Hermeneutics:

Principles of Bible Interpretation

Part 1 of 2

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Part 2 of 2

Introduction to Hermeneutics

I.   What is hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical Interpretation.

A. *Origin of term*   "The word *hermeneutics* is said to have had its origin in the name Hermes, the Greek god who served as messenger for the gods. . . ." (Henry Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, p. 15).

B. *A definition*   "Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation. It is a science because it is guided by rules within a system; and it is an art because the application of the rules is by skill, and not by mechanical imitation." (Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 1) "Hermeneutics is a *science* in that it can determine certain principles for discovering the meaning of a document. . . . It is also an *art* . . . because principles or rules can never be applied mechanically but involve the skill of the interpreter" (Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 11).

C. *The rules by which we play*   Hermeneutics determines the methods, techniques, rules and principles which best help us determine the intended meaning of the biblical text. It is the rules by which we play. Just as a football player must understand the rules of football in order to effectively play the game, the interpreter of the Bible must also abide by certain rules to make sure his or her interpretation is true to the intended meaning of the text. "Hermeneutics is essentially a codification of the processes we normally use at an unconscious level to understand the meaning of a communication" (Virkler, p. 19).

II.   Difference between General and Special Hermeneutics

A. *General Hermeneutics*   The study of those rules that govern interpretation of the entire Bible.

B. *Special Hermeneutics*   The study of those rules which govern the interpretation of specific literary forms such as parables, types and prophecy.

III.   Why is understanding and applying proper Hermeneutics important?

A. *So we can know what God has said*   "This is the primary and basic need of hermeneutics: *to ascertain what God has said in Sacred Scripture; to determine the meaning of the Word of God*. There is no profit to us if God has spoken and we do not know what He has said. Therefore it is our responsibility to determine the meaning of what God has given to us in Sacred Scripture" (Ramm, p. 2).

1. <u>Proper belief depends on it</u> As believers, we must make sure we are interpreting God's Word accurately. We must do so in order to have correct views concerning salvation, Christian living and our future hope.

2. <u>2 Timothy 2:15</u>   "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth."

B. *So we can correctly apply what God has said*   "We must know the meaning of the Bible before we can know its message for today. We must understand its sense for then before we can see its significance for now" (Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation,* p. 10*)*. Proper interpretation is essential to proper application. If we do not interpret properly, we may end up applying the Bible incorrectly.

C. *So we can avoid misinterpreting the Bible*   We do not want to be like those who are "adulterating the word of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). Nor do we want to be like those who "distort" the Scriptures "to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16).

D. *Because the Bible is our sole authority*   "Conservative Protestantism takes *only* the Bible as authoritative, there is no secondary means of making clear the meaning of the Bible." (Ramm, p. 1) Unlike Roman Catholicism and other groups, our divine authority comes from the Bible. Thus, there are no other authorities equal with the Bible that can interpret the Bible for us.

E. *Because we are dealing with an ancient book*   "The first five Old Testament books were written by Moses around 1400 B.C. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, was written by the Apostle John around A.D. 90. So some of the books were written about 3,400 years ago and the latest one was written about 1,900 years ago. This suggests that in hermeneutics we must seek to bridge several gaps posed by our having such an ancient book in our hands" (Zuck, pp. 15-16).

   1. Language gap The Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. To formulate rules to bridge this gap is one of the most important tasks of Biblical hermeneutics" (Ramm, p. 5).

   2. Time gap "Because of the extensive time gap between ourselves and the writers and initial readers of the Bible, a huge chasm exists. Since we were not there, we cannot talk with the authors and with the initial hearers and readers to discover firsthand the meaning of what they wrote" (Zuck, p. 16). For example: Jonah's lack of concern for the Ninevites is better understood when we realize the extreme cruelty and sinfulness of the people of Ninevah.

   3. Cultural gap "There is also the *culture-gap* between our times and Biblical times which the translator and interpreter must bridge. Culture, in the anthropological sense, is all the ways and means, material and social, whereby a given people carry on their existence. Until we can recreate and understand the cultural patterns of the various Biblical periods we will be handicapped in our understanding of the fuller meaning of Scripture" (Ramm, p. 5).   "Great differences exist between the way people in the Western world do things and think and the way people in Bible lands lived and thought. Therefore it is important to know the cultures and customs of peoples in Bible times. Often faulty interpretations stem from an ignorance of those customs" (Zuck, p. 16).

4. Geographical gap   "Most readers of the Bible today live thousands of miles from the countries where Bible events took place. The Middle East, Egypt, and the southern Mediterranean nations of present-day Europe were the places where Bible people lived and traveled. These extend from Babylon in present-day Iraq to Rome (and possibly Spain, if Paul traveled there). This geographical distance puts us at a disadvantage" (Zuck, p. 16).

IV. **The relationship between hermeneutics and other fields**   Hermeneutics is not isolated from other areas of biblical study.

A. *Canonicity*   The determination of which books were inspired by the Holy Spirit and, thus, are to be regarded as Scripture.

B. *Biblical Introduction*   Biblical Introduction deals with many issues related to each book of the Bible. It deals with issues such as the historical background of the writers, readers, locations, cultures and philosophies associated with each book.

C. *Textual Criticism*   "This is the process of study whereby one establishes the exact words that were written by the original author, based on the thousands of documents resulting from the copyings of the originals" (Robert L. Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis*, p. 13).

D. *Hermeneutics*   The art and science of biblical interpretation

E. *Exegesis*   "Exegesis may be defined as the determination of the meaning of the biblical text in its historical and literary contexts. . . . Exegesis is the actual interpretation of the Bible, and hermeneutics consists of the principles by which the meaning is determined" (Zuck, pp. 19- 20).

F. *Biblical Theology*   "Biblical theology is the study of divine revelation as it was given throughout the Old and New Testament. It asks the question, 'How did this specific revelation add to the knowledge that believers already possessed at that time?' It attempts to show the development of theological knowledge throughout the Old and New Testament era" (Virkler, p. 18).

G. *Systematic Theology*   "Systematic Theology organizes the biblical data in a logical rather than historical manner. It attempts to place together all the information on a give topic (e.g., the nature of God, the nature of the afterlife, the ministry of angels) so that we may understand the totality of God's revelation to us on that topic. Biblical and systematic theology are complementary fields" (Virkler, p. 18).

H. *Exposition* "Exposition is the communication of the meaning of the text along with its relevance to present-day hearers" (Virkler, pp. 19-20).

V. **Qualifications For Hermeneutics**

A. *Must be born again* (1 Cor. 2:14)   No one can fully comprehend the meaning of the Bible unless he is regenerate. The unsaved person is spiritually blind (2 Cor. 4:4) and dead (Eph. 2:2).

B. *Must have an interest in God's Word*

C. *Must have a prayerful attitude and humility*

D. *Must have an obedient attitude*

E. *Must rely on the Holy Spirit*

F. *Must be objective*   "The Bible student must also approach the Scriptures with sound judgment and reason, seeking to be as objective in his approach to the Bible as possible, without coming to the Scriptures with prejudice or preconceived notions" (Zuck, p. 25).

The History of Interpretation

I.   **The History of Interpretation**

   A. *The importance of knowing the History of Interpretation*   "A knowledge of the history of biblical interpretation is of inestimable value to the student of the Holy Scriptures. It serves to guard against errors and exhibits the activity and efforts of the human mind in its search after truth and in relation to noblest themes. It shows what influences have led to the misunderstanding of God's word, and how acute minds, carried away by a misconception of the nature of the Bible, have sought mystic and manifold meanings in its content" (Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 31).

   1. Learn from mistakes of others   "By observing the mistakes of those who have preceded us, we can be more aware of the possible dangers when we are similarly tempted. Santayana's adage that 'he who doesn't learn from history is bound to repeat it' is as applicable to the field of interpretation as it is to any other field" (Virkler, p. 48).

   2. Balanced view of Church Fathers   Many great Christians (e.g., Origen, Augustine, Luther) understood and prescribed better hermeneutical principles than they practiced.

   B. *Two Schools of Interpretation*   "Throughout the centuries since God revealed the Scriptures, there have been a number of approaches to the study of God's Word" (Virkler, p. 47).
   Literal School
   Gives to words the same meaning they would have in normal, ordinary usage

   Allegorical School
   Gives to words hidden and deeper meanings that were not intended by the original author

   1. The Literal School   "More orthodox interpreters have emphasized the importance of a literal interpretation, by which they meant interpreting God's Word the way one interprets normal human communication." (Virkler, p. 47) "The literal method of interpretation is that method that gives to each word the same exact basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary usage, whether employed in writing, speaking or thinking. It is called the grammatical-historical method to emphasize the fact that the meaning is to be determined by both grammatical and historical considerations" (Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 9).

2. <u>The Allegorical School</u> "The definition of the allegorical method is as follows: The allegorical method regards the literal, grammatical, historical sense of a passage as a mere vehicle for getting underneath to a hidden meaning which is deeper, more profound, and more spiritual." (James Rosscup, *Hermeneutics*, syllabus for Master's Seminary, 1988, p. 25) With the allegorical method, what the original writer of Scripture is trying to say is passed over in search of a deeper and more spiritual meaning.

II.   **Interpretation Throughout History**

A. *Ezra (ca. 445 B.C.)*   "It is generally agreed by all students of the history of hermeneutics that interpretation began at the time of the return of Israel from the Babylonian exile under Ezra as recorded in Nehemiah 8:1-8. Such interpretation was necessary, first of all, because of the long period in Israel's history in which the Mosaic law was forgotten and neglected. . . . It was necessary, further, because the Jews had replaced their native tongue with Aramaic while in exile. Upon their return the Scriptures were unintelligible to them. It was necessary for Ezra to explain the forgotten and unintelligible Scriptures to the people. *It can hardly be questioned but that Ezra's interpretation was a literal interpretation of what had been written*." (Pentecost, p. 16) (emphasis mine)   "Herein lies the recorded birth of literal Bible exegesis and the formal exposition of God's Word" (Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, p. 41).

B. *Jewish interpretation during the Intertestamental Era (400 B.C.—A.D. 10)*

1. <u>The rise of Letterism</u> At first, the interpreters after Ezra kept to a normal, literal method of interpreting Scripture. However, as Paul Lee Tan said, "The splendid Bible study movement started under Ezra later deteriorated under the rabbis into a   school which fanatically worshiped the bare letters of Scripture" (Tan, p. 41). This   *letterism* placed undo focus on the letters of the words of Scripture. As a result the author's intended meaning was often overlooked and replaced by fanciful   speculation.

2. <u>The School of Rabbi Hillel (70 B.C.—A.D. 10(?))</u> Rabbi Hillel was a prominent leader among the Jews of Palestine who established a school named after him in Jerusalem. "He set up seven hermeneutical rules by which the mass of Jewish   traditions could be deduced from the Scripture. Although some of Hillel's rules   were valid and sensible, most opened the floodgates to excessive allegorization"   (Tan, p. 41).

   a. Ex: "'Eliezer' has the value of 318 in the Hebrew. Since Abraham also had 318 servants, the rabbis interpreted this to mean that Eliezer was equal to all the rest of Abraham's servants" (Tan, p. 43).

   b. Ex: there must be 903 ways of dying because the Hebrew word for death in Psalm 68:20 has a numerical value of 903 (Tan, p. 43).

c. *Critiquing Letterism* "There is one major lesson to be learned from rabbinical exegesis: the evils of letterism. In the exaltation of the very letters of Scripture the true meaning of the Scriptures was lost" (Ramm, p. 48). Opponents of a literal interpretation of prophecy often point to the hyper-literalists of Jewish Rabbinism as proof that one can be too literal with the Scriptures. But this is not valid. "The Jewish rabbis did not really misuse the literal method. Literalism and letterism are two different things. . . . Letterism is the premature (not extreme) form of literalism. The interpreter who is properly conversant with the literal method of interpretation can never be too literal in interpreting God's Word" (Tan, p. 45).

C. *The rise of Allegorism (B.C.)*

1. <u>Greek Allegorists</u> "It may seem strange to list. . . the Greek school, but this is necessary to understand the historical origins of allegorical interpretation. The Greeks were not concerned with the Sacred Scripture but with their own writings, and in this sense it is improper to classify them within the context of Biblical interpretation. But in that their allegorical method was adopted by both Jew and Christian they deserve this special attention" (Ramm, p. 24). Thus, *allegorical interpretation stems from pagan sources.*

   How did allegorizing start? "Greek philosophers while appreciating the ancient Greek writings of Homer (ninth century B.C.) And Hesiod (eighth century B.C.), were embarrassed by the immoral conduct and by the anthropomorphisms of the fanciful gods of Greek mythology in those writings. For instance Phadra fell in love with her stepson Hippolytus. Zeus had to defeat the three-headed Typhon. . . . How could the Greek philosophers revere these writings and at the same time accept the elements in their writings. . . . To get around this problem, the philosophers allegorized the stories, looking for hidden meanings underneath the literal writings. . . . The Greek writers in this way were using allegorizing for apologetic purposes, to keep the Greek poets from being ridiculed" (Zuck, pp. 29-30).

