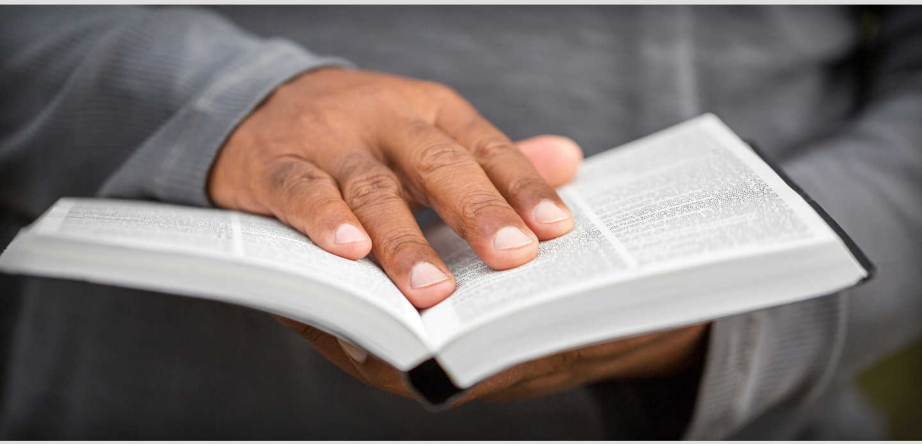
"I have long awaited and prayed for this book." — Sam Storms

HOW TO UNDERSTAND AND APPLY THE NEW TESTAMENT

TWELVE STEPS FROM EXEGESIS TO THEOLOGY



Andrew David Naselli

FOREWORD BY D. A. CARSON

"This is an exceedingly practical guide that will truly help every minister of the Word understand and apply the New Testament. Naselli has a knack for explaining the principles well and then clarifying them with helpful examples. How I wish every pastor and teacher of the Word would absorb and practice the contents of this book. The church would thrive and grow with the kind of solid preaching that this would produce."

—**Clinton E. Arnold**, Dean and Professor of New Testament, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University; Member, ESV Translation Oversight Committee

"The task of biblical interpretation is sometimes presented as a special 'hermeneutic' (whatever that is) or even as a checklist of tasks to follow whenever one sits down to interpret a Bible passage. The fact is that to gain a detailed understanding of Scripture and of any one portion of it takes a serious amount of effort and commitment to mastering a whole armada of subjects: theological, historical, linguistic, and more. And it takes devotion to the Lord and to his ways (Ps. 119:100). In this book, Andy Naselli introduces students who are starting out in this most exciting and enriching enterprise to the multitude of study areas that one engages in as an exegete. Naselli writes in a personal way to guide beginners through this labyrinth, and he adds value to his own presentation with many references to other works for further study throughout. This work will certainly help many beginning Bible students."

—**S. M. Baugh**, Professor of New Testament, Westminster Seminary California

"Andy Naselli has written a thorough and substantive book on how to interpret the Bible. It covers all the bases. In addition, it is very practical for Christians who may not be scholars, teachers, or pastors, though scholars, teachers, and pastors will definitely benefit from it. If you want to better learn how to interpret the Bible and apply it to your life, then Naselli's book is for you. If you want to be better prepared to teach Bible study groups and Sunday school classes, this is the book for you. If you are a pastor and you want to be better prepared to preach, then this is the book for you. If you want to learn how to memorize Scripture, then this is the book for you. In sum, if you are really serious about wanting to understand Scripture better, then this is the book for you. It does not contain technical jargon but is written in a very understandable way, yet it is not lightweight. I heartily commend Andy Naselli's book."

—**G. K. Beale**, J. Gresham Machen Chair of New Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

"Any introduction to New Testament exegesis must strive to accomplish three goals: it must be succinct, it must be readable, and it must be up to date. Andy Naselli's book not only meets but surpasses these goals. Each of the twelve steps of exegesis is carefully introduced and amply illustrated. In addition, students will appreciate the annotated 'Resources for Further Study' section that concludes each chapter. The Spirit is fully able to speak through the Scriptures to us today, and this excellent resource will surely

help us to hear his voice with greater clarity and accuracy. I cannot recommend Andy's book enthusiastically enough."

—**David Alan Black**, Dr. M. O. Owens Jr. Chair of New Testament Studies, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; New Testament Editor, International Standard Version

"This is an astonishing book—clear enough with all the basics, sophisticated enough with numerous topics not usually found in a hermeneutics primer, abreast of cutting-edge scholarship with thorough and helpful bibliographies, warmly pastoral in spirit, and filled with practical illustrations of each interpretive step applied to key biblical texts. Whereas other works of partially comparable scope have required two or three authors, Naselli has mastered all the pieces himself and produced a truly one-stop-shopping resource. An outstanding tool not likely to be superseded anytime soon."

—**Craig L. Blomberg**, Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary; Member, NIV Committee on Bible Translation

"As a career Bible translator, I heartily recommend Andy Naselli's book on how to understand and apply the timeless message of God's Word. Good Bible translation must begin with good exegesis. The thorough approach and accessible style of this book will make it a valuable resource for Bible translators around the world."

—**Dave Brunn**, International Bible Translation Consultant, New Tribes Mission

"Naselli wrote this book with the serious layperson in mind, and it shows. We don't just want to read the New Testament; we want to understand it, meditate on it, and live in response to it. Showing the skill of a distinguished teacher, Naselli anticipates and articulates the questions of his readers while providing helpful illustrations and practical solutions. If you have been looking for a guide to help sharpen your exegesis and grow as a theologian, grab this inspiring, thorough, and pertinent resource."

—**Aimee Byrd**, Cohost, Mortification of Spin; Author, *Housewife Theologian*, *Theological Fitness*, and *No Little Women*

"Though there are many introductions to New Testament exegesis, there are few volumes with which to compare this title by Andy Naselli. It admirably combines a wealth of information with clarity and ease of use. But perhaps most distinct is its overarching devotional approach to the art and science of reading the New Testament. These three characteristics blend to create a formidable and edifying resource that will strengthen the skill, knowledge, and resolve of all who endeavor to study and teach the New Testament."

—**Constantine R. Campbell**, Associate Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

"You may spot a notable difference between most of the other people who have endorsed this book and me: while most of them are professors and scholars with academic

pedigrees, I am just a guy with a blog. But I'm a guy with a blog who loves to read and loves to learn. I have found significant value in what I call 'stretch reading': reading that pushes me to the edge of my understanding and sometimes even a little beyond. This book was just such a stretch read but represented a challenge that I am glad I accepted. Andy Naselli is one of my favorite authors because of the combination of his soundness as a theologian and his giftedness as a teacher. Both qualities are on bright display here as he encourages and equips readers to better appreciate, understand, interpret, apply, and teach the precious Word of God. Let this be a personal encouragement from me to you: Consider reading this book. Take the challenge and through it enjoy a deep, compelling, exciting look at God's Book."

—**Tim Challies**, Blogger, challies.com; Pastor, Grace Fellowship Church, Toronto

"Naselli has provided a resource rich with insights that will aid students of Scripture for years to come. As I worked through his approach to understanding and applying Scripture, I became excited about implementing many of his insights in my exegesis courses. This book is immensely practical and challenging, providing many examples to illustrate proper interpretation."

—**David A. Croteau**, Professor of New Testament and Greek, Columbia International University

"Andy Naselli is to be congratulated for putting together this superb introductory volume for a new generation of New Testament students. From beginning to end, Naselli's thoughtful, substantive, and reliable work is presented in a pedagogically sound and reader-friendly manner. I am confident that it will find a warm welcome among its readers, offering them outstanding guidance along the way. It is a genuine delight to recommend this fine book."

—**David S. Dockery**, President, Trinity International University

"Here is a work that asks all the right questions, and then answers them. Naselli has written a comprehensive, readable, and wise guide to New Testament exegesis. Because of its balanced interest in the art and the science, the heart and the methods of exegesis and theology, this book belongs on the shelf of seminary students and seasoned pastors alike."

—**Dan Doriani**, Professor of Theology and Vice President of Strategic Academic Initiatives, Covenant Theological Seminary

"Naselli's book is a lively and inviting resource for anyone who wants to move faithfully from text and interpretation to theology and life in studying the New Testament. In twelve clear, well-organized chapters, he surveys various steps in the process, giving just the right mix of detailed explanation and illuminating examples of what is important and why. I especially recommend his chapters on Bible translation, historical-cultural context, biblical theology, and practical theology. Each chapter includes a richly packed

annotated bibliography of printed and online resources for further study. This is a thoughtful, engaging presentation for beginners as well as more experienced students of the New Testament. Heartily recommended!"

—**Buist M. Fanning**, Department Chair and Senior Professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary; Translator, NASB, NET Bible

"There are so many good things about Andy Naselli's *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament* that it is hard to know where to begin. Not-so-common, good sense graces every page. Yet the greatest strength of this accessible, pedagogically useful text is not its constituent parts, which are very strong, but its integration—integration of the movements of exegesis and integration of that process with its purpose. Naselli writes not only as a well-trained, clearheaded New Testament scholar, but as one who has thought deeply about the role of New Testament studies in a Christian life and ministry well lived. I can't recommend this book strongly enough."

—**George H. Guthrie**, Benjamin W. Perry Professor of Bible, Union University; Translation Consultant, ESV, CSB, NLT, NCV

"Andy Naselli is one of evangelicalism's best and brightest. And yet this book captures what so many love about his work: it is written with an evident heart to help Christians understand their Bibles and to love their God more deeply. There can be no greater ambition for a theologian. Naselli has provided us with an excellent resource to be more fully equipped to mine the life-giving treasures of the New Testament."

—**Matthew J. Hall**, Dean, Boyce College

"Here is a unique, sparkling jewel. A jewel, because for any interpreters of the New Testament it is an exceptionally valuable resource. A unique jewel, because no other comparable work in the field is so comprehensive and thorough. A sparkling jewel, because it is so user-friendly with its consummate clarity and engaging style. And do not miss the superlative appendixes!"

—**Murray J. Harris**, Professor Emeritus of New Testament Exegesis and Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; Member, original NIV Committee on Bible Translation

"With this volume Naselli has produced a model primer for the discipline of New Testament exegesis. Like other handbooks on the subject, Naselli offers 'steps' to the exegetical process in a logical order without insisting on the exact sequence. To the relief of student readers, this is not an exhaustive-but-exhausting textbook; and to the relief of scholarly professors, neither is it a tantalizing-but-merely-tolerable survey. It is comprehensive, comprehensible, compassionate, and courageous. This volume introduces exegesis—and its relationship to the other theological disciplines—with the simplicity needed by students and laypeople and yet in terms that do not make scholars wince. Conversely, in fact, scholars will want to use this text in their classrooms precisely

because Naselli has accomplished much of the labor of making theological technicalities accessible without unnecessarily dumbing them down. The book contains many illustrative examples and engages directly in many of today's debated interpretation issues. The book is captivating to read, and I found myself wondering with anticipation how the author would treat the next step in the process. Yes, Naselli has written an ideal introductory textbook for New Testament exegesis."

—**Douglas S. Huffman**, Professor and Associate Dean of Biblical and Theological Studies, Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

"This book is an excellent comprehensive introduction to biblical exegesis and more. Its evenhanded presentation, well-chosen examples, logical organization, and winsome writing provide a superb 'nuts and bolts' guide for students, pastors, and anyone else interested in how to better read the Bible."

—**Karen H. Jobes**, Gerald F. Hawthorne Professor Emerita of New Testament Greek and Exegesis, Wheaton College and Graduate School; Member, NIV Committee on Bible Translation

"Andy Naselli's *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament* is an accessible and thorough introduction to the disciplines of biblical interpretation. Its noteworthy strengths include an abundance of examples showing how principles work out in practice and its emphasis on the spiritual and pastoral dimensions of the study of God's inerrant Word. Sound, sensitive practices in studying the Bible are as much caught as taught, and this book comes as close as a book can come to offering the opportunity to look over the shoulder of a seasoned exegetical 'coach' as he explores the Scriptures' varying terrain."

—**Dennis E. Johnson**, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

"In contrast to insecure academicians who disguise their own limits with unfamiliar language, truly good scholars should be able to make complex matters simpler. That's what Naselli does in this work, communicating effectively even in the way he explains what to many readers are less familiar subjects, such as grammar and how to understand Greek language. (Less extraordinarily, Naselli also keeps most simple matters simple.) Well informed on current translation principles and grammatical debates, Naselli also bridges the sometimes inappropriate divides among studying Scripture passages, recognizing biblical themes, and articulating coherent theology."

—**Craig S. Keener**, F. M. and Ada Thompson Professor of Biblical Studies, Asbury Theological Seminary

"Many young preachers feel the need to 'connect to the culture' today, and that is right. But many do so before or even without taking great pains to be sure they understand the scriptural text thoroughly. Careful exegesis will unlock more riches in the passage than the preacher will be able to cover! There are many good books on interpreting

the biblical text, and Andy Naselli lists many of them. But his own volume is as accessible and user-friendly for the working expositor as any I've seen. I recommend it!"

—**Tim Keller**, Senior Pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City; Cofounder, The Gospel Coalition

"Eduard Haller once said, 'Nobody needs to be afraid of exegesis unless he is lazy or careless.' Fear not! Naselli gives us the motivation to get off our tails and the method to ensure that we're not chasing them. His counsel is wise, his commentary is witty, and his convictions are worthy of *the* Book!"

—**J. Ed Komoszewski**, Coauthor, *Reinventing Jesus* and *Putting Jesus in His Place*

"Although it is sometimes forgotten, Christianity has always been a movement focused on a text. The fundamental question must always be: What does the Bible say about that? And this wonderful new volume by Andy Naselli helps answer that question. With precision, clarity, and an eye for the practical, Naselli has given the church a much-needed handbook on how to better understand God's Word."

