture was written in well-known human languages—Hebrew, a little bit of Aramaic, and Greek—not in some heavenly language that we know nothing about.

The accommodation of revelation also means that when God speaks of divine or infinite concepts, He does so in a way that you can relate to. For example, 2 Chronicles 16:9 says that "the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth." Does that mean that God the Father has physical eyes? He doesn't. Other texts tell you that He is an infinite spirit (John 4:24). Then why does God talk about His *eyes*? God knows that eyesight is the most perceptive of human senses; therefore, He describes His infinite perceiving abilities in a way that you can understand. The lesser thing (human eyesight) helps you understand the infinitely greater thing (God's all-powerful ability to perceive).

God makes a similar accommodation when He speaks of "the hand of the Lord." Does God the Father have hands? No. But He knows that for us hands represent power—the ability to grasp something and control it. Knowing that, God graciously describes His infinite power as His hand. That's accommodation. Like an adult speaking to a child, God stoops to our level and describes Himself in ways that we can understand.

3) THE HARMONY OF SCRIPTURE

Although written by more than thirty human authors over a period of 1,500 years, the Bible agrees with itself. Can you imagine thirty people writing on any subject and agreeing

perfectly with one another? And what if the subject were religion? And what if some of them lived a thousand years apart? The theological agreement of the Bible is amazing. Actually, it is not so amazing when you recall that behind the Bible's array of human authors is one divine Author. Because the Scripture was spoken by the God who knows everything and never lies, the Bible harmonizes with itself; it does not contradict itself.

The harmony of Scripture is a foundational doctrine, but it can be abused. Sometimes Christians determine what they believe based on *one* text and then use a hammer and pry bar to force every other text to "harmonize" with that view. Don't ever do that. Let every passage say what God said, and in the end they will harmonize. Sometimes two texts will teach two distinct but equally true truths (such as the deity and humanity of Christ). Let both texts speak. But since the Bible has one divine Author, we come to it expecting to find theological agreement, and indeed, we do.

4) NORMAL INTERPRETATION

Usually people's biggest problem in Bible interpretation is that they read the Bible abnormally. When they open their Bibles, it's as if they forget everything they ever learned about reading. They ignore the context; they look for secret, personal meanings. Normal interpretation, on the other hand, means that you read the Bible following the reading practices you would consider sensible for reading any other important document, human or divine.[4]

When the headmaster writes a note to the school's maintenance man instructing him to replace a faulty florescent light in classroom eleven, that's an important document to the maintenance man. It's his job to fix such problems. What does the maintenance man do? He doesn't read a mystical, secret meaning about spiritual light into the headmaster's note. He reads it normally and carefully in order to determine which light is burnt out, and then fetches a fresh globe and a stepladder. That's normal interpretation; we need to read our Bibles the same way.

Sometimes this approach to interpreting the Bible is called *literal* interpretation—you take the words literally, taking them to mean what they say, rather than giving them some fantastic, imaginary interpretation.[5] But is everything in the Bible literal? Doesn't the Bible use figures of speech? The Bible often uses figurative language: the Lamb of God, wolves in sheep's clothing, God our rock, and so on. Not everything in the Bible is to be taken

literally—God is not literally a *rock*. That's why this principle is called *normal interpretation*. The question then, is how do you normally decide whether a statement is literal or figurative?

If your mother says, "You're a hard-headed mule," does she mean you have long ears, gray fur, and thick yellow teeth? Of course not. She is using a word picture to rebuke your stubbornness. It is *normal* to communicate using word pictures and comparisons. But not everything is a figure of speech. If your mother says, "I would like a cup of tea," she means just that. She doesn't intend a figurative meaning in which tea is salvation, the gospel, or forgiveness. How can you distinguish between your mother's figurative statements (hard-headed mule) and her literal statements (a cup of tea)? It's not as hard as you might think.

You distinguish between literal and figurative communication every day. How? You start with the literal meaning, and if it doesn't make sense, you switch to consider possible figurative meanings.[6] In other words, in normal listening or reading you assume something is literal until it is obvious that it must be figurative—you don't actually have long ears, gray fur, and thick yellow teeth; therefore, when addressed to you, the words *hard-headed mule* must be figurative.

