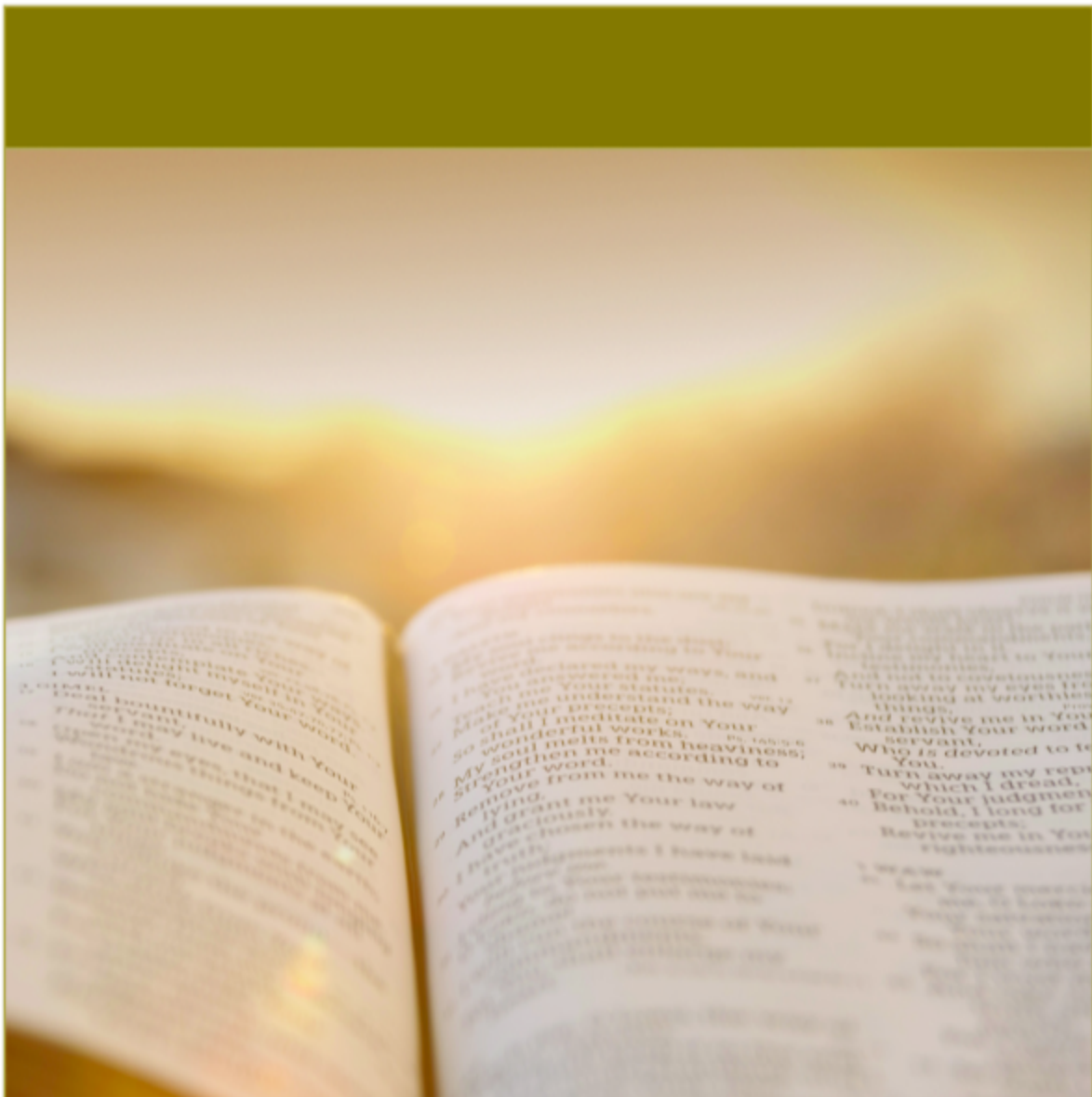




40 QUESTIONS ABOUT Interpreting the Bible

Second Edition

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QUESTION 4

Does the Bible Contain Error?

It is not uncommon to encounter people who assert that the Bible has errors in it. Such a view, however, does not square with the Bible's claims about itself or the historic view of the Christian church. What do we mean when we say the Bible is inerrant, and how can we support that assertion in light of alleged discrepancies in the Bible?

The Vocabulary of Inerrancy¹

Up until the mid-seventeenth century, essentially all persons who claimed the name of Christian accepted that the Bible was completely truthful in all matters that it asserted. With the elevation of human reason in the Enlightenment, however, some people began to have a more skeptical view of previously sacrosanct texts. People started to judge revelation (that is, the Bible) on the basis of their own human reason, rejecting and criticizing various portions, based on what seemed reasonable or probable to them. Many of these critics wanted to maintain some connection with the Christian church while at the same time making themselves the final arbiters of truth. Of course, the historic witness of the church to the complete truthfulness of Scripture has continued in spite of challenges, but the critics of it also have continued until this day.²

Within the last fifty years, due to increased Christian debates over the truthfulness of Scripture, a vocabulary has evolved to summarize various claims about the Bible's truthfulness. Below are some of the terms that are regularly used.

- *Inerrant/Inerrancy*. The doctrine of inerrancy, or the claim that the Scriptures are inerrant, means that the Bible is completely truthful in all things that the biblical authors assert—whether in geographic, chronological, or theological details. Advocates of inerrancy affirm a verbal plenary view of inspiration. That is, although the human authors of Scripture were thinking composers, God so superintended the writing process such that *every word* written was according to his will. The words were divinely guarded from all error. Wayne Grudem provides this helpful definition of inerrancy: “The inerrancy of Scripture means that Scripture in the original manuscripts does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.”³ Similarly, Kenneth Kantzer writes, “Put quite simply, ... inerrancy holds that the Bible tells us truth and never says what is not so.”⁴
- *Infallible/Infallibility*. *Infallible*, according to modern dictionaries, also means “incapable of error.”⁵ However, the word has taken on more narrow connotations in current debates over the Bible. To claim the Scriptures as infallible is to assert that they are error-free in matters of theology or faith. This view is sometimes also called limited inerrancy. Advocates of full inerrancy certainly would affirm that the Scriptures are infallible, but not all persons who affirm the Bible's infallibility also would affirm full inerrancy. The word *infallible* is weaker in connotation and does not include within it the claim that the Bible is free from *all* error (intentional or unintentional, theological or nontheological). Those less famil-

iar with the narrow connotations of the term *infallible* may unwittingly use it as a synonym for *inerrant*.

- *Inspired/Inspiration*. To claim the Bible as divinely inspired is to assert that God was somehow behind its writing. Without further clarification, this assertion is more ambiguous than the terms above. Some who claim the Bible as inspired also would maintain that nonbiblical documents also are inspired or that God continues to inspire people in the same way today. Advocates of inerrancy claim that the Bible is inspired in a unique, verbal plenary (“fully every word”) way. See [question 3 \(“Who wrote the Bible—humans or God?”\)](#) for a brief discussion of competing views of inspiration.
- *Neo-orthodox/Neo-orthodoxy*. *Neo-orthodoxy* literally means “new orthodoxy” and is a term used to describe a theological movement of the 1920s to the 1960s. Neo-orthodox scholars generally affirm that God revealed himself in history through mighty acts but that fallible human beings recorded these acts imperfectly. According to neo-orthodox theologians, these writings become the Word of God as they are newly proclaimed and people have an existential encounter with the living God. Though neo-orthodoxy is no longer a recognizable movement, the works of neo-orthodox theologians (e.g., Karl Barth, Emil Brunner) continue to exercise influence.
- *Trustworthy/True/Authoritative*. Sometimes critics charge that words like *inerrant* and *infallible* are not found in Scripture and wrongly focus on negation (that is, *no* error). Would it not be better, they ask, to use positive and historic terms such as *true*, *trustworthy*, or *authoritative*? While such positive affirmations admittedly are beneficial, modern debate over the Scripture has necessitated the precision of words such as *inerrant* (along with

further explanatory comments on what *inerrant* means and does not mean). A glance at the history of Christian theology shows that new summary terms and qualifications are often required to combat theological error.

Scripture's Claims about Itself

Within the Bible itself, we find numerous claims and assumptions that the Scriptures are completely truthful in all that they assert (intentional or unintentional claims, theological or nontheological information). Below is a brief sampling of such Scriptures with a few explanatory comments.

- *Numbers 23:19: "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?"* If God is completely truthful and the Bible is God's communication to humanity (Heb. 1:1–3), then it follows that the Bible, as God's Word, is completely truthful.
- *Psalms 12:6: "And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times."* Psalms and Proverbs are filled with repeated praises of the perfections of God's Word. See especially Psalm 119.
- *2 Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."* This verse asserts that while the Bible has human authors, the words they wrote must be attributed ultimately to the divine in-breathing (inspiration) of God.
- *2 Peter 1:21: "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."*

Again, this verse reminds us that each word written in the Bible is the exact word God intended to be written.

- *John 10:35: "The Scripture cannot be broken."* In his teachings and debates, Jesus repeatedly appealed to the Old Testament Scriptures, with the clear assumption that those texts were completely true in all they reported. Jesus referenced many persons and incidents of the Old Testament, assuming the factuality of all details. While Jesus frequently criticized distorted understandings of the Bible, he never questioned the veracity of the Scriptures themselves.⁶ Like Jesus (as recorded in the Gospels), all the New Testament authors are unified in their citation of the Old Testament as a historically accurate work.⁷
- *Hebrews 1:1–2: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe."* If the prior anticipatory revelation of God (the Old Testament) was completely truthful ("God spoke"), how much more then should the culmination of God's revelation in Christ be received as completely trustworthy and authoritative.

The Historic View of the Christian Church⁸

During the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the issue of the truthfulness of Scripture became a major dividing line between Christians in the United States. Denominations divided, and new denominations, schools, and mission agencies were founded as a result of this debate. Some noninerrantists claimed that the so-called doctrine of inerrancy was really the creation of modern conservative Protestants,

not the historic witness of the Christian church.⁹ In response, overwhelming evidence has been presented to prove the contrary. While the exact term *inerrancy* (or non-English equivalents of this term) may not be found in early, medieval, or reformational church history, the *concept* or *idea* of inerrancy is the historic position of the church in all ages.¹⁰ From 1977 to 1988, supporters of inerrancy worked through the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and produced three formal, signed statements on inerrancy and interpretation.¹¹ The most significant of these documents, the “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” (1978), continues to serve as a touchstone for the definition of inerrancy.

Qualifications of Inerrancy

The doctrine of inerrancy must be properly explained and qualified to prevent misunderstanding. A number of important qualifications are listed below.

1. *Inerrancy applies only to the autographs (original copies of Scripture).*¹² No one denies that there are some copying errors in every Hebrew and Greek manuscript of the Bible (particularly with numbers, for example). Yet, with the vast number of Greek and Hebrew manuscripts and their careful transmission, we are able to reconstruct the original wording of the Old and New Testament with extreme accuracy.¹³ For more detail on manuscript accuracy, see [question 5 \(“Were the ancient manuscripts of the Bible transmitted accurately?”\)](#).
2. *Inerrancy respects the authorial intent of the passage and the literary conventions under which the author wrote.* If the author intended an assertion literally, we should understand it so. If

the passage is figurative, likewise, we should interpret it accordingly. We must respect the level of precision intended, as well as the writing conventions of that day. For example, in Mark 1:2–3, Mark cites three different Old Testament texts (Exod. 23:30; Isa. 40:3; Mal. 3:1) with the introductory phrase, “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet.” Assuming our modern conventions of citation, this is an error because part of the quotation is from Exodus and Malachi. But, as early Jews sometimes cited only one prophetic spokesman when quoting amalgamated texts, we should respect the literary conventions of Mark’s day.¹⁴

As another example we can consider the order of events in the Synoptic Gospels. It is clear that the Gospel authors are not intending to give a strict chronological account of Jesus’s ministry.¹⁵ The material is frequently arranged topically. Thus, it should not surprise us to find a different order to Jesus’s temptations in Luke 4:1–13 and Matthew 4:1–11. As the temple is a motif in Luke (e.g., Luke 1:9; 18:10; 23:45; 24:53; Acts 2:46; 5:20; 26:21), it appears that Luke has rearranged Jesus’s temptations to place the pinnacle of the temple as the climactic temptation.¹⁶ Or, possibly, as mountains are often of symbolic value in the Gospel of Matthew (5:1; 8:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 28:16), Matthew has done the rearranging. Part of faithful interpretation is respecting the individual emphases and purposes of the different authors and faithfully allowing those original emphases to come through in our teaching and preaching.

3. *Inerrancy allows for partial reporting, paraphrasing, and summarizing.* The words of a speaker, for example, might be summarized or paraphrased rather than given verbatim. As long as the meaning of the speaker is accurately conveyed, this reporting

is completely truthful. Also, just as modern writers may choose to leave out certain details or emphasize other points, biblical writers did the same as they reported on the same events from different vantage points. For example, John reports more of Jesus's ministry in Jerusalem, while Matthew, Mark, and Luke focus on his itinerant Galilean ministry.

4. *Inerrancy allows for phenomenological language (that is, the description of phenomena as they are observed and experienced).* Humans often report events they see from their experiential vantage point rather than providing an objective scientific explanation. Thus, we would no more charge a biblical author with error when speaking of the sun rising (Ps. 19:6) than we would chastise a modern meteorologist for speaking of the anticipated time of tomorrow's sunrise. Neither the psalmist nor the meteorologist is intending to deny a heliocentric (sun-centered) solar system.
5. *Inerrancy allows the reporting of speech without the endorsement of the truthfulness of that speech (or the implication that everything else said by that person is truthful).* Psalm 14:1 says, "There is no God." Of course, in broader context, the passage reads, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" Obviously, in reporting the speech of "the fool," the psalmist does not agree with him. Similarly, in quoting from pagan authors in his speech before the Athenians (Acts 17:22–31), Paul (and by extension, Luke, who records the speech) is not intending to endorse the truthfulness of everything written by Epimenides or Aratus (Acts 17:28).

6. *Inerrancy does not mean that the Bible provides definitive or exhaustive information on every topic.* No author in the Bible, for example, attempts a classification of mollusks or lessons in subatomic physics. The Bible tangentially touches on these subjects in asserting that God is the creator of all things, marine or subatomic, but one must not press the Scriptures to say more than they offer. If you want to learn how to bake French pastries, for example, there is no biblical text I can suggest. I can, however, exhort you to do all things diligently for God's glory (Col. 3:17) and not to engage in gluttony (Prov. 23:20). And I would be happy to sample any of the pastries you make.
7. *Inerrancy is not invalidated by colloquial or nonstandard grammar or spelling.* Spelling and grammar vary within various linguistic, cultural, geographical, and economic groups without impinging on the truthfulness of the actual communication. As Wayne Grudem notes, "An uneducated backwoodsman in some rural area may be the most trusted man in the country even though his grammar is poor, because he has earned a reputation for never telling a lie. Or, I could be typing quickly and send an email that says, 'I teeche theology at Phoenix Seminaary,' a statement that is completely truthful even though two words are misspelled. Similarly, there are a few statements in Scripture (in the original languages) that are ungrammatical (according to current standards of proper grammar at that time) or contain irregular spellings of words, but these statements are still *inerrant* because they are completely true. The issue with the doctrine of inerrancy is *truthfulness* in speech."¹⁷

Recommendations for Dealing with Difficult Texts in the Bible

Below are a few recommendations for dealing with alleged discrepancies in the Bible.