—**Michael J. Kruger**, President and Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

"Naselli has produced a book that is both comprehensive and yet amazingly accessible. Not only does he guide the reader through the various issues that should be addressed when interpreting the Bible and doing exegesis, he also provides numerous helpful examples that demonstrate the very concepts that he is teaching. This book is loaded with both foundational and practical material that will prove beneficial to any reader. If someone wishes a guide to interpret the Bible faithfully, this is definitely the right book."

—**Benjamin L. Merkle**, Professor of New Testament and Greek, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

"Andy Naselli's guide to interpreting the New Testament comprehensively covers the methods and issues involved. He guides the reader through the thicket of current issues and takes a sensible approach to them. The book is very readable, with frequent use of effective illustrations. I recommend it to beginning New Testament students as well as to more experienced interpreters looking for a refresher."

—**Douglas J. Moo**, Wessner Chair of Biblical Studies, Wheaton College; Chair, NIV Committee on Bible Translation

"By the time you have finished the last page of Andy Naselli's profound work, you will have walked through a resource designed to help you become a better student and a more effective communicator of the Word. His perspective has that rare balance between clarity and brevity, simplicity and profundity, depth and warmth. Dr. Naselli has produced a unique book that can help everyone. Whether or not you agree with

every interpretive conclusion presented in the book, you will intellectually and spiritually grow through the process. Andy's book is a must-read for every seminary student."

—**Steve Pettit**, President, Bob Jones University

"Andy Naselli argues that 'exegesis exists because worship doesn't.' This has two implications: the goal of life is worship, and the way to get there is exegesis. There is an all-encompassing worldview behind those two implications—a worldview that I believe in with all my being. It's a worldview that says: The highest spiritual experiences (such as worship) arise through the most ordinary mental acts (such as reading). Which means that skill in reading God's Word serves the sweetness of relishing God's glory. So choose your reading guides wisely. Andy Naselli is one of the best."

—**John Piper**, Founder and Teacher, Desiring God; Chancellor and Professor of Biblical Exegesis, Bethlehem College & Seminary

"As I read through Naselli's new book, I kept finding myself thinking, 'Yes! That's the way to say that!' or 'This will really help students!' or 'Why didn't I think of that?' I expect God to use this book to shape thousands of Christians to be more faithful readers, teachers, and disciples of his Word."

—**Robert L. Plummer**, Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"A confident and faithful reading of the New Testament requires the mastery of a range of skills. For many years I've struggled to recommend a textbook to students that covers all of them adequately. My search is over. Andy Naselli's gem of a book is comprehensive in scope, lucid, engaging, and practical. It is an excellent introduction to the art and science of responsible New Testament exegesis."

—**Brian S. Rosner**, Principal, Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia

"Naselli's book on how to do exegesis is an outstanding resource. It is wonderfully clear and accessible and hence interesting to read. At the same time, it is packed with information so that readers are instructed in the art of interpretation. There are many resources out there on how to interpret the Scriptures, but this is surely one of the best."

—**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Associate Dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Cochair, CSB Translation Oversight Committee

"Naselli has produced a surprisingly comprehensive textbook in remarkably clear fashion. I cannot think of a single significant issue that he has failed to address. Moreover, the book is replete with levelheaded comments and helpful suggestions. Highly recommended."

—**Moisés Silva**, Retired Professor of New Testament, Westmont College (1972–81), Westminster Theological Seminary (1981–96), and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (1996–2000); Comité de traducción bíblica, Nueva Versión Internacional (the Spanish NIV); Translation Consultant, NASB, ESV, NLT

"This outstanding text should catapult to the top of the heap in the field of exegetical handbooks. It is clear and practical, simple but not simplistic. Refreshingly personal and pastoral, Naselli's illustrations and anecdotes flesh out what is often seen as a sterile academic exercise. In short, it offers the best of both worlds: sound theoretical foundations and timely applications of those principles. Naselli has written a real keeper. I recommend it enthusiastically."

—**Jay E. Smith**, Professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

"Naselli has compiled an impressive compendium of information and suggestions for interpreting biblical texts covering such areas as textual criticism, translation, Greek grammar, diagramming biblical arguments, the importance of understanding historical and literary contexts, and biblical, historical, systematic, and practical theology. I found the chapter on Bible translation especially helpful."

—**Robert H. Stein**, Senior Professor of Biblical Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"I have long awaited and prayed for this book. I didn't know that Andy Naselli would be the one who would finally write it, but I can think of no one more qualified to do so. If you are an average, adult-educated layperson in the local church who wants to know how to read and interpret Scripture, this book is for you. If you are a young pastor who entered ministry without the benefit of a seminary education, this book is for you. If you are a pastor who has allowed his earlier training to slip away because of the business of ministry, this book is for you. It is challenging yet user-friendly, remarkably exhaustive yet readily accessible, and above all else deeply devoted to the life-changing power of God's written Word. In a day when the Bible is badly read, poorly preached, and horribly misapplied, we need this wise and nearly comprehensive guide to bring us back on track. So you pastors, teachers, and all other Christians who long for the deep things of God: get this book and devour it!"

—**Sam Storms**, Lead Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City; President, Enjoying God Ministries

"This is a great book! It is clear, accurate, balanced, well organized, readable, practical, and chock-full of good examples and illustrations. Naselli has no bones to pick or axes to grind, just lots of light to shine on fundamental principles of biblical interpretation. Highly recommended."

—**Mark L. Strauss**, University Professor of New Testament, Bethel Seminary San Diego; Vice-Chair, NIV Committee on Bible Translation

"If you want to learn how to study, practice, and teach the Word of God (Ezra 7:10), then ideally you would want to have a skilled and godly teacher who not only models good interpretation but knows how to put it into practice. Further, you would want someone who knows how to communicate the principles clearly, giving lots of examples. Finally, you would want someone who could give you a comprehensive

approach—from beginning to end, from understanding to application. All of this is found in this remarkable book from Andy Naselli. I cannot think of another introduction to New Testament exegesis that combines this degree of clarity and comprehensiveness, all with the design of helping us live in light of the gospel for the glory of God. The people of God will be strengthened in their walk with the Lord to the degree that they understand and apply the principles of this excellent book!"

—**Justin Taylor**, Executive Vice President of Book Publishing and Book Publisher, Crossway; Managing Editor, *The ESV Study Bible*

"S. Lewis Johnson Jr. complained that biblical scholars—both exegetes and theologians—had ignored, as he called it, 'the holy bonds of matrimony' between the two disciplines. This divorce has hardly been amicable. Both arid exegesis and ungrounded theology are the result. Forty years later, Naselli has boldly reconciled the two in a single volume. As professor of New Testament and theology, he's the right man for the job. Comprehensive, clear, convincing, and convicting, this irenic and witty book is the outpouring of a mind devoted to the text and of a life lived to the glory of King Jesus."

—**Daniel B. Wallace**, Senior Professor of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary; Executive Director, Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts; Senior New Testament Editor, NET Bible

"Books on the study of the Bible can often be like bowls of shredded wheat—nutritious, filling, . . . and flavorless. Andy Naselli has admirably remedied that problem. *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament* informs and engages. Readers of all levels will find rich food for thought as Naselli leads them through nuanced, up-to-date, and bibliographically informed discussions of the steps of studying the New Testament. Even if one does not always agree with its conclusions, one will leave *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament* with a firmer grasp of both the message of the New Testament and the methods of its study, and with a clear challenge to read and apply the New Testament to the glory of God."

—**Guy Prentiss Waters**, James M. Baird Jr. Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson

"What Andy Naselli has done in this work is remarkable. He has taken what multiple volumes focus on and in one book written on how to move from exegesis to theology with precision, clarity, and biblical fidelity. I know of no other book that so helpfully and carefully enables the reader to understand the basics of literary forms, textual criticism, translation theory, Greek grammar, and numerous other crucial points of exegesis with such accuracy and written in such a readable and engaging way. But Naselli does more. He not only describes these helpful points of exegesis, but also helps the reader do exegesis, and he clearly illustrates how to move from the biblical text to proper biblical and theological conclusions by offering specific examples and illustrations. Our day desperately needs the church to be faithful Bible readers and

doers in order to know our great and glorious triune God truly. In fact, the life and health of the church is directly related to our reading and application of God's Word to our lives. This book is greatly needed to help pastors, students, and all other Christians to rightly divide God's Word and to apply it to their lives. I highly recommend it, and I pray that it will have a wide use in the church."

—**Stephen J. Wellum**, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Editor, *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*

"Unlike the author of this book and writers such as Don Carson, Tom Schreiner, and others who have endorsed it, I am neither a technical scholar nor one who teaches hermeneutics. Although I am honored and eager to endorse it, my guess is that I was invited to do so because of my connection to the *Apply* part of the title, for that's been more of the emphasis of my published work. So while parts of this book may not reveal their full value if you don't have at least a working knowledge of New Testament Greek, don't conclude that there's no benefit here for you. *Mē genoito* ('God forbid!'—and see chapter 8). Andy Naselli has written a book that's both interesting and useful for anyone who wants to know the New Testament better, whether that person is reading it in Greek or English. Naselli furnishes not only valuable insights to many key New Testament passages, but also tools for the reader to use on his or her own in future Bible study. Moreover, Naselli provides the reader with a great deal of unexpected bonus material along the way, such as why and how to organize your personal theological library, why and how to memorize an entire New Testament book, and more. If you had enough interest in this volume to pick it up and also to read this far into my hearty endorsement, then I'm certain that there's much here you will enjoy and find profitable."

—**Donald S. Whitney**, Professor of Biblical Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"In my years of teaching the Bible, the most common refrain I hear from those wanting to teach or study is: 'Where do I start?' Andy Naselli offers twelve steps to place us on the path with a map and a compass. Bible study requires a careful balance of humility and confidence. Andy helps us consider the weight of the joyful task, offering the resources to encourage us to take up the burden responsibly. This book is profitable for grasping a comprehensive view of how to handle the text, serving also as a reference tool that I will go back to again and again."

—**Jen Wilkin**, Bible Teacher; Author of *Women of the Word* and *None like Him*

"This remarkable book assembles, organizes, and synthesizes the wisdom of great biblical interpreters of both yesteryear and today. It adds in the energy and shrewdness of Naselli's own omnivorous reading and wide-ranging informational quests. The result is a grounded but decidedly current manifesto for serious Bible interpreters. It covers advanced Greek-language matters without getting mired in minutiae and

escorts readers onward into theological domains to which Scripture, rightly handled, inexorably leads. It performs the service of providing numerous lists of other books that go into more detail on every subject covered. It makes fine contributions in its own right to understanding and living Scripture and to avoiding pitfalls along the way. It deserves a wide readership in college and seminary classrooms. It will also appeal to serious disciples of Christ everywhere who want to freshen and upgrade what they bring to the table as Bible readers seeking more than what good intentions and devotional dedication alone can provide."

—**Robert W. Yarbrough**, Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

"It's no secret that exegetical/hermeneutical guidebooks are not created equal. They are not equally informed, they are not equally useful, and they are not equally enjoyable. As a class they provide a vital service to the church, of course—after all, what could be more important than understanding God's Word rightly? But find one that is at once informative, useful, and enjoyable, and you have a winner. Andy Naselli's book is a winner, one that will without doubt strengthen the preaching of all who read and follow his counsel. Wonderfully comprehensive yet pleasantly concise, well informed yet easily accessible, the book is a delightfully enjoyable read. Read it through quickly as a needed refresher course; read it through carefully and slowly for weeks of learning and equipping for increasingly faithful ministry of God's Word."

—**Fred G. Zaspel**, Pastor, Reformed Baptist Church, Franconia, Pennsylvania; Executive Editor, Books at a Glance; Associate Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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To John Piper,
who inspires me to look at the Book—
and to keep looking

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   5. Dative of Time
   6. Dative of Association
   7. Means/Instrument
   8. Dative of Cause

F. Analyzing the Accusative Case
   1. Direct Object
   2. Double Accusative of Person-Thing
   3. Double Accusative of Object-Complement
   4. Subject of the Infinitive

G. Analyzing Articles
   1. Simple Identification
   2. Anaphoric (Previous Reference)
   3. Par Excellence
   4. Monadic (Unique)
   5. Well Known
   6. Abstract
   7. Generic
   8. As a Pronoun
   9. As a Substantive with Certain Parts of Speech
   10. With Multiple Substantives Connected by Καί (*Kai*): The Granville Sharp Rule

H. Analyzing Participles
   1. Means
   2. Manner
   3. Time
   4. Genitive Absolute
   5. Cause
   6. Concession
   7. Condition
   8. Result
   9. Purpose
   10. Attendant Circumstance
   11. Attributive
   12. Predicate
   13. Substantival

H. Motivation to Do Biblical Theology
   1. How Do I Do Biblical Theology?
   2. Can God's People Handle This?

XI. Historical Theology: Survey and Evaluate How Significant Exegetes and Theologians Have Understood the Bible and Theology
   A. What Is Historical Theology, and Who Are Some of the Most Significant Exegetes and Theologians?
      1. The Early Church (first century–600)
      2. The Middle Ages (600–1500)
      3. The Reformation and Post-Reformation (1500–1750)
      4. The Modern Period (1750–present)
   B. Ten Reasons to Study Historical Theology
      1. It Helps You Distinguish between Orthodoxy and Heresy
      2. It Displays the Fruit of Orthodoxy and Heresy
      3. It Can Foster God-Glorifying Unity When Fellow Christians Disagree on Nonessential Issues
      4. It Helps You Think Globally
      5. It Can Reveal Your Theological Blind Spots
      6. It Gives You Perspective regarding Seemingly Novel Views
      7. It Cultivates Humility
      8. It Guards You against Chronological Snobbery
      9. It Inspires You
      10. It Reminds You That God Sovereignly Controls Everything for His Glory and Our Good
   C. Example: Keswick Theology
      1. What Is Keswick Theology?
      2. Where Did Keswick Theology Come From?