When you read the Bible, do the same thing. Assume that God's words are to be taken literally unless it is obvious that He is using a figure of speech. For example, when Jesus said, "I am the door" (John 10:9), you do not conclude that Jesus is made of wood and has hinges. Your mind examines the literal meaning of Jesus' statement, finds it unlikely, and accepts it as a figure of speech. That's normal reading.

With normal reading, you always begin by assuming that a text should be interpreted literally until it is clear that it must be understood otherwise. But even when interpreting figurative language you start with the literal: What is a door? What purpose does a door serve? Why would Jesus compare Himself to a door or a gate? The literal function of a door suggests the meaning of the figure: Jesus is the gateway to eternal life.

5) ONE MEANING OF A TEXT

The grass is green. Does that sentence mean that the grass is purple, red*,* blue*,* or yellow? Does it mean that the trees are brown? If *The grass is green* can mean all those things, then it would mean nothing. Language is helpful only when it means one thing and not another. For example, the word *green* is helpful precisely because it doesn't mean purple, red, blue, yellow, or brown. The word *grass* is useful precisely because it distinguishes that plant from those somewhat taller plants we call trees. In the same way, the words and sentences of

the Bible are helpful because they mean one thing and not another. The principle of one meaning is basic to all communication, but who determines the one intended meaning of a word or sentence?

For communication to be effective, *the person speaking or writing* must be allowed to dictate the meaning of his or her words.[7] For example, when I was growing up, my mother often told me to clean my room. She, the one who gave the command, was the one who decided what that command meant. If I decided that *Clean your room* meant to push all my dirty clothes under the bed, I soon discovered that my mother's interpretation of that command was different from mine—and somehow her interpretation always won! That's the way it should be. She spoke the command; she had the right to define its meaning.

In the same way, when God speaks, He gets to define what He means. "Aha," you say, "but God is not here to explain His meaning." True. Therefore, we must interpret His written words as normally and carefully as possible. The words themselves, the flow of thought, and the historical context of the human author through whom God spoke will reveal what God meant.

I knew that when my mother told me to clean my room, she didn't mean I should thrust all my dirty clothes under the bed. Why? The word *clean* didn't mean that to her. And if in doubt, I was responsible to discover what the word *clean* did mean to her, and to act accordingly. In the same way, it is your job as a Bible interpreter to discover what the words and sentences of the Bible meant to the original human authors as God stooped to speak through them. We are not free to give the words of Moses, Isaiah, or Paul *our* meaning. We must give them the one meaning they intended.

Every Bible passage has one true meaning, the meaning God intended through the human author. What it meant to *them* is what it means. If *The grass is green* can also mean that the grass is brown, that communication is nonsense. God's word becomes just as meaningless if it has more than one meaning.

6) INTERPRETATION, *THEN* APPLICATION

If the principle of one meaning is confusing to you, it could be that you are thinking about application, not meaning. In fact, when Christians say, "What this verse means to me…," what they are often saying is, "How this verse *applies* to me is…" They want to personalize the verse before they find out what it meant to Moses, Matthew, or Paul. In other words, they want to decide how to act before they actually find out what God wants them to

do. That's dangerous; therefore, you must faithfully maintain a distinction between interpretation and application.[8]

Interpretation strives to discover the meaning the original author intended in his historical situation, for example, what Paul meant when he wrote to the church of Rome two thousand years ago. Interpretation is not worried about how Paul's words affect our lives today. That's vitally important, but that application is a separate, second step. Interpretation discovers the passage's significance to everyone, everywhere, all the time, because it discovers the original author's meaning.

Application, on the other hand, refers to the various ways the original author's one meaning affects life today. Application refers to the different ways different people at different times in different places can live out the one meaning of that text. Interpretation is like a man with a shovel digging for buried treasure. He digs and digs until he finds the chest of gold coins. Application refers to all the different ways he can spend those coins once he has found them.

THREE EXAMPLES

Consider the command, *You shall not steal*. That command has one meaning: *don't take something that is not yours or not yours to use in that way*. That meaning holds true no matter who you are, where you live, or when you read Exodus 20:15.