2. <u>Jewish Allegorists in Alexandria</u> "Jews in Alexandria, Egypt were influenced by Greek philosophy. But they too faced a problem: How could they accept the Old Testament and also Greek philosophy, particularly that of Plato? Their solution was to do the same as the Greek philosophers themselves, namely, to allegorize the Old Testament. The Alexandrian Jews were concerned about anthropomorphisms and immoralities in the Old Testament, just as the Greek philosophers were embarrassed by those elements in Homer and Hesiod. Because of the many Greeks living in Alexandria, the Jews were readily influenced by them, and easily took up allegorizing the Old Testament as a way of accepting it along with Greek philosophy. They too saw this as a means of apologetics, a way to defend the Old Testament to the Greeks." Accounts thought too embarrassing include:

   a. Exodus 15:3 "The Lord is a man of war."

   b. Exodus 32:14: "And the Lord repented of the evil."

   c. Lot's incest

   d. Noah's drunkenness

3. <u>Philo</u> "Philo (ca. 20 B.C.—ca. A.D. 54) is the best known Alexandrian Jewish allegorizer. He too was influenced by Greek philosophy, yet because of his piety as a Jew he sought to defend the Old Testament to Greeks and even more so, to fellow Jews. He was led to allegorize the Old Testament rather than always following a literal method of interpretation because of his desire to avoid contradictions and blasphemies. Philo stated that allegorizing is necessary to avoid seemingly unworthy statements of God, or seemingly contradictory statements in the Old Testament" (Zuck, p. 32).

    a. **Ex. A statement unworthy of God**. "Adam hid himself from God." To Philo this dishonors God because God sees all things.

    b. **Ex. A contradiction**. Cain had a wife

    c. **Ex. Four heads** The four heads of the river going out of Eden are the virtues of prudence, courage, temperance, and justice.

D. *Jesus' interpretation of the Old Testament*   Jesus used the normal, literal method of interpreting the Old Testament Scriptures and not the allegorical method. An examination of Jesus' use of the Old Testament shows: 1) He consistently treated the historical narratives as straightforward records of fact. The allusions to Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David, for example, all seem to be intended and were understood as references to actual people and historical events; 2) When Jesus made an application of the historical record, He drew from the normal, as opposed to the allegorical, meaning of the text. He showed no tendency to divide scriptural truth into levels—a superficial level based on the literal meaning of the text and a deeper truth based on some derived mystical level; 3) Jesus denounced the way the religious leaders had developed casuistic methods that set aside the very Word of God they claimed to be interpreting and replaced it with their own traditions; 4) The Scribes and Pharisees never accused Jesus of using any Scripture unnaturally or illegitimately (Taken from Virkler, p. 54).

E. *The Apostle's use of the Old Testament* The apostles followed the Lord Jesus in interpreting the Old Testament literally. Though there are times when the New Testament writers seem to modify the original meaning of the Old Testament text or seem to use the Old Testament in unnatural ways, there can be no doubt that on the whole, the apostles and New Testament writers interpreted the Old Testament normally. As Virkler says, "In conclusion, the vast majority of the New Testament references to the Old Testament interpret it literally; that is, they interpret according to the commonly accepted norms for interpreting all types of communication— history as history, poetry as poetry, and symbols as symbols. There is no attempt to separate the message into literal and allegorical levels. The few cases where the New Testament writers seem to interpret the Old Testament unnaturally can usually be resolved as we understand more fully the interpretive methods of biblical times" (Virkler, p. 58).

F. *The Early Church Fathers Era (A.D. 100—500)*   "Despite the practice of the apostles, an allegorical school of interpretation dominated the church in the succeeding centuries. This allegorization sprang from a proper motive—the desire to understand the Old Testament as a Christian document. However, the allegorical method as practiced by the church fathers often neglected completely the author's intended meaning and the literal understanding of a text to develop speculations the author himself would never have recognized." (Virkler, pp. 58-59) "From these early church fathers it is obvious that while they may have started out well, they were soon influenced by allegorizing" (Zuck, p. 33).

1. The Alexandrian School (Allegorists)

   a. **The Epistle of Barnabas** (Early 2nd century, spurious. Written probably by some Alexandrian Christian influenced by Philo.) Concerning the reference to the 318 servants of Abraham (Gen. 14:14), Barnabas believed, "The Greek letter *t* stands for 300 and represents the cross, and the letters *I* and *e* represent 10 and 8 respectively, and are the first two letters in *Iesous*, the Greek word for Jesus. The 318 servants then become a type of Jesus on the cross." (Zuck, p. 33) Barnabas wrote, God "knows that I never taught to anyone a more certain truth."

   b. **Pantaenus (ca. 180)**, teacher of the school at Alexandria, was the first to adopt the allegorical method of interpretation (Tan, p. 48).

   c. **Clement of Alexandria (150-215)** Believed in five senses to Scripture (historical, doctrinal, prophetic, philosophical and mystical). "Clement taught that all Scripture speaks in a mysterious language of symbols" (Zuck, p. 35).

      (1) Ex. The two fish Jesus used to feed the five thousand represent Greek philosophy.

      (2) Ex. The Mosaic Law prohibitions against eating swine, hawks, eagles and ravens (Lev. 11:7, 13-19) represent respectively unclean lust for food, injustice, robbery and greed.

   d. **Origen (ca. 185-254)** "He believed that Scripture is one vast allegory in which every detail is symbolic" (Virkler, p. 60). "Origen so ignored the literal, normal meanings of Scripture that his allegorizing became unusually excessive. As one writer stated, it was 'fantasy unlimited'" (Zuck, p. 37).

      (1) Ex. Noah represents Christ, Noah's Ark represents the Church.

      (2) Ex. The two donkeys used in Christ's triumphal entry represent the Old and New Testaments.

      (3) Ex. Rebekah's drawing water at the well for Abraham's servant means we must daily come to the Scriptures to meet Christ.

e. **Augustine (354-430)**   Augustine interpreted much of Scripture literally but unfortunately he was also driven to allegorical interpretations of Scripture at times. As Tan says, "Augustine modified allegorism by confining it to the prophetic Scriptures. That is, he interpreted the non-prophetic Scriptures literally and the prophetic Scriptures allegorically" (Tan, p. 50).

    (1)   *Father of Amillennialism* "Augustine is best known among students of prophecy as the father of amillennialism. His view of the millennium was incorporated into Roman Catholic theology. Augustine rejected the literal millennium as too materialistic and carnal, and taught that 'the millennium is to be interpreted spiritually as fulfilled in the Christian Church'" (Tan, p. 50).

    (2)   *Abuse of 2 Cor. 3:6*   "He justified allegorical interpretation by a gross interpretation of 2 Cor. 3:6 ['the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life']. He made it to mean that the *spiritual* or *allegorical* interpretation was the real meaning of the Bible; the *literal* interpretation kills. For this experimental reason Augustine could hardly part with the allegorical method" (Ramm, p. 35).

f. **Jerome (347-419)**   "Originally followed Origen in his allegorizing." (Zuck, p. 38). Later he became more literal though he still held to a deeper meaning of Scripture. "It becomes clear from these late church fathers that Jerome and Augustine paved the way for two emphases that were to endure for more than a thousand years—allegorization and church authority" (Zuck, p. 41).

2. <u>The Antiochian School (Literalists)</u>   "Sensing the rampant disregard for the literal meaning of the Scriptures in the Alexandrian Fathers, several church leaders in Antioch of Syria emphasized historical, literal interpretation." (Zuck, p. 37) ". . . this school of interpreters stood like a Gibraltar amidst a shifting sea of allegorism." (Tan, p. 51) "The exegetical principles of the Antiochian school laid the groundwork for modern evangelical hermeneutics" (Virkler, p. 62).

a. **Doroetheus (240-312)**   "Helped prepare the way for the founding of the school at Antioch of Syria" (Zuck, p. 37).

b. **Lucian (died 312)**   Founder of the School at Antioch.

c. **Diodorus (died 393)** He wrote, *What is the Difference between Theory and Allegory*. This work refuted allegorical interpretation.

d. **Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428)**   The greatest interpreter of the Antiochian school. He wrote, *On Allegory and History against Origen*. He was also called "the prince of ancient exegetes."

e. **John Chrysostom (354-407)** The greatest expositor of the early church era.

f. **Theodoret (386-458)** His commentaries were "among the best specimens of ancient exegesis" (Zuck, p. 37).

What happened to the school of Antioch? "Unfortunately, one of the students of the school, Nestorius, became involved in a major heresy concerning the person of Christ. His association with the school, together with other historical circumstances, led to the eventual demise of this promising school of thought. The hermeneutical historian Farrar sighs over the demise of the school: 'Unhappily for the Church, unhappily for any real apprehension of Scripture, the allegorists, in spite of protest, were completely victorious. The School of Antioch was discredited by anathemas'" (Tan, p. 52).

G. *The Middle Ages* (500—1500)   "Little original scholarship was done during the Middle Ages; most students of Scripture devoted themselves to studying and compiling the works of the earlier Fathers. Interpretation was bound by tradition, and the allegorical method was prominent" (Virkler, p. 63).

Little original scholarship was done during the Middle Ages; most students of Scripture devoted themselves to studying and compiling the works of the earlier Fathers. Interpretation was bound by tradition, and the allegorical method was prominent.

1. Fourfold sense of Scripture Augustine's fourfold sense of Scripture became the norm for biblical interpretation— literal, allegory, moral and anagogy.

   a. **Ex. Jerusalem**   "The city of Jerusalem can be used to illustrate this idea. Literally, Jerusalem refers to the historical city itself; allegorically, it refers to the church of Christ; morally, it indicates the human soul; and anagogically (eschatologically) it point to the heavenly Jerusalem" (Virkler, p. 63).

   b. **Ex. Genesis 1:3— "Let there be light."** Medieval interpreters interpreted this verse to mean 1) literally—an act of creation; 2) allegorically—Let Christ be love; 3) morally—May we be mentally illumined by Christ; 4) anagogically— May we be led by Christ to glory (Tan, p. 53).

2. Church's role in interpreting the Bible   "During this period the principle was generally accepted that any interpretation of a biblical text must adapt itself to the tradition and doctrine of the church. The source of dogmatic theology was not the Bible alone, but the Bible as interpreted by church tradition" (Virkler, p. 63).

3. Important figures

    a. **Gregory the Great (540-604)** "The beginning of the Middle Ages is usually identified with Gregory the Great, the first pope of the Roman Catholic Church." (Zuck, pp. 41-42). He was known for excessive allegorizing.

        (1)   Ex. Job's seven sons are the twelve apostles

        (2)   Ex. Job's 7000 sheep are innocent thoughts

    b. **Venerable Bede (673-734)** Works largely allegorical.

    c. **The Cabbalists in Europe and Palestine (late medieval)** Practiced letterism to the point of absurdity. They believed that every letter of the Bible had supernatural significance.

    d. **Stephen Langton (ca. 1155-1228)** "Archbishop of Canterbury, held that spiritual interpretation is superior to literal interpretation. Therefore in the Book of Ruth, the field is the Bible, Ruth represents students, and the reapers are the teachers" (Zuck, p. 48).

    e. **Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)** He held that the literal meaning of Scripture is basic, but that other senses are built on it including the allegorical (Zuck, p. 43).

    f. **The Victorines** Three men, Hugo (1097-1141), Richard (died 1173) and Andrew (died 1175), were known as "the Victorines." They held to a literal sense of Scripture and were "a bright light in the Dark Ages" (Zuck, p. 42).

    g. **Nicholas of Lyra (1279-1340)** is a significant figure in the Middle Ages because he is a bridge between the darkness of that era and the light of the reformation. Though Nicholas accepted the fourfold sense of Scripture common in the Middle Ages, he had little regard for it and stressed the literal. Martin Luther was strongly influenced by Nicholas.

    h. **John Wycliffe (1330-1384)** "wrote that 'all things necessary in Scripture are contained in its proper and literal sense'" (Zuck, p. 44). He has been called "the morning star" of the Reformation.

H. *The Reformation (1500's)* "Although historians admit that the West was ripe for the Reformation due to several forces at work in European culture, nevertheless there was a *hermeneutical reformation* which preceded the ecclesiastical Reformation." (Ramm, pp. 51-52) "The Reformers built on the literal approach of the Antiochene school and the Victorines" (Zuck, p. 44).

1. <u>Martin Luther (1483-1546)</u> "Luther stressed the literal sense of the Bible. He wrote that the Scriptures 'are to be retained in their simplest meaning ever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids' (Luther's Words, 6:509)" (Zuck, p. 45).

   a. **Luther's view of allegorization** Luther admits that, as a monk, he was an allegorizer of Scripture, but that changed after his study of Romans. Luther strongly denounced allegorization by stating: "Allegories are empty speculations and as it were the scum of Holy Scripture." "Origen's allegories are not worth so much dirt." "To allegorize is to juggle the Scripture."

   b. **Back to the originals** Luther's stress on literal interpretation led to emphasis on the original languages.

   c. **Bible can be understood** Luther strongly believed that every Christian could study and understand the Bible for himself. He also stated that "a layman who has Scripture is more than Pope or council without it."

   d. **Church authority not equal to Bible** Luther also maintained that the Church should not determine what the Scriptures teach, but rather the Scripture should determine what the church teaches.

   e. **Not always consistent** Though Luther was vehemently against allegorization he occasionally did it himself. Luther believed Noah's Ark was an allegory of the church.