XII. Systematic Theology: Discern How a Passage Theologically Coheres with the Whole Bible
   A. What Is Systematic Theology?
   B. Ten Corresponding Strengths and Dangers of Systematic Theology
      1. It can enrich how you exegete a particular text, but it can distort how you exegete a particular text.
      2. It can give you an accurate theological grid, but it can substitute for the Bible.
      3. It can precisely identify doctrinal tensions, but it can tempt you to errantly resolve tensions.
      4. It can help you correlate how a particular text harmonizes with others, but it can lead you to develop your own "canon within the canon."

5. It can directly address contemporary issues in a way that exegesis and biblical theology can't, but it can more easily overlook the text because it is further removed from it.
6. It can make necessary and helpful logical inferences from texts, but it can irresponsibly speculate in a way that is not tethered to a text.
7. It can efficiently package what the whole Bible teaches, but it can irresponsibly prooftext the Bible.
8. It can help you refute error, but it may be erroneous.
9. It can help you correlate how the Scriptures cohere on a particular topic, but it can focus so much on historical theology, theological prolegomena, and philosophy that it fails to correlate what the Bible teaches.
10. It can help you do theological triage, but it does not automatically churn out the right answer.

C. Example: What Is the Gospel?
   1. What Does the Word *Gospel* Mean?
   2. News Can Be Good to Various Degrees
   3. The Bad News Is Very Bad
   4. The Good News Is Very Good
   5. We Can Summarize the Bad News and Good News with Four Words: *God*, *Man*, *Christ*, *Response*
   6. So What Exactly Is the Gospel?

D. Example: The Logical Problem of Evil
   1. What Is Evil?
   2. What Are the Logical and Emotional Problems of Evil?
   3. What Are Some Unbiblical/Inadequate Solutions to the Logical Problem of Evil?
   4. What Does a Biblical Approach to the Logical Problem of Evil Include?

XIII. Practical Theology: Apply the Text to Yourself, the Church, and the World

A. What Is Practical Theology?
   1. Why Do We Need to Apply the Bible to How We Live?
   2. Are There Traditional Categories for Practical Theology?
   3. Does Exegesis Always Precede Application?
   4. It's Complicated

B. Six Guidelines for Applying the Bible
   1. Recognize That Exegesis and Theology Control Application
   2. State a Truth from a Passage as a Universal Principle
   3. Exegete Your Audience and Their Culture
   4. Target Specific Categories of People
   5. Apply a Universal Principle to a Specific Contemporary Situation regarding Duty, Character, Goals, and/or Discernment
   6. Recognize That Applications Have Different Levels of Authority

FOREWORD

MANY HAVE REMARKED that New Testament scholars who teach elementary Greek for twenty or thirty years very often decide to write their own introductory Greek grammars, firmly believing that the particular slant or emphases they introduce make their textbooks the best option in a sea of introductory Greek grammars. And indeed, each such volume tends to be very good when used by the scholar whose experience over two or three decades has produced it: the published work nicely fits the style and teaching priorities of that particular teacher. Some such works are too idiosyncratic to find broad popularity, of course, but the best of them win the approval of other teachers and gradually find their niche in the smorgasbord of introductory Greek grammars.

Something similar could be said about works designed to introduce students to New Testament exegesis. In this field, too, numerous handbooks of exegesis and introductions to exegesis have appeared over the last few decades. But this field is far more complex than the field of Greek grammar; indeed, Greek grammar is merely one topic within the comprehensive sweep of exegesis. As a result, there is far more scope for variations in emphasis, comprehensiveness, clarity, and the like.

And that's where this book by Andy Naselli comes in. As a first-level introduction, there is nothing quite like it. The range of its topics is remarkable: literary genre, textual criticism, translation, grammar, phrase diagramming, historical-cultural and literary contexts, word studies, biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, practical theology—and two remarkable appendixes, about which more in a minute. Doubtless some teachers will prefer to include a little more of this, a little less of that. What is really striking about this introduction, however, is its combination of five strengths: (1) the range of topics that Dr. Naselli introduces is remarkable; (2) the mass of detail that he presents on most of the topics, without making the reader choke on the sheer quantity, is wholly impressive; (3) Dr. Naselli manages to combine an attention to little details with an eye on the big picture; (4) he knows how to organize his material in ways that are pedagogically helpful, not least to beginning students; and (5) he writes with rare clarity and simplicity. The book is a delight to read.

And then we remember the appendixes. The first one underscores the importance of (digital) filing systems and suggests in some detail one useful approach. Over the long haul, good and faithful exegesis demands the ability to find and retrieve good material, often material that one has already read. The second appendix tells us "Why and How to Memorize an Entire New Testament Book." That's not a separate topic: the best exegesis immerses the student in the text, and memorization of the text is an important part of the discipline. But the impact of this second appendix is broader: it reminds all of us that we must avoid such a focus on tools and genres and disciplines and skill sets and historical trends that we never really soak in holy Scripture. The aim, as always, is not to master the text, but to be mastered by it.

D. A. Carson
Research Professor of New Testament
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PREFACE

I LOVE GOD, and I love studying his Word and his world. I wrote this book to help you study the New Testament, specifically how to do exegesis and theology.

Whom is this book for?

- *Students.* This book could be a textbook for a college or seminary course on interpreting the Bible. (My school uses it for a course that our seminary students take during their first semester.)
- *Pastors and people with theological training.* This book could refresh and enhance how you understand and apply the New Testament.
- *Thoughtful men and women who have little or no formal theological training.* This book is also for thoughtful Christian laypeople. As I drafted this book, I requested feedback from some men and women who don't have any formal theological training. I incorporated many of their suggestions because I want this book to serve everyone who is eager to understand and apply the Bible. A few parts of the book may be challenging for you if you do not have a lot of theological education, but if you are convinced that it is worth the effort (and it is!), then you can rise to meet that challenge.

The book's structure is simple. It begins by introducing exegesis and theology, which I break down into twelve steps. Those twelve steps are the book's twelve chapters.

I drafted this book in summer 2015 as I prepared to record a course called "New Testament Exegesis" for Logos Mobile Ed in a studio at the Faithlife headquarters in Bellingham, Washington. At the end of that process, John J. Hughes from P&R Publishing casually asked me whether I had any book ideas in mind, and it occurred to me that I could serve the church by taking the course notes I had drafted for a teleprompter and revising them as a book. This book maintains the informal tone and personal anecdotes from those lectures.

As we study how to understand and apply the New Testament, let's follow Johann Albrecht Bengel's advice: "Apply yourself wholly to the text; apply the text wholly to yourself."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THIS BOOK EXPLAINS how to interpret and apply the Bible. Where do I even begin thanking God for all the people he has used to help me? I'll limit the scope to seven individuals or groups:

First, my doctoral mentor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School was D. A. Carson, and I served as his research assistant for about nine years. That was like a young lawyer's getting to clerk for a Supreme Court Justice. If you are familiar with Carson's work, you will no doubt see his fingerprints all over this book. He is a model exegete and theologian, and it's an honor that he wrote the foreword.

Second, I dedicate this book to John Piper, who inspires me to look at the Book—and to keep looking. He influenced me so deeply that when I started dating my wife-to-be, I lent her my marked-up copies of *The Pleasures of God*, *Desiring God*, and *Rediscovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, and I asked her to read them to make sure that we were on the same page theologically. (She loved them.) John models how to look at the Book and exult in it.

Third, in my college and early seminary years, Mark Minnick and Layton Talbert taught me how to exegete the Bible and do theology. I listened to hundreds of Minnick's sermons on cassette tapes, and he was my pastor for four years and my professor for a few seminary courses. Talbert was my professor for ten courses in college and seminary, and he was a groomsman in my wedding, which Minnick performed. I thank God for how they mentored me.

Fourth, I'm grateful to my school, Bethlehem College & Seminary, for encouraging and empowering me to research and write in order to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. I love my school's theology, team, and strategy.

Fifth, it's a joy to serve shoulder to shoulder with Jason DeRouchie at Bethlehem College & Seminary. He embodies Ezra 7:10. I can't think of another Old Testament seminary professor I'd rather team up with. We spend about three hours together each week while commuting, and the better I get to know him, the more I thank God for

him. I especially love coteaching a fourth-year graduate course with him on biblical theology. Jason is both an Old Testament scholar *and* a biblical theologian. He helps me see Jesus more clearly in the Old Testament. It was an honor to collaborate with Jason as I prepared this book and he prepared the companion volume *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology*.

Sixth, some friends graciously offered incisive feedback on drafts of this book, including Don Carson, Tim Challies, Jason DeRouchie, Abigail Dodds, Doug Huffman, Scott Jamison, Jeremy Kimble, Matt Klem, Pam Larson, Daniel Kleven, Rob Marcello, Jenni Naselli, Dane Ortlund, Brian Tabb, and Dan Wallace. Special thanks to my teaching assistant, Matt Klem, for his detailed feedback, to Andy Hubert for helping my diagrams from Bibleарc.com fit this book's format, to Karen Magnuson for her outstanding copyediting, and to John Hughes for overseeing the entire process.

Finally, I thank God for my excellent wife, Jenni. My heart trusts in her. She enthusiastically supports the research-writing-teaching-shepherding ministry that God has called me to, and she makes our home—"The Burrow"—my favorite place to be. (It's where I wrote this book.)

ABBREVIATIONS

ASV	American Standard Version
BBR	*Bulletin for Biblical Research*
BDAG	Walter Bauer, Frederick William Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
CEB	Common English Bible
CEV	Contemporary English Version
CSB	Christian Standard Bible
ESV	English Standard Version
GNT	Good News Translation
GW	God's Word Translation
HALOT	Ludwig Köhler, Walter Baumgartner, M. E. J. Richardson, Johann Jakob Stamm, and Benedikt Hartmann, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 3 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000)
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
KJV	King James Version
LB	Living Bible
LEC	Library of Early Christianity

LXX	Septuagint
NA^{28}	Nestle-Aland, 28th edition (Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012])
NAB	New American Bible
NAC	New American Commentary Studies in Bible and Theology
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCV	New Century Version
NET	The NET Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIDNTT	*New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*
NIDOTTE	*New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV	New King James Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
TDNT	Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984)
TLG	*Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*
TNIV	Today's New International Version
TR	*Textus Receptus*
UBS^{5}	United Bible Societies, 5th edition (Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 5th ed. [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies, 2014])
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

INTRODUCTION

What Is Exegesis?

One of the few framed items in my school office features the words of Ezra 7:10: "For Ezra had set his heart [1] to study the Law of the LORD, and [2] to do it and [3] to teach his statutes and rules in Israel." The pattern has three steps:

1. *Study* the Word.
2. *Practice* or *do* the Word.
3. *Teach* the Word.

Before you teach the Word to others, you need to practice it. You must practice what you teach and preach. But before you practice and teach the Word, you have to know what it says. So you must study it. That's what this book is about: How should you study the Word so that you can practice and teach it? More specifically, how should you understand and apply the New Testament?

New Testament refers to the second part of the Christian Bible, the twenty-seven books that are the counterpart of the Old Testament. In order to understand the New Testament, you must exegete it. But what does *exegesis* mean?

I remember the first time I heard someone use that word. My face twisted up in puzzlement, and I thought, "*Exe-Jesus*?! Did he just take the name of Jesus in vain?" But I soon learned that *exegesis* is the opposite of *eisegesis*. Exegesis draws the meaning *out of* a text (that's good!), and eisegesis reads a meaning *into* a text (that's bad!). In other words, exegesis interprets a text by analyzing what the author intended to communicate. Exegesis is simply *careful reading*. For example, when a young lady who is deeply in love with her fiancé receives a letter from him, she reads it carefully. She wants to understand what her fiancé meant.

Exegeting the New Testament includes but is not limited to parsing Greek words, doing word studies, and analyzing syntax at various levels (i.e., clause, sentence, discourse, genre) while being sensitive to literary features and the running argument. *The text means what the text's author meant*. Exegetes are primarily concerned with interpreting a text, that is, discovering what the author meant. And when the text is the

Bible, we must never stop with exegesis: we must also do theology—biblical, historical, systematic, and practical theology. We must *apply* what the text means in our contexts.

This may raise a couple of questions:

- What's the difference between *exegesis* and *hermeneutics*? Herman who?! *Hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics concerns *principles* of interpretation (i.e., it's about how the interpretive process works), and exegesis *applies* those principles. Hermeneutics supplies the tools to discover a text's meaning, and exegesis uses those tools.
- Where does expository preaching fit into this process? Expository preaching communicates not only what a text means but how it applies to people in their contexts. Expository preaching is sermons that build on sound exegesis. That is, the sermons explain and apply the Bible based on sound exegesis. In general, this means that the main point of the biblical text from which a preacher is preaching should be the main point of the sermon.[1] So hermeneutics is to exegesis what homiletics is to preaching. Homiletics concerns *principles* of preaching (i.e., preparing, structuring, and delivering sermons), while exposition *applies* those principles (e.g., preaching a sermon on Romans 3:21–26).

For example, you can study how to make pizza, but that is different from applying that knowledge while you make pizza. Or you can study rules and strategies for playing soccer, but that is different from applying that knowledge while you play soccer. Similarly, homiletics studies how to preach, which is different from applying those principles while you preach. And hermeneutics studies how to interpret the Bible, which is different from applying those principles while you interpret or exegete the Bible (i.e., carefully read it by drawing meaning out of it, analyzing what the author intended to communicate).

Exegesis may sound complicated, but it's really not. You know how to exegete a text. If I randomly opened an e-mail thread in my Gmail inbox and if I asked you to exegete it, what would you do? You would probably do the following (though not necessarily in this order):

1. Recognize that the style of literature is e-mail, so the thread consists of messages that two or more individuals electronically wrote to each other.
2. Look at the subject line to see whether it tells you what the thread is about.
3. Look at the names of the authors in the thread.
4. Look at the time stamps of the e-mails.
5. Figure out who the authors are.
6. Read the messages in the order in which people sent them.

1. Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert, *Preach: Theology Meets Practice*, 9Marks (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2012), 36–38.

If you were to *eisegete* an e-mail thread, you would read your own meaning into it. You might select a word or phrase or sentence from an e-mail that strikes you and then invest it with a meaning totally foreign to what the authors in the thread meant. You may unintentionally eisegete it because you do not sufficiently understand the language or historical context.

