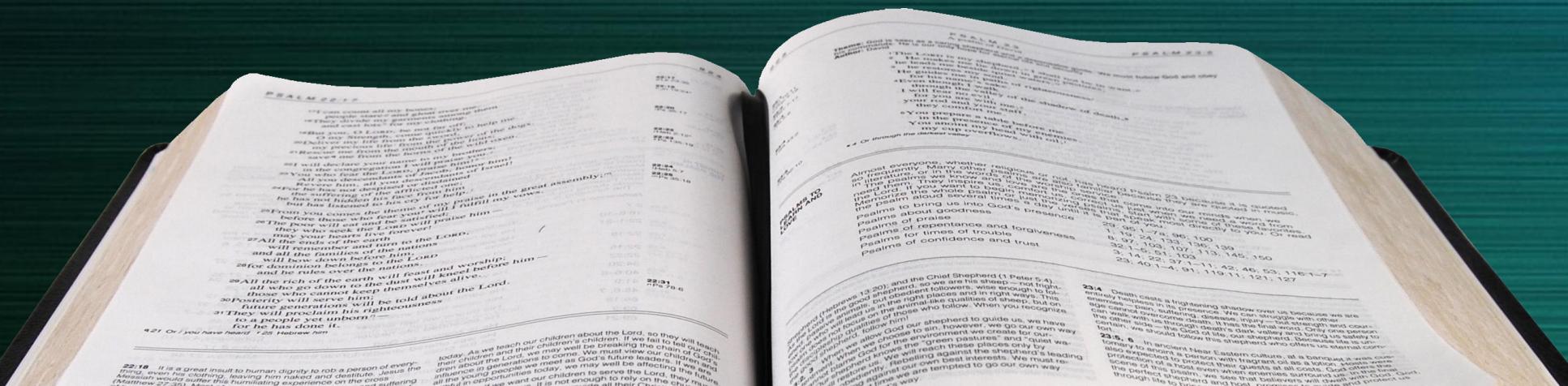


Guidelines for Inductive Bible Study

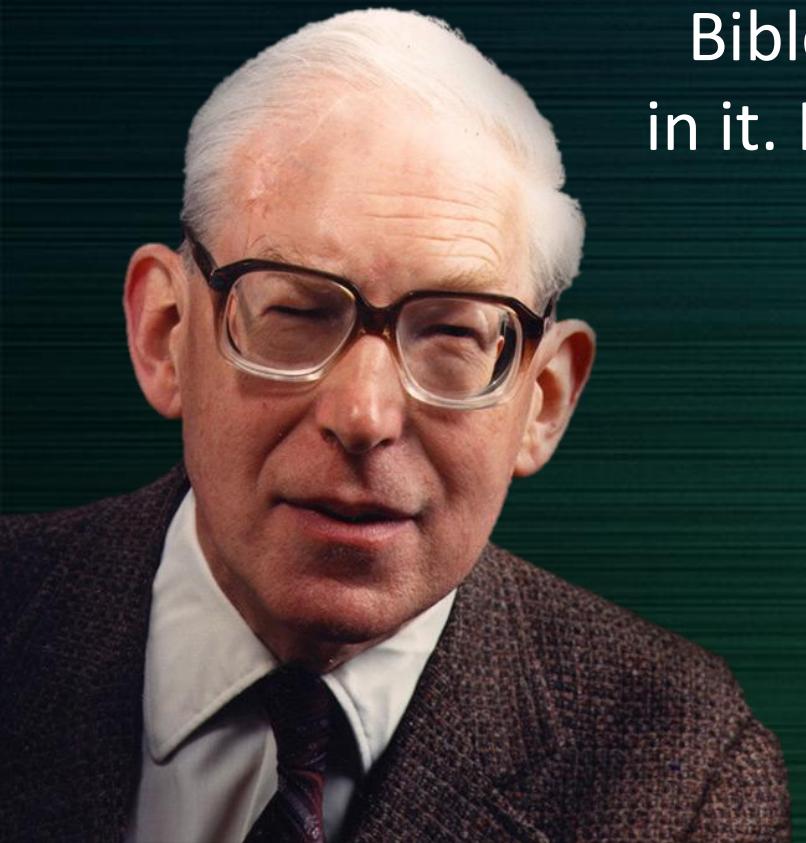
Six Essential Principles



“To determine what God has said is a high and holy task. With fear and trembling each should be ever so careful of that which he has adopted as his method of Biblical interpretation. Upon the correct interpretation of the Bible rests our doctrine of salvation, of sanctification, of eschatology, and of Christian living. It is our solemn responsibility to know what God has said with reference to each of these. This can be done only if we have carefully, thoroughly, and systematically formulated that system of Biblical interpretation which will yield most readily the native meaning of the Bible.”

—Bernard Ramm,
Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 2



A black and white portrait of J. I. Packer, an elderly man with white hair and glasses, wearing a suit and tie.

“Scripture can rule us only so far as it is understood, and it is understood only so far as it is properly interpreted. A misinterpreted Bible is a misunderstood Bible, which will lead us out of God’s way rather than in it. Interpretation must be right if biblical authority is to be real in our lives and in our churches.”

—J. I. Packer, “Give Me Understanding,” 104).

