

How To read The Bible

(Without becoming a cult-leader, heretic, snake-handler, Pharisee, etc...)

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Introduction

From Cult-Leader to Pharisee

The sub-title of this book sounds a bit inflammatory. That was my intention. Yet despite the language, there is real truth in the title. I'm convinced that if heretics, cult-leaders, snake-handlers, etc.... would carefully apply basic principles of Bible interpretation (some of which are in this book), they would certainly discard their heresies, disband their cults, and cage their snakes.

Now perhaps you're not a heretic, nor do you plan on joining or leading a cult; good. But, what's to stop you from becoming a marginalized and lukewarm evangelical, or a Pharisee, or a rabid wild-eyed disgruntled fundamentalist? The reason I ask is that I believe the root causes of heterodoxy, stale orthodoxy, sterile orthodoxy, or insipid orthodoxy are all close cousins. In other words, your passion for God, firmness in the truth, and witness to the world will be no greater than your relationship with the Bible (though it may be less). The psalmist declares that you'll walk, talk, and sit aright if your stride, conversations, and leisure are thoroughly informed by Scripture. *"Like a tree planted by living water,"* the writer illustrates, *"yielding its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and whatever he does he prospers"* (Psalm 1:1-3). What's the water from which a believer is to draw truth and vitality? *"In his law he mediates day and night"* (vs.2). Jesus declares that the elect would be sanctified in this godless age by it (John 17:5). Paul describes the blemished bride of Christ as being washed and perfected through it (Eph.5: 23). So, the man or woman of God who is rooted in God's word will experience life, vitality, prosperity, protection, and cleansing.

Biblical Illiteracy in America

Psalm 1 creates a tremendous irony for American Culture. The Bible is the all-time bestselling book, as well as the bestselling book each year (with America leading in both categories). It has no close second. According to one evangelical polling firm, 92% of Americans own at least one, most households contain four, 59% claim to read it occasionally,ⁱ and nearly 40% of Americans claim to read it every week.ⁱⁱ

This is astounding and ironic given the beliefs and behavior of the American population at large, but more tragically, given the beliefs and behavior of the evangelical community. Let's take our beliefs as an example.

In a 2009 study, only 9% of Americans have a Biblical worldview. The survey defined such world-view as including the following tenets:

"Absolute moral truth exists; the Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today."ⁱⁱⁱ

The study revealed that only 9% of Americans affirm this entire statement as being true (yeah, the same group which has a marked affinity towards it). What is frightening, however, is that the survey revealed that only 19% of self-professed “born-again” Christians have a Christian worldview. Only one out of five alleged followers of Jesus affirmed the preceding statement to be true.^{iv} In a previous study, when the above statement was expanded to contain thirteen basic beliefs, only 1% of adult believers firmly embraced all thirteen as being biblical perspectives.^v So, we have a culture, both American and evangelical, who esteem Scripture, purchase it, read it, cite it, and yet share a fundamentally different vision of reality from it.

You don’t need a pollster to know that just as there is a huge chasm between our beliefs and Scripture, so there is with our behavior. The British Times articulated the irony well in reflecting on similar findings in their nation:

“Forget the modern British novelists and TV tie-ins, the Bible is the best-selling book every year. If sales of the Bible were included in the best-seller lists, it would be a rare week when anything else would achieve a look in. It is wonderful and weird, that in this godless age, this one book should go on selling every month.”

So we have an epidemic of men and women who have read the Bible, and yet can neither identify Abraham or adultery, they confuse Testaments and genders, they believe that proverb “God helps those who help themselves” is a biblical reference, yet are allergic to responsibility and ownership. Worse yet, we have an age of men and women who neither know Jesus’ person nor his work of atonement. When it comes to his person, he’s been reduced to our BFF (best friend forever), a life-coach, a personal trainer, or one of many sages (like the Dali Lama, Eckhart Tolle, and Deepak Chopra) that offer methods to achieve our personal goals of self-actualization. We’ve embraced the slipshod scholarship and unfounded biases of the History Channel, the Jesus Seminar, Hollywood, and unimpressive fiction (ala, The Da Vinci Code), all of which either entertains or embraces the position that Jesus was as fallible and fallen as you, though a stellar example of how a sinner can navigate the existential terrain. As to the cross: a tragedy, of course; atonement, never! At best, the cross is merely an example (of love, sacrifice, humility, you fill in the blank) to which to strive. The Cross: nothing more than an example, perhaps something less.

One commentator laments,

“Literally, millions of Americans, who declare themselves to be Christians contend that Jesus was like the rest of us when it comes to temptation – fallen, guilty, impure, and Himself in need of a Savior.”^{vi}

So, how can so many folks, who have an apparent affinity towards Scripture, exhibit such dissonance from its truths in how they think and live? The answer is not all that different from why people lead cults, embrace heretical doctrine, handle serpents, and drink spiked punch. There is a fundamental flaw in one’s approach, understanding, and application of the Bible. Assuming that those surveyed really read Scripture (I have my doubts), if they would simply approach, handle, and apply it well, then we would see the corresponding effects of spiritual vitality. Modifying the analogy from Psalm one, although they are near the water, they’re not planted or rooted in the water and so do not experience life of the stream.

The Science and Art of Interpretation

The goal of this book is to get you “planted” in the Bible. This process of planting is what we’ll call Hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is just an impressive way of describing the science and art of biblical interpretation.

Approaching, understanding, and applying Scripture is a *Science* in that it involves certain rules, parameters, and methods to handle it well. In this sense, hermeneutics is like driving a car. There are laws that prescribe how you ought to handle your vehicle, and if you don’t, you run a high risk of causing damage to property and life, both yours and others. Similarly, there are basic rules of interpretation that if not heeded, will place you and other people in great spiritual danger, even spiritual death (1 Timothy 4:16).

Approaching, understanding, and applying Scripture is an *Art*, as well as a Science. It involves engagement, intuition, and rugged experience. How do you get better at driving a stick shift: by jumping into your pickup and grinding gears? Through repetition and practice a person begins to get “the feel” of the vehicle. Likewise, how do I get better at the Bible: by engagement, experience, and grinding gears? What I offer are some aids to minimize friction and maximize traction. We’ll first address six principles for approaching the Bible. After this, we’ll look at four rules for understanding Scripture. Lastly, we’ll examine how to properly apply Scripture to our lives.

Approaching the Bible: Read it like It's No Other Book

It's Like No Other Book

Much misunderstanding about the Bible can be cleared up by answering two simple questions: (1) what is the nature of this book, and (2) what is it designed to do?

These two questions are answered by the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

“16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

What is the nature of the Bible? Paul says that all Scripture is “inspired.” The English may move us to take the apostle as meaning the authors were motivated with artistic or religious creativity like any other human activity that is done with passion and skill. On this view, Isaiah was “inspired” when he wrote his book in the same way that Shakespeare or Madonna were inspired when they composed their hits (maybe Madonna isn’t the best example of artistry). If this meaning were adopted, then our posture towards Scripture would be respect at best, but never reverence; its placement would be among many equally authoritative and inspirational voices in human history, but not that which transcends the veil of perspective and fallibility. This is not Paul’s position or point in this passage. Paul declares the writings to literally be “God-breathed.” The allusion is to the creative voice of God speaking the worlds into existence. God breathed, “*Let there be light*” in Genesis 1:3, and light came into existence. When Scripture came into existence, God was breathing, or better yet, talking. Scripture is literally, the voice of God, the “talking of God.” Needless to say, the Bible is like no other book.

What is the Bible designed to do? The question isn’t what could it be used for. It could be used as décor, a museum exhibition, literature, and to smuggle dope. Similarly, the space shuttle can be used in many other ways than its design. It can be used as a missile, a restaurant, and a commercial airliner. But what was the shuttle designed to do? Answer: to take people to space. What is the Bible designed to do? Verse 16 and 17 state that it is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness that the people of God may be equipped adequately for every good work. Paul’s point isn’t merely that Scripture will equip us to be good boys and girls, but that Scripture has the power to connect us to true goodness, Jesus Christ, whose life of righteousness becomes ours (vss.14-15; Ephesians 2:8-10). Again, the Bible is like no other book.

Most, however, do not view the Bible as the sole authoritative communication of God to be read so that I might become conformed into the image of God’s son. Rather, it’s read to glean wisdom, enhance relationships, quell anxieties, address grief, and a thousand other pragmatically driven goals. It can and may be used these ways, but if one’s approach is no more than that, you’ve missed point. If you misunderstand the intent behind the Bible, you’ll misunderstand the content of the Bible.

Given Scripture's nature and purpose, I offer six principles that help us to approach it in a way that it demands.

Read Reverently

People tend to read the Bible like it is reading material in the restroom. They have some free time to spare and have the option to peruse the Reader's Digest, the Farmer's Almanac, People magazine, or the Bible. Since it has been a while since they've opened the Holy Book, and they proceed to read either a prayer from Jabez, or a proverb from Solomon, or psalm from David, or the multi-colored maps in the back. May I submit to you, don't read the Bible like this. Read Scripture reverently. Regard it the way the way that Old Testament saints did. They so connected Scripture with God himself, that one must treat Scripture with the same fear and trembling that you would God's presence. Specifically, The Jews regarded Scripture as they did the Presence of God, Ark of the Covenant, and the Name of God. These three are associated in value and approach, and were connected with the Sacred Writings.

For example,

"David and all Israel went up to Baalah, that is, to Kiriath-Jearim, which belongs to Judah, to bring up from there the ark of God, the LORD who is enthroned above the cherubim, where His name is called" (1 Chronicles 13:6).

Consider that the very presence of God, the ark of God, and the name of God are bound together. God is pictured here as enthroned above the Ark. It was directly in front of the ark of God that the High Priest pronounced the name of God once a year. Now, with this in mind, look at Psalm 138:2,

"I will bow down toward Your holy temple and give thanks to Your name for Your loving-kindness and Your truth; For You have magnified Your word according to all Your name (the KJV renders the passage, "for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name").

