

INTRODUCTION

Around AD 66, as he prepared for his execution, the apostle Paul penned what would be his last letter to his dear son-in-the-faith, Timothy. The letter, known as 2 Timothy, contains Paul's last will and testament—a sober collection of final exhortations and encouragements for the one who would continue the gospel ministry after his death.

As a testimony to the sober simplicity of 2 Timothy, numerous statements from the letter are particularly memorable. One of those statements is found in 2 Timothy 2:15,

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

Leading up to and following this statement, the apostle Paul warns Timothy about the treacherous context of the gospel ministry. There will be those given to “wrangle about words, which is useless and leads to the ruin of the hearers” (v. 14). There will always be the danger of “worldly and empty chatter” that must be avoided, “for it will lead to further ungodliness” (v. 16). There will be those who stray from the truth by advocating false doctrine, whose popularity spreads quickly and destructively like gangrene (vv. 17–18). Amid these distractions and dangers, Paul gives Timothy this simple directive, which can be examined in three parts:

- (1) **A command**—“**Be diligent to present yourself approved to God**” (v. 15a). Timothy was exhorted to “be diligent.” The verb describes one who is “especially conscious in discharging an obligation.” Timothy’s obligation was to present himself to God as “one approved”—one who could withstand an in-depth, comprehensive examination when he stood before God to give an account of his ministry. Paul himself anticipated that moment (4:7–8). He wanted Timothy to be ready for it as well.
- (2) **A comparison**—“**as a workman who does not need to be ashamed**” (v. 15b). Paul indicated that the way for Timothy to pass the examination would be for him to conduct himself according to a particular standard. The standard was that of a “workman”—one who labored strenuously—who could look back over all of his work at the end of the day and not be “ashamed.” To be ashamed meant “to experience a painful sense of loss of status because of some particular event or activity.” Paul earnestly desired Timothy to avoid such an experience.
- (3) **A course**—“**accurately handling the word of truth**” (v. 15c). At the end of the statement Paul gets to the heart of the matter: Timothy could be successful in his ministry if he was steadfastly focused on “accurately handling the word of truth.” The verb “to handle accurately” means “to cut straight.” It was used to describe the making of roads through a forest, or the cutting of stone at a quarry. For Paul, the verb probably reflected his experience as a leatherworker, cutting right edges of leather to sew tents and other materials. The analogy was appropriate for Timothy: he was to “cut straight”—or *interpret correctly*—the contents of the Word of God. If he did this faithfully, he would one day stand before the God of the Word unashamed.

Paul’s memorable exhortation to Timothy does not come with an expiry date. The powerful teaching it contains applies to all who would be involved in the gospel ministry. The statement expresses the motto for any who would claim to be students of “the word of truth” and ministers of that Word to others. As such, it reminds us about what is at stake. It reminds us of the need for the right interpretive principles or “**hermeneutics**” for “**cutting it straight**” and standing without shame before the God of the Word.

In the previous session we introduced these essential principles and described four of them:

- I. Submit to Scripture's authority and seek divine enablement.
- II. Suspend preunderstandings and search for the writer's intent.
- III. Respect the context and read the language naturally.
- IV. Pursue a single meaning for each text.

In this session we will focus on the final two essential principles:

- V. Read in the light of antecedent revelation.
- VI. Validate your interpretation by external sources.

V. REMEMBER WHAT COMES BEFORE

V. Read in the light of antecedent revelation.

In other words, the way in which we interpret Scripture should deliberately reflect the way in which Scripture was delivered.

As a considerate and masterful Teacher, God educated humanity about His glorious character and plan of redemption *progressively*, through an emerging story of His mighty words and mighty acts. We call this the doctrine of **"progressive" or "cumulative revelation."** In other words, as God inspired more and more Scripture, the breadth of topics revealed increased—as did the depth of the topics revealed. This does not mean that later revelation replaced earlier revelation, or that later revelation corrected or changed earlier revelation. Instead, God began by revealing the fundamentals and then provided greater and more details with each successive revelation. Theologian John Feinberg expresses it as follows: "New revelation doesn't void prior revelation but amplifies it. Hence, as time passes the total amount of divine revelation given accumulates. On the other hand, later revelation doesn't merely elaborate points already revealed but can add new content never before revealed. In this respect, revelation also progresses" (*Light in a Dark Place*, 45 fn. 18). Or as "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" explains, "We affirm that God's revelation in the Holy Scriptures was progressive. We deny that later revelation, which may fulfill earlier revelation, ever corrects or contradicts it. . ." (Article V).