2. <u>Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560)</u> Luther's companion and a scholar in Hebrew and Greek. He, for the most part, followed the literal method of interpretation.

3. <u>John Calvin (1509-1564)</u> Calvin was probably the greatest exegete of the Reformation era. Like Luther, Calvin rejected allegorical interpretations. John Calvin said, "It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say" (Tan, p. 54).

4. <u>William Tyndale (1494-1536)</u> Tyndale stressed the literal meaning of the Bible. According to him, "Scripture has but one sense, which is the literal sense."

5. <u>Anabaptists (1525 ff.)</u> They too stressed a literal interpretation of the Bible.

6. <u>Summary of Reformation era</u> "The gift of the Protestant reformers to the Christian church consists not only in an open Bible but also in the literal method of interpreting the Bible. Unfortunately, however, the reformers refused to be involved in the issue of prophetic interpretation, and so the whole of Protestantism went the way of Roman Catholic amillennialism by default. This omission of the reformers is probably explainable by the fact that truths such as justification by faith and the problems of ecclesiology were claiming the immediate attention of the reformers as the latter sought to sift through the Roman debris" (Tan, p. 54).

I. *Post-Reformation (1600-1799)*   "The 200 years of the 17th and 18th centuries were noted for several influential movements and activities" (Zuck, p. 49). The following are the major influences of the post-Reformation era:

1. Confessionalism   "After the death of John Calvin (1564), the immediate post-Reformation period was an age of creeds and the formulation of various theological systems. The Council of Trent delineated the proper bounds of Roman Catholic theology and the Protestant churches came out in kind with theological statements. With the emphases of the age on creeds and church interpretations, there was little progress in sound Scriptural interpretation. Nevertheless, after the Reformation, the literal method was firmly established as the proper method of Bible exegesis, and a large number of scholars and exegetes arose to follow in the footsteps of the reformers" (Tan, p. 54).

   a. **The Westminster Confession (1647)**   Spelled out the tenets of Calvinism for Britain.

   b. **Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609)** This Dutch theologian rejected a number of teachings of John Calvin and sparked the Calvinism vs. Arminianism debates.

2. Pietism Pietism arose as a reaction to the dogmatic and often bitter exegesis of the confessional period. Pietists called for an end to needless controversies and a return to Christian concern and good works.

   a. **Positively**   Pietists combined a deep desire to know God's Word and apply it to one's life. Some pietists actually had a fine appreciation for the grammatical-historical approach to interpretation (See Virkler, p. 68).

   b. **Negatively**   "Many later Pietists discarded the grammatical-historical basis of interpretation and depended instead on an 'inward light' or 'an unction from the Holy One.' These expositions based on subjective impressions and pious reflections, often resulted in interpretations which contradicted one another and had little relationship to the author's intended meaning." (Virkler, p. 68) Ramm gives two weaknesses of a pietistic approach to interpretation: 1) "It falls prey to allegorization especially in the use of the Old Testament. In the effort to find a spiritual truth or application of a passage of Scripture the literal and therefore primary meaning of the passage is obscured; 2) Devotional interpretations may be a substitute for the requisite exegetical and doctrinal studies of the Bible" (Ramm, pp. 62-63).

3. Rationalism   "This movement stressed that the human intellect can decide what is true and false. The Bible, then, is true if it corresponds to man's reason, and what does not correspond can be ignored or rejected." (Zuck, p. 51) Thus man's reason stands in authority over the Bible. The Bible is only to be believed when it harmonizes with what man deems reasonable to accept. As a result, doctrines such as human depravity, hell, the virgin birth, and the resurrection are rejected. Rationalism in regard to the Bible dates back to Hobbes (1588—1679) and Spinoza (1632—1677).

J. *Modern Hermeneutics (1800 to the Present)*

1. <u>Liberalism (19th century)</u>   Rationalism laid the base for liberalism. Liberalism denies the Bible is a supernatural book. "Whereas in previous centuries revelation had determined what reason ought to think, by the late 1800s reason determined what parts of revelation (if any) were to be accepted as true" (Virkler, p. 69). With liberalism came the following:

   a. **Overemphasis on human authors**. The Bible is a human book as opposed to a divine one. "Influenced by both the thinking of Darwin and of Hegel, the Bible came to be viewed as a record of the evolutionary development of Israel's religious consciousness (and later the church's), rather than God's revelation of Himself to man" (Virkler, p. 70).

   b. **Denial of inspiration** "For many *inspiration* no longer referred to the process whereby God guided the human authors to produce a Scriptural product that was His truth. Rather, *inspiration* referred to the (humanly produced) Bible's ability to inspire religious experience" (Virkler, p. 70). Historical accounts in the Bible were often taken to be in error.

   c. **Historical criticism**   "In the 19th century, biblical criticism became prominent. It was rationalistic in its approach with its emphasis on the human authorship of the Bible and the historical circumstances surrounding the development of the biblical text. Being rationalistic, Bible students rejected the supernatural character of the Bible and its inspiration." (Zuck, p. 52) Julius Wellhausen (1844—1918) is famous for his denial of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch in favor of the Documentary Hypothesis (J,E,D,P theory).

   d. **Rejection of hell, six-day creation, virgin birth, and miracles**

   e. **Jesus not a Savior from sin but a moral and ethical teacher**

2. <u>Neoorthodoxy (20th century)</u> "Neoorthodoxy is a twentieth-century phenomenon. It occupies, in some respects, a position midway between the liberal and orthodox views of Scripture. It breaks with the liberal view that Scripture is only a product of man's deepening religious awareness, but stops short of the orthodox view of revelation. Those within neoorthodox circles generally believe that Scripture is man's witness to God's revelation of Himself. They maintain that God does not reveal Himself in words, but only by His presence. When a person reads the words of Scripture and responds to God's presence in faith, revelation occurs. *Revelation is not considered to be something that happened at a historical point in time which is now transmitted to us in the biblical texts, but is a present experience that must be accompanied by a personal existential response*" (Virkler, p. 71) (emphasis mine). Thus the Bible is not revelation but a witness to revelation.

a. **A comparison** 1) Orthodox interpreters says the Bible *is* the Word of God; 2) Liberals deny the Bible is the Word of God; 3) Neoorthodoxy says the Bible becomes the Word of God when it speaks to you.

b. **Karl Barth (1886—1968)** Barth is known as the father of neoorthodoxy

c. **Beliefs** "Neoorthodox theologians deny the inerrancy and infallibility of the Bible. The Creation of the universe, the creation of man, the Fall of man, the resurrection of Christ, and His second coming are interpreted mythologically. The Fall is a myth that teaches that man corrupts his moral nature. The Incarnation and the cross teach us that the solution to the problem of human guilt must come from God. These events happened on a different level of history, a mythological level in contrast to actual history" (Zuck, p. 54).

3. The New Hermeneutic (1940— present) The 'new hermeneutic' has been primarily a European development since World War II and is usually attributed to Rudolf Bultmann (1884—1976) and Ernest Fuchs. With the "new hermeneutic," the biblical text can mean whatever the reader wants it to mean. The new hermeneutic also rejects the Bible as propositional truth and denies its supernatural elements. According to adherents of this view, the Bible must be "demythologized." This means all "myths" (i.e. supernatural elements) must be stripped away in order to find the transcendent spiritual truths. For example, Jesus did not literally rise from the dead. Instead, His resurrection speaks of the new freedom His disciples experienced.

4. Literal Hermeneutic In spite of all modern trends in hermeneutics, many Christians today are committed to the literal method.

III. **Conclusion** This review of the history of hermeneutics shows us how essential it is that we stay committed to the historical-grammatical approach to interpreting the Bible. Only by this method can we understand the Word of God correctly.

The Basis for the Literal Method of Interpretation

I. **Determining the rules of interpretation**

    A. *Principles of interpretation are discovered not invented*   ". . . the rules or principles for interpreting the Bible are not arbitrary. They are not imposed like laws over the Bible, for if that were so then some might conceive of the principles as having more authority than the Bible itself. These hermeneutical principles. . . are not the result of some unusual genius of a select few individuals. The principles of interpretation are not invented or learned but are part of the very nature of man. . . . the principles for interpreting the Bible are simply descriptions of the way people think and read when they seek to understand the meaning of any writing. They are not inventions, they are discoveries. Rather than being created, they are observed. If they were arbitrarily devised by man, then each person could make up his own rules. But since these principles are part of the way man normally communicates, they are to be considered universal. They are not special rules applicable only to Bible study" (Zuck, pp. 59-61).

    "Hermeneutics, the universal laws of human language, is a science. Man has not made up these laws, rather he has discovered them. These laws are just as real and objective as the law of gravity. These laws apply to all languages and cultures. They are timeless. They are relevant in interpreting writings written four thousand years ago and they will continue to be up-to-date as long as man is communicating to other men or even to God. Just as for thousands of years, men knew and functioned by the law of gravity even though Newton had not formulated the law, even so for ages man has observed and functioned by these laws of human language even though they often were not aware of their existence" (Dennis W. Brindley).

    B. *The Bible — Divine and Human*   True Christians accept two axioms (self-evident truths) in regard to the Bible. First, the Bible is a divine book and second, it is a human book.

        1. <u>Bible as a human book</u>   Though the Bible is of supernatural origin, it is still a book. As such it was written in languages that were intended to communicate specific meanings to its readers. The writers of the Bible, therefore, used signs or symbols on the pages for the purpose of communicating ideas to someone else. The following are some logical inferences or corollaries that stem from the fact that the Bible was written by human beings:

a. **Each word, sentence, paragraph and book of the Bible was recorded in a written language and followed normal, grammatical meanings, including figurative language** (Zuck, pp. 61-62)   "This suggests that the Bible was not written in unintelligible code to be deciphered by some magical formula. Since it was written in the languages of the people (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek), it did not have to be decoded, deciphered, or translated. Those who read the Bible did not need to read into, beyond, or between words for some 'deeper' or other-than-normal meaning. . . . The words were immediately understandable. The readers knew immediately the concepts being conveyed by the sentences in the Bible. They understood them in the way they would normally understand other sentences written in their languages. They did not need to call on a wizard, sorcerer, or a person with unusual spiritual insight or mystic intuition to convey its meaning" (Zuck, p. 62).

b. **Each book of the Bible was written by someone to specific readers in a specific historical, geographical situation for a specific purpose**. Since the books of the Bible were written to people who lived in certain locations and times we must first seek to understand what the words meant to those initial readers before we can know how they apply to us today. Thus we must always ask, "What did this passage mean to the original readers?"

c. **The books of the Bible are influenced by the cultural environment in which each writer wrote**. (This is discussed in greater detail in the section called *Bridging the Culture Gap*)

d. **The books of the Bible must be understood according to the context they were written in.** (More on this in section called *Determining Context*)

e. **The books of the Bible must be understood according to the literary form in which it was written**. (More on this in section called *Bridging the Literary Gap*)

2. <u>Bible as a divine book</u>   Though the Bible is a book, it is a unique book in that God is its divine author (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21).

a. **Without error (inerrant)** Since the Bible has God as its divine author, it is a fair inference that it is without error as originally given.

b. **A unity**   Since God is the author, we know that the Bible cannot contradict itself. The Analogy of Faith principle says there is one unified, consistent, harmonious system of faith (belief) in the Bible. Thus no passage of Scripture, when interpreted correctly, will contradict another passage.

(1) *Seeming contradictions need to be interpreted in light of the harmony of Scripture.* James statement in 2:24 that "a man is justified by works" does not contradict the rest of the Bible which clearly declares that salvation is by faith alone (Rom. 4; Eph. 2:8-9). James' point is that works justify, or make evident to other people, that one is truly saved. The justification referred to in Rom. 4:1-5 refers to the judicial act by which God declares a person righteous before God.

(2) *Obscure and secondary passages need to be interpreted in light of clear and primary passages.*

   (a) <u>Ex. Is there a second chance?</u> Baptism for the dead in 1 Cor. 15:29 cannot mean that a second chance exists for those who die in unbelief. Passages like Hebrews 9:27 and Luke 16:19-31 make clear that one's eternal fate is sealed at the time of death.

   (b) <u>Ex. Future for Israel.</u> When Jesus said, "the kingdom of God will be taken from you. . ." (Mt. 21:43) this does not mean that God no longer has a future for Israel. Romans 11:26 states that "all Israel will be saved."

(3) *Recognize the progress of revelation*   The Progress of Revelation principle states that later Scriptures add to what God has given in earlier portions. These additions add to and supplement previous revelation; they never contradict earlier revelation. Progress of Revelation also means some commands given earlier were changed later.

   (a) <u>Ex. Prophecy</u> The book of Revelation adds to the prophetic revelation given in Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah.