The value of God's word (i.e., Holy Scripture) is equal to the value of "all his name." In ancient times the "name" of a person designated their authority and greatness. Even today Diana Ross sings, "Stop, in the name of love," which is to say, "out of respect of love's value, stop!" When the Sanhedrin wanted to know how Peter and John were able to heal the cripple, they asked, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?" Peter would thunder, "let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead-- by this name this man stands here before you in good health" (Acts 4:7-10). Peter was unmistakably clear that it was due to the authority and greatness of Jesus that this sick man was raised to health.

God has exalted his word according to his name. But he is even more specific when he declares Scripture to be exalted according to "all of his name." David means every drop of value and meaning that can be squeezed out of "Yahweh" must be in turn associated with the Bible. This is why the stone tablets were placed in the Ark (Exodus. 25:16,21), as well as the book of the Law was placed next to the Ark (Deut 31:24-26). So the name and presence of God are bound to the Word of God. This is a compelling reason to read Scripture reverently. Approach it like you would the Holy of Holies on the great Day of Atonement.

Follow the example of George Whitefield. He is one of the great evangelists in all of church history. He developed the practice of reading Scripture on his knees and praying over each verse.

“We can visualize Whitfield at 5:00 in the morning in his room on his knees with his Bible, his Greek New Testament and a volume of Matthew Henry spread out before him. With intense concentration he reads a portion in English, studies its words, its tenses in the Greek and then he considers Matthew Henry’s exposition of the whole. Finally we come to knee posture praying over every line and every word in both the English and the Greek. Facing his mind and his heart upon it until its essential meaning has become a part of his very person. When we see him preaching 40 more hours per week with virtually no time whatsoever for preparation we may look back upon these days and recognize that he was then laying up a store of knowledge which he was able to draw a myth of tumult and haste of that greater ministry.”^{vii}

Some years later, George Muller read a biography of Whitefield seeking to find the secret of Whitefield’s power and passion. He was arrested by Whitefield’s practice of reading Scripture on his knees.

“Particularly was this impression deeply made on Mr. Muller’s mind and heart: that Whitefield’s unparalleled success in evangelistic labors was plainly traceable to two causes and could not be separated from them as direct effects; namely, his unusual prayerfulness, and his habit of reading the Bible on his knees.”^{viii}

He adopted the practice. What Whitefield was to evangelism, Mueller became to faith. He chronicled over 50,000 specific and extraordinary fulfilled prayer requests. He ran multiple orphanages completely on prayer. Just as Muller rightly identified the power of Whitefield’s ministry with prayer-filled approach to Scripture, we can rightly identify the power of Muller’s ministry with the same.

May I suggest that your usability for God in his kingdom will likewise be linked to your prayerful posture towards the oracles of God? Adopt the frame of mind; perhaps even adopt the posture of body. Read reverently.

Read Regularly

Sometimes, people read the Bible in the way that married couples with children date: They don’t. The pace of life is so swift and demanding, relational intimacy is the first thing to go. The irony is that the establishment and expansion of a family that was founded on intimacy, now it in turn kills it, resulting in husbands and wives becoming functional roommates. Yet, it’s precisely the health of mom and dad that is desperately needed to insure a healthy family in the long haul. A couple must sit down, plan, and commit to times of marital solitude, otherwise, it will never happen.

You have to approach Bible reading the same way. If you don’t sit down, block out chunks of time in your week to practice solitude, in which you engage in serious bible study and prayer, it will never happen. Consequently, your relationship with God will be casual at best. Beg, barter, and bribe if you have to. Do whatever you can to plan and keep serious times with God.

Read Systematically

Some people read their Bible like most men watch TV: they channel surf. They watch a little bit of everything, and ultimately a whole lot of nothing. They preview the first five minutes of a game, move on to ten minutes of Cops, transition to the local weather, and attempt to watch the last part of Seinfeld. There's very little depth to their viewing. Unfortunately, this is precisely the tactic used towards the Bible: a proverb here, a Psalm there, a chapter out of John, and a devotional from Oswald Chambers. And likewise, there is little depth.

It is imperative to hear the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). To pick out and isolate portions, or even chapters of the Bible and think you'll come away with something meaningful is mistaken. That's akin to randomly selecting, isolating, and attempting to appreciate a chapter in a massive novel. The chapter won't make sense without the grand story of the book. Better yet, it's like a sentence in which we remove letters. Try to understand this one:

o pi k ut d late r ve cha ters f te Bile a ink yu' co aay wih soeting magful i mitak.

That's the second sentence of the last paragraph. It's unintelligible without looking at all the words of that sentence. The Bible can't be understood fully and clearly without attending to all its parts. View it as one massive sentence.

To this end, I would highly recommend that you would follow a Bible reading plan.

There are 1,189 chapters. Using a five-day a week reading plan,

- One Year Plan = 4.57 chapters a day.
- Two Year Plan = 2.28 chapters a day.
- Three Year Plan = 1.52 chapters a day.

I wouldn't suggest a one-year plan. It resembles sightseeing Yosemite National Park in a jet. The goal isn't merely to get through the entire Bible, but also to get the entire Bible into you. I think taking one day in which to soak in, meditate on, and even memorize portions of one to two chapters is perfect. Whatever plan you choose, read systematically.

Read Actively

Even if guys actually commit to one show, studies have shown that brain activity seriously declines when we watch television. Part of that is due to what is communicating the story, and the part is due to the story that's being communicated. This is what I mean. First of all, Television is a spectator sport. We sit in front of it and receive visual and audio stimulation. Our very posture in relationship to the TV inclines us towards passivity. Secondly, much of the material we watch requires very little mental processing or concentration. Most of the plots are suggestive at best, and canned at worst. Because of the over-saturation of Television in our mental life, most of us have tremendous difficulty following sustained arguments or concepts laid out in literature. If something requires a great deal of concentration, we tune out or gloss over those portions until we find that which is easily grasped. Put differently, we want to read like we watch TV: with little work.

The tragedy is two-fold. We've allowed an amazing gift of God to atrophy – our minds. And we've grown satisfied with a superficial understanding of the Word of God. For many, unless it's pithy, proverbial, and pragmatic, they'll reserve it for another time or other people to uncover. If this is you I urge you to develop new habits for your mental life. I suggest the following to help cultivate the active interaction with Scripture: read your Bible with a journal open and a pen in hand. Imagine the pen as the device to help focus your thoughts, and the journal as the slate on which those thoughts are drafted. As you read a passage, engage the text like you were sitting down with the author. Write down the questions that come to mind from the text. Try to figure out how he might answer those inquiries. Write down any and all impressions that are suggested by what you're reading. It's in this kind of interaction the content is imprinted in a way it never would be by a casual skimming.

The great pastor/theologian Jonathan Edwards mastered this practice. Wherever he went, he had a pen in hand and would record any and all questions, observations, and thoughts that came to mind as he contemplated divine truth. While at home, he'd record these thoughts on a Bible that he had fashioned, made with a blank piece of paper between each page the written text on which to record his thoughts. If he was traveling abroad or about running errands, he'd record these thoughts on the 18th century version of a sticky note. He'd pin the notes to his jacket. By the time he arrived home, his coat was coated with these notes. It became a usual practice for his many children (some would call it a tribe) to greet him at the door and carefully unpin these notes. These notes, as well the larger and structured works that sometimes stemmed from these notes, have kept the Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University quite busy. When they finish their task, the number of sizable volumes of Edwards' material will reach over 50. Certainly, most of us don't come close to Edwards' overall discipline of mind and spirit, but imagine how the quality of your time with God would be transformed if you would wrestle with the Bible the way that Jacob did the Angel of the Lord. Read Actively.

Read Objectively

Some approach the Bible with the same mindset that they approach instruction manuals: *"What's the least amount that I can read to operate my iPhone or assemble my lawn furniture?"* Similarly, *"what's the least amount I have to understand Scripture to walk away with something practical for today?"* I believe this approach is fundamentally flawed and undermines the desire for practical application. To put it precisely, if you come to the text immediately looking for application, chances are that you'll find the wrong one. Just as you'll break your phone and misassemble your lawn furniture if you don't carefully refer to and respect the respective manuals, so you'll break or misassemble you're life without a careful and cautious treatment of God's word. We'll either do the wrong works, or do the right works the wrong way.

I worked with a gentleman who published a book on how to read the Bible who admittedly downplayed the need for serious interpretation. His philosophy was that we should get as quickly to application as is possible. One application suggested to the readers of his book as they interacted with John 4 (when Jesus met the women at the well) was that the reader should that day witness to someone at a water fountain. Don't get me wrong, I believe in mission, and I don't mind doing it near small or large bodies of water, nevertheless the point of the passage isn't witnessing but worship. Well intended, but misinformed.

There is no debate about the application of Scripture being the *ultimate goal* of Bible-reading (1 Timothy 1:5; 2 Timothy 3:16-17), but it should never be the *immediate goal* of our interaction with it. The immediate goal is deciphering what God has actually said. The ultimate goal is properly responding to what God has said. Consider the epistolary model Paul often used. He often spends the bulk of his writing establishing doctrine (which addresses the question of *what God has said*), and then follows it with duty (which addresses the question of *how we should respond to what God has said*). For example,

Ephesians 1 – 3 = Doctrine. Ephesians 4 – 6 = Duty.

Colossians 1 – 2 = Doctrine. Colossians 3 – 4 = Duty.

Romans 1 – 11 = Doctrine. Romans 12 – 16 = Duty.

This structure exhibits for us the logical and spiritual dependence of God-glorifying application upon God-glorifying interpretation. What would happen if the structure were tampered? Imagine if we were to gut the doctrinal portions of these books and merely had the application of “*present you lives as living sacrifices*” without the “*Therefore, I urge you by the mercies of God*” (and Paul’s exposition of those mercies from chapters one through eleven of the book of Romans)? What do we have left: we have a challenge to be moral akin to every other belief system that rests on human effort to be good. Put differently, we have a *gutted* morality--a sailboat without sail, mast, crewmen, or an ocean. Application is always hollow and inert when interpretation is minimized. We must read Objectively.