1. *Be sure that you are interacting with real texts.* Do not allow another person's uninformed skepticism to poison your own intellect.
2. *Approach the text in trust, not as a skeptic.* Investigating the truthfulness of Christianity is to be encouraged.¹⁸ Christianity has nothing to fear from the facts. However, there comes a point when one realizes that the Bible is internally consistent and its claims are frequently confirmed by externally verifiable data (that is, by other ancient sources, archeology, etc.). Just as in a healthy marriage one trusts his or her spouse and does not live in constant doubt or suspicion, likewise a Christian trusts the biblical text in areas that cannot be confirmed by external criteria. For example, we have no external records confirming the visit of the magi to Herod (Matt. 2:1–12). Yet the jealous, distrustful behavior of Herod the Great in the Gospel of Matthew certainly agrees with extrabiblical accounts of his character (see Josephus, *Antiquities* 17.6.5).
3. *Pray about a difficult text.* God is a loving Father who cares for his children. Jesus taught,

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him

a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (Matt. 7:7–11)

4. *Keep in mind the “Qualifications of Inerrancy” when dealing with difficult texts (see above).* Don’t demand that ancient writers conform to your expected standards (demanding perfectly parallel, verbatim quotations, for example).
5. *Seek counsel when dealing with difficult texts.* Tell a Christian friend, pastor, or professor about your question. Sometimes the serpent of apparent error is defanged in articulating one’s question. Consult the best evangelical commentaries on the subject.¹⁹
6. *Be willing to set a text aside for further consideration rather than force harmonization.* Augustine (A.D. 354–430) speaks of his trusting and patient approach to the canonical Scriptures:

I have learned to yield this respect and honour only to the canonical books of Scripture: of these alone do I most firmly believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the [manuscript] is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.²⁰

Summary

In claiming the Bible as “inerrant” (without error in all its assertions), we are agreeing with the Bible’s witness to itself and the historic

witness of the Christian church. Nevertheless, to hold a defensible view of inerrancy, one must recognize necessary qualifications (for example, allowing for ancient literary conventions, partial reporting, paraphrasing, summarizing, phenomenological language, etc.). Christians must be aware of distorted perceptions of the Bible and be prepared with informed responses. Still, the verbal affirmation of right doctrine is not enough. We must demonstrate our submission to the inerrant Word through winsome lives of faith and love (Matt. 7:21; James 2:14).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Has anyone ever presented you with an alleged error in the Bible as an argument as to why it is not true? What was your response?
2. What is the most puzzling text in the Bible to you?
3. Why do people disagree on their assessment of the Bible's truthfulness—some seeing it as the inerrant Word of God and others viewing it as an unreliable collection of contradictory documents?
4. If a neighbor were to tell you that he didn't believe the Bible because it is "full of errors," how would you respond?
5. Have you ever met an "ungodly inerrantist" (someone with a verbal affirmation of the Bible's truthfulness but otherwise ungodly behavior)? What does the Bible say about this situation?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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- Bruce, F. F. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* 6th ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981.
- Geisler, Norman L., and Thomas Howe. *The Big Book of Bible Difficulties: Clear and Concise Answers from Genesis to Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008.
- Geisler, Norman L. and William C. Roach. *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011.
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- Kitchen, K. A. *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.
- Williams, Peter J. *Can We Trust the Gospels?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.

See the entry for “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy” at www.wikipedia.org for a link to the full text of the statement.

1. Christians disagree about how to articulate and qualify the doctrine of inerrancy. See Stanley N. Gundry, J. Merrick and Stephen M. Garrett, eds., *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).
2. New challenges against inerrancy continue to appear. For a modern defense of inerrancy against recent detractors, see Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder, eds., *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013); Norman L. Geisler and William C. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Inerrancy and the Gospels: A God-Centered Approach to the Challenges of Harmonization* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); and G. K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).
3. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 85.
4. Kenneth S. Kantzer, foreword to *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, by Gleason L. Archer (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 7.
5. This is the first definition of *infallible* in the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, www.merriam-webster.com (accessed March 31, 2020).
6. See the definitive study by John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).
7. See Grudem's list of references outside the four Gospels (*Systematic Theology*, 89–90).
8. See chapter 5 ("The Inerrancy of Scripture: How has the church come to believe that the Bible is completely true and without error in everything that it affirms?") of Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 99–119.
9. See Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979); or, similarly, Russell H. Dilday, *The Doctrine of Biblical Authority* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1982), 57–59.
10. See John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers and McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982). Erickson agrees: "The

church throughout its history has believed in the freedom of the Bible from any untruths" (Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 252). Also, see Article XVI of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy: "We affirm that the doctrine of inerrancy has been integral to the Church's faith throughout its history. We deny that inerrancy is a doctrine invented by scholastic Protestantism, or is a reactionary position postulated in response to negative higher criticism."

11. According to a 1980 publication by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, "The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy is a California-based organization founded in 1977. It has as its purpose the defense and application of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy as an essential element for the authority of Scripture and a necessity for the health of the church. It was created to counter the drift from this important doctrinal foundation by significant segments of evangelicalism and the outright denial of it by other church movements" (from inside the front cover of R. C. Sproul, *Explaining Inerrancy: A Commentary*, ICBI Foundation Series, vol. 2 [Oakland, CA: International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1980]).
12. Article X of the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy reads: "We affirm that inspiration, strictly speaking, applies only to the autographic text of Scripture, which in the providence of God can be ascertained from available manuscripts with great accuracy. We further affirm that copies and translations of Scripture are the Word of God to the extent that they faithfully represent the original. We deny that any essential element of the Christian faith is affected by the absence of the autographs. We further deny that this absence renders the assertion of biblical inerrancy invalid or irrelevant."
13. Grudem writes, "For over 99 percent of the words of the Bible, we *know* what the original manuscript said" (*Systematic Theology*, 92). D. A. Carson affirms 96–97 percent textual certainty for the New Testament ("Who Is This Jesus? Is He Risen?" a documentary film hosted by D. James Kennedy and Jerry Newcombe [Fort Lauderdale, FL: Coral Ridge Ministries, 2000]). No doctrinal issue is left in question by textual variations.

14. J. Marcus writes, "Such conflation of OT texts is familiar from postbiblical Judaism, especially from the Dead Sea Scrolls" (*Mark 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 27 [New York: Doubleday, 2000], 147).
15. Even Papias (ca. A.D. 70–155), notes, "And the elder [the apostle John?] used to say this: 'Mark, having become Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately everything he remembered, though not in order, of the things either said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, followed Peter, who adapted his teachings as needed but had no intention of giving an ordered account of the Lord's sayings. Consequently Mark did nothing wrong in writing down some things as he remembered them, for he made it his one concern not to omit anything that he heard or to make any false statement in them'" (*Fragments of Papias* 3.15 in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007], 739–41).
16. The word *temple* occurs 46 times in Luke–Acts (NIV).
17. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 88. Commentators on the book of Revelation frequently discuss the solecisms (grammatical irregularities) found in the book. See Laurențiu Florentin Moț, *Morphological and Syntactical Irregularities in the Book of Revelation: A Greek Hypothesis*, *Linguistic Biblical Studies* 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
18. See, for example, Credo House Ministries (credohouse.org); Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017); Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Craig A. Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008); and J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).
19. For suggestions on the best commentaries, see bestcommentaries.com; Tremper Longman, III, *Old Testament Commentary Survey*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013); and D. A. Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 7th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013). Also, you can consult reference works

such as Gleason L. Archer's *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* or an evangelical study Bible, such as *The Zondervan NIV Study Bible*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); or *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

20. Augustine, *Letter* 82.3. Translation by J. G. Cunningham, *NPNF*₁ 1:350.

QUESTION 6

Who Determined What Books Would Be Included in the Bible?

The canon is the closed list of books that Christians view as uniquely authoritative and inspired. The Greek term *kanōn* originally meant “reed” or “measuring rod” and only later “norm” or “rule.”¹ While the concept of a limited canon is ancient (Deut. 31:24–26; Dan. 9:2), the first person to use the Greek word *kanōn* to refer to Christianity’s restricted list of inspired books was apparently Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 352, *Decrees of the Synod of Nicea* 5.18).² The first church council to use the word *kanōn* in this way was the Synod of Laodicea (A.D. 363).³ Very quickly, the term came to be widely used and accepted.⁴

For Protestant Christians, the canon is not an authorized collection of writings (in that the church conferred its authority or approval upon a list of books). Rather, the canon is a collection of authoritative writings. The biblical writings have an inherent authority as works uniquely inspired by God. Canonization is the process of recognizing that inherent authority, not bestowing it from an outside source.

Most Christians take the canon for granted without thinking about the process of the books’ recognition. Oftentimes, only when a Christian encounters a person who rejects the canon outright (a non-Chris-

tian) or one who endorses a variation of the canon (a Roman Catholic who accepts the Apocrypha, for example) does he begin to think more deeply about this issue. Who determined that thirty-nine books would be in the Old Testament canon and twenty-seven books in the New Testament canon? Why and when did they choose these books and not other books? Is the canon closed, or can additional books be added?

Old Testament Canon

The thirty-nine books in the Old Testament canon were written between 1400 and 430 B.C. We do not have detailed information about the discussion that likely surrounded the inclusion or rejection of writings into the Old Testament. It seems that some books were recognized instantly as authoritative on the basis of their self-authenticating nature or a prophetic word being fulfilled (Exod. 24:3–7; Deut. 18:15–22; Dan. 9:2). Other books may have taken some time to be edited or fully recognized (Isa. 30:8; Prov. 25:1). Walter Kaiser summarizes the apparent history of the Old Testament canon: “[There was a] *progressive recognition* of certain books as being canonical right from their inception by readers and listeners who were contemporaries with the writers and who are thereby in the best position to determine the claims of the writers.”⁵ It seems clear that by the time of Jesus, most Jews were in agreement as to their own canon—a list that matches our current Old Testament in content.

The Samaritans (half-Jews) of Jesus’s day recognized only an edited copy of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) as their Scripture, but Jews never viewed the Samaritans as legitimate descendants of Abraham (Matt. 10:5–6; Luke 17:18). A small but more mainstream Jewish party in Jesus’s day, the Sadducees, viewed books outside the Pentateuch as less authoritative or inspired (Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:8). Jesus rejected the Sadducees’ views, endorsing the threefold

Jewish canon (Law, Prophets, Writings) as it stood in his day (Luke 24:44; note that the Psalms, as the largest of the Writings section, was sometimes used to refer to the whole section). For Christians, accepting the thirty-nine-book Old Testament canon is relatively easy. One might say, “Jesus and his apostles affirmed the Jewish canon of the Hebrew Scriptures in their day. As a follower of Jesus, I affirm the same.”

In recent history, some Old Testament scholars have claimed that the Jewish canon was not closed until the so-called Jewish Council of Jamnia (or Jabneh) in A.D. 90.⁶ The term *council* and a specific date are misleading, however. In actuality, following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans in A.D. 70, rabbinic discussions continued on a variety of subjects in Jamnia for the next six decades.⁷ Subsequent reexamination of the rabbinic discussion at Jamnia favors the traditional Christian view that the canon was long settled for the majority of Jews by the first century.⁸ Jamnia provided a venue for the discussion of challenging Old Testament texts, but no binding canonical decisions were proclaimed.⁹ Josephus claimed that the Jewish canon, which matches in content our modern Old Testament, had been settled from the time of the Persian King Artaxerxes (465–423 B.C.). The Jews in Josephus’s and Jesus’s day ordered their Hebrew Scriptures differently, resulting in twenty-four books, equaling our current number of thirty-nine books (see [figure 7](#)).¹⁰ Josephus’s statement on the closure of the Hebrew canon (see the box on the next page) is particularly striking. It is difficult to see why we should dismiss his unambiguous claims in favor of tenuous modern reconstructions.

New Testament Canon

Compared with the Old Testament canon, we know much more about the formal recognition of the books in the New Testament. In

discussing the canon, the early church insisted that recognized books be:

- *Apostolic*: written by or tied closely to an apostle (an authorized eyewitness of Jesus).
- *Catholic*:¹¹ widely, if not universally, recognized by the churches.
- *Orthodox*: not in contradiction to any recognized apostolic book or doctrine.

Josephus (A.D. 37–100), the non-Christian Jewish historian, wrote about the discussions on the Hebrew canon:

For we have not an innumerable multitude of books among us, disagreeing from, and contradicting one another, [as the Greeks have], but only twenty-two books, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death. This interval of time was little short of three thousand years; but as to the time from the death of Moses till the reign of Artaxerxes, king of Persia, who reigned after Xerxes, the prophets, who were after Moses, wrote down what was done in their times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God, and precepts for the conduct of human life. It is true, our history has been written since Artaxerxes very particularly, but has not been esteemed of the like authority with the former by our forefathers, because there has not been an exact succession of prophets since that time; and how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation, is evident by what we do; for, during so many ages as have already passed, no one has

been so bold as either to add anything to them, to take anything from them, or to make any change in them; but it is natural to all Jews, immediately and from their very birth, to esteem these books to contain divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be, willingly to die for them. (*Against Apion* 1:38–42, Whiston's translation)

The first canonical list that matches exactly our twenty-seven-book New Testament is the list by Athanasius in his Easter letter (letter 39) of A.D. 367. Two early church councils (Hippo Regius, A.D. 393, and Carthage, A.D. 397) confirmed the twenty-seven-book list.

Though an oversimplification, T. C. Hammond presents a helpful summary of the recognition of the New Testament canon.

- The New Testament books were written during the period A.D. 45–100.
- They were collected and read in the churches A.D. 100–200.
- They were carefully examined and compared with spurious writings A.D. 200–300.
- Complete agreement was obtained A.D. 300–400.^{[12](#)}

Sometimes students are troubled to discover that we do not have a canonical list of New Testament books that exactly matches our own until Athanasius's letter of A.D. 367. Several facts must be remembered, however. First, all the New Testament documents were viewed as authoritative and were circulating among the churches by A.D. 90 or 100 (Col. 4:16; 2 Peter 3:16). Second, from the earliest post-New Testament Christian writings (the apostolic fathers), it is clear that

an implicit canon existed. By their frequency of citation, the apostolic fathers attribute unique authority to what came to be called the New Testament.¹³ Third, in the absence of a unified ecclesiastical hierarchy and in a situation where documents were copied by hand, it is not surprising that we find churches debating what writings were truly apostolic. Eusebius (ca. A.D. 260–340) mentions three categories of books in his day—the universally confessed, the debated, and the spurious.¹⁴ Fourth, one must keep in mind the large geographic distances between some early Christian communities, as well as the persecutions that made communication and gatherings of decision-making bodies virtually impossible until the conversion of the Roman emperor in the fourth century A.D.

The observation of Barker, Lane, and Michaels is fitting:

The fact that substantially the whole church came to recognize the same 27 books as canonical is remarkable when it is remembered that the result was not contrived. All that the several churches throughout the Empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their origin and character. When consideration is given to the diversity in cultural backgrounds and in orientation to the essentials of the Christian faith within the churches, their common agreement about which books belonged to the New Testament serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely at the human level.¹⁵

FIGURE 7: ORDERING OF HEBREW SCRIPTURES IN THE FIRST CENTURY	
JEWISH SCRIPTURE (24 BOOKS)	THE CHRISTIAN OLD TESTAMENT (39 BOOKS)
LAW	HISTORICAL BOOKS
Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Genesis Ruth Exodus 1–2 Samuel Leviticus 1–2 Kings Numbers 1–2 Chronicles Deuteronomy Ezra Joshua Nehemiah Judges Esther
FORMER PROPHETS	WISDOM BOOKS
Joshua Judges Samuel Kings	Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon (Song of Songs)
LATTER PROPHETS	
MAJOR PROPHETS	
Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel	
MINOR PROPHETS	
The Book of the Twelve (Hosea–Malachi)	
WRITINGS	PROPHETICAL BOOKS
Psalms Job Proverbs Ruth Song of Solomon (Song of Songs) Ecclesiastes Lamentations Esther Daniel Ezra–Nehemiah Chronicles	MAJOR PROPHETS
	Isaiah Jeremiah Lamentations Ezekiel Daniel
	MINOR PROPHETS
	Hosea–Malachi (The 12)

Beyond the valid historical questions of canon formation, however, Christians approach the canon of the Bible with certain presuppositions. If God accurately preserved the prior revelation of himself in the Old Testament writings (as endorsed by Jesus), how likely is it that the culmination of that revelation—the person and teaching of his Son—would fail to be recorded and preserved (Heb. 1:1–2)? Indeed, Jesus promises his apostles the presence of the Holy Spirit in bringing his teaching accurately to their memory and conveying further necessary information to his followers (John 14:26).

The Apocrypha

Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians (Eastern Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, etc.) have some additional books in their Old Testaments that Protestants do not consider Scripture¹⁶ (see [figure 8](#)). Protestants refer to these books as the Apocrypha, though Roman Catholics call them the deuterocanonical books (literally, the “secondly canonical” books, because they were formally recognized as canonical at a later time—as opposed to the protocanonical, or “firstly canonical,” books). These books were written by Jews in the roughly five-hundred-year period between the Old and New Testaments (430 B.C.–A.D. 40).

Protestants do not consider the Apocrypha as Scripture for a number of reasons.