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

—2 Timothy 2:15

(1) A Command (v. 15a)

“Be diligent” = “to be especially conscious in discharging an obligation”

(2) A Comparison (v. 15b)

“Ashamed” = “to experience a painful sense of loss of status because of some particular event or activity”

(3) A Course (v. 15c)

“Accurately handling” = “to cut a path in a straight direction”

Six Essential Principles of Bible Study

- 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.
- V. Read in the light of antecedent revelation.
- VI. Validate your exegetical results by objective sources.

I. Submit to Scripture's authority and seek divine enablement.

- Attitude affects interpretation.
- The effectiveness of your study of the Bible will depend upon whether you approach it in a manner consistent with its nature.
- **2 Timothy 3:16** – “All Scripture is inspired by God.”
- **1 Thessalonians 2:13** – “For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God . . . you accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.”
- **Isaiah 66:2** – “But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.”

“The Bible is the Word of God in such a way that when the Bible speaks, God speaks.” —*B. B. Warfield*

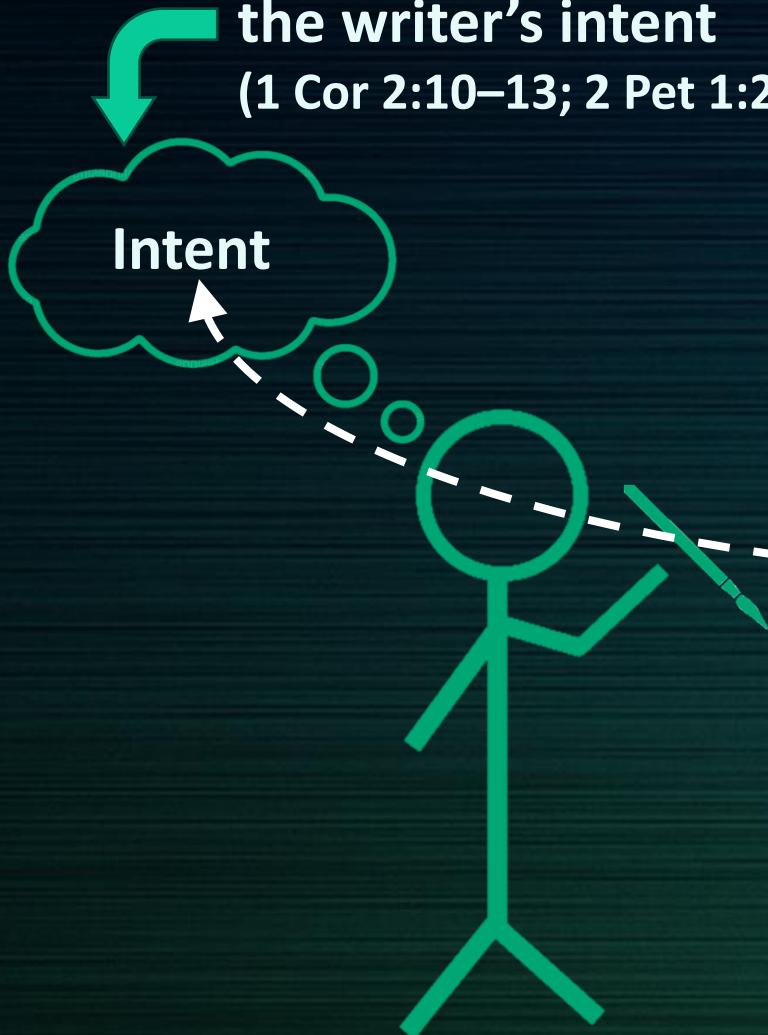
“Think in every line you read that God is speaking to you.”
—*Thomas Watson*