Read Independently

Here is our last principle in approaching Scripture: *Read Independently*. Some depend on Bible-study helps (e.g., Study-Bible notes, commentaries, online research tools, etc.) to understand Scripture the way that many depend on the spell-check application in their Word Processor to get the correct spelling. For those of you who don’t have such an application, it will signal to the writer when he or she has got a word wrong (with the suggestion of the correct spelling), and in some cases, it will simply change the word and make the correction for you without your previously expressed permission. As for me, I’ve developed an unhealthy dependence on the spell-check feature. Ironically, this application that was designed to enhance my orthographic skill, has in actuality made me a worse speller. I’ll prove it to you now. I’ll turn it off right now:

“Iv’ just terned oof tha spel chek aplacasion.”

It’s back on now. Okay, it’s not that bad, but it’s bad enough. The same is true with Bible-study aids. If not used carefully, you’ll become a worse student of the Bible because the interpretation is delivered to you without your personal struggle and interaction with the text. The immediate goal is to get to the right interpretation, but that goal is better served when you become the kind of Bible-reader that gets there “on your own.” Furthermore, as much as study aids are helpful, we must remember they are the product of fallible human beings who are also wrestling with the text, sometimes betraying theological presuppositions that might lead them to mishandle the Bible. As a rule, I think it’s safe to use study aids as a check and not a guide. Typically, I’ll consult material to get some background information of a book I’m reading. After that, it’s just the Bible and me. After I’ve approached the text virginally and drawn some conclusions about the meaning of a chapter, then I’ll consult with reputable study aids to insure I’m not a heretic. I suggest you do the same. Read independently.

Understanding the Bible: Read it like It's Any Other Book

It's Like Any Other Book

The guiding principle for understanding the text is the opposite from the rule guiding our approach. When you approach the Bible, read it like *it's no other book*. When you seek to understand the Bible, read it like *it's any other book*. This rule helps guard against the outlandish excesses made by Bible teachers who wrongly conclude that since the Bible is extraordinary in origin, therefore we must utilize extraordinary methods and tools, be it pixy dust or secret decoder rings, to extract its truths.

Some of the most extreme examples involve people who utilize complicated mathematical algorithms to unlock supposed codes that are found in the original language. Some claim that these codes reveal information about God and the future that the plain text does not communicate. Whether that's the prediction that Yitzhak Rabin's assassination or Paul and Jan Crouch's television network being the Noah's Ark of our generation, some have claimed that up to this point we've had only the chaff of understanding, now we have the kernel. Others believe that they have extracted the gospel of Jesus from the genealogy of Genesis 5, and still others claim to have divined the rapture from Psalm 90. All of these are tragic.

Less extreme examples include those who make too much of symbols and typology, as well as those who conclude that whatever impressions are suggested to them by the passage is probably the meaning of the passage. For most of these methods, words are viewed as symbolizing things different from what they ordinarily symbolize. So "Judas" seems to refer to the disciple of Jesus who betrayed him, but in reality, "Judas" refers to the old nature that undercuts your personal devotion to God. Or, *"that passage seems to say that divorce is justified only given few circumstances, but I feel that this is too restrictive. That can't be God's heart. It must refer to something else."*

Proper Biblical hermeneutics is driven by the conviction that the Bible is accessible and clear enough in its basic teachings that the average person using ordinary means can grasp its truth. You don't have to be a pastor, a priest, or a pontiff to grasp its meaning. John Calvin described Scripture as God communicating in a way just like parents baby talk with their two year old. God has purposely designed this book to be accessible to you. It has been this conviction that has compelled Bible translators since the birth of the church to get Scripture in the *lingua franca* of all peoples. For instance, William Tyndale gave his life to get the Bible in the hands of the average English speaker. He declared that when he was done, the boy ploughing the field would know more about God than the Pope in his palace. The Bible is for the common man and women.

Also, proper Biblical hermeneutics is driven by the obsession to take any and all portions of the Bible in the way that each respective author intended for it to be taken. Some believe that it matters little what Peter, or James, or John (or Shakespeare and the authors of the constitution) meant when they penned what they did. What matters is what you get out of the text. What matters is how the text speaks to you. D.A. Carson cites the prevalence of this faulty hermeneutic.

“In neighborhood Bible studies and adult Sunday school classes, one soon becomes aware that it is far more important for every opinion to be heard and praised than for the meaning of the text to be uncovered...the focus of interpretation has shifted from the author of the text to the reader...meaning is in you, not in the Scripture” (Carson, The Gagging of God, pg.91).^{ix}

True Bible-readers fights this trend. These students of Scripture seriously distrust themselves, as well as others in what they bring to the text. They’re not really concerned with what Sally or Sam feels what the Bible says; rather they are possessed with what the Bible is truly saying regardless of one’s feeling. They realize that on their best day, with hearts all ablaze with passion for Jesus, they still will twist and bend even the clearest pronouncements of God to rationalize their sin. They know that even the greatest saint and exegete will morph God into their own image if unchecked. They are convinced that every thought must be taken captive to the obedience of Christ. This not only includes thoughts of rage or lust, but our highest impressions of what God might be saying in Scripture. Because of this, God-glorifying Bible-readers will implement tools that are designed to help readers to (as much as is humanly possible) step outside of themselves to hear what God is saying as opposed to what we want God to say. We’ll now address four of these principles.

The Literary Principle

The Literary Principle moves the Bible-reader to recognize and respond appropriately to the literary dimensions of the text. The Bible is literature, and as such must be handled as such (though it is more). Many of the same rules that conservative literary critics would apply to non-biblical poetry or prose will in turn serve you immensely in hearing God in a passage.

The first rule moves us to *identify the style of literature* we are reading. In this respect, the Bible is a lot like a newspaper. In the newspaper there are different styles of writing: journalistic reporting, opinion/editorial, comics, obituaries, raw data, and advertisements. Each style of writing demands a different approach from the other styles. You don’t want to treat the reporting with the op/ed section. You don’t want to confuse your approach to the obituary and comics. And certainly, you don’t want to examine the stocks as you would the advertisements. As you approach a newspaper, you want to handle each section the way the style of that section demands.

The Bible likewise contains a number of different styles that require different approaches.

Here are a few:

- Law (e.g., Deuteronomy) - Law is prescriptive and so the meaning is relatively straightforward.
- History (e.g., 1st and 2nd Samuel) - History is far more descriptive than prescriptive. The *meaning* of a historical section is therefore more difficult to decipher than Law. Biblical historians have theological agendas that are unearthed by examining the content of the stories, the arrangement of stories, and their relationship to law.
- Prophecy (e.g. Revelation) - Prophecy is often highly symbolic and predictive. This style of literature is certainly the most difficult for Bible-students to handle and presupposes a rich grasp of other portions of the Bible to handle well.
- Proverb - Proverbs are typically general truths that should not necessarily be taken as categorically true at all times. Proverbs 22:6 states that if we train a child in righteousness, he’ll end up righteous. Though this is true most of the time, it’s not true all of the time. We all know good parents with bad

kids and bad parents with good kids. The point of the proverb isn't to give certainty, but probability.

- Psalm – The Psalms are the worship songs of the Old Testament church. They typically capture the devotional and introspective experience of a believer with God. It chronicles the full-spectrum of one's psychological states, from depression to ecstasy.
- Gospels (e.g. Matthew) - The Gospels are theologically and missionally-driven biographies of Jesus.
- The Epistles (e.g. 1st Timothy) – The Epistles are letters of correspondence by early church leaders to individuals and/or churches.

Just as failing to recognize the literary diversity that exists in a newspaper would be confusing and maybe even disastrous, so it is with Scripture. If we treat Law as if it were Prophecy, then we might conclude idolatry, adultery, murder, theft, and the other commandments as actually symbolic of something different than what we have taken the commandments to mean. If we treat Prophecy as if it were Law, then we might conclude that there are seven Holy Spirits of God, bringing the count of the Godhead to nine (Revelation 4:5), the devil is a dragon (Revelation 20:2), and Jesus is a lamb (Revelation 5:6). We would also have to conclude that astronomical bodies that are thousands of times larger than the earth fall to the earth (Revelation 6:13). The list of oddities is seemingly infinite.

The second rule moves us to *identify the figures of speech* in whatever you're reading. This second rule recognizes that in whatever style of Biblical literature we are reading, every style of literature include various figures of speech or ways of saying things that are not straightforward. The same is true with newspapers. Although we would expect poetry published in the L.A. Times to contain metaphor, simile, and other literary devices, we can also find these devices in the most scientific portions of the paper. In the weather section, for example, it lists the times of both "sunrise" and "sunset." Of course, the sun neither "rises" nor "sets," though it appears to do so. These are figures of speech that should not reflect on the scientific convictions of the attending meteorologist. Among a number of figures of speech, here are a few.

The Bible contains *hyperbole*. Hyperbole is an overstatement or a statement that is exaggerated for the sake of effect. If we are not careful to note the presence of hyperbole, then we might conclude that there are two ways to go to heaven: (1) justification by Imputation and (2) justification by Amputation. The first refers to Jesus' righteousness being placed into our moral bank account (the fancy words is "imputation") when we believed Christ's finished work. The second refers chopping off body parts to get to heaven. Note Matthew 5:29-30,

29 *"If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.*
30 *"If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell."*

At first glance, this text seems to suggest that I could go to heaven if I took the radical method of amputating the members of my body. The message would be, *"You want to go to heaven, well, pluck out an eye."* At second glance and recognizing the literary device, we might take Jesus as teaching us to take radical measures in our fight against sin. For example, if a man struggles with pornography and his access to the internet at home makes impurity easy, Jesus is saying, *"it's better to be without a computer, Google, email, a phone line than to have all these luxuries and sin."* *"Throw it out!"* At third glance, recognizing the broader context of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus seems to remove all grounds

for self-justification by highlighting the spirit of the law that we fail miserably at, his intention might be to move us to despair because no amount of “castration” or religion (which is a form of castration) actually removes the rebellion within. That despair in turn compels us to trust in Jesus who fulfills the law and the prophets in our place (5:3, 17-19). In this third interpretation, the talk of amputation is designed to compel us to imputation. Whether you opt for the second or third interpretation, certainly we should avoid the first. Watch out for hyperbole.