However, rain from one cloud might fall on many fields. In other words, the one meaning of *You shall not steal* can be lived out in different ways by different people at different times in different places. For a ten-year-old boy, that command restrains his temptation to stuff a chocolate bar in his pocket when the shop attendant isn't looking. For an adult, it rebukes his temptation to take a nap in the sun during work hours (as an employee, his time is not his to use in *that* way). Those are two different applications based on the one, author-intended meaning of Exodus 20:15. That one meaning can be applied to literally thousands of situations, to adults and children, to men and women, to Africans and Asians, but the interpretation of Exodus 20:15 never changes: *don't take something that is not yours or not yours to use in that way*.

As a second example, consider Proverbs 15:1, *A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger*. That proverb can be applied in a host of different situations. A father can apply it during a tense elders' meeting by restraining his tongue and speaking quietly when another elder disagrees with him. A mother might apply it when her teenage

daughter grumbles about having to help prepare supper when she would rather be listening to music with her friends. Mom's gentle firmness avoids a heated debate. The daughter can apply the self-restraint of Proverbs 15:1 when her younger brother tries to start an argument by calling her an insulting name—will she respond with gentle words or with a little name-calling of her own? Her brother can apply it on the soccer field when an argument is brewing about whether a penalty kick should be awarded for a tripping incident. Those are all different applications of the text, but Proverbs 15:1 has only one interpretation: *kind words and a gentle tone of voice will help you avoid sinful conflict*.

Is it critical to distinguish between interpretation and application? Yes. Rushing to application before discovering God's meaning is a sign that *you* want to control the text. You want to privatize or personalize the text, but the text is God's. The Bible should be applied by every person, but it is God's meaning that must be applied, not one's own. Furthermore, what will happen if the ten-year-old boy grows up thinking that *You shall not steal* means only that he should not shoplift chocolate bars? He will spend his adult days stealing from his employer by sleeping in the sun when he should be working. Why? He confused an application of *You shall not steal* with its meaning, and therefore, never saw all the other possible applications.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3 Paul said, *This is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality*. If the preacher thunders, "This verse means that you should not look at pornography," he has given an *application*, but not the *interpretation* of the text.[9] If not looking at pornography is the interpretation, then 1 Thessalonians 4:3 says nothing to the young adult who is sleeping with his girlfriend or the man who is cheating on his wife. And you know that can't be right.

By confusing interpretation and application, you might unintentionally exclude many important applications. You'll say what you want to say, but not all that God said. The interpretation of 1 Thessalonians 4:3 is much broader than just pornography: *completely avoid seeking sexual fulfillment outside of a one-man, one-woman marriage relationship*. From that one, authorially intended meaning—a meaning that is the same for everyone, everywhere, all the time—you and your congregation can create a host of legitimate and useful applications.

Interpreting the text and applying the text are distinct steps in Bible study. Discovering what the text would have meant to the original author comes first. Once that is established, you can reflect on the multitude of ways that text affects life today.

A PRACTICAL EXERCISE

Let's take a moment to practice distinguishing interpretation from application. Let's assume you are studying Romans 12:1-2 and wanted to rewrite Romans 12:1-2 in your own words. Let me give you an example of both a wrong and a right effort, focusing on the first part of Romans 12:2, which says, *Do not be conformed to this world*. The first attempt hurdles interpretation and goes straight to application. It gets too specific too soon.

Wrong approach: "To me not being conformed to the world means that we shouldn't watch television. In fact, this verse means all television is evil. If you own a television you're not a Christian. That's what Paul said to the Romans, you know."

While I share that person's aversion to the unbiblical content of most television shows, I think he might have put the applicational cart before the horse of interpretation. Paul did not tell the Romans not to watch television; they didn't even have televisions. While that application might be valid, we can't be sure, because the interpretation was assumed. And the interpretation of a Bible passage is too important to assume it.

Right approach: *Interpretation*: "Paul said that the Roman believers should not embrace the patterns of thinking and living evidenced by the unbelievers around them." That rewords what Paul said to the Romans. (A slavish repetition of *Paul said* really forces you to stick to interpretation, doesn't it.) This interpretation explains key words such as *conformed* and *world*. If Paul came back from heaven, he would say, "Yes, that's what I meant. Believers are not to think and live like unbelievers." Having established the interpretation, now we can think about an *application*: "Something that influences me to think like an unbeliever is watching television. To avoid being pressed into the mold of worldly thinking, I should be more discerning about what I watch on television. Perhaps I should even consider not watching television at all."