- The divine enablement you need is that which is graciously provided by the illumination of the Holy Spirit.
- “Illumination” is the Spirit’s ministry within the believer of developing *understanding, certainty, desire, and obedience* with respect to the meaning of the biblical text.
- **Psalm 119:18** – “Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law.”
- **Psalm 119:125** – “I am Your servant; give me understanding, that I may know Your testimonies.”

II. Suspend preunderstandings and search for the writer's intent.

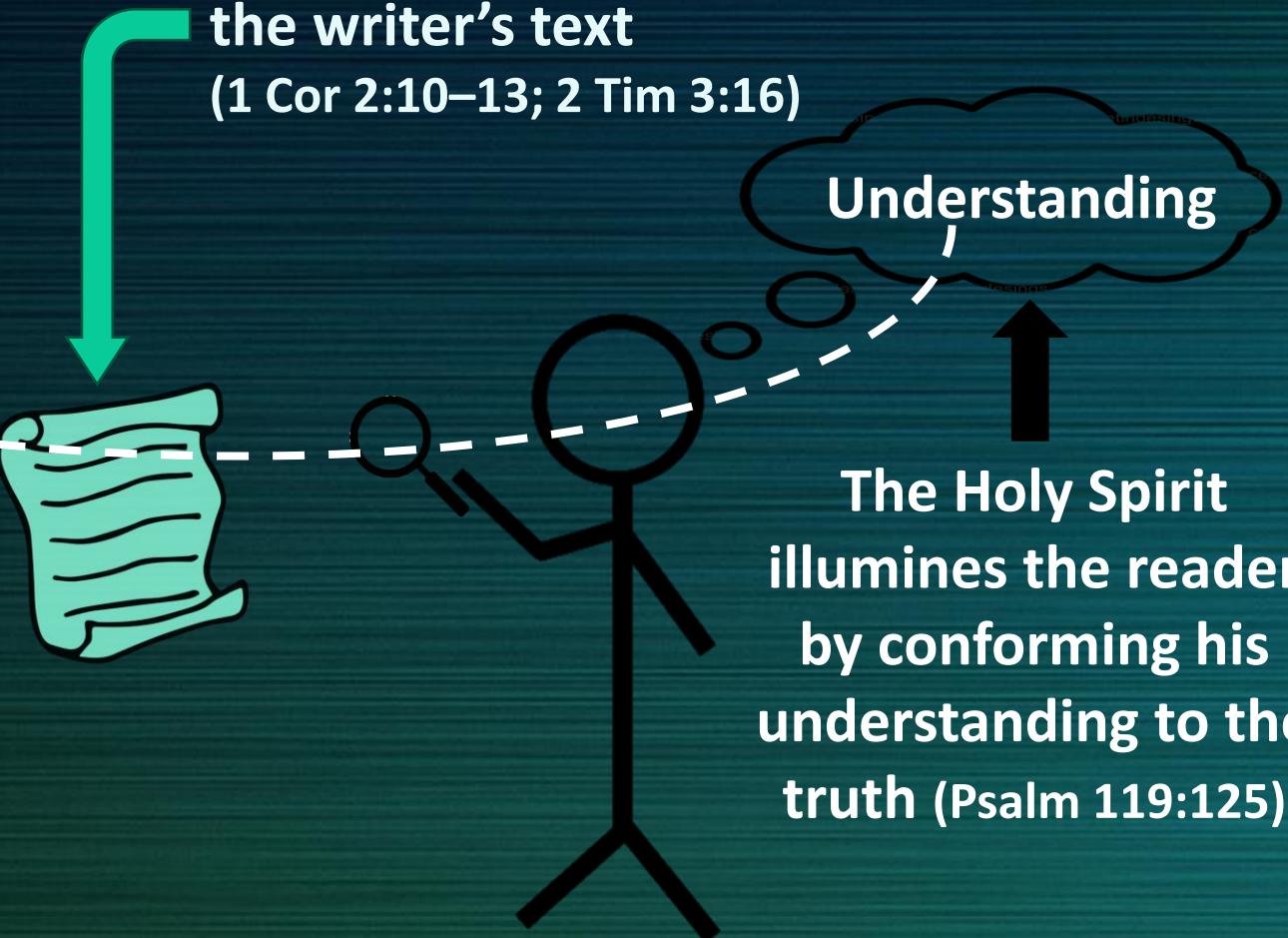
- “Preunderstandings” are already-formed conclusions about what the text means; they can be correct or incorrect.
- You are not to become a perpetual *tabula rasa*, but you are to admit the inadequacy of your understanding and guard against bias.
- It is the biblical writer whom God has used to reveal His intent; it is this writer's understanding which must be clearly heard.
- Your desire must be to sit at his feet—the man who writes on behalf of God—and listen, not speak.