The Bible contains *metaphor* and *simile*. Both of these devices capture the similarities between two objects that are otherwise very different. When I say I treat my wife like a queen, I don’t mean that I serve her hand and foot like slavish serfs served female despots three hundred years ago. All I mean is that I treat her good. When I declare to my wife, “*you are the queen of our home*,” she has never taken that as a platform to demand subordination and groveling from her husband and children. My wife has the queenly quality of being the dignified woman of our household, but here you’ll find more dissimilarity between the two than similarity.

If we fail to recognize the presence of these figures of speech in Scripture, we’ll wrongly conclude that God is a Gas Grill, because he’s called a “consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:29), or that He is Big Bird (better yet, the Biggest Bird) because he covers his people under his wings and feather (Psalm 91:4). Mormons conclude that God has a physical body like ours because various passages attribute body parts to him (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth, arm, hand, feet, etc...). Roman Catholics believe that the communion elements are transformed during Mass into the literal body and blood of Jesus, because Jesus said of the bread and wine, “*This is my body... this is my blood*” (Matthew 26:26-28). Word of Faith adherents imbue the tongue with metaphysical power because “*life and death*” are in its power (Proverbs 18:21). All of these are seriously mistaken. Watch out for metaphor and simile.

The Bible contains personification. This figure of speech attributes personal characteristics to non-personal or inanimate objects. With this device we have the powerful verbal images of rivers clapping and mountains singing (Psalm 98:8). John the Revelator, presents the entire cosmos as expressing adoration of the Triune God.

“13 And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever” (Rev 5:13).

What better way of literarily capturing the way in which “the heavens are declaring the glory of God” then by giving them rationality, soul, voice, and song to express the greatness of the God who created them.

The Bible contains *Phenomenology*. Writers of sacred Scripture will often describe things *as they appear* (or the *phenomenon*) without necessarily trying to describe how those things *really are*. As was mentioned earlier, Joshua may report the sun stood still without being committed to the belief that the earth revolved around the sun (Joshua 10:13). It certainly “appeared” to Joshua that the sun stood still, and so to report it as such is perfectly valid. Moses classifies bats with birds (Leviticus 11:13-19), a move some critics view as confirmation of Scriptures’ fallibility. However, it seems perfectly reasonable for Moses (whose goal was not to provide a precise taxonomy of the biological world) to use morphological and functional similarities (or, how they appear to be related) as the criterion of relationship.

Some have suggested that the gospel accounts of the Resurrection are hopelessly at odds with each other. One of the alleged disparities is the timing of the women's discovery of the empty tomb. John says that Mary went to the tomb *"while it was still dark"* (John 20:1). Mark describes it taking place *"at the rising of the sun"* (Mark 16:2). Matthew says that *"it began to dawn"* (Matthew 28:1). Luke says that it was *"early dawn"* (Luke 24:1). The skeptic announces triumphantly that these accounts contradict each other. Yet, these accounts can easily be reconciled when we consider the phenomenological dimension of dawn. One can say it's still night when you look towards the west, and another can say it's sunrise if you look towards the east. This is akin to people arguing if a glass is half empty or half full. It's both. The phenomena can be described in different ways.

Up until this point we have seen the importance of carefully identifying the style of literature you are reading in any given portion of the Word of God, as well as identifying the various figures of speech used in any portion you're reading. In addition to these, we want to seek to identify the *meaning of words within a text*. This rule is vital for a few reasons.

We have to carefully identify the meaning of words *because they can be extremely dangerous if mishandled*. Miscommunication is the leading cause of divorce, a significant cause for international relations, and was the occasion of the fall of humanity. Satan's tactic in the garden was to tamper with the meaning of God's directive to our parents by accenting the prohibition of God's command rather than the liberty God provided them (comp. Genesis 2:16 with 3:1). With the subtleties of language, Satan quietly suggested inferior motives in God that proved to be a Trojan Horse filled with the loud slander against God's character, *"You surely will not die!"... "For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"* (Genesis 3:4-5). This was elsewhere repeated when Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). Using the subtleties of the language of Old Testament Scripture, he urged Jesus to test the Father's love and commitment to him by throwing himself off of the temple. This nuanced handling of Psalm 91:11-12 was a ploy hiding Satan's true intention that came out in its blasphemous form in the final temptation, *"All these things I will give to you if you fall down and worship me"* (Matthew 4:9).

We have to carefully identify the meaning of words *because they are easily mishandled*. Words are like volatile chemicals that burn, explode, and even kill with the slightest bump or shake. The difference between chemicals and words is that chemicals stay the same, words don't. Once every ten years Merriam-Webster dictionary has to be updated. Why? In 2003, it was because of 10,000 new words in use, 100,000 new meanings to words already existing, and 225,000 revised definitions to words, all within our American culture. At one time *"gay"* referred to a state of emotion, and now it refers either to a state of sexuality or fashion. At one time *"dead president"* meant a former commander and chief of the U.S. who is no longer living. Now it refers to money. At one time to call your spouse *"awful"* was a great compliment (as in, *"you are full of awe"*). To do this now is grounds for separation. The examples are endless, and so is the potential for miscommunication.

In identifying the meaning of a word found within Scripture, realize that the meaning of a word can sometimes be derived or enriched by looking at its origin. For instance, *"Philadelphia"* is a compound of two Greek words: *"Phileo"* which means *"love,"* and *"adelphos"* which means brother. *"Philadelphia"* means literally, *"brotherly love."* So the city is known as *"the city of brotherly love."* Take the Hebrew word underlying the English word *"glory"* (*kabod*). At its root, this word implies *"weight"* or *"heaviness."* These terms suggest *"importance"* and *"worth."* Therefore, when Paul declares, *"all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God"* (Romans 3:23), he means that all have taken God *"lightly."*

Or, all have failed to acknowledge and respond appropriately to his worth.

Here's one more example taken from 2 Timothy 2:15.

"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."

The phrase "accurately handling" is translated from the Greek word "orthotomeo." The modern translations are right translating this word the way they did, but looking at the word's origin helps to anchor Paul's point in the passage. "Orthotomeo" comes from two Greek words: "Ortho," which means "straight." In English, we use "orthodontics" to describe making crooked jaws or teeth straight, and "orthopedics" to describe making crooked bones straight. "Tomeo" means "to cut." These two words combined mean literally, "to cut a straight way or path." It was used to describe a farmer plowing a straight furrow across the field, a traveler driving a straight path across a country, and mason cutting and squaring a stone so that it could be fitted in its proper place.

Paul tells Timothy that he's like a farmer, or a traveler, or a Mason. His tool isn't a plough, a horse, or square, however. It's the Word of God. Paul charges Timothy to use this tool well, and to teach others to do the same. *"Charge them not to wrangle about words, which is useless and leads to the ruin of the hearers"* (vs.14). Elsewhere, Paul tells Timothy not *"to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the administration of God which is by faith"* (1 Timothy 1:4). Which is to say, we're commanded not to cut corner in using God's word, nor to take detours from its intended meaning. Let's cut a straight path to what God is communicating by handling and applying it skillfully.

Here are some resources to help you with word studies (you'll find these and more in Chapter 5):

Books: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* by G. Kittel, G. Friedrich, & G. W. Bromiley; *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, by S. Zodhiates; *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* by Warren Baker, Gene Carpenter; *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words: With Topical Index* by W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger.

Software: P.C. Bible; BibleWorks; Libronix; QuickVerse.

Online: www.blueletterbible.org; www.studylight.org; www.preceptaustin.org

We've seen that looking at a word's origin may reveal its meaning. With that said, you can usually find a word's meaning by looking at the context in which it takes place. In this sense, Bible-Study can be like C.S.I. These forensic professionals have an uncanny ability to pin point the significance of an obscure piece of evidence by carefully examining the environment in which it lies. Nine times out of ten, you'll unearth the meaning of a passage by carefully surveying its immediate and broader context. Context often determines meaning.

For example, the phrase "you're hot" will mean different things due to the environment in which it's spoken. If a person is broke down on the side of the road in 130 degree temperature deep in Death Valley and a passerby says, "You're hot," it clearly refers to one's intense body temperature. But, if this phrase is spoken in a dimly lit restaurant overlooking the ocean at sunset with a man playing violin, and your company whispers so softly, "You're hot," well that's something altogether different than what was meant in Death Valley. Again, let's say you're traveling from Death Valley to the restaurant when some-

one cuts you off nearly causing an accident, and you begin to genuflect and speak in tongues (not angelic). If the passenger says, "You need to calm down, you're hot." This will mean something different from the other two uses.

Here is a Biblical example. The word "salvation" means the act of rescuing a soul. Well, at least in some contexts (e.g. Romans 1:16-17). But we probably don't want to read the word in this way in our understanding of 1 Tim 2:15.

"But women will be saved through childbearing"

If we're not sensitive to the context, we may mistakenly affirm "salvation by baby," in addition to salvation by faith. When we carefully consult the context, however, Paul seems to be teaching that God can use "motherhood" as a tool to get women more like Jesus.

Verses 9 – 14 suggest that some women felt that they could not fulfill their potential in worshipping God unless they assumed functions that were reserved for males. This would have included a certain restlessness on the part of female spouses who felt spiritually impeded by their home life. Paul's response is this: rather than thinking that being a stay at home mom prevents you from following Jesus to your potential, this can be one of the most powerful tools of sanctification in the life of a women.