When people interpret the Bible, even though they may have the best motives in the world, they can still read their ideas into the Bible rather than draw out what the author originally intended. Throughout this book, you can examine many specific New Testament texts that people eisegete rather than exegete, and you can learn how to responsibly exegete.

Twelve Steps for Exegesis and Theology

In this book I'm breaking down the process of doing exegesis and theology into twelve steps. These twelve steps are the book's twelve chapters:

1. *Genre*. Establish guidelines for interpreting a passage's style of literature.
2. *Textual Criticism*. Establish the original wording.
3. *Translation*. Compare translations.*
4. *Greek Grammar*. Understand how sentences communicate by words, phrases, and clauses.*
5. *Argument Diagram*. Trace the logical argument by arcing, bracketing, or phrasing.*
6. *Historical-Cultural Context*. Understand the situation in which the author composed the literature and any historical-cultural details that the author mentions or probably assumes.
7. *Literary Context*. Understand the role that a passage plays in its whole book.
8. *Word Studies*. Unpack key words, phrases, and concepts.
9. *Biblical Theology*. Study how the whole Bible progresses, integrates, and climaxes in Christ.
10. *Historical Theology*. Survey and evaluate how significant exegetes and theologians have understood the Bible and theology.
11. *Systematic Theology*. Discern how a passage theologically coheres with the whole Bible.
12. *Practical Theology*. Apply the text to yourself, the church, and the world.

* I plan to use New Testament Greek throughout the book, especially in steps 3–5. If you don't know Greek at all, this book is still for you. I am not assuming that you know intermediate Greek grammar and syntax, though it will certainly help if you know at least a little bit of Greek, such as basic forms and vocabulary. But those who don't know Greek can easily follow the vast majority of this book.

Steps?

It's somewhat artificial to break down exegesis and theology into twelve steps because in practice I don't know of any New Testament scholars who think, "OK: Step 1: do this. Step 2: do that," and so on.

It's like asking Lionel Messi how he plays soccer. He doesn't think, "Well, step 1 is that I dribble. Step 2 is that I run and dribble at the same time." There are so many facets to playing soccer at a high level. That's why soccer players can improve their overall game by focusing on individual areas such as dribbling and passing and sprinting and cutting and shooting and lifting weights to get stronger and studying strategies to win. But in the heat of the moment during a game, soccer players aren't thinking, "Step 1: do this. Step 2: do that." At that point they're just playing by instinct and employing all the skills they've developed as best they can. They go with the flow of the game and adjust to their opponents' defensive schemes and strategize how to improve on both ends of the field. But they're not following a clear twelve-step list.

So it is with exegesis and theology: When a world-class scholar exegetes a passage, he is not thinking, "Step 1: do this. Step 2: do that." After decades of exegeting the Bible, he has found that the exegetical process has become more intuitive and integrative for him.

But I'm not assuming that you're a scholar. So as we study New Testament exegesis, we'll break it down into logical steps so that we can analyze the whole process piece by piece and see how it works. Focusing on these steps one at a time is like a soccer player's focusing on aspects of soccer one at a time: dribbling, passing, shooting, and the like.

So these twelve steps are "steps" only in theory. They are interrelated. And you won't necessarily need to spend time on each step for every passage you exegete or even deliberately proceed from one step to the next, checking off items on a list as you go. But presenting twelve steps like this helps us focus on various aspects of exegesis as we attempt to understand the process better.

Exegesis Is Both a Science and an Art

I don't want to imply that exegesis is a mechanical, robotic process, that if you simply follow the instructions you will inevitably churn out the right interpretations. No, exegesis is both a science and an art because it involves weighing factors, not just counting them. It's complicated. And that's why it's important for you to posture your heart correctly before you even begin. Approach the exegetical process humbly and prayerfully. Ask God to open your eyes. You need the Holy Spirit to illumine your mind.

John Piper, chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary, defines education as instilling habits of mind and heart that incline and enable students for the rest of their lives to do six actions for the glory of God and the good of the world:

1. Observe the Word and the world carefully.
2. Understand what you observe clearly.
3. Evaluate what you have understood fairly.

4. Feel that evaluation proportionately.
5. Apply your discoveries to all of life wisely.
6. Express your discoveries clearly and accurately and creatively and winsomely.[2]

That's a daunting task for which you need God's help. So you may want to pray something like this as you exegete God's Word: "Father, this is the one to whom you will look: the one who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at your Word (Isa. 66:2). Please give me grace to be humble and contrite in spirit and to tremble at your Word."

How Do Exegesis and Theology Interrelate?[3]

Five Theological Disciplines

There are five theological disciplines:[4]

1. *Exegesis* interprets a text by analyzing what the author intended to communicate. It draws the meaning out of a text. The first eight steps in this book are components of exegesis: genre, textual criticism, translation, Greek grammar, argument diagram, historical-cultural context, literary context, and word studies.

2. *Biblical theology* studies how the whole Bible progresses, integrates, and climaxes in Christ. It makes organic, salvation-historical connections with the whole canon on its own terms, especially regarding how the Old and New Testaments integrate and climax in Christ. It focuses on the turning points in the Bible's story line, and its most pivotal concern is how the New Testament uses the Old. Old and New Testament theology are subsets of whole-Bible biblical theology. We must read the whole Bible—including the Old Testament—with *Christian* eyes.

3. *Historical theology* surveys and evaluates how significant exegetes and theologians have understood the Bible and theology. How has Christian doctrine developed? In particular, how has it responded to false teaching? This focuses on periods of time earlier than our own.

4. *Systematic theology* discerns how a passage theologically coheres with the whole Bible. This builds on but goes beyond exegesis. It answers the question "What does the whole Bible say about _____[fill in the blank]?" It presupposes that the whole Bible is coherent, that it doesn't contradict itself.

5. *Practical theology* applies the text to yourself, the church, and the world. It answers the question, "How should we then live?"[5]

2. See John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 181–98.

3. This section condenses Andrew David Naselli, "D. A. Carson's Theological Method," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29, 2 (2011): 245–74.

4. These are the five major categories I use to organize my library. See "Appendix A: Why You Should Organize Your Personal Theological Library and a Way How."

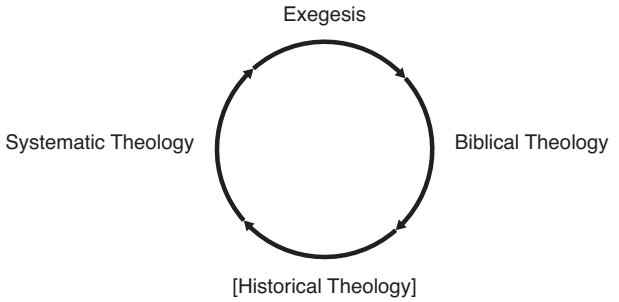
5. This question borrows the title of a well-known book: Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*, in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview*, 5 vols. (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1985), 5:79–277.

Describing each of those final four final theological disciplines with a single adjective—*biblical*, *historical*, *systematic*, and *practical*—can be confusing because those adjectives also describe the other disciplines. Biblical theology, for example, is not *a*historical, *un*systematic, and *im*practical! And systematic theology should be biblical. Those terms are simply traditional labels for interrelated theological disciplines.

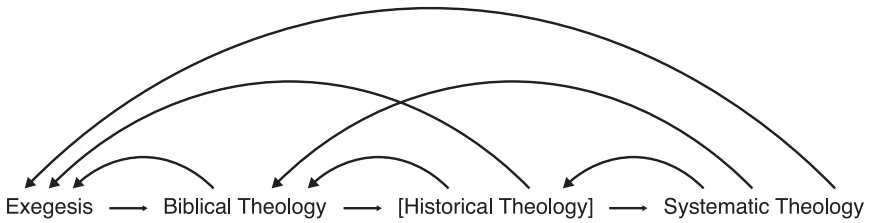
The Complex Interrelationship between the Five Theological Disciplines

D. A. Carson explains:

> It would be convenient if we could operate exclusively along the direction of the following diagram:
>
> Exegesis → Biblical Theology → [Historical Theology] → Systematic Theology
>
> (The brackets around the third element are meant to suggest that in this paradigm historical theology makes a direct contribution to the development from biblical theology to systematic theology but is not itself a part of that line.) In fact, this paradigm, though neat, is naïve. No exegesis is ever done in a vacuum. If every theist is in some sense a systematician, then he is a systematician *before* he begins his exegesis. Are we, then, locked into a hermeneutical circle, like the following?



> No; there is a better way. It might be diagrammed like this:



> That is to say, there are feedback lines (and more lines going forward, for that matter). It is absurd to deny that one's systematic theology does not affect one's exegesis. Nevertheless the line of final control is the straight one from exegesis right through biblical and historical theology to systematic theology. The final

> authority is the Scriptures, and the Scriptures alone. For this reason exegesis, though affected by systematic theology, is not to be shackled by it.[6]

Now let's briefly think through how the theological disciplines interrelate, how they influence one another. Consider seven relationships:

1. *Exegesis and Biblical Theology.* These are the two most similar theological disciplines. In general, exegesis analyzes, and biblical theology synthesizes. Exegesis helps you read the Bible's story line with precision, and biblical theology helps you exegete with the Bible's story line in view.

2. *Exegesis and Historical Theology.* Creeds and theologians are not ultimately authoritative; only Scripture is. But many Bible interpreters move straight from exegesis to systematic theology without pausing to consider historic creeds and significant theologians. Historical theology reveals orthodox exegetical options and shows how many contemporary views are not as novel as they may seem.

3. *Exegesis and Systematic Theology.* You might think that you exegete the Bible neutrally and objectively and that you build your systematic theology on such discoveries. But that's not how it works: your systematic theology profoundly influences your exegesis. One danger here is that you can develop your own "canon within the canon"—your own list of favorite passages that you think are most important and that operate like a controlling interpretive grid—so that your systematic theology controls your exegesis. (And sometimes your systematic theology may simply be your church tradition.) This helps explain how, for example, some covenant theologians and dispensationalists can exegete the same texts with such different results.[7] Or sometimes you might overemphasize one biblical truth at the expense of another.

4. *Historical Theology and Systematic Theology.* When studying what the Bible teaches about a particular subject (i.e., when you are doing systematic theology), you must integrate historical theology. Systematic theology uses categories from historical theology, but what often drives systematic theology is what you think are the most important current issues to address.

5. *Biblical Theology and Historical Theology.* Since we are finite, we do biblical theology best when we interact with historical theology. How have other significant exegetes and theologians done biblical theology?

6. *Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology.* Biblical theology is inductive, historical, and organic; systematic theology is relatively deductive, ahistorical, and universal. For biblical theology, the text sets the agenda. For systematic theology, the text is important, but other factors often set the agenda—such as a philosophical question. Here's how Carson puts it:

6. D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 91–92.

7. See Stephen J. Wellum, "Covenants in Biblical-Theological Systems: Dispensational and Covenant Theology," in Stephen J. Wellum and Peter J. Gentry, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 39–80.

> Systematic theology tends to be a little further removed from the biblical text than does biblical theology, but a little closer to cultural engagement. Biblical theology tends to seek out the rationality and communicative genius of each literary genre; systematic theology tends to integrate the diverse rationalities in its pursuit of a large-scale, worldview-forming synthesis. In this sense, systematic theology tends to be a culminating discipline; biblical theology, though it is a worthy end in itself, tends to be a bridge discipline.[8]

7. *Practical Theology and the Other Theological Disciplines*. Practical theology applies (i.e., culturally contextualizes) exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, and systematic theology to help people glorify God by living wisely with a biblical worldview. It includes pastoral theology, preaching, counseling, evangelism, ethics, education, culture, worship, and much more. It answers such questions as "How should people respond to God's revelation?" You simply can't do responsible practical theology unless its foundation is exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, and systematic theology.

If you emphasize "what the Bible means *to me*," you might completely ignore the distance between yourself and the text. But if you read more responsibly, you will read a passage of the Bible on its own terms, discern how it contributes to the whole Bible, and ask how that applies to yourself, the church, and society.

Doing exegesis and theology well is a lot of work. Where does prayer fit in?

Which Is More Valuable: Ten Minutes of Prayer or Ten Hours of Study?

God did not reveal the Bible merely to satisfy our curiosity about intellectual questions. He reveals himself and his ways in order to transform how we live. So on the one hand, we don't want to superficially exegete the Bible and then irresponsibly and prematurely apply it. But on the other hand, we don't want to rigorously exegete the Bible and stop there.

Some people perceive a massive tension between (1) rigorously exegeting the text and (2) cultivating a prayerful devotional life. But do you have to choose between being academic and being devotional?

Enter B. B. Warfield (1851–1921). He was a scholar—one of the best. And he refused to separate theology and spirituality. Warfield strikes an outstanding balance in five articles, reprinted in his *Selected Shorter Writings*. Here are the five titles in chronological order:[9]

1. "Authority, Intellect, Heart," 2:668–71.
2. "The Indispensableness of Systematic Theology to the Preacher," 2:280–88.

8. D. A. Carson, "Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 103.

9. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970–1973).

3. "Spiritual Culture in the Theological Seminary," 2:468–96.
4. "The Religious Life of Theological Students," 1:411–25.
5. "The Purpose of the Seminary," 1:374–78.

Those five articles by B. B. Warfield are hugely helpful and motivating. So here is a little taste of Warfield.

