

# INTERPRETATION

## “handling accurately the word of truth”

### Key question

How is a person to rightly interpret the Biblical text?

### Key text

## II Timothy 2:15

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

### Key Definition

## Interpretation

Interpretation is the imperfect discerning of the meaning of the Biblical text by the believer in community with other believers and in response to the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

### Introduction

*A man was trying to teach his fifth-grade son the value of tithing. The boy listened attentively only to say, "I still don't understand why you have to pay taxes." My friend replied, "Because the Bible says we must give unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and unto God what belongs to God." His son looked puzzled. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, Dad. Caesar died a long time ago."*

1. While “inspiration” receives most of the attention in the debate over Scriptural authority, it is interpretation that is the critical issue. If you believe the Bible is inspired but misunderstand its meaning there is no light or truth.
2. “We aren’t supposed to interpret the Bible. We are supposed to let it interpret itself.” While this statement may reflect a frustration with people reading into the text what they want, it also reflects a profound naiveté with respect to the powerful role played by the reader with respect to any text, especially the Bible. The Bible cannot be understood without the reader’s interpretation of the text.
3. To see we need both light (revelation) and sight (illumination).
4. The question of the objectivity of the interpreter is very significant. Is it possible to be objective in any meaningful way? How can we work toward objectivity?

A. **Proper interpretation is a complex issue that requires sensitivity to two laws.**

## ***The Bible***

The Word of God	In human language
The Laws of the Spirit	The Laws of language
Subjective	Objective
Personal	Public

1. The **laws of the Spirit**. Because the Bible is the Word of God we must be spiritually sensitive to God if we are to have “ears to hear.”
  - a. It is possible to read and not understand or receive the Word because of:
    - **a rebellious spirit - Amos 8:11-12** “Behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord God, ‘When I will send a famine on the land, not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, but rather for hearing the words of the Lord. And people will stagger from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east; **they will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they will not find it.**”  
The context of Amos 8 indicates that because of disrespect and disregard for the will of God the revelation of God was removed.
    - **a spirit that is thankful for what has been understood - Rom.1:21-23** “For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but **they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.** Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.”
    - **a secular approach to the Scripture - II Pet.1:20-21** “But know this first of all **that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation**, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.
    - **a failure to be familiar with the ways of the Spirit of Christ - I Cor.1:10-16** “<sup>10</sup> For to us God revealed {them} through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. <sup>11</sup> For who among men knows the {thoughts} of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the {thoughts} of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. <sup>12</sup> **Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God,** <sup>13</sup> which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual {thoughts} with spiritual {words.} <sup>14</sup> But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. <sup>15</sup> But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. <sup>16</sup> *For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him?* But we have the mind of Christ.”
  - b. How does the Spirit reveal truth to us?
    1. The Spirit teaches as we search the Scripture.
 

**I Pet.1:10-12** “<sup>10</sup> As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that {would come} to you made careful search and inquiry, <sup>11</sup> seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. <sup>12</sup> **It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you,** in these things which now have been

announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven-- things into which angels long to look.”

2. The Spirit teaches through both the prophet’s writing and the preacher’s preaching.
3. The basic message of the New can be understood in terms of:
  - a. The sufferings of Christ,
  - b. The glories to follow.
4. The Spirit convicts the world and glorifies Christ.

**Jn.16:7-14** “7 But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. 8 And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment; 9 concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; 10 and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you no longer behold Me; 11 and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. 12 I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear {them} now. 13 **But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth;** for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. 14 He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose {it} to you.”

5. He is a gift to the believing community.
6. The nature of the Spirit’s teaching ministry.
  - a. “convicting” - It is directed to the inner man.
  - b. “guiding” - It is comprehensive.
  - c. “glorifying” - It is centered in Christ.
  - d. “disclosing” - It is a ministry of clarifying not complicating.
- c. The Spirit will not contradict the text.

**Prov.30:5-6** “Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. **Do not add to His words lest He reprove you, and you be proved a liar.**”

**I Cor.4:6** “Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that in us you might learn **not to exceed what is written**, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.”

- d. The Spirit will enable us to see beyond the letter of the law.
 