The Holy Spirit superintended
the writer's intent
(1 Cor 2:10–13; 2 Pet 1:20–21)



The Biblical
Writer

The Holy Spirit inspired
the writer's text
(1 Cor 2:10–13; 2 Tim 3:16)



The Holy Spirit
illuminates the reader
by conforming his
understanding to the
truth (Psalm 119:125)

“If authorial intent is our hermeneutical conviction, then our approach to the quest for authorial logic should be consistent with that; namely, the author should be the starting point and the center of the discussion.” —*Abner Chou*

“It is not the right course to weigh the mere words, nor examine the language by itself, as many errors will be the consequence, but to attend to the intention of the writer. And unless we pursue this method in our own discourses, and examine into the mind of the speaker, we shall make many enemies, and every thing will be thrown into disorder.” —*John Chrysostom*

III. Respect the context and read the language naturally.

- “**Context**” refers to the world into which a text is woven; all biblical texts are *woven* into historical and literary contexts.
- The more you interpret apart from this original context, the more you will interpret according to *your* context—according to your *convenience*.
- To read language naturally means to read it according to the norms of the author and his audience—treating the text’s language as *plain* or *figurative* depends on the conventions of the author’s day, not on the reader’s tastes.
- Context and language form the most definitive guardrails for accurate interpretation.

“We must everywhere stick to the simple, pure, and natural sense of the words that accords with the rules of grammar and the normal use of language as God has created it in man.” —*Martin Luther*

“The material before the passage is the radar which guides the approach, and the following material is the radar of the leaving. And if we can track the material approaching and leaving the particular passage, we have the framework in which the passage is to be understood.” —*Bernard Ramm*

“The easiest explanation, that is, the one which grows out of all the facts most naturally and without coercion, is usually the most accurate explanation. It is not true that the trickiest interpretation or the most mysterious one is the soundest.” —*Robert Traina*