Warfield argues that pitting doctrine against devotion is a false dichotomy because God intends them to go together. They are not mutually exclusive; one without the other is incomplete. Here's a sample from his essay "The Religious Life of Theological Students":

> The ministry is a "learned profession"; and the man without learning, no matter with what other gifts he may be endowed, is unfit for its duties. But learning, though indispensable, is not the most indispensable thing for a minister. "Apt to teach"—yes, the minister must be "apt to teach"; and observe that what I say—or rather what Paul says—is "apt to *teach*." Not apt merely to exhort, to beseech, to appeal, to entreat; nor even merely, to testify, to bear witness; but to teach. And teaching implies knowledge: he who teaches must know. Paul, in other words, requires of you, as we are perhaps learning not very felicitously to phrase it, "instructional," not merely "inspirational," service. But aptness to teach alone does not make a minister; nor is it his primary qualification. It is only one of a long list of requirements which Paul lays down as necessary to meet in him who aspires to this high office. And all the rest concern, not his intellectual, but his spiritual fitness. A minister must be learned, on pain of being utterly incompetent for his work. But before and above being learned, a minister must be godly.
>
> Nothing could be more fatal, however, than to set these two things over against one another. Recruiting officers do not dispute whether it is better for soldiers to have a right leg or a left leg: soldiers should have both legs. Sometimes we hear it said that ten minutes on your knees will give you a truer, deeper, more operative knowledge of God than ten hours over your books. "What!" is the appropriate response, "than ten hours over your books, on your knees?" Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God? If learning and devotion are as antagonistic as that, then the intellectual life is in itself accursed, and there can be no question of a religious life for a student, even of theology. . . . Just because you are students of theology, it is understood that you are religious men—especially religious men, to whom the cultivation of your religious life is a matter of the profoundest concern—of such concern that you will wish above all things to be warned of the dangers that may assail your religious life, and be pointed to the means by which you may strengthen and enlarge it. In your case there can be no "either-or" here—either a student or a man of God. You must be both.[10]

10. Ibid., 1:411–12.

Here's one more taste, from Warfield's essay "Spiritual Culture in the Theological Seminary":

> The entire work of the seminary deserves to be classed in the category of means of grace; and the whole routine of work done here may be made a very powerful means of grace if we will only prosecute it in a right spirit and with due regard to its religious value. . . .
>
> I beseech you, brethren, take every item of your seminary work as a religious duty. I am emphasizing the adjective in this. I mean do all your work religiously—that is, with a religious end in view, in a religious spirit, and with the religious side of it dominant in your mind. Do not lose such an opportunity as this to enlighten, deepen, and strengthen your devotion. Let nothing pass by you without sucking the honey from it. If you learn a Hebrew word, let not the merely philological interest absorb your attention: remember that it is a word which occurs in God's Holy Book, recall the passages in which it stands, remind yourselves what great religious truths it has been given to have a part in recording for the saving health of men. . . . Apply every word to your own souls as you go on, and never rest satisfied until you feel as well as understand. . . . Treat, I beg you, the whole work of the seminary as a unique opportunity offered you to learn about God, or rather, to put it at the height of its significance, to learn God—to come to know him whom to know is life everlasting. If the work of the seminary shall be so prosecuted, it will prove itself to be the chief means of grace in all your lives. I have heard it said that some men love theology more than they love God. Do not let it be possible to say that of you. Love theology, of course: but love theology for no other reason than that it is THEOLOGY—the knowledge of God—and because it is your meat and drink to know God, to know him truly, and as far as it is given to mortals, to know him whole.[11]

11. Ibid., 2:478–80. The section entitled "Warfield the Affectionate Theologian" at the end of this book is spot on: Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B. B. Warfield: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 567–70. Zaspel nails it when he describes Warfield as "a theologian of the heart" (568):

> He will surrender neither doctrine nor experience. There is no genuinely Christian experience apart from truth, and it is this depth of Christian experience that characterizes Warfield throughout his writings. If he argues for an inerrant Bible, it is to find in it certain truth about the God whom we can trust. If he explores the mysteries of the Trinity, it is to deepen worship. If he argues for the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, he finds in it cause for praise and comfort and assurance. If he argues for a clear understanding of the two natures of Christ, it is to rest in a uniquely qualified Redeemer and to know and glory in the greatness of his condescending love; only an informed reflection on the redeeming grace of the incarnation "more ardently kindles the affection of faith." If he argues against Pelagian and Arminian and for Calvinistic views of humanity and salvation, it is to heighten our sense of dependence upon and appreciation for divine grace and thereby cultivate piety that is distinctly and thoroughly Christian. If he argues for justification by faith, it is because in no other place can the conscience find rest and be at peace with God and enjoy fellowship with him. When he reads the narrative of Jesus' trials, he highlights not simply the evil of humanity as displayed in Pilate, the priests, and the mob; rather, he adores the contrasting perfections of the One they condemn. For Warfield the academic study of Scripture is to be not only a means to minister to others but also "a religious exercise out of which you draw every day enlargement of heart, elevation of spirit, and adoring delight in

Academia didn't master Warfield; Warfield mastered academia.[12] He refused to separate what God has joined together. Serious theological study and spirituality go together.

Which is more important: an airplane's left wing or right wing? That's a bad question. And so is this one: Which is more valuable: ten minutes of prayer or ten hours of study? Answer: Ten hours of study *on your knees*.

Key Words and Concepts

Argument diagram
Biblical theology
Canon within the canon
Eisegesis
Exegesis
Expository preaching
Genre
Greek grammar
Hermeneutics
Historical-cultural context
Historical theology
Homiletics
Literary context
Practical theology
Systematic theology
Textual criticism
Translation
Word studies

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Some preachers eisegete the Bible instead of exegeting it. How can you discern whether a preacher is explaining what the author intended to communicate?
2. Do you ever exegete your e-mail more carefully than you exegete the Bible? If so, why?
3. Of the twelve steps for exegesis and theology, which are you most and least passionate about? Why?
4. Regarding how exegesis and theology interrelate, do you think some of the five theological disciplines are more important than others? Why?

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your Maker and your Savior." . . . He was, in his heart of hearts, a sinner rescued by divine grace, and it is this consideration that seems to have driven both his devotional life and his polemic endeavors. (569–70)

12. See Andrew David Naselli, "Three Reflections on Evangelical Academic Publishing," *Themelios* 39, 3 (2014): 428–54.

5. Do you ever feel a tension between carefully reading the Bible and cultivating a prayerful devotional life? What practical steps can you take so that you don't separate what God has joined together?

Resources for Further Study

Adler, Mortimer J., and Charles Van Doren. *How to Read a Book*. 2nd ed. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972. A classic on how to read carefully. The authors do not have biblical exegesis in mind, but their principles apply to reading any book—including the books of the Bible.

Black, David Alan, and David S. Dockery, eds. *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001. About 550 pages to reference. It includes chapters on most of the twelve steps that we address in this book.

Blomberg, Craig L., with Jennifer Foutz Markley. *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010. One of the most helpful introductions to New Testament exegesis. It lays out the exegetical process in ten steps: (1) Textual Criticism, (2) Translation and Translations, (3) Historical-Cultural Context, (4) Literary Context, (5) Word Studies, (6) Grammar, (7) Interpretive Problems, (8) Outlining, (9) Theology, and (10) Application.

Bock, Darrell L., and Buist M. Fanning, eds. *Interpreting the New Testament Text: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006. Surveys most of the twelve steps that I address in this book for over 300 pages and then includes 150 pages of detailed examples.

Cameron, Andrew J. B., and Brian S. Rosner, eds. *The Trials of Theology: Becoming a "Proven Worker" in a Dangerous Business*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010. Part 1 excerpts writings from six past voices: Augustine, Luther, Spurgeon, Warfield, Bonhoeffer, and C. S. Lewis. Part 2 includes present voices, and the highlight is D. A. Carson's chapter: "The Trials of Biblical Studies" (109–29). Carson's essay reflects on five interrelated domains that students in biblical studies must address: (1) four forms of integration, such as not separating technical and devotional Bible study; (2) polar temptations regarding work; (3) five facets of pride; (4) pressures to manipulate Scripture; and (5) three priorities regarding writing. What ties these together is humility.

Carson, D. A. "Approaching the Bible." In *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, edited by D. A. Carson et al., 1–19. 4th ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994. See especially the second half of the article under the heading "How to Interpret the Bible."

———. *New Testament Commentary Survey*. 7th ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013. Carson shrewdly advises what the best New Testament resources are.

Croteau, David A. *Urban Legends of the New Testament: 40 Common Misconceptions*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2015. Debunks forty "urban legends" such as these: (1) there was no room at the inn; (2) Jesus died when he was thirty-three;

(3) *hell* referred to a first-century garbage dump near Jerusalem; and (4) women should not wear jewelry. Croteau skillfully uses the appropriate exegetical tools for each job. Sometimes he uses textual criticism or grammar or the literary context or the historical-cultural context. This book is well researched and enjoyable to read.

Duvall, J. Scott, and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. A good college-level introduction that covers most of the twelve steps that we address in this book.

Dyer, John. *Best Commentaries: Reviews and Ratings of Biblical, Theological, and Practical Christian Works*. www.bestcommentaries.com/. John Dyer, who has a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, started this website in 2008. It is especially helpful if you are wondering about the best commentaries to consult on a certain book of the Bible. Dyer is a web developer who has thought a lot about technology (e.g., he wrote a book in 2011 called *From the Garden to the City: The Redeeming and Corrupting Power of Technology*), and he puts his skills to good use for this website. He uses a scoring algorithm for commentaries that takes into account how other scholars such as D. A. Carson rate them.

Fee, Gordon D. *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*. 3rd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002. Another excellent introduction to New Testament exegesis. Fee methodically lays out fifteen steps for exegesis, primarily to help students write research papers. (Blomberg's book is more user-friendly and up to date.)

Guthrie, George H., and J. Scott Duvall. *Biblical Greek Exegesis: A Graded Approach to Learning Intermediate and Advanced Greek*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998. The second half of the book is called "The Exegetical Method" (97–165), and it walks through twelve steps of exegesis that overlap with most of the steps in this book.

Köstenberger, Andreas J., and Richard D. Patterson. *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology*. Invitation to Theological Studies. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011. Nearly 900 pages thoroughly introduce students to hermeneutics. In 2015 Kregel released an even more accessible version of this book that is half the size: *For the Love of God's Word: An Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*.

Naselli, Andrew David. "D. A. Carson's Theological Method." *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 29, 2 (2011): 245–74. I follow D. A. Carson's theological method in this book.

Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006. Comprehensively introduces students to hermeneutics.

Piper, John. *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017. Part 1 argues from the Bible that our ultimate goal in reading the Bible is to worship God by exalting his infinite

worth and beauty, and parts 2 and 3 explain how reading the Bible is both a supernatural and a natural act.

Plummer, Robert L. *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*. 40 Questions. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010. A master teacher clearly and accessibly introduces readers to hermeneutics.

Schreiner, Thomas R. *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011. An outstanding handbook for New Testament exegesis that focuses on Paul's letters.

1

GENRE

ESTABLISH GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING A PASSAGE'S STYLE OF LITERATURE

Why Start with Genre instead of Textual Criticism?

As I explain in the introduction, I've broken down the exegetical and theological process into twelve steps. Step 1 is Genre: Establish guidelines for interpreting a passage's style of literature. (*Genre* refers to a style of literature.)

I'm starting with genre rather than textual criticism. Many exegetes begin their steps of exegesis with textual criticism, that is, establishing the original wording of the text. Many, perhaps most, handbooks on Old and New Testament exegesis make textual criticism step 1.

Textual criticism is a logical starting point. You need to make sure that you're working with the right text before you can analyze it. But I think it makes more sense to start with genre because this is the first step we intuitively take when we read something.

For example, when you get the (physical) mail from your mailbox, you intuitively sort it according to genre before you read it: advertisements (which you'll likely trash immediately), bills, personal letters, and so forth. Or when you read an e-mail or text from a close friend or family member, you know before you even start reading the message that it differs from a Supreme Court opinion or a newspaper's editorial or a Shakespeare play or a romantic poem or a Harry Potter novel or an academic journal article.

And the same is true with parts of the New Testament. Before you even begin the process of textual criticism (which we address in step 2), you already have a sense for the sort of genre you're in, whether it's Gospel or narrative or letter or apocalyptic.[1]

1. Another reason that I think it's worth starting with genre is that I find it much more interesting than textual criticism! It seems like letting the air out of your tires to start an exegetical voyage by talking about textual criticism.

What Are Some General Principles for Interpreting the Bible?

Before we establish specific guidelines for interpreting various styles of literature in the New Testament, we should establish some general principles for interpreting any of the styles of literature. The technical terms for these general principles and specific principles are *general hermeneutics* and *special hermeneutics*. Special hermeneutics concerns various genres, while general hermeneutics concerns all genres.

Rob Plummer suggests ten general principles:[2]

1. *Approach the Bible in prayer.* You are not all-knowing; only God is. And sin permeates your whole being, including your mind, will, and emotions. So you need God's help to remove the blinders related to your finite abilities and related to your sin. You should make it your habit to directly ask God to illumine your mind through the Holy Spirit and then to maintain a prayerful posture that depends on God's Spirit as you read.

This does not mean that you check your brain at the door when you enter the world of Bible study. Far from it. Consider what Paul writes to Timothy: "Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything" (2 Tim. 2:7). That is stunning logic: What is the reason that Timothy should carefully think over what Paul writes? The reason is that the Lord will enable Timothy to understand. That's how Bible study works. You give it everything you've got. You work hard to understand. You use the tools of exegesis that we are learning to use in this book. And as you do that, you depend on the Lord to give you understanding.

In this book's introduction, I ask, "Which Is More Valuable: Ten Minutes of Prayer or Ten Hours of Study?" That's not the best question. Why not study for ten hours on your knees? It's so important not to separate doctrine from devotion. They go together.

2. *Read the Bible as a book that points to Jesus.* The chapter on biblical theology unpacks this (chap. 9).

3. *Let Scripture interpret Scripture.* Follow this syllogism:

- Major premise: God is entirely truthful—without error and incapable of error.
- Minor premise: The Bible is God-breathed.
- Conclusion: Therefore, the Bible is entirely truthful—without error and incapable of error.[3]

This means that the Bible doesn't contradict itself. So a sound principle is that we should interpret less clear passages in light of more clear passages. We shouldn't zoom in on just one text and interpret it without reference to the rest of the Bible. That's what heretics do.