Biblical texts that describe God's work of expanding His revelation include:

- Deuteronomy 18:18–22
- John 16:12–13
- Hebrews 1:1–2
- 1 Peter 1:10–12

NOTE: Two other topics that must be kept in mind when considering the doctrine of progressive or cumulative revelation are: (1) the sufficiency of Scripture (see Lesson #5); and (2) the completion of Scripture (see Lesson #9).

The development of this progressive, cumulative revelation can be compared to the building of a house. Figuratively speaking, God began with the most foundational aspect—the Law of Moses, the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy). Then He built upon that the writings of the Former and Latter Prophets of the Old Testament. As He did, He also added the Old Testament Wisdom Literature. Then came the New Testament writings to complete the heights of this "structure." But never does this subsequent revelation change or annul the meaning of what God revealed prior to it. As Michael Vlach explains, "Progressive revelation from the New Testament does not interpret the Old Testament passages in a way that cancels the original authorial intent of the Old Testament writers" (*Christ's Prophetic Plans*, 24).

How does this quality of Scripture affect our study of it? Simply stated, **we are to read Scripture in the same way that it was delivered—in the light of antecedent Scripture.** We are to remember, for example, that when David wrote his psalms, he presupposed the Law of Moses; that when Isaiah recorded his prophecies, he presupposed the writings of David and Moses; and that when Paul wrote to the Romans, he presupposed Isaiah and David and Moses.

**The Hermeneutic of
Antecedent Revelation**

One practical implication of this principle is that students must give attention to the reading of *the whole Bible, in chronological order*. Reading the Bible in isolated parts, approaching it without any

concern for the chronological development of God’s unfolding plan of redemption, or ignoring certain sections of the Bible that are “too difficult” will not result in a healthy understanding of the message of Scripture in its parts. As such, **readers must work hard to overcome biblical illiteracy.**

Another practical implication is that students must always consider what antecedent theology is being assumed and developed by the writer of the text they are studying. The key question when reading is, “Is this author drawing upon and expanding knowledge of a concept that was revealed earlier?” If there are indications that this is indeed the case, it is incumbent upon the reader to familiarize himself with that earlier revelation. Biblical texts were not given in vacuums.

Ultimately, students must be careful not to read *backward* into earlier texts the more detailed knowledge revealed in later texts. Rather, students must respect the *forward moving force* of progressive revelation. Earlier texts provide the much-needed context for the development that comes in later texts.

VI. LOOK FOR APPROPRIATE AFFIRMATION

VI. Validate your interpretation by external sources.

The Word of God is objective in meaning. Its meaning transcends the reader’s circumstances, experiences, social identity, and felt needs. Each text means what it always meant. And each text means what it means whether that meaning is understood and accepted by the reader or not. Consequently, the affirmation of an interpretation cannot be based on the personal, subjective authority of the interpreter. One can never assert, “This interpretation is right because I believe it!” Affirmation of an interpretation must be come *from the outside*, from sources external to the interpreter and his personal authority. This is essential because there are no infallible interpreters. David Wells (*Above All Earthly Powers*, 174) summarizes this need well when he writes,

Revelation, then, is public, not private. It is public in the sense that God’s primary locus of communication is not within the self nor are his intentions accessed by intuition. He has spoken and he continues to speak, through the words of Scripture which constitute the Word of God. . . . And though it has to be understood and interpreted, its meaning is always objective to the interpreter.

There are three external-to-self sources or authorities that should play a role in validating (or invalidating) proposed interpretations of Scripture:

The Hermeneutic of Objective Validation

A. Scriptural Accord

A. The Totality of Scripture

This validation is based upon what is known as **the analogy of Scripture** principle. Scripture is its own infallible standard. Interpretations cannot contradict what God has said elsewhere in His Word.