IV. Pursue one definite meaning for each text.

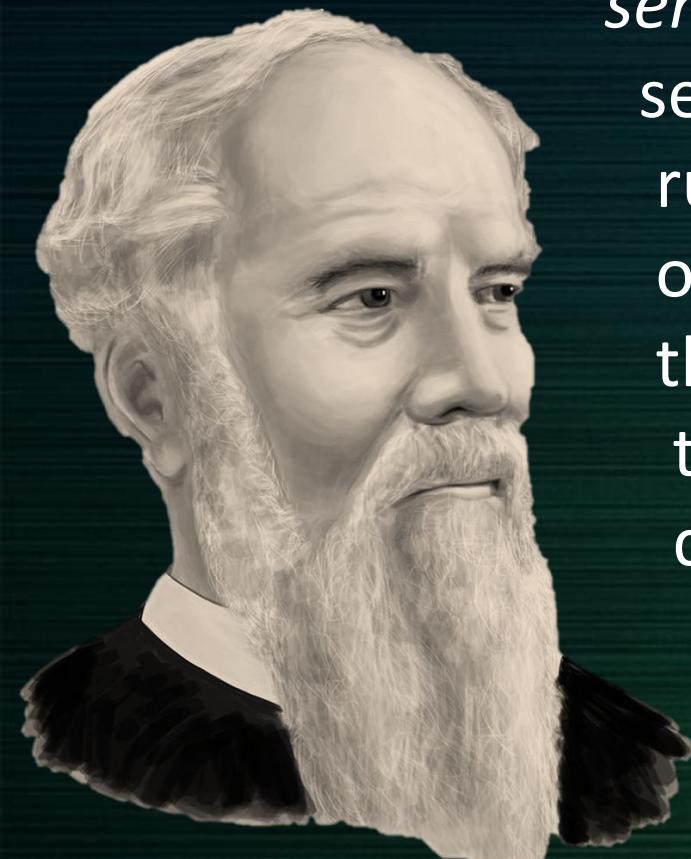
- Today's postmodernists insist that every interpreter "creates" his own meaning; there are as many "meanings" as there are interpreters.
- For example: "Today, since I think that we have moved into a postmodern age, I would be much more careful in speaking of *meaning*. . . . Nowadays I tend rather to believe that texts do not have meaning in themselves, and that what we call meaning is something that comes into being at the meeting point of text and reader. If that is so, then meaning is reader-dependent and reader-specific, and there are in principle as many meanings as there are readers" (David Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed., 131).
- Common question today: "What does this text mean *to you*?"