For example, I'm not 100 percent sure what "being baptized on behalf of the dead" refers to in 1 Corinthians 15:29, but based on other Scripture I can rule out

2. Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, 40 Questions (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 95–107. The italicized headings below quote Plummer.

3. See Andrew David Naselli, "Scripture: How the Bible Is a Book like No Other," in *Don't Call It a Comeback: The Same Faith for a New Day*, ed. Kevin DeYoung (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 59–69.

what it certainly does *not* mean. We must interpret the unclear in light of what is more clear.

4. *Meditate on the Bible*. Think deeply for an undistracted period of time about what you read, whether that's a word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph, a psalm, a story, a whole book, or how a theme in one passage connects to other passages. Make your mind a Crock-Pot, and let the Bible sit in it. Give it time. One of the best ways to do this is to memorize the Bible, whether small portions or large ones.[4]

5. *Approach the Bible in faith and obedience*. The Bible is a book like no other. It's not a philosophy book for you to critique. *God* wrote it. It's God-breathed, so it carries the authority of God himself. It's the final, ultimate, supreme authority. So you should approach the Bible accordingly: believe it, and obey it—by God's grace. "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22).

6. *Take note of the biblical genre you are reading*. The rest of this chapter studies genre.

7. *Be aware of historical or cultural background issues*. The chapter on historical-cultural context works through this (chap. 6).

8. *Pay attention to context*. The chapter on literary context addresses this (chap. 7).

9. *Read the Bible in community*. Don't be a lone ranger. If you are a Christian, then you are part of the body of Christ. Other members in the body have gifts that you don't. God designed the body to function together. So study the Bible together. This is one reason that preaching is so special: the church gathers together to hear the Word of the Lord together.

One other thing: you're not the first person to try to understand the Bible. Thousands of Christians a lot smarter than you have been doing this for about two thousand years. And the Holy Spirit was helping them, too. So do you think it'd be wise to consider what some of the most significant exegetes and theologians wrote? We'll talk more about that in the chapter on historical theology (chap. 10).

10. *Begin* [and faithfully continue on] *the journey of becoming a more faithful interpreter.* Don't be discouraged that you don't understand everything in the Bible. You never will. But although you will never understand the Bible exhaustively, you can understand it truly. And you can grow in your knowledge. You can understand it better and better. And like learning a trade or excelling in a sport or hobby, reading the Bible well is a skill that takes time. Start small, and set manageable goals. Keep at it every day, and see what God will do.

One challenging aspect of general hermeneutics (i.e., for all genres) is interpreting figures of speech. So the next section addresses that issue directly, and then what follows addresses special hermeneutics (i.e., for specific genres).

How Should We Interpret Figures of Speech?

Short answer: not literally but according to what the author or speaker intended to communicate. In other words, if I walk into the room with a little backpack on

4. See "Appendix B: Why and How to Memorize an Entire New Testament Book."

and say, "My bag weighs a ton," you shouldn't interpret that literally. The bag obviously doesn't weigh two thousand pounds. You should interpret my words according to what I intended to communicate: *my bag is really heavy*. I used a figure of speech called *hyperbole*.

Here are eight types of figures of speech:

1. *Hendiadys* (hen-**dī**-ə-dəs) is substituting two coordinate terms for a single idea with one term modifying the other. Example: *"the sacrifice and service* coming from your faith" (Phil. 2:17 NIV) = *"the sacrificial offering* of your faith" (ESV).

2. *Hyperbole* is exaggerating for emphasis (not intended literally or to deceive). Example: "straining out a gnat and *swallowing a camel*!" (Matt. 23:24).

3. *Merism* is substituting two contrasting parts for the whole. Examples: *"Heaven and earth* will pass away" (Matt. 24:35). "I am *the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end"* (Rev. 21:6).

4. *Metonymy* is substituting one word or thing for another (usually because of a close mental association). Examples: "[God] will justify *the circumcised* [i.e., Jews] by faith and *the uncircumcised* [i.e., Gentiles] through faith" (Rom. 3:30). "You eat this bread and drink *the cup"* (1 Cor. 11:26): "the cup" = the liquid in the cup.

5. *Personification* is representing a thing, quality, or idea as a person. Example: "O *death*, where is your victory? O *death*, where is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55).

6. *Synecdoche* (sə-**nek**-də-kee) is substituting a part for the whole or the whole for a part. Examples: *"all the world* should be registered" (Luke 2:1) = "a census should be taken of *the entire Roman world"* (NIV). "To the Jew first and also to *the Greek"* (Rom. 1:16) = "first to the Jew, then to *the Gentile"* (NIV).

7. *Simile* is an explicit comparison using *like* or *as*. Example: "All flesh is like grass" (1 Peter 1:24).

8. *Metaphor* is an implied comparison without *like* or *as*. Example: "All flesh is grass" (Isa. 40:6).

I saved metaphor for last because I'm going to spend a little more time illustrating this one. You probably use metaphors all the time. For example: "LeBron James was a freight train." I obviously don't mean that the basketball player LeBron James was literally a freight train. I mean that when the 6-foot-8-inch, 250-pound LeBron James drove down the lane in a basketball game, he was so big and strong and fast that standing in his way was *like* standing in front of a freight train.

A metaphor has three parts: (1) the topic or item that the image illustrates, (2) the image, and (3) the point of similarity or comparison. Sometimes one or two of the three components may be implicit rather than explicit.

1. LeBron James was a freight train.
   - Topic: LeBron James.
   - Image: freight train.
   - Point of similarity: You don't want to be standing in front of either one when it is coming at you at full speed!

2. Herod is a fox.
   - Topic: Herod.
   - Image: fox.
   - Point of similarity: Four legs? Red? Furry? No, *sly*.

Warning: Talking about the point of similarity this way can be misleading. "Herod is a fox" and "Herod is sly" are not identical statements. You can't substitute *sly* for *fox* and maintain an equivalent meaning with all the same connotations. A metaphor communicates distinctively. But breaking down the components like this is a helpful way to analyze it.

Let's try doing this for an extended metaphor in Romans 11:16b–24:

> If the root is holy, so are the branches.
>
> But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

Analyzing this extended metaphor is more challenging than analyzing a simple statement such as "LeBron James was a freight train." That simple statement explicitly names the topic and image. But the extended metaphor in Romans 11:16b–24 includes several images without explicitly naming the topics. Let's display this extended metaphor in figure 1.1 on the following page.[5]

5. I'm simply illustrating how metaphors work. For more on this extended metaphor in Romans 11:16b–24, see Andrew David Naselli, *From Typology to Doxology: Paul's Use of Isaiah and Job in Romans 11:34–35* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 20–21 (used with permission).

1. Image	2. Topic	3. Point of Similarity
a. One cultivated olive tree	The people of God	A living organism
b. Arboriculturist	God	Skillful cultivation
c. The root of the olive tree	Israel's patriarchs as recipients and conveyers of God's covenantal promises	Basic means of support and nourishment
d. Natural branches	Israelites	Natural extension of the living organism
e. Natural branches broken off	Non-Christian Israelites	Disconnected from the living organism
f. Wild olive shoot from an uncultivated olive tree	Gentiles	Not naturally related to the living organism
g. Wild olive shoot engrafted into the cultivated olive tree	Gentile Christians	Attached extension of the living organism

Fig. 1.1. Extended Metaphor of the Olive Tree in Romans 11:16b–24

Interpreting figures of speech is part of general hermeneutics. The rest of this chapter addresses special hermeneutics (i.e., guidelines for interpreting specific genres).

What Genres Are the Gospels and Acts, and How Do the Gospels and Acts Relate to One Another?

What Genre Are the Gospels?[6]

The New Testament has four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The New Testament itself doesn't use the word *Gospel* in that way. The early church added the title *Gospel* to these books because it recognized that there is only one gospel. The New Testament preserves four perspectives on that one gospel: the one Gospel *according to* Matthew, the one Gospel *according to* Mark, the one Gospel *according to* Luke, and the one Gospel *according to* John.

So what style of literature are the Gospels? It is difficult to be certain because as far as we know the four Gospels in the New Testament are the first books in history to have the

6. Cf. D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *Introducing the New Testament: A Short Guide to Its History and Message*, ed. Andrew David Naselli (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 18.

title *Gospel* like this. The Gospels are most likely *biographies*. But they aren't like modern biographies that you are used to reading—say a biography of Winston Churchill or Steve Jobs. The Gospels do not narrate how Jesus developed as a child into an adult, nor do they use chronological precision. In that way they are similar to ancient Greco-Roman biographies. But unlike ancient Greco-Roman biographies, the authors don't identify themselves by name, and the Gospels uniquely combine Jesus' teaching and action.[7]

What is striking about the Gospels is that they focus on one week in Jesus' life—the final week in his life up to his death on the cross. Everything points to that one week, and the Gospels devote about a third of their words to that final week.

- Matthew 21–28 = ⅓ of book
- Mark 11–16 = ⅓ of book
- Luke 19–24 = ¼ of book
- John 12–20 = nearly ½ of book (John 13–19 is devoted to one day = ⅓ of book)

One-third (twenty-nine of the eighty-nine chapters) of the Gospels is devoted to Jesus' final week, and the other two-thirds prepares readers for that final week. The heart of the Bible is the Gospels, and the heart of the Gospels is the sacrificial, redemptive work of Christ. The Gospels are essentially passion narratives with extended introductions.

What Genre Is Acts?[8]

Acts surveys three decades of the early church's history. It starts in Jerusalem, moves out to Judea, Samaria, Syria, Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, and ends in Rome. Two apostles dominate the story: Peter is prominent in chapters 1–12 and Paul in chapters 13–28.

So what style of literature is Acts? It goes together with Luke's Gospel as volume 2 in a *history* of Christian beginnings. *Acts* denoted a style of literature in the ancient world that described the great deeds that people or cities accomplished. The title *The Acts of the Apostles* is not *wrong*, since the apostles play such prominent roles in the story, but a more theologically precise title is *The Acts of the Holy Spirit* or *What Jesus Continued to Do and Teach* (see Acts 1:1).[9]

How Do the Gospels and Acts Relate to One Another?

So how do these first five books of the New Testament relate to one another? First of all, they are each God-breathed and therefore do not contradict each other.

7. Cf. Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) ; Craig S. Keener, "Ancient Biography and the Gospels: Introduction," in *Biographies and Jesus: What Does It Mean for the Gospels to Be Biographies?*, ed. Craig S. Keener and Edward T. Wright (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2016), 1–45.

8. Cf. Carson and Moo, *Introducing the New Testament*, 53, 59.

9. Cf. Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke's Account of God's Unfolding Plan*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 27 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 48–49.

They supplement each other, and they harmonize. But two specific relationships are especially important:

1. *Matthew, Mark, and Luke*. Scholars refer to the first three Gospels as the *Synoptic Gospels* (*synoptic* means "seeing together") because they are highly similar in three ways: structure, content, and tone.

2. *Luke and Acts*.[10] The prologues to Luke and Acts connect the two books. Each addresses Theophilus, and Acts 1:1 refers to Luke's Gospel as the "first book." Some insist that Luke and Acts form one book (*Luke-Acts*) that has two volumes simply because a single papyrus scroll was not large enough to hold both Luke and Acts. On the one hand, virtually all scholars today agree that the same person wrote both Luke and Acts, and most also find a considerable degree of unity in their themes. On the other hand, the Gospel of Luke is biography while Acts is not. So they are two separate but closely related books.

How Should We Interpret the Gospels and Acts?

Here are nine principles for interpreting the Gospels and Acts:

1. *Interpret the Gospels and Acts as history.* You can so single-mindedly focus on the literary and theological features and purposes of these five books that you might minimize or ignore that the events these books recount actually took place. This is just a step away from the unorthodox position that the stories are myths. Granted, the Gospels and Acts don't read like modern history books. But if you're a sympathetic reader, that should not bother you. The authors themselves intended that people read what they wrote as actual history. We have a different standard of history-writing today; we demand greater precision (i.e., more exact detail—something can be completely accurate without being precise). But the Gospels and Acts faithfully recount actual events that happened. The authors of the Gospels and Acts are both historians and theologians. History and theology are inseparably connected. Historical matters matter to the Christian faith.[11]

2. *Discern why the Gospels and Acts recount the events they do in the way they do.* All history is selective. If both you and I attended an event together—say, a football game—and afterward we each wrote a truthful three-hundred-word summary of the game on Facebook, do you think that our accounts would be identical? Probably not. That's because when you recount history, you always have your own perspective, a slant, a narrative that you want to convey. It's impossible to say everything. You have to select which details to include and exclude. So when you read the Gospels and Acts, try to discern why they include the details they do in the way they do. What is the author trying to do?

3. *When reading a passage in the Gospels that has a parallel passage (or passages), compare it with the other Gospels to note differences and similarities.* Sometimes this can help you discern what the author of a Gospel is emphasizing.

10. Cf. Carson and Moo, *Introducing the New Testament*, 41–42.

11. See James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary, eds., *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

4. *Highlight an author's editorial comments.* These are important. When an author is telling a story, his asides are significant. For example, Mark adds this comment in Mark 7:19 (which the ESV puts in parentheses): "Thus he declared all foods clean." That's a hugely important line.

5. *Discern whether the author thinks a character is one you should imitate.* Storytellers cue readers both directly and indirectly whether a character they are describing is trustworthy and exemplary. For example, after quoting Judas Iscariot, John's Gospel cues readers directly: "He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief, and having charge of the moneybag he used to help himself to what was put into it" (John 12:6). Also, pay special attention to the words that a character speaks in a story.