1. The Jews who authored the books never accepted them into their canon. This is a weighty argument in that those who wrote and preserved these books put them in a different category from the recognized Hebrew Scriptures. Indeed, comments within the Apocrypha distinguish contemporary writers from the divinely

inspired prophets, who had long been silent (1 Macc. 4:41–46; 9:27; 14:40).

FIGURE 8: THE CANON IN VARYING CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS		
PROTESTANTISM	ROMAN CATHOLICISM	GREEK ORTHODOXY
OLD TESTAMENT	OLD TESTAMENT	OLD TESTAMENT
Pentateuch (Gen.–Deut.) Prophets • Former (Josh.–Kings) • Latter Major (Isa., Jer., Ezek.) Minor (The Twelve) Writings	Pentateuch (Gen.–Deut.) Prophets • Former (Josh.–Kings) • Latter Major (Isa., Jer., Ezek.) Minor (The Twelve) Writings	Pentateuch (Gen.–Deut.) Prophets • Former (Josh.–Kings) • Latter Major (Isa., Jer., Ezek.) Minor (The Twelve) Writings
	APOCRYPHA	APOCRYPHA
	Tobit Judith Additions to Esther Wisdom of Solomon Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) Baruch (+ Letter of Jeremiah) Prayer of Azariah Susanna Bel and the Dragon 1 Maccabees 2 Maccabees	Tobit Judith Additions to Esther Wisdom of Solomon Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) Baruch (+ Letter of Jeremiah) Prayer of Azariah Susanna Bel and the Dragon 1 Maccabees 2 Maccabees 1 Esdras (or 3 Ezra) Prayer of Manasseh 3 Maccabees 4 Maccabees (appendix) Psalm 151
NEW TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT
Gospels Acts Paul (and Hebrews) General Epistles Revelation	Gospels Acts Paul (and Hebrews) General Epistles Revelation	Gospels Acts Paul (and Hebrews) General Epistles Revelation

2. The Apocrypha contains clear factual errors and, from the standpoint of Protestants, theological errors (such as praying for the dead, see 2 Macc. 12:43–45).¹⁷
3. The Roman Catholic Church did not officially recognize the books in the Apocrypha as canonical until the Council of Trent in 1546.¹⁸ In fact, Jerome (A.D. 340–420), the translator of the Vulgate (the official Roman Catholic Latin Bible for more than a millennium), claimed the books of the Apocrypha were edifying for Christians but were “not for the establishing of the authority of the doctrines of the church.”¹⁹ At the Council of Trent, Roman Catholics recognized the deuterocanonical books in reaction to Protestant leaders who called for a return to biblical Christianity, stripped of later accretions and distortions. Roman Catholics include the Apocryphal books within their Old Testament canon, sometimes adding whole books and sometimes combining apocryphal portions with books Protestants recognize as canonical (for example, three additions to Daniel—The Prayer of Azariah, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon). These additions and combinations result in a forty-six-book Old Testament canon for Roman Catholics.²⁰
4. While there are some debatable allusions to the Apocrypha in the New Testament, New Testament authors nowhere cite the Apocrypha as Scripture (that is, with a formula such as “The Scripture says”). Almost every book in the Old Testament is cited as Scripture.²¹

The Apocrypha is helpful for understanding the historical and cultural changes that lead up to the New Testament. For example, by reading 1 and 2 Maccabees, one can learn about the origins of the Feast

of Dedication (mentioned in John 10:22). The Apocrypha also contains entertaining stories (for example, Tobit, which would make a great Disney movie, or Susanna or Bel and the Dragon, which read like detective stories). Other parts of the Apocrypha occasionally sound similar to the Psalms or Proverbs (e.g., Sirach). In fact, Protestants sometimes unwittingly sing hymns based upon Apocryphal texts (“It Came Upon a Midnight Clear,” based on Wisdom of Solomon 18:14–15, and “Now Thank We All Our God,” based on Sirach 50:22–24). Still, it is clear that the leaders of the Protestant Reformation were wise to return the church to its earliest understanding of the Apocrypha as interesting, sometimes beneficial, but uninspired literature.²²

Is the Canon Closed?

According to the early church’s categories for canonicity (apostolic, catholic, orthodox—see above), it would be impossible to have any additions to the canon. For example, even if a genuine and orthodox letter of the apostle Paul were discovered, that letter would not have had widespread usage in the early church (that is, it could never claim catholicity). The canon of Scripture is closed.

Summary

The canon is the list of books that Christians view as uniquely inspired and authoritative Scripture. The Old Testament canon consists of thirty-nine books written between 1400–430 B.C. These books were progressively recognized by those who were contemporaries of their composition and fulfillment. The Hebrew canon at the time of Jesus mirrors our thirty-nine-book Old Testament in content. Thus, in affirming the thirty-nine-book Old Testament, Christians affirm the Hebrew Scriptures recognized by Jesus and his apostles.

The recognition of the twenty-seven-book New Testament followed this historical progression: (1) The New Testament books were written during the period A.D. 45–100. (2) The books were collected and read in the churches A.D. 100–200. (3) They were carefully examined and compared with spurious writings A.D. 200–300. (4) Complete agreement was obtained A.D. 300–400.

The Apocrypha is not considered Scripture by Protestants. The books were written by Jews in the time between the Old and New Testaments (i.e., 430 B.C.–A.D. 40). The Jews who wrote the books of the Apocrypha never recognized them as Scripture, and the Roman Catholic Church only officially did so at the Council of Trent in 1546. Various branches of Christianity (for example, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Russian Orthodoxy, etc.) recognize slightly different lists of deuterocanonical (Apocryphal) books.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Prior to the reading above, had you ever investigated the canon? What prompted your interest in turning to this question?
2. Explain the difference between “an authorized collection of writings” and “a collection of authoritative writings.” Is this an important distinction?
3. If a Roman Catholic neighbor were to ask you, “Why do you Protestants cut some books out of the Bible?” How would you reply?
4. Is it possible to be a Christian and yet have a wrong understanding of the canon (as say, an Ethiopian Orthodox person would)? Explain.

5. Does the survey of the canon above leave any questions unanswered for you?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Archer, Gleason L. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. Rev. ed. Chicago: Moody Press, 1994 (see chap. 5, "The Canon of the Old Testament," 75–88).
- Bruce, F. F. *The Books and the Parchments*. Rev. ed. London: Marshall Pickering, 1991.
- . *The Canon of Scripture*. Leicester and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988.
- Carson, D. A., and Douglas J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005 (see chap. 26, "The New Testament Canon," 726–43).
- Gallagher, Edmon L. and John D. Meade. *The Biblical Canon Lists from Early Christianity: Texts and Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Geisler, Norman L., and Ralph E. MacKenzie. *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995 (see chaps. 9–10).
- Harrison, R. K. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969; reprint, Peabody, MA: Prince (Hendrickson), 1999 (see part 4, section 4, "The Old Testament Canon," 260–88).
- Kruger, Michael J. *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.
- . *The Question of Canon: Challenging the Status Quo in the New Testament Debate*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013.

Wegner, Paul D. *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999 (see pp. 101–51).

Recommended website: The Canon Fodder blog: michaeljkruger.com

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1. *Kanōn* is derived from the Hebrew word for reed or stalk, *qāneh*. See H. W. Beyer, “κανών,” in *TDNT*, 3:596–602; Michael J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 27.
 2. As cited in R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969; Peabody, MA: Prince (Hendrickson), 1999), 261.
 3. While the synod’s list of canonical New Testament books matches our own (except for the omission of Revelation), most scholars believe this list is a later addition (Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987], 210).
 4. David S. Dockery, *Christian Scripture: An Evangelical Perspective on Inspiration, Authority and Interpretation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 89.
 5. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 31.
 6. H. H. Graetz is apparently the originator of this idea (*Kohélet oder der Salominische Prediger* [Leipzig: Winter, 1871], 160–63), followed by H. E. Ryle, *The Canon of the Old Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1892). More recently, see, for example, Bernhard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 4th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 641. Liberal theories of canonical formation also date the books of the Old Testament much later.
 7. Jack P. Lewis, “Jamnia (Jabneh), Council of,” *ABD* 3:635–36.
 8. Jack Lewis writes, “It would appear that the frequently made assertion that a binding decision was made at [Jamnia] covering all scripture is

conjectural at best" ("What Do We Mean by Jabneh?" *JBR* 32 [1964]: 132). According to Sid Leiman, "The widespread view that the Council of Jamnia closed the biblical canon, or that it canonized any books at all, is not supported by the evidence and need no longer be seriously maintained" ("The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence," *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 47 [Hamden, CT: Archon, 1976], 124).

9. Admittedly, a minority of Jews did question the appropriateness of some texts or books (e.g., Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes), but such questioning continued, and, in fact, continues even among some Jewish scholars today. Giving Jamnia the most credit it could merit, Bruce writes, "The books which [the participants at Jamnia] decided to acknowledge as canonical were already generally accepted, although questions had been raised about them. Those which they refused to admit had never been included. They did not expel from the canon any book which had previously been admitted. The Council of Jamnia, as J. S. Wright puts it, 'was the confirming of public opinion, not the forming of it'" (F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, rev. ed. [London: Marshall Pickering, 1991], 88–89).
10. Josephus counts Judges–Ruth as one book and Jeremiah–Lamentations as one book, reducing the total number to twenty-two books.
11. The word *catholic* means universal. Its use here should not be confused with the way the word is used to identify various Christian traditions (e.g., The Roman Catholic Church).
12. T. C. Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men: An Introductory Handbook of Christian Doctrine*, rev. and ed. David F. Wright, 6th ed. (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 29. Hammond puts the books of the New Testament as written between A.D. 50 to 100, so I have adjusted his scheme by five years here. Also, canonical debates continued longer in the East.
13. John Barton writes, "The central importance of most of the writings that would come to form the New Testament is already established in the early second century" (*Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997], 64).
14. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.25.1–5.

15. Glenn W. Barker, William L. Lane, and J. Ramsey Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 29.
16. See Hans Peter Rüger, "The Extent of the Old Testament Canon," *BT* 40 (1989): 301–8.
17. For examples of errors, see table 8.4 ("Inaccuracies in the Apocryphal Books") in Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 125.
18. Various regional councils (e.g., Hippo, A.D. 393, or Carthage, A.D. 393, 397, 419) did affirm the Apocrypha as canonical at an earlier date, though not without differing contemporaneous views in circulation.
19. Jerome, *Prologus Galeatus*, as cited in Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 81n.8.
20. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994), 34.
21. Gleason Archer notes that every Old Testament book is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament except Ruth, Ezra, and Song of Songs (*A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 83n.16). Most Old Testament books are cited unambiguously as Scripture.
22. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, Lutherans and Anglicans (as opposed to Calvinists and Anabaptists) were more open to seeing the Apocrypha as devotionally beneficial (Norman L. Geisler and Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995], 157n. 1).

QUESTION 9

How Has the Bible Been Interpreted throughout Church History?

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”¹ Or, so goes the famous historical dictum. Just as a wise child learns from the successes and mistakes of his parents and grandparents, so a wise Christian learns from his ancestors in the faith—those generations of Christians who went before him. Throughout the centuries, how have Christians interpreted the Bible? What can we learn from their approaches? Where should we beware of their missteps? We will attempt to answer these questions briefly in broad strokes. We also begin with this caveat—to survey nearly two thousand years of interpretive history in such a short space, we must employ a number of oversimplifications. For more detailed analysis, see the suggested books at the end of this section.

The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament (A.D. 45–90)

The first place that we see Christian interpretation of the Scriptures is the citation of Old Testament texts by New Testament authors. The citations of such texts have a number of characteristics.

1. New Testament authors and characters (in narratives) cite the Old Testament Scriptures as reliable accounts of God's prior interventions and communications (e.g., Matt. 12:40–41; Rom. 4:1–25).² For the New Testament authors, the Scriptures were God's inspired, inerrant Word (see [question 4, "Does the Bible contain error?"](#)).
2. New Testament authors respected the contexts of the passages they cited. Sometimes New Testament authors are wrongly maligned for citing texts haphazardly. But a sympathetic and careful look at their usage shows that this accusation is unfounded.³
3. New Testament authors employed the Old Testament in a typological and messianic way (see [question 24](#) for a more detailed explanation). This means they saw God's prior revelation as anticipatory, reaching its climactic fulfillment in the coming of Messiah Jesus. God's prior interventions pointed to the coming of Jesus and may be cited as historical anticipations of the final sacrifice, final redemption, final deliverance, final solution, etc.
4. The New Testament authors did not use the Old Testament in allegorical ways. That is, they did not assign meanings to details of the Old Testament texts that the original authors would not have countenanced. Admittedly, in one place in the New Testament (Gal. 4:24), Paul says that Hagar and Sarah may be understood "allegorically" or "figuratively" to represent the two covenants, one of slavery and one of promise. Even here, though, Paul does not claim to be interpreting the relevant Old Testament texts but freely admits that he is offering a homiletical reflection that he explicitly labels as figurative.

Some Christian scholars debate whether the New Testament authors' use of the Old Testament should be considered normative for modern interpretation. The primary issue here concerns typological use of the Old Testament, which is especially widespread in Matthew and Hebrews. It seems safe to say that any typological use of the Old Testament not explicitly sanctioned in the New Testament should be entertained with caution.

Another discussion among Christian scholars concerns early Jewish interpretive methods and whether they influenced Jesus and the writers of the New Testament. Admittedly, some forms of Jewish exegesis (*midrash* and *peshet*, for example) regularly stray far from the authorial intent of Scripture and propose untenable secret meanings, sometimes based on the numerical value of words or even the shapes of letters.⁴ The messianic, typological interpretation of the Old Testament found in the New Testament, while comparable to *midrash* or *peshet*, is a far cry from the fanciful interpretations of the rabbis.

The Rise of Allegorical Interpretation (A.D. 100–500)

Not long after the New Testament period, many early church fathers began to employ allegorical methods of interpretation. Allegory is a genre of literature that assigns symbolic significance to textual details. For example, John Bunyan's famous work, *Pilgrim's Progress*, is an allegory in which every character has a signification in relation to the Christian life. When intended by the writer and understood by the reader, allegory can be a powerful literary medium. However, if allegory is not intended by the author yet is employed as an interpretive method by the reader, then a dangerous misrepresentation of the author's meaning can result. There are several reasons why early Christians fell prey to the hermeneutical misapplication of allegory.

1. One reason early Christians were drawn to allegory was the limited presence of allegory in the Bible itself. Yes, Jesus gave an allegorical interpretation to at least one of his parables (Mark 4:1–20; also see Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43). Paul also seems to employ allegory once (Gal. 4:24, see above). Obviously, where Jesus and Paul *intended* allegorical meaning in the New Testament, faithful interpretation demands respect for this powerful genre. It is the illegitimate importation of allegory that is the problem.
2. A casual look at history or current society shows that human nature is often enamored with the secretive or conspiratorial. People love to feel that they are in the know or have access to a deeper reality than others. It seems very likely that some early Christian writers and speakers allegorized the texts in order to gain fame as purveyors of the deep, secret things of God. Likewise, the popularity of such teaching—whether ancient or modern—often is driven by an unhealthy interest in the speculative rather than holding to the clear meaning of Scripture (e.g., note the popularity of *The Bible Code* or *The Da Vinci Code*). While the Bible does claim to reveal God’s mysteries, it does so through unequivocal apostolic proclamation (1 Cor. 2:1–7).
3. Perhaps most significantly, allegorical interpretive methods were commonly used in the ancient Greco-Roman world to interpret difficult religious texts.⁵ The immoral and capricious actions of the Greco-Roman deities were made palatable and instructive through allegory. Possibly, such allegorical methods were rooted in a Platonic view of the world—looking for ultimate reality behind the visible world or text.⁶ As the Christian faith spread, former pagans applied the recognized literary conventions of their day to challenging texts in their

new Scriptures. For example, unusual Old Testament laws or the strange or immoral actions of characters in Scripture were read in allegorical ways. As early Christianity faced threats from the heretic Marcion, who rejected the Old Testament, and groups espousing similar views, it became important to show that the Old Testament was inspired and relevant.⁷ Not only early Christians but also early Jews immersed in Greco-Roman culture adopted the allegorical method. Philo (20 B.C.–A.D. 50), a first-century Jew living in Alexandria, regularly employed the allegorical approach to the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, in Genesis 9:20–21, we read that after the flood, Noah planted a vineyard and got drunk. Clearly, the Bible does not approve of drunkenness (Prov. 23:29–35), but in Genesis 9 there is no explicit censure of Noah's behavior. How does Philo explain how Noah, a hero of the faith, became inebriated? Rather than observing that not all behavior described in the narrative is normative, Philo writes:

What is the meaning of the statement, "And Noah became sober after the wine?" (Genesis 9:24)

The literal meaning is too notorious. Therefore we need only here to speak of what concerns the inner sense of the words. When the intellect is strengthened, it is able by its soberness to discern with a certain accuracy all things, both before and behind it, both present, I mean, and future; but the man who can see neither what is present nor what is future with accuracy, is afflicted by blindness; but he who sees the present, but who cannot also foresee the future, and is not at all cautious, such a man is overcome by drunkenness and intoxication; and he, lastly, who is found to be able to look all around him, and to see, and discern, and comprehend the different natures of things,

both present and future, the watchfulness of sobriety is in that man.⁸

Thus, just as Philo, a Jew living in a pagan culture, came to apply the accepted literary methods to the Hebrew Scriptures, so Christian preachers and scholars living in similar settings employed allegorical methods in interpreting the Scriptures.