While there can be many *applications* of a text to everyday life, there is still only one *meaning*—the *original one*!

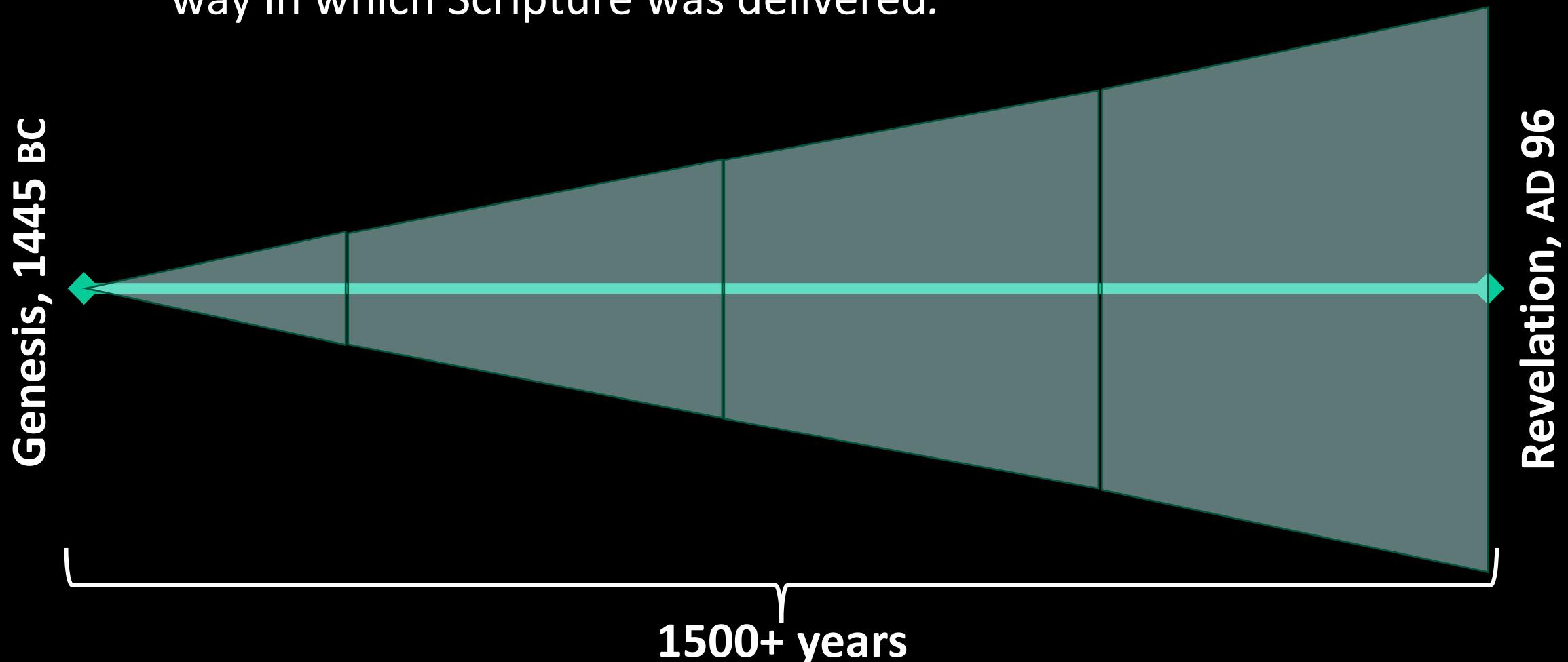
“I hold it to be a most dangerous mode of interpreting Scripture, to regard everything which its words may be tortured into meaning as a lawful interpretation of words. I hold undoubtedly that there is a mighty depth in all Scripture, and that in this respect it stands alone. But I also hold that the words of Scripture were intended to have *one definite sense*, and that our first objective should be to discover that sense, and adhere to it rigidly. I believe that, as a general rule, the words of Scripture are intended to have, like all other language, one plain definite meaning, and that to say that words *do* mean a thing, merely because they *can* be tortured into meaning it, is a most dishonorable and dangerous way of handling Scripture.”