6. *Distinguish between description and prescription.* There's a big difference between "This event happened" (that's situational or descriptive) and "We must do this today" (that's normative or prescriptive). Just because the Gospels or Acts tell a story about an event doesn't mean that we must repeat that event today. Before you apply the Gospels and Acts to today, you must locate where the events fit in salvation history and reflect on the nature and purpose of the story.[12] Here's how D. A. Carson puts it for reading the Gospels:

> Handling the gospels sensitively means, among other things, that we cannot treat the first disciples' coming to full Christian faith exactly like the coming to faith of people today. In the case of the first disciples, for fully Christian faith they had to wait until the next major redemptive-historical event—the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Thus their steps in faith can never be exactly like ours, for we look back on those events while they had to wait for them. That means we must never teach and preach from the gospels as if they were written simply to provide psychological profiles in discipleship, or as if they were exemplary "how-to" manuals for Christian living (though they certainly provide rich materials for such constructions). Rather, they are more like books that tell us how-we-got-from-there-to-here; above all they focus on who Jesus is, why he came, how and why he was so largely misunderstood, how his teaching and life led to the cross and resurrection, why he is worthy of all trust, the purpose of his mission and much more. And as we focus on Jesus Christ himself, we are called to trusting and faithful discipleship.[13]

7. *Understand what the kingdom of God is.* You'll be lost if you don't because it was the main topic that Jesus taught about. The kingdom of God is God's rule over his people and the entire created order. The Jewish apocalyptic movement during the Second Temple period sharply divided the sin-dominated present age from the

12. See Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 123–31.

13. D. A. Carson, "Approaching the Bible," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 17.

age to come when the Messiah conquers sin and eradicates its presence.[14] In other words, the popular Jewish view of the kingdom was that God would become King and then vindicate the Jews by conquering their enemies. But Jesus spoke of the kingdom very differently: the kingdom is already here in the person and teaching of Jesus, but it's not yet *fully* here because Jesus has not yet fully consummated his rule. The kingdom is already but not yet. The coming of Jesus inaugurated the age to come but did not yet eradicate sin's presence; that will happen in the future when Jesus returns.

Thus, to use Oscar Cullmann's analogy from World War II, Christians today are living in between D-Day (June 6, 1944) and V-E Day (May 8, 1945). In World War II, D-Day marks the day when the Allies decisively defeated their enemy.[15] Anyone could see that there was no way the Allies could lose now. But the war wasn't over yet. Some of the most gruesome fighting in the war followed D-Day. It was not until V-E Day (Victory in Europe Day) that the war was officially over. So in this analogy, D-Day represents when Jesus decisively defeated Satan in his life, cross-work, resurrection, and ascension, and V-E Day represents when Jesus will return to earth to consummate his victory. Right now we are living in that period between D-Day and V-E Day. The war is not yet over. Jesus has already won the victory, but he has not yet consummated it. The kingdom is already but not yet.[16]

8. *Look beyond individual stories to series of stories.* The authors of the Gospels and Acts do not always tell stories in a strictly chronological order. Sometimes they may tell stories topically.

For example, consider Matthew 8:23–9:8. This passage recounts three stories from Jesus' ministry: (1) Jesus calms a storm; (2) Jesus heals two men with demons; and (3) Jesus heals a person who could not walk. Matthew strings these three stories together to make a single compelling point. (The three stories are not even in chronological order: the third story occurred *before* the first two.)

You are familiar with this way of communicating. Let's suppose you are talking to some boys who have never seen Michael Jordan play basketball, and you tell them that Michael Jordan is the greatest all-around scorer in the history of basketball. How might you communicate that?

- You could quote from Michael Jordan's profile on nba.com, which says, "By acclamation, Michael Jordan is the greatest basketball player of all time."[17]

14. *Second Temple Judaism* refers to Jewish history and literature from the time Zerubbabel completed the second temple (c. 516 B.C.) to when the Romans destroyed Herod's temple in A.D. 70.

15. Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, trans. Floyd V. Filson, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 141–42, 145–46.

16. For more on the kingdom of God, see Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *The Kingdom of God*, Theology in Community (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); T. D. Alexander, "The Kingdom of God," in *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 2662–63.

17. www.nba.com/history/players/jordan_bio.html.

- You could rattle off statistics of his achievements: "Rookie of the Year; Five-time NBA MVP; Six-time NBA champion; Six-time NBA Finals MVP; Ten-time All-NBA First Team; Nine-time NBA All-Defensive First Team; Defensive Player of the Year; 14-time NBA All-Star; Three-time NBA All-Star MVP; 50th Anniversary All-Time Team; Ten scoring titles—an NBA record and seven consecutive matching Wilt Chamberlain; Retired with the NBA's highest scoring average of 30.1ppg."[18] Voted the greatest athlete of the twentieth century over Babe Ruth and Muhammad Ali. (And you could go on.)

But that fails to capture it, doesn't it? It doesn't say much about what Michael Jordan was like in action. So you might highlight some specific stories for vividness (and I'll merely mention these generally rather than take the time here to tell the stories):

- Unbelievable buzzer-beating, game-winning clutch shots in playoff games
- Scoring 69 points in a single game
- Scoring 40 and 50 points in playoff games while sick with the stomach flu
- Soaring, twisting, acrobatic, tongue-wagging layups and dunks

Now, when you give specific examples like that, you selectively emphasize particular details and leave out others. But telling such a string of stories underscores one main point: Michael Jordan was the greatest all-around scorer in the history of basketball. You are communicating one point vividly by telling a string of stories.

And passages such as Matthew 8:23–9:8 do the same thing. Matthew is telling people about Jesus. Many of those people had never even seen Jesus. Matthew could have simply rattled off impressive facts: Jesus is God; Jesus is the Creator of the world; Jesus will judge the world; Jesus is all-powerful; Jesus is all-knowing; Jesus performed miracles; and so forth. But that's not the way that Matthew presents Jesus here. Matthew tells a string of stories in chapters 8–9 for specific reasons, and here he tells three stories that cohere to make the very same point.

What's the common thread? How do those three stories make the same point? These three miracles show Jesus' *authority*:

- In 8:23–27, Matthew tells the story about Jesus' calming a storm to show that Jesus has authority over *nature*.
- In 8:28–34, Matthew tells the story about Jesus' healing two men with demons to show that Jesus has authority over *demons*.
- In 9:1–8, Matthew tells the story about Jesus' healing a person who could not walk to show that Jesus has authority over *sin and sickness*.

9. *Don't overinterpret parables*. This one is so important that we devote the next section to it.

18. Ibid.

How Should We Interpret Jesus' Parables?

The word *parable* is remarkably flexible and can include a proverb, riddle, allegory, metaphor, or simile. I am using the word more specifically for Jesus' *story* parables. A story parable is an extended metaphor or simile with a story: "The kingdom of heaven is *like . . .*" (Matt. 13:31). Jesus commonly teaches this way in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Here is one big warning for interpreting Jesus' parables: *Don't overinterpret parables*. Here are six more specific principles:

1. *Don't assume that the stories in the parables themselves are historical*. It is beside the point to ask whether the stories in the parables actually happened in history. What actually happened in history is that Jesus told these parables, but Jesus probably made up the stories.

2. *Don't propose allegorical meanings that aren't clearly anchored to the text*. Allegory goes wrong when its hermeneutical key is outside the text. Augustine, for example, overinterpreted the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37):[19]

1. *A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho* = Adam
2. *Jerusalem* = the heavenly city of peace, from which Adam fell
3. *Jericho* = the moon, and thereby signifies Adam's mortality
4. *robbers* = the devil and his angels
5. *stripped him* = of his immortality
6. *beat him* = by persuading him to sin
7. *leaving him half dead* = as a man he lives, but he died spiritually; therefore, he is half dead
8. *the priest and Levite* = the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament
9. *the Samaritan* = is said to mean Guardian; therefore, Christ himself is meant
10. *bandaged his wounds* = binding the restraint of sin
11. *oil* = comfort of good hope
12. *wine* = exhortation to work with a fervent spirit
13. *donkey* ("*beast*") = the flesh of Christ's incarnation
14. *inn* = the church
15. *the next day* = after the resurrection
16. *two silver coins* = promise of this life and the life to come
17. *innkeeper* = Paul

That's creative. But it's definitely not what Jesus meant.

3. *Discern the main point or points*. Some evangelical scholars debate whether a parable has only one point or whether it can have two or three points. Most have argued that a parable has only one main point, but Craig Blomberg has argued that the number of

19. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 155.

main characters or items in a parable determines the number of points.[20] Blomberg is on to something here, but still, I think you can summarize a three-character parable in a single sentence that captures the big idea. So in general, while a parable may have minor points in addition to a single main point, it's helpful to think of a parable as having one big idea, one main point, one central teaching.

Bible readers and teachers commonly overinterpret parables. But whenever you compare two unlike things, the comparison will break down at some point. A parable's details are significant with reference to the parable's central point. The details are there to help tell the story, to give the story life. Parables are not allegories like John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

4. *Pay special attention to a parable's historical and literary context*. The setting, which includes the original audience, likely explains the reason that Jesus gave the parable. Ask yourself, "What point is the author seeking to make by including this parable here?"

5. *Recognize common symbols*. For example, common symbols for God in Jesus' parables include a father, judge, king, master, and shepherd, and common symbols for Israel include a fig tree, son, vine, and vineyard.

6. *Translate the main point into your own context*. Some of the parables are so historically remote from us that we don't naturally feel the emotions and tension that the stories stirred up for the original hearers. One resource that does this well is *Modern Parables*. These fifteen- to twenty-minute videos present six parables in modern-day settings. They're thought-provoking, and they are based on common, everyday situations that creatively parallel Jesus' parables.[21]

Example: The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15)

The parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 can help us illustrate how to interpret a parable. Let's answer four questions:

1. *What historical-cultural aspects of this story might a modern reader not pick up?* Moisés Silva mentions three:[22]

- "The request of the son—'Give me my share of the estate'—would likely have been interpreted as a wish for his father's death."
- "The elder brother, in that situation, would have been expected to do all he could to reconcile his brother to the father. Not only does he fail to do that, but he even accepts his own share of the inheritance. In other words, from the very beginning of the story the elder brother is put in a bad light. He actually shares in the sin of his brother, and that gives us a better perspective with which to understand his self-righteous indignation at the end of the story."

20. Craig L. Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables: From Responsible Interpretation to Powerful Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012); Blomberg, "The Parable of the Good Samaritan: Redefining 'Israelite' or Redefining 'Neighbour'?," *Foundations: An International Journal of Evangelical Theology* 64 (2013): 24–37.

21. See http://andynaselli.com/modern-parables.

22. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. and Moisés Silva, *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 164–65.

- "When we read about the father *running* to meet the younger son, we view that merely as an expression of joy. In the Middle East, however, particularly in rural areas, a mature man is expected always to walk slowly and with dignity. It is likely that the father in the parable runs to protect the son from the children in the town who might decide to meet him with stones. In doing so, however, the father humbles himself and becomes a powerful picture of the God of grace."

Silva adds, "While the primary meaning of the parable does not change on the basis of these cultural details, they give us insight into the 'overtones' of the story that add greatly to our understanding of Jesus' teaching."

2. *What's the immediate literary context?* This is the *third* parable in a series of three parables: the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son. These three parables are a unit; they go together. The first two are important for understanding the third one.

3. *What is the immediate historical context?* Look at how Luke introduces these three parables: "Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable" (Luke 15:1–3). To whom did Jesus speak these three parables? To Pharisees and scribes who grumbled that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. So the characters surrounding this story are (1) Jesus, (2) sinners, and (3) Pharisees. I think the primary point of this parable applies to the Pharisees.

4. *What is the main thread between the three parables?*

- *Lost sheep*. The shepherd finds his lost sheep, which results in rejoicing. In heaven, there is great rejoicing when a lost sinner repents. At this point the Pharisees do not react negatively to the parable.
- *Lost coin*. The woman finds her lost coin, which results in rejoicing. In heaven, there is great rejoicing when a lost sinner repents. The Pharisees still do not react negatively to the parable.
- *Lost son*. The father finds his lost son, which results in rejoicing. In heaven, there is great rejoicing when a lost sinner repents. But now the Pharisees react negatively to the parable because this one includes a new detail—the older brother, who represents the Pharisees.[23]

23. There is a fascinating debate about whom the father in the story represents. The father obviously represents God, but some get more specific about whether the father represents God the Father or God the Son. Tim Keller follows Ed Clowney, arguing that the clincher depends on something that's not in the story itself but that Clowney thinks is assumed and implicit: in that culture, the older brother was responsible to seek and save his younger brother. Hence, Jesus is the "true older brother," and the father in the story represents God the Father. John MacArthur, in contrast, thinks that the father represents Jesus, and he says that this story concludes later in the Gospels with a shock: the older brother (i.e., the Pharisees) rises up and kills the father (i.e., Jesus). See Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008); John MacArthur, *A Tale of Two Sons: The Inside Story of a Father, His Sons, and a Shocking Murder* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008).

The unexpected turn in this parable is how the older brother responds. The main point of these parables is about not rejoicing. The most significant point of the third parable is not the lost son or the father; the focus is the older brother. The primary recipient of the parable is the Pharisees. Jesus contrasts how the Pharisees and those in heaven view repentant sinners. The main point is not the story of someone who is lost and comes home. The main point of these parables is to address the attitude of people like the Pharisees who claim to be righteous but are not really righteous at all. People who are right with God do not respond like the older brother. We think the older brother is a rascal, but we may have that same attitude sometimes. You can picture a Pharisee saying, "What a terrible older brother!" Then it would hit him: "Hey! Jesus is talking about me! He is saying that I'm like that older brother."

The primary point of these three parables is not that "God rejoices in the recovery of lost things, so you should repent." The primary point is that "God rejoices in the recovery of lost things, so you should rejoice in the recovery of lost things, too." Jesus is not evangelizing the Pharisees; he is exposing their self-righteous attitude.

Remember that debate in the previous section about whether a parable has only one point or whether it can have two or three? Craig Blomberg argues that since this parable has three main characters (the prodigal, the older brother, and the father), it has three points, which he states this way:

- Even as the prodigal always had the option of repenting and returning home, so also all sinners, however wicked, may confess their sins and turn to God in contrition.
- Even as the father went to elaborate lengths to offer reconciliation to the prodigal, so also God offers all people, however undeserving, lavish forgiveness of sins if they are willing to accept it.
- Even as the older brother should not have begrudged his brother's reinstatement but rather rejoiced in it, so those who claim to be God's people should be glad and not mad that he extends his grace even to the most undeserving.[24]

That's a helpful perspective, but I still think you can summarize the parable more succinctly as one point, incorporating everything that Blomberg says here. Here's one way to say it concisely: *We should rejoice when God graciously saves sinners.*

How Should We Interpret the Epistles?

