

Interpretation (cont.)

The fourth presupposition for reading Scripture is that the Bible is a written revelation. The message of Scripture is communicated through the medium of words, sentences, and paragraphs. This means that we are going to have to pay attention to the particularities of language. It is the words in front of us that mediate the author's intention. To interpret well, then, we will have to study the meaning of words in their context. I say in their context because the meaning of words is never cast in stone. One cannot simply assign a kind of dictionary definition to a word and expect that word to always conform to that definition. Many of us try to do that with Scripture, but it is almost always a bad idea. We need to allow the Bible to speak with all the freedom of expression that we ourselves use. We can just take a couple of English words and see the manifold ways in which we use a word. There are many examples of words that have more than one dictionary definition. Words have meaning only in context. The Greek word *cosmos* is often translated 'world,' but it actually has diverse semantic ranges. A standard Greek lexicon lists no fewer than eight different meanings for the word *cosmos*. In the Bible there are scores of words, as there are in any language, that have many different meanings, and the only way to understand the use of the word is to see it in context.

2 Peter 3:9 tells us that God is not willing that any should perish. How should we understand the word 'will' here? There are several options. We could understand this text as saying that God has legislated a precept that no one is allowed to perish; it is against God's law that anyone die outside of Christ. That is one way of understanding the word 'will.' Another is that God has sovereignly decreed and effects most certainly that no one will ever perish, so we have a legislative statement of God's intention. A third way of understanding the word 'will' here is that God is not pleased, He is not delighted, when people perish. All three of those are possible within different understandings of the word 'will,' understandings of the word 'will' that are all present in the Bible. But not all three of those interpretations are possible for the text, and it is only the context and the analogy of Scripture that will help us understand what is the correct interpretation of this statement from Peter.

We should also note that different biblical writers have their own peculiar uses of words, uses of words that are peculiar to them, that are not shared with other writers. A famous example here is the difference between Paul and John regarding the word 'flesh.' Paul uses the word very negatively. For him, it does not mean the body, but rather the sin principle, a principle which resides in the human heart but radiates out to all members of man. John uses the word 'flesh' positively. It refers to humanity in its natural, created earthliness. For him, it means the body, as in "the Word become flesh." So for John, flesh is good; for Paul, it is bad. We must be careful with words.

The key is context. The fact is, context is the first word in good interpretation; it is the second word in good interpretation, and it is probably the last word in good interpretation. C.S. Lewis suggests, in an article on literary criticism, that words do not mean at all—that is the way he put it—words do not mean. Sentences mean. Words have meaning only in context. But we could actually push this issue, and even push Lewis, a bit further. Sentences can also be taken out of context. It is not sentences that mean, it is actually thought units that mean. It is the thought unit that is the unit of meaning. But a thought unit is difficult to define. What is a thought unit? A thought unit begins wherever the idea begins and ends whenever the idea is over. That might be a sentence, it might be a paragraph, or it might be a much longer piece of discourse, but again the issue is context.

Now this all sounds kind of scary, but there is really nothing magical, mystical, or strange about reading in context. We read everything else that way, everything but the Bible. For some reason we have been trained to read the Bible in a different way than we have been trained to read everything else. Imagine I

took your newspaper away from you this morning, and I went through and numbered all the sentences, and I said, “Just read to me sentence number six, that will give me what I need.” So you see we do not read anything else that way. Reading the Bible contextually is not something we have been taught to do. We have been taught to think, not intentionally to be sure, but we have been taught to think that the Bible is to be read differently, at least at the interpretive level.

Quite simply, without knowledge of the context, we can make the Bible say whatever we want, and that is the reality that stands behind cults. Far too often we evangelicals have been taught to read the Bible as a series of numbered and grammatically sealed propositions and it is not meant to be read that way. We need to remember that chapter and verse divisions are artificial. We sometimes speak of verses, but the Bible was not written as a collection of verses, of self-contained nuggets of wisdom, except for the book of Proverbs. Chapter and verse divisions actually did not even appear until after the Reformation period, and they appeared for the sake of reference. These divisions should never dictate the boundaries of the texts. Meaning is more important than such divisions. If you were to just read Romans 1, you would come away with the impression that Paul is meaning to morally beat up on different groups of people. But on the next day you might come back and read Romans 2, the very first verse of which says, “And so were some of you.” Until you started chapter two, you really did not get the point of what Paul was doing in chapter 1. We need to read texts, rather than verses.