A striking example of this sort of early Christian allegorical exegesis appears in the Epistle of Barnabas 9.6–9. In this text, the author conflates Genesis 14:14 and Genesis 17:23, asserting that Abraham circumcised 318 members of his household. Appealing to the Greek capital letters used to abbreviate the number 318 (*IHT*), the author claims that Abraham's practice of circumcision was intended to point to Jesus (whose name begins with *IH* in Greek texts) and the cross (the shape of which is similar to the Greek letter *tau* [*T*]).

Indeed, the allegorical meaning of a text came to be viewed by some as the highest meaning of the passage. The prominent early church father Origen (A.D. 185–254) cited Proverbs 22:20–21 and 1 Thessalonians 5:23 as the basis for his hermeneutical approach.⁹ Just as the person is tripartite (body, soul, and spirit), Origen claimed the text also has a body (literal meaning), soul (moral meaning—teaching ethics), and spirit (spiritual or allegorical meaning). Granted, Origen employed certain caveats to his interpretive method—claiming that one could never introduce an allegorical meaning that is contrary to the “rule of faith” (early Christian doctrinal summary).¹⁰ But even with such safeguards, it is important to note that the interpreter is giving a meaning to the text the inspired author did not intend.

While the allegorical approach to the Scriptures became dominant in the early church, it is important to note that some voices continued to clamor for a literal reading of the Bible, respecting the intent of the

inspired authors. One such group was the Antiochean fathers—Lucian (A.D. 240–312), Diodore of Tarsus (d. ca. A.D. 394), John Chrysostom (A.D. 347–407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (A.D. 350–428), Theodoret (A.D. 393–457), and others. Unfortunately, the Antiocheans were a minority among early church interpreters, and the movement essentially dissolved by the eighth century.

The early church fathers' interpretations of biblical texts, while usually Christological and orthodox in conclusion, were often very distant from the authorial intent of the texts expositied. In such an environment, it became increasingly important to have some objective theological safeguards so that heretics could not claim validity for their equally ungrounded, though unorthodox, interpretations. The “rule of faith” (the accepted and often assumed summary of orthodox Christian doctrine), along with a growing reverence for tradition and formal doctrinal summaries (that is, creeds), served this purpose.¹¹ The repetition of church tradition and the summarization of orthodox doctrine functionally replaced the primacy of the Bible.

The Fourfold Meaning of Scripture (A.D. 500–1500)

Moving from the patristic to the medieval period, the allegorical approach to the Bible continued, with the addition of a fourth level of meaning. As early as the writing of John Cassian (A.D. 360–435) and Augustine (A.D. 354–430), we find the assertion that every biblical text has four levels of meaning: the literal, moral, spiritual (allegorical), and heavenly (eschatological or anagogical).¹² Essentially, this fourth level of meaning was another allegorical level with heavenly or eschatological (end-times) nuances. A reference to Jerusalem, for example, would include these four dimensions.¹³

- *Literal*: plot of ground in Palestine

- *Moral*: the human soul
- *Spiritual*: the Christian church
- *Heavenly*: the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem

An oft-repeated poem summarizes this fourfold hermeneutical method in memorable rhyme.¹⁴

The *letter* shows us what God and our fathers did;
 The *allegory* shows us where our faith is hid;
 The *moral* meaning gives us rules for daily life; The *anagogy*
 shows us where we end our strife.

This fourfold interpretive approach to the Bible became widespread and assumed. Indeed, much biblical scholarship in the medieval period was not true exegesis but the cataloging of church fathers' interpretations of various passages.¹⁵ Church tradition effectively trumped the primacy of Scripture. At the same time, we should note that isolated voices continued to call for a return to the priority of the literal meaning of the text.¹⁶

The Return to a More Faithful Interpretive Method (A.D. 1500–Present)

The cry of the Reformation was *Ad fontes!* (“to the sources”). With the Protestant Reformers calling people back to the authority of the Bible (*Sola Scriptura*, “the Bible Alone”), the so-called fourfold meaning of Scripture came under increased scrutiny and criticism. The famous reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) referred to earlier allegorical interpretations as “silly,” “amazing twaddle,” “absurd,” and “useless.”¹⁷ Luther confessed, “When I was a young man, my own attempts at allegory met with fair success.... But, I ask you is this not a desecration of the sacred writings?”¹⁸ John Calvin likewise said, “We ought to have

a deeper reverence for Scripture than to reckon ourselves at liberty to disguise its natural meaning.”¹⁹ Elsewhere, Calvin wrote, “It is ... an audacity, closely allied with sacrilege, rashly to turn Scripture in any way we please, and to indulge our fancies as in sport; which has been done by many in former times.”²⁰

Although heirs of the Protestant Reformation continued to fall prey to the siren song of allegory, over time biblical scholars reached an established consensus that allegory (when not intended by the authors) is a perversion of the text. Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), the most famous New Testament scholar of the twentieth century, set forth the following essential presupposition of sound biblical scholarship: “It belongs to the historical method, of course, that a text is interpreted in accordance with the rules of grammar and of the meaning of the words.”²¹ That is, to understand the Bible, we must look to the sense of the author’s actual words according to the norms of language and grammar.

While the modern study of the Bible eventually eviscerated the allegorical method,²² allegorical flights of fancy are still found in much popular Christian preaching and teaching. Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892), for example, in his *Lectures to My Students*, comments favorably on some allegorical preaching (or, as he calls it, “spiritualizing”).²³

Within the last sixty years, the body of scholars who approach the Bible self-consciously as both academics and faithful Christians has increased dramatically. The Evangelical Theological Society was founded in 1949 as a professional society of religion professors who hold to the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. The organization now boasts more than 4,500 members.²⁴ (Not all members are professors, but all full members must have the minimum of a Th.M. degree.) Moreover, every year, many significant commentaries and biblical reference works are produced by evangelicals. While diverse in the details of

their interpretive methods, the majority of evangelicals interpret the Bible with a literal, historical, and grammatical approach to the Bible. For evangelicals, the conscious intent of the human author (whether the original author or a later biblical author in canonical reflection) is the touchstone of interpretation.

It should also be noted that there has been a recent movement calling for an appreciation of the allegorical interpretive methods of the church fathers. For example, Hans Boersma, in his 2017 book, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (a 2018 *Christianity Today* book award winner), repeatedly praises Origen's hermeneutical brilliance and modern-day relevance. In reference to the writings of Origen and other church fathers, he avers, "It is this same sacramental sensibility that has the vitality to renew the life of the church today."²⁵ Boersma suggests that Origen's allegorical interpretation of Joshua chapter 9 provides a solution to a biblical narrative he finds morally objectionable, that is, the Israelite enslavement of the Gibeonites. Boersma writes,

Modern exegetes who advocate a strictly literal reading of the text are faced with a stark choice: to justify the violence inherent in the Old Testament or to abandon the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. Since either option seems to me detrimental to the church, I suggest that a serious look at the third-century exegete Origen is well worth our while.²⁶

Iain Provan, in his insightful *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture*, has responded skillfully to this recent allegorical challenge.²⁷ As the title of his book indicates, Provan calls on modern evangelical Protestants to stand unashamedly in the author-oriented hermeneutical tradition of the Protestant reformers.

The Antisupernatural Bias and Skepticism of Modern Scholarship (A.D. 1650–Present)

Running along parallel chronological tracks with the return to a more faithful approach to Scripture, a modern hermeneutic of anti-supernatural skepticism has come to flourish in the secular academy. This skeptical approach finds its roots in the Enlightenment and its optimistic elevation of human reason. The leading New Testament scholar of the twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann, embodied this antisupernaturalism. In a pivotal article, Bultmann mentions a necessary presupposition to biblical exegesis. He writes,

The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effect.... This closedness means that the continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers, and that therefore there is no 'miracle' in the sense of the word. Such a miracle would be an event whose cause did not lie within history.²⁸

In other words, Bultmann claims that a necessary presupposition to the academic study of the Bible is to maintain that supernatural events do not happen. Because the Bible contains so many descriptions of supernatural events, scholars accepting Bultmann's premise necessarily take an extremely skeptical view toward the historical reliability of the Bible. These scholars end up saying that the biblical authors who described miraculous events were deceived, mistaken, or attempting to convey some truth in "mythological terms." None of these three explanations, however, respects the genre of the biblical documents or the character and intelligence of their authors.²⁹ The writing of antisupernaturalist scholars sometimes degenerates into the sifting of

supposed sources and hypothetical reconstructions of the “real events” or situations that gave rise to the texts.

Other scholars engage in sociological comparisons or the application of various philosophical lenses through which they evaluate the text (Marxism, feminism, homosexual activism, etc.). More recently, some scholars have attempted to salvage a sympathetic study of the Bible while avoiding the thorny questions of truth or historical reliability. Such “canonical” or “theological” approaches to interpreting the Scriptures insist on reading the biblical documents as a finished, interrelated whole.³⁰ Other scholars have proposed various forms of literary or narrative analysis, attempting to view the text as a whole.³¹ Similarly, a study of reception history tries to salvage the meaning and unity of the text by considering the way it has been understood throughout church history.³² Such interpretive methods are helpful insofar as they help the reader to listen to the text. Eventually, however, any thinking reader of the Bible must ask, “Is this true? Did God really say ...?” The Bible confronts the reader with ultimate claims as to the human situation (rebellion and condemnation) and the nature of God (holy and loving). In that sense, no neutral middle ground will ever be possible in biblical scholarship. Jesus said, “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters” (Matt. 12:30).

Summary

By considering how the Bible has been interpreted throughout church history, we can learn from our forefathers in the faith. The first example of Christian interpretation is the use of the Old Testament by New Testament authors. The New Testament authors viewed the Old Testament as reliable history and authoritative revelation, respecting

the original contexts of passages cited. New Testament authors also viewed the Old Testament through a messianic, typological lens.

Very soon after the completion of the New Testament, many church fathers erred in fanciful allegorical interpretations. Although a celebrated interpretive approach in the ancient Greco-Roman world, allegorical exegesis distorts the authorial meaning of the text. Widespread allegorical excess was checked by the Protestant Reformation, but received its death blow (in the academy, at least) from modern biblical scholarship (c. 1800–present).

Much modern biblical scholarship, however, introduces another distorting element—an anti-supernatural skepticism. At the same time, in the last sixty years, a vibrant evangelical community has produced many significant academic contributions. Also, in recent decades, both liberal and conservative scholars have employed a number of interpretive techniques that claim to establish an academic “middle ground”—respecting the surface-level authorial intent of a biblical text without making explicit pronouncements on its origin or reliability.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When reading the New Testament, do you pay attention to the citation of Old Testament texts? Do you ever look up the Old Testament texts cited?
2. Have you ever heard an allegorical sermon or read an allegorical interpretation in a devotional book? At the time, did you recognize the interpretive method as allegorical? What did you think?

3. It has been said, “We can see so far only because we stand on the shoulders of giants.” How would this saying apply to biblical interpretation?
4. Have you noticed any of the interpretive trends mentioned above in books that you own?
5. Of what value are the allegorical expositions of the church fathers?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Bartholomew, Craig G. *Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Framework for Hearing God in Scripture*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015.

Beale, G. K. and D. A. Carson, eds. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker; Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2007.

Dockery, David S. *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992.

Grant, R. M., with David Tracy. *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984.

Hauser, Alan J., and Duane F. Watson, eds. *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Ancient Period*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Rev. ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004. (See chap. 2, “The History of Interpretation,” 23–62.)

McKim, Donald K., ed. *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007.

Provan, Iain. *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017.

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1. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason or the Phases of Human Progress: Introduction and Reason in Common Sense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905), 284.
 2. See John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).
 3. See G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker; Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2007).
 4. Henry A. Virkler and Karelynne Gerber Ayayo, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 45.
 5. Jean Pépin, *Mythe et Allégorie: Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes*, rev. ed. (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1976). See especially part 2 of the volume.
 6. William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 25–26.
 7. David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 45.
 8. *Questions and Answers on Genesis 2.73* in *The Works of Philo: New Updated Edition*, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 838.
 9. Origen, *De Principiis* 4.2.4–17 (ANF: 4:359). Origen quotes a variant reading (not the Masoretic text) of Proverbs 22:20–21. This variant reading is also followed by the Douay-Rheims American Edition (1899): “Behold I have described it to thee *three manner of ways*, in thoughts and knowledge: That I might shew thee the certainty, and the words of truth, to answer out of these to them that sent thee” (emphasis added). The Douay-Rheims translation gives a literal rendering of the Latin Vulgate. First Thessalonians 5:23 reads, “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through

and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (NIV).

10. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 89–91. Thomas Aquinas (A.D. 1225–1274) argued that all allegorical interpretation of Scripture must be grounded in the text's literal sense (*Summa Theologica* 1.1.8, cited by Robert M. Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 89).
11. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now*, 45–73.
12. Grant with Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 85.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 83.
16. E.g., Isho'dad's *Introduction to the Psalms* in the ninth century (Grant with Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 64–65); biblical commentaries by Andrew of St. Victor (twelfth century), abbot of an English abbey at Wigmore (Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 44); the writings of Nicolas of Lyra (1270–1340), which influenced Luther (L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952], 25); and Geiler of Keiserberg of the fifteenth century (Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 46).
17. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 1–5*, in *Luther's Works*, ed. J. Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1958), 1:91, 98, 233.
18. Ibid., 232.
19. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 3:63 (vol. 17 in reprint series).
20. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), xxvii (vol. 19 in reprint series).

21. Rudolf Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?" in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Meridian, 1960), 291.
22. Note, for example, the death blow to allegorizing parables dealt by Adolf Jülicher in *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu* (Freiburg: Mohr, 1888).
23. C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: Complete and Unabridged* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 97–98. At the same time, Spurgeon warns, "Avoid that childish trifling and outrageous twisting of texts which will make you a wise man among fools, but a fool among wise men" (*ibid.*, 100).
24. www.etsjets.org/faq (accessed April 2, 2020).
25. Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 279.
26. Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 111. Boersma notes, "[Origen] ... provides a spiritual interpretation of the Gibeonites' identity as people who go through all the right motions in church while making no effort to restrain their vices and to cultivate virtuous habits" (110). See, similarly, Keith D. Stanglin, *The Letter and Spirit of Biblical Interpretation: From the Early Church to Modern Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 170–71. Craig A. Carter offers a more nuanced approach, looking to Calvin as a key interpretive model. Carter confesses, "I am probably more enthusiastic about the Fathers than [D. A.] Carson is, although I might be slightly less enthusiastic about them than Boersma is" (*Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018], 207). Also, see Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 207; Stephen E. Fowl, "The Importance of a Multivoiced Literal Sense of Scripture: The Example of Thomas Aquinas," in *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation*, eds. A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 35–50; R. R. Reno, "'You Who Were Far Off Have Been Brought Near': Reflections on Theological Exegesis," *Ex Auditu* 16 (2000): 169–82.

27. Iain Provan, *The Reformation and the Right Reading of Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).
28. Bultmann, "Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible," 291–92.
29. Regarding the Gospel of John, for example, C. S. Lewis writes, "I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this [Gospel]" ("Fern-seed and Elephants," in *Fern-seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity by C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper [London: Fontana/Collins, 1975], 108). For a scholarly defense of the miraculous in the Bible, see Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).
30. See, for example, Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970); idem, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); and Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).
31. See, e.g., David G. Firth and Jamie A. Grant, eds., *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).
32. See, e.g., the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press). Similarly, a study of effective history traces the effects of a text on various aspects of thought, culture, and art.