Interpretation—what Paul and God said—is distinct from how you and I are to act based on what they said. Dig for the treasure of the interpretation; once you've found it, then think about all the ways that you can spend that treasure. A good Bible interpreter understands those two steps and keeps them separate: first interpretation, *then* application.

7) CONTEXT

Context refers to the words, sentences, and paragraphs that come before and after the text you are studying. This principle emphasizes the fact that you discover the true meaning of a passage only when you consider the words around it.[10] As with all words, the words of the Bible mean something based on the words around them. The word *god,* when placed next to the name *Baal,* does not mean the same thing as it does when it is placed next to the name *Yahweh*. The Tswana people of southern Africa have a saying, "Man is a man through other people."[11] In other words, a man has no distinct identity apart from his family and his tribe. In the same way, words in the Bible have no identity apart from their family and tribe—the words, sentences, and paragraphs around them.

For example, Philippians 2:3 says *Do nothing*. Do nothing?!! Does the Bible actually say that? The sluggard leaps from his bed to celebrate; the teenager shouts for joy and dances a victory dance. This is the biblical command that they have been looking for: *Do nothing*! Is Philippians 2:3 justification for laziness? No. The rest of the verse says, "Do nothing *from selfishness or empty conceit*." The words *Do nothing* have a family. And when you meet that family, you discover the command's true identity.

Philippians 4:6 says *Be anxious*. The perpetual worrier exclaims, "Aha! God not only tolerates my anxiety, He commands it." Does Philippians 4:6 remove worry from the list of God-condemned sins? No. The rest of the verse reads, "Be anxious *for nothing*." By ignoring the words around a command, you can stand God's word on its head. In fact, ignoring the context of those two commands would have led you to disobey God, not to obey him. To adapt our Tswana saying, "A word is a word through the words around it."

AN EXAMPLE FROM ISAIAH

Isaiah 1:10 says, *Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the instruction of our God, you people of Gomorrah*. To whom is God speaking? Based on reading only Isaiah 1:10, you would conclude that Isaiah is addressing the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But verse 10 belongs to a tribe—the verses around it. And when you meet the relatives of Isaiah 1:10, the picture changes dramatically. For example, you find that verse 1 says Isaiah prophesied during the reigns of four kings: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. A quick glance at your Bible dictionary will tell you that those kings reigned 1400 years *after* God scorched Sodom and Gomorrah from the face of the earth. Verse 3 says that Isaiah

proclaimed God's word to *Israel*. Furthermore, verse 8 addresses the listeners as the *daughter of Zion*, a poetic Old Testament name for Jerusalem. And finally, verse 9 uses the words "*like* Sodom" and "*like* Gomorrah."

Context is important. If you read only Isaiah 1:10, you would conclude that Isaiah 1 is addressed to Sodom and Gomorrah. Your interpretation would be embarrassingly wrong. Isaiah was preaching to Jerusalem, Judah, and Israel, but he was doing so by means of a powerful comparison between Jerusalem and those two evil cities of antiquity. The true interpretation of Isaiah 1:10 is found only by considering its family and tribe, the sentences and paragraphs around it. That's true of the whole Bible: context determines meaning.

AN EXAMPLE FROM JEREMIAH

Jeremiah 29:11 is a favorite sound-bite verse for Christian greeting cards and calendars: *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans for welfare and not for calamity."* Some Christians cling to this verse, believing that it is a promise that nothing will go wrong in their lives. However, if you read Jeremiah 29, you find that this promise is not a general promise to all believers. It is not like the promises one often finds in the Psalms, such as in Psalm 145:18, "The Lord is near to all who call upon Him." When you meet the family and tribe of Jeremiah 29:11, you find that, far from being a general promise to all believers, this promise is part of a letter sent by Jeremiah to the Jews exiled in Babylon over five hundred years before the time of Christ. In that letter, God promised that those Jewish exiles would not stay in captivity; after seventy years God would bring them home to Jerusalem.