   (b) <u>Ex. Afterlife</u> Heaven and Hell are more fully described in the New Testament than they are in the Old Testament.

   (c) <u>Ex. Trinity</u>   The Trinity is presented in a fuller way in the New Testament.

   (d) <u>Ex.   Kingdom presentation</u> Jesus' command to avoid Gentile and Samaritan cities was made at a time when the kingdom of God was still being presented exclusively to the nation of Israel. After Israel's clear rejection of their Messiah, the Gospel was then to be taken to "all the nations" (Matt. 28:19).

   (e) <u>Dietary restrictions</u>   Leviticus 11 details what foods were unclean and thus not to be eaten. But in Mark 7:19 it is stated that Jesus "declared all foods clean." Plus, in Acts 10:15 a voice declared to Peter, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy."

   Authoritative: Since the Bible is the Word of God it has inherent authority. We must be diligent to learn what it says and apply it to our lives.

II. **The Literal Method**

    A. *Defined* "To'interpret' means to explain the original sense of a speaker or writer. To interpret 'literally' means to explain the original sense of the speaker or writer according to the normal, customary and proper usages of words and language. Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means explaining the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usages of its language*" (Tan, p. 29).

        1. <u>Grammatical-Historical</u> Literal interpretation is also known as *grammatical-historical interpretation* since the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations.

        2. <u>Normal</u> "The principle might also be called *normal* interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages" (Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 80).

        3. <u>Plain</u> "It might also be designated *plain* interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal rules out figures of speech. Symbols, figures of speech, and types are all interpreted plainly in this method, and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation" (Ryrie, pp. 80-81).

        4. <u>Oneness of meaning</u> "This principle means that a biblical text has one basic proper meaning or interpretation, not two or three. There is one correct interpretation, but after it is ascertained we may make several legitimate applications of its relevance to our own lives or the lives and situations of other people" (James Rosscup, *Hermeneutics,* p. 60).

B. *Defended* There are three significant reasons for holding to the literal method:

1. Philosophically "The purpose of language itself seems to require literal interpretation. Language was given by God for the purpose of being able to communicate with mankind. . . . If God is the originator of language and if the chief purpose of originating it was to convey His message to humanity, then it must follow that He, being all-wise and all-loving, originated sufficient language to convey all that was in His heart to tell mankind. Furthermore, it must also follow that He would use language and expect people to understand it in its literal, normal and plain sense" (Ryrie, p. 81).

2. Biblically "A second reason why dispensationalists believe in the literal principle is a biblical one: the prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the first coming of Christ— His birth, His rearing, His ministry, His death, His resurrection— were all fulfilled literally" (Ryrie, p. 81).

3. Logically "If one does not use the plain, normal, or literal method of interpretation, all objectivity is lost. What check would there be on the variety of interpretation that man's imagination could produce if there were not an objective standard, which the literal principle provides? To try to see meaning other than the normal one would result in as many interpretations as there are people interpreting. Literalism is a logical rationale" (Ryrie, p. 82).

Errors to Avoid When Interpreting the Bible

I. **Errors to avoid in interpretation** The following are ways to avoid misinterpreting the Bible:

When Interpreting the Bible
Thou Shalt Not

1. Make the Bible say what you want it to say
2. Spiritualize the text
3. Decide on a doctrine without looking at all relevant texts
4. Isolate texts from their contexts
5. Apply promises made to Israel to other nations.
6. Replace Israel with the Church
7. Pour current thinking into the Bible
8. Use the supernatural experiences of Bible men as normative for today
9. Dismiss a text as cultural because you are uncomfortable with it
10. Overpersonalize the Bible

A. *Do not make the Bible say what you want it to say* Ex. 1 John 2:2   This verse teaches that Jesus "is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world." Some (but not all) who hold to the limited atonement view argue that "world" in this verse means "the elect." This view, however, seems strained and forced. Of the twenty two times "world" is used in 1 John, it is never a synonym for the elect.

B. *Do not spiritualize the text* To spiritualize (or allegorize) is to go beyond the plain meaning of the passage in search of a deeper or hidden meaning. The danger with this method is that there are no checks for fanciful interpretation. The only standard becomes the mind of the interpreter. Stick to the intended meaning of the text.

   1. Ex. Isaiah and Football? Vineyard Pastor and Promise Keepers board member, James Ryle, makes connections between the Colorado Buffaloes football team and the book of Isaiah. He says the Holy Spirit told him to turn to Isaiah 21:6 after his team, Colorado, lost the national championship when they were beaten by Notre Dame 21-6 in the 1990 Orange Bowl. After Colorado's tough loss, the Holy Spirit also revealed to him that God would "reach out His hand a second time" according to Isaiah 11:11. This supposedly was fulfilled when Colorado, the next season, beat Notre Dame and won the national championship. According to Ryle, Isaiah 11:11 also was related to Colorado's 11-1-1 win, loss and tie record (see James Ryle, *Hippo in the Garden* (Orlando, FL: Creation House, 1993), pp. 77, 182-83).

   2. Ex. Joel 2:23 Early and Latter Rains Joel 2:23 and its reference to "early" and "latter" rains has been used as a basis for the Latter Rain Movement. Supposedly, the "early rain" in this verse refers to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the "latter rain" refers to the outpouring of the Spirit in the twentieth century. However, Joel 2:23 is addressed to the nation Israel not the Church. This passage addresses Israel's future in the millennial kingdom. Plus, the early and latter rains mentioned are referring to literal, seasonal rains and not the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. What is the real point of Joel 2:23? When Israel is restored to their land in the millennium, God will send the proper   autumn and spring rainfall for their crops.

3. <u>Ex. Song of Solomon</u> Many have taken the Song of Solomon to refer to Christ's love for His church. This is an unwarranted interpretation. The Song of Solomon is about the greatness of marital love. There is nothing in this song that speaks of Christ or the Church, nor is there any NT evidence that indicates this song should be taken in any other way than about marital love.

   a. **Ex**. **Rose of Sharon and lily of the valley (SOS 2:1)** These have nothing to do with Christ. Instead, this passage refers to the young Shulamite comparing herself with tender flowers.

   b. **Ex. His banner over me is love (2:4)** This often used phrase of children's songs and banquet halls does not refer to Christ but to Solomon's protective care of his bride.

C. *Do not prooftext* Prooftexting is stringing together an inappropriate or inadequate series of Bible verses to prove one's theology. "Put another way—it is enticing, but wrong, to form one's theology apart from a complete inductive study of Scripture. It is wrong, having done this, to start looking for biblical texts that seem to support our conclusions, all without carefully interpreting the text to which we appeal" (Mayhue, p. 75).

   1. <u>Ex. The "Name it and claim it error."</u> The Prosperity movement loves to quote John 14:14, "If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it." They interpret this verse to mean that we can claim by faith whatever we want (ex. car, riches, etc. . .) as long as we tack on "in Jesus name" at the end of our request. They do not stress that to pray "in Jesus name" means to pray according to what Jesus desires not what we selfishly crave. Plus other texts reveal that answered prayer is based on praying according to God's will (1 John 5:14-15); praying with an obedient heart (1 John 3:22) and praying with right reasons and not selfish motives (James 4:1-3).

   2. <u>Ex. The homosexual movement error</u> "The gay community's prooftexting their sinful (not   alternative) life-style from the Bible marks another major error. They misinterpret selected   texts to make their point [i.e. David and Jonathan's friendship in 1 Samuel 19:1; 20:41].   Then they ignore clear Scriptures that unquestionably prohibit homosexuality, such as   Leviticus 20:13; Romans 1:24-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; and 1 Timothy 1:9-10"
    (Mayhue, p. 78).

D. *Do not isolate texts from their context (isolationism)* "Closely associated with prooftexting, yet somewhat different, is *isolationism*. This occurs when we fail to interpret a single Scripture text in light of its context. We isolate the Scripture from its immediate literary surroundings." (Mayhue, p.80) When this happens we can make almost any part of the Bible say what we want it to say.

1. Ex. Matt. 18:19-20   "How many times have you heard someone claim an answer to prayer by quoting Matthew 18:19-20? 'Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three are have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst.' If you look carefully at the verses, you will note that they are inseparably linked to Matthew 18:15-18. *The two or three gathered have not assembled to pray but rather to enact church discipline*" (Mayhue, p. 80) (emphasis mine).

2. Ex. James 1:5 and Divine Revelation   Mormonism's roots reach back to 1820 when Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, supposedly received direct revelation after reading James 1:5, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." Smith allegedly was visited by God and told not to join any existing church "for they were all wrong" (*Pearl of Great Price*, Joseph Smith, 2:15-19). From Joseph Smith and the church he founded would come such beliefs as a denial of the Trinity, God having a human body, Jesus being the spirit brother of Satan, salvation by works and other heretical doctrines. James 1:5, though, does not validate receiving subjective experiences and revelations that contradict other portions of the Bible. James 1:5 is about asking God to help us live godly while facing trials.

3. Ex. Does 2 Cor. 3:6 condemn literal interpretation?   "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."   Does this verse warn against taking the Bible too literally or seriously? No. Paul is not even addressing the issue of literal versus spiritual interpretation. Context reveals that the "letter" is the Old Covenant—the Mosaic Law (i.e. "letters engraved on stones" (v.7)). Thus the contrast is between the Old Covenant, which reveals man's sin and thus kills, and the New Covenant which gives life.

4. Ex. 2 Peter 2:20 and losing salvation   Some people use this verse to teach that a believer can lose their salvation: "For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become for them than the first." The "they" in this passage, though, is referring to false prophets as mentioned in 2:1. This passage is referring to false prophets and not true believers.

E. *Do not apply specific promises made to Israel to other nations (Nationalizing)*   "This type of misinterpretation happens when we see our own country as the recipient of national promises made by God in the Bible to Israel." (Mayhue, p. 90) In other words, avoid taking specific promises to Israel and applying them to other countries such as the United States.   Ex. 2 Chronicles 7:14 and the United States   Many Christians like to claim this passage for the United States: "and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." This verse though has nothing to do with the United States. As Mayhue says, "Don't miss this! God's promise to Solomon and Israel has nothing to do with America or any other country where Christians live today. No matter how spiritual or unspiritual America becomes, the outcome of our national history will not rest on the condition of 2 Chronicles 7:14 but rather on the sovereignty of God" (Mayhue, pp. 91-92).

F. *Do not replace Israel with the Church*   The Bible never confuses Israel with the Church. Though there are similarities between the nation Israel and the Church, unconditional, eternal promises to the nation Israel should not be spiritualized and transferred to the Church.

1. Ex. Genesis 13:14-17 ("for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever")   God promised a literal land (Canaan) to a literal people (Abraham's descendants—the Jews). The land cannot be spiritualized to mean salvation or heaven. Nor does the church inherit these promises at the expense of national Israel.

2. Ex. Romans 11:25-26 ("thus all Israel will be saved")   Many Amillennialists, including John Calvin have taken "Israel" in verse 26 to be a reference to the church composed of both Jews and Gentiles. The special context of Romans 9-11, though, shows that of the eleven times "Israel" is used in this section it always refers to biological Jews and never refers to Gentiles.

G. *Do not pour current thinking into the biblical text (embellishing)*   Embellishing occurs when we read current thinking into the Bible.

   1. Ex. Six-day Creation (Genesis 1-2)   A normal, literal interpretation of Genesis 1-2 shows that God created the world in six, twenty-four hour days. The Hebrew word for "day" (yom) when accompanied by a numerical adjective (i.e. fifth day), is never used figuratively. It is always understood normally. However, with the increasing belief in evolution and an old earth, some have tried to reinterpret the days of creation not as literal twenty-four hour days, but as long periods of time. Thus "six days" is just figurative for a long period of time, which can include millions of years.

   2. Ex. Do we need to love ourselves first to love others? (Matt. 22:39)   Many in Christian psychology have twisted this passage to mean that we must learn to love ourselves in order to love others. Yet in this passage, self love is not encouraged but assumed ("for no one ever hated his own flesh. . ." (Eph. 5:29)) The point is that we need to show the same concern for others that we naturally show ourselves.   As Mayhue says, "*In Matthew 22 Jesus speaks of two commands—loving God and loving our neighbor. There is no third command to love ourselves. As a matter of biblical record, there is no command in Scripture to love ourselves. At times, it appears that the basis for self love comes more from Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs than from the Bible*" (Richard Mayhue, *How to Interpret the Bible for Yourself*, pp. 100-01).

   3. Ex. Psychology and redefining of terms   Psychology's influence in the church has often led to a twisting of biblical terms and their meanings.

      a. **Sin**   For example, note Robert Schuller's redefining of what sin is: "Sin is any act or thought that robs myself or another human being of his or her self-esteem" (Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, p. 14).

      b. **Hell**   Also notice Schuller's redefining of hell: "And what is hell? It is the loss of pride that naturally follows separation from God— the ultimate and unfailing source of our soul's sense of self-respect. . . . A person is in hell when he has lost his self-esteem" (pp. 14-15).

      c. **Being born again**   What is being born again mean to Schuller? "To be born again means that we must be changed from a negative to a positive self-image—from inferiority to self-esteem, from fear to love, from doubt to trust"

H. *Avoid making all phenomena and experiences in the Bible normative for today (Generalizing)*   Not every experience that happened in the Bible is normative for today.