QUESTION 10

What Are Some General Principles for Interpreting the Bible? (1)

While good biblical interpretation is better caught (that is, learned from reading and hearing those who do it well) than taught, it can be helpful to enumerate some overarching interpretive principles. Applied over time, these principles will become more second nature in your interpretation of Scripture.

Approach the Bible in Prayer

The Scriptures tell us that the human heart is desperately wicked and deceitful (Jer. 17:9). Indeed, the basic human response to God's natural revelation (through conscience or nature) is to suppress it in idolatry (Rom. 1:18–23). Even God's people, though given a new nature and the Holy Spirit as a guide, must beware of the deceitful inclinations of their remaining sinful nature. In Psalm 119, the author, traditionally assumed to be King David, serves as a good example of honest self-assessment in his approach to the Scripture. Repeatedly, he prays for insight and redirection. Below is a list of sample petitions within the psalm. Slowly praying through selected verses in Psalm 119 is an excellent way to begin a Bible study session.

- *Verse 5:* [addressing the LORD] “Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!”
- *Verse 10:* “I seek you [LORD] with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.”
- *Verse 12:* “Praise be to you, O LORD; teach me your decrees.”
- *Verses 17–20:* “Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word. Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me. My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times.”
- *Verses 34–37:* “Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.”

The great reformer Martin Luther recognized Psalm 119 as helpful instruction for studying the Bible. He noted:

Thus you see how David keeps praying in the above-mentioned Psalm, “Teach me, Lord, instruct me, lead me, show me,” and many more words like these. Although he well knew and daily heard and read the text of Moses and other books besides, still he wants to lay hold of the real teacher of the Scriptures himself, so that he may not seize upon them pell-mell with his reason and become his own teacher. For such practice gives rise to factious spirits who allow themselves to nurture the delusion that the Scriptures are subject to them and can be easily grasped with their reason, as if they were *Markolf* or Aesop's Fables, for which no Holy Spirit and no prayers are needed.¹

As we approach the Bible, we need to realize that sin affects all of our being—our emotions, wills, and rational faculties. We can easily deceive ourselves or be deceived by others. We need the Holy Spirit to instruct and guide us. Thus, prayer is the essential starting point for any study of the Bible.²

Read the Bible As a Book That Points to Jesus

In a debate with the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem, Jesus said, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39–40; cf. Luke 24:25–27). If we study or teach any part of the Bible without reference to Jesus the Savior, we are not faithful interpreters.³ Of course, not every text points to Jesus in the same way. The Old Testament promises, anticipates, and prepares. Jesus noted this forward-looking dimension to all of God’s prior revelation, saying, “For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John [the Baptist]” (Matt. 11:13). The New Testament announces the fulfillment in Christ of all of Israel’s law, history, prophecies, and institutions. Every passage of Scripture must be read as a chapter in a completed book. As we know how the story wraps up (in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection), we must always be asking how prior chapters lead to that culmination. See [question 18 \(“Is the Bible really all about Jesus?”\)](#) for further information on understanding the Christocentric (Christ-centered) nature of Scripture.

Let Scripture Interpret Scripture

The hermeneutical guideline of Scripture interpreting Scripture has long been espoused by Christian interpreters, going back at least to Augustine (A.D. 354–430) and Irenaeus (A.D. 130–200).⁴ If we believe that all the Bible is inspired by God and thus noncontradictory, passages

of Scripture that are less clear should be interpreted with reference to those that are more transparent in meaning. Cults and heretical groups often seize upon a few obscure texts, ascribe to them questionable meaning, and then interpret the remainder of the Bible through these aberrant lenses.

Another dimension of letting Scripture interpret Scripture means listening to the full panoply of texts that touch upon a subject. For example, if we were to read God's words to Abraham in Genesis 17:10–12, we might conclude that even today all male worshippers of God must be circumcised.⁵ Yet, we read in 1 Corinthians 7:19, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts." By understanding the trajectory of Scripture (promise → fulfillment in Christ), we see that circumcision served a preparatory role for the Jewish nation but is no longer required of God's people. As the author of Hebrews says, "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves" (Heb. 10:1). Paul can circumcise a coworker as a means of strategic missionary accommodation to unregenerate Jews (Acts 16:3), but when the basis of salvation is at stake, Paul is unbending (Gal. 2:3). This brief survey demonstrates how a nuanced understanding of a subject requires the consideration of multiple biblical texts that touch upon it.

Meditate on the Bible

The Bible is not a book for superficial reading. While it is certainly beneficial to read large portions of Scripture in one sitting, no biblical diet is complete without extended rumination on a smaller portion of text. Scripture itself is filled with instructions on such a meditative approach. Drawing from Psalm 119, Martin Luther noted this pattern.

Secondly, [in your study of the Bible,] you should meditate, that is, not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so that you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken them once or twice, and that you have complete understanding. You will never be a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is half ripe.

Thus you see in this same Psalm [119] how David constantly boasts that he will talk, meditate, speak, sing, hear, read, by day and night and always, about nothing except God's Word and commandments. For God will not give you his Spirit without the external Word; so take your cue from that. His command to write, preach, read, hear, sing, speak, etc., outwardly was not given in vain.⁶

It is instructive that many Christians have found it best to start their prayers with quiet and sustained reflection on a small portion of Scripture. We are reminded that we come to God with empty hands. God himself provides the words for our prayers in the Bible. The Puritan Thomas Manton (1620–1677) wrote,

Meditation is a middle sort of duty between the word and prayer, and hath respect to both. The word feedeth meditation, and meditation feedeth prayer; we must hear that we be not erroneous, and meditate that we be not barren. These duties must always go hand in hand; meditation must follow hearing and precede prayer. To hear and not to meditate is unfruitful. We may hear and hear, but it is like putting a thing into a bag with holes.... It is rashness to pray and not to meditate. What we take in by the word we digest by meditation and let out by prayer. These three duties must be so ordered that one may not jostle out the other. Men are barren, dry, and sapless in their prayer for want of exercising themselves in holy thoughts.⁷

Approach the Bible in Faith and Obedience

The Bible is not a philosophy textbook to be debated; it is a revelation from God to be believed and obeyed. As we believe and obey God's Word, we will experience not only joy (Ps. 119:72) but also, more importantly, God's blessing, or approval. James writes,

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does. (James 1:22–25)

At the same time, we must remember that obedience to God's Word can never be brought about by increased human effort. Regeneration and divine empowerment are necessary to believe and obey God's Word. Obedience is possible only through Christ. As the apostle John writes, "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God" (1 John 5:3–5).

The person who reads Scripture and does not obey it is self-deceived (James 1:22). To claim to know God while consistently and consciously disobeying his Word is to demonstrate the falseness of one's claim. The apostle John writes, "The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4).

Responding with faith and obedience, specifically through difficulties, seems to be one of God's chosen means of maturing his people

(Rom. 5:1–11; James 1:1–12; 1 Peter 1:1–12). As we encounter trials in life and meet those difficulties trusting in God and his Word, we can expect the Lord to conform us more into the image of his Son. We can be comforted by the words of Paul in Romans 8:28–29: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”

Martin Luther noted that the many references to David’s trials and enemies in Psalm 119 are instructive for the Christian facing similar situations. He wrote:

Thus you see how David, in the Psalm mentioned, complains so often about all kinds of enemies, arrogant princes or tyrants, false spirits and factions, whom he must tolerate because he meditates, that is, because he is occupied with God’s Word (as has been said) in all manner of ways. For as soon as God’s Word takes root and grows in you, the devil will harry you, and will make a real doctor of you, and by his assaults will teach you to seek and love God’s Word. I myself (if you will permit me, mere mouse-dirt to be mingled with pepper) am deeply indebted to my papists that through the devil’s raging they have beaten, oppressed, and distressed me so much. That is to say, they have made a fairly good theologian of me, which I would not have become otherwise. And I heartily grant them what they have won in return for making this of me, honor, victory, and triumph, for that’s the way they wanted it.⁸

Like Luther, we can meet the troubles of life with trust in God and a reliance on him to obey his Word.

Summary

In this section, we have begun surveying some general guidelines for interpreting the Bible. The ones we discussed above are: (1) Begin

Bible study with prayer, confessing your inclination to deceitfulness and imploring the Lord's assistance. (2) Read the entire Bible as a book which points to Jesus. (3) Let Scripture interpret Scripture. That is, allow clearer passages to help interpret more obscure texts. Also, let the full swath of Scripture speak on a topic before reaching settled conclusions. (4) Meditate on the portion of Scripture you are studying. (5) Approach the Bible in faith and obedience.

Our survey of general interpretive guidelines continues below in [question 11](#).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What role do prayer and meditation currently play in your study of the Bible?
2. What steps can you take to make prayer and meditation a regular part of your Bible reading?
3. Do you approach all portions of the Bible as pointing to Jesus? Which parts seem the most difficult to view in this way? Why?
4. What does it mean to let Scripture interpret Scripture?
5. Is it possible to believe and understand the Bible without obeying it? Can you back up your answer with Scripture?

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1. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings" (1539), in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 72.
 2. Spurgeon advised young pastors, "Praying is the best studying. Luther said so of old—'*Bene orasse est bene studuisse*,' and the well-worn proverb will bear repeating. Pray over Scripture; it is as the treading of grapes in the wine-vat, the threshing of corn on the barn floor, the melting of gold from the ore" (C. H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students: Complete and Unabridged* [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954], 86).
 3. See this helpful and accessible book: Michael Williams, *How to Read the Bible through the Jesus Lens: A Guide to Christ-Focused Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).
 4. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 36–37; and Robert M. Grant with David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 49–50.

5. Genesis 17:10–12, “This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised.”
6. Luther, “Preface,” 72–73.
7. Thomas Manton, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton*, vol. 17, *Sermons on Several Texts of Scripture* (reprint, Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2008), 272–73. See Donald S. Whitney, *Praying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).
8. Luther, “Preface,” 73.

QUESTION 11

What Are Some General Principles for Interpreting the Bible? (2)

In this section, we will continue our survey of general principles for interpreting the Bible. In the prior section, we focused more on the devotional aspect of Bible study (prayer, meditation, obedience). In this section, we will focus more on technical or literary guidelines.

Take Note of the Biblical Genre You Are Reading

If your son were to come home from school and claim to have a ton of homework, you would not discipline him for lying. You would understand that he is using hyperbole to express his strong emotions. In the same way, we need to approach the Bible as sympathetic readers, respecting the various genres and authorial assumptions that accompany such genres. For example, the genre of proverbs generally assumes exceptions. Proverbs are wise advice, not failproof promises. For example, we read in Proverbs 10:4, “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.” All of us can think of examples from our lives that confirm this proverb. At the same time, most of us likely know a few lazy, rich people. Such exceptions do not make the proverb false. Rather, such exceptions confirm the general rule. Proverbs 10:4 is

not a promissory note. Proverbs offer wise advice for ordering our lives, but most of them assume exceptions. For more detail on interpreting proverbs, see [question 28 \(“How Do We Interpret Proverbs?”\)](#).

The genre of historical narrative also includes a number of authorial assumptions. For example, the biblical authors employ historical narrative to report many events of which they do not necessarily approve. The author of Judges clearly does not think sacrificing one’s daughter is a good thing (Judg. 11), though he fails to comment on Jephthah’s actions in the immediate context. The repeated cycle of disobedience in Judges, along with the summary statement (“In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” [Judg. 21:25]), cue the reader that both God and the author are not pleased with Jephthah’s actions. Similarly, many Scriptures teach that drunkenness is wrong, though the apostle John does not feel the need to note its impropriety in John 2:10, where there is a passing reference to inebriation. (A friend once appealed to John 2:10 to make a “biblical” case for excessive drinking!) The author of a historical narrative does not always give explicit sanction or condemnation for behavior reported. A careful reading of the whole work is often necessary to understand the purpose of smaller portions. One must thoughtfully determine what is simply reported and what is intended as normative. For more detail on interpreting historical narrative, see [question 22 \(“How Do We Interpret Historical Narratives?”\)](#).

The study and application of interpretive guidelines for various genres is sometimes called the field of special hermeneutics. Much of the latter half of this book is devoted to special hermeneutics.

Be Aware of Historical or Cultural Background Issues

The sixty-six books of the Bible often assume a reader’s familiarity with various cultural practices, geographic markers, or political fig-

ures. Thus, when an untrained reader opens up the book of Isaiah and starts reading about nations that no longer exist and obscure political alliances, he or she might close the Bible and say, “This is too hard to understand.” As with any historical document, the reader of the Bible will need study aids to delve into the nuances of background issues. Of course, some of the books of the Bible assume little knowledge on the part of the reader and are quite accessible. The Gospel of John, for example, is often distributed as a stand-alone evangelistic tract for this reason. Depending on one’s familiarity with the Scripture, some background issues may be more or less transparent. Do you know what Passover is? Then you shouldn’t have trouble with John the Baptist’s description of Jesus as the (Passover) lamb (John 1:29). Are you familiar with Israel’s forty years of wandering the wilderness? Then Jesus’s forty-day stay in the wilderness, where he was tested but did not sin, takes on added significance (Matt. 4:2; Luke 4:2).

As you study the Bible more, you will have less need to consult commentaries or study aids for the answers to basic questions. There are many introductory surveys of the Old and New Testaments, as well as books specifically on backgrounds, which provide a wealth of information to the curious student. See [question 13 \(“What Are Some Helpful Books or Tools for Interpreting the Bible?”\)](#) for additional discussion on how to use outside books in studying the Bible.

In discussing Bible backgrounds, we also must note two important caveats. First, one can become so enamored with outside historical, cultural, political, or archaeological matters that he essentially ends up using the Bible as a springboard for extrabiblical trivia. The study of ancient Near Eastern culture, while fascinating in its own right, is not the purpose of Bible study. Not a few resources billed as helps for understanding the background of the Bible are little more than collations of interesting facts and speculations about tangentially related

background issues. One must always ask: Did the biblical author really assume that his readers would know this fact? And, if he assumed his readers would know this fact, was it important for the meaning that he was trying to convey? If the answer to both of these questions is yes, then the background issue is indeed worthy of consideration.

Recently, a former student called to ask about Mark 3:13–19, where Jesus calls his twelve apostles. The student said, “I read that all Jewish boys were trained to be rabbis, and if they performed well enough, then they became disciples of rabbis and eventually rabbis themselves. So, in this passage, Jesus’s disciples should be understood as those who had been rejected by conventional rabbinic training. I plan to preach this passage as emphasizing that Jesus chooses persons who have failed. Am I on track?” I responded, “There are passages of Scripture that speak of God choosing the lowly and rejected in this world (1 Cor. 1:26–27), but I do not think that the inspired author, Mark, is emphasizing that point here. In what book did you read this explanation of the background of Mark 3? (Student answers ...) Have you read a similar explanation in any other reference work or commentary? (Student answers, “No.”) That alone should cause you to pause and question whether there is a basis for interpreting this text in light of background information that is not found in any text in the Bible. It appears the source from which you have gathered this information has, at the very least, oversimplified and distorted its description of first-century rabbinic training. Second, and more importantly, Mark does not in any way cue his readers that he intends us to understand this passage as teaching that Jesus chose persons rejected by other rabbis. Does the passage speak of Jesus’s effective call, his demand for radical discipleship, and his delegated authority? Yes! Then preach and teach the meaning of the text—not a fanciful, distorted reconstruction of a background issue.”¹ Unfortunately, in attempts to provide something fresh to their congre-

gations, too many pastors are readily taken in by far-fetched interpretations. A pastor's time would be better spent meditating prayerfully on the text to discover genuine text-driven applications.

A second error one must avoid in background issues is to neglect them. In order to understand and apply a text faithfully, one often must have some awareness of the author's historical or cultural assumptions. One cannot understand the denunciations in the Minor Prophets, for example, without knowing something of Israel's history and relations to surrounding nations. And, while much of this historical background can be garnered directly from other biblical documents, an uninitiated reader will need the help of a more mature reader's summaries. A study Bible, such as *The Zondervan NIV Study Bible* or *ESV Study Bible*, provides brief but helpful comments on relevant background issues.