This emphasis upon words in context is often spoken of as grammatical interpretation, and it is associated with what Luther called the *sensus literalis*. When we hear that term, it means ‘the literal sense.’ But Luther did not quite mean what we mean when we use the term literal interpretation. When we use that language, we usually mean the immediate intuitive sense. That is not what Luther meant. When he used the term *sensus literalis*, he meant the natural sense of a statement within its literary context. And we need to be very careful with the idea of literal interpretation. The Reformation, with its emphasis on grammatical interpretation, was intentionally moving away from the medieval idea of allegorical hermeneutics, or allegorical interpretation.

Basically, allegorical interpretation brushes aside all historical, contextual, or linguistic concerns in search for a deeper meaning, a spiritual meaning, a meaning which is not apparent at the surface level of the text. The allegorical method of reading the Bible was championed by people like Origen in Alexandria in the second century. Origen had been deeply influenced by Platonic philosophy, a philosophy that tended to devalue the earthly, the historical, and the temporal. In the Platonic view this world is, if not outright evil, at least suspect. Thus when the Word of God talks about a mountain or a tree it is not really about those things because those things are bad; those things cannot be the bearers of meaning. What those things are must really be symbols for internal realities, spiritual realities, and heavenly realities. With that kind of approach to interpretation you can virtually make the Bible say whatever you want it to mean. The Reformation would reject that allegorical approach to the text and allegorical hermeneutics, in favor of Luther’s notion of the *sensus literalis*, and in favor of grammatical interpretation. They would add another word here; they would not only speak of grammatical interpretation but also add ‘historical’ to it. We will speak more about grammatical-historical interpretation.

Before we push on to our next point, we should say that we can sometimes push grammar too far. We need to take the words in front of us very seriously, but we need to realize that words are a kind of symbolic representation. All language is. Language represents reality, but it never does so absolutely, perfectly, or exhaustively. The word on the page is not reality itself, nor does it correspond to it in any simple one-to-one relationship. The function of language is to create a symbolic model or analogue of reality, not stand in place of it. Let me just give one quick example here; it might help. In Romans 8:29-

30, Paul tells us that those whom God foreknew, He also predestined, He also called, He justified them, and He glorified them. At a strictly grammatical level, it is possible to conclude that Paul is talking about an order of events: that foreknowledge comes first, which is then followed up by predestination, then calling, then justification, then glorification. But for good contextual and theological reasons, there is every reason to doubt that such a message was Paul's intent. It looks as if he was actually ganging up different terms to speak to a single reality. He is ganging up language in order to make the point that our election in Christ cannot be exhausted by any one concept, by any one verbal structure; it cannot be captured in a word. So while we want to take the text seriously, we need to recognize that words on a page are symbolic; they are a degree of representation.

Our fifth presupposition in approaching Scripture is that the Bible was originally written in a language we do not speak. The Bible is a translated book. Now this is not a presupposition in the normal sense of the word, but it is a reality that we need to keep in mind. And I mention it here because it falls right on the heels of a recognition of the Bible as a written revelation. We said quite a bit already about the Reformation commitment. As the Reformers were drawing away from the Roman Catholic Church, they first of all had a commitment to the Bible in its original languages. They were committed to Scripture and to the principle of *sola scriptura*, the Bible as the norm of norms, and therefore it was important to get the Bible right, not simply to use any old translation, so there was a return to the biblical languages. But even as that was the case, they knew that most people were not going to learn how to read Hebrew and Greek. So there was also a commitment to the Bible in the vernacular, the Bible in translation, the Bible in your language. But we need to realize that all translations are also interpretations. Even before you open your Bible, there has been a lot of interpretation that has been done. The textual critic, who has to choose the right kind of texts, the right readings of the texts, is the first interpreter. But the translator also makes interpretations. Quite simply, the act of translation is inherently an act of interpretation. Words and phrases in one language rarely have exact equivalents in another language. Thus the translator is regularly called upon to make choices regarding the meaning of the text and the best way to render that text into the receptor language. Those choices that the translator makes will affect how you read, how you understand, and that makes the selection of a good translation crucial.

