

# *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*

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## ***Hermeneutics: Principles of Interpretation***

### ***Introduction***

There is an old joke about a man who attempted each day to take a verse of Scripture and apply it to his daily life. Rather than systematically working through a book of the Bible, he would close his eyes and randomly pick a verse of Scripture each day. This seemed to work very well for him until he randomly picked Matthew 27:5, “And he [Judas] threw the pieces of silver into the sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself.” Somewhat shaken, he then randomly let the Bible fall on another verse, John 13: 27b, “Whatever you do, do quickly.” That day the man closed his Bible for good and never picked it up again.

This story can teach us something. It can be dangerous to apply Scriptures which we do not understand in their Biblical context. “Flipping and dipping” through the Bible is not a sound method of Biblical interpretation, and we can get little benefit from it. Well-known and recognized principles of interpretation are available to us which will help us grasp the meaning of the Scriptures in their historical and cultural context.

### ***The Necessity of Hermeneutics***

Since the Reformation, evangelical theologians have stressed the liberty and the duty of all Christians to study the Bible for themselves. In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation and afterwards, the Reformers insisted that the interpretation of the Bible is not the exclusive domain of the church, and the church does not have the right to dictate the meaning of Scripture to the individual. As part of the Counter Reformation, the Council of Trent maintained the following opinion of the private interpretation of Scripture:

To check unbridled spirits it [the Council] decrees that no one, relying on his own judgment shall in matters of faith and morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, distorting the Holy Scriptures in accordance with his own conceptions presume to interpret them contrary to that sense which Holy Mother Church to whom it belongs to judge of their true sense and interpretation has held or holds or even contrary to the unanimous teaching of the Fathers, even though such interpretations should never at any time be published (Quoted in *Knowing Scripture*, R. C. Sproul, p.35).

Thus, the meaning of the Bible is to be determined by none other than the duly appointed leaders of the “Holy Mother Church.” This of course ruled out the possibility of any other interpretation, however convincing this interpretation might be. The Roman Catholic Church was convinced that if the Scriptures were placed into the hands of untrained church members, all kinds of errors would be produced and would spread to thousands of church members, errors which could lead to everlasting damnation. Ironically, the very thing the church hierarchy said it wished to prevent became a reality. Errors cropped up in the doctrine of the church which the church members were powerless to oppose.

The Reformers, and many who preceded the Reformation, had a very opposite opinion from the Roman Catholic hierarchy. While they recognized the potential for error and its harmfulness, they also recognized the potential for good which far outweighed the bad. With the Bible in the language of the common Christian, every Christian could read it for himself and could benefit from the Word of God. The Bible, it was maintained, was not written merely for priests and

theologians, but for farmers, carpenters, mothers, and children, ordinary people who could understand the ordinary sense of its meaning. A biblically literate church would also be able to challenge an ecclesiastical hierarchy which strayed from the old paths of biblical orthodoxy. The protestant reformers believed in the priesthood of all believers who are obligated to study the Scriptures for themselves.

However, as with many biblical doctrines, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers can be misinterpreted and misapplied.

### ***Two Errors to Be Avoided***

**1.** One misinterpretation is that there is no need for gifted leaders in the church. Biblically, this error can be easily refuted. Just as God had given Israel priests who studied the OT Scriptures and taught the congregation the Law of God, God has given the Church pastors and teachers for the building up of the saints for their work of service (Eph.4:11-13). The priesthood of believers does not mean (and did not mean to the Reformers) that God has equipped every Christian equally to interpret the meaning of the Bible or to apply it properly. It just means that each Christian has a part to play in the functional ministry of the church and to function properly each Christian should be enlightened with biblical truth.

Modern evangelicalism has often distorted the meaning of the right to private interpretation to mean that every Christian has equal competency (ability) in this endeavor. The result has been a lack of appreciation of those who have spent considerable time studying the Bible under the instruction of others who in turn learned from other godly, educated men. Generation after generation this theory of equal competency has led to the belief that the believer can “start from scratch” in his understanding of the Bible while ignoring centuries of historical theology. But God never intended for us to forget the lessons of the past or to ignore those He has given to teach us, but to go beyond the lessons of the past in our quest to understand the Bible. Just as God gives insight to us today, He has given insight to men in times past which has been committed to writing. To ignore the learning of the past is a critical mistake and a manifestation of our modern arrogance which claims that if knowledge is 100 years old, it must be outdated. If such thinking were consistently applied to the field of science, we would still be reinventing the wheel and airplanes would not yet be invented.

**2.** Another error is a vague subjectivism in biblical interpretation. The question which often arises in Bible studies is, “What does this text mean to you?” Someone answers this question, followed by the answer of someone else whose answer is clearly in contrast with the first interpretation. No one seems to care that the two answers are contradictory to one another. The important thing is that the Scriptures have “spoken” to both people in their subjective experience. Each Christian has his own private meaning which comforts him in his existential experience.

It doesn't take long to figure out that based on the above principle of “a meaning for me and a meaning for you”, the objective sense of Scripture is not possible. It can mean two contradictory things at the same time. In the final analysis, it really does not matter what the Scripture means to me or to you. What is important is what the Scripture *means*—that is, what it means *objectively* whether or not you or I are “moved” by it emotionally. Another way of putting it is:

What did the Scripture mean to the *original writer*? As Henry Virkler puts it, "...the meaning of a text is the author's intended meaning, rather than the meanings we may wish to ascribe to his words." (*Hermeneutics*, p.76, emphasis his). The singular meaning of a text is to be assumed even in light of the fact that the Bible is a human-divine book. That is, it was written by humans under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The human author may not have understood the full implications of his writings. For example, Moses, who wrote Genesis, could not have known that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22) was a type or picture of God's willingness to sacrifice Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son. But to say that all Scripture has a double meaning, the meaning of the human author and the meaning of the divine author (God), opens the door to all kinds of speculative interpretation. I once heard a sermon on David's three mighty men (2 Sam. 23: 9), whom the preacher identified as the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. This allegorical method of interpretation was made popular by Origen in the second century. Based on this method, one can only imagine the wild interpretations which have little resemblance to the author's intended meaning.

On the other hand, we should not be too hasty in forbidding interpretations which use OT texts in illustrating established doctrines. For example, in Galatians 4:21-31, Paul likens Hagar and Sarah to two covenants, the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The first is the mother to all who would wish to be saved by law. The other is the mother of all who would wish to be saved by grace. When Moses wrote the Pentateuch (first five books of the OT), he did not write the history of Hagar and Sarah as an allegory but as an historical narrative, yet Paul sees in this story an allegory to distinguish the Old and the New Covenant and the spiritual offspring of each. The spiritual children of Hagar are in bondage to the law while the spiritual children of Sarah are living in the freedom of the gospel. The apostle Paul was under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit when he wrote, and we are obliged to believe that the Holy Spirit provided him with further insight into the story of these two women which could not have been intended by Moses. We will spend more time with this important subject later (See pp. 45-49 of your Hermeneutics notes).

### ***One Meaning but Many Applications***

The singular meaning of a text of Scripture (the intended meaning of the author) does not imply that a text can have only one application. Since the divine author of the Bible is God, the applications of a text can be numerous. Several sermons can be preached from any text of the Bible without violating the intended meaning of the original author. For example, the text of Matt. 5:5, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth", can have many applications. The general meaning is that the new, restored earth will one day belong completely to Christians as God's covenant people. Therefore, knowing this, we can make the following applications and many others: We should be patient when wronged by others; we should not live for material possessions; we should not attempt to dominate others who are weaker than we are; we should understand that true greatness in the sight of God has more to do with humility of heart than power and reputation for achievement; etc. etc. We could learn many different lessons from this text which has only one meaning.

#### ***I. The Analogy of Faith***

One of the most helpful principles of interpretation is the analogy of faith—Scripture must be

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allowed to interpret Scripture. Although the Bible has many human authors, it has only one divine author, the Holy Spirit, who inspired each human author. God is always consistent with Himself; therefore, it follows that no text of Scripture may be interpreted in such a way which is inconsistent with any other text of Scripture. Of course, we are making several assumptions with this principle. We are assuming that God is consistent in everything He says. We are assuming that the Holy Spirit inspired each writer of Scripture so that the human author only wrote what God wanted him to write. We are also assuming that the Bible is a miraculous book. All of these assumptions are questioned by many scholars living today, but they are assumptions based on the testimony of the Bible itself (See 2 Tim.3:16; Num.23:19; 2 Pet.1:2). As we learned in our study of the Doctrine of Scripture (See notes), one has to make a decision whether he will depend on the authority of the Bible or the authority of human beings who attempt to determine the trustworthiness of Bible. There are no other options.

Even when we are interpreting non-sacred writings and come to two different passages which seem to contradict one another, unless we can demonstrate their inconsistency, we should give the author the benefit of the doubt. How much more should we give God the benefit of the doubt when we interpret Scripture. If we sense an inconsistency between two passages, the problem is not with the Bible but with our understanding of the Bible.

The analogy of the faith implies that the broader context of any passage of Scripture is the whole Bible. The word “context” in the English language literally means “woven together”. Therefore, we believe that the Bible has been woven together in such a way that every text of Scripture relates in some way to every other text of Scripture. By understanding one passage, we are able to use that one passage to understand other passages, especially those which use similar wording or concepts. If we are familiar with a whole book of the Bible, so much the better. We will then be able to use our knowledge of that one book to interpret many other passages of Scripture. If we are familiar with the whole Bible, then we will be able to see how the whole Bible fits together into a meaningful whole and this will facilitate (make easier) the interpretation of many more passages.

No system of theology is faultless because such systems are formulated by men and not by God. God gave us the Bible in various forms of writing (genre) including stories, letters, prophecies, and poems. He did not give us the Bible as a textbook of systematic theology, and for that we can be eternally thankful. Yet, we believe that the purpose of God in giving us the Bible was the communication of His plan of salvation and the application of that saving work to the lives of believers. It is therefore inconceivable that God would give us a Bible from which we could not develop systematic doctrine on the nature of God, the work of Christ, man’s purpose, etc. The goal of all instruction in the Bible is ethical holiness so that God’s people can reflect His own perfections. If the Bible is inconsistent with itself, it is unlikely that we could be expected to live lives of ethical purity and purpose which glorifies God. Indeed, if one surveys the history of doctrinal errors and heresies throughout the age of the church, he will find that wherever one finds doctrinal error, he also finds immorality in one form or another (See Romans 6, which is Paul’s response to those who were misinterpreting the grace of God in the gospel.) Our Christian practice may sometimes be better than our knowledge, but most often, our practice will be lagging far behind our knowledge. Thus, if our knowledge is deficient, our practice will be deficient in proportion to our ignorance. The Bible says, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6).

### *A. The Analogy of Faith Illustrated*

It would probably be helpful at this point to illustrate the importance of this principle of hermeneutics: scripture interprets scripture. In Romans 3 and 4 Paul defends the doctrine of salvation by faith alone. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is stated explicitly in 3:28 and 4: 5-6: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law”.... “But to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works....” His reference to work is a reference to the obedience of the Law or a righteousness based on works and not faith, for he says in vv.13-14, “For the promise to Abraham or to his descendents that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified.”

He is even more pointed in Galatians when he says, “I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (2:21). Again, we could substitute the word “work” for Law in this verse so that it reads, “I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through [works], then Christ died needlessly.” In other words, if it were possible to earn our way to heaven through works or through keeping the Law, then it would not have been necessary for Christ to die on a cross. Salvation through works makes the cross null and void or unnecessary. Paul says the same thing in Rom. 11:6, “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.” As far as the basis of our salvation is concerned, grace and works are like oil and water. They don’t mix. Just as soon as we add works to grace we no longer have a salvation which is based on grace through faith. It is now a salvation based on our performance through works. The deciding issue is no longer what Christ has done for us, but what we have done to secure our salvation.

We see, then, that by the analogy of faith—interpreting Scripture with Scripture—we can come to an understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the work of Christ.

Paul is not the only apostle who teaches salvation by grace through faith. Peter writes in his first epistle that we “are protected by the power of God through *faith* for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1: 1) and that this salvation is the outcome of our *faith* (1: 9), not our works. The Apostle John assures us that “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn. 1: 9). Forgiveness is not based on works of merit or penance, but genuine repentance and faith in the accomplished work of Christ. Such statements of salvation by grace through faith alone are not as explicit as those of Paul’s, but they are, nevertheless, confirmations of this doctrine by different Biblical authors.

So far, so good. But then we come to the Epistle of James in which he forthrightly argues that faith without works will not save anyone. Notice that in James 2:14, 17, 21-23 James says, “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?...Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself....Was not Abraham our father *justified by works*, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled

which says, ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God.”