1. <u>Ex. Experiences of Moses, prophets and apostles and other biblical men</u>   Martyn Lloyd-Jones in his book, *Revival*, says that God's revealing of His glory to Moses in Exodus 33:18-23 is something all believers should seek:

"*Now Moses knew of the glory of God. He had not seen it, but he believed God. He had accepted the revelation and he had had odd manifestations here and there. And on the strength of this he said, 'Now let me see thy glory, let it be manifested.' And that should be our position. . . . We know that God is there in all his glory, and the necessity is that we should be moved, as Moses was, to desire the manifestation of this glory. It is almost inconceivable, is it not, that there should be any Christian who does not offer this prayer of Moses?*" (Lloyd-Jones, *Revival*, pp. 216-18).

Lloyd-Jones also gives other examples of experiences in the Bible that believers should be experiencing today: Isaiah's vision of the Lord sitting on His throne (Isa. 6:1-7); John's vision of Christ on Patmos (Rev. 1); Saul's encounter with Christ on the Damascus road (Acts 9); and the apostles' seeing Christ transformed before them on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17). Concerning experiences like these Lloyd-Jones says "we must never forget that all this is possible at any time to the individual."

Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King also make the point that Christians today should experience many of the miraculous acts that men in the Bible experienced: "If anything is clear from a reading of the Bible, this fact is clear: God speaks to His people. He spoke to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in Genesis. He spoke to Abraham and the other patriarchs. God spoke to the judges, kings, and prophets. God was in Christ Jesus speaking to the disciples. God spoke to the early church, and God spoke to John on the isle of Patmos in Revelation. God does speak to His people and you can anticipate that He will be speaking to you also" (Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God*, pp. 131-32).

HOWEVER men like Moses (see Deut. 34:10-12), Isaiah, and the apostles were unique men with unique ministries. The Bible does not suggest that their experiences are to be normative for today. Nor does the Bible tell us to seek the experiences of these unique men. Zuck is correct when he states, "We must see if the principle in the passage is taught elsewhere. If what happened to someone in Bible times is considered normative for all believers, it must be in harmony with what is taught elsewhere in Scripture" (Zuck, p. 285).

2. <u>Raising the dead</u> The fact that Elijah and Peter were able to raise people from the dead (1 Kings 17 and Acts 9:36-43) does not mean that God intends all believers to be raising people from the dead. The Bible never says this activity is normative for believers today.

3. Paul's trip to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:1-10)

4. Casting out demons   Casting out of demons was done by Christ and the Apostles to validate their proclamation of the nearness of the Kingdom (Matt. 10:5-8; 12:28). Nowhere in the instruction to the churches are believers told to be casting out demons.

5. Polygamy   "Abraham, Jacob, David, and others had more than one wife. Does this mean polygamy is acceptable, as some believe? No, this is not an acceptable practice. Even though God did not specifically condemn them individually for such a practice, as far as the scriptural record is concerned, we know polygamy is wrong because God gave Adam one wife and He said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh' (Gen. 2:24) and because numerous passages in the New Testament speak of marital fidelity to one's wife (e.g., Matt. 5:27, 31-32; 1 Cor. 7:2-3; Eph. 5:22-23; Col. 3:18-19; 1 Thes. 4:3-7)" (Zuck, p. 286).

I. *Do not dismiss a text as cultural simply because it does not seem to fit with the ideas of modern society (Culturizing).* Culturizing is limiting a text to a specific time in history when in reality that text carries application for all times.

1. Ex. Husband leadership in the home (Ephesians 5:22-33)   Modern society often rejects role distinctions between men and women. Thus, the idea of the husband being the leader and the woman being subject to her husband is often rejected as being cultural and limited to Paul's day. Yet there is nothing in the context to limit these commands to the time of Paul's day. In fact, the instruction to husbands is based on Christ's example of loving the church.

2. Ex. Male Elders (1 Timothy 2:11-15)   Scripture makes clear that women are not to hold authority positions over men in the church. Many Christian churches, though, allow women to be elders and pastors. Passages such as 1 Timothy 2:11-15, which explicitly prohibit leadership positions for women, are dismissed as the product of a male-dominated society. Nothing, however, in 1 Timothy 2:11-15 indicates that its commands were limited to that time and culture. In fact, male leadership is rooted in the creation order (2:13) and the fall (2:14).

J. *Do no overpersonalize the Bible*   In your Bible study, do not "suppose that any or all parts apply to you or your group in a way that they do not apply to everyone else. People tend to be self-centered, even when reading the Bible. When the big picture of God's redemptive history fails to satisfy, they may fall prey to the temptation to look for something that will satisfy their personal needs, cravings, or problems. They can forget that all parts of the Bible are intended for everyone, not just them" (Fee and Stuart, p. 92).

1. Ex. "The account of Balaam's talking donkey was meant to show that I talk too much."

2. Ex. In the book, *Experiencing God*, Henry Blackaby applies the account of Jesus' raising of Lazarus as proof that God would heal his daughter's sickness (p. 190).

Tools for Effective Bible Study

I. **Choosing the right Bible** The first step in understanding God's Word is finding the right Bible. The books of the Bible were originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Since most of us are not experts in these languages it is imperative that we seek a good English translation of the Bible.

    A. *New American Standard Bible (NASB)*   This is the version we recommend at IHCC. We use this version because 1) the NASB is based on the earliest and best manuscripts available; and 2) the NASB is a literal translation of the original languages.

    B. *Supplemental versions*   After purchasing the NASB these versions may also be of help to you:

        1. New International Version (NIV)   The NIV is purposely less literal in its translation in order to be a smoother reading translation. The advantage of this version is that it is easier to read than the more literal versions. The disadvantage is that it is not always as accurate in its translations as the literal versions.

        2. King James Version (KJV)   The KJV is a literal translation written in 17th century English. Many enjoy this version because of it literary quality. Some of the language, though, has become outdated and potentially confusing. The manuscripts used by the KJV translators are of slightly less quality than those used by the NASB and the NIV.

        3. New King James (NKJV)   The New King James is based on the same manuscripts used by the KJV translators. The New King James differs from the KJV in that much of the language has been updated, making for easier reading.

        4. What about paraphrases? Paraphrases (i.e. *The Living Bible*) are more of a commentary than a translation. Though paraphrases may have some value after Bible study has been done, the Bible student should stick with a more literal translation of the Bible.

    C. *Choosing a study Bible*   Acquiring a study Bible can help you in your studies. Helpful footnotes can give you instant access to valuable information

        1. Ryrie Study Bible   Helpful, readable notes.

        2. The New Scofield Study Bible

        3. The MacArthur Study Bible (New King James only) Helpful, detailed notes compiled by John MacArthur and the Masters Seminary faculty.

II. **Choosing Bible study aids** (For a more detailed list see *Bible Study Tools For The Layman* by the Indian Hills Community Church Pastoral Staff)

   A. *Bible Dictionary*   A Bible dictionary serves as a quick source of a wide variety of information presented in comprehensive style.

   B. *Bible Encyclopedia*   Helps understand the people, places and customs of the Bible.

   C. *English Concordance*   "A concordance lists each English word used in a particular translation. It is invaluable for quickly tracing what the Bible says about a person, a place, a word, or a theme. Also when you are frustrated because you can remember a verse but not its location, the concordance will help you locate this verse" (Mayhue, p. 37).

   D. *Bible Atlas* "You will find a Bible atlas invaluable when studying the Old Testament historical books, the gospels, and Acts. These books will come alive when you can reconstruct the route of Paul's missionary journeys, trace the path of the Exodus, or follow the flow of Christ's life" (Mayhue, p. 36).

   E. *Bible Commentary* Commentaries give interpretations of the Bible book being examined. Commentaries are good to use when you are having trouble determining the meaning of a passage.

   F. *Systematic Theology* "All that the Bible says about a subject or doctrine is usually not confined to just one passage. A theology volume will provide thorough biblical background for the subject you are dealing with. . . . A theology volume allows you to see the facet you are studying in light of all the rest that the Bible teaches on the subject" (Mayhue, p. 38).

   G. *Hermeneutics*   Looks at the basic rules and principles for Bible interpretation.

   H. *Word studies*   Since the Bible is made up of words, it is necessary to check the meaning of key terms. A good word study will allow you understand the key terms of Scripture so that you will have a greater understanding of the text. Basic definitions of Greek and Hebrew terms are given.

   I. *Bible Survey*   Basic, introductory material concerning the authors, dates, purposes, themes and outlines of the Bible.

Determining Context

I. **Introductory matters concerning context**

A. *A definition*   "The word *context* is composed of two Latin elements, *con* ("together") and *textus* ("woven"). Hence when we speak of the context, we are talking about the connection of thought that runs through a passage, those links that weave it into one piece." (Walter Kaiser, p. 71) "Context refers to that which goes before and that which follows after" (Howard Hendricks, *Living By The Book*, p. 225).

B. *Importance of context*   "Neglect of context is a common cause of erroneous interpretation and irrelevant application" (A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, p. 99). People often want to take a verse or passage of Scripture and make it mean what they want it to mean. But disregarding context is one of the greatest problems in Bible interpretation. By taking a verse or passage out of its context we may completely misunderstand its true meaning. Always remember "context determines meaning!"

C. *Reasons for studying context*   Studying context is important for three reasons.

   1. Multiple meanings   Words, phrases and clauses may have multiple meanings. Examining how they are used in a given context can help determine which of several meanings is more likely. For example, the term "board" can refer to a piece of timber, a table on which food is served, food itself (i.e. room and board), a board of directors or the deck of a boat (Zuck, pp. 104, 106).

   2. Thoughts expressed in association   Thoughts are usually expressed by a series of words or sentences that are in association with each other— not in isolation from each other. Thus the meaning of a verse or passage is almost always controlled by what precedes and what follows.

   3. Avoid false interpretations   False interpretations often arise from ignoring the context. "In fact, every major cult is built on a violation of the principle of context" (Hendricks, p. 226).

      a. **Ex. Psalm 2:8**   "Psalm 2:8, 'Ask of Me, and I will make the nations Your inheritance, the ends of the earth Your possession,' is sometimes used by missionaries to speak of anticipated conversions on their mission fields. The preceding verse, however, makes it clear that these words are spoken by God the Father to God the Son" (Zuck, p. 106).

b. **Ex. Ezekiel 37:16-17** Mormonism holds that the joining of the two sticks in this passage refer to the joining of the Bible with the Book of Mormon. But the context clearly indicates that what will be joined together is the divided kingdoms of Judah and Israel— "And I will make them one nation in the land" (v.22) The real meaning of this text is that Judah and Israel will once again be reunited into one nation when God brings His people back into the land (Ralph H. Alexander, "Ezekiel," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, v. 6, p. 927).

II. **Principles for determining context**

A. *Determining the context of a book* "Good exegetical procedure dictates that the details be viewed in light of the total context. Unless the exegete knows where the thought of the text begins and how that pattern develops, all the intricate details may be of little or no worth. This ability—the ability to state what each section of a book is about and how the paragraphs in each section contribute to that argument—is one of the most critical steps. If the exegete falters here, much of what follows will be wasted time and effort" (Kaiser, p. 69).

1. <u>Read the book you are studying multiple times</u> "Context is the most important hermeneutical principle. By reading and familiarizing ourselves with the entire book, the expositor can relate each passage to the overall context of the book" (John MacArthur, "A Study Method for Expository Preaching," in *Rediscovering Expository Preaching*, p. 219).

2. <u>Find out the historical situation facing the author and his readers</u> By looking at the internal information of the book or by using a good Bible introduction, survey book or commentary you can help answer the following questions: Who was the writer? To whom was he writing (e.g. believers, unbelievers, Jews, Gentiles, apostates or those in danger of apostatizing)? What was the historical situation facing the author and readers? "Unless we have a knowledge of the writer's background, supplied through historical-cultural and contextual analysis, our tendency is to interpret his writings by asking, 'What does this mean to me?' rather than 'What did this mean to the original author'" (Virkler, p. 78).

   a. **Ex. 2 Thess.** Paul wrote this book because his readers thought they were already in the Day of the Lord (2:2).

   b. **Ex. Lamentations** Reading Lamentations will make little sense unless one realizes that Jeremiah was writing a funeral dirge bemoaning the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

   c. **Ex. Colossians** Paul wrote Colossians partly to combat early Gnosticism and the dangers of legalism, asceticism, and the denial of Christ's deity.

3. <u>Look for the author's purpose in writing the book</u> "Note if the author has explicitly stated in his preface, conclusion, and/or constant refrains throughout the book what his intention is. The rest of his work can then be systematically skimmed to note how this explicitly stated purpose and plan have been worked out" (Kaiser, p. 71).

    a. **Ex. John 20:31** "these things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."

    b. **Ex. Ecclesiastes 12:13** "The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person."

    c. **Ex. 1 John 1:4; 2:1; 2:26; 5:13** Four times John uses the formula "these things" to state his purposes in writing 1 John. He wrote 1 John so his readers may have joy (1:4), may not sin (2:1), may not be deceived (2:26) and may know they have eternal life (5:13).

    d. **Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1** Luke's purpose in writing was to present an orderly account of the life of Jesus and the beginning of the Christian era.