What are some translation strategies? Generally speaking, the newer translations done by carefully selected groups of scholars are more accurate textually than older translations. There is a long-standing debate among Bible translators about how we ought to translate the Bible. Both Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, and Greek, the language of the New Testament, are languages that are very different from English. All three languages have different word orders and different syntactical structures. And often words or phrases defy a simple transference into the receptor language. The question is how linguistically strict at a grammatical level a translation should be. Should it try to stick to the Hebrew and Greek as closely as possible? Or should it seek a translation that is more of a sentence by sentence affair? There are some options that are most prevalent.

One option is what is called formal equivalence. It is a translation strategy which claims that meaning is to be found primarily in the words and the grammatical particularities of the Hebrew and Greek text. The translator seeks the closest possible equivalent for a word or idiom, and he stays as close to the word order as the syntax of the receptor language will allow. A good example here is the New American Standard Bible, the NASB; it follows this understanding of translation. When you read the NASB, you find it is a rather stiff-reading Bible and the reason is that it tried to reproduce the original structures of the Hebrew and Greek language as much as it can. It is a very poor Bible for public reading, but it is a very good study Bible, particularly if it is used in tandem with other Bibles.

A freer method to translation is the paraphrase approach. It is not as tied to the particularities of language as the formal equivalence approach. It seeks a sense-for-sense translation. The paraphrase is more concerned with translating thought units or ideas, rather than particular words and grammar. An example of this method is the Living Bible.

A third approach, which falls midway between formal equivalence and paraphrase, is the dynamic equivalence perspective. As the name suggests, it seeks to be freer than a strict word for word translation, yet the dynamic equivalence translation is much closer to the wording of the original Hebrew and Greek text than is a paraphrase. The New International Version falls in this category.

One example text that might help show the differences is Amos 2. God is recounting the many things He has done for Israel, and He keeps coming back and saying, “And still you have not returned to Me.” At one point He says, “I gave you cleanness of teeth.” The Hebrew text literally would say, “I gave you cleanness of teeth.” Can you figure out what that image means? It is famine. In a translation, should I say “cleanness of teeth” or “famine?” If it was the Living Bible, it would say “famine,” because they are going for the idea. But if you are going for a strict, literal sense, you are going to say “cleanness of teeth.” Does that make sense?

I want to make a comment here about the King James Version because I think it is interesting. People often think that the King James Version is an extremely faithful and strict representation of the Hebrew and Greek text. The reality is, however, that the King James is an extremely free translation; it could not be called a translation that follows the formal equivalence philosophy. That is one of the reasons it reads so well. If you read the English King James, it is much better literature than the Hebrew or Greek text. It reads better than Paul. But what is also interesting here regarding the King James is that the Puritans already had an English Bible when the King James was done; it was called the Geneva Bible. When the King James appeared, they thought it was the liberal Bible. It is funny how those trends happen. But sometimes people come close to thinking of the King James Bible as next to inspired. For them it is the Bible against which all other translations must be measured. But advocates of such a view fail to realize that they need to be careful about which King James Version they are referring to. The King James has been edited or has gone through no less than 33 editions and the present King James is in some ways very different from the original.