Here we have a potentially confusing text in which both Paul and James use the example of Abraham to prove two *apparently* contradictory points. Paul uses Abraham to prove that he was saved by faith apart from the works of the Law, while James uses Abraham to prove that he was “justified by works, and not by faith alone” (v.24). Who is right, Paul or James? Since we believe that God is never inconsistent, we know that this is not the right question. Paul and James are both correct. Our task is to find out how these two passages can be harmonized.

One key to understanding the text is in the word “perfected” in v.22. “As a result of works, faith was perfected”. The word for “perfected” can be translated “completed”. By offering his son Isaac on the altar, Abraham’s faith was *completed or brought to its intended goal*. The goal of faith is obedience (1 Pet. 1: 2), and if Abraham had refused to sacrifice his son, it would have implied that his faith in the promises of God in Gen. 15 was not a genuine faith. In Genesis 15, God promised him that his descendents (through Isaac) would be as the stars of the heaven in number. The text says that Abraham believed this promise and that his belief was reckoned to him as righteousness. Later, his willingness to sacrifice Isaac proved that his faith was not an empty faith, but a living faith which produces obedience. Heb. 11:19 informs us that when Abraham raised the knife to kill Isaac, he believed that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead, if necessary, to fulfill His promise.

Though often inconsistent, a person will habitually (generally) act according to what he really believes. If I were to say to you, “The roof of this building is going to collapse in thirty seconds!”, none of you would move from his seat for one simple reason, you wouldn’t believe me. If you did believe me you would be scrambling to get out of the building! Many false professors of Christianity say they believe in God, in Jesus Christ, in the gospel and in the reality of hell for disobedient sinners; but they certainly don’t live as if they believed these things. Their disobedient life proves that they really don’t believe them. Abraham proved by his obedience that he truly believed God’s promises.

The question is not whether works need to be added to faith to secure our salvation. This would be a clear contradiction of Romans 3:28, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith *apart* from works of the Law.” The question is whether the faith which is without works is the *same* faith as that which is accompanied by works. James introduces the whole problem of faith without works in v.14 by saying, “Can *that* faith [a faith which is not accompanied by works] save him?” The answer is obvious. It cannot save him because it is not a genuine faith; it is not the same *kind* of faith which saved Abraham who demonstrated by his obedience that his faith was the real thing. (Admittedly, the word, “that”, is not in the Greek text before “faith”. It reads, “the faith”, but some translations have rendered the article “that”, indicating that the translators have interpreted “the faith” in v. 14 as a certain kind of faith, the faith which will not save.)

Thus far, we have only attempted to sort out this apparent contradiction by looking at the passage in James. There are many other passages of Scripture which demonstrate that there is no contradiction at all. In Matt.7:24-27, for instance, we learn that it is not the man who merely hears Jesus’ words who is wise, but the man who hears His words and acts upon them. In the

parable of the sower (Matt.13:3-9), Jesus says that there are many who hear His words but are unproductive. Only those who hear His words and bear fruit will be saved (7:23).

In Matt.18:21-35, in the parable of the unforgiving servant, the slave who refused to forgive the debt of his fellow slave was condemned to punishment. Jesus explains the meaning of the parable in v.35, “So shall My heavenly Father also do to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.” It would appear that Jesus was teaching a salvation by works just as much as James, but such a conclusion would be mistaken. He was simply making the point that if we are forgiven of our sins, the grace of God’s forgiveness produces in our own hearts the same forgiveness of others. One who is truly forgiven is a forgiving person, whereas one who is not forgiven is not a forgiving person. The goal of our being forgiven is obedience—in this case, the obedience of forgiveness. This is saying essentially the same thing as James when he says that Abraham’s faith was perfected (brought to its proper goal or completion) when he was willing to sacrifice Isaac. Our faith is brought to its proper goal when we begin to exhibit the same behavior as our Lord Jesus Christ. Without a Christ-like behavior, our faith is an empty boast.

We come to the same conclusion when we study Matt.25:31-46. The separation of the “sheep” from the “goats” will not be done on the basis of whether a person simply professes faith in Christ or not. The separation will be done on the basis of what a person does with his faith. Did he feed the hungry or did he exhibit calloused indifference? Did he give the thirsty something to drink, or not? Did he clothe the naked, or not? Did he visit the prisoner, or not? Empty words will not do, but only actions which proved him to be a man or woman of genuine faith. Is this not the clear teaching of our Lord in Matt.7:21 when He says, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who *does* the will of My Father who is in heaven”? Once again, is Jesus teaching a salvation by works which the apostle Paul later corrects, or is He simply saying the same thing as James, “Faith without works is dead”? The answer should be obvious.

Notice how the story of the rich young ruler in Lk. 18: 21-30 is followed by the stories of blind Bartimaeus (Lk. 18: 35-43) and Zaccheus (Lk. 19: 1-10). Jesus challenged the rich ruler’s claim to being a Law-keeper by giving him one more commandment to keep. He must sell all he has, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus. By rejecting this invitation to obedience, the ruler proved that he was guilty of breaking the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before Me.” Despite his claim, he was a Law-breaker, and Jesus was forcing him to recognize this fact. He was not in any sense telling the ruler that he could be saved by his works. This conclusion is supported by the story of blind Bartimaeus who is basically destitute and has nothing to offer Jesus. He did not ask Jesus what *he* must do to regain his sight, but begged for mercy (v. 39). In the end, his *faith*, not his *works*, made him well (v. 42). Zaccheus, unlike the rich young ruler, was not anxious to cling to his riches when confronted with the majesty of Christ. Rather, he was anxious to make things right between him and those he had defrauded and to give to those who had need. Jesus never asked him to do this, but he volunteered to do it on his own initiative. Seeing the change of heart exhibited in his obedience to divine law, Jesus responded, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham” (v. 9. On the “son of Abraham”, see also Jn. 8: 39-41).

Thus far, we have seen how faith and works are related together in the mind of James and Jesus, but does Paul himself have anything to say about this relationship? We will discover that the entire chapter of Romans 6 is devoted to this subject. A question naturally arises in Rom. 6: 1 from the doctrine of justification by faith alone taught in chapter 5: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?” In other words, does it even matter how we live if we are saved by faith alone? Can we not just live like the devil and ask God to forgive us later? Paul then begins to prove from v. 2 onward that it is impossible for a person who is truly justified to live a life which is dominated by sin. He has been crucified with Christ and can no longer live a life which is characterized by habitual sin. True Christians have been united with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. When He died, we died with Him (not actually, but vicariously or substitutionally); when He was buried, we were buried; and when He rose again, we rose again with Him “to walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6: 4). The Christian, who has died to the old life, is now “freed from sin” as a way of life (6: 7). Other Pauline passages could also be consulted to prove that Paul, James, and Christ were in full agreement with one another (See Gal.5:16-25; Eph.2:8-10; to name only a few).

This identical truth is also taught in John’s epistles; namely, that a true believer cannot sin as a way of life. He does not teach that a true believer will never sin (1 Jn. 1: 8), but that he will not sin *habitually* as he did before being saved (1 Jn. 3: 6-9). In the Greek, the present tense of “sins” in 3: 6 indicates the continuous activity of sin. The verse could be translated, “No one who abides in Him keeps on sinning habitually....” The New American Standard Bible of 1977 and 1995 uses “practices sin” in vv. 8-9 to denote (indicate) habitual sin. Of course, as Christians, we still sin every day, but our lives are more accurately characterized by righteousness than by sin, for in 3: 7 John says, “...the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He [Christ] is righteous” (cf. 1 Jn. 2: 3-6).

We can see then that James is not left all by himself in teaching that faith without works is dead and that obedience is not optional, but absolutely essential, for the Christian. We are certainly not saved by faith *and* works, as Paul so adamantly maintains, but we are also not saved by a faith which *doesn’t* work, a faith which produces no righteousness. Rather, we are saved by a faith which produces good works and proves itself to be a genuine faith.

Were it not for all the evidence from other writers of Scripture and from Jesus Himself, James’ epistle may have given the church far more difficulty in interpretation. Instead, we can see from the analogy of the faith (Scripture interpreting Scripture) that he is right on target and in full agreement with the rest of Scripture. Such is the value of this principle of hermeneutics. By shifting too much weight of the argument to James, many have erroneously (mistakenly) assumed that our works play a crucial role as one criterion (basis) of our salvation—the most important one. By shifting too much weight of the argument to some Pauline passages to the exclusion of others, many have also erroneously assumed that our obedience to the truth is purely optional and unimportant. As I hope we can see from the above discussion, careful attention to the analogy of faith found in *many* passages written by *different* authors will bring balance to the discussion.

### ***B. The Value and Authority of the Analogy of Faith***

Berkhof (*Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, p.165), tells us that the analogy of faith found in the Bible will have differing degrees of “evidential value and authority.” Four factors will determine this value and authority.

### ***1. The number of Biblical texts in which the same doctrine can be found***

For example, in our study of the relationship between faith and works, we discovered that this doctrine is not limited to a few isolated texts of Scripture, but is well established in many texts. Thankfully, there are many texts of Scripture which establish the doctrine of the Trinity beyond reasonable doubt. This does not imply that if we find a doctrine in only one text we can safely ignore it. Nothing in the Bible can be safely ignored. Yet, it is evident that Christians often disagree on what the Bible teaches, and if a doctrine can be well established from many texts, we will have a greater possibility of agreement.

### ***2. How closely the different passages agree with one another***

We have already illustrated this point in our discussion of James. Our examination of passages in Matthew, Luke, Romans, and 1 John indicate a close agreement among the authors that genuine faith finds its confirmation only in righteous living. Using another example, in John 10:30, Jesus says, “I and the Father are one.” In John 14:9, in response to Philip’s request to show them the Father, Jesus says, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” In Matt. 11: 27 we read, “All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him*.” These passages teach that there is a unity of essence between the Father and the Son.

Isaiah 46:10 says, “My [God’s] purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.” The fact of God’s providential rule over all creation and over the activity of men is repeated in Ephesians 1:11: “...also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will.”

### ***3. The perspicuity (clearness) of the passage***

It is difficult to establish a Biblical doctrine if it is based either wholly or to a great extent on obscure (unclear) passages. For example, it would be unwarranted to rest the belief that all infants dying in infancy are saved and go to heaven on 2 Sam. 12:23. In that passage, David has lost his first-born son by Bathsheba as part of God’s judgment upon their adulterous relationship. What does David mean when he says, “I shall go to him...”? My personal belief is that all infants dying in infancy are elect unto salvation. This belief is based on the general teaching of Scripture that the mercy and grace of God “superabounds” in the face of human sinfulness (Rom. 5: 20). Furthermore, His righteous judgment upon sinners will be understandable to them even in hell, though they remain in rebellion. The purpose of judgment is not to inflict punishment per se (by itself), but to demonstrate the righteous justice of God (See R. A. Webb, *The Theology of Infant Salvation*, pp. 288-291). It is also based on the specific teaching of Scripture that men will be judged according to their deeds (2 Cor. 5:10; Matt. 25: 31-46; Matt. 7: 23; Matt. 16: 27; Jn. 5: 29; etc.). If men are judged for their deeds done on earth, then for what deeds will the infant be judged who cannot be conscious of any transgression of the law of God?

It stretches my credulity (willingness to believe something with little proof) to believe that an infant condemned to hell for the imputation of Adam's sin would understand the righteousness of this judgment. This is not based on the fact that they are innocent. They prove in later life that they are sinners infected with the guilt and disposition of Adam. It is based on the fact that God is just and wishes to exhibit His justice to all mankind, but what kind of justice can God exhibit to an infant condemned to hell for the sin of Adam?

As much as I would like to appeal to 2 Sam. 12:23 for support of my belief, the passage alone cannot support the weight of my conclusion. David could have meant simply that just as the child had gone to the realm of the dead, so he also would one day follow the child to the realm of the dead, a more likely conclusion based on the OT understanding of salvation.

Another example of using obscure passages to support a doctrine is found in the doctrine of an earthly millennial reign of Christ for 1000 years. This doctrine is mostly supported by an appeal to Rev. 20:1-4, a passage written in apocalyptic language which is highly symbolic and which receives a great number of different interpretations by gifted scholars. To my knowledge Revelation 20 is only one of four passages where a thousand years is mentioned in Scripture, the other three being 2 Pet.3:8, Ecc. 6: 6, and Ps. 90: 4, none of which have anything to do with the millennial question. One wonders how dispensationalists are so dogmatic on the necessity of a thousand year reign of Christ on earth when only one obscure passage supports their belief. This is not to say that they are necessarily wrong, only that their doctrine is resting on a very shaky foundation.

#### ***4. The number of places the analogy is found in the Bible (or the distribution of the passages)***

This is different from the first factor of the number of passages. The issue here is whether the doctrine can be found in a large number of *different* places scattered all over the Bible rather than in the same book of the Bible. It is also helpful if we can establish a doctrine using both the Old and the New Testaments rather than resting it only in one or the other. It is also helpful if we can find the same analogy taught by a number of different authors rather than just one or two, as we were able to do earlier in our study of the relationship between faith and works.