**Jn.5:39-40** “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and **it is these that bear witness of Me**; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life.”
- e. We can see things at different levels.
  1. Three Greek words for sight in **Jn.20:1-10**
    - a. “and stooping and looking in, he **saw** the linen wrappings lying there; but he did not go in.” vs.5 “Saw” BLEPO means to see in a general (superficial) way.
    - b. “Simon Peter therefore also came, following him, and entered the tomb; and he **beheld** the linen wrappings lying there, and the face-cloth, which had been on His head, not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.” vs.6-7 “Beheld” THEOREO means to observe in an attentive way.

- c. “Then entered in therefore the other disciple also, who had first come to the tomb, and he **saw**, and believed.” vs.8 “Saw” HORAOW means to discern or to grasp the implications of.
2. Three levels of understanding Scripture.
- Occasional level - What did the text mean to the original author and readers.
  - Universal level - What is the timeless message of the text for our generation.
  - Personal spiritual level - What is the Spirit teaching me through this text.
- Matt.6:22-23** “<sup>22</sup> The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. <sup>23</sup> But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”
- Matt.16:17** “And Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.’”
- Jn.14-16**
- Eph.1:18** “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.”
- I Cor.2:14-16** “<sup>14</sup> But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. <sup>15</sup> But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is approved by no man. <sup>16</sup> For ‘*Who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him?*’ But we have the mind of Christ”
- II Cor.4:3-4,6** “<sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, <sup>4</sup> in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” . . . “<sup>6</sup> For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of god in the face of Christ.”
3. Each level builds upon the previous level. It is our goal to be able to work with each level in interpreting the Bible.
- We must be willing to obey what we learn.
 

**Jn.7:17** “If any man is willing to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself.” Jn.8:47 “He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.”
  - We must meditate on the Scripture. **Ps.119:97-104**
  - We must have a hunger to learn.
 

**I Pet.2:2** “like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation,”
  - Spiritual maturity is an important factor in understanding God’s Word. **I Cor.2:14-3:3** “Spiritual”, “carnal”, and “babes” in Christ.
2. The **laws of human language**. Because the Bible is written in the language of man we must respect normal rules of word usage, grammar, and syntax.
- The historical meaning of words at the time of writing must be discerned.
  - The style of individual human authors and the genera of literature must be respected.

1. A truly literal reading of a text will by definition involve respect for the nature or genera of the text. To read poetry in the same technical methods used in reading a scientific paper would be a violation of the “literal” or intended purpose of the poetry. In the same way, the Gospels are not to be read as technical histories of Jesus’ ministry. They fall into a special category that does not follow the precision of an academic historian writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is not to say that they are not recording the truth but rather that they are selective in a way an academic historian may not be.
2. There are many sections of the Biblical record that should be approached with humility and care in light of the different types of literary expression that are used in the Bible – Psalms, Gen. 1-11, Job, Jonah, Parables of Jesus, etc.
  - Hebrew acrostics – an arrangement of words, or lines in a poem, in which the first letters of each word or line create a pattern. (See Ps. 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145; Prov. 31:20-31; Lam. 1, 2, 3, 4, (5).
  - Hebrew parallelism – a characteristic of Hebrew poetry in which a thought in one line, or the first part of a line, is echoed, developed, or enlarged in the second part or line.
- c. The literary context of a passage including syntax and grammar are important.
- d. The cultural - historical context of the interpreter must be understood.
3. The proper interpretation respects a **spiritual, grammatical, historical method**.
  - a. The subjective element of the Spirit.
    1. If this is ignored you have Christian deism or rationalism.
    2. If this is exaggerated you have Christian gnosticism.
  - b. The objective rules of grammar and syntax.
    1. If this is ignored you have Christian allegoricalism.
    2. If this is exaggerated you have literary critical bias.
  - c. The historical, cultural context of propositional language.
    1. If this is ignored you have Christian sentimentalism.
    2. If this is exaggerated you have historical critical bias.
  - d. Two types of Biblical stories.
    1. History as **Incidental** – ILL. Prodigal son parable. The historicity of this parable is not essential to its purpose and significance.
    2. History as **Indispensable** – ILL. Resurrection of Jesus. The historicity of these events are fundamental to their significance.
4. **Midrash** (Heb. meaning “inquire” or “interpret”) is a term used to describe the way ancient Hebrews read Scripture.
  - a. They would respect the historical critical method as valid but in need of answering the question – “What does this mean for us today in light of God’s full revelation?”.
  - b. To do this, they would embellish the text with their own existential encounters with the text (much like a sermon).
    1. The text would be read as an “eternal” text with an application for each generation.
    2. They would ask the question, “What does this text have to say to our community today?” They would then take some liberties in answering this question. John 6 has been read as an extended midrash on Psalm 78:24.