Talking about the King James Version allows us to make another point regarding words. Words are dynamic; they change their meaning. They have life spans; they are born and they die. Better yet, we can think of words as commodities—they get used up. After they have fulfilled whatever needs they were coined for, they go out of fashion. Let me give you some examples from the King James Version. Genesis 25:29 says, “And Jacob sod pottage: and Esau came from the field, and he was faint.” Psalm 5:6, “Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing.” 1Kings 11:1, “But king Solomon loved many strange women.” 2 Corinthians 8:1, “Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God.” I am not sure what many of those are talking about. Sometimes words simply go out of use. They just die. Other times they do not go out of use; they stick around, but they undergo a transformation of meaning. Our word ‘nice’ comes from the Latin word *neccias*, which originally meant something like ‘ignorant.’ Today when we say someone is nice, we do not mean to say he is stupid. Back in the Elizabethan period, the English word ‘cute’ meant bow-legged. Sometimes words change right before our eyes. Within my own lifetime, the word ‘gay,’ which once meant ‘joyous and carefree,’ has taken on a much different meaning.

Presupposition number six for reading Scripture is that the Bible is an historical revelation. We talked about this very issue previously, that at the structural level, the Bible tells a story, that one story which Christians contend tells us the truth about God, ourselves, and our world. This one story, this drama of

redemption, is told in Scripture in terms of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. We also said that this four-part story is the over-arching theme of Scripture. All of this suggests that the Bible is concerned primarily with historical truth, not philosophical abstractions and not pious intuition.

The primary redemptive event of the Old Testament was the Exodus—God bringing Israel out of Egypt. And the primary redemptive event of the New Testament is the resurrection—God’s declaration of victory in bringing Jesus Christ back to life. The Old Testament is insistent that if the Exodus did not happen the rest of the story is a lie. And Paul proclaims, if the resurrection did not happen, the rest is vain. Quite simply, the Word in Scripture is referential to the mighty deeds of God. The Bible is a word and deed revelation. God reveals Himself both through what He has done and what He has said. And most of what He says is about the things He either has done or will do.

All of which means hermeneutically that a very important question is: What happened? Those who suggest that the historical question is irrelevant to the story—and much of theology does that today—simply do not respect the text at the level of which it itself sees the story as operating. Much of theology will say it is not important what happened. I want to suggest that it is. Why is this such an important question? The answer is that God is a person, a particular person, not an idea, not a feeling, not a theorem, and persons are known only by their historical actions in the world. That is where we are going when we start talking about the doctrine of God. The very character of God, as a personal God, means that what drives the biblical revelation are historical events and relationships. That is important and it is important for us. The Bible is able to address us in the fullness of our concrete historicity because it is talking about the fullness of concrete historicity. It is talking about the historical acts of God on our behalf. George Ladd, in critiquing existentialism, said, “Real existential relevance only comes from historical events. What is really true of our God only comes from historical reality.” That is so because we are historical. Are historical events crucial? Exodus 20 will settle this matter. When we turn to Exodus 20, what are we going to find? We will find the Ten Commandments. What does God say just before the first commandment? He says, “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” That is part of the command, actually, because it is saying, “If I did not do that, there is no reason to obey Me.” It is really that simple. And the New Testament equivalent to that, of course, would be 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul says, “If Christ were not raised, our faith would be in vain.”

The seventh presupposition about reading Scripture is that the Bible is a revelation which is historically removed from us. The group of historical events which are the concern of biblical revelation happened a long, long time ago in a land far, far away. In the last decade or so the hot topic in theological publishing has been books on interpretation, books on hermeneutics. And interestingly, the thing that almost all of these books concentrate on—it is interesting because 25 years ago none of them said anything like this—is the fact that we need to appreciate the great chasm, the great historical and cultural chasm, between us and the thought world of the Bible. It is sometimes called the principle of ‘distantiation,’ which means the strangeness, the otherness, of the text. We cannot take the text for granted. We cannot assume or presume that our cultural assumptions are the assumptions of the text. The first audiences were not like me; they were not middle class, white, middle-aged, Western, 20th century conservative Presbyterians. We often assume a kind of historical contemporaneity with the biblical message. What this means is that we completely ignore the distance and we assume that people in Scripture thought like we think, that they valued what we value, that they saw life as we see life. When we do that, we read in, we eisegete, our values, our thought world, our perspectives, into the text. It is amazing how American evangelicals read Moses as believing in democracy. Cecile B. Demille spoke for all of us in saying, “Before we can begin to come to terms with the biblical message and really hear what it is saying, we must recognize and accept the historical, cultural, linguistic disjunction between ourselves and the text.”