The context—a promise to a specific group of people about a specific plan of rescue—limits the application of Jeremiah 29:11. It isn't a sweeping promise that all believers will have an easy and calamity-free passage through life. Jeremiah himself was hated, harried, kidnapped, and thrown into prison for his faithful preaching—it certainly didn't apply to him! A promise God gave to Jews in the sixth century BC to rescue them from exile should not be interpreted as a guarantee that God has only easy and comfortable things planned for believers today. Context determines meaning; a word is a word through the words around it.

8) PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

God revealed His truth over an extended period of time—about fifteen hundred years. Naturally, His revelation became more detailed as time went along. In a word, it

progressed.[12] It did not progress from false to true (it was always true), but it did progress from partial to complete. The letter to the Hebrews says that completion focuses on our Savior, Jesus Christ: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son" (Heb 1:1-2). We know more today than Moses, Solomon, or David knew in the Old Testament era: they anticipated God's greatest sermon; we've heard it.

As rewarding as a more complete knowledge is, it holds a danger for today's Bible interpreters. The fact that God's revelation has grown more detailed over time means you must avoid the trap of reading *later* revelation back into *earlier* revelation (usually the New Testament back into the Old Testament).[13] In Genesis 12:3, God said that through Abraham He would bless all the families of the earth. At that time, God didn't give a detailed explanation of what that blessing would be. However, in later revelation such as Galatians 3, God said that blessing ultimately includes salvation through Jesus Christ, Abraham's ultimate seed. It would be a mistake to assume that Abraham understood all of that when God gave him that promise in Genesis 12. Only as revelation progressed did God fully unveil the specifics of His plan.

When studying Old Testament passages, you must take care not to read into them more than the author could have known at his time in history. Once you have established the author's meaning in his historical context, you can and should fill out that meaning with later revelation. There is no reason to act as if you don't have the rest of the Bible. However, interpreting a passage in its historical setting on one hand, and filling out that passage with information from later revelation on the other, are two different steps of Bible study.

9) GRAMMAR AND SYNTAX

Paul went to Corinth does not mean the same thing as *Corinth went to Paul*. Why not? People who speak English follow certain rules (word order, and so on), and based on those rules, *Paul went to Corinth* and *Corinth went to Paul* can't mean the same thing. In fact, if you don't follow the rules, your words become nonsense. If I wrote *Bible your read*, you would wonder what I meant. But if I write *Read your Bible*, you know exactly what I mean. Why the difference? In the first sentence I did not follow the rules of English; in the second I did.

Rules are important. How can there be a soccer world cup every four years? Simply because soccer is soccer everywhere. The world cup is possible because the rules of soccer do not change from person to person or country to country. Teams from all over the world can come together and have a meaningful competition because soccer is played the same way everywhere on the planet. In the same way, we can all "play" English because there is a basic set of rules that all effective English speakers follow. Those rules make a language useful; they make it understandable.

Grammar and *syntax* refer to the rules that make your sentences mean one thing and not another. Without those rules, there would be no communication. Specifically, *grammar* refers to the rules governing how individual words relate to each other. *Syntax* refers to how groups of words relate to each other.[14]

Rules simplify Bible interpretation: a verse cannot mean more or less than the rules of language make it mean. To be sure, the context will shape that meaning. God often uses figures of speech. At times the inherent flexibility of words and their relationships gives the interpreter several options. Grammar and syntax simplify Bible interpretation; they don't make it easy. Nonetheless, since God followed the rules of language when He spoke, following those rules will lead you to His thoughts.[15] (For a simple introduction to English grammar for the purpose of serious Bible study, see *Expository Studying* by Joel James, available at www.gracefellowship.co.za)

10) HISTORICAL APPROPRIATENESS

As a student of the Bible, you are interpreting a book written between two thousand and three thousand five hundred years ago: history is important to your work.[16] As you interpret, the principle of historical appropriateness will guard you from two errors. The first

error is reading the Bible as if its events happened yesterday. For example, when Jesus traveled from town to town, He didn't go by taxi. He didn't preach using a microphone and a sound system. He didn't cross the Sea of Galilee in a motorboat. To describe Jesus' ministry in those ways would be ridiculous; they are not historically appropriate.