Pay Attention to Context

Any portion of Scripture must be read within the context of the sentence, paragraph, larger discourse unit, and entire book. The farther one moves away from the words in question, the less informative is the adduced material. Attempting to understand or apply a particular biblical phrase or verse without reference to the literary context is virtually guaranteed to result in distortion. Unfortunately, in popular Christian literature and preaching, there are many examples of such failure to respect the context of a passage. One of the most painful exhibits of such hermeneutical failure is a preacher who bullies and blusters about the authority and inerrancy of Scripture while practically denying its authority through his sloppy preaching.

If one is asked to deliver a message on 1 Corinthians 11:1 ("Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ"), he should not simply meditate on the verse in question but begin by setting the verse in the

context of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians. Paul has been speaking of his voluntary self-denial as an apostle (1 Cor. 9:1–12) as an example for the Corinthians, whom he is calling to deny themselves of permissible food that might cause a Christian brother or sister to sin (1 Cor. 8:9–13). Paul's concern for the spread of the gospel compels him to find every way to avoid placing an obstacle in its way. No one can charge him with being motivated by greed, for he preaches without pay (1 Cor. 9:12–18). Similarly, the Corinthian Christians' concern for the spiritual well-being of others means they should be willing to forego permissible things for the spiritual benefit of others. Indeed, Christ is the supreme example of one who set aside his rights and privileges for the salvation of others (1 Cor. 11:1; cf. Mark 10:45; Phil 2:6–11). Once we understand Paul's original meaning in context, it is easier to faithfully apply the text to our current situation. What permissible things are we being called to forego so as not to lead our weaker Christian brothers and sisters into sin? How can we give priority to the spiritual well-being and salvation of others rather than our own rights and privileges? Where are we being called to self-denial out of love for others, as were Paul, the Corinthians, and ultimately Christ?

It often has been said, "A text without a context is a pretext," meaning that a preacher will be inclined to infuse a text with his own biases if he does not allow the context to direct him to the authorial intent. I have found this true in my life. When I am given the opportunity to select a text for a sermon, I sometimes already have an idea of what I want to say. But, as I go back to the text and study it within context, prayerfully meditating over it, the direction of my message often shifts. Holding tightly to the text calls me back to the inspired author's meaning. I tell my students to hold onto the biblical text like a rider in a rodeo holds onto a bull. And, I also warn them that the only persons in the rodeo ring not on bulls are clowns. When preaching the

Bible, I want to be able to place my finger on specific words and phrases in the text to justify my exhortations. I want the congregation to be persuaded by the words of Scripture, not by my rhetorical ability. The power of a sermon or Bible lesson lies in its faithfulness to the inspired text.

Read the Bible in Community

We live in an individualistic age. Yet God created us to live and worship and grow spiritually together in community. The author of Hebrews writes, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:25). Only as we live out our faith in Christ together do we come to understand with depth and clarity what God has done in and through us (Philem. 6). Similarly, we see that God has structured the church as a body and that every member of that body does not have the same function (Rom. 12:4–5). Some are more gifted as teachers (Rom. 12:7). Others are more gifted in showing mercy or serving in some other way (Rom. 12:8). While all God’s people are called to read and meditate on his Word (Ps. 119:9, 105), some are specially gifted in explaining that Word and exhorting others to believe and obey it (Eph. 4:11–13). If we neglect God’s grace to us in the gifting of other believers, how impoverished we will be! Reading the Bible with fellow believers helps us to gain insights that we would otherwise miss. Also, our brothers and sisters can guard us from straying into false interpretations and misapplications.

A few years ago I visited a nearby church where a student pastor was preaching. Honestly, his sermon was not very good. Yet this pastor had the habit of inviting trusted persons in the church to give him honest feedback on his message every week. When I visited that church several months later, the pastor’s sermon was surprisingly good.

Though it can be painful, when a pastor opens himself up to constructive criticism on his teaching and preaching, the fruit of his humility can be a harvest of faithful and engaging messages. Many mediocre preachers will continue to preach the same dull and errant sermons over their whole lifetimes because they are too proud to seek constructive feedback.

If a pastor does not feel that members in his church can provide him sufficient feedback, he likely underestimates the degree to which the Holy Spirit has distributed gifts within his congregation. Regardless, one can always consult the commentaries of trusted pastors and theologians as dialogue partners in seeking the meaning and application of a biblical text. When one is sufficiently grounded in essential Christian doctrine, it also can be beneficial to read persons who are outside the orthodox and evangelical fold. See [question 13](#) for which commentaries to buy and how to use them.

Begin the Journey of Becoming a More Faithful Interpreter

None of us can claim to be inerrant interpreters. No matter what academic degrees or experiences one has, every person stands before the Bible as a learner. Some are farther along on the journey, but that should not intimidate those who are just beginning the trip.

One way to begin the journey toward more faithful interpretation is to start small. By choosing one particular book of the Bible and spending focused time in it over a period of several weeks or months, one will begin to see the importance and benefit of careful Bible study. Make manageable goals on reading and studying the Bible. Possibly invite a friend or friends to make the sojourn alongside you. Bible study, like athletic training, is often furthered by the camaraderie and accountability of a group.

Rome was not built in a day, and a full-orbed knowledge of the Bible is not attainable through reading one book. I am reminded of a seminary student who told me that my semester-long Greek course was much more difficult than the course he could take at an extension center over five weekends. “Yes,” I replied. “That is because in my class you are actually learning the material.”

Sometimes, things are worth what you pay for them. To acquire a rich knowledge of Scripture, one must be willing to spend the time and energy in study. Indeed, with the psalmist, the modern student of Scripture will come to declare, “The law from your [the LORD’s] mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold” (Ps. 119:72). See [question 12](#) for more suggestions on how to improve as an interpreter of the Bible.

Summary

In this section, we continued our survey of general principles for interpreting the Bible. In the prior section ([question 10](#)), we covered five guidelines. Five additional guidelines in this section are: (1) Take note of the biblical genre you are reading. (2) Be aware of historical and cultural background issues. (3) Pay attention to the immediate and broader context of a passage. (4) Read the Bible in community. (5) Begin the journey of becoming a more faithful interpreter.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. When you read the Bible, do you, either consciously or unconsciously, take into account the genre of the book you are reading?
2. With whom are you reading and discussing the Bible? How have you benefited from studying the Bible with others? If you are not

studying the Bible in community, do you know of an existing small-group Bible study that you can join?

3. Can you think of an instance where additional historical or cultural background information aided you in understanding a biblical text?
4. Have you ever changed your view on what a text of the Bible means by studying the context more carefully? "A text without a context is a pretext." Can you think of an example or illustration of this maxim?
5. What next step can you take on the journey to becoming a more faithful interpreter?

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1. This report of our conversation represents the tenor and main points, not the verbatim words.

QUESTION 12

How Can I Improve As an Interpreter of the Bible?

In the previous section, one of the interpretive guidelines I recommended was to begin the journey of becoming a more faithful interpreter. But what specific steps can you take toward becoming a more faithful interpreter?

Read the Bible

When I was thirteen years old, my mother gave me a photocopy of a hand-written guide for reading the Bible through in a year. Thus began the most important part of my theological education—immersion in Scripture.

In order to understand the Bible, one must read it. And, in order to read the individual parts of the Bible in context, one must read the whole. Thus, it is essential for any faithful interpreter of the Bible to have read the entire Bible and to continue to read through the Bible regularly. Can you imagine a teacher of Milton who admitted to having read only portions of *Paradise Lost*? How foolish it is for a minister of the gospel to seek faithfulness in expounding God's Word while remaining ignorant of the contents of that revelation.

During my freshman year in college, I attended a Bible study run by a campus ministry. The group was discussing John 3:14, “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.” The leader of the Bible study said this verse referred to Moses picking up the serpent (which had been his rod) by the tail at the burning bush (Exod. 4:1–4). Of course, because I had already read through the Bible several times, I knew this passage referred to the bronze serpent in Numbers 21:9. I decided not to return to the campus gathering. Unfortunately, at this point in my life, my mental knowledge of the Bible far exceeded my obedience.

For reading large sections of the Bible, I recommend a modern, dynamically equivalent translation, such as the New Living Translation (see [question 7, “Which Is the Best English Bible Translation?”](#)). You can start at Genesis 1 and read three or four chapters per day. By the end of the year, you will have finished the Bible. Another option is to read portions of both the Old and New Testament every day. The famous Scottish preacher Robert Murray M’Cheyne developed a reading plan that takes one through the Old Testament once and New Testament and Psalms twice over the course of a year—reading about four chapters per day. I am currently following this reading plan, which is found in an introductory section of D. A. Carson’s devotional, *For the Love of God: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God’s Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998).¹ This book has a one-page devotional for each day of the year. At the top of each page is a list of Bible chapters to read for that day, according to M’Cheyne’s reading plan. Carson, a leading evangelical New Testament scholar, provides insightful reflections on one chapter from the reading plan each day. Carson also has completed a second volume, *For the Love of God*, vol. 2, which follows the same format.² I appreciate the way he faithfully interprets the passages while showing how the small pieces fit in the overall vista of

Scripture, finding ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Our church leaders have talked about using Carson's devotional for training new elders. Over the course of a year or two, the bite-sized chunks of biblical theology, slowly digested, could have quite a beneficial effect on the thoughtful reader.

Read and Listen to Faithful Preaching and Teaching

As I mentioned in [question 10](#), faithful interpretation is more easily caught than taught. By reading or listening to faithful expositions of Scripture, one's heart and mind are engaged. Just as the person who regularly drinks fine coffee develops a refined taste for the beverage, a person who consumes a regular diet of faithful teaching develops a mind and heart that is able to recognize good interpretation, as well as distortions.

One of the most important questions you need to ask yourself is, "Am I hearing the Bible faithfully preached and taught at my local church?" If you are not, the second question you should ask yourself is, "Why am I a member of a church where God's Word is not being taught correctly?" If you are not experiencing the edifying and sanctifying effects of biblical teaching, you are likely withering and ineffective in your spiritual life (Col. 1:28–29; 2 Peter 1:3–8). If you are receiving a regular diet of biblical edification but only from source(s) outside your church, that is a good indication that you need to seek a new church—one where the pastors faithfully shepherd the flock, feeding them from the Word of God (Acts 20:28).

Although a local church where the Bible is faithfully taught is an absolute necessity, one can also grow spiritually from reading or listening to the sermons and Bible teaching of those outside your local church. Free audio sermons are widely available online. Three podcasts I recommend are *Truth for Life* (teaching by Alistair Begg), *Gospel in*

Life (teaching by Timothy Keller) and *John Piper Sermons*. There are, of course, many other gifted, faithful preachers to whom you can listen.

One also can learn much from reading sermons, commentaries, and devotionals by faithful exegetes. Certainly, the Bible is *The Book*, but God's gifting of his servants demands that we admit the usefulness of others' books as well. The famous British preacher, Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892), wrote:

Some, under pretense of being taught of the Spirit of God, refuse to be instructed by books or by living men. This is no honoring of the Spirit of God; It is disrespect to Him, for if He gives to some of His servants more light than to others—and it is clear He does—then they are bound to give that light to others, and to use it for the good of the church. But if the other part of the church refuse to receive that light, to what end did the Spirit of God give it? This would imply that there is a mistake somewhere in the economy of God's gifts and graces, which is managed by the Holy Spirit.³

One way to discover useful books or resources is to ask a trusted fellow Christian. Maybe there is someone in your church who has demonstrated a mature knowledge of the Scriptures. Why not ask that person, "What good books have you read recently? Do you have any book recommendations?" For additional advice about books that will help with your Bible study, see [question 13 \("What Are Some Helpful Books or Tools for Interpreting the Bible?"\)](#).

Understand the Relationship between Faith and Understanding

The early church leader Augustine (A.D. 354–430) advised, *Crede, ut intelligas* ("Believe in order that you may understand").⁴ Similarly, Anselm (ca. 1033–1109) said, "For I do not seek to understand in order to believe; I believe in order to understand. For I also believe that 'Un-

less I believe, I shall not understand.”⁵ God demands that we approach him in faith and receive his revelation with trust. Indeed, to reject God’s revelation is nothing other than calling God a liar (1 John 1:10); it is the embracing of idolatry, the exaltation of something or someone above God (Rom. 1:18–32).

This does not mean that you cannot come to God with the honesty of your emotions and questions. The lament psalms (e.g., Pss. 13, 74, 142) are prime examples of such raw honesty before God. Indeed, roughly one-third of the psalms express lament. But even in the midst of darkness, questions, and trials, the psalmist consistently affirms, “But as for me, I trust in you” (Ps. 55:23).

The Scriptures demand that humans approach God in a humble attitude of dependence. What other posture could finite creatures take before their infinite, holy, and all-powerful Creator? The author of Hebrews warns, “And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb. 11:6). Like the father who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus for healing, we may have to cry with honesty, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

As we seek God’s assistance to understand, believe, and obey the Scriptures, a posture of humble faith is absolutely essential. James writes:

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. (James 1:5–8)

Likewise, because obedience is the fruit of genuine faith (James 2:14–26), God expects his children to walk before him in a manner worthy of their calling (Eph. 4:1). Indeed, if a professed Christian does not have a lifestyle of obedience (and repentance for his failures), his relationship with the Lord will be hindered. A consistently unrepentant lifestyle of sin shows that one's profession of faith is false (1 John 1:6).

Peter warns, “Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers” (1 Peter 3:7). A pastor who is unloving and non-sacrificial toward his wife and children can expect little illumination from the Holy Spirit in the study or the pulpit. “Without holiness, no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14), warns the author of Hebrews.⁶ Without lives lived in faith and obedience (though certainly full of failure and repentance too; 1 John 1:8–10), we can expect little divine assistance in understanding and explaining the Scriptures. In fact, when Paul lists the qualifications of pastors, all but one are character qualities—living in integrity before the church and the world (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).⁷ The men who explain God's Word to the gathered church must be people who live according to that Word.

After teaching his disciples a model prayer (the Lord's Prayer), Jesus warns, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matt. 6:14–15). We may be able to recite a systematic theology text from memory, but if our lives are devoid of the love and faith we profess, we are nothing but clanging gongs or clattering cymbals—empty, annoying noisemakers (1 Cor. 13:1).

When Paul begins his letter to Philemon, he writes, “I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints” (Philem. 4–5). Here are the essential prerequisites for biblical study that pleases God—faith in the Lord Jesus and love for others. Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354–430) famously said, “Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.”⁸

Do Not Just Affirm Sound Interpretive Principles; Apply Them

At the seminary where I teach, there is a large, grassy lawn in the middle of the campus. Decades ago, two parallel sidewalks ran through the middle of this lawn. Though the sidewalks have been gone for years, in the hot summer months, two brown stripes reappear in the lawn. Why does the grass continue to turn brown? Possibly it is because the dirt was packed underneath the sidewalks or perhaps it is due to the chemicals used on the sidewalks for weed control. Regardless, the memory of these sidewalks is hard to erase. Similarly, students may come to affirm sound principles of interpretation in a hermeneutics class, but in the heat of regular ministry old patterns continue to surface.

Modern ministers are not the only ones who struggle for consistency in their theoretical and practical hermeneutical methods. Historians of biblical interpretation often note that proponents of sound interpretation throughout church history have failed to consistently apply their own advice. For all his denunciations of allegorical exegesis, Martin Luther sometimes fell prey to it himself.⁹ Similarly, Augustine enumerated several helpful principles of exegesis that he did not consistently employ.¹⁰

A student taking a course in biblical interpretation can get perfect scores on all the tests and assignments and still end up failing to faithfully interpret the Bible in his or her ministry. Once the student is out of the artificial environment of the classroom, he will discover what many ministers have before him, that it is much harder work to prepare a faithful Bible study or sermon than to talk spontaneously about what he thinks people need to hear.

One of the saddest legacies of a ministry who fails to handle God's Word correctly is a congregation that is spiritually starving and confused. Over time, rather than learning how to understand the Bible, a congregation that sits under an unfaithful interpreter will learn how to misinterpret the Bible. As children and grandchildren are affected, potentially hundreds, if not thousands, of people are led into error and spiritual malaise. In considering the devastation that one bad preacher can cause, it is little wonder that James warns us, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1).

An unfaithful interpreter also can create a spiritual codependency—a situation in which people feel they must come to the pastor to understand the text because they are never able to see on their own the things he emphasizes in his teaching. These poor, starving infants who should have been fed on the pure milk of the Word (1 Peter 2:2) stare with gaunt eyes at the pulpit each week, hoping that manna will fall from heaven.