One easy example may help. In Matthew 5, Jesus tells His hearers that they are the salt of the earth. I actually heard a pastor once preach a sermon that said Christians add flavor to life. But that is not what Jesus was talking about. Only an understanding of how salt was used in the ancient world will help us, how salt was used before the invention of refrigeration, which was not that long ago. Our use of salt as a flavor enhancement makes no sense to that text. The reader needs to know that before the invention of refrigeration, salt was used as a preservative—it preserved meat; it kept it from putrefaction; it kept it from rotting. That is what Jesus is saying.

Thus, before we can legitimately hear the Word of God as it is addressed to us in our situation, we must seek to understand the original setting. We must seek to hear the Word as it was addressed to its original audience. That means we need to reconstruct the original setting. And here is where we start to move more towards historical interpretation. If you recall, I said that context is the key to grammatical interpretation; a word has meaning only in context. Context is also the key to historical interpretation, or the historical realities of the text. The historical situation can radically alter the meaning of a statement. Imagine you are out on a highway at night and it is dark. All of a sudden you get a flat tire and a car rolls up behind you with its lights on. Suddenly they go off and a dark figure gets out of the car and says, “Hi. I am a policeman.” A policeman—that statement has a certain comfort. Maybe you are a nut and you decide to go down the street and go into a bank and hold it up and someone taps you on the shoulder and says, “Hi. I am a policeman.” The statement has a very different meaning in that second context. The historical context includes such things as the time and culture of the author and his readers, including temporal, geographical, ideological and political factors. It makes a difference in understanding whether a prophet wrote before the exile, during the exile, or after the exile. It makes a difference whether you are talking about the city of Galatia or Corinth in the first century. There were peculiar realities in those cities. Quite simply, a good interpreter needs to develop a familiarity with the culture and history of Bible times. That means studies in archaeology, historical studies, anthropology, and many others are all relevant to interpretation.

I do not want to dig the hole too deep, but I hope you can see that I am suggesting that interpreting is work. It is. With the right to interpret comes the responsibility to do it well. Again, we evangelicals often assume that the Bible should be a simple book, an easy book, to grasp. It is easy to grasp in its primary message, that Jesus is the Christ. But beyond that, it is not. Beyond that it is going to be work. And there are no shortcuts. It takes time; it takes commitment, and some people are going to be better at it than others. One of the things that I suggest to people is that they buy a good Bible handbook. *Eerdman's Handbook to the Bible* and *Halley's Bible Handbook* are among several good ones. Using a study Bible or reading someone like Calvin, someone we trust, can also be a good idea, because there are people who have spent far longer in the text than you or I. Even if we do not accept everything they say, we should respect their opinion. The key is to know where the text ends and the commentary begins.

Interpretation is work and there are no shortcuts in literal interpretation. People sometimes talk about literal interpretation. Unfortunately, those appeals can often sound quite frankly like a kind of laziness: “I do not need to do the work. I just interpret Scripture literally.” If we were to read the Bible literally, and oftentimes that means literalistically, we can fall into trouble. Matthew 26:26-29 read literalistically suggest that Christians are cannibals. If we read John 14:1-4 literalistically, we would be forced to conclude that God is preparing rooms for us all in Solomon's temple, a building that was destroyed in 70 AD. We are not all literally sheep and Jesus is not literally a door. One author made the helpful comment that, “The only way the word literal has any real meaning for us is this: the text ought to be understood as the author literally meant it to be understood.” Does that make sense? Far too often, we bring a kind of literalism to the text and it becomes an artificial grid, an artificial rigor. We use language

with a lot of diversity. We use metaphors. We use similes. We use all kinds of conventions all the time. Likewise in the Bible, the text literally means what the author intended it to mean.