Consulting the context also does a lot to dispel popular myths. Many will contend that we should never judge anyone. They base this on Matthew 7:1, "Do not judge so that you will not be judged." Consulting the passage reveals no such categorical denial of judgment. Verse 5 tells us that once we have removed the log out of our eye, "then we will see clearly to remove the speck out of our brother's eye" (i.e., to judge). Jesus prohibits hypocritical judgments, not all judgments. Elsewhere, he declares, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24).

Others have read a passage like Matthew 18:18 which says, "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven," and infer that we are to bind evil spirits, sickness, debt, and loose angels, health, and money. This is a popular interpretation, as well as a really bad one. Matthew 18 has nothing to do with spiritual warfare. In verses 12-14, Jesus illustrates the heart of God to restore lost people using the imagery of a shepherd pursuing a lost sheep. In verses 15-17, he commissions his disciples to do the same. "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother" (vs15). So a lost sheep has been gathered into the fold.

What happens should this brother fail to heed the call to restoration? "But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that BY THE MOUTH OF TWO OR THREE WITNESSES EVERY FACT MAY BE CONFIRMED. "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

Notice that there's no mention of demons or angels, disease or health, and debt or wealth. These things are nowhere to be found. What we do find, however, are officers of the church who are commissioned by Jesus to pursue lost people and include them into the church if they succeed. Such inclusion requires that these officers identify whether a person has truly repented, or whether they have refused

to obey the gospel. On the behalf of God, they pronounce forgiveness (because they see evidences of grace and repentance), or confirm their condition of spiritual alienation (cf. John 20:23; Matthew 16:19). The passage then, is about ministers handling the gospel well.

To sum up the Literary Principle, when you approach the Bible, carefully identify the kind of book you're reading, the different figures of speech contained in that book, as well as the meanings of the various words found in the passage.

The Grammatical Principle – What's the Structure of Grammar?

Just as the Literary Principle moves the Bible-reader to recognize and respond appropriately to the literary dimensions of the text, the Grammatical Principle moves us to do the same with the grammatical structures of Scripture. The importance of grammar cannot be understated. As irrelevant as it seemed to be in grade school it has massive implications for life.

I remember hearing a story about a gentleman whose wife traveled to Europe. She ran across an expensive necklace that she had to have. So she sent a message back home to her husband through a telegraph asking for permission to purchase the jewelry. The husband was a spendthrift and promptly responded negatively. He charged the telegrapher operator to send this message, "No, price too high!" Regrettably, the operator omitted the comma. So it read this way: "No price too high!" What was meant as a refusal was transformed into enthusiastic permission by the absence of one comma. This gentleman soon realized the grave importance of grammar.

Grammar makes the determination of whether a phrase can be taken as a question or a command or a declaration. In Acts 1:8 Jesus says, "You shall be my witnesses." Is he predicting in the future they shall be his witnesses or is he giving a command, "You shall be my witnesses?" The grammar decides this question: it's a command. ^x

In Mark Jesus says, "One of you shall betray me." Is Jesus giving a command, "I want one of you to betray me" or is he making a prediction? The grammar indicates he's making a prediction.

Grammar makes the difference between Jesus being fully God or Diet-Deity. In *The New World Translation* of the Bible (more appropriately called, *The New World Transgression*), produced by the Watch Tower Organization, John 1:1 is rendered this way:

"In [the] beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god." ^{xi}

All recognized Bible translations render the phrase without the indefinite article. Literally, it reads, "and God was the Word." The indefinite article (*a* god) arbitrarily inserted by the Watchtower Organization makes the difference between Jesus being fully God and being God-light. Needless to say, grammar is important.

Grammar is paramount for understanding the nature of our standing with God. In Romans 5:9, Paul says "having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him." Consider that our justification is a condition that we *have been in*. But notice also that salvation is referred to as taken place in the future: "having now been...shall be saved." Carefully observing these tenses reveal a few important truths about salvation. First of all, salvation can be viewed in multiple

tenses: *I have been saved, I am being saved, and I will be saved*. Secondly, we also see an important priority in these tenses. Paul carefully distinguishes past justification from future salvation. We never hear him say, “we *shall be justified* from the wrath of God.” Justification is always past tense; it grounds the other senses in which salvation is used. Although there are three tenses of salvation, we need to be clear on what are past, present, and future. As to the past, we have been justified (declared righteous). As to the present, we are being sanctified (becoming more righteous). As to the future, we will be glorified (we will have become righteous). If you get these three elements confused, it could be disastrous.

Here’s a good illustration of this. Take these three statements:

- You may have children
- You will have children.
- You have children

Depending on what statement is true, your response will be very different. If you *have* kids, you’re not going to act as if you *will* or *may* have them, otherwise C.P.S. will take your children away. If you *will* or *may* have kids, then chances are you aren’t going to act as if you *have* them already, otherwise the paddy wagon may escort you to the nearest mental facility.

Likewise, if you believe you may be justified in the future, then uncertainty and fear will inevitably paralyze you. If you believe you’re already glorified, then overconfidence and pride will sterilize you. Needless to say, grammar is important.

The Historical Principle – What’s the Small Picture?

The Historical Principle recognizes that the content of any portion of Scripture does not take place in a vacuum. The truths of Scripture are incarnated in complex and highly nuanced environments. These environments are made up of political, religious, cultural, geographical, relational, and psychological components (just to name a few). Though Biblical truths transcend any and all such environments, nevertheless these truths are expressed in and through them. As such, Biblical truths are in fact accented and highlighted by the environments through which they’ve been delivered. Unless we carefully inspect the immediate historical context in which any portion of Scripture is delivered, we may miss its meaning. The historical principle moves us to discover what the immediate and relevant historical picture is for any given portion of Scripture. Let’s look at a few instances.

The Historical Principle recognizes the importance of chronology. It is helpful to know when a book is written, or the time frame captured in a particular passage. For instance, 2 Samuel through 2 Kings contains the same historical material that is found in 1 and 2nd Chronicles. Why the repetition of historical material? The answer is found in when and why they were written. 2 Samuel through Kings were written in time when Jews were in exile. The people were trying to cope with the reason for God’s judgment. These books were designed to highlight their unfaithfulness to God and his Word. They were crafted to create repentance for sin and acceptance of the consequences. As such these books are marked with deep pessimism. 1 & 2 Chronicles are written after the Jews have left Babylon. They are in the process of rebuilding both religious and civic life from the ashes of destruction and deportation. They desperately need encouragement and optimism. 1 & 2 Chronicles were designed to remind the Jews of their former glories so as to create an appetite and drive for restoration. These books are marked by a strain of optimism.

It doesn't take long before a reader discovers a relationship between first three books of the New Testament that is similar to 2 Samuel through 2 Kings and 1st and 2nd Chronicles. 89% of Mark's book is found in Matthew, and 72% of Mark is found in Luke.^{xii} Why is John so different? Eusebius (265 -340 A.D.), the Father of Church History, provides for us a compelling answer from tradition:

"And when Mark and Luke had already published their Gospels, they say that John, who had employed all his time in proclaiming the Gospel orally, finally proceeded to write for the following reason. The three Gospels already mentioned having come into the hands of all and into his own too, they say that he accepted them and bore witness to their truthfulness; but that there was lacking in them an account of the deeds done by Christ at the beginning of his ministry"^{xiii}

Eusebius explains the differences between John and the other gospels from 'history' that was passed down to him. According to tradition, Matthew, Mark, and Luke majored on the last part of Jesus ministry, leaving some events in Christ's life unrecorded. John offers his gospel to fill in the gaps left by the other writers. These historical factors are important for appreciating the text.

The Historical Principle also recognizes the importance of the relationship between author and audience. It's important to know to whom a book or passage is written and how that audience helped shape the author's writing. Using the gospels again, we find the first four books of the New Testament to be the story of Jesus from four different perspectives. The Historical Principle helps to appreciate such diversity. Matthew is writing to the Jews, Mark to the Romans, Luke to Gentiles, and John to the Church. We see each author highlighting a facet of Jesus that would have meant something special to the respective recipient: Matthew accents Jesus as Messianic King, Mark present Jesus as Servant, Luke presents Jesus as Son of Man, and John presents him as Son of God.

The Historical Principle also recognizes the importance of atmosphere. It's important to know what matters were relevant and pressing in the formation of a book or passage. The epistles of John can't be fully appreciated without understanding the Gnostic heresy the apostle addresses. Among some of the beliefs, Gnosticism taught that reality was a duality: spirit and matter. Spirit was regarded as intrinsically holy, whereas matter was viewed as intrinsically unholy. These two realities could never have true contact or communion. Because of this, Gnostic teachers asserted that Jesus never incarnated in a human or fleshly body; God becoming man is impossible. Jesus only "appeared" human. Having this small picture in mind helps us to appreciate John's insistence that the apostles had not only heard and seen the Word of life, but they touched him with their hands (1:1). Elsewhere he would insist that every person that denies that Jesus has come in the flesh is not of God, but is of the spirit of antichrist (1 John 4:1-2; 2 John 1:7). In addition to denying the incarnation of Christ, the Gnostics insisted that one could simultaneously be spiritual, and yet live a flagrantly immoral lifestyle. The rationale was that since spirit and matter can't have a cause and effect relationship, then one's behavior doesn't necessarily reflect the condition of your soul. John repudiates this and insists that spiritual birth will of necessity *cause* a change in behavior. "No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God" (1 John 3:9; cf. 2:3-6,9,29; 4:7; 5:1,4,18). A regenerated spirit will always shape and fashion matter into displays of righteousness.

The Historical Principle even finds importance in geography. Knowing where things happen helps to underscore events and truths. I'll provide one example. Jesus uses the word "Gehenna" as a description of "hell" or eternal damnation (e.g., Matthew 5:22,29,30). "Gehenna" literally means "valley of Hinnom"

which was located just south of Jerusalem. The Jews would come to stigmatize this place due to the rank idolatry that occurred in this region that precipitated God's judgment. Specifically, the Jews worshipped the god Molech and sacrificed children as an expression of that devotion (2 Chronicles 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31). The great reformer Josiah converted the area into a trash heap for the city into which carcasses and the bodies of criminals were disposed to illustrate his repulsion for the area. To deal with the putrefying flesh and other refuse, a fire was kept burning perpetually. The smoke from these flames were a constant reminder to all in the area of the Jew's past idolatry and God's judgment. One can begin to see how this area served to vividly portray God's final judgment (ultimate and eternal deportation from God's kingdom) for sin.