—J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, 2:383



V. Read in the light of antecedent revelation.

- The way in which we interpret Scripture should reflect the way in which Scripture was delivered.



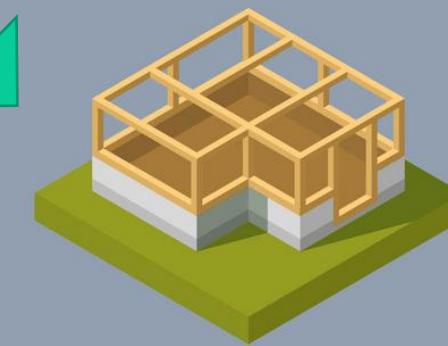
- **John 16:12–13** – “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.”
- **Hebrews 1:1–2** – “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in *His* Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.”

- As a considerate and masterful Teacher, God educated humanity about His glorious character and redemption *progressively*, through an emerging story of His mighty words and mighty acts.
- We call this the doctrine of “**progressive**” or “**cumulative revelation**”—as God revealed His special revelation over time, the breadth of topics and the depth of knowledge of each topic *increased*.
- John Feinberg: “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).

THE NATURE OF PROGRESSIVE/ CUMULATIVE REVELATION



Foundation



Frame



Roof



Facade

“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.”

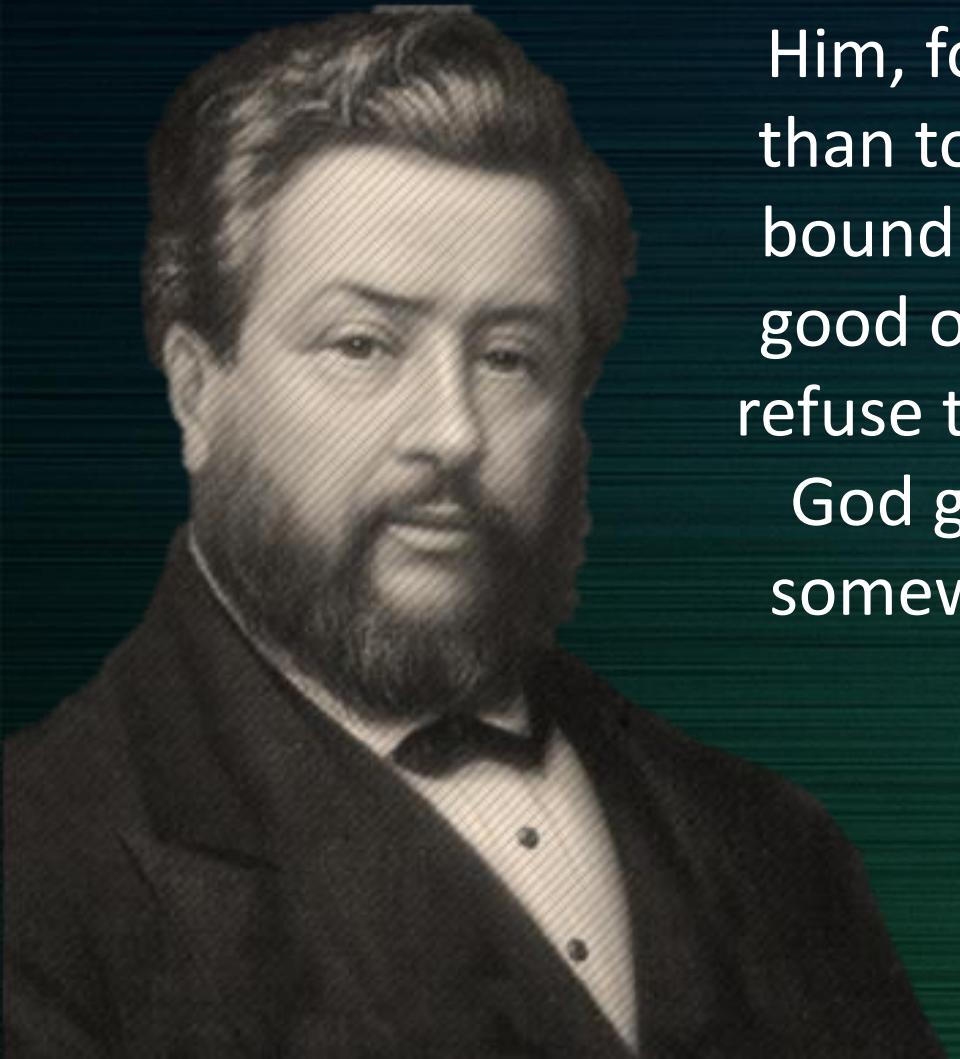
—Michael Vlach, *Christ’s Prophetic Plans*, 24

VI. Validate your interpretation by objective sources.

- The Word of God is objective and transcendent in meaning.
- Each text means what it always meant, and each text means what it means whether that meaning is understood and accepted or not.
- Consequently, interpretation cannot be a subjective experience or a private affair.
- Interpretations cannot be asserted as true based simply on one's own personal authority.
- External affirmation is necessary because there are no infallible interpreters.

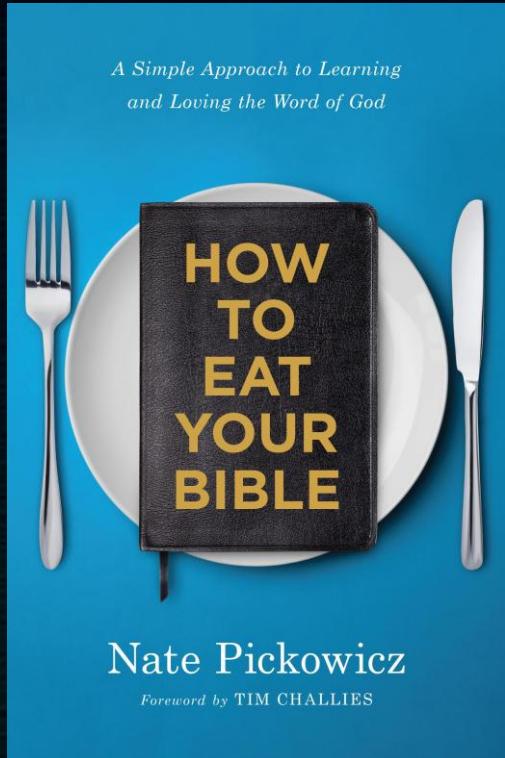
- **Acts 17:11** – “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.”
- **Ephesians 4:11–16** – “And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head . . .”