The eighth presupposition is that the Bible is a progressive revelation. This means that the Bible is not an all-at-once revelation. It moves from implicit to explicit, from anticipation to realization, from promise to fulfillment. And that is right there in a story. In any story, there is a 'before' and an 'after' and the difference is important. The same is true in Scripture. That is important for the issue of interpretation in a number of senses. First of all, we cannot assume that the biblical writers knew everything that we know about the fullness of biblical revelation. It is right here that the principle of the analogy of Scripture can sometimes be a problem. What we do is come to a text and we then take everything we know about the issue and pour it into the text. The fact of the matter is, Old Testament characters, in some ways, know less about the story of redemption than you do. We should not read knowledge of Jesus and the cross into Old Testament writers. If Moses knew Jesus as you and I know Jesus, Moses should have told us, but he did not. Moses did not have the knowledge about the Messiah that New Testament authors did and that they wrote down for us. We should be very careful about simply reading back all of that material into the text.

Secondly, as the story grows, it does change; there are changes in the biblical story. Some of those changes alter the former text. This means that while the Old Testament remains the Word of God, its imperatives must be understood in light of the fuller revelation of the New Testament. We are not to erect a mound of stones and sacrifice sheep or goats even though we can find commands in the book of Leviticus that tell us to do exactly that. Those commands have been abrogated in the fuller revelation of the New Testament. One of the realities of any story is that things do change, even when you are talking about the absolute, inspired, inerrant Word of God. This does not make the Old Testament obsolete. The Old Testament remains the foundation for the New Testament. In fact, the New Testament cannot be properly understood apart from the Old Testament.

I want to say something about typology as an important interpretive device in Scripture. I sometimes hear students ask, "Why do I need the Old Testament at all? What is all that stuff about? Can I not just put it aside? The fullness is come in Jesus Christ." But what the Old Testament does is it sets down a pattern—a pattern of expectation, a pattern of interpretation. We speak about this pattern under the term 'typology.' Now typology has been grossly misunderstood in the history of the church. It has often been said that a type is a kind of prototype, a kind of the archetype. I am going to suggest that is a backwards understanding of typology. It is an unproductive understanding of typology. For example, we would say this: Abraham was a kind of Jesus, a kind of Christ. When we use that kind of language we empty Abraham out of his own meaning and we pour in Christological meaning. So we are reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament. But we should rather be thinking of a type as a pattern.

The reality is that typology works by the principle of analogous fulfillment. It respects the linear progression of the text. Abraham sets or continues a pattern that will be fulfilled in Jesus. What God is actually doing in history is engaging in a series of events, a series of historical events, and that series creates a pattern. There are many patterns in Scripture and you can learn to recognize them, things like water in the Old Testament—flood and exodus—and in these patterned events we see a pattern of the way God does things. And you start seeing it some more and then Jesus shows up and He is doing the same things. That is the process where you understand who He is. Those provide the interpretive clues. That is why John was able to say, "Now we got it. Now we figured it out. We related this to what has come before." That is why Matthew uses his word 'fulfillment.' Jesus comes and He fills up. He comes as the New Moses. It is not accidental that in the book of Matthew you have a story about the baby Jesus going to Egypt and coming out and then He is giving a Sermon on the Mount. He is the New Moses. He

is the New Israel. He is the new David. He takes those patterns, recapitulates them, and fills them up to overflowing. A new typology is a very important way of interpreting and of seeing the new in terms of the old.

Presupposition number nine is that the Bible is a redemptive revelation. The focus of Scripture is its redemptive function. It reveals what God has determined to do, is doing, and will yet do in order to redeem a sin-sick world. This of course relates to the issue of sufficiency. We said that Scripture has everything it needs to fulfill its intended function, and that function is to declare God's mighty deeds in history, His redemptive deeds in history. Since the Bible is primarily a redemptive revelation, this suggests that it is not fundamentally a scientific textbook, or even a historical textbook. But we need to be careful here. To say that the Bible is not a scientific textbook, or it is not a textbook on science, is not to say that what it does talk about is scientifically irrelevant. We need to be very careful not to create a false dichotomy. We can scientifically reflect upon the things that are reported in Scripture. That is legitimate, but we need to realize that Scripture's purpose is not to give us scientifically precise information. The Bible, for instance, does not give us any scientific information about how God performs miracles. We do not know. He does it by His Word. But that is not a scientific description. It does not tell us a whole lot about how He raises people from the dead. Scientifically, exactly, how did God create? Aside from 'by His Word,' I do not know. We can ask such questions. They are fair; they are legitimate, but we should not expect to get answers from the biblical text.