3. The emphasis is not only on the text but the interpreter's experience of the text in light of subsequent events, revelation, and experience.
  4. **Pesher** is a eschatological form of midrash that assumes that the text contains a hidden meaning that is uncovered only in events occurring at the time of the interpreter, indicating that the interpreter is living at the climax of history. John 19:28 seems to follow this pattern.
- c. Two forms of the Law became prominent in Jewish culture.
1. The **Written** Law (Tora). The Sadducees held that only the written Law was central.
  2. The **Oral** Law (tradition of the elders) – open to new additions and expansion. This oral midrashic tradition was favored by the Pharisees and was finally organized into a written collection (200CE) called the Mishnah, which was supplemented (300-400CE) by the Gemara. The Palestinian and Babylonian editions of these writings (Palestinian Talmud) (44CE) and the Babylonian Talmud (600CE) followed.
- d. Midrash is believed by some to explain the way the NT writers interpreted the OT.
1. Many OT texts seem to be quoted or interpreted by the NT writers, with a freedom or range that our stricter rules (of a literal meaning) would not allow.
    - a) **Matt.1:18-23 (Isa.7:14)** “Now all his took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet; ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel.’”  
 There is no clear record that the virgin birth of Jesus was predicted in Isaiah (from a grammatical-historical perspective). It was only made clear through Matthew's commentary (midrash).
    - b) **Matt.2:6 (Micah 5:2)** “And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, **are by no means least** among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler, who will shepherd My people Israel.”  
**Micah 5:2** in the OT - “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, **too little to be** among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.”
    - c) **Heb.10:30** (Deut. 32:36) “The Lord will **judge** His people”  
**Deut.32:36** “For the Lord will **vindicate** His people.”
    - d) **Rom.11:26** “The Deliverer will **come from Zion**, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.” This quote changes the LXX version of Isa.59:20 “come for the sake of Zion” as well as the Hebrew version “come to Zion.”
    - e) **Matt.2:15 (Hosea 11:1-2)** “. . . that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, ‘**Out of Egypt did I call My son.**’” (referring to Jesus)  
**Hosea 11:1-2** “<sup>1</sup> When **Israel** was a youth I loved him, and **out of Egypt I called My son.** <sup>2</sup> The more they called them, the more they went from them; they kept sacrificing to the Baal and burning incense to idols.” (referring to Israel)
  2. It is only logical to learn from and pattern our use of the OT text after the example of the NT writers use of the OT. We do this with “theological types” etc.
- e. Midrashic reasoning should be respected as a legitimate ways of reading the OT text.
1. **Recontextualization:** Midrashic hermeneutics often read the words of an OT text in other contexts that were a part of God's subsequent revelation (Christ, Eschatological truths, etc).

2. **Teleological perspective:** Midrashic hermeneutics pursues the God intended (fuller) meaning of an OT text in the context of God's full revelation in Christ.
3. **OT only:** Midrashic exegesis can be applied legitimately only to the books of the OT, not to the books of the NT. The authors of the NT use the midrashic technique to provide the final explanation of God's OT mystery. One would not treat the explanation as if it were also a mystery. This is why Qumran's sectarian literature midrashically exegetes the OT but not other sectarian literature, and why rabbinic midrash compilations expound the OT but not other midrash compilations.
4. **Apostolic authority:** Midrashic readings are respected when they come from the Apostles but suspect when they come from modern theologians. The subjectivity of such readings is the problem.