We do not have to depend on our understanding of spiritual gifts on 1Cor.12 alone. We also have Romans 12, Ephesians 4 and 1Pet.4:10. Clearly, we have more light shed on this subject by Paul than by Peter, but he at least acknowledges them. Also, each of the Pauline passages gives us a different angle on the spiritual gifts thus enlarging our understanding of the subject. But we are not limited to the NT either. We learn from the OT that different people were endowed by the Spirit to perform special work on the tabernacle and the garments of the priests (Ex.31:1-5).

#### ***C. Four Additional Rules for Employing the Analogy of Faith***

Berkof also lays down four other rules which should be kept in mind when using the analogy of faith (p. 166).

***1. A doctrine that is clearly supported by the analogy of faith cannot be contradicted by a contrary and obscure passage.***

It is agreed by most Bible scholars that once a person is truly saved, he can never be lost. Hebrews 6:1-8 appears to teach otherwise, but this passage is much less clear than the passages teaching the perseverance of the saints (See Phil.1:6; Rom. 8:35-39; John 10:28-29). Upon closer inspection, even this passage teaches that “better things” (than falling away from the faith) are expected of those who are truly saved (See 6:9). Compared to the passages in Romans and Galatians which clearly explain justification by faith alone, James 2 is also obscure. Therefore, special effort must be expended to understand the meaning of James 2: 21-26.

It is the clear teaching of Scripture that baptism is a sacrament given to those who have professed faith in Christ and should be administered to the person while he is alive. There is one passage of Scripture (1Cor.15:29) which has been used historically by the Roman Catholic Church to justify baptism for those who have already died. Using this very obscure passage to justify the practice is highly questionable in light of the predominate teaching of the Bible. Most likely, Paul is only mentioning baptism for the dead already being practiced in his day without taking time to refute it.

***2. A passage that is neither supported nor contradicted by the analogy of faith may serve as the positive foundation for a doctrine, provided it is clear in its teaching. Yet the doctrine so established will not have the same force as one that is founded on the analogy of faith.***

Berkhof is referring to those areas of Christian theology which can be supported by only one or a few texts of Scripture. He provides no examples of such teaching and I am also at a loss to think of any. For that reason, we will proceed to the third rule.

***3. When a doctrine is supported by an obscure passage of Scripture only, and finds no support in the analogy of faith, it can only be accepted with great reserve.***

Berkhof mentions, as an example, the dispensational teaching of a literal 1000 year reign of Christ on earth supposedly found in Rev. 20:1-4. As we have already said, we have no evidence of this earthly reign anywhere else in Scripture. This does not mean that the dispensationalists are necessarily wrong, but the passage is not sufficiently clear in its teaching to remove all doubt about this doctrine. Most Reformed theologians reject it.

***4. In cases where the analogy of Scripture leads to the establishment of two doctrines that appear contradictory, both doctrines should be accepted as Scriptural in the confident belief that they resolve themselves into a higher unity. Think of the doctrines of predestination and free will, of total depravity and human responsibility.***

Consider the sovereign election of those who will be saved and the responsibility of Christians to preach the gospel to the whole world, knowing that only the elect will respond in faith. Another mind-twister is the responsibility and privilege of prayer. Jesus teaches us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Since God is Sovereign and will do all His pleasure, prayer would appear unnecessary. Yet, Scripture also teaches that God uses prayer to accomplish His purposes (Ex. 32).

### ***Conclusion of the Analogy of Faith***

The hermeneutical principle of the analogy of faith is akin to the *theological analysis* of Scripture or *systematic theology*. There is, of course, the ever-present danger of reading our theological system into a particular text of Scripture. In doing this, we may be missing what the text is saying due to the conscious or unconscious desire to “protect” our system. We may also be inclined to dismiss what other Biblical interpreters are saying because they do not fall into our particular “camp”. For example, we may dismiss what a dispensationalist interpreter says about a passage just because he is a dispensationalist even though what he says is accurate. This is known as an *ad hominem fallacy* (argument against the man) rather than a valid argument against his position. We need to listen to what a person is saying before we judge his words as false just because his position is not our own.

One famous illustration of this ad hominem fallacy is the debate between Martin Luther and John Eck in Leipzig in the early days of the Reformation. After making a statement about justification by faith alone, Luther was reprimanded (scolded) by Eck who retorted, “Jon Hus said that!”, as if a reference to Hus was the end of the argument. Jon Hus was a reformer who lived and wrote 100 years before Luther who taught the same doctrine as Luther and was burned at the stake by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Thus, when Eck mentioned Jon Hus, this was supposed to be the end of the argument. If Hus said it, then the statement must be false. To Eck’s retort, Luther responded in like kind, “I don’t care if the devil said it; if it is true, it is true no matter who said it!”

To put this into context here in Uganda, just because a preacher is not of our particular denomination, this doesn’t necessarily make his teaching wrong. And just because a preacher may have a high position in our own denomination, this doesn’t necessarily make him right. The Bible tells us to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1John 4:1; See also Rev. 2:2). When these words were written, there were only individual churches; there were no denominations like the Church of Uganda or the Presbyterian Church in Uganda. Our attitude should be like that of the Jews in Berea, who, upon receiving the word of God from Paul and Silas, were “examining the Scriptures daily, to see whether these things were so.” No matter how Biblical or evangelical a church may be, it only takes a short time for that church to be overcome by false teaching due to the laziness of its teachers who neglect the careful study of the word of God.

## ***II. The Context***

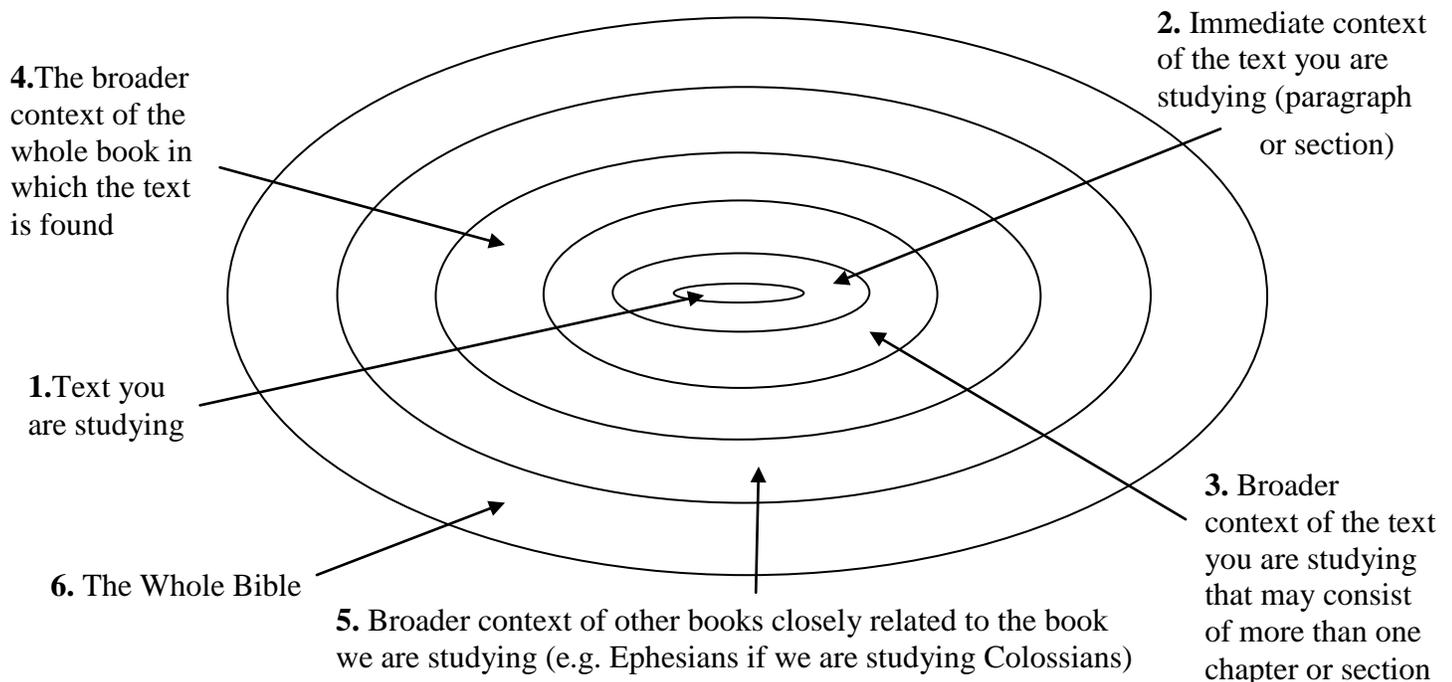
Second in importance to the analogy of faith is the importance of context in the interpretation of Scripture. (Or we could say that context is the most important since the analogy of faith pertains to the broader context of the whole Bible.) The Bible consists of 39 books in the OT and 27 books in the NT, but it is still one book with one central message and one divine author. And since this one divine author inspired all the human authors, we can safely assume that each human author wrote in such a way that his thoughts in each part of the book were related to one another.

Context is important because thought is usually expressed in a series of related ideas. Occasionally a person does make a swift and radical departure from the train of thought he is pursuing. Sometimes thoughts are tied together loosely by a general theme. But whether ideas are thus bound by close logical union or whether the main propositions are developed by repetition, the meaning of any particular element is nearly always controlled by what precedes and what follows (A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, p.100).

## A. The Immediate Context

### 1. The Passage Before and After the Passage Under Consideration

In our study of context, we will proceed from the specific to the general rather than from the general to the specific. The context of any passage is the whole Bible, but when preparing a sermon each week, the preacher does not have time to read the whole Bible in advance. This is a task which should be an ongoing routine. What he *can* do is begin his search for the truth from the *specific text* outward into *broader circles*. He can start first with the verses which come before the text in question. Then he can examine the verses which follow the text in question. Both the passages which come before and those which come after is the immediate context. He can then examine the context of the author's argument or ethical instruction (See 2 below), and then the whole book in which the text is found. If the passage under examination is written by an author who has written more than one book, then the other books by that author can be examined for ideas, phrases, concepts, etc. which are similar to the one being examined.



#### a. Ignoring chapter divisions.

One of the first considerations when dealing with the immediate context is to ignore the chapter divisions of the passage. This will be difficult since we are somewhat programmed to believe that these divisions are inspired by God. They are not. Chapter and verse divisions were added many years after the writing of the Scriptures and are in no sense inspired. They were added so that people worshipping together could find an announced passage easily. Just imagine trying to direct a congregation to a particular verse of Scripture in any book of the Bible, particularly a large one, without chapter and verse divisions.

Sometimes these divisions can be very helpful in sorting out the segments in an author's thought. However, as often as not, chapter divisions prevent us from understanding the author's complete thought. At this point we will do a few short exercises to illustrate the importance of ignoring chapter divisions. We will also pay attention to context and the analogy of faith.

### *Acts 5*

In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira are judged for lying to the Holy Spirit, a judgment which ends in physical death (5: 1-11). The seriousness of their crime and the severity with which God deals with it can be understood more fully by examining the context of Acts 4: 31-37. The power and presence of the Holy Spirit had been mightily demonstrated from the Day of Pentecost onward. After Peter's and John's arrest and release (4: 1-30), the Holy Spirit responded to the corporate prayer of the saints by shaking the building they were in (v. 31). Immediately afterward, Luke (the author) reports that "the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them" (v. 32). Luke also reports the miracles attending the witness of the apostles who were carrying out their ministry with the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 33). In other words, this was a time of unusual manifestation of the Holy Spirit who was brooding, so to speak, over His church protecting it from dangers *outside* and dangers *inside*. On the *outside* were the dangers of the Jewish leaders who had Peter and John arrested. In all likelihood they would have had Peter and John executed had it not been for the fact that they performed an undeniable miracle by healing a lame man (Acts 3). On the *inside* were Ananias and Sapphira who were willing to lie to the apostles and the Holy Spirit, thus quenching the Holy Spirit and threatening to interrupt "the victorious progress of the people of God" (F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 110). Bruce likens the sin of Ananias and Sapphira to the sin of Achan in Joshua 7 in which Achan steals objects under the ban and halts the progress of Israel in conquering the land of Canaan.

### *1 Thessalonians 4*

In 1 Thessalonians 4:15, a casual reading of the text will lead us to believe that "the coming of the Lord" is the same as "the day of the Lord" in 5:2. Dispensational theology wishes to separate these two events in time, maintaining that chapter 4 refers to the secret rapture of the church before the Great Tribulation and judgment, while chapter 5 refers to the coming of the Lord in judgment at the end of the world at least a thousand years later. If we can ignore the chapter divisions, we can see that the coming of Christ for His people takes place at the same time as the judgment of the wicked. The simultaneous (occurring at the same time) salvation of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked is a constant theme throughout the OT. (The conquest of Canaan and the dividing of the Red Sea are notable examples.)