The Consistency Principle

If the Historical Principle is concerned with the small picture, then the Consistency Principle is concerned with the big picture. Whereas the Historical Principle obsesses about the immediate context, what's going on with this particular passage or that book, the Consistency Principle ensures that a passage is interpreted in light of the overarching story of the Bible.

Bible readers are like troops on the ground in some niche in some foreign and hostile city far away from anything familiar. These troops depend heavily upon immediate intelligence derived from personal observation. This alone can be insufficient however, for obstacles, dead ends, and even hostiles may be just around the corner. This is like you and I in, let's say, Leviticus. We're combing through each verse and chapter, trying to navigate through the sacrifices, feasts, and overall complexities of a challenging book. It's easy to get lost, to stumble over details, and to get detoured from the point of the book. We need to understand the small picture, or the immediate context for the book to make sense of our personal observations. This would be the function of the Historical Principle.

Utilizing the Historical Principle would be akin to ground troops using live feed from a Predator drone circling overhead. It gives them much needed real time data to navigate safely and efficiently through some of the intricacies of a complex environment. But ground troops rely upon more than personal observation and the information provided by the Predator drone. They also rely heavily upon G.P.S. These are Satellites that provide the troops the big panoramic picture necessary to get to, through, and out of a place with all their objectives reached. The Bible Reader also must have the Big Picture of the Bible in view. This is the function of the Consistency Principle.

The Consistency Principle states that every book of the Bible has the gospel of Jesus as its main plot or storyline (Matthew 5:17). Each book will somehow contribute to this big storyline, but not necessarily with equal clarity or force. Any book that is read which fails to accent some facet of the gospel is read wrongly (John 5:39).

Further, since Scripture is the infallible and inerrant Word of God, it will be consistent in its parts as well as its whole. Just as the big picture is coherent, so is the smaller picture. What this means is that practically no passage of Scripture should be interpreted in such a way that it clashes or contradicts with another passage. If a passage can be taken two ways, one that contradicts and another which doesn't, then you must disregard the one that contradicts.

Here are two rules that stem from this principle:

Unclear passages should be interpreted in a way that upholds the truths of clear passages.

Here's an example from 1 Corinthians 15:29.

“Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?” (NIV)

Paul is here addressing Christians who were attracted to the Greek doctrine that “there is no resurrection.” Paul is arguing with great force and logic for the resurrection of the body. One of his arguments seems to go something like this, “You Corinthians practice a ritual in which you are baptized for the dead. This practice is bound to the idea of resurrection. If you want to keep this ritual, get rid of the heresy. If you want to keep the heresy, get rid of the ritual.”

Some have taken this to be a ritual in which a person can stand in for someone who may be in perdition or purgatory. Through proxy baptism, these departed loved ones will be allowed to participate in the resurrection of life. They say that this was Paul's practice, the early church's practice, and so it should be ours.

Now someone who is using the Consistency Principle will immediately notice that this doctrine appears nowhere else in Scripture (it's neither supported nor implied by other passages). Also, this person will note that this interpretation clashes with two well-attested doctrines in the Bible. The first is that works or rituals cannot save a person. Baptism is a response to salvation, not a ground for it. The second is that a person's spiritual state at death will be their spiritual state for eternity. If you die saved, you'll spend eternity saved. If you die lost, you'll spend eternity lost. The Consistency Principle will dismiss this proffered interpretation due to its collusion with clearly embedded doctrines.

So what does Paul mean by “baptism for the dead?” The difficulty is the word “for,” which means to do something on the behalf of someone. The straightforward interpretation would be living people being baptized on the behalf of dead people. Having dismissed that option, here's my attempt at a resolution.

Paul isn't referring to another ritual of baptism (i.e., one for dead people). He's referring to the tradition ritual performed by adult converts and asking the Corinthians to consider the implications of it for the disputed matter of physical resurrection. The word “baptism” can mean *complete identification* with something; this is why correct Christian baptism involves complete immersion in water. Of course this ritual is symbolic, but symbolic of what? The water represents the grave or death. Spiritual and physical death are symbolically merged into this ritual, for physical death stems from spiritual death.

When a person is baptized or immersed, this act partly typifies a person's union with sin and death (a condition shared by all humans). Each time a person participates in this ritual, they visibly display both humanity's immersion into sin and death, as well as Christ's immersion into humanity's sin and death on the cross. In some sense then, each time a person is baptized, *they represent everyone who has experienced the scourge of sin, which is death*. They are baptized *for* (on the behalf of, or representing) the dead (both spiritually and physically). They play out the fall of Adam and his offspring.

Now, the ritual doesn't stop with immersion, but with emergence. The subject doesn't remain immersed in the water, he is pulled out of the water. Spiritual death and physical death are linked together, and so spiritual resurrection and physical resurrection must be. I think Paul might be saying this: "if you're going to be consistent, just continue to hold the person down in the water forever. Your heresy cuts the ritual right in half. You have people going into the water, but no one coming out." Or, he may be saying, "you have people identifying with both spiritual and physical death, but no one emerging into life both spiritually and *physically*." Or, "you have people identified with the physical and "spiritual" death of Christ, but you have no one identified with his physical resurrection."

Whatever nuance taken, the fundamental point is that their affirmation of baptism implies an affirmation in physical resurrection, not merely spiritual resurrection.

I offer this take on the passage completely aware that it is not a clean fit. The Consistency Principle recognizes that there will always be difficulties, but it moves us to choose our difficulties well by choosing those that create the least amount of difficulty for the overall coherence of the Bible.

The second rule is just the first one broadly put. Just as unclear verses should be interpreted in the light of clear ones, so unclear books should be interpreted by clear books. Prophetic books like the book of Revelation should be interpreted in light of clearer books like the epistles and the gospels. Some have the opposite approach. They read a prophetic book; draw conclusions that create tension with the epistles and gospels, and proceed to *bend* the declarations of these clearer books to fit their take on an unclear book. This is like using a code to understand a decoder. It's backwards.

A Grid for Understanding - A Triangular Approach

Here's a grid in which apply the afore mentioned principles. I'm assuming that you will approach the Bible reverently, regularly, systematically, actively, objectively, and independently. I'm also assuming that you'll handle the text utilizing the Literary, Grammatical, Historical, and Consistency Principle. With these tools within hand's reach, what is a basic method that frames your use of these tools of interpretation? Here is a triangular approach.

Repetition – As you are regularly and systematically reading through the Bible, wherever you are at, read that assigned section (let's say a chapter) multiple times. Listen to it multiple times on CD or through the Internet. ^{xiv} Read it slowly, carefully, and repeatedly until you can recite out loud the basic concepts of the passage. Yeah, I mean talking out loud to yourself, to the wall, to a windshield.

"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night" (Joshua 1:8).

"O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Psalm 119:97).

During this time of repetition, you are reading reverently and actively, writing down in your journal impressions, questions, and observations that come to mind. You're paying attention and notating the Literary, Grammatical, Historical, and Contextual dimensions of the text.

Linking – As you’re reading a passage in this way, try to identify how any given part of the passage connects with other portions of that passage, or even neighboring chapters. As you interact with the section circle the word or phrase, and draw a line linking it to other similar words or phrases. For example, Jesus says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where people break in and steal” (Matthew 6:19). Certainly this has reference to various forms of materialism, but reducing the verse to wealth loses the flow of thought found in the preceding passages. In verses 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 16, Jesus uses the word “reward.” Since “reward” and “treasure” are similar ideas, I’ve circled them and have drawn lines connecting them to “treasure” in verse 19. This connection proves to be significant. In these verses, Jesus warns us not to settle for a lesser reward or treasure, which is the applause of man sought *through religious activities* rather than applause of the Father. This means both wealth and *religion* can eclipse what should be our true treasure in life.

Outlining – Lastly, take the results of repetition and linking and formulate an informal outline in your journal. Outlining is to text what X-Ray machines are to bodies. Outlining is that process identifying and writing down the skeletal structure of any given passage. It includes distinguishing major ideas, supporting ideas, and the connections in between. Here’s an outline of the first two chapter books of 1 John.

1. The Person and Work of Jesus in History
 - a. The Person of Jesus (1:1-4)
 - b. The Need for Jesus (1:5-10)
 - c. The Work of Jesus (2:1&2)
2. The Effects of Jesus in our Affections – What we Love
 - a. They Love Righteousness (2:3-13)
 - b. They Hate Worldliness (2:15-17)
 - c. They Withstand Deception (2:18-27)

An outline usually doesn’t capture the depth of the passage, but it does its breadth; it captures the overall flow of thought and unity of parts outlined. In both major headings, I’ve sought to capture in a pithy and memorable way what I sensed to be the point of a chapter. The first section (1 John 1:1-2:2) is clearly a gospel presentation. I have labeled it as such. Having identified and labeled the theme of the section, I’ve sought to identify and label sub-sections that comprise each section. The point of outlining isn’t to uncover every facet of the text, but simply to frame it.

Repetition, Linking, and Outlining will help you tremendously in your utilization of the principles of approach and principles for understanding. Now we move on to the final movement in reading the Bible: Application.

Applying the Bible: The Science and Art of Biblical Application

Knowing God

Unfortunately, there are lots of people who will pull a hamstring to understand what the Bible says, and yet have never broken a sweat to get it in their lives. Historically there's always been a propensity in people to drift either towards experience over doctrine or doctrine over experience. We often label the former "charismatic subjectivism" and the latter "dead orthodoxy." The former gives off lots of heat and little light, and the latter lots of light but little heat. The truth of the matter is that God desires and demands both. "What God has put together, let no man put asunder." God requires the union of logic and zeal, tradition and experience, Word and Spirit, exposition and experience.