- Especially important is what we can call ***the community of faith*** principle: Scripture should be read in accountability to the elders and fellow members of one's local church.
- This “interpretive check” is based on the premise that *God illuminates the individual believer through the ministry of the local church* (Acts 17:11; Eph 4:11–16; Titus 1:9).
- **KEY QUESTION:** “Is my interpretive conclusion accountable to my elders and fellow church members?”
- This principle disallows the notion that one can be unaccountable to his local church and yet be wholly successful in how he interprets the Bible.

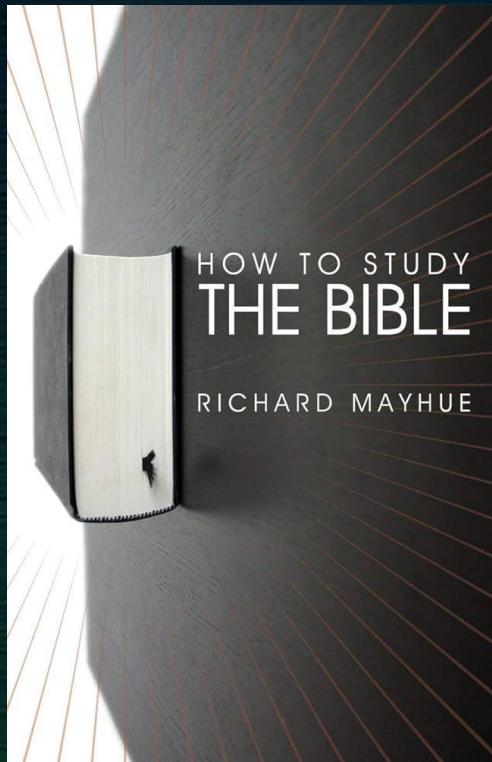
A black and white portrait of Charles Spurgeon, a prominent English Baptist preacher. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark suit jacket over a light-colored shirt with a high collar. He has a full, dark beard and mustache. His hair is dark and wavy, combed upwards. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a thoughtful expression.

“Some, under pretense of being taught of the Spirit of God, refuse to be instructed by books or by living men. This is not honoring of the Spirit of God; it is disrespect for Him, for if He gives to some of His servants more light than to others—and it is clear He does—then they are bound to give that light to others, and to use it for the good of the church. But if the other part of the church refuse to receive that light, to what end did the Spirit of God give it? This would imply that there is a mistake somewhere in the economy of God’s gifts and graces, which is managed by the Holy Spirit.”

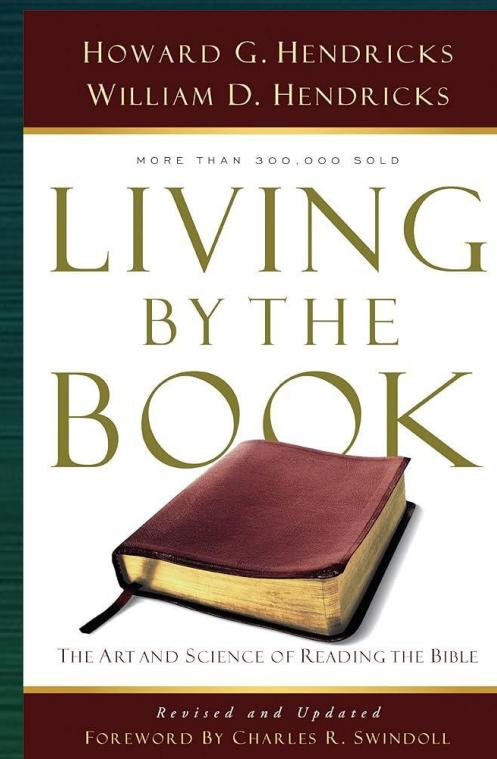
—Charles Spurgeon, *Words of Counsel for Christian Workers*, 111



Nate Pickowicz, *How to Eat Your Bible.*



Richard Mayhue, *How to Study the Bible.*



RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Howard Hendricks and William Hendricks, *Living by the Book.*