It is also evident from this juxtaposition (placing side by side) of the "coming of the Lord" for His people and the "day of the Lord" in judgment of the wicked that Paul believed that they were one and the same. He therefore warns them to be sober and alert.

Thus far, we have only looked at the immediate context of the passage to help us with our interpretation. But while we are here in Thessalonians, notice several other principles of hermeneutics, including the analogy of faith, which will help us with this passage. Several *parallel phrases* come up in the passage which we can find elsewhere in Scripture. For example,

the phrase “the Lord will come just like a thief in the night” reminds us of a similar phrase in Matthew 24:43. In that passage, Jesus is also talking about His second coming. If we examine the verses previous to v.43, Jesus likens “the coming of the Son of Man” to the days of Noah when God destroyed the world with a flood. In those days the people were “eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark” (Matt.24:38). In other words, they were not expecting the flood, and it came upon them suddenly and unexpectedly. The second return of Christ will be just like this, unexpected, just like the coming of a thief. The “coming of the Son of Man” (Matt.24:37) is a parallel to the “coming of the Lord” in 1Thes.4:15, and the mention of a “thief” (24:43) parallels 1Thes. 5:2, 4. We should, therefore, be inclined to think that Paul was drawing upon the instruction of Christ about His second coming and incorporating this instruction into his epistle to the Thessalonians.

In Matt.24:42 Jesus warns believers not to let His future coming be a surprise to them as it will be to the rest of the world. Just as the flood was not a surprise to Noah and his family, the coming of the Son of Man should not come as a surprise to the people of God. When He comes back we should be about His business preaching the gospel and doing good to people just like the “sensible slave” in v.45-47. The rest of the world will be totally self-absorbed with daily life and unprepared for His coming, just like the people of Noah’s day and just like the people Paul mentions in 1Thes. 5:3.

It appears evident from the parallels in Matthew that Jesus and Paul are talking about the same event. In this event, we not only see that God is going to save His people but is also going to destroy His enemies at the same time. This must be the case or else the coming of the Son of Man is *not* like the days of Noah in which God saved Noah and His family and destroyed everyone else. There is not the slightest hint in the passage that there will be a delay of 1000 years before Christ returns (a third time) in judgment of the wicked. Just as soon as we are being united with the Lord, He will turn in wrath upon His enemies.

We might also ask how the “rapture” of the church (meeting the Lord in the air) can be a secret event in light of the fact that “the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first [rise out of the graves]”? Can such a coming of Christ be a secret event with all the noise in the air and bodies rising out of graves? Was the Noahic flood a secret event or was it simply unexpected? The reference to His coming like a thief is not a reference to the *secrecy* of His coming, but a reference to the *time* of his coming. The thief does not announce his coming in the daily newspapers and neither will Christ, but we as believers should always be on the lookout for the coming of the Lord.

### ***Ephesians 6***

Everyone is familiar with Paul’s instructions to the Ephesians concerning spiritual warfare in Eph. 6, and we are inclined to believe that he is talking primarily about “Elijah-on-Mount-Carmel” incidents. However, if we ignore the chapter divisions, we will see that Paul has just given the church many practical instructions about life in the church, the family and at work. Everyone should be subject to one another in the fear of Christ knowing that Christ is head of the church (5: 21). On a functional level, wives should be submissive to their own husbands (5: 22), and husbands should love their own wives as Christ loved the church and sacrificed His life for the church (5: 25). Children should obey their parents in the Lord as they are directed in the fifth

commandment, “Honor your father and mother” (6: 1). Fathers should not provoke their children to wrath but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (v. 4). At work, slaves should be obedient to their masters even as they would be obedient to Christ, for in the final analysis it is really Christ whom they are serving (vv. 5-8). Masters, on the other hand, should be kind to their slaves knowing that they have the same Master in heaven who will not be partial because of social or economic standing. Before God, both the slave and the earthly master are equal.

How would the Christian community be able to obey these instructions? For hundreds of years the old covenant community, the nation of Israel, had failed to do so. The answer to this question is found in 5: 18-19, being filled with the Holy Spirit as they relate to one another both in worship (v. 19) and in everyday life (5: 22—6: 9). Without the filling of the Spirit, living out the Christian life is hopeless.

When we come to 6: 10-20, it would seem strange that Paul would depart from the ordinary struggles of God’s people attempting to live out the Christian life in the home, the church, and at work, to take up the more sensational conflicts with demonic forces which we normally call “spiritual warfare”—for example, casting out demons and healing the sick, events which were so common during the ministry of Jesus. Instead, it is more likely that Paul is speaking of the spiritual warfare which is ever present in the life of ordinary Christians (Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self*, p. 179). Where, exactly, are the demons lurking—in the brothels (houses of prostitution), in the crime-ridden districts of Kampala or New York, in the high places of government? The answer is all of the above, but they are also lurking in the living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms of Christian homes where husbands, wives, fathers, mothers and children wage fierce conflicts with one another over presumed rights and obligations. They are lurking in every work place where employers are tempted to mistreat their workers by withholding wages and benefits and workers are tempted to cheat their employers by being lazy. Spiritual warfare is an everyday affair, and we will not be up to the battle unless we strap on the spiritual armor prescribed by the Apostle Paul.

### ***Other Passages***

In his book, *Knowing the Scriptures*, Arthur T. Pierson mentions several passages whose interpretations are facilitated (made easier) by ignoring the chapter divisions: Matt. 9:38 and 10:1; Matt.16: 28 and 17:1; Matt. 19:30 and 20:1; Mark 2:23-28 and 3:1-5; Luke 20: 45-47 and 21:1-4; Acts 7:60 and 8:1; 1 Cor. 10:33 and 11:1; 1 Cor. 12:31 and 13:1; 2 Cor. 4:18 and 5:1; 2 Cor. 6:18 and 7:1 (pp.135-136). In each of these examples, the thought of the biblical author is carried forward into the succeeding chapter.

In ***Matt. 9:37-38***, Jesus laments that the harvest is plentiful but there are insufficient workers to send into the harvest to reap it. He then tells the disciples to ask God to send out workers to reap the harvest. Based on the chapter division, we could easily lose the lesson of this situation. One can reasonably assume that as soon as Jesus asked the disciples to pray about this, they began to do so. They began to pray that God would soon provide laborers for His harvest of human souls. The very next thing we see Jesus doing in chapter 10 is sending these very same disciples into the harvest. The application or lesson we can gain from this is that when we begin to pray that God would do something, He will often choose us to do it, so we better be careful what we pray for!

In Matt. 19:30 Jesus says, “But many who are first will be last and the last, first.” The parable of the laborers in the vineyard in *Matt. 20* is told as an explanation of this statement and serves as a mild warning to the disciples who often argued among themselves who would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven (See 18: 1 which occurs in the near context of this parable). For the immediate context of 19:30, read 19:27 in which Peter asks what rewards would await the disciples who had given up everything to follow Jesus. (For an excellent explanation of this passage, cf. Knox Chamblin, pp. 165-167, who takes note of the potential for pride in the apostles who are promised special rewards at the end of time—Matt. 19: 28). Regardless of the rewards bestowed on any of God’s servants, they must be ever mindful that even the rewards are the gifts of God’s grace. They are not given because they are earned, but because God is gracious (Carson, p. 428). In this sense there is a fundamental equality among all of God’s people regardless of the level of giftedness—whether apostles, elders, or Christians who have no positions of leadership (Chamblin, p. 167). No matter what we have given up or sacrificed in this life (19: 27), we must never presume that somehow God will be in debt to us at the end of the age when Christ returns (20: 11-12). Anything bestowed upon us on that day will be due solely to His generosity.

When Jesus heals the man with the withered hand in *Mark 3:1-5*, the miracle was in response to the murmuring of the Pharisees in 2:24 who were offended when the disciples were harvesting grain on the Sabbath to feed themselves. Jesus heals the man on the Sabbath as proof that He is Lord of the Sabbath.

The connection between *Luke 20:45-47 and Luke 21:1-4* is the presence of the widow in the synagogue. The Pharisees enjoyed the respect and prestige of all the people in public places. Widows had no such respect, but they were the very ones who contributed to the needs of the scribes and Pharisees so they could continue their studies in the Law. This contribution, which was sometimes beyond their means and was solicited (asked for) by the Pharisees through pressure, is what Jesus was talking about when He said, “who devour widows houses” (v.47; see Geldenhuys, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament, The Gospel of Luke*, p. 518). When the widow put into the temple treasury her two insignificant copper coins, Jesus used her sacrifice as an opportunity to teach the disciples and those who were listening a valuable lesson. It is not the amount of the offering that matters, but the willingness to sacrifice. The Pharisees and scribes who put vast sums of money into the treasury to receive the praise of men were those who were least respected by Jesus. They were not making much of a sacrifice. The poor widow, whom no one but Jesus seemed to notice, was the most highly esteemed in the eyes of Jesus. Her contribution was not insignificant after all.

In *Acts 8:1*, Saul’s complicity (agreement) in putting Stephen to death has more forcefulness when read in conjunction (in connection) with the immediate death of Stephen in 7:60. It is quite possible that the heroic death of Stephen had a very powerful influence on Paul’s life which would only come to fruition later.

When Paul says in *1 Cor. 11:1*, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ,” we may wonder what the substance of this imitation would include. Does it mean that we should all become traveling missionaries? Does it imply that we should not marry? The statement finds its substance in chapters 8-10 in which Paul lays down the principles and practice of Christian

liberty. All things permitted in the moral law of God were permissible for Paul, but sometimes it was necessary to forego even lawful liberties in order to seek the salvation of others (1 Cor. 10:33). In doing so, he was doing no more than His Savior before him (“just as I also am of Christ”). The imitation of Paul is the willingness to sacrifice our own interests for the interests of others. (For an excellent treatment of Christian liberty, see J. Knox Chamblin, *Paul and the Self, Apostolic Teaching for Personal Wholeness*, pp. 131-154).

In **1 Cor.13:1**, charity (love) is the more excellent way which Paul mentions in 1 Cor.12:31. It is important to read chapter 13 along with chapter 12. The problem with the Corinthians was that some were flaunting (making a show of) their spiritual gifts without demonstrating the love of Christ with their gifts. Paul wishes to show in chapter 13 that without the demonstration of love, the spiritual gift amounts to nothing.

The discussion of the “earthly tent” in **2 Cor. 5:1** is a continuation of the “eternal” things Paul is talking about in chapter 4. To do justice to the text in 2 Cor.5:1-10, we would need to go back as far as v.7 of chapter 4. From v.7 to the end of chapter 4, Paul is talking about the frailty and weakness of this life, the key verse being v.10. In this life we are always manifesting the weakness of the Lord Jesus Christ who submitted Himself willingly to the death of the cross. We do this so that the self-sacrificial life of Christ can be demonstrated to the world through our lives. Christians are also put on display to the world in the weakness of their human bodies, sometimes being put to death. At the very least, our physical bodies will one day wear out (4:16) and be torn down in death (5:1). But the weakness of Christ was temporal, and now He is ruling and reigning with power, and the weakness of the Christian is also temporal, and one day we will “have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens”, a “dwelling from heaven (5:2). We know this because our estimation of reality is not based on what we see but on what we believe: “for we walk by faith, not by sight” (5:7).

A closer examination of **2 Cor.6:14-18** would reveal that 7:1 would better fit into chapter six than it would chapter seven. The “promises” refer to 6:18 and the exhortation to “cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh... [etc.]” refers to “being bound together with an unbeliever” in 6:14-16.

***b. The immediate context within the same chapter.***

Thus far, we have only dealt with passages in which the chapter divisions may obscure the immediate context of the passage and therefore its meaning. The student should be aware of the danger of distorting the meaning of any passage within a single chapter by ignoring the immediate context. This may be illustrated in **Hebrews 6**. After all the disturbing warnings about those who have “tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away...” (vv.4-6), we are ready to conclude that a Christian can lose his salvation. After all, how can a person not be truly saved who has been made a partaker of the Holy Spirit? However, if we keep reading the passage, we come to v.9 in which the writer assures his readers that he is “convinced of better things concerning [them], and things *that accompany salvation...*” The reason he was “speaking in this way” (v.9) to them was to encourage them to persevere in their faith (See vv.11-12). This example also serves as a warning to interpreters who are inclined to impose their own theological meaning upon words in the text. For instance, to “partake of the

Holy Spirit” may not imply the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which is necessary for salvation. There are apparently people who have received a special endowment of the Spirit who have not been truly indwelt by Him or regenerated by Him. We surely can remember King Saul who was able to prophesy under the inspiration of the Spirit but remained unconverted (See 1 Sam. 10:1-16; 16: 1,14).