Since the Bible is a redemptive revelation rather than a scientific revelation or some other kind of revelation, its central focus is on the Redeemer. Since the Bible is redemptive, the Redeemer is front and center. He is the hero of the story. This is what we mean when we say the Bible has a theocentric focus. God is the hero. The Bible is about His redemptive intent. Yes, there are human beings all over the story, but they are always receivers, bearers, mediators, or respondents. We are not the heroes. The story is not about us. The story of Genesis 12 is not about Abraham. The story of Exodus 3 is not about Moses. The story of Genesis 6 is not about a guy building a boat. All those texts are about God. Biblical persons and biblical characters should not be treated as moral examples, as moral exemplars, unless the text specifically tells the reader to treat them as such, and that happens very rarely. Much of our Sunday school preaching and so many of the sermons we hear are simply moralistic teaching: "Dare to be a Daniel," "Esther listened to the advice of her uncle Mordecai, so you listen to the advice of Mordecai." But as you read there, the text does not say, "Now you listen to the advice of Mordecai." Mordecai is not the hero of the book of Esther. Esther is not the hero of the book of Esther. Haman is the bad guy of the book of Esther. But the hero of the book of Esther is the One who does not get spoken about, that providence that makes everything come together, that makes the king have the dream one night in which Mordecai is about to be executed. God is the hero of the book of Esther. Who is the hero of Genesis 6? The God who is going to bring judgment so that He can preserve His creation is the hero.

The tenth presupposition for reading Scripture is that the Bible is a book consisting of many types of genre. One mental mistake that people make in reading the Bible is that they fail to understand that it employs a number of different types of proclamation. The recognition of genre type is crucial to good reading and to sound interpretation. Our understanding that a particular text is written in a particular genre sets our expectations for the text and it helps us develop the questions we will ask of the text. That is not a problem for us. If you think about it, we do it all the time. "Once upon a time," is a genre indicator. As soon as you hear it, you know to do certain things. You suspend disbelief and read in a certain way. So we are used to the idea of genre. We do not read a letter from the government the same way that you read a laundry list. It is not a problem for us. In two minutes at my home I go from reading a theology book to a children's bedtime story, and I know not to confuse the two. The literary critic Leland Ryken emphasizes that the interpreter must ask the questions of the text that are appropriate to its

literary form. He says, "Any piece of writing must be read in terms of what it is. When we fail to ask literary questions, we go astray. Interpreting figurative statements as if they were intended literally, looking for theological propositions in a lyric poem that contain mainly an outpouring of human emotion, [etc.]" The way you read the Bible well in terms of things like genre is to read the Bible often. We have a tendency to want to read all the parts the same. But a psalm does not read like a narrative. A narrative does not read like an epistle. And the way to know how to read the epistles is to read the epistles and to see that Paul is speaking to the church at Corinth, or to the church at Galatia, and to see the issues there and to know that it is not the way that the book of Revelation reads; it is not the way the book of Genesis reads.

All genres in the Bible are equally authoritative, but some do make different kinds of truth claims than other genres. One of the principles of hermeneutics is that didactic literature is more authoritative for the setting of doctrine than narrative is, and there is a good reason for that. In the book of Acts, it is very doubtful that Luke means to develop a doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. What he is doing is citing occasions. When you then go to Corinthians 12-14, however, Paul has something to say about the gifts of the Holy Spirit that will be relevant to that issue.

Not only do we have genre, we also have form in Scripture. I did not list all the kinds of genre, and I am not going to go over all the different kinds of form. The difference between form and genre is that genre is a way of looking at a biblical book as a whole. The book of Luke is a gospel. The book of 1 Corinthians is an epistle. A form looks at a smaller unit. It is a category for analyzing relatively small, individual literary units. In terms of form in Scripture, we see law, dream, lament, parable, dirge, report, lawsuit, and many others. There will be different principles for different forms.