**B. There are six characteristics that mark an evangelical interpretation of the Bible. The Bible is to be read -**

1. **Privately** — by each individual, not by a special ruling class.
2. **Rationally** — by inductive and empirical reason, not by subjective impression.  
 “No religious movement places more emphasis upon a rational faith than do conservatives. The defenders of conservatism gladly take their case into the arena of logic and reason because they believe that it is precisely here that they have their best case.” — W.E. Hordern
3. **Normally** — by reading it as you would any other book, not by viewing it as symbolic and esoteric.
4. **Systematically** — by expecting the Scripture to be internally consistent, complete, and self-explanatory, not the disjointed product of natural/cultural/historical forces.
5. **Prayerfully** — by expecting the Holy Spirit of Christ to guide the interpreter's heart, not only by mechanical academic scholarship.
6. **Christocentric** — by seeing each part as a contribution to an unfolding drama of redemption centered in the gospel message.  
 The **Old Testament** — the stage is set.  
 The **Gospels** — the good news is revealed.  
 The **Acts** — the good news is spread.  
 The **Epistles** — the good news is explained.  
 The **Revelation** — the good news is fulfilled.

**C. Ten general rules of interpretation that Christians should respect.**

1. We must learn from the **mistakes** as well as the **insights** of the past, through a **study of the history of interpretation** of the Bible.
2. We must **submit our lives** to the **authority** of Scripture and to **service** of Christ.
3. We must **expect** the Holy Spirit to **progressively reveal** the truths of God's Word to us as He **prepares** us to receive them.
4. We must interpret each text so as to be **consistent** with the Bible's teaching as a **whole**, respecting the **progressive nature** of revelation.
5. We must strive to see the text through the eyes (**historically, culturally, and religiously**) of **the original readers** before we assess its significance for us today.

6. We must respect differences in **literary mood, form, and style**.
  7. We must cultivate sensitivity to **literary context, grammar, and syntax**. For example, the same Greek word (kosmos “world”) is used in John 3:16 “For God so loved the world. . .” as in I John 2:15 “Love not the world nor the things in the world.” The context demands a very different meaning in each text.
  8. We must discern the **meaning of the terms** (words) in the Bible as we would in **any other** form of literature.
  9. We must strive to **recognize** and “**correct for**” our personal **historical and cultural biases**.
  10. We must recognize that accurate interpretation is meaningless and limited without active **application** of what we see.
- D. **Note how Postmodern sensitivities have affected the way we read the Bible.** (For a description of Postmodernism see the notes Postmodernism in the introduction #109.)
1. **Presuppositions are given more attention.** We can’t just assume that we are all starting at the same place. There are fewer foundation truths (that can be assumed) as a result of Postmodern sensitivities.
  2. **Language is understood as a sign of a concept** not as a sign of an object of experience. We see objects differently and experience life differently. Language is best understood as a concept of an object or experience rather than being exactly equivalent to the object or experience.
  3. **Meaningfulness is seen as more important than meaning.** How does a concept impact my life is the issue rather than assuming that there is a common meaning shared by all. There is a long tradition of pietistic private interpretation that predates deconstructionist postmodernism and is remarkably similar in that it treats the text like a Rorschach test. The “true information” is not in the text, but in the reader.
  4. **The context of reference is expanded.** We must be much more sensitive to the cultural context in which a document is written and read.
  5. **Felt and real needs take precedence over abstract truths.** Truths are relevant only as they impact life’s needs.
  6. **Personal experience is an important basis for Biblical reality.** The foundation of our understanding is our personal experience of life.
  7. **The supernatural is taken seriously.** The world is seen as bigger than a material understanding will permit.
  8. **Communities of understanding replace rugged individualism.** We need to listen to how other groups with different experiences interact with the text. The text is not for private understanding without the checks and balances of different perspectives within the believing community.
  9. **Linguistic sophistication replaces narrow cultural understanding.** Language is complex and by nature, culturally bound. It cannot be understood mechanically.
  10. **Thinking about interpretive theory is central.** We can’t take interpretive principles for granted. We must be aware of how we are interpreting the Bible.
  11. **Multicultural sensitivity is important.** We must be willing to listen to how other cultures see a text.

### E. **Principles that lead to objectivity.**

NOTE: Objectivity can not be taken for granted. Objectivity is possible (in a relative sense). There are principles that help us find objectivity.