Notice also that the writer holds out the possibility that some can fall away from the faith who have tasted of “the powers of the age to come.” Such apostates (those who fall away from the faith) can be partakers even of spiritual gifts. It is difficult to avoid using the principle of the *analogy of faith* when dealing with such an important passage. Remember that Jesus warns that at the end of the age some will appeal to God on the basis of their spiritual gifts (**Matt.7:22-23**). In that passage, Jesus does not deny the reality of those gifts; He does not question that they actually cast out demons in His name and performed miracles in His name. Is it not possible, even most likely, that Judas had been able to do exactly the same things as the rest of the disciples (See Matt.10)? On the night of Jesus’ betrayal, not one of the other eleven disciples suspected that Judas was the one who would betray Christ (John 13:22). What Jesus denies in Matt.7 is the internal reality of their faith since their lives had not shown evidence of the holiness which faith inevitably produces. They practiced “lawlessness”. (By using the hermeneutical principle of grammatical analysis, we find that the word “practice” is a present participle implying continuing activity. These people continue to practice lawlessness habitually.) Demas was a co-worker of Paul close enough to him in his ministry for Paul to mention his name in **2 Tim. 4:10**. It is inconceivable that Demas would have worked so closely with Paul that he would have avoided the responsibility of teaching and preaching the word. Yet Paul says of him that he “loved this present world.” A few years ago, I heard of a well-known preacher from Cambridge, England who had left his wife and ministry for a male lover. I have heard and read many of his sermons and they are some of the best expositions of the word of God that I have ever heard. There is no doubt in my own mind that for a season the Spirit of God was influencing this man’s ministry, but unless there is repentance in the future, it is evident that he was never converted. Such is the mystery of providence and the work of the Holy Spirit.

By examining the context of the parable of the “prodigal son” in **Luke 15**, a title that Jesus never gave to the parable but one which has stuck in the mind of readers for decades, we may be inclined to change the popular name of the parable to the “elder brother.” Notice from 15: 1-2 that the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling among themselves that Jesus received to Himself those people who were the dregs (most worthless members) of society, the “tax-gatherers and the sinners.” He then told three parables all of which end with a reference to rejoicing. Just as the man who finds his lost sheep rejoices over this one sheep, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (v.7). Special notice should be given to the words “righteous persons who need no repentance.” In the second parable, the woman who finds the lost coin rejoices when she finds it. In the same way, the angels in heaven rejoice when even one sinner repents.

The third parable is the parable of the “prodigal son,” but notice that Jesus begins this parable by saying that “A certain man had *two* sons.” The younger son goes away and squanders his inheritance with irresponsible living while the elder son stays with his father and keeps all the rules. When the younger one comes back, everyone is delighted that this sinner has come to his senses and returned—all except the elder brother. Far from rejoicing, he becomes angry that his

younger brother is getting so much positive attention and complains to his father that he has gotten a bad deal (vv.29-30). His self-righteousness is plain for all to see.

The purpose of telling this parable was to present a vivid picture of the scribes and Pharisees as the self-righteous elder brother, the brother who thought he “needed no repentance” (v.7). Jesus never wished to imply that there were some who actually did not need to repent, and the parable vividly portrays the lack of repentance of these Jewish leaders. However, Jesus leaves room for their repentance as well. As Doriani observes, “As the elder brother must ultimately decide if he will welcome his sinning-but-restored brother and enter the party, so too the Pharisees must decide if they will welcome restored sinners and join the kingdom celebration. Jesus leaves the final decision of the older brother in doubt, to keep the Pharisees involved by inviting them to finish the story for themselves” (*Getting the Message*, p.36).

The student should be warned not to press all the details of the parable in an effort to isolate the meaning of every detail. We will discuss this hermeneutical error later on in our discussion of parables. In verse 31, when the father tells the elder son that “all that is mine is yours,” this should not be interpreted as meaning that the unrepentant scribes and Pharisees were members of the Father’s kingdom. A parable has one main point to make, and the point of this parable has been given above. Perhaps even two main points are permissible with this parable—the joy of the Father at true repentance and the folly of self-righteousness.

Doriani uses this parable to illustrate one of his six principles of literary context: “Try to determine why your text belongs precisely where it is, and nowhere else” (*Getting the Message*, p. 35).

## ***2. The Immediate Context of the Author’s Argument or Ethical Instruction***

Sometimes the immediate context takes far more into consideration than several verses before and after the passage in question. The immediate context of the author’s argument or ethical instruction must also be taken into consideration. Virkler gives us six principles which will guide us in this process (*Hermeneutics*, pp.84-88). These principles are paraphrased in bold type, followed by my examples of how they are to be applied.

### ***a. Understand how the passage under consideration fits into the whole picture of what the author is saying.***

In ***Matt. 18: 15-20***, we find instructions from Christ on how to deal with sin within the body of Christ. (For a more thorough treatment of this text, see my “Synoptic Gospels” as well as many good published commentaries). When a “brother” sins against us, we must confront him in private. If he refuses to listen to us we must take one or two more believers with us and confront him again. If this fails, we eventually take the matter to the church which may find it necessary to remove this unrepentant member from the communion of the church. The whole passage may seem severe and unloving unless we take note of the context in vv. 1-14.

In the early part of the chapter, Jesus has stressed the importance of receiving the kingdom of God as a little child. Anyone receiving the kingdom in this fashion is considered one of Christ’s “little ones” (v. 6) who are precious in His sight and who are, by virtue of their identification

with Christ (v. 5), entitled to His protection. Woe to the person who causes even one of His little ones to stumble into sin (v. 7). God provides His little ones angelic protection (v. 10), and if even one strays from the fold, the Good Shepherd will leave the 99 and go look for the one sheep which is lost. It is clear from v. 14 that the lost sheep is another metaphor for one of Christ's little ones for whom Christ will exert great effort in any search and rescue mission. It is not the Father's will for one of these little ones to perish.

When we finally come to vv. 15-20, we now understand that the erring brother is identified with the little ones of vv. 1-14 and specifically the wayward sheep of vv. 12-14. But the one who goes looking for this sheep is the church, first in the person of the one the erring brother has wronged, then with one or two more, and finally with the whole church if necessary. Christ will spare no efforts in pursuing and rescuing the erring brother and bringing him back into the protective fold of the church. The goal of such action is, therefore, not punishment but restoration (cf. 1 Cor. 5, especially v. 5). There is, therefore, nothing negative about the whole passage of vv. 15-20 except the erring brother's sin. The passage is specifically about the care and concern of the body of Christ about one sheep who strays off and endangers himself.

Continuing with this lesson, and in answer to Peter's question in v. 21, Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving slave which has one major meaning. Forgiveness is not to be measured out to others in exact quantities. We must be as generous in our forgiveness to others as the heavenly Father has been to us. If we are not forgiving, our lack thereof only proves that we have never tasted of forgiveness ourselves.

In consideration of the broader context of the passage and how a single passage fits into the author's whole purpose, it is helpful to have an outline of the whole book. Some books are more easily outlined than others since some of the Biblical authors are more systematic in their thinking than others (e.g. Paul is more organized than Peter and James). This doesn't make any book less authoritative than another, only harder to discern its arguments. Consider the following outline of Romans by William Hendriksen (*Survey of the Bible*, pp.342-343).

- I. Exposition. Justification by faith, apart from the works of the law, is: (chps. 1-11)
  - A. Necessary. (chps. 1-3)
  - B. Scriptural. (chp. 4)
  - C. Effectual. (chps. 5-8)
  - D. Historical (chps. 9-11)
- II. Significance for every sphere. The attitude of the justified believer toward: (chps. 12-16)
  - A. God and the brotherhood. (chp. 12)
  - B. The higher powers (the state). (chp. 13)
  - C. Those who are weak. Salutations. (chps. 14-16).

Now we may proceed to interpret a particular passage as part of the author's broader argument.

In chapters 1-3, Paul wishes to prove that justification apart from the works of the law was necessary in the plan of God. Why was this so? In chapter one, he shows that even the Gentiles had knowledge of the many perfections of God seen in creation, and yet they "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator...." Later, in chapter two (vv.14-15), he says that the Gentiles also have a general understanding of God's moral absolutes because they show the "work of the law written on their hearts." They have a

conscience. That is, everyone has a sense of God's moral standard even if he has never heard of the Ten Commandments. The Jews, on the other hand, received the Law directly from God but didn't keep it any better than the Gentiles who never received the law in written form (2: 17-24). As it turned out, the Jew was no better at keeping the law than the Gentile with the result that both Jew and Gentile remained under the dominion of sin, a dominion which continues until this day (3: 9-19). Justification by faith and not by law, then, is necessary because both Jew and Gentile have failed to live up to God's righteous standards presented both in the written law and in the work of the law written on the heart. By paying attention to Paul's argument in chapters 1-3, we can see how the argument is an extension of the theme of the whole epistle found in 1: 16-17.

In chapter 4, Paul uses the life and faith of Abraham, taken from the OT Scriptures, to prove that justification is not through the law but through faith. It is in the context of this broader argument that we can understand the details of chapter 4. In v.9 Paul asks whether the blessing of forgiveness mentioned by David in Ps. 32:1 is upon those who are circumcised or upon those who are uncircumcised. Then he quotes Gen. 15:6, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness" to prove that Abraham's faith was reckoned as righteousness *before* Abraham was circumcised. This proves that circumcision does not enter into the picture of Abraham's justification. Abraham's justification before God was never on the basis of his circumcision but always on the basis of his faith in the promise of God (vv.10-13). The whole chapter is an extended argument from the OT that justification is by faith apart from the works of the law.

***b. Determine the contribution of the passage in question to the flow of the author's thought.***

In other words what is the logical or theological connection between the passage and the material before it and after it? As an example let us go back to Romans, this time to chapter 6. How are we to interpret Rom. 6: 6-11? What is its contribution to the flow of Paul's argument in chapters 5-8?

In chapter 5, Paul establishes the doctrine of justification by faith alone in the atoning work of Christ. At the end of this chapter in v.20, he indicates that the purpose of the Law (the Law of Moses) was that transgressions might increase. Such a statement sounds strange in light of the fact that the Law reveals the holy character of God, but when it is read in context with 5: 14 we understand that the Law of Moses multiplies the type of sin which is represented in Adam's offense. And what type of offense is the offense of Adam? It was sin against the expressly revealed law of God and not the law of God impressed merely on the conscience. In v.14, death reigned during the period from Adam to Moses over men who had not sinned against expressly revealed law. They sinned against the law of God revealed in their consciences but not against a law engraved on stones, for they were never exposed to the Law of Moses. With the coming of the Law of Moses, the sin against expressly revealed law was increased. (See John Murray, *Romans*.)

However, as the sin against God's revealed law increased, so did grace. And grace did not increase in proportion to sin (the same as sin), but grace "abounded all the more" or "superabounded" through Jesus Christ. If so, then one might be led to believe that the superabounding of grace against the background of more sin actually enhances the glory of grace (makes grace more glorious). After all, we would not see the stars if it were not for the blackness of the sky. The more we sin, the more the grace of God is shown to be the wonderful thing that it is. Paul then anticipates (foresees) a misunderstanding of the doctrine of justification

by faith to the effect that if grace increases with the increase of sin, and if grace is shown to be more glorious the more we sin, then why not continue in sin that grace may continue to increase?

His answer to this misunderstanding is, “May it never be!” Throughout the remainder of the chapter, he demonstrates that just as Christ died as our representative to the reign of sin and death, so too, the believer died with Christ in his crucifixion and death. But also, as Christ rose again to life, the believer rose with Christ to a new life characterized by the life of Christ, a life of righteousness. When Christ was crucified, our old man was crucified with Him, the old man which was under the dominion of sin. Since the old man is now crucified with Christ, the relationship of the believer to the dominion of sin is now terminated. His relationship to the world of sin can no more remain or be sustained than the relationship of a physically dead man to the physical world can remain. The believer is now dead to the realm of sin just as a deceased (dead) person is dead to life he lived before he died. By way of analogy, if a citizen of Uganda dies, he is no longer obligated to obey the constitution and laws of Uganda. He is now dead to the rule and reign of Ugandan law over his life. Before his death to sin through the crucifixion of Christ, the believer was under the reign and rule of sin, but by his death in the death of Christ, the believer has died to that rule so that he is no longer bound to the dominion which held him in bondage. He is now dead to that rule and the new man in Christ is resurrected with Christ to an entirely different rule of life.