This separation could be remedied if we had a Biblically informed understanding of "knowledge" and "doctrine." For instance, when Paul stresses to Timothy the need for sound doctrine, included in "doctrine" is both right behavior as well as right belief. In 1 Timothy 1:4 Paul charges Timothy to instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines that included an obsession with speculative theology (genealogies, myths, and speculations). Rather, the goal of teaching/doctrine/knowledge should be "love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (vs.5). In verse 10, immoral behavior declared to be contrary to "sound doctrine." In 4:6-10, the apostle says that insofar as Timothy embraces and teaches the discipline of godliness and rejects the futility of theological speculation, he will be a good servant of Christ Jesus "nourished on the words of the faith and sound doctrine." In verse 16, he tells the young pastor "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you." All sound doctrine will have sound living.

Of course, this isn't unique to Paul. Jesus would famously illustrate this point in the Sermon on the Mount,

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine and acts on them, may be compared to a wise man who built his house on the rock. 25 "And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and yet it did not fall, for it had been founded on the rock. 26 "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and does not act on them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. 27 "The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house; and it fell - and great was its fall" (Matthew 7:24-27).

It is clear from these verses that doctrine and experience, though distinct, should never be divided. True knowledge of God will be a blend of information and piety. Calvin stated the relationship well,

"The knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know him. Indeed we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety" ^{xv}

This view of knowledge isn't really all that foreign to our understanding. When we say that Lance Armstrong "knows" bike riding, what do we mean? We mean that he has *know-that* knowledge. Lance can explain the history and physics on bike riding, and especially the anatomy of a bike. But what if despite that knowledge he keeps crashing every few feet. Does Lance know bike riding? He does in some sense, but not fully. Now, let's say that Lance rides quite well, that is, he has *know-how* knowledge; bike riding is instinctive to him. Yet he's unable to identify where the handlebars, pedals, seat, and wheels are. He's clueless on how the bike works. Does he know bike riding? He does in some sense, but not fully. What makes Mr. Armstrong such a stellar cyclist is that he has learned the art of marrying the two kinds of knowledge. Put differently, he realizes the danger of dividing factual and experiential knowledge. In the same way, both *Know-That* knowledge and *Know-How* knowledge comprise the Biblical concept of knowing God. The two must be distinguished, but never divided.

Spiritual Voyeurism

One of the problems this chapter deals with isn't so much the tendency of many Bible students to divide interpretation and application, but propensity to confuse the two; to confuse logic and zeal, tradition and experience, Word and Spirit, exposition and experience. Because they have acquired massive amounts of *know-that* knowledge of God, there is an illusion created that they too possess *know-how* knowledge. I call this spiritual voyeurism.

Voyeurs, especially those who are fanatical and stalk their victims, usually amass all sorts of information about the person they're prying into. In some cases they may know more about that person than most people know (perhaps even more than their spouses). Here's the dangerous emotional leap of logic: the more they know *about* the person, the more they think they *really know* them. The more they obsess, the more they feel entitled to have audience with the person.

In some of the more frightful cases, stalkers have become hostile when the person they "know" is oblivious to them and refuses relationship. One stalker moved into David Letterman's house from time to time. One 51-year-old mother with 4 kids contacted Richard Gere by phone, fax and email hundreds of times and even showed up at his Greenwich Village office at least 6 separate occasions. She's quoted as saying: "*I want to be with you and share your life.*" Robert Gardner stalked Janet Jackson for nine years, sent her multiple messages, showed up at random events like the trial for her brother Michael and a *Saturday Night Live* rehearsal. At the rehearsal, he was caught in possession of a box cutter and a knife. Why? He believed the two were in a relationship.

Spiritual Voyeurs succumb to the same disastrous leap of logic: the more they know *about* God, the more they think they *really know* Him. The more they obsess about information, the more they feel entitled to have audience with Him. The parable of the wise and foolish builder mentioned previously was specifically crafted by Jesus to make this very point. In the verses immediately preceding the illustration, we read this:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.' (Matthew 7:21-23).

Here we have people who know enough about God to venture out in ministry. It's not a stretch to think that Jesus had the Pharisees and the Scribes in mind. These would be men who had an amazing grasp of Scripture, having mastered even some of the most obscure portions of the Law. These would be men who used such knowledge to preach to people, to convert people, and to alleviate some degree of human suffering. And yet on the judgment day, God banishes them to perdition declaring that they "*never knew*" him. These damned-souls made that disastrous leap of logic from information to intimacy. Because they had information, it felt like intimacy. At bottom, these preachers of the law were practitioners of lawlessness. They played the part of the foolish builder constructing their spirituality on sand by hearing and not doing the will of God.

The Fallen Condition Focus

The first way to promote rigorous application is to keep one of the major purposes of the Bible in mind like a Sailor tends the compass on a ship. The apostle declares Scripture is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17). Scripture is profitable for,

"teaching" - It shows us *what is right*.

"reproof" – It shows us *what isn't right*.

"correction" – It shows us *how to get right*

"training" - It shows us *how to stay right*.

This passage tells us that every one of us lacks what it takes to be fully equipped. Because sin remains in the most sanctified of us, we are all deficient in countless ways that limit our obedience to the will of God and usability for the glory of God. The apostle declares that Scripture is God's response to and provision for all areas of spiritual deficiency.^{xvi} That suggests that whatever passage you are reading in context will deal with some area of fallenness in your past, present, or future. That passage contains the antidote for all of them. The task of application is to figure out (1) what defect is addressed in a passage, (2) what solution is given to address the defect, and (3) what relevance both of these have to us. This is what Bryan Chapell calls the "Fallen Condition Focus."

"The Fallen Condition Focus is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to whom or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God's people to glorify and enjoy him."^{xvii}

The idea is that your deficiencies are just like the deficiencies of those people to whom and about whom the Bible is written. All humans essentially sin in the same ways, though the modes and expressions vary. Therefore, just as Scripture contains grace to fix areas of fallenness in people who lived thousands of years ago, it has grace to sufficiently deal with yours.

How then do we determine the FCF?

Here are a few questions to answer as you interact with God's Word:^{xviii}

1. What spiritual concern or concerns does the text address?
2. How could these issues be similar to spiritual challenges that I have faced, I am facing, or I will face?

3. What solutions does the text provide to address those spiritual concerns for those people about whom or to whom it was written?
4. How can I apply those solutions in a relevant way to my life?

Here's an example of how the FCF helps you with more difficult passages.

"3 But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. 4 Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. 5 But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. 6 For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. 7 For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. 8 For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man" (1 Corinthians 11:3-8).

At first glance, the application seems to be clear and simple: "guys, take off the caps." "Ladies, put on your bonnets." This seems straightforward, but upon further inspection this application appears a bit simplistic. The complexity of the passage is unmistakable as Paul declares in verses 14 & 15 that nature teaches us that it's a shame for men to have long hair and women to have short hair. This is to undergird his previous point on why women need to wear head coverings. The question arises, "how does nature teach us that?" Both men and women naturally grow hair (guys grow more than girls). So the point isn't what happens naturally. Paul says that men and women feel *shame* when depending on their *hairstyle*, not hair *growth*. Now, we can either take the apostle as meaning something is *intrinsically* immoral with how men and women were wearing their hair and donning their hats, or that something was *culturally* immoral. The latter makes sense.

Consider that in some cultures, men wearing skirts (I mean kilts) is viewed as masculine (Scotland), and in others women wearing pants is feminine (America). If a man wears a skirt in America, he's considered confused about his gender. So is a woman who wears pants in the Middle east, she's viewed as attempting to usurp men. This is also true with hairstyles, in certain African and European cultures; short hair on a woman is "hot." Not so in Yemen or Saudi Arabia. The issue isn't the style per se, but what the style of hair or dress communicates about one's gender in your environment. Apparently, some in the Corinthian church were adopting hair and/or fashion styles that suggested a confusion or a disregard of gender distinction in that culture.

Having established the interpretation of this passage, the FCF moves us to ask some follow up questions for application. This is how someone may answer these.

What spiritual concern or concerns does the text address? Answer: *God addresses the tendency within the church at Corinth to downplay or confuse gender distinction, as well as the respective roles of men and women.*

How could these issues be similar to spiritual challenges that I have faced, I am facing, or I will face in 21st century America? Answer: *There is tremendous gender confusion in our culture, from sexual orientation to functionality in a home. The broader culture (my co-workers, family, friends, etc.) has pressured*

me to minimize God-created distinctions. My friends are pressuring me to accept homosexuality as a viable lifestyle. There is confusion and conflict in my home about who should be setting the pace for our family.

What solutions does the text provide to address those spiritual concerns for those people about whom or to whom it was written? Answer: *They were to get clear on the created order, and be quick and firm on making the necessary alterations in home and church that reflect that order.*

How can I apply those solutions in a relevant way to my life? Answer: *I need to be quick, clear, and firm in upholding the Biblical model for masculinity and femininity. I need to identify where I have confused the matter in my life, repent of it, and model my gender well. If I'm a wife that seeks to dominate my husband, I'll ask his forgiveness and learn to respectfully submit to his leadership. If I'm a husband that has either relinquished or abused my responsibility, I will repent to my family and lead and love my family like Christ loves the church. If I'm a young man tempted by relationships with the same sex. I'll resist and fight these temptations by the Spirit of God and accountability to fellow believers. If I'm a young woman who suffers from a ravaged self-esteem because of the way men have treated me, I'll fight to trust what God says when He declares that I was made with dignity and worth and that I'm here to image God through my femininity.*

Helmet, Shoulder Pads, and Pain-Relievers

Finding the FCF is important, but insufficient in getting the Bible Reader where God wants them to be. To promote rigorous application of Scripture, you must also resolve to expend extraordinary energy in getting Scripture into you. Application requires nothing less than hard work. I mean “hard” work! I mean putting on a helmet, shoulder pads, a cup (if you're a guy), grabbing the ball, and incessantly and ruthlessly colliding with your old nature and a fallen world to try to gain a few yards of obedience. In this sense, the Christian life is just like one lifelong football game. Upon rebirth, you're thrown in the game and you're at the one-yard line. Your goal is to get the ball to Jesus. The in zone is the day you enter into glory. Here's the point, between you and the end zone are the most ugly and massive opponents with no other passion in life than to paralyze you. You will spend the rest of your life contending with these opponents. This is the degree of resistance we will have, and so it requires nothing less than resolve and intensity.