1. Strive for harmonization of all senses without avoiding data as excluding information. (especially Biblical text.)
2. Recognize that there are difficulties and apparent conflicts that must be addressed.
3. Respect the limited range of possible interpretations allowed by the languages of a text.
4. Sensitivity to the immediate literary context is the greatest help in understanding any text.
5. The whole context of systematic theology cannot be ignored.
6. Descriptive texts help us understand prescriptive texts.
7. Historic and cultural contexts can be significant in narrowing interpretive options.
8. An ability to articulate both sides of an issue is an important sign of openness.
9. A history of having changed a view because of Scripture is an important sign of openness.
10. Cross cultural and cross historical interpretations can be important windows of insight.

### G. **The Bible contains both occasional and universal teaching.** All Scripture is written FOR us but not TO us or ABOUT us.

1. Some parts of the Bible are addressed to specific historic (occasional) situations and are not meant to be applied universally.
  - a. An example of an occasional command might be seen in II Tim.4:9-13 where Timothy is asked to come to Paul quickly, making sure to bring his cloak and books from Troas.
  - b. The challenge is to know how to recognize what is occasional and what is universal.
2. A teaching is more likely to be trans-cultural (not occasional) if:
  - a. It has not changed from Old Testament to New Testament.
  - b. Its purpose / intent statement is trans-cultural.
  - c. It is tied to the Fall / Curse of Gen. 3.
  - d. It is linked to the creation patterns of Gen.1-2.
  - e. It is linked to the new creation in Christ.
  - f. It persists in light of other cultural options.
  - g. It stands in conflict with the prevailing culture.
  - h. It is not textually linked to other teachings that are obviously cultural.
  - i. It does not involve a harsh penalty.
  - j. It is used to make a theological analogy.
  - k. It is a part of a list of universal laws.
    1. It seeks support from the O.T. in the N.T.
  - m. Its pragmatic logic holds true universally.
  - n. It is supported by social / scientific evidence.

Characteristics of Occasional teaching	Characteristics of Universal teaching
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isolated to particular time and place - <i>concubines</i></li> <li>• Meaningful in a narrow context - <i>meat offered to idols</i></li> <li>• Rare references with little illustration of actual practice – <i>foot-washing</i></li> <li>• Violation of clearly stated principle - <i>baptism for the dead</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistency across Biblical cultures - <i>sanctity of life</i></li> <li>• Universal setting - <i>water baptism</i></li> <li>• Appeal to a permanent factor - <i>marriage</i></li> <li>• Both commanded and practiced consistently - <i>evangelism</i></li> <li>• Final position within progressive revelation - <i>Sabbath, tithing</i></li> </ul>

3. Identifying the **principle truth** behind the specific text is generally a preferred method of interpretation. The question is – how do you identify the core principle (moral absolutes)? Some suggestions:

- a. Examining a statement in the light of comparable ones where the principle may be more overt.
- b. Considering the statement in the light of parallel extra-biblical materials.
- c. Examining the statement in the light of the overall biblical message.
- d. Finding the theology that “undergirds” or “informs” the actual text.
- e. Finding a basis in the moral nature of God.
- f. Finding a connection to the creation order.
- g. The lack of situational limitation in the formulation of the teaching.
- h. Consistency throughout the progressive revelation of the divine will.
- i. Consistency with the progress of God’s redemptive purpose.
- j. Constancy across cultures
- k. Universal setting
- l. A recognized permanent factor as a base.
- m. Indissoluble link with an experience regarded as essential.
- n. Final position within progressive revelation.

4. **Jesus’ treatment of the Sabbath – Mark 2:23-28.**

“23 And it came about that He was passing through the grain fields on the Sabbath, and His disciples began to make their way along while picking the heads of grain. 24 And the Pharisees were saying to Him, "See here, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" 25 And He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and became hungry, he and his companions: 26 how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest, and ate the consecrated bread, which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests, and he gave it also to those who were with him?" 27 And He was saying to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. 28 So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."”

1. Jesus gives two examples of where a strict interpretation of Ex.35:2 is trumped by basic common sense and human needs.