This is precisely what Paul talks about in Gal. 2:20 which is a *parallel passage* to this one: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and delivered Himself up for me.” That is, it is no longer the old Paul who lives because that Paul has been crucified with Christ. And the life Paul now lives is no longer lived through the *resources and power of Paul*, but the *resources and power of Christ* who lives His life through Paul (See Rom. 7: 4-6). It is for this reason of death to sin that Paul now says that it is impossible for sin to reign in the life of the believer. “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” (v.2)—a rhetorical question demanding a negative (no) answer.

How does 6: 6-11 contribute to Paul’s argument in chapters 7 and 8? Just as Paul demonstrated the inability of the Law to *justify* in chapters 1-3, he demonstrates the inability of the Law to *sanctify* in chapters 7-8. Conversely (by way of contrast), he shows how the gospel is *effective for justification* in chapters 1-3, and he shows how the gospel is *effective for sanctification* in chapters 7-8. We cannot rely on our own personal resources in keeping the law for justification (Chaps.1-3) and we cannot rely on our own personal resources in keeping the law for sanctification (Chaps 7-8).

None of this is designed to say that there is anything wrong with the law of God. The problem is with us (Notice 7: 7-13). What is needed for us all is a personal crucifixion of the old man and a continual reminder that he remains crucified. The old man is thoroughly wicked and beyond reformation. We cannot reform or improve the old man; he must be killed by crucifixion. Through Christ Jesus, the old man is now crucified and the new man has taken his place. Yet, because of sin, the new man sometimes fails to reckon the old man as dead (6: 11) and yields himself to the desires of the flesh (7: 14-25). But because the Christian is essentially and characteristically a new man, he cannot deliberately sin without being smitten in his conscience

(7: 24), and he cannot live in sin as a way of life (6: 14—for the analogy of faith, see 1 John 3:1-10).

In Romans 8:1 and throughout the chapter, Paul proceeds to show us that the sanctifying work which the law of God could not do because of the powerlessness of our flesh, God did through the work of Christ (8: 1-3). Now, through the Holy Spirit (who was sent by the Father and the Son as a consequence of the Son's completed work), we are enabled to keep God's holy requirements (not perfectly but habitually) because the Holy Spirit gives us a change of mind which is "set" on the "things of Spirit" rather than the "things of the flesh" (8: 6). In 8:12 he says that we are no longer under any obligation to live according to the flesh which is saying essentially the same thing he said in 6: 11 to consider ourselves dead to sin. The verse also reminds us of 6: 12 in which Paul tells us not to let sin reign in our bodies that we should "obey its lusts." Obeying the lusts of the flesh is the same thing as being "under obligation" to the flesh in 8: 12.

***c. Understand the author's perspective.***

Is the author speaking from the perspective of God (noumenologically) or from man's perspective (phenomenologically)? Paul's instruction to the Romans is didactic instruction which must be taken noumenologically as God's perspective. However, other portions of Scripture are narrative (telling a story) and must be understood phenomenologically (the way the author saw the events). This does not mean that the passage is not what God wanted the writer to say. Rather, it means that the Holy Spirit allowed the writer to speak the truth using the particular perspective of the author who described events the way he saw them rather than the way only God could have seen them.

In Gen. 15: 12, Moses said, "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram..." Is God ignorant of the scientific fact that the earth rotates on its axis around the sun? Obviously, God allows Moses to describe the sunset the way he saw it without going into great detail about scientific laws. We do the same thing all the time when we say the sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening. This is the way we see it and no one ridicules us for being scientifically inaccurate.

Virkler notes that Milton S. Terry believes that Moses also used a phenomenological perspective when telling the story of the flood in Gen. 6-9 (Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, p.85). Moses' description seemed to indicate a universal flood but he was probably describing it the way it was seen by Noah and passed on to other generations of people through story telling. Although a good illustration of phenomenological language, this theory seems highly unlikely. In Matt. 24: 37, Jesus tells us that the coming of the Son of Man would be "just like" the days of Noah and the flood. If only a small portion of the human race had been extinguished in the flood, it would hardly have served Jesus' purpose of the type of universal destruction of the wicked which would come later. The destruction brought by the flood was not a human exaggeration (See Matt. 3: 5) but total annihilation from God's perspective.

***d. Determine whether the passage in question is prescribing principles of moral truth or merely describing what happened at a particular time in Biblical history?***

Going back to Romans, it should be clear that Paul is not attempting to merely describe what has happened in his life as a result of his conversion. He is prescribing the way all Christians should think about the gospel. All of Paul's didactic epistles (and the epistles of other Scripture writers) are *prescriptive* of Christian behavior as is all the *didactic* portions of the gospels which report the *teachings* of Jesus.

Such is not necessarily the case with narrative portions of Scripture in which an historical event is merely being described without any effort to pass judgment upon what happened. Take for example the story of Abraham's lying to Pharaoh about Sarah being his sister. Abraham plotted to save his skin rather than trust God to protect him and Sarah, which God succeeded in doing supernaturally without Abraham's "help" (See *Gen. 12: 10-20*). The interesting thing about the story is that God does not chastise Abraham for lying about Sarah, but He strikes Pharaoh with plagues for taking Sarah as his wife. We might conclude (wrongly, I believe) that what Abraham did was acceptable since "all is well that ends well." That is, since everything worked out well for Abraham, he did not sin (a pragmatic view of ethics). But Moses does not attempt here to critique (examine) the rightness or wrongness of Abraham's actions. He merely reports what happens and shows how God is taking care of His elect servant regardless of his failings.

The story of Rahab is a bit more difficult (See *Joshua 2*). Certainly we cannot conclude that lying in this situation is permissible just because she lied and her lie had good results. Nor can we conclude that her lie was permissible because nothing is said in Scripture to condemn her lie. But the Scripture gives us a lot more information about this woman, Rahab. She is included in the physical line of Christ in Matt. 5: 5, undoubtedly a great honor. Hebrews 11: 31 includes her in faith's "Hall of Fame" and James 2: 25 says that her act was an indication that her faith was not an empty boast but one that was perfected (brought to its completion or goal) by her action. It would be very difficult to separate the Scriptures' approbation (approval) of Rahab's faith from the activity upon which the approbation of faith rests (her lie). This is, of course, not an encouragement for us to lie, but recognition that moral situations are sometimes not black and white.

In Nazi-occupied Europe, some believers decided to provide safe-havens for Jews who had been condemned to concentration camps or execution in the gas chambers. When German soldiers came looking for the Jews, these courageous Christians would do anything necessary to protect them, including deception. What would you have done? Is it Biblical to lie in order to save a life? Rahab was rewarded for doing so, and her fame has been recorded in Biblical history. (For a more complete discussion of Rahab's lie, see Rousas J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, pp.542-549; Henry Krabbendam, *The Epistle of James: Tender Love in Tough Pursuit of Total Holiness*, an unpublished commentary, pp. 121-123; and for a contrary view, John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, pp.138-139. See also Ex. 1: 15-21).

Acts 15 gives us a *description* of what happened at the council of Jerusalem when the topic of justification by faith apart from the observance of circumcision and the Law of Moses (v.5) was debated by the apostles and elders of the church (v.22). Some scholars have used this chapter as a *prescription* for a certain form of church government, particularly the existence of a "general assembly" consisting of teaching and ruling elders from all the churches within the denomination (Thomas Witherow, *The Apostolic Church, Which Is It?*) While this chapter may be a good illustration of the advantages of the collective wisdom of the church, it is questionable to use it as

the definitive prescription for a certain form of church government since it is a narrative portion of scripture. Nor do we find a definitive reference to the continuing requirement of such councils elsewhere in the didactic portions of the NT. Doubtless this is why there are so many differences of opinion among evangelical scholars concerning the proper form of church government.

***e. Determine the “teaching focus” of the passage in question and distinguish it from that part of the passage which is only “incidental detail.”***

Virkler mentions two heresies which arose from a failure to carefully distinguish between the main focus of the passage and the incidental detail. In John 15 Jesus identifies Himself as the vine and His disciples as the branches. One heretical group came to the conclusion that since a vine was part of creation, then Jesus Himself must also be part of creation rather than the Creator. Another heretical group, the Pelagians of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, determined from the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 that since the son went directly to his father without a mediator, then we may conclude that we also do not need a mediator. A further discussion on the interpretation of parables will follow in your notes since parables are particularly “fair game” for often well-meaning preachers who wish to “wax eloquent” on the many incidental details of parables which are given simply to flesh out the story rather than to provide theological content.

Several years ago, I had a discussion with a Methodist preacher about the suitability of female pastors in the church. He used Col.4:15 to support his belief that the practice was Biblical. Only a brief examination of this passage will prove that the propriety (suitability) of women pastors is not the teaching focus of this text. Paul simply wishes to extend Christian greetings to those who have been especially helpful and supportive of his ministry. It teaches us to appreciate the work and the support of others; it does not say specifically that Nympha was the pastor of the church which met in her house.

Recently I heard about a pastor who preached on the barrenness of Elizabeth in Lk. 1. His main point in the sermon was directed to barren women: “If you are barren, you need an angel.” This was not the teaching focus of the passage.

***f. Determine the audience of the author.***

To whom is the author addressing the particular passage? What was normative (required) for the OT saint living in Israel is not necessarily required for the NT Christian. The OT saint could not wear a garment made with two different kinds of material mixed together (Lev.19:19). The intent of this prohibition was to teach Israel in a tangible way that they as a nation were not to mix with the wicked nations around them lest they practice the same wickedness and idolatry. The same intent was given to the food laws and other ceremonial laws which are now no longer directly applicable to the Christian but which are applied in principle when we are careful not to be unduly influenced by the evil of this world (2 Cor. 6: 14-18). Nevertheless, the command of Lev.19:19 is culture-bound to the context of the ancient Israelite. God doesn't care about whether we mix two kinds of cloth together in our clothing or whether we eat pork (Acts 10).

God instructed the Israelites to conduct holy warfare against the Canaanites, wiping out men,

women, and children in the cities within certain geographical areas (Deut. 20: 10-20). Quite obviously, this command no longer applies to us today in the same way it did to Israel. Exterminating the wicked Canaanites was a theological type (picture) of the warfare God is waging against all unbelief in the world even to this day, but the method He gives us for waging war has dramatically changed. The Christian is not commanded to kill the unbeliever, but to convert him to Jesus Christ thus “killing” his old man in bondage to sin. Our tactics for doing so are not carnal (physical) weapons, but spiritual ones (Eph. 6: 10-18). (We could only wish that the Islamic extremists terrorizing the world today would adopt the same spiritual tactics.)

Even passages within the NT have to be carefully evaluated to determine if the instructions of the author apply equally across the board to every Christian or to a certain group of Christians living during the time the author is writing. For example, in 1 Cor. 7: 7-8, 26-27 Paul advises those who are not married to remain unmarried. Should we today take this instruction as advice against marriage or as proof of the superiority of singleness? Paul gives us a hint in v.26 when he says, “I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is.” What this “present distress” was we are not told, but we must understand Paul’s reservations about single people getting married or remarried in the context of this special, difficult situation facing the Corinthians at that time. His instruction does not apply across the board. On the other hand postponement of marriage would be appropriate for Christians today who may be facing imminent (without delay) danger or situations hindering them personally from getting a good start in their marriage. Yet Paul also qualifies his instructions, saying that even under the present distress those who do not have the self-control to remain single may get married or remarried (vv.9, 28). (Incidentally, the passage proves that the remarriage of those who have been “released” or divorced from a spouse is not necessarily a sin. Paul says in v.28, “you have not sinned.” Every case must be evaluated on its on merit as to whether it is a biblical or unbiblical divorce or remarriage. See your notes on “Divorce and Remarriage” in Systematic Theology.)

### ***B. The Context of the Book in which the Passage is Found***

Often a Biblical author has more than one “axe to grind.” That is, he has more than one argument to make and several purposes for writing the book which contribute to his central purpose. An examination of 1 Corinthians will reveal many important matters Paul addressed in this letter. He wished to address the problems of Christian unity (chps.1-3), triumphalism (chp.4), sexual immorality within the church and church discipline (chp.5), lawsuits by Christians against fellow Christians (chp.6), marriage and divorce (chp.7), unlawful use of Christian liberty (chp.8-10), unlawful participation in the Lord’s Supper (chp.11), misunderstanding of spiritual gifts and its remedy (chp.12-14), and a lack of belief in the resurrection of the body (chp.15). If anyone thinks that the early church presented the ideal for what the church should be, he needs to read 1 Corinthians to rid himself of any romantic delusions about the early church.

Virkler gives us some valuable help in understanding the context of the entire book (*Hermeneutics*, pp. 81-84). Three questions should be asked when approaching any book: (1) Who wrote the book? (2) To whom did he write it? (3) What was the writer’s purpose in writing it?