In the same way, you might read about the shield of faith in Ephesians 6:16, and immediately think of the shield traditionally carried into battle by Zulu warriors. But the warriors of Paul's day (Roman soldiers) did not carry that kind of shield. If you described the shield of Ephesians 6 as a Zulu shield, your interpretation would be historically inappropriate.

Besides reading modern ideas into the events or instruments of the ancient world, a second historical trap is the danger of forgetting biblical history itself. For example, in an earlier section we decided that Isaiah 1 could not be addressed to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah although it initially appeared to be so. Those two cities had been destroyed by God more than a thousand years before Isaiah lived; therefore, it is historically inappropriate to conclude that his sermon was addressed to them.

I once listened to a sermon from Philippians in which the preacher rightly emphasized the important place of the word *rejoice* in that epistle. To highlight the fact that Paul's joy was not dependent on his circumstances, the preacher also noted that Paul was in prison when he wrote. The preacher then went on to describe the Mamertine Prison of ancient Rome. That prison was built along the lines of a giant septic tank, and is not a place easily associated with a repeated use of the word *rejoice*. According to the preacher, the fact that Paul wrote Philippians from the Mamertine Prison proved that Paul's joy was not dependent on his circumstances.

Unfortunately, that man forgot his biblical history. Philippians was almost certainly written during Paul's *first* imprisonment when he was under house arrest in Rome.[17] In that imprisonment, Paul was not held in the Mamertine Prison. According to Acts 28, he lived under house arrest in his own rented flat for two years (28:30). While it is true that Paul's joy was not dependent on his circumstances, it is not historically accurate to say that Paul was rejoicing while writing Philippians in spite of the fact that he was being held in a dark, filthy dungeon below the streets of Rome. A good Bible interpreter always makes sure that his interpretations are appropriate to the history of the biblical era.

11) WORD STUDY

To understand a passage of Scripture, its key words must be defined accurately. When the Bible says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Eph 2:8), neither you nor I are free to give the words *grace*, *saved*, and *faith* our own definitions. Instead, we must discover what those words meant to Paul when he used them. You can do a lot of word study with just an exhaustive English concordance and some persistence. As you look at every use of a key biblical word, you'll see its range of meanings and how it is used in different contexts.[18]

Word studies are an important part of sermon preparation because words can be used in different ways.[19] Consider the English word *spring* as used in the following sentence: *In spring, I will spring over the spring on my way to the spring*. (I admit that I had fun coming up with that one!) After consulting a dictionary for a list of possible meanings of the word *spring*, you can easily make sense of it: *In the season that follows winter, I will leap over a curly piece of metal on my way to the place where water comes up out of the ground*.

All languages conserve effort by occasionally giving one word a variety of meanings. How can you tell which meaning is intended when a word has more than one meaning or a range of similar meanings? Context. The word's family and tribe point you to its identity. If I said, *The pipe is blocked*, you might not be sure if I meant a sewer pipe or an old man's tobacco pipe. But if I said, *The pipe is blocked, and the plumber is on his way to clear it*, the context (the reference to a plumber) clears up the mystery. In relationship to the word *plumber*, the word *pipe* almost certainly refers to a sewer pipe, not an instrument for poisoning yourself with tobacco.

Let's consider a biblical example. The biblical authors use the word *flesh* in a variety of ways—of meat, the human body, the human race, man's sinful weakness, and so on. What do you do in a case like that? The context will coach you. If the passage talks about eating flesh, you can be sure that meat is intended. If it says, "All flesh has gone astray," you would suspect it is referring to the human race. If it says, "Do not walk according to the flesh," you can be sure that sinful human weakness is meant.

One of the great dangers a Bible student faces is reading his definition of a word into a biblical one. For example, it is common in Africa to associate the word *salvation* primarily with rescue from sickness and poverty. It is much less common to define *salvation* as rescue from God's wrath at sinners due to their disobedience of His holy law. However, the question is not how we use the word *salvation*, but how a biblical author uses it.