2. Jesus indicates that the Sabbath is to enhance human life not make it more difficult. This implies that there are situations that may demand exceptions to the strict interpretation of Sabbath proscriptions.
3. Jesus bears witness to his divinity by claiming to be Lord of the Sabbath. Only God could alter the Sabbath Law ordained by God – Ex.20:8-11.

H. **The “Redemptive-movement hermeneutic”** William J. Webb, in *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* suggests that the Bible provides a critique of ancient culture, that is not the final expression of God’s ethic, but the beginning of a development of various ethical trajectories that are to be developed by subsequent generations of God’s people under the leading of His Spirit.

1. Webb suggests that the issues of slavery, gender roles, and homosexuality provide good case studies for this progressive ethic.
  - a. Ancient culture embraced slavery, prescribed gender roles, and disrespected homosexuality.
  - b. The Bible softened the cultural view of slavery, and modified gender roles, while continuing to disrespect homosexuality.
  - c. This trajectory, if followed, would suggest that eventually God’s people would reject slavery altogether along with gender roles while continuing to disrespect homosexuality.
  - d. It is assumed that the Christian community has followed this hermeneutic with respect to slavery and homosexuality but has not respected or followed it with respect to gender roles. Webb argues for the application of this principle to gender roles as well.
2. If we were to apply this principle to some other issues we might conclude:
  - a. Celibacy is the logical extension of Paul’s encouragement to focus on the things of the Kingdom (I Cor.7).
  - b. Socialism is the logical extension of communal life in the early church.
  - c. The Roman Catholic church’s authority in the formation of doctrine is a logical extension of Apostolic authority.
  - d. Premarital sex is an extension of advancements in birth control and modern medicine.
  - e. Homosexual activity is an extension of modern understandings of human genetic science. (Webb believes that the Scripture would not support this example but gay activists would strongly disagree.)
3. Wayne Grudem (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society Vol.47, No.2 pp 299-346*) offers the following critique of Webb’s hermeneutic.
  - The moral authority of the entire NT is nullified in that it is simply a primitive pointer to an unspoken future more mature ethic.
  - A distinction between the Old Covenant system and the New Covenant system (in Christ) is ignored by Webb. He lumps the whole Biblical story together as if it represented a consistent ethic with no progressive development.
  - Webb treats Gen.2-3 as unhistorical in that it suggests gender roles prior to the Fall of Adam and the corruption of culture.
  - Webb fails to distinguish between prescriptive and descriptive texts as he gathers evidence to support his thesis that there are some obvious Biblical mandates that no one today would consider binding.

- Webb repeatedly assumes unlikely interpretations of Scripture in order to present a Bible that is so clearly wrong that it is impossible to believe and obey today.
- Webb creates an overly complex system of interpretation that will require experts in ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman culture to work.
- Webb's system is overly liable to subjective influence and therefore is indeterminate and will lead to significant misuse.

### **The Point**

Proper interpretation of the Bible demands both a soft heart toward God and a hard mind with respect to the disciplines of the use of human language.

## **Response**

### **Head**

#### **I am to understand that:**

Proper interpretation requires hard discipline and skill in the use of language.

### **Heart**

#### **I am to believe that:**

My heart's posture toward God is an important subjective aspect of true understanding.

### **Hands**

#### **I am to behave by:**

Being a patient life long student of the Bible.

## **Pastoral advice**

### **How can I learn to rightly interpret the Scripture?**

1. Read the Bible a lot. This is the best way to become familiar with the tone, themes, and questions raised by the text.
2. Learn to listen - to good teachers, to God's Spirit in meditation, to your own soul, to the world around you, to the broader Christian community.
3. Learn to ask good questions. The quality of your questions of the text will influence the depth of your insights.
4. Study in the company of others who are serious students of Scripture.
5. Study the art of reading the Bible and pray for wisdom.

## **Questions that you should be able to answer.**

### **1. Specific facts you should know.**

- a. What are the two laws that the interpreter must respect?
- b. What are some practical examples of each law?

### **2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.**

- a. What are some of the principles that are a part of sound interpretation?
- b. What are some common mistakes people make in interpreting the Bible?

### **3. Questions you should wrestle with.**

- a. How objective can any interpreter be?
- b. What is the role of academic study in the illuminating work of the Spirit?