### ***1. Who wrote the book?***

For our purposes, we need not concern ourselves here with the tedious scholarship which has defended the authorship of several books of the Bible, books which specifically state the author's name (See Isaiah 1:1; Romans 1:1; etc.). We are indebted to conservative scholars who have spent endless hours and much mental labor defending what the Bible expressly states so that we can get on with the labor of determining *what* the author said. However, some books of the Bible do not state the author's name. The book of Hebrews is one such book and speculations have ranged from the apostle Paul to Apollos. In the opinion of many, judging from the style in which it was written, Paul does not appear to be a likely candidate for authorship.

It is very helpful to know the author since we can compare the way in which he uses words and phrases from one book to another. For example, even a casual reading of Ephesians and Colossians will reveal a similarity of content in both epistles. If we are in doubt about what Paul means in one epistle, we can refer to the other one to help us in our interpretation. The same thing is true with regard to many of the arguments in Romans and Galatians. We will talk more about this later when we come to the subject of parallel passages and the broader context of multiple books by the same author.

### ***2. To whom did the author write the book?***

Did the author write the book to “believers, unbelievers, apostates, believers who were in danger of becoming apostates?” (Virkler, p.81) It is not enough to know, for example, that Paul is writing to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians, because there are various factions of believers in the church (as we learn from 1 Cor.1-4). The tone of Paul's letter changes from one section to the other: from tenderness (chp. 2) to mild exhortation and admonition (chp.8-9) to an outright face-off (confrontation face to face) with those in the Corinthian church who were challenging his apostleship (chps.10-13). The tone in chapters 1-9 differs so dramatically from 10-13 that some conservative scholars have speculated about the possibility that chapters 10-13 actually constitute a separate letter from chapters 1-9, but this theory is not widely accepted.

In Romans, sometimes Paul is addressing Gentiles in the church at Rome and sometimes he is addressing Jews in the same church. Compare Rom.1: 18-32 with 2: 17-29. In Hebrews, the author is addressing Jewish Christians who because of ongoing persecution were in danger of returning to the types and shadows of Judaism and thus apostatizing from the Christian faith. (See 2: 1-4; 3:3-6; 8: 1-13; 10: 32-39; 12: 18-24.) Understanding the difference in audiences is an important element in determining the interpretation of James 2 which maintains that a man is not saved by faith alone but also by his works. Unless we want to oppose James and Paul (who said that justification was by faith apart from the works of the Law) we need to consider the different audiences of the apostles. Paul was addressing Judaizers in his letter to the Romans and Galatians who maintained that faith alone was not enough; one must also obey the Law. James, on the other hand, was opposing antinomians who taught that since we are saved by grace alone through faith, it does not matter what we do. James drives his point home in no uncertain terms that faith which does not produce good works is not a true faith and will not save anyone. By considering the differences in audiences, we are able to understand the difference when Paul says “faith without works” and when James says, “faith without works.” They are not saying the same thing because they are using the words differently. Paul was using the term “faith” in its genuine sense as the faith of Abraham whose faith “was reckoned as righteousness.” He used

the term “works” as the self-righteous works of the flesh which supposedly merit the favor of God. James, on the other hand, uses the word “faith without works” to denote (stand for) insincere faith which is devoid (empty) of true content (2: 14). “Works” in James signifies (indicates) genuine works of righteousness which flow out of a genuine faith. Hence (therefore) faith without genuine works is not a true faith and will not save.

In Genesis, Moses is writing to the Hebrews coming out of Egypt who had been absorbed into the idolatry of Egypt. To counter their superstitions and idolatrous thinking, Moses spends considerable space (Gen.1-2) developing the importance of man as the image of God living throughout the earth as a testimony that the true God rules over all the earth and demands worship from His creatures. Pharaoh, with all the multiplied images of himself throughout the land of Egypt, was not in charge; God was in charge. (See your notes on the image of God in Systematic Theology, pp.82-83, and Richard Pratt, *Designed for Dignity*, p.8.)

Even the story of Joseph should be understood in light of the 400 years of Egyptian bondage. If the Israelites were inclined to question the goodness of God (and they did continually), they should understand their bondage in Egypt as part of God’s overall plan to protect them and make them a strong nation. Joseph’s exhortation to his brothers is properly applied to the whole Jewish nation coming out of Egypt: “And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” (Gen. 50:20). God never sends His people through suffering for no purpose, but to bless them. Coming as it does at the end of the book of Genesis, Joseph’s statement may well serve as one of the major purposes for which the book was written. “God meant it for good” (50: 20) was a statement designed not just for Joseph’s brothers, but for all Israel.

Originally, the books of 1 and 2 Kings were combined as one book. The book of 1 Kings begins with the consolidated (strengthened) kingdom of David and ends with Jerusalem burned, the temple destroyed and looted, and the inhabitants of Israel in exile. The writer (unknown) is writing to the exiled people of Israel to show how such a drastic change of events could take place. The reason? Israel’s unfaithfulness to Jehovah.

### ***3. What was the purpose of the author in writing the book?***

Virkler gives us three ways to go about determining the purpose of a book (*Hermeneutics*, p.83).

#### ***a. Be alert to the author’s “explicit statement [of purpose] or his repetition of certain phrases.”***

The express statement of Luke’s purpose in writing the gospel according to Luke is found in Luke 1: 1-4. The purpose of Acts, also written by Luke, is to take up where he had left off in presenting an account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Acts is an account of what happened after Jesus’ ascension into heaven just before the Day of Pentecost. In this account, the ministry of Jesus continues in His physical absence but not in the absence of the Spirit of Jesus who empowers His apostles to continue the work of taking the gospel to the entire world. As we have seen in our study of the Gospel of John, the purpose of the book is stated explicitly in John 20: 30-31, that the one reading the account may believe in Jesus Christ and have everlasting life in Him.

In Galatians, we do not have an *explicit statement* of purpose, but only the reader who is half asleep will miss the extreme emotion and urgency with which Paul makes his appeal to the Galatians. He is so urgent in his purpose that he cuts short his usual greetings to the churches and gets right to the point of his letter in 1: 6-9. The “gospel” which the Galatians are hearing from others is not the gospel Paul brought them, and whoever preaches another one (even if Paul himself) can be “accursed” (Greek, “anathema”—placed apart from; see Rom.9:3). In other words, Paul says “If another person, even me, comes to you preaching a gospel other than the one I have preached to you, let him go to hell.” Strong words, especially from a preacher and missionary! But his purpose was urgent—to save the Galatians from the soul-damning heresy of salvation by works rather than salvation by grace through faith in Christ. (See also your notes on Galatians.)

A *repetitive phrase* occurs in 1 and 2 Kings in reference to the wicked kings of Israel: “He did evil in the sight of the Lord” (1 Kings 15: 26, 34; 22: 52; 2 Kings 3: 2; 8: 18; 14: 24; etc.). This phrase gives us a clue to the purpose; namely, to show the Jews in exile that the troubles brought upon them were due to the poor leadership of their kings and the willingness of the people to imitate them. (Incidentally, the books of 1 and 2 Kings teach us a very valuable lesson: just because a nation’s leader is ungodly is no reason to conclude that the similar behavior of the nation’s citizens is thereby justified.)

Repetitive phrases can also be *thematic* statements. In his book, *Getting the Message, a Plan for Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, Daniel Doriani says that the interpreter should look for “thematic statements that introduce or interpret an entire section.” One good example of this is the phrase we find in the Book of Judges, “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17: 6). This same thematic statement is made at the very end of the book for heightened emphasis (21: 25), and also occurs in a shortened form in 18: 1 and 19: 1. They are given to the reader as an explanation why there is so much lawlessness, violence, and immorality among the Israelites during the period of the Judges (Doriani, p.37). They had no godly leadership and were a law unto themselves.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the word “kingdom” occurs about a hundred times, emphasizing the importance of the kingdom of God in the minds of these writers. John, on the other hand, emphasizes many “I am” passages which indicate the divine identity of Jesus. In the creation account in Genesis, the phrase “And God saw that it was good” is repeated many times until we come to the creation of man after which it is said, “And God saw all that He had made [including man made after His image], and behold it was *very* good.” Then, in the more detailed account of the creation of man, God says “It is *not* good for the man to be alone....” a phrase which should demand our attention in light of the fact that everything else was good or very good (Doriani, pp. 37-38).

***b. The reader must pay close attention to the ethical instruction of the writer.***

We may determine the purpose of the author through the exhortations he is making to his audience. One way we can determine what these exhortations are is by noticing the word, “therefore” in the text. Whenever we see a “therefore”, we need to find out what it is “there for.”

For example in Rom. 12: 1, Paul says, “I urge you *therefore*, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.” This verse is the beginning of the major portion of Paul’s exhortations or ethical instructions to the Romans and is based upon the doctrines of justification by faith and sanctification by faith found in chapters 1-11. Essentially, Paul is saying, “Therefore, in light of what I have been saying from the very beginning of this letter, this is what you must do.” Clearly, Paul is not interested in making arm-chair theologians in Rome who simply enjoy discussing theology for entertainment. His purpose is to inform them of the great doctrines of the faith so that the greatness of their salvation in Jesus Christ will produce holiness of life (sanctification).

Almost at the sunset of Paul’s life, in his second letter to Timothy (his last letter) he says, “Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, or of me His prisoner; but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us, and called us with a holy calling not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity....” (1:8-9). Such an exhortation is a strong indication of his purpose in writing to Timothy, especially when considered along with other such exhortations (See 2:1-10; 4: 2; etc.) Paul’s purpose was to prepare Timothy, a fellow preacher of the gospel and his personal disciple, for the difficult days ahead and to encourage him to keep on preaching the gospel no matter what the costs. From historical sources other than the Bible, we believe that Paul was beheaded by Emperor Nero of Rome shortly after writing this letter. This belief heightens the drama and the emotional fervor (passion) of this epistle as we read it. Richard Baxter, a famous preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century once said, “I preach as a dying man to dying men.”

In Philippians 4:1-3 Paul gives another “therefore” followed by his exhortation to two prominent women in the church who were not getting along very well. The wonderful “kenosis” passage in 2: 5-11 must be understood in the light of this conflict (See also 2:12-13).

*c. We must pay attention to what is omitted and what receives the focus of the author.*

A very interesting example of this is found in 1 Kings 16 and 2 Kings 14 in the stories of Kings Omri and Jeroboam II. To determine the omission, we have to gather some historical information from both biblical and extrabiblical (outside the Bible) sources about these two kings of the northern kingdom of Israel. In a very short length of time, Omri established important political and commercial relationships with other countries, including Tyre and Sidon, which gave Israel a sizable advantage in world-wide trade. In Assyrian texts written as many as 100 years after his death, the land of Israel is still called the land of Omri and the Israelite kings who followed him were known as the sons of Omri even if they came from a different dynasty. In other words, from a purely secular standpoint, Omri was one of the most influential, prosperous kings of Israel.

Likewise, Jeroboam II was also a powerful king during whose reign the far northern boundaries of Israel were extended as far as they were under the reigns of David and Solomon. We learn this from 2 Kings 14: 25 *but the writer does not highlight the significance of this achievement*. During his kingdom, the nation of Israel grew to new heights of wealth and prosperity, and

people built splendid mansions, some of which have been excavated in modern times, and lived extravagant lifestyles which were condemned in the prophesy of Amos (Amos 1:1; 6: 4-6).

If Omri and Jeroboam II were living today, they would be praised in all the newspapers and magazines for their economic brilliance, and they would be feared for their military might. They would be the envy of many world leaders. However, man's report card is not the same thing as God's report card. As God told Samuel, men look at people and evaluate people on the outside, but God can see the heart and His evaluation is not based on worldly achievements. When God's history book is written in the book of 1 Kings, this is what we read about all of Omri's achievements: "And Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, and acted more wickedly than all who were before him. For he walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat and his sins which he made Israel sin, provoking the Lord God of Israel with their idols" (1Kings 16:25-26). Jeroboam II did not fare any better at the hands of the biblical writer who says of him, "And he did evil in the sight of the Lord; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel sin" (2 Kings 14: 24). This is a terrible summary of a man's life-achievements, but it is all these great and powerful men received from the inspired historian.

Therefore, the negative assessment of both Omri and Jeroboam II, in spite of their earthly successes, is presented to us by the writer of Kings not only by what he *says* but by what he *does not say*. He emphasizes their spiritual failures and does not in any way draw attention to their wealth, power, and human achievements. As the famous statement goes, "Life will soon be past, and only that which is done for Christ will last."

### ***C. Parallel Statements and Concepts...***

#### ***1. ...in different books by the same author.***

As stated earlier, it is to our advantage that some NT epistles have been written by the same author. This gives us the ability to cross-reference parallel statements and concepts found in all of his writings. In Paul's writings, Ephesians and Colossians are twin epistles, and Galatians and Romans share some of the same concerns and concepts. Galatians and Colossians are both concerned with confronting legalism. Compare some of the following verses from Ephesians, Colossians, Galatians and Romans. The comparisons are not intended to be exhaustive (to include all examples).