B. *Determining the context of a word* or phrase "The first responsibility of every interpreter is to note carefully what precedes and what follows any verse or passage which he is interpreting" (Mickelsen, p. 102).

1. <u>Check the immediate context</u> The sentence in which a word is used clarifies the meaning.

    a. **Ex. World** What does the term "world" (*kosmos*) mean? It depends on the immediate context. World can mean: 1)The world of people (John 3:16); 2) The organized system of evil in rebellion against God (1 John 2:15-16) or 3) This physical planet (John 17:5).

    b. **Ex. Saved or Salvation** These terms do not always mean deliverance from sin. They can mean: 1) Israel's deliverance from her enemies (Luke 1:71); 2) deliverance from physical danger (Acts 27:20; Matt. 24:13); 3) deliverance from physical sickness (James 5:15) and 4) deliverance from sin (John 3:17).

    c. **Ex. Spirit** The word "spirit" (*pneuma*) is used a variety of ways in the New Testament. It is used of the wind (John 3:8), the life breath (Rev. 11:11), the temper of the mind (Luke 9:55), the life principle or immortal nature of man (John 6:63), the perfected spirit of a saint in the heavenly life (Heb. 12:23), demons (Matt. 10:1; Luke 4:36) and the Holy Spirit of God (John 4:24; Matt. 28:19). John 3:8 is an example where *pneuma* (spirit or wind) is used twice in the same context. It is used of the natural wind and the Holy Spirit (Milton S. Terry, "The Use of Words in Various Contexts," *Rightly Divided*, ed. Roy B. Zuck, p. 134).

2. <u>Check the paragraph or chapter context</u>   "The context of the paragraph or chapter is sometimes helpful in clarifying a word, phrase, or sentence that is not made clear in the sentence in which it is used." (Zuck, p. 109)

   a. **Ex. Temple**   Jesus, in John 2:19, spoke of destroying "this temple." What is the temple Jesus was speaking of? Verse 21 explains that the temple of which Jesus spoke was His own body.

   b. **Ex. Fire**   Does "fire" in Matthew 3:11 ("He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire") refer to a literal fire of hell or does "fire" refer to the spiritual fervor Christ will give? The fact that "fire" in verses 10 and 12 refer to a fire of judgment indicates that the fire in 3:11 also refers to judgment. The fire, then, refers to eternal torment.

   c. **Ex. Seeing the Kingdom**   What did Jesus mean when He said to His disciples, "There are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom (Matthew 16:28)"? The fulfillment of this promise came in the following chapter with the Transfiguration (ch. 17). Jesus gave Peter, James and John a preview of the kingdom that would be established at Christ's second coming.

3. <u>Check the book context</u>

   a. **Ex. Sin**. 1 John 3:6-10 cannot mean that a Christian never sins, in view of what John wrote in that same epistle in 1:8, 10 and 2:1 (Zuck, p. 109).

   b. **Ex. Prophets**.   "In Ephesians 2:20 does the word *prophets* refer to Old Testament prophets or New Testament prophets? As one examines the other ways Paul used *prophets* in Ephesians— in 3:5 and 4:11—it becomes clear that in those verses he was referring to New Testament prophets. Therefore it is likely that he means the same thing in 2:20" (Zuck, p. 104).

   c. **Ex. Divorce**   "The brief statement of Jesus on divorce in Matthew 5:31-32 has a parallel in Matthew 19:3-12 where the interpreter has more context" (Mickelsen, p. 106).

4. <u>Check parallel passages</u>   "Parallel passages also serve as helpful contexts for ascertaining the meaning of certain words or sentences. Parallel passages may be verbal parallels, in which the same or similar words, phrases, or sentences occur, or idea parallels, in which the same or similar ideas are expressed but in different words" (Zuck, p. 110).

   a. Ex. Matthew—Mark—Luke

   b. Ex. 1 and 2 Kings—1 and 2 Chronicles

   c. Ex. Romans—Galatians

   d. Ex. Ephesians—Colossians

   e. Daniel—Revelation

   f. 2 Peter—Jude

5. <u>Check the entire Bible context</u>

   a. **Ex. The dead**   "Does Ecclesiastes 9:5, 'The dead know nothing,' teach soul sleep, the view that the dead have no consciousness till they are resurrected? No, because that view would contradict other verses in the Bible that teach that the dead are conscious (Luke 16:23-24; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23). Interpreted in the light of all Scripture, the verse in Ecclesiastes does not mean unconscious existence. How then is it to be understood? The context of the paragraph suggests that the dead will no longer have personal knowledge or firsthand experience of the things they experienced in this life, including the emotions of love, hatred, and jealousy and the happenings of daily life (Ecc. 9:6), and rewards for accomplishments (v. 5)" (Zuck, pp. 110-11).

   b. **Ex. Security of salvation**   Does Hebrews 6:4-6 and its mention of falling away from the truth teach that a true believer can lose his salvation? It cannot for other passages clearly teach that a believers salvation is eternally secure (Rom. 8:31-39; Rom. 5:9-10; John 10:28-29; Philippians 1:6; Hebrews 7:25). When interpreted correctly, Hebrews 6:4-6 is speaking of unbelievers who know the truth but stop short of committing to it and being saved.

   c. **Ex. The Kingdom "at hand"**   Many have taken Jesus' statement that the "kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17) to mean that the Kingdom began with Christ's earthly ministry. But other passages clearly show that Jesus did not see the Kingdom as having begun during His earthly ministry (see Acts 1:6-7; Luke 21:20; 22:16). When Jesus declared the Kingdom as "at hand," He meant that it was "near" not that it had arrived. It was near while the King was present and in the offer of the Kingdom to Israel (Matt. 10:5-7). After the clear rejection of the Messiah by the leaders of Israel (Matt. 12), the Kingdom was no longer presented as "at hand" but as something that would take place in the future (Luke 21:20).

Cultural Context

I. Introductory matters concerning culture

A. *Definition of culture* "Webster defines 'culture' as the total pattern of human behavior [that includes] thought, speech, action, and artifacts, and as the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits. . . of a racial, religious, or social group.' Thus culture includes what people *think* and believe, *say*, *do*, and *make*. This includes their beliefs, forms of communication, customs and practices and material objects such as tools, dwellings, weapons, and so forth. An individual's culture includes several spheres of relationships and influences—his interpersonal relations with other individuals and groups, his role in his family, his social class, and the nation or government of which he is a part. Religion, politics, warfare, law, agriculture, architecture, business, economics, and the geography of where one lives and travels, what he and others have written and read, what he wears and the language(s) he speaks—all these leave their mark on how he lives, and if he is an author of a Bible book, on what he wrote" (Zuck, p. 79).

B. *Importance of cultural studies* "Cultural matters are not niceties we may search out if we have the time but which we may ignore under the pressure of time and circumstances. They are indispensable for the accurate understanding of Holy Scripture" (Zuck).

C. *Scriptures—a foreign land* "When we go to the Scriptures, it is as if we are entering a foreign land. Just as we may be puzzled by the way people do things in other countries, so we may be puzzled by what we read in the Bible. Therefore, it is important to know what the people in the Bible thought, believed, said, did, and made. To the extent we do this we are then able to comprehend it better and communicate it more accurately. If we fail to give attention to these matters of culture, then we may be guilty of eisegesis, reading into the Bible our Western 20th-century ideas" (Zuck, p. 79).

D. *Transporting ourselves to Biblical times* "'Understanding the Bible properly requires that we clear our minds of all ideas, opinions, and systems of our own day and attempt to put ourselves into the times and surroundings of the Understanding the Bible properly requires that we clear our minds of all ideas, opinions, and systems of our own day and attempt to put ourselves into the times and surroundings of the Apostles and Prophets who wrote.

E. Apostles and Prophets who wrote.' To the extent that we seek to transport ourselves into the historical situation of the Bible writers and disengage ourselves from our own cultures, to that extent the likelihood of our being more accurate in interpreting the Bible increases"(Zuck, p. 77).

II. **Examples where knowledge of culture contributes to proper interpretation**

    A. *Political* (national, international and civil matters)

    1. <u>Ex. Jonah's reluctance to go to Ninevah</u>   "The Ninevites were atrocious in the way they treated their enemies. . . . No wonder Jonah did not want to preach a message of repentance to the Ninevites! He felt they deserved judgment for their atrocities" (Zuck, p. 81).

    2. <u>Ex. Instruction for slaves and masters (1 Peter 2:18; Eph. 6:5)</u>   "In order to better appreciate the writings of men such as Paul, we need to understand how greatly slavery permeated his society. Our concept of the word "servant," which usually refers to a slave, is inadequate to convey the emotional and social impact. Too often we think of a household servant, and office worker or a member of a construction crew. When Paul used the word "servant," he often meant "slave" (The primary meaning of *doulos* is slave, with an emphasis on bondage) (William L. Coleman, *Today's Handbook of Bible Times and Customs*, p. 134).

    3. <u>Ex. Third position in Babylon (Daniel 5:7, 16)</u>   Why did King Belshazzar offer Daniel the third position in his kingdom and not the second? The reason is that Belshazzar was only second in command himself. His father, Nabonidus, was actually first in command though he was temporarily out of the country.

    4. <u>Ex. The Samaritans</u> Understanding who the Samaritans were will help one's understanding of the gospels. The Samaritans were descendants of the Jews who remained in Palestine after the Assyrians defeated Israel. They came from mixed marriages between Jews and Assyrian settlers who entered the Promised Land. They also set up their own worship system where they built their own temple and sacrificed animals. Because of their mixed heritage and worship system, they were despised by the Jews. Understanding Jewish hatred for Samaritans helps us understand the significance of Jesus' willingness to speak to a Samaritan woman (John 4), the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and the account of the Samaritan leper who returned to give Jesus thanks (Luke 17:11-19) (J. I. Packer, Merrill Tenney and William White, *The Bible Almanac*, pp. 509-10).

    B. *Religious*

        1. <u>Corban in Mark 7</u>   "In Mark 7. . . Jesus upbraids the Pharisees soundly for their concept of corban. In the practice of corban a man could declare that all his money would go to the temple treasury when he died, and that, since his money belonged to God, he was therefore no longer responsible for maintaining his aging parents. Jesus argues that men were using the Pharisaic tradition to render God's command (the fifth commandment) of no account. Without a knowledge of the cultural practice of corban, we would be unable to understand this passage" (Virkler, p. 79).

        2. <u>Meat sacrificed to idols in 1 Cor. 8</u>   "What was the point of meat being sacrificed to idols which Paul discussed in 1 Corinthians 8? No one today sits down to a meal in the home of a guest and asks if the meat had been sacrificed to idols. Obviously this custom pertained to a cultural setting different from today. The point is that people in Corinth would buy meat in the marketplace, offer some of it to pagan idols in one of several temples, and then take the rest of it home for dinner. Therefore some Christians felt that eating such meat involved them in idol worship" (Zuck, p. 84).

3. <u>Elijah, Baal and Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18)</u> Why did Elijah choose Mount Carmel as the place for his showdown with the 450 prophets of Baal? The followers of Baal believed that Mount Carmel was the home of Baal. Showing the supremacy of Yahweh on Baal's home turf would be devastating to the followers of Baal.

C. *Economic*

1. <u>Ex. Giving of sandal</u> "Why did Elimelech's closest relative give his sandal to Boaz? (Ruth 4:8, 17) According to the Nuzi tablets, discovered in present-day Iraq, in excavations from 1925-1931, such an action symbolized releasing one's right to land he walked on. This was done when a sale of land was completed" (Zuck, p. 84).

2. <u>Ex. How much is a "denarius"? (Rev. 6:6)</u> A denarius is one day's wage. In Revelation 6:6 famine conditions will be so bad that a full day of work will barely be enough for a man to feed his family.

D. *Legal*

1. <u>Ex. The Stolen Blessing</u> In Genesis 27, Jacob deceives his father, Isaac, and receives the blessing that was supposed to be for Esau. When the plot was discovered, Isaac could not change the result. Why? It might seem strange to members of Western society that such importance was placed on an oral blessing or testament. However, recent discoveries have verified that an oral benediction (in those days) was legally as valid as a written last will and testament.

2. <u>Ex. Daniel, Darius and the lion's den (Daniel 6)</u> When King Darius of Medo-Persia was tricked into making a decree that would send Daniel to the lion's den, why didn't he simply revoke his former decree since he wanted Daniel to live (Dan. 6:14)? Once a decree was made in this empire, no one, not even the king, could revoke it (see Esther 8:8).

E. *Agricultural*   "The Jewish involvement with the land was reflected in the teachings of Jesus Christ. His imagery and illustrations gave His listeners vivid pictures, such as a sower, pouch at his side, flinging seed across a newly plowed field. He frequently used metaphors about rich ripe grapes and fruitful vines" (Coleman, p. 145).