The Epistles are the twenty-one letters in the New Testament. About 35 percent of the New Testament text is letters. In the historical-cultural context of the Greco-Roman world, communicating by letters was popular and convenient, and the New Testament authors used letters to pastor flocks from a distance.

24. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 200–201.

New Testament Letters in Their Greco-Roman Context[25]

A typical letter had three parts:

1. *Introduction*. The address and greeting were short, such as "Andy to Jason, greetings." Most New Testament letters tweak the word *greetings* (χαίρειν, *chairen*) to *grace* (χάρις, *charis*). Greco-Roman letters often wished good health to the recipient. New Testament letters seem to parallel that sentiment by thanking God for the recipient or asking God to bless the recipient.

2. *Body*. The letter's longest section did not follow a typical form. Some New Testament letters, such as Romans and Ephesians, are relatively easy to outline (e.g., part 1 is more theological and part 2 is more ethical), and others seem impossible to outline (e.g., 1 John). Sometimes a letter simply responds to the recipient (e.g., 1 Corinthians).

3. *Conclusion*. Letters typically ended with greetings, and New Testament letters normally add a doxology or blessing.

Greco-Roman letters were diverse, ranging from informal to formal. Informal letters could read like a telegram asking family or friends to send money, and more formal letters were master rhetorical treatises. The New Testament letters are in the middle of that range. Some New Testament letters are more informal (e.g., Philemon and 3 John), and some are more formal (e.g., Romans and Hebrews).

What Are Some Principles for Interpreting the Epistles?

Here are six:

1. *Remember that the New Testament authors wrote the Epistles to specific first-century churches and individuals on specific occasions*. So the letters directly apply to the intended recipients—to their specific questions, to their specific situations. Many of those issues also directly apply to us today, but we can't assume that. Otherwise, what do you do with commands such as "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Cor. 16:20b) and "Do your best [Timothy] to come to me [Paul] soon" (2 Tim. 4:9)? We must first read the text on its own terms before applying it to our situation today. We must begin by asking not "What does this text mean for me?" but instead "What did the author mean when he wrote this text?"

2. *Don't expect the letters to read like a systematic theology*. This follows from the previous principle. Do you think it's fair to Peter to construct Peter's full-blown systematic theology based solely on two short letters that he wrote?

Maybe this thought experiment will help: What do you think would happen if a theologian tried to write a book explaining what your systematic theology is based solely on your e-mails? That'd be tricky, wouldn't it? There are probably a lot of important doctrines—or at least aspects of doctrines—that you haven't e-mailed people about explicitly and in detail. Would it be fair to say that your e-mails comprehensively and logically represent everything you believe?

That's what we're up against when we read the New Testament letters. They are *occasional* documents: the authors wrote them on specific occasions to specific people

25. Cf. Carson and Moo, *Introducing the New Testament*, 65–66. On understanding the form and significance of Paul's letters, see Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *Paul the Ancient Letter Writer: An Introduction to Epistolary Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016).

for specific purposes. So it's not fair to expect the letters to read like a comprehensive, well-organized systematic theology. The letters are filled with theology, of course, but it's always theology for specific, practical purposes.

The next four principles are ones that we examine in more depth in chapters 5–8. This is the sort of advice that applies to any part of the Bible, but it's especially critical for the New Testament letters:

3. *Trace the argument*. More than any other genre, the letters unpack arguments with logical rigor. We explore how to trace the argument in chapter 5.

4. *Understand the historical-cultural context*. For example, the driving purpose for some parts of the New Testament letters is to directly counter a specific false teaching. That kind of information is critical to factor in as you exegete the text. Or how did the prevailing honor-shame culture affect how the New Testament authors wrote? We must skillfully and responsibly read between the lines. More on this in chapter 6.

5. *Understand the literary context*. The New Testament letters often have a literary theme with logical supporting arguments, so understanding a letter's overall structure and purpose and theme is important for understanding a portion of the letter. When your friends e-mail you a letter, do you ever divide the letter up into little chunks and then read the various parts one day at a time? Or do you typically read the entire letter in one sitting? That's how we should read New Testament letters: in one sitting. A letter is a literary whole—not a reference work such as a thesaurus or encyclopedia. More on this in chapter 7.

6. *Understand the meaning of significant words*. The New Testament letters teach doctrine more explicitly and densely than any other genre in the Bible, so it's crucial that you know what significant words mean. We walk through how to do word studies in chapter 8.

How Should We Interpret Revelation?

The book of Revelation is the most challenging book to interpret in the New Testament. The main reason is that when most people start reading it, they feel a bit like how an English-speaking American citizen would feel if she were somehow able to travel back in time and get dropped off in a populated Egyptian city in 1500 B.C. Reading Revelation is like visiting a foreign country in another time period because most of us aren't used to reading its style of literature.

What Genre Is Revelation?[26]

It is reductionistic to label Revelation as apocalyptic because it combines elements of *three* genres: letter (Rev. 1:4), prophecy (1:3), and apocalypse (1:1). No other literature combines these three genres as Revelation does. The first element is what you are probably most familiar with:

1. *Letter.* Although Revelation is a circular letter "to the seven churches that are in Asia" (1:4), its content and style differ from the twenty-one New Testament Epistles.

26. Cf. Carson and Moo, *Introducing the New Testament*, 159–60.

2. *Prophecy.* Unlike apocalyptic, in prophecy the prophets directly proclaim a message from the Lord, and God saves his people not by the breaking in of an apocalyptic new world but through the processes of this world. Like other passages in the Bible (e.g., Daniel, Isaiah, Zechariah, Matthew 24–25), Revelation contains elements of both prophetic and apocalyptic literature. We can't rigidly distinguish them.

3. *Apocalypse.* Here are six general characteristics of apocalyptic literature:

- It responds to persecution.
- It claims to relate heavenly mysteries that an angel or some other spiritual being reveals.
- It is pseudonymous. A pseudonymous writing is falsely (*pseud-*) named (*onoma*, "name"). The false names for Jewish apocalypses include great figures such as Adam and Moses (e.g., 1 Enoch in the Pseudepigrapha).
- It culminates with the breaking in of God's kingdom, which the author expects in the very near future.
- It uses extensive symbolism in historical surveys.
- It has a dualistic conception of history that sharply contrasts the present sinful world with the world to come. Scholars call this *apocalyptic eschatology*.

Revelation is not pure apocalypse because it is not pseudonymous (the opening paragraph states that the author is John) and because it grounds hope in Jesus' *past* sacrifice. But Revelation has many features of apocalypse, so many scholars refer to it as apocalyptic.

So what genre is Revelation? Apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter. Or you could call it a prophetic-apocalyptic letter.

What Are Some Principles for Interpreting Revelation?

Here are four:

1. *Understand the major approaches to interpreting Revelation.*[27] Interpretations of Revelation typically fall under five approaches:

- *Preterist.* John's visions describe events in his own day, so they are now *past*. (*Preterit* means "expressing a past action or state.") The symbols in John's visions all refer to people and events in John's day, and he wrote to exhort Christians to persevere as they wait for God to deliver them.
- *Historical.* Revelation sketches church history all the way up to our own day. The Reformers identified the beast with the papacy. (Throughout history, the people who have adopted this approach usually place their own time period at the end of history.)
- *Idealist.* Revelation doesn't give a detailed schedule of future events but helps us understand who God is and generally how he interacts with the world.

27. Cf. ibid., 160–61.

- *Futurist*. God will fulfill everything in chapters 4–22 in the very last days of human history. A more moderate futurist approach holds that some events in chapters 4–22 have already occurred or will occur before the very end, which John describes from the perspective of his historical-cultural context.
- *Eclectic*. This is a mixed approach that combines insights from all four of the previous approaches.

I take an eclectic approach because I think there is some truth in each of the first four approaches, but I think that a moderate futurist approach is most accurate.

2. *Understand Revelation's literary structure*. This is a big debate that is inseparably tied to the major approaches to interpreting Revelation. Here are the two most common structures (which aren't mutually exclusive—you can blend them):

- *Chronology*. The book has three basic chronological parts that correspond to Revelation 1:19: "Write therefore [1] the things that you have seen, [2] those that are and [3] those that are to take place after this." The three parts are past, present, and future, and these may correspond with chapter 1 (past), chapters 2–3 (present), and chapters 4–22 (future).
- *Recapitulation*. The book doesn't follow a strict chronological order. Instead, the book recapitulates. In other words, it describes the same basic events over and over again from different angles.

3. *Be aware of evangelical debates about eschatology, but don't let those overshadow the book's theological message*. For example, evangelical theologians commonly debate what the millennium means in Revelation 20 and what that means for the three main views on the millennium: premillennialism (Jesus returns *before* the millennium), postmillennialism (Jesus returns *after* the millennium), and amillennialism (the millennium exists between Jesus' ascension and return). That's a debate worth having. But it must not become more important than the book's theological message: *The Lamb will consummate his kingdom for God's glory by saving his people and judging his enemies*. God wins! The purpose of Revelation is not to confuse you or entertain you or intrigue you or give you a train schedule for future events. It's to comfort and encourage and exhort Christians by revealing future events and providing a heavenly perspective on present earthly difficulties. It's okay to debate finer eschatological issues, but make the main thing the main thing.

4. *Interpret symbols with literary sensitivity*. Grant Osborne is one of my favorite commentators on Revelation, so I was delighted to take a Ph.D. seminar from him called "Revelation and Apocalyptic Literature." We spent the first half of the course reading apocalyptic literature from Second Temple Judaism (such as 1 Enoch, one of the most popular apocalyptic books outside the Bible) so that we could get a feel for how apocalyptic literature works. And many of the symbols in that literature occur in Revelation as well. Further, just about all the symbols in Revelation allude to the Old Testament—especially passages such as Isaiah 24–27; Ezekiel 38–39; Daniel 7–12; and Zechariah 1–6. So interpreting the symbols in Revelation well requires at a minimum

that you are making the proper connections to the Old Testament. And symbols are just that—symbols. They stand for something else; they represent reality in a figurative way. So it's silly to take them literally. Otherwise, many of the images in Revelation would be grotesque (e.g., a sword coming out of Jesus' mouth in Revelation 19:15). Good commentaries such as those by G. K. Beale and Grant Osborne will help you with this.[28]

Key Words and Concepts

Apocalypse
Eclectic
Epistles
Futurist
General hermeneutics
Genre
Hendiadys
Historical
Hyperbole
Idealist
Merism
Metaphor
Metonymy
Parable
Personification
Preterist
Prophecy
Simile
Special hermeneutics
Synecdoche

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Of the ten general principles for interpreting the Bible, which are you most likely to neglect? Why?
2. What genre in the New Testament do you most enjoy reading? Why?
3. Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). What figure of speech did he use, and what does he mean?
4. One of my favorite biographies is Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken: A World War II Story of Survival, Resilience, and Redemption* (New York: Random House, 2010). What is one of yours? How does its format compare to the Gospels?
5. What is one of your favorite parables that Jesus told? Try making Jesus' same point by retelling the parable in your specific historical-cultural context.

28. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

6. Which approach to interpreting Revelation do you find most compelling? How should you interact with fellow Christians (especially fellow church members) who disagree?

Resources for Further Study

Carson, D. A., and Douglas J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005. This is the gold-standard New Testament introduction. It responsibly explains the New Testament genres.

———. *Introducing the New Testament: A Short Guide to Its History and Message*. Edited by Andrew David Naselli. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. I abridged Carson and Moo's seminary-level textbook (the previous book in this list) for laypeople. The big text is about 355,000 words, and this small one is about 47,000 words (about 13 percent as long). In a handful of small sections in this chapter, I updated some of the text that I abridged for this shorter Carson-Moo book (I footnote those instances).

Fee, Gordon D., and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. Doug Stuart is an Old Testament professor, and Gordon Fee is a New Testament professor. They team up well in this popular book. It's clear and a joy to read, though Fee seems to grind his ax occasionally on issues such as egalitarianism. The main message that you should walk away with after reading this book is simple: *A text cannot mean what it could never have meant*. Or, stated positively: *A text means what its author intended it to mean*.

IVP dictionaries on the New Testament. These valuable reference works are massive and comprehensive, and the myriads of articles are clearly organized and good entry points to studying the New Testament:

Green, Joel B., Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013.

Hawthorne, Gerald F., and Ralph P. Martin, eds. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Martin, Ralph P., and Peter H. Davids, eds. *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

Kaiser, Walter C., Jr., and Moisés Silva. *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007. See especially chapters 10–11, which Silva wrote on the Gospels and Epistles.

Stein, Robert H. *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011. A commonsense, easy-to-understand introduction to hermeneutics. A good text for students in high school or college.

Strauss, Mark L. "Finding the Heart of God in the Diverse Genres of the New Testament." In *How to Read the Bible in Changing Times: Understanding and Applying God's Word Today*, 157–205. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011. A reliable lay-level survey.

See also the "Resources for Further Study" at the end of chapter 6 on the historical-cultural context.

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- Go further in your studies using the extensive recommended resources for every step of the way.

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—**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Associate Dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

"This book is profitable for grasping a comprehensive view of how to handle the text, serving also as a reference tool that I will go back to again and again."
—**Jen Wilkin**, Bible Teacher

"I cannot think of another introduction to New Testament exegesis that combines this degree of clarity and comprehensiveness, all with the design of helping us live in light of the gospel for the glory of God."
—**Justin Taylor**, Executive Vice President of Book Publishing and Book Publisher, Crossway

"Andy Naselli is one of my favorite authors because of the combination of his soundness as a theologian and his giftedness as a teacher. Both qualities are on bright display here."
—**Tim Challies**, Blogger, challies.com

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