This principle is based on the premise that *Scripture is not contradictory*. A text rightly interpreted will never contradict another text rightly interpreted, for God cannot lie or change His mind (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18). Thus, the key question to ask before affirming one’s proposed interpretation is, “**Does my interpretive conclusion contradict what Scripture as a whole teaches on this subject?**” The analogy of Scripture principle automatically disallows the practice of asserting any interpretation that clearly conflicts with what God has said elsewhere—a practice that would portray God as irrational, deceitful, or incompetent in communication.

This principle of interpretive validation is the most authoritative, for it acknowledges the incomparable clarity, sufficiency, and authority and of God’s Word.

B. Historical Appreciation

B. The History of Interpretation

This validation is based upon what can be called **the catholicity of truth** principle. Scripture should be read with an appreciation for all of God’s people throughout the ages. The discovery of truth is not limited to particular periods of church history or to particular people groups.

This principle is based on the premise that *the meaning of Scripture was not hidden at times in history, nor does it change through time*. Rather, it is fixed, accessible, and sufficiently clear to all of God’s people from the moment it was revealed (Deut 29:29; 1 Tim 3:15; Rev 2:7a, 11a, etc.). Thus,

the key question to ask before affirming one's interpretation is, **"Does my interpretive conclusion represent a *new interpretation never seen before?*"** The catholicity of truth principle dismantles the notion that *novel interpretations*—interpretations that are "discovered" for the first time hundreds of years after the Scripture was written—are best.

The authority of this source of validation does not rise to the level of the first principle stated above, for while Scripture is infallible, how God's people have handled the Scriptures through history is not.

C. Ecclesiastical
Accountability

C. The Function of the Local Church

This validation is based upon what can be called **the *community of faith*** principle. Scripture should be read in accountability to the elders and fellow members of one's local church.

This principle is based on the premise that *God illumines the individual believer in conjunction with the ministry of one's local church* (Acts 17:11; Eph 4:11–16; Titus 1:9). Often, the Spirit's ministry of illumination is assumed to be private in nature. Yet when understood correctly, this ministry of the Spirit works in conjunction with God's work in the local church. Thus, the key question to ask before affirming one's interpretation is, **"Is my interpretive conclusion *accountable to my elders and fellow church members?*"** The community of faith principle disallows the notion that one can be unaccountable to his local church and yet wholly successful in how he interprets the Bible.

Once again, the authority of this source of validation—the local church—does not rise to the level of the first principle stated above, for while Scripture is infallible, a local church is not.

DISCUSSION
QUESTIONS

Discuss these questions in your small group:

1. Explain in your own words the two essential principles of Bible study covered in this lesson.
2. Define the term "progressive" or "cumulative" revelation. Provide a helpful analogy that explains how God revealed Himself and His will to mankind in Scripture.
3. To "read in the light of antecedent revelation" (Principle 5) assumes a steadily growing knowledge of the contents of the entire Bible a good understanding of the Bible's storyline. How is your understanding of this storyline? Discuss with one another how you can improve in this area.
4. Why is it important to look outside of ourselves for the validation (or invalidation) of our efforts to interpret the Bible?
5. What are the three sources of this validation (Principle 6)? Which of the three is most authoritative? Why must we refrain from giving the other two sources ultimate authority?
6. How accountable are you to the leaders and members of your local church? What does this accountability look like in practical terms?

FURTHER
STUDY

For further study this week:

1. Memorize Ezra 7:10.
2. Commit to memory the two essential principles of Bible study discussed in this lesson (#5 and #6).
3. Listen to the sermon by John MacArthur, entitled "How to Study Your Bible: Closing the Gaps" (*Grace to You*), preached June 22, 1997, available here: [How to Study Your Bible: Closing the Gaps](#).

RECOMMENDED
READING

To prepare for the 3-part mini-series—"The Practice of Bible Study"—that begins next week, we recommend reading through one of these two beginner-level books on Bible Study:

- Pickowicz, Nate. *How to Eat Your Bible: A Simple Approach to Learning and Loving the Word of God*. Moody Publishers, 2021.
- MacArthur, John. *How to Get the Most out of God's Word: An Everyday Guide to Enrich Your Study of the Bible*. Thomas Nelson, 1997.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: www.gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: April 2, "The Practice of Bible Study, Part 1" (Brad Klassen)