To discover a biblical author's meaning, first evaluate all the uses of that word by that author.[20] Then explore its uses by other biblical authors (for example, Paul might use a word differently than John or Peter does). If you are working in the New Testament, you should always note the Old Testament background of a word. Most of the New Testament authors were Jewish men, and as such, their education came almost exclusively from Genesis through Malachi. From where, then, do you think they obtained their theological language?[21]

Today there are many excellent lexicons (Greek or Hebrew dictionaries) and theological word books that provide invaluable help when you are wrestling with the meaning of a biblical word. If you want to be a serious Bible student, it's worth saving your money to buy one or two. They will help you give God's words God's meanings.

12) THE CHECKING PRINCIPLE

Bible interpretation didn't start yesterday, and you are not the only one whom the Spirit illumines. Therefore, it is a good practice to check your understanding of a passage against the interpretation of Bible scholars both past and present.[22] For example, you might want to think twice about preaching an interpretation that all Christians in the last five hundred years have rejected. Furthermore, it is impossible for you and me to know all of the historical, grammatical, and geographic details that affect the interpretation of a passage of Scripture. Just who are the *sons of Javan* in Genesis 10:4? What kind of shield would Paul have pictured in his mind when he spoke of the shield of faith? It takes Bible scholars a lifetime of study to provide accurate answers to such questions. You can shorten a lifetime to two minutes when you use a Bible dictionary to find out that Javan was the Hebrew name for Greece or to discover what a Roman soldier's shield looked like.

Notice, however, that the checking principle is the last principle in this section. As a rule it's best to do your own study of a passage, and then compare it with someone else's. Sometimes you'll need to use a Bible dictionary or commentaries early in the study process to get a handle on a slippery word or a difficult theological concept. That's advisable. However, avoid the trap of opening a commentary and reading it as if it were the Bible. Rather than read the results of someone else's analysis, first analyze the passage yourself. By all means, use the checking principle; it will save your interpretational life. But don't become so commentary-dependent that you never develop your own ability to interpret the Scripture.

CONCLUSION

Soccer has rules, as every game must: only the goalie can use his hands; going in cleats-first earns a red card; defenders are not supposed to grab, trip, or bite an opponent who is trying to score a goal. If a soccer player ignores the rules, the referee sends him off. God is equally severe with people who misrepresent His words because they have failed to follow the rules of interpretation: "Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we shall incur a stricter judgment" (Jas 3:1). If you faithfully follow these twelve principles of Bible interpretation, God won't ever have to give you a red card!

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[1] McCartney, *Let the Reader Understand*, 38-39.

[2] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 108.

[3] Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1970), 99-100.

[4] Ibid., 123.

[5] Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 147.

[6] Ibid., 145-6.

[7] McCartney, *Let the Reader Understand*, 35.

[8] Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 113.

[9] Some of the confusion on this issue is due to the fact that the English word *mean* can be used both of the author's intended *meaning* of a text and of the *implications* of that text for the lives of believers. This is a regrettable weakness of English. Meaning and implications are, in fact, two different things.

[10] Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 106.

[11] Van der Walt, *Understanding and Rebuilding Africa: From Desperation Today to Expectation for Tomorrow* (Potchefstroom, South Africa: The Institute for Contemporary Christianity in Africa, 2003), 143, 139.

[12] James E. Rosscup, "Hermeneutics and Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, John MacArthur, Jr. and The Master's Seminary faculty, (Dallas, Texas: Word Publishing, 1992), 131.

[13] Ibid., 132.

[14] J. William Johnston, "Grammatical Analysis: Making Connections" in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: An Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. by Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006), 57.

[15] The scholars who have translated the Bible into English (or other languages) know the rules of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek grammar—the original languages of Scripture. The English translations that work the hardest to reflect the grammar and syntax of the original languages are *The New American Standard* (NAS) and its 1995 *Update*, the *English Standard Version* (ESV), the *New King James Version* (NKJV), and the *King James Version* (KJV). See Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2002), 50-55.

[16] Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 6.

[17] Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, in The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 26.

[18] Rosscup, "Hermeneutics and Expository Preaching," 127.

[19] Darrell L. Bock, "Lexical Analysis," in *Interpreting the New Testament Text: An Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*, ed. by Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2006), 138.

[20] Zuck, *Basic Biblical Interpretation*, 104-5.

[21] David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 18.

[22] Rosscup, "Hermeneutics and Expository Preaching," 135.