1. <u>The Fig tree (Mark 11:12-14)</u> "Why did Jesus denounce a fig tree for having no fruit when it was not even the season for figs? In March fig trees in Israel normally produce small buds followed by large green leaves in April. The small buds were edible 'fruit.' The time when Jesus 'cursed' the fig tree was the Passover, that is, April. Since the tree had no buds it would bear no fruit that year. But 'the season for figs' was late May and June, when the normal crops of figs ripened. Jesus' denouncing of the tree symbolized Israel's absence of spiritual vitality (like the absence of the buds) in spite of her outward religiosity (like green leaves) (Zuck, p. 86).

2. <u>Vines and the Vineyard</u>   "The vine was of great importance in the religion of Israel. It was used as a symbol of the religious life of Israel itself, and a carving of a bunch of grapes often adorned the front exterior of the synagogue. The symbolism was based upon passages such as Psalm 80 and Isaiah 5:1-5 where Israel is God's vine. The importance of the vine is why the Pharisees took the point so angrily when Jesus told the story of the wicked tenants in the vineyard (Matthew 21:33-41, 45-46)" (Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, p. 111)

F. *Architectural*   <u>Roof</u>   "How could four men let a paralytic man down through a roof? (Mark 2:1-12) Most houses in the Western world are built with slanted roofs, but in Bible times roofs were flat and often were made of tiles. Therefore it would be no problem for these men to stand on the roof, remove some of the tiles, and let the man down" (Zuck, p. 86).

G. *Clothing*   <u>Girding loins</u>   "What is meant by the command 'Gird up your loins' in Job 38:3; 40:7; and 1 Peter 1:13? When a man ran, worked, or was in battle, he would tuck his robe under a wide sash at his waist so that he could move about more easily. The command thus means to be alert and capable of responding quickly" (Zuck, p. 87).

H. *Domestic*

1. <u>Burying the Father</u>   In Luke 9:59 a man who wanted to be Jesus' disciple wanted to first bury his father. Was Jesus' denial of this request insensitive? Actually to bury one's father meant to wait until one's father died (which could take years) so one could receive their inheritance. Thus Jesus' denial stressed the urgency of following Him immediately.

2. <u>John's leaning on Jesus at the Last Supper (John 13:23)</u> Back then people did not sit in chairs at meals as we do today. They were either on the floor or on couches. To lean on someone, then, was not considered rude.

I. *Geographical*

1. <u>Passing through Samaria</u>   What was significant about Jesus passing through Samaria (John 4)? The Jews would not defile themselves by walking through the land of the Samaritans, who the Jews considered half-breeds. Jesus would not partake in this prejudice.

2. <u>Lukewarm water</u> In Revelation 3:16 the church at Laodicea was referred to as "lukewarm." This undoubtedly is a play on the lukewarm water the people had in that city. The water in Laodicea was channeled six miles from Hieropolis. When the water left Hieropolis, it was hot, but by the time it reached Laodicea, it was lukewarm.

3. <u>Going down from Jerusalem</u>   "Why did Jesus speak of a man going 'down' from Jerusalem to Jericho when Jericho is located northeast of Jerusalem? (Luke 10:30) The elevation drop in the 14 miles from Jerusalem to Jericho is more than 2,000 feet. Obviously going from Jerusalem to Jericho then was to go down in elevation" (Zuck, p. 88).

J. *Social*

    1. <u>Mourners</u> Why when Jesus went to the house where a little girl had died, were there flute-players and a noisy crowd (Matt. 9:23)? It was the custom then that when a person died, the family would hire professional mourners to show how much they cared for their lost loved one.

    2. <u>Sackcloth and ashes</u>   "The Israelites used sackcloth as a ritual sign of repentance or a token of mourning. . . .The New Testament also associated sackcloth with repentance (see Matt. 11:21). The sorrowful Israelite would clothe himself in sackcloth, place ashes upon his head, and then sit in the ashes. Our modern Western custom of wearing dark colors to funerals corresponds to the Israelites' gesture of wearing sackcloth" (Packer, *The Bible Almanac*, p. 477).

III. **Cultural relevance and present day application**

A. *The issue of culture*   "One of the most important issues Bible interpreters face is the question of culturally conditioned Bible passages. That is, are some passages of the Bible limited to that day by the culture setting and therefore not transferable to our culture, or is everything we read in the Scriptures normative for today. . . . If some passages are limited. . . then how do we determine which ones are transferable to our culture and which ones are not?" (Zuck, p. 90).

B. *The options*   There are three ways to approach this issue of culture and present day application:

1. Modify the scriptural principle and the behavioral command which expresses that principle in light of historical changes. For example, according to this view, the commands that women should not teach or exercise authority over men (1 Timothy 2:12) or that women should be subject to their husbands (Ephesians 5:2) should be rejected because we now live in an egalitarian society which does not recognize the role distinctions between men and women. Thus, the principle and the working out of the principle must both be rejected. HOWEVER, if one accepts the Bible as the unchanging Word of God, this approach is unacceptable.

2. Observe the scriptural principle and always abide by the accompanying behavioral commands. Thus, the command to "greet one another with a holy kiss" mentioned five times in the New Testament should be observed in principle and in practice. HOWEVER, the behavioral commands of biblical times do not always carry the same meaning in other cultures in other eras.

3. Observe the scriptural principle and either 1) keep the biblical expression described or 2) if the biblical expression does not carry the same meaning today, look for a way that principle can properly be expressed in one's own culture. Using our previous example of greeting one another with a holy kiss, the following may be drawn. The principle is to greet one another. However, in our day a proper greeting is usually done by a handshake or a hug. Thus, a handshake or hug properly expresses the biblical principle. As Henry Virkler says, "since a behavior in one culture may have a different meaning in another culture, it may be necessary to change the behavioral expression of a scriptural command in order to translate the principle behind that command from one culture and time to another" (Henry A. Virkler, "A Proposal for the Transcultural Problem," in *Rightly Divided*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck, p. 240). *This principle seems best and has the least problems*. (For more on this issue see C. 4 on page 46.)

C. *Principles to determine relevance for today* The following principles may be useful in determining which cultural practices, commands and precepts in the Bible are transferable to our culture and which ones are nontransferable.

1. <u>If a command or principle that pertains to a theological or moral subject is not revoked, it is permanent and transferrable to us.</u> "When the Bible clearly gives a command and nowhere else nullifies that command, it must be accepted as the revealed will of God" (Zuck, p. 93). "All Scripture should be received as normative for every person in all societies of all time unless the Bible itself limits the audience" (J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, p. 245).

   a. **Not Revoked***:*

      (1) *Capital punishment* (Gen. 9:6) Capital punishment is considered a permanent command because, after being given in Genesis 9:6, it is nowhere revoked. Plus this command is rooted in a universal principle that man is made in the image of God.

      (2) *Being baptized* (Acts 2:38)

      (3) *Observing Lord's Supper* (1 Cor. 11:24)

      (4) *Loving God and neighbor* (Matt. 22:37-39)

   b. **Revoked***:*

      (1) *The Mosaic Law*   The Law was the rule of life for Israel in the Old Testament, but the New Testament is clear that with the death of Christ the Law has been revoked (Rom. 6:14-15; Gal. 5:18; Heb. 7:12; 10:1). Therefore, the commands for sacrifices, stoning of rebellious children and making blasphemy a capital offense are not operative today. For example, in the OT, incest was a capital offense, but in 1 Cor. 5, Paul's instruction for dealing with incest was deliverance to Satan and expulsion from the church.

      (2) *Long hair for men*   Under the Nazirite vow men were allowed to grow long hair as a sign of dedication to the Lord (Judges 13:5; 1 Sam. 1:11). Yet 1 Cor. 11:14 states that "if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him."

      (3) *Unclean food* The dietary restrictions of Leviticus 11 have been revoked by the   clear testimony of Mark 7:19 ("He declared all foods clean") and Acts 10:9-16.

2. If a situation, principle or command is given to an individual in a nonmoral or nontheological setting, it is not transferrable to today.

    a. **Cloak and scrolls**   Paul's instructions to Timothy to bring his cloak and scrolls (2 Tim. 4:11-13)

    b. **Wine**   Paul telling Timothy to take some wine for his stomach (1 Tim 5:23)

3. Some commands and experiences were applicable to certain people at a unique period of time and are not applicable to today.

    a. **Offer of the Kingdom to Israel (Matt. 10:5-15)**   The twelve apostles were told to preach the nearness of the kingdom. But they were to avoid the paths of the Gentiles and Samaritans and only preach to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Certain factors make this text only applicable to the disciples. First, this command came at a time when the kingdom was being offered to Israel, something that is not happening today. Second, the apostles were given unique delegated authority by the King (10:1). Part of this authority included the ability to perform miracles. Third, after Christ's resurrection, the command is given to go "make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19).

    b. **Paul's being caught up to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12)** Paul's experience is nowhere said to be normative for today.

    c. **God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22:1-19)**

4. "Some situations or commands pertain to cultural settings that are only partially similar to ours and in which only the principles are transferrable" (Zuck, p. 93). If the behavior prescribed in the Bible means something different in our culture, use the behavioral expression that best expresses that principle.

    a. **Showing partiality to the rich (James 2:1-9)**   This passage condemns showing partiality to the rich. In James' day that was expressed by giving the rich special seats while the poor often sat on the floor. Today partiality for the rich may be shown in other ways. Thus, the principle of not showing partiality to the rich may take different forms today than it did in James' day.

    b. **Abstaining from meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8; Acts 15:29)** "Though meat we purchase has not been sacrificed to idols, the principle of 1 Corinthians 8 holds true, namely, that we ought not be involved in any practice that would be a stumbling block to weak believers" (Zuck, p. 94).

    c. **Praying for kings (1 Timothy 2:1-2)** This passage tells us to pray for kings. But what about believers who do not live under a king? The principle is that we pray for our leaders. For us that would involve our president.

D. *Principles for determining whether Bible commands are culture-bound or transcultural* (Principles 1-5 taken from Virkler, *Rightly Divided*, pp. 242-43)

1. <u>Discern as accurately as possible the principle behind the given behavioral command.</u>

2. <u>Discern whether the principle is timeless or time-bound.</u> Since most biblical principles are rooted in God's unchanging nature, it seems to follow that a principle should be considered to be transcultural unless there is evidence to the contrary.

3. <u>If a principle is transcultural, study the nature of its behavioral application within our culture.</u> Will the behavioral application given be appropriate now, or will it be perceived as out-of-date or odd? However, remember that the criterion for whether a behavioral command should be applied in our culture is not whether it conforms to modern cultural practices but whether or not it adequately and accurately expresses the God-given principle that was intended.

4. <u>If the behavioral expression of a principle should be changed, suggest a cultural equivalent that would adequately express the God-given principle behind the original command.</u> For example, a handshake in place of a holy kiss.

5. <u>If after careful study the nature of the biblical principle and its attendant command remain in question, apply the biblical principle of humility.</u> There may be occasions when even after careful study of a given principle and its behavioral expression, we still may remain uncertain about whether it should be considered transcultural or culture-bound. If we must decide to treat the command one way or the other but have no conclusive means to make the decision, the biblical principle of humility can be helpful. After all, would it be better to treat a principle as transcultural and be guilty of being overscrupulous in our desire to obey God? Or would it be better to treat a transcultural principle as culture-bound and be guilty of breaking a transcendent requirement of God? The answer should be obvious (Vikler, *Rightly Divided*, p. 243).

IV. **Tools for Overcoming the Culture Gap**

A. *The New Manners and Customs of Bible* Times by Ralph Gower

B. *Today's Handbook of Bible Times and Customs* by William Coleman

C. *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Bible Facts* by J. I. Packer, Merrill Tenney and William White

D. *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* by Fred White

E. Commentaries

Grammatical Context

I. The Importance of Studying Grammar

A. *The Nature of Inspiration*   Since the Bible is the Word of God, every word of Scripture is inspired and thus important.

B. *The importance of studying grammar* Thoughts are expressed through words, and words are the building blocks of sentences. To determine God's thoughts, then, we need to study His words and how they are associated in sentences. If we neglect the meanings of words and how they are used, we have no way of knowing whose interpretations are correct.

C. *The Bible was written in a foreign language*   "We want to get as close to the original as possible in our understanding of the Scriptures. This means, therefore, that we should learn the original languages, or if that is not possible, then we need to rely on others who do know the languages. Bible students, commentators, teachers, and preachers who know Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek can be useful sources of information in helping us know the meaning of the Scriptures in their original languages. This is not to suggest that a person cannot know, appreciate, and teach the Bible without knowing those languages. Many capable Bible expositors who have not known Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek have been greatly used of God in preaching and teaching the Bible. . . . The point, however, is that greater precision is available as one learns the biblical languages" (Zuck, p. 100).