Welcome and Receive Feedback Graciously

The main teaching pastor at my church has the habit of e-mailing his sermon to five or six trusted friends on Saturday night. We have the responsibility of giving him correction and encouragement on his

message. Often, I have little to say, but occasionally my words have kept him from error.

When I first started preaching, I would always ask my wife to read my sermon. Sometimes her criticisms were quite withering, and I did not want to hear them; but after reflection, I usually came around to agree with her.

If you want to know the truth about your teaching—both at the level of interpretation and delivery—you are going to have to ask. And it is likely you are going to have to ask several times and make it clear that you are not going to strike back or hold it against people if they tell you the truth. It is probably best to decide beforehand exactly what you will say. You can rehearse the interchange in your mind. For example, here are some words you can adapt to your setting.

I'm a bit nervous to ask you this because I know I have room to improve, but I was wondering if you could e-mail me your honest feedback on my sermon. I want to be a more faithful interpreter and better communicator, and I believe you can help me. Please feel free to offer any advice at all. Do not be afraid to offer criticisms. That is what I want.

Also, decide beforehand not to defend yourself. Respond only with thanksgiving—even if you feel that some of the advice was misguided or unjustified. If you seek to defend yourself, do not expect to ever get honest feedback again from the person to whom you are responding.

If you feel sheepish about opening yourself up to criticism from someone in your current setting, possibly you can e-mail your sermon or Bible lesson to an old friend from college or seminary. Ideally, you should move toward asking those in your current setting. Over time, you can develop a trusted cadre of advisers and rejoice to see their interpretive skill developing along with your own. Possibly God will

raise up other leaders to share the teaching ministry through these relationships.

As you seek the help of others in growing as an interpreter, here are two proverbs on which to meditate.

- *Proverbs 27:17*: “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.”
- *Proverbs 24:26*: “An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.”

Acquire and Employ Bible Study Tools

Erasmus, a church leader in the sixteenth century, said, “When I get a little money, I buy books; and if any is left, I buy food and clothes.”¹¹ We can be thankful that we don’t live in such lean days, but a diligent student of the Bible will make it a priority to purchase books to aid in his or her study of the Scriptures.

Besides acquiring several modern translations of the Bible (see [question 7, “Which Is the Best English Bible Translation?”](#)), your first purchase probably should be a good study Bible. A study Bible will not only give you a helpful overview of each book but also provide verse notes to help you understand more obscure statements. The notes in a study Bible obviously will exhibit the doctrinal biases of the persons writing those notes. For that reason, I recommend the *Zondervan NIV Study Bible* and the *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway). Both are respected works whose notes represent the broad consensus of evangelical scholarship.

As you continue your study of the Scriptures and are seeking more in-depth study aids, consult [question 13, “What are some helpful books or tools for interpreting the Bible?”](#)

Pass On What You Are Learning

In the spiritual life, you are either a stagnant pool or a flowing fountain. If you are learning but not sharing what you are learning, you will be like an algae-covered pond. Much of the advice above has assumed that the readers of this book are engaged in or aspire to some public ministry. Possibly you don't see yourself in public ministry. Yet, when it comes to the Bible, all of God's people are to overflow with the truths they are learning. Even if your conversations about the Bible are with your children, spouse, and neighbors, you should be seeking to share the new insights you are learning about God.

Summary

No one has "arrived" as an interpreter of the Bible. We are all on a journey to greater faithfulness. In this section, I offered seven suggestions for how to grow in hermeneutical skill: (1) Read the Bible. (2) Read and listen to faithful preaching and teaching. (3) Understand the relationship between faith and obedience. (4) Do not just affirm sound interpretive principles; actually apply them. (5) Welcome and receive feedback graciously. (6) Acquire and employ Bible study tools. (7) Pass on what you are learning.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Is reading the Bible your daily practice? If not, why not start today?
2. Is the Bible taught faithfully at your church? Are you and your family being edified and challenged by Scripture there?

3. If you currently teach or preach the Bible, do you have a method for receiving feedback on your teaching?
4. Do you own a study Bible? If so, who is the publisher? What is the stated aim of your study Bible notes?
5. What relationships do you have that allow you to share what you are learning from the Bible?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

ESV Study Bible. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.

Köstenberger, Andreas J. *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology*. Invitation to Theological Studies Series. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2021.

Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Rev. ed. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006.

Zondervan NIV Study Bible. Rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011.

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1. For a free, legal copy of this devotional (vol. 1), see this link provided by The Gospel Coalition: s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/1998_for_the_love_of_God.pdf.
 2. For a free, legal copy of this devotional (vol. 2), see this link provided by The Gospel Coalition: s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/1999_for_the_love_of_God.pdf.
 3. Charles Spurgeon, *Words of Counsel for Christian Workers* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1985), 112–13.
 4. Augustine, *Homilia* 43.7, 9.

5. Anselm, *Proslogion* 1.1. The English translation is from Anselm, *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 81. At the end of this quotation, Anselm cites the Old Latin version of Isaiah 7:9.
6. Though the author of Hebrews appears to be referring to one's standing before the Lord at the final judgment, the statement is equally true in this life.
7. The only skill or non-character quality listed is having the ability to teach (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9).
8. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.36 (NPNF₁ 2: 533).
9. Robert H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings*, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 48.
10. So judges Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 37.
11. This is Erasmus's supposed quip, as it is often repeated. The closest wording I could locate in his published works reads: "The first thing I shall do, as soon as the money arrives, is to buy some Greek authors; after that, I shall buy clothes" (Letter 124, "To Jacob Batt, Paris, 12 April [1500]," in *The Correspondence of Erasmus, Letters 1 to 141, 1484 to 1500*, trans. R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson [Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 1974], 1:252).

QUESTION 19

Do All the Commands of the Bible Apply Today?

Why do you insist that homosexual behavior is wrong when the Bible also commands people not to wear clothes woven from two different kinds of materials (Lev. 19:19)? You just pick and choose your morality from the Bible.” Such accusations against Christians are not uncommon today. How can we, in fact, determine what biblical commands are timeless in application? Do we have a biblical basis for obeying some commands in Scripture while neglecting others?

Covenant-Bound Commands

In looking at this important question, we first need to distinguish between commands linked to the old covenant that have been superseded in Christ and commands that are still to be lived out on a daily basis by God’s people. Though a bit of an oversimplification, it can be helpful to think of God’s commands in the Old Testament as divided into civil (social), ceremonial (religious), and moral (ethical) categories. Those laws that relate to the civil and ceremonial (for example, food laws, sacrifices, circumcision, cities of refuge, etc.) find their fulfillment in Christ and no longer apply. The idea that Christians are not ex-

pected to obey the Old Testament's civil and ceremonial commands is found throughout the New Testament. For example, in Mark 7, we read:

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a man can make him 'unclean' by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him 'unclean.'" After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (*In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean."*) He went on: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'" (Mark 7:14–23, my emphasis)

Similarly, in the book of Acts, we read:

The apostles and elders met to consider [the question of whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised to be saved]. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: "Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, *why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?* No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are." (Acts 15:6–11, my emphasis)¹

Not only the civil and ceremonial laws but also the timeless moral demands of God find their fulfillment in Christ. Yet, these moral com-

mands continue to find their expression through the Spirit-empowered lives of Christ's body, the church (Rom. 3:31).

Some speculate as to the reasons for some of the more unusual commands in the Old Testament. Why does touching someone's dead body make one unclean for seven days (Num. 19:11–13)? Why was eating catfish forbidden (Lev. 11:9–10)? Sometimes, pseudoscientific reasons are offered, such as in books that encourage people to eat like the ancient Israelites.² Elsewhere, pastors or commentators wax eloquent on the symbolic meaning of various commands. Admittedly, there are some symbol-laden divine instructions; yeast, for example, seems to have repeated negative connotations in the Bible (Exod. 12:8–20; 23:18; Lev. 10:12; Luke 12:1; 1 Cor. 5:6–8; Gal. 5:9).³ Moving beyond the few explicit indications, however, the suggested symbolic significance for Old Testament regulations quickly becomes quite fanciful. Whatever the reason for the various commands (frankly, some of which *are* puzzling), it is clear that one of their main functions was to keep God's people as a separate, distinct group, untainted by the pagan cultures around them (Exod. 19:6; Ezra 9:1; 10:11). Also, some of the biblical commands imply that the surrounding nations engaged in the exact practices God forbade, apparently with pagan religious connotations (Lev. 19:26–28). God preserved the Jews as his chosen people, through whom he revealed his saving plan and finally brought the Savior at the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4).

Many supposed inconsistencies of Christian morality (for example, the charge that Christians pick and choose their morality from the Bible) are explained by understanding the provisional and preparatory nature of the civil and ceremonial laws of the old covenant period. The parallel is not exact, but imagine how foolish it would be for someone to raise the accusation, "Millions of people in every state of the Union

are flaunting the Constitution! You don't really believe or obey your Constitution, which clearly states in the Eighteenth Amendment:

The manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States and all territory subject to the jurisdiction thereof for beverage purposes is hereby prohibited.⁴

To which we would reply, "Yes, that amendment once was the law of the land, but it was superceded by the Twenty-first Amendment, which begins, 'The eighteenth article of the amendment to the Constitution of the United States is hereby repealed.'"⁵

The Bible is not a policy book, with each page giving equally timeless instruction. Yes, "Every word of God is flawless" (Prov. 30:5). Nevertheless, the Bible is more like a multivolume narrative, in which the later chapters clarify the ultimate meaning and sometimes the temporary, accommodating nature of earlier regulations and events (e.g., Matt. 19:8). Old Testament commands that are repeated in the New Testament (for example, moral commands, such as the prohibition of homosexuality [Lev. 18:22; 1 Cor. 6:9]) or not explicitly repealed (as are the civil and ceremonial laws [Mark 7:19; Heb. 10:1–10]) have abiding significance in the expression of God's Spirit-led people.

Prescriptive versus Descriptive

If we reflect on what biblical texts are applicable today, it is also important to consider whether a text is prescriptive or descriptive. That is, does a text prescribe (command) a certain action, or does it describe that behavior? This question can be complex, as some behaviors are described in praiseworthy ways so that they essentially have a secondary prescriptive function. Luke, for example, repeatedly reports Jesus's praying (e.g., Luke 3:21; 5:15–16; 6:12; 9:18–22, 29; 10:17–21; 11:1;

22:39–46; 23:34, 46). Such descriptive passages complement more explicit exhortations to pray in Luke's Gospel (Luke 11:2–13; 18:1–8; 22:40, 46). So, a good general rule is that a behavior reported in the text may be considered prescriptive only when there is subsequent explicit teaching to support it.

Another situation where we must consider the prescriptive and descriptive nature of texts is Christian baptism in the New Testament. Some Christians claim that baptism must be performed immediately upon a convert's initial profession of faith. In support, they cite a number of narrative texts in the New Testament, which describe baptism as coming immediately or very soon after a person believes (e.g., Acts 2:41; 8:12, 38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8). However, nowhere in the New Testament do we find an explicit prescription such as this: "Baptize persons immediately after they believe." It is clear that all believers are to be baptized (Matt. 28:19; Rom. 6:3–4; 1 Cor. 1:13–16), but the exact timing of that baptism in relation to conversion is not explicitly stated.

In further thinking about the timing of baptism, we should note that many early conversions reported in Acts came within families or groups that were steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures. Yes, the early church was quick to obey Jesus's command for disciples to be baptized, but the background and setting of these early believers differs considerably from those of many converts today. Also, the evidence of conversion that accompanied the apostolic preaching in Acts was often dramatic and/or miraculous. Since we lack an explicit command on the timing of baptism, wisdom must be applied in discerning the reality of our converts' faith. Thus we conclude: immediate baptism could be advisable or further times of instruction and observation may be necessary.

Culture, Time, and Biblical Commands

In relation to culture and time, the *moral* commands of Scripture can be divided into two categories.

1. Commands that transfer from culture to culture with little or no alteration.
2. Commands that embody timeless principles that find varying expressions in different cultures.

Many commands in Scripture are immediately applicable in other cultures with little or no alteration. For example, in Leviticus 19:11 we read, “Do not steal.” While cultures may have varying understandings of private property and the public commons, all humans are equally bound by this clear supracultural command. It is wrong to pilfer the private property of others.

Other commands of Scripture, while immediately applicable across various cultures, have wider implications depending on the culture in which they find expression. For example, in Ephesians 5:18, we read, “Do not get drunk on wine.” This command applies in a timeless way across all cultures. It is always wrong to get drunk with wine at any time in any culture. In more detailed application, however, the student of Scripture also should ask what other substances a culture may offer that have a similar effect to wine (for example, being drunk with vodka, getting high on marijuana, etc.). In seeking such implications within new cultures, the initial command, while immediately understandable, is given broader application. One way to develop applications is to distill the *principle* of the original command—for example, “Do not take a foreign substance into your body to the degree that you

lose control of your normal bodily functions or moral inhibitions.” Then, one can go on to discuss what substances in different cultures would present this danger and thus should be forbidden from human intake to the degree that they cause the deleterious effect.⁶

The close similarity between drunkenness from beer, vodka, or wine is relatively transparent to most readers. But what about a command with more cultural veneer? In 1 Corinthians 11:5, for example, Paul writes, “And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is just as though her head were shaved.” Should women today, then, always cover their heads when they pray in public? Again, it is important to ask the *purpose* behind Paul’s original command. Was it specifically the physical placing of a piece cloth on a woman’s head that concerned him? Was it not, rather, the woman’s submission to her husband that this head covering expressed in the culture to which Paul wrote (see 1 Cor. 11:1–16)?⁷ If so, we can ask, “Does a woman covering her head in our culture express submission to her husband?” Transparently, it does not. What behaviors, then, communicate a woman’s submission to her husband? Two examples from the Southeastern United States are a woman’s wearing of a wedding ring on her left ring finger and the taking of her husband’s last name (without hyphenation). While a woman keeping her maiden name may not express an unbiblical independence in some cultures (China, for example), within the circles where I grew up, a woman keeping her last name after marriage was an implicit rejection of biblically defined gender roles. I also recognize that, even within the Southeastern United States, this cultural expression could change. There may come a day when a Southern woman keeping or hyphenating her last name at marriage does not convey a rejection of biblical teaching on gender roles.

Finally, we should note that there are some nonmoral commands that are not applicable outside of their original setting. For these commands, the author intended them to be fulfilled only once by the intended recipient(s) and did not see them as paradigmatic in any way. The list of such commands is very small. One example would be 2 Timothy 4:13, where Paul asks Timothy, "When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments." Such a command was obeyed by Timothy, we presume, and has no further application in any other culture or time.

Below is a list of guidelines to help determine in what way a biblical command may find varying expressions in other settings.

1. Rephrase the biblical command in more abstract, theological terms. Is the injunction a culturally specific application of an underlying theological principle? Or are the command and cultural application inseparable?
2. Would a modern-day *literal* application of the command accomplish the intended objective of the biblical author's original statement (assuming you can determine the objective of the biblical author's command)?
3. Are there details in the text that would cause one to conclude that the instructions are only for a specific place or time?
4. Are there details in the text that would cause one to conclude that the instructions have a supracultural application (that is, the command applies unchanged in different cultures)?
5. Do your conclusions about the debated passage cohere with the author's other statements and the broader canonical context?

6. Is there a salvation historical shift (old covenant → new covenant) that would explain an apparent contradiction with other biblical instructions?
7. Beware of a deceitful human heart that would use hermeneutical principles to rationalize disobedience to Scripture. Interpretive principles, like a sharp knife, can be used for both good and ill.

Summary

Most Christians do not attempt to obey all the commands in the Bible (for example, the command to not wear clothes woven of two different fabrics, Lev. 19:19). As odd as it may sound, there are good biblical reasons for neglecting some scriptural injunctions. As participants in the new covenant, Christians must distinguish between moral commands with abiding authority and those civil and ceremonial regulations of the old covenant that find their fulfillment in Christ (Mark 7:14–23; Acts 15:6–11). The timeless moral commands of both the Old and New Testament, while fulfilled in Christ, find ongoing expression through the Spirit-led lives of Christ's body, the church.