This type of intensity I see in Ezra. Ezra was the man God used to usher in a massive revival in Jerusalem of religion among the newly arrived deportees. Ezra's tactic for promoting revival would have baffled modern revivalist. He gathered the masses in the town square, read the law of Moses (with all of its complexities and harshness) for hours at a time and weeks in a row, and called people to repent. Revival broke out. In contemporary “revivals,” clarity of doctrine seemed irrelevant, distracting, or sometimes opposed to the movement of God's Spirit. “Give your heart to Jesus” replaces “Plead for mercy from an angry God.” “Love Jesus” replaces, “repent and be saved.” Clarity of understanding or thought is portrayed as ruinous to the emotional fervor of the moment. The grand project is, “can we move their hearts,” regardless of what is in the mind. Today there is no small number of people who will respond vigorously to the gospel filtered and twisted by their natural mind. When asked what they propose to accept about Christ, often it is a Christ who saves from financial ruin or relational ruin. Christ is either embraced “as a purpose for living,” or a reason “for not giving up.” There's very little sin-saving in these moves. Ezra knew nothing of these so-called revivals. Ezra knew the real thing.

Why was Ezra so instrumental in the revival of a nation? The answer is that he was a revived man himself. The source of his intensity and tenacity is recorded for us in Ezra 7:10.

“For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice it, and to teach His statutes and ordinances in Israel.”

Ezra could not effectively usher people into change through teaching unless he himself struggled with sweat and tears to interpret and apply the Bible consistently in his own life. Most scribes were content to have mastered the science and art of interpretation. Not so for Ezra, he also had mastered the science and art of Biblical application. His energy wasn't reserved only for the study of God's word, but also for the practice and promotion of it. How about you? If you're reading this book, chances are you're interested in reading and understanding the Bible. Great. Yet I wonder, will you put equally as much energy into applying Scripture as you will into understanding it? If not, let's be clear. You are not serious about Scripture.

Bible-Intercession

If you are serious about applying Scripture and staying clear of spiritual voyeurism, then your Bible reading will be saturated in prayer. Psalm 119 is often cast as a chapter devoted to Scripture, but in reality, it's one big *prayer* about Scripture. There is equal emphasis on praying about God's Word, as there are descriptions of God's Word. It's the prayerful pleas by the Psalmist that we might love, understand, treasure, apply, promote, and be revived by Scripture that imprints its grace in his life. True Bible reading is Bible-intercession.

C.H. Spurgeon captured this well in the instruction he gave to his Bible College students:

“Texts will often refuse to reveal their treasures till you open them with the key of prayer. How wonderfully were the books opened to Daniel when he was in supplications! How much Peter learned upon the housetop! *The closet is the best study*” (42 lectures).

History is filled with saints who lived lives of tremendous power and influence precisely due to their marriage of Scripture and intercession. We've seen earlier how Whitefield and Muller's power was traced to the practice of reading on their knees; we see the same effect in Jonathan Edwards' life.

George Marsden captures the kind of prayerful interaction Edwards' had with Scripture. Recounting a watershed moment in his life having struggled mightily against the doctrine of God's sovereignty. Exhausted by the mental and spiritual struggle, one day he rested in 1 Timothy 1:17, “Now to the King eternal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen.”

“He had heard those words countless times and long since repeated catechism answers cataloguing such attributions of the deity and emphasizing that people existed to “glorify and enjoy” God. Now the implications of the incomprehensible greatness of the God of the vast universe who was truly eternal and all wise flamed out at him. As he read these words, he recalled, “there came into my soul, and was as it were diffused through it, a sense of the glory of the divine being; a new sense, quite differ-

ent from anything I ever experienced before.” He was so much enraptured that, as he put it, “I thought with myself, how excellent a Being that was; and how happy I should be, if I might enjoy that God, and be wrapped up to God in heaven, and be as it were swallowed up in him.” He kept repeating the verse “and as it were singing over these words of Scripture to myself...and prayed in a manner quite different from what I used to do; with a new sort of affection.” ^{xix}

Marsden would proceed to describe Edwards as often walking trails, woods, and meadows reading, contemplating, singing, memorizing and praying Scripture. ^{xx} This kind of Bible-intercession would continue through Edwards’ life. Let no one be mistaken, his power and influence for God’s kingdom find their source in this practice. Use these men of God as templates to encourage and fashion your own interaction with God. Learn to wed vigorous study with vigorous prayer.

A Community Project

A fourth way to promote the application of God’s word to your life is through accountability. Consider these words from the book of Hebrews:

“23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:23-25).

This passage implies that we’re not going to hold firm to the confession of faith with the type of intense resolve *on our own*. Isolated from a community which upholds God’s truth in loving accountable relationships, we will not love as we should, do the good that we should, and avoid sin as we should. Put in a different way, if our love of good, our practice of good, and our avoidance of sin flowed naturally from Christians who were isolated from others, it would be a complete waste of space for Paul to say to us, “Let’s communally, with much proactive group forethought and strategy, consider how we can move beyond our moral presets and fallen defaults, to stretch beyond our natural condition into the image of Jesus.” Bible application is clearly represented by the author of Hebrews as a community project.

This is reinforced by the word “provoke.” It’s used in a negative sense a few other places in Scripture. In Acts 15:39 we read that “there occurred such a *sharp* disagreement that they separated from one another.” It also occurs in Deuteronomy 29:28 (LXX). “And the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger and in fury and in *great* wrath, and cast them into another land, as it is this day.”

It certainly was not a mild disagreement that Paul and Barnabas had; it was sharp, contentious, and big enough to cause their separation. Again, it wasn’t a mild anger that God had towards Israel; it was great wrath, significant enough to move God to cast them into another land. In the same way, this word used positively in Hebrews 10, God isn’t content, nor should we be content with a marginal goodness and mild love towards God and each other. He wants impassioned, fiery, feverish, radical, abundant love and good deeds. He calls for an *incited* application of goodness from friends holding up the standard of the Word of God to each other’s lives. The Psalmist invokes his fellow believers to do the same.

“Let the righteous smite me in kindness and reprove me; It is oil upon the head; Do not let my head refuse it” (Psalm 141:5).

Tools for Your Toolbox: Some Tips and Resources

9 Quick Tips for Reading the Bible

1. Have a regular time and quiet place to read and pray.
2. Start out your time with prayers like this: “Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law” (Psalm 119:18). Pray that God would open your eyes and incline your heart to His Word.
3. Have a reading plan. If you are new to reading the Bible, avoid tough books (e.g. Revelation, Ezekiel, etc.). Start with easier books (e.g., Mark, 1 John, or Proverbs).
4. Don’t always look for what you think you need. Let the Bible tell you what you need. We have big needs that we are clueless about. Also, don’t bring your own personal assumptions and preconceived notions into your understanding or conclusions. As a rule, you should be suspicious of your own personal assumptions and preconceived notions (Pro. 28:26; Jer.17:9; Mark 7:21).
5. Seek to understand the general context of a particular Bible passage by reading the verses and chapters just before and after it. Ask questions like these: What does the scripture I am studying clearly saying? What is the scripture I’m studying NOT saying? To whom was the particular book I’m reading written to? Who wrote the book? Who is speaking in the passage that I am reading? Does my understanding of this Bible passage harmonize with the rest of Scripture?
6. Remember that the Bible at times uses parables, allegories, symbols, poetry, metaphors, and other figures of speech and literary techniques to reveal God's truth. Adjust your interpretation to the kind of speech used.
7. Do not form conclusions based on partial facts or insufficient information, or the opinions and speculations of others. Remember that your or anyone else's convictions, regardless of how strong they may be, don't necessarily count. GOD'S WORD is your ultimate standard and guide.
8. Remember that God’s Word is given to make you like Jesus. As you study a portion of Scripture, ask yourself how you should apply the truths of that passage to your life in a way to love God and your neighbor better.
9. End your Bible study by using it to connect to God in prayer. Use the following acronym to link your daily Bible reading with daily prayer: A.C.T.S. *A-Adoration*: What does this chapter show you about God? Take some time to reflect on and praise God for his nature and attributes. *C-Confession*: What faults does this passage show you about yourself? Take some time to reflect on and repent for these faults. *T-Thanksgiving*: According to this passage, what blessings has God given you? Take some time to reflect on these things and praise God for his kindness in your life. *S-Supplication*: What does this passage move you to ask God for? Take some time praying for your needs, as well as the needs of others.

Bible Translations

NASB -95 - New American Standard Bible – www.lockman.org/nasb/

ESV – English Standard Version - www.gnpccb.org/esv/

NKJV – New King James Version -

www.biblegateway.com/versions/?action=getVersionInfo&vid=50

NIV – New International Version - www.ibsstl.org/niv/index.php

Reading Plans

Here are ten different plans available on the ESV website - www.esv.org/biblereadingplans

Study Bibles

ESV Study Bible - www.esvstudybible.org/

NIV Study Bible

MacArthur Study Bible -

www.amazon.com/MacArthur-Study-Bible-James-Version/dp/0849912229

Reformation Study Bible - www.reformationstudybible.com

Online Sources

www.blueletterbible.org

www.biblegateway.com

www.preceptaustin.org

www.monergism.com

www.biblestudytools.com

Bible Software

Logos (expensive) - www.logos.com

PC Study Bible - www.biblesoft.com/new

BibleWorks (expensive) - www.bibleworks.com

Quick Verse - www.bibleworks.com

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