In addition to genre and form, the Bible includes many literary devices. Hyperbole, for instance, is simply overstatement. Even the biblical authors overstate the case. Paul can do it, and he does it well. Irony, sarcasm, synecdoche, symbol, simile, riddle, metaphor, euphemism, allegory, are all found in the Bible. In short, the Bible uses language in all the variety, in all the diversity, that you and I use language. And that means we must be careful with it. Not all statements communicate the same, and not all statements make their truth claim in exactly the same way.

The eleventh presupposition we use for reading Scripture is that the Bible is God's Word for us. The reader of Scripture needs to ask a series of historical and literary questions of the text. It is work to interpret Scripture. You have to ask historical questions. You have to reconstruct context sometimes, and all of those sorts of things. All of that is legitimate, but we need to remember where we started. What is God's Word to us? Sometimes reading Scripture, theology, and all the rest can end up pretty cold, pretty dry. We forget the very reason we came to the text. We should never be satisfied with merely an historical lesson. It is still going to be the case that what it *meant* is the key to what it *means*. What the author intended to say is the key for what it means to say here. That is always going to be true. But I cannot be satisfied with merely an historical retelling. The Bible is an historical revelation, but it is not locked up in its historicity, for it addresses us as well as the first audience. Here is where it is real work. The rest was easy up until this point. The rest was predictable. The rest was simply a matter of following proper, historiographic and linguistic method. Here it is real work and the only rule that I can cite is that the original intent still controls meaning. A contemporary application of the text will never run roughshod over the historical meaning of the text. Yet the Word may be applied in ways unforeseen by the author. Moses did not know anything about automobiles, phone sex, credit cards, or all the rest of the stuff in our world. Yet the Word of God is as relevant to all of that as it was to the Middle East in the second millennium B.C. We live under different historical circumstances. We confront different historical challenges, and we are presented with different historical opportunities than Moses. A

question for us finally is: What is God's Word for us? Our historical and linguistic-historical setting should not forget that reality. The demons know how to exegete, but it does not save them. If I can give you one more question to ask the text, it might help here. The question is: How should we be responding to this text? That is the operative question that moves us from simply the historical study of the text, beyond the historical exegesis of the text by way of grammatical-historical interpretation to where we want to be.

The twelfth and final presupposition on our list for reading Scripture is that biblical interpretation will not solve every issue. I really want to press this home to you. What we must understand is that our beliefs, as much as we might like to think otherwise, are never simply the products of our engagement with Scripture. Remember we said that we have presuppositions. Even after we have engaged the Word of God, we will come to some conclusions that are also the product of our confessional traditions, or the traditions we have aligned with. Or they are the products of a philosophical insight that we have aligned ourselves with. Let me give the example of baptism. Every semester I have to fight this battle in different courses. The debate between believers' baptism and pedobaptism is simply not resolvable by way of biblical citation. Believers on both sides cite the Bible. And we earnestly want to be faithful to the Bible. So why do not we agree? The fact of the matter is, on both sides of the aisle, the Bible is not the only thing that informs us. We have other sorts of commitments at work here. The nature of the church, the function and integrity of the covenant, the means of grace, the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and many other things come into play. There simply are some issues that the Bible alone will not satisfy. When a Baptist looks at the text, to him it clearly says or indicates believers' baptism. I should be respecting him when he says that. But as a pedobaptist when I read the text, it clearly implies to me pedobaptism, and that is why we have not moved from this. That is why that debate continues, and it should continue, but it also tells us that we have more at stake here than simply a reading of Scripture. So what happens here in some of these issues is we go looking for the killer text, the trump card that will decide the matter. But then the person is not convinced and we cannot figure out why. Well, we have other things here as well. This is exactly why the Reformation pointed to the issue of the analogy of Scripture as the primary principle of biblical interpretation. The most important tool we bring to the interpretive process is the mind of Christ, but that mind is achieved only by an immersion into the Word of God, and no matter what the issue is, God give us the grace that will allow His Word to shed light upon us.