In interpreting the Bible, it is also important to keep in mind the difference between prescriptive and descriptive writing. Much is described in Scripture that is not specifically commanded. Finally, in seeking to apply commands that come to us with a "cultural veneer," it is important to determine the underlying theological principles and their concomitant applications in our setting today. Guidelines for determining to what degree a command may be culturally conditioned are listed above.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Has anyone ever accused you of picking and choosing your morality from the Bible? How did you respond?
2. Do you feel confident explaining why Christians are not to obey food laws or sacrificial laws in the Old Testament? Try giving a brief explanation. Be sure to cite Scriptures to support your assertions.
3. Read Judges 11. Is the behavior of Jephthah prescriptive or descriptive? How do you know?
4. In Romans 16:16, Paul writes, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." In what way is this command applicable today? Explain.
5. Are there any commands in Scripture about which you have interpretive questions or doubts?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Croteau, David A. *Urban Legends of the New Testament: 40 Common Misconceptions*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015.

Schreiner, Thomas R. *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011. (See chap. 9, "Delineating the Significance of Paul's Letters," 151–59.)

Van Voorst, Robert E. *Commonly Misunderstood Verses of the Bible: What They Really Mean*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017.

Virkler, Henry A., and Karelynn Gerber Ayayo. *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker,

2007. (See chap. 8, “Applying the Biblical Message: A Proposal for the Transcultural Problem,” 193–216.)

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1. As a missionary accommodation (so as not to offend Jews), the early Christians did forego some permitted foods (Acts 15:20; 1 Cor. 8–10).
 2. E.g., Jordan Rubin, *The Maker's Diet: The 40 Day Health Experience That Will Change Your Life Forever* (Lake Mary, FL: Siloam, 2004).
 3. Yeast can refer to pride, hypocrisy, false teaching, etc. But note how it symbolizes a positive pervasive influence in Luke 13:21.
 4. The Eighteenth Amendment was ratified January 16, 1919.
 5. The Twenty-First Amendment was ratified December 5, 1933.
 6. Stein uses Ephesians 5:18 to illustrate implications (Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 33–34).
 7. See Benjamin L. Merkle, “Paul’s Argument from Creation in 1 Corinthians 11:8–9 and 1 Timothy 2:13–14: An Apparent Inconsistency Answered,” *JETS* 49, no. 3 (2006): 527–48.

QUESTION 20

Why Can't People Agree on What the Bible Means?

The diversity of biblical interpretations can tempt a Christian to cynical resignation: "If all these Bible scholars can't even agree on (*fill in the blank*), then what makes me think I can figure it out?!" Faithful Christians disagree on what the Bible teaches on issues such as baptism, divorce, and predestination, but such lack of unanimity should not lead to hermeneutical despair. The Bible itself provides us with insights in dealing with the interpretive disagreements we will inevitably encounter.

Non-Christians Can Be Expected to Misunderstand and Distort the Bible

Many times the so-called Bible scholars who appear on television or are quoted in the media are actually non-Christians antagonistic toward Christian orthodoxy. The apostle Paul warns us that such people have been given over to depraved and deceived minds as punishment for their continuing rejection of the truth (Rom. 1:18–32; 2 Thess. 2:11–12). Thus, we should not be surprised by nonbelievers' misinterpretations of the Bible and misrepresentations of Christ. Neither should we be surprised that the world applauds opinions that confirm it in its rebellion (1 John 4:5).

Non-Christian scholars often start with the assumption that God does not intervene miraculously in the world. It is no surprise, then, that they end up denying supernatural events such as the virgin birth. It is dishonest, however, not to admit that one's starting pre-supposition ("miracles do not happen") is essentially the same as one's conclusion ("this miracle did not happen"). A revealing question to ask the skeptic is, "What evidence would convince you that the Bible is reporting a factual event here?"

Describing the period between his first and second comings, Jesus warned, "Many false prophets will appear and deceive many people" (Matt. 24:11). Such false prophets often come dressed in the clothes of religiosity. Jesus cautioned, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Matt. 7:15). In similar language, Paul warned the Ephesian elders:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. (Acts 20:28–31)

Do non-Christians ever have accurate insights into the meaning of the Bible? Of course they do. In his common grace, God has given rational minds to both redeemed and unredeemed persons. At a fundamental level, however, the unbelieving mind remains veiled to the gospel and is unable to perceive or overcome its distorted judgments on spiritual matters (2 Cor. 4:3).

The Amount of Disagreement among Genuine Believers Is Overstated

In considering debated biblical interpretations, we must be certain that we are considering real cases of disagreement and not vague notions of incongruity. On what interpretive issue are Christians disagreeing? What are the various positions? Who supports each position, and what are their arguments?

If you are troubled by a particular text or topic, it can be helpful to write out the answers to the questions above. You will likely discover that there is actually a great deal of agreement among persons who submit to the authority of Scripture. This is an important point. If you find someone arguing, “Yes, the Bible says that, but ... [followed by some reason suggesting that you should disregard the Bible’s teaching],” then recognize this interpretive opinion as what it really is—disobedience to and distortion of God’s Word. At the same time, we should not accuse other Christians of denying the faith or undermining biblical authority for disagreement on secondary issues. In fact, we should always remain open to being persuaded by the Scriptures to change our views. Otherwise, God’s revealed Word, the Bible, is no longer our authority.

Let us consider briefly how one might approach the debated topic of divorce. A partial list of notations might include:

Christians agree: Divorce is bad. God does not like divorce
(Mal. 2:16; Mark 10:2–9).

Christians disagree Are there ever valid reasons for divorce
(e.g., abandonment, adultery, etc.)? Con-

sider Matthew 5:32; 19:9; and 1 Corinthians 7:15.

Christians agree: God forgives repentant divorced persons (1 John 1:9).

Christians disagree: May divorced persons be church leaders? May divorced persons remarry and, if so, under what circumstances? Consider Deuteronomy 24:1–4; Matthew 1:19; 19:3–9; and 1 Timothy 3:2, etc.

Obviously, a thorough study of divorce goes beyond the scope of this book, but in such a study numerous relevant texts need to be considered carefully.¹

It is also important to recognize that none of us has arrived. We are all on a hermeneutical journey (see [question 12, “How Can I Improve As an Interpreter of the Bible?”](#)). If you submit to the authority of Scripture, however, you will find yourself changing your views and behaviors as you discover what God has revealed on various matters.²

God Did Not Reveal All Issues with the Same Clarity

A traditionally accepted doctrine in Protestant Christian theology is the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture. To simply assert that the Bible is clear, however, is to be less than clear. In fact, as noted above, the Bible is not clear to nonbelievers, who are blinded by their sin. Also, the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit is necessary to bring greater clarity to God’s people as they study his Word (see [question 16, “What Is the Role of the Holy Spirit in Determining Meaning?”](#)). Wayne Grudem is right to qualify the doctrine of perspicuity accordingly: “The clarity of

Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that it is able to be understood, but right understanding requires time, effort, the use of ordinary means, a willingness to obey, and the help of the Holy Spirit; and our understanding will remain imperfect in this lifetime.”³

Still, it seems that further definitional qualifications may be necessary. Some texts in the Bible indicate that God did not intend for all things to be made clear. For example, in Romans 14:5, Paul allows for continued Christian disagreement on whether some days have special significance for Christian worship. Paul does not say, “Don’t you know? The Scriptures are clear on that. Everyone should ...”. Rather, Paul says, “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom. 14:5). Thus, it appears that continuing disagreement *on some secondary issues* is not a matter of failing to submit to Scripture or evidence of a lack of interpretive skill. For whatever reason, God did not intend to make all things clear.

Neither did God intend to make all matters easy. The apostle Peter writes:

Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:15–16)

We note that Paul’s letters, as well as other portions of Scripture, contain some things that are “hard to understand,” though not impossible to understand. Some texts are challenging and when wrongly handled (by false teachers) lead persons to heresy and damnation. It is noteworthy that one can never blame God for misunderstanding the Bible. Just as all are without excuse when they view God’s glory

revealed in creation (Rom. 1:20), so interpreters are without excuse for distorting God's special revelation of himself in Scripture (Matt. 22:29). In *The Bondage of the Will*, Luther excoriated Erasmus for implying that the Scriptures were unclear, when in actuality it was Erasmus's sinful and vacillating mind that was to blame.⁴ The Bible promises that true believers have God's assurance that, whatever their innate weaknesses or interpretive challenges, the Holy Spirit will ultimately guard them from denying the faith (Phil. 1:6; 1 Peter 1:5; 1 John 2:20–27). Such promises should lead not to hubris but to humility.

While God's revelation is sufficient for us (giving us all we need), it is not exhaustive. Moses says, "*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law*" (Deut. 29:29, my emphasis). Similarly, speaking in the third person, Paul describes a revelatory experience he had: "This man ... was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell" (2 Cor. 12:3–4). Clearly, God did not speak to every issue in the Scriptures. In divine wisdom, the Bible provides sufficiently clear paradigms for whatever ethical or theological implications we need in our day. We are not promised insight into the mysteries of all God's work. "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror," but one day we will see Christ face to face (1 Cor. 13:12).

A few final caveats on hard-to-understand biblical texts are in order. (1) It is sometimes advisable to reserve judgment on debated issues or texts. I am reminded of a prominent pastor who told me that he suspended his expositional series of Revelation at chapter 11 until he had more confidence in his understanding of the rest of the book. (2) It is also acceptable to have a provisional opinion on debated matters. An honest interpreter might say, "I'm 70 percent convinced of this view." Depending on the setting, it also can be appropriate to educate your

hearers about the strengths and weaknesses of proposed alternatives. In a traditional sermon, however, it is generally best to deliver the fruit of your study rather than enlisting laborers to glean behind you in the fields of exegesis. (3) If you are the only advocate of an interpretation, it is almost certainly wrong. Strange and idiosyncratic interpretations should be recognized for what they are.

Interpreters Have Varying Levels of Knowledge and Skill

While it is true that some technical arguments related to the Greek and Hebrew texts of our Bible can be engaged in only by linguistic experts, it is striking that the Bible discounts or ignores characteristics that one might normally list as prerequisites for skilled interpretation. The apostles are described as theologically untrained by the cultural standards of their day (Acts 4:13). One would not normally choose a fisherman as the leader of a new religious movement (Matt. 16:18). In fact, the exaltation of human intelligence is seen as a barrier to understanding God's revelation. The apostle Paul writes,

Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." (1 Cor. 3:18–20)

Similarly, Jesus prays, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure" (Matt. 11:25–26).

What, then, makes a person truly wise in God's eyes? In Psalm 119, David tells us that the wise person has a thorough knowledge of and obedient response to God's Word. Addressing God, the psalmist writes,

Your commands make me wiser than my enemies,
for they are ever with me.
I have more insight than all my teachers,
for I meditate on your statutes.
I have more understanding than the elders,
for I obey your precepts.
(Ps. 119:98–100)

We also should note that it is possible to have immense knowledge but lack the obedient response the psalmist describes. In such cases, the knowledge is empty and dead, like a body without a spirit (Matt. 7:15–20; James 2:14–26; 1 John 2:4). Without love and good deeds, a knowledgeable teacher might as well be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Cor. 13:1–3).

Although some people in the church are gifted with timely messages from God or the ability to teach his Word (1 Cor. 12:8; Rom. 12:7), Christianity has no high priestly intelligentsia. God made his Word accessible to his people so that they might, by the power of his Spirit, believe it, obey it, and teach it to others (Deut. 6:6–7; Matt. 28:20).

Interpreters Have Varying Levels of Spiritual Illumination and Diligence

Regardless of their natural gifting, all Christians are assured of the supernatural presence of the Holy Spirit, who will teach them and protect them from error (1 John 2:20–27; cf. John 16:13). At the same time, believers are called to responsibility, being exhorted to diligence. Paul writes to Timothy: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

God calls us to approach his Word with prayer, meditation, repentance, faith, and obedience (Ps. 119). The Holy Spirit works to correct

our sinful biases and give us clarity of observation and judgment (see [question 16, “What Is the Role of the Holy Spirit in Determining Meaning?”](#)). If, however, we approach the Scriptures haphazardly or in disobedience, we should not expect the Holy Spirit to aid us. If we are living in unrepentant sin, we are grieving the Holy Spirit rather than opening our ears to listen to and follow him (Eph. 4:30; 1 Peter 3:7).

Martin Luther spoke of the need to approach the Scriptures reverently and meditatively.

And take care that you do not grow weary or think that you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken [the words of Scripture] once or twice, and that you have complete understanding. You will not be a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is half ripe.⁵

When discussing a biblical text, however, one can never appeal to one's spiritual preparation as the basis for the correctness of one's interpretation (for example, “I prayed over this text for three hours, so I know I am right!”). Neither can one accuse his opponents of error because of perceived spiritual maladies. Arguments and appeals must always be made with a finger on the text, pointing to evidence that is available to all. Apollos can serve as a model, “For he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, *proving from the Scriptures* that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 18:28, my emphasis).

Interpreters Have Various Biases

All interpreters come to the text with biases, both perceived and unperceived. The families we were reared in, our church upbringing (or lack of it), our education, our jobs, our life experiences—all of these influence our thinking. We can pray with the psalmist, “Who can discern his errors? Forgive my hidden faults” (Ps. 19:12). But until we stand in

Christ's presence, we will have to contend with indwelling sin and its concomitant mental and spiritual distortions (Gal. 5:17).

I was born to Baptist parents, raised in a Baptist church, attended a Baptist seminary, and now teach at a Baptist school. I am firmly convinced that the Bible teaches believer's baptism by immersion, but I am not so simpleminded as to think that my upbringing and employment have not influenced my judgment. Hypothetically speaking, what would it take to convince me of the paedobaptist (infant baptism) view? The cost of moving to such a position (resignation from the school where I teach and the church where I pastor) likely have a strong unconscious influence on me. The same could be said for paedobaptist pastors and professors who would have to resign from their positions for moving to a credobaptist view (that is, believer's baptism).

Summary

Until Christ returns, we will live in a world where people disagree over the meaning of the Bible. In this environment, it is important to remember that many so-called "experts" who speak or write publicly on the Bible are actually non-Christians whom we should expect to misunderstand and distort the truth (Matt. 7:15; Rom. 1:28–32; 2 Thess. 2:11–12). Also, the amount of disagreement *among genuine believers* is easily overstated. Moreover, the Bible makes clear that God did not intend to reveal all matters with the same clarity (Rom. 14:5; 2 Peter 3:15–16).

While interpreters have varying levels of skill and knowledge, worldly intelligence does not make a gifted interpreter. A deep knowledge of and whole-hearted obedience to God's Word, however, makes one truly wise (Ps. 119:98–100). Finally, we noted that that Holy Spirit guards God's people from error and aids them in understanding and applying his Word (1 John 2:20–27). Such promised divine assistance,

however, does not absolve the Christian from the responsibility to be diligent (2 Tim. 2:15).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Have you been struggling to reach an opinion on a particular biblical text or theological issue? What is the next step you should take in dealing with this matter?
2. Who is the most recent religious expert you have heard quoted in the news? Could you tell if he or she was a Christian?
3. Can you think of an interpretive issue on which you have changed your mind? What convinced you to change?
4. As noted above, Wayne Grudem defines the perspicuity of Scripture accordingly: "The clarity of Scripture means that the Bible is written in such a way that it is able to be understood, but right understanding requires time, effort, the use of ordinary means, a willingness to obey, and the help of the Holy Spirit; and our understanding will remain imperfect in this lifetime."⁶ Based on the discussion above and your own reflections, would you add any further qualifications?
5. Is there some topic on which you wish the Lord had provided additional comment in Scripture?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Carson, D. A. *Collected Writings on Scripture*. Compiled by Andrew David Naselli. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020.

Thompson, Mark D. *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*. New Studies in Biblical Theology 21. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

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1. See, for example, Craig S. Keener, *And Marries Another: Divorce and Remarriage in the Teaching of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).
 2. For example, see William A. Heth, "Jesus on Divorce: How My Mind Has Changed," *SBJT* 6, no. 1 (2002): 4–29.
 3. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 109. See also Mark D. Thompson, *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 21 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).
 4. Luther writes, "Come forward then, you, and all the Sophists with you, and cite a single mystery which is still obscure in Scripture. I know that to many people a great deal remains obscure; but that is due, not to any lack of clarity in Scripture, but to their own blindness and dullness, in that they make no effort to see truth which, in itself could not be plainer.... They are like men who cover their eyes, or go from daylight into darkness, and hide there, and then blame the sun, or the darkness of the day, for their inability to see. So let wretched men abjure that blasphemous perversity which would blame the darkness of their own hearts on the plain Scriptures of God!" (Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston [Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1957], 72).
 5. Martin Luther, "Preface to the Wittenberg Edition of Luther's German Writings" (1539), in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 66.
 6. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 109.