II. Lexical (word) Study

A. *Meaning of Words*   In order to understand the Bible we must know the meaning of the words it uses.

1. Etymology   "Etymology refers to the root derivation and development of words. In etymology the aims are (a) to get back to the root meaning of the word and (b) to see how the word developed (Ibid, p. 101).

   a. **Ex.**   "The Greek word *ekklesia*, usually translated "church," comes from *ek* ("out of") and *kalein* ("to call or summon"). Thus it came to refer in the New Testament to those who are called out from the unsaved to form a group of believers." (Ibid.)

   b. **WARNING**   Though studying the root meaning of words is essential, we must be careful. "The meanings of words often change radically with the passage of time, so that little or no apparent connection remains between the original meaning of the root word and its meaning a few hundred years later" (Virkler, p. 100).

(1) Ex. "The English word *enthusiasm* originally meant "possessed by a god" and was so used until the early 1800s" (Ibid.).

(2) Ex. "The English word *nice* from the Latin *nescius* originally meant "simple" or "ignorant," hardly related to is present-day meaning" (Zuck, p. 102).

B. *Helpful Tools to find word meanings*

1. Concordances "A concordance contains a listing of all the times a given word is used in Scripture" (Virkler, p. 101).

   a. James Strong *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*

   b. Robert Thomas *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*

2. Lexicons A lexicon is a dictionary of Hebrew or Greek words. Like an English dictionary, it lists the various denotations of each word found in it. Many lexicons survey the usage of words in both secular and biblical literature, giving specific examples. Words are often listed in Hebrew and Greek alphabetical order, so it is helpful to know the Hebrew and Greek alphabets in order to use these tools.

   a. Hebrew. Brown, Driver, and Briggs *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*

   b. Greek. George Abbot-Smith *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*

   c. Greek. Joseph Thayer *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

3. Dictionaries

   a. W. E. Vine. *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* The student can look up a word in English and find the various Hebrew and Greek words associated with the English term. It is easy to use with no knowledge of Greek necessary.

4. Theological Word Books "These books give more extensive definitions of words than are found in lexicons or books of synonyms" (Virkler, p. 103).

   a. Hebrew. Harris, Archer, Waltke. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (2 vol.)

   b. Greek. Colin Brown. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (4 vols.)

   c. Greek. Kittel. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.)

III. **Syntax Study (relationship of words)**

A. *What is syntax?* "The word 'syntax' comes from the Greek *syntassein* which means 'to place in order together.' According to Webster's Dictionary 'syntax' is 'the way in which words are put together to form phrases, clauses, or sentences.' It is a branch of grammar" (Zuck, p. 117). Syntax deals with the way thoughts are expressed through grammatical forms (Virkler, p. 109). "Single words by themselves seldom convey a complete thought. Like bricks in a building, words are single elements that together make sentences, the basic units of thought" (Zuck, p. 117).

    1. **Ex**. The man hit the ball hard.

    2. **Ex.** The ball hit the man hard.

    3. **Ex**. The hard ball hit the man.

B. *Why is syntax difficult?* "Each language has its own structure, and one of the problems that makes learning another language so difficult is that the learner must master not only the word definitions. . . but also new ways of arranging and showing the relationship of one word to another" (Virkler, pp. 109-110).

C. *Elements of syntax* (This is a very brief summary. Consult a good English grammar book for further study.)

    1. <u>Phrases</u> A phrase consists of a short grammatical group of words without a verb.

        a. **Prepositional phrase** "In Christ."

        b. **Participial phrase** "Speaking the truth in love."

    2. <u>Clauses</u> A clause is a grammatical unit of words comprised of a subject being discussed and a predicate (the verb indicating action, state or condition).

        a. **Independent clause** (a complete thought) "He chose us."

        b. **Dependent clause** (not a complete thought) "*For even though I am absent with you in body*, nevertheless I am with you in spirit."

    3. <u>Sentences</u> A sentence is a series of words arranged to express a single complete thought.

        a. **Simple sentence** (only one independent clause) "You set your mind on things above."

        b. **Compound sentence** (two independent clauses in same sentence) "Husbands love your wives and [you] do not be harsh to them."

        c. **Complex sentence** (at least one independent clause and one dependent clause) "We always thank God because we have heard."

D. *Helps for studying syntax*

  1. <u>Hebrew and Greek Grammars</u>   "Hebrew and Greek grammars explain the various forms that words can take in their respective languages, and the meaning of the words when they appear in one of these forms" (Virkler, p. 111).

     a. A.T. Robertson   *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (This work includes analysis of nearly every important word and phrase in the New Testament.).

     b. Marvin Vincent   *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* (This work also looks at key words and phrases in the NT).

     c. Dana and Mantey   A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament.

Literary Context

I. Literary Genre in the Bible

A. *What is Literary Genre?* "*Genre*, a French word from the Latin *genus*, means a literary type. "Literary genre" refers to the category or the kind of writing characterized by a particular form(s) and/or content" (Zuck, p. 126).

B. *Why is Genre important?* Distinguishing the various genres (kinds of literature) in Scripture helps us to interpret the Bible more accurately. "It helps give a sense of the overall thrust of the Bible book, so that verses and paragraphs can be seen in light of the whole. This helps prevent the problem of taking verses out of context" (Zuck, p. 126).

C. *Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics*: "We affirm that Scripture communicates God's truth to us verbally through a wide variety of literary forms" (Article X). "We affirm that awareness of literary categories, formal and stylistic, of the various parts of Scripture is essential for proper exegesis and hence we value genre criticism as one of the many disciplines of Biblical study" (Article XIII).

II. Biblical Genres

A. *Epistles (exposition)* The epistle is the dominant literary genre of the New Testament in terms of space. It is a mixed form that combines literary and expository features. The usual New Testament epistle consists of five main parts: 1) an opening or salutation; 2) thanksgiving (prayer for spiritual welfare and/or remembrance of recipients); 3) body of letter; 4) moral exhortations; and 5) closing with final greetings and benediction (Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, p. 155).

1. <u>Ex. Romans</u> "The book of Romans is a tightly reasoned explanation of the gospel. Paul argues like a lawyer presenting a case before a court" (Hendricks, *Living By the Book*, p. 210).

2. <u>Other examples</u> Paul's other letters— Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, the epistles of John, and Jude.

3. <u>Advantage of epistolary or expositional literature</u> "Their meaning lies close to the surface. . . . And their purposes are easy to grasp; they practically outline themselves. Yet they also make for exciting in-depth analysis because their truths are inexhaustible" (Hendricks, p. 210).

4. <u>Key to understanding</u> "The key to understanding a work of exposition is to pay attention to its structure and the terms it employs" (Hendricks, p. 211).

B. *Narrative*   "A narrative is of course a story, but a biblical narrative is a story told for the purpose of conveying a message through people and their problems and situations. Biblical narratives are selective and illustrative. The biblical narratives are not intended to be full biographies giving every detail of individuals' lives; the writers carefully selected the material they included (obviously doing so under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) to accomplish certain purposes" (Zuck, p. 128).

1. <u>Examples</u> Much of Genesis—Ezra, Acts

2. <u>Most predominant literary category</u>   "The Bible contains more of the type of literature called 'narrative' than it does of any other literary type. For example, over 40 percent of the Old Testament is narrative. Since the Old Testament itself   constitutes three-quarters of the bulk of the Bible, it is not surprising that the single most common type of literature in the entire Bible is narrative" (Gordon D. Fee and   Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 78).

3. <u>Purpose of narratives</u> The purpose of biblical narratives is to show God at work in His creation and among His people. Narratives help us understand and appreciate God for who He is and what He does. Narratives also reveal much about human beings in their relations to God.

4. <u>Keys to understanding narratives</u>

   a. **Find the plot and movement of the story**.   "This could be physical, as in the case of the Israelites moving across the Sinai peninsula in Exodus; it could be spiritual, as in the case of Samson in Judges. . . it could be relational, as in Ruth, or political, as in 1 and 2 Kings. The question is, what development is there in the story? What is different at the end of the book, and why?" (Hendricks, p. 211).

   b. **Study the characters**.   Who are the characters in the narrative? What roles do they play? How are they presented? How do the characters relate to each other? What progress or regress do they make? Do they fail or succeed? Why?

5. <u>Principles for interpreting narrative parts of the Bible</u> (adapted from Fee and Stuart, pp. 83-84).

   a. **Experiences found in narratives are not to be taken in a normative way unless other Scripture explicitly says so.**   "Our assumption, shared by many others, is that *unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative way—unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way*" (Fee and Stuart, p. 106).

   b. **Narratives usually do not directly teach doctrine.**

   c. **Narratives usually illustrate a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.**

   d. **Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time.** Not every narrative has an identifiable moral of the story.

e. **What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us**. The fact that God allowed polygamy in the cases of Abraham, David and Solomon does not mean that such action is acceptable before God. Godly men, at times, did wrong and sinful things.

f. **All narratives are selective and incomplete.** The only details that are recorded are those that the Spirit of God inspired the human author to write (cf. John 21:25).

g. **Narratives are not written to answer all of our theological questions.** They have particular, limited purposes, leaving other issues to be dealt with elsewhere.

h. **Narratives my teach either explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by clearly implying something without actually stating it).**

i. **God is the hero of all biblical narratives.**

C. *Gospels*   The gospels include a good deal of narrative material but it is a mistake to approach the gospels as simply biographical information about the life of Jesus Christ. As Zuck says, "The Gospels include a good bit of biographical material on Christ, but they are more than biographies. They are both doctrine and narrative, presented to set forth information on the person of Jesus Christ" (Zuck, p. 132). Special emphasis is placed the last few years of Jesus' life and His sacrificial death.

D. *Legal*   Legal literature involves material that is mostly made up of commandments. Legal literature in the Bible includes Exodus 20-40, the Book of Leviticus, portions of Numbers (chs. 5-6, 15, 18-19, 28-30, 34-35) and almost all of Deuteronomy.

E. *Parables*   "A parable is a brief tale that illustrates a moral principle" (Hendricks, p. 212). It presents scenes and activities common to everyday life.

1. Examples   Matt. 13, Mark 4, Luke 15-16

2. Keys to understanding parables (see section on "Interpreting parables")

F. *Poetry*   "The Books of Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are the five major poetical books of the Old Testament. . . . A distinct feature of the poetry of the Bible is that two (and sometimes three or four) lines are stated in parallel form" (Zuck, p. 130). The distinctive feature of poetry is its appeal to the emotions, as well as the imagination" (Hendricks, p. 212).

1. <u>Examples</u> Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.

2. <u>Keys to understanding poetry</u>

   a. **Sung not read** Realize that much of poetry, including most of the Psalms, were meant to be sung, not read.

   b. **Hyperbole** Recognize "hyperbole," extreme or exaggerated language. For example, "Every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears" (Ps. 6:6).

G. *Wisdom* "In this genre, the writer assumes the role of a wizened veteran of life prepared to share his insights with a younger, inexperienced, but teachable reader" (Hendricks, p. 214).

   1. <u>Examples</u> "The Wisdom books are Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes.   (Some also include the Song of Songs in this group.) All wisdom literature is poetry, but not all poetic material is Wisdom literature" (Zuck, p. 131).

   2. <u>Two kinds of wisdom literature</u>

      a. **Proverbial literature** Proverbial literature is best seen in the book of Proverbs. "The proverbs or maxims are general truths based on broad experience and observation. These are guidelines which are normally true in general. They are guidelines, not guarantees; precepts, not promises" (Zuck, p. 132).

         "Proverbs state a wise way to approach certain selected practical goals but do so in terms that cannot be treated like a divine warranty for success. The particular blessings, rewards, and opportunities mentioned in Proverbs are *likely* to follow if one will choose the wise courses of action outlined in the poetical, figurative language of the book. But nowhere does Proverbs teach automatic success" (Fee and Stuart, p. 220).

         (1)   Ex. "The Lord will not allow the righteous to hunger" (Prov. 10:3).

         (2)   Ex. "Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6).

      b. **Reflective literature** This type of literature involves a discussion of the mysteries of life as found in Job and Ecclesiastes.

H. *Prophetic and Apocalyptic* "Prophetic literature is material that includes predictions of the future at the time of the writing of the material with injunctions often included that those who hear the prophecy adjust their lives in light of the predictions. . . . A special form of prophetic literature is apocalyptic material, which focuses specifically on the end times, while presenting the material in symbolic form" (Zuck, pp. 134-35).

  1. <u>Examples</u> Much of Isaiah—Malach and Revelation

  2. <u>Keys to understanding prophetic and apocalyptic literature</u> (More on this in section called "Interpreting Prophecy")

  a. **Become familiar with the historical context the prophet was writing in.** Determine the identity of all people, places and events mentioned.

  b. **See if the prophecy has been fulfilled already in history or is waiting future fulfillment**.

  c. **Work at understanding the symbolic language.** Realize apocalyptic literature uses more symbols and analogous language. The Bible student, then, must work at understanding the meaning of the symbols and analogous language. Remember, though, the use of symbols does not mean one should jettison the literal approach to interpretation. Behind each symbol is a literal meaning.

  d. **Check parallel passages or other cycles within the same prophecy for further information.** (Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, p. 206) For example, when studying Revelation, check parallel passages in Daniel.

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