#### ***Ephesians***

2: 11-16  
2: 1-2  
3: 10  
4: 22-32  
5: 22- 6: 9  
6: 18-19

#### ***Romans***

6: 1-11  
4: 14

#### ***Colossians***

1: 19-22; 2: 14  
2: 13  
2: 15  
3: 5-17  
3: 18-4: 1  
4: 2-4

#### ***Galatians***

2: 17-20  
2: 21

4: 13

7: 1-6

8: 15-17

3: 29

3: 23-4: 5

4: 4-7

***Galatians***

4: 8-11

***Colossians***

2: 16-23

For a sampling of the parallel statements and concepts in the writings of John, refer to your notes on the Gospel of John and I, II, and III John.

***2. ...within the same book.***

Repeated words studied in their immediate context will illumine the author's meaning of these words. Unless there is compelling evidence to the contrary, a repeated word or phrase will have the same meaning throughout the book. For example what is the meaning of the "mystery" found in Eph. 1: 9; 3: 3; 3: 9; 5: 32; and 6: 19. The "mystery" remains a mystery to us until we examine the word in Eph. 3: 4-6 in which the mystery is explained as the entrance of Gentiles as fellow heirs on equal standing with Jews in the body of Christ. It should also be noticed that the word "mystery" is closely associated with the words "made known", "revealed", or "revelation" (See 1: 9; 3: 3; 3: 5). The conclusion, then, is that the mystery of which Paul speaks is "not something 'mysterious' but rather a truth previously withheld but now revealed and proclaimed." (Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, pp. 106-107).

***3. ...in books by different authors.***

To be expected, there are many parallel statements found in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and to a lesser extent, the Gospel of John. Jesus repeated Himself many times throughout the gospels simply because he traveled to many places in the land of Palestine (Mickelsen, p.106). The slightly different forms in which His statements occur do not indicate discrepancies or contradictions in the text, but the variety of ways which Jesus said essentially the same thing with different emphases. The differences and similarities are both helpful in establishing the meaning of His teaching. In order for us to come to a well-rounded, informed position of what Jesus taught on divorce, we cannot simply study Matt. 5: 31-32 but also Matt. 19: 3-12; Luke 16: 18; and Mark 10: 2-12. Likewise, the Sermon on the Mount found in Matt. 5-7 should be compared to the shortened account in Luke 6: 20-49.

For years, Dispensationalists made a distinction between the "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew and the "kingdom of God" in Luke and Mark. The kingdom of God, in their hermeneutical system, referred to the universal reign of God, including the angelic hosts, while the kingdom of heaven referred to the future Messianic reign of Christ on earth during His millennial kingdom. Most interpreters readily see these phrases as parallel terms meaning the same thing. For example, it would be difficult to come up with different meanings for the terms from Luke 13: 18-20 and Matt. 13: 31-33. Besides this, both the expressions "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" occur in Matthew's gospel (Matt. 13: 44-47; Matt. 18: 1-4; Matt. 19: 24; Matt. 21: 31). Are we to suppose that Jesus would confuse His audience by using the different terms in two different ways with no explanation given for the difference? Due to criticisms to this approach, Dispensationalists no longer make this distinction.

A harmony of the gospels, in which the parallel passages of all four gospels are placed side by side with each other, is very helpful in interpreting the meaning of these passages. Often, by giving us similar accounts with slightly different wording, the Holy Spirit maximizes the teaching of a single passage with different emphases. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew's account Jesus says, "Blessed are the *poor in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5: 3), while Luke's account reads, "Blessed are you who are *poor*, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6: 20). We have already discussed the issue of the kingdom of God versus the kingdom of heaven. But what are we to make of the difference in wording between "poor in spirit" versus "poor"? Obviously, Jesus is not saying that being poor qualifies one to go to heaven. If this were true, the best evangelism would be to destroy all wealth, forcing everyone into material poverty and, therefore, into the kingdom of God. Besides, Jesus is not in a technical sense speaking to everyone in Galilee, but to those who were following Him (Norval Geldenhuys, *Luke*, p. 210).

By studying both the Matthew and Luke passages together, the fuller meaning of Jesus' words emerges. From Matthew, we understand Jesus' emphasis upon the recognition of our spiritual poverty in order to be blessed with the kingdom of heaven (or the kingdom of God). The kingdom belongs not to the proud and self-sufficient; not to the one who believes that he is a good person deserving of the kingdom because of the wonderful person he believes himself to be or because of the wonderful deeds he thinks he has done. Rather, the kingdom belongs to the person who recognizes that in himself there is nothing good, and that nothing he has done in life is deserving of the blessing of God. This difference in people and attitudes is amply (sufficiently) illustrated in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector in Luke 18: 9-14, in which the Pharisee attempts to establish his reputation and merit before God, but the tax-collector disclaims (does not claim) any merit at all, but humbly begs for mercy. Jesus tells us that the tax-collector went to his house a forgiven man, while the Pharisee went home unforgiven.

The Gospel of Luke, when compared with the other gospel accounts, appears to highlight the importance of the gospel being presented to the poor. The sacrifice associated with purification given by Joseph and Mary for Jesus in Luke 2: 22-24 was a sacrifice appropriate for poor people. Jesus' mission is presented in Luke (more so than in Matthew 11: 5) as the fulfillment of the Day of Jubilee which included the preaching of the gospel to the poor, the release of slaves who had become slaves because of their poverty, and the liberation of those who were oppressed (Luke 4: 18-21). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus the poor man; the healing of the ten leprosy men (who by virtue of their sickness were no doubt poor); and the story of Zaccheus who agreed to give half his possessions to the poor are found only in Luke. Spiros Zodhiates, executive editor of the *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible* says in his introduction to the Gospel of Luke, "Special emphasis is placed upon the kindness of Jesus toward women, the poor, the outcasts, the weak, and those who were suffering in different ways."

The above discussion is an extended illustration both of the importance of parallels in gospel accounts and how the inclusion of some stories, sayings, etc. in some gospel accounts and not others will provide us with clues to interpreting their general purpose. A harmony is helpful in this regard, but also exhaustive concordances and the marginal notes found in study Bibles.

These are just a few of the parallels found in the gospels. Others include the following which are listed in Mickelsen, p.109, along with my own interpretive comments.

***a. The Centurion's Servant—Matthew 8: 5-13 and Luke 7: 1-10.***

In this parallel, Matthew's account indicates that the centurion came in person to plea for the life of his servant, while Luke's account says that the centurion sent some sympathetic Jewish elders to plead for him. There is no contradiction in the two accounts. For the centurion to use mediators between himself and Jesus is the same as pleading with Jesus in person. He shows his humility by saying that he is not worthy to be in Jesus' presence (Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p. 395). Another possibility is that the centurion had a change of mind and overcame his initial hesitation and came after the elders contacted Jesus (Geldenhuis, *Luke*, p. 220). Rather than a contradiction, we have a more detailed account of what happened by consulting both Matthew and Luke, which is what the Holy Spirit intended for us to have.

***b. The Transfiguration—Matthew 17: 1-13, Mark 9: 2-13; and Luke 9: 28-36.***

In all three accounts, Jesus is transfigured before Peter, John, and James, Jesus' inner circle of disciples, and Jesus is talking with Moses and Elijah. However, only Luke tells us what they are talking about: "His departure which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem" (Luke 9: 31); that is, the events of His crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension. Furthermore, all three accounts record different words being said by God the Father (Compare Luke 9: 35 with Mark 9: 7 and Matt. 17: 5); and only Matthew and Mark record Jesus' instructions to the disciples not to tell anyone what they had seen until the resurrection. All three accounts tell the disciples to "listen to Him," indicating His superiority over Moses and Elijah who were representatives of the Law and the Prophets which Jesus came to fulfill. By the very fact that this event is recorded in three gospels is evidence of the extreme importance of the transfiguration. Whenever we find something only once in the Bible, it is important because it is God's word; but when we find the same thing three times, its importance is highlighted.

***c. The Feeding of the Five Thousand—Matthew 14: 13-21; Mark 6: 31-44; Luke 9: 12-17; and John 6: 1-14).***

There are many differences in the four gospels in the recording of this event which may be pieced together to get a fuller understanding of what happened. Only John gives us the theological significance of this event by recording Jesus' discourse on being the bread of life (John 6: 26-28).

***D. Historical-Cultural Context***

Thus far, we have only studied the *literary context* of the Bible which Doriani defines in the following way: "Literary context is the words, sentences, paragraphs, or chapters that surround and relate to a text." He goes on to say that the study of the literary context does not depend on our knowledge of the writer (as a person) or the times in which he wrote or an understanding of the culture and concerns of the original audience (*Getting the Message*, p.31). This does not imply that we may ignore the Biblical statements which identify the author or the audience which would be part of the literary context.

Doriani defines the historical context as “the culture, customs, languages, beliefs, and history of the author and his original audience.” The historical context shows “how a portion of the Bible fits into its world,” and “allows readers to overcome the feeling that the text belongs to another time or culture and allows them to enter the world of the original speakers, writers, and readers” (*Getting the Message*, p. 31). To risk the danger of oversimplification, while literary context can be obtained from a careful reading of the text, much of the historical-cultural context must be obtained from extrabiblical sources. This is not absolutely the case since much of the history and culture can be gleaned from the text themselves (See the examples below). Nevertheless, other passages can only be illumined through the study of other sources such as good commentaries, Bible dictionaries, Bible encyclopedias, etc.

Virkler gives us three key factors which should be determined in establishing the historical-cultural context (*Hermeneutics*, pp. 79-81).

### ***1. The general historical situation of the writer and his audience***

Under this heading, the economic, political, and social setting of the writer and his audience come into view. For an example of this principle, let’s examine the prophecy of Amos. During his prophecy, Jeroboam II was king of the northern kingdom of Israel (Amos 1: 1). We have already mentioned the political and military success of this king (p. 29 of your notes). In his book *Old Testament Bible History*, Alfred Edersheim tells us that “Jeroboam II was certainly the most warlike king and the most successful administrator of all who occupied the throne of Israel” (Vol. VII, p. 64). His reign was one of the longest in the history of Israel and was characterized by great wealth and prosperity. It was also characterized by wide-spread oppression of the poor (Amos 2:6- 8; 3: 15; 4: 1; 6: 4-6).

As indicated in the texts, the rich had extravagant homes for every season, winter homes and summer homes. Their beds were made of ivory and they feasted extravagantly and wastefully from the young, half-grown animals of their herds while the poor went hungry. They used the garments of the poor (taken unlawfully as pledges for loans; see Ex. 22: 25-27) as blankets to lie upon as they engaged in the syncretistic (mixed) worship of God and Baal (C. F. Keil, *Hosea*, pp. 58-59, 63). (It is quite possible that the connection between Amos 2: 7 and 2: 8 indicates that these garments were being used as blankets to engage in sexual intercourse with temple prostitutes, a practice common in the worship of Baal, although Keil does not accept this possibility. See C. F. Keil, *Amos*, pp. 253-254). Religiously, Israel was in terrible decline and the worship of Baal either had been restored from the days of King Ahab (1 Kings 18), or was seriously confused with the worship of Jehovah so that what the Israelites passed off as the true worship of Jehovah was actually the worship of Baal (Amos 2: 8; 4: 4; Hosea 2: 13, 17; Hosea 1: 1 which indicates that Hosea was also written during the reign of Jeroboam II).

Politically, the days of Jeroboam II matched the economic success of the nation. Syria, Israel’s arch-enemy, had been defeated and Israel had no one to fear on any side. Its borders had been expanded outward to the same territorial boundaries enjoyed during the kingdoms of David and Solomon. One might say that when Amos began to prophesy, the economic and political elite classes in Israel were sitting on top of the world. Spiritually, it was in ruins.

This political, economic, religious, and social situation must be understood in order to interpret the prophecy of Amos. Furthermore, we should take note of the biographical

information given to us of Amos himself. This man was not the well-educated Isaiah who prophesied in the palace courts (Isaiah 38-39), but a simple shepherd and fig-grower who did not have direct access to the king (Amos 7: 10, 14-15). This gives us the picture of the drama unfolding in the prophecy in Amos. We behold a simple shepherd-farmer confronting one of the most powerful kings in the history of Israel during a time of prosperity never surpassed with the message that God would “rise up against the house of Jeroboam with the sword” (7: 9b). Based on the political and economic situation described above, his message was hardly believable. Was it not more believable that God had blessed Israel on every side and that even better and more prosperous days lay ahead?

In the days before the Great Depression in the United States in the 1930's, there was a song out which was very popular among the economic elite, particularly the new rich class which had recently acquired their riches from stock market investments—as it turned out, overpriced ones. The lyrics of this song went something like this: “Blue skies, falling on me, nothing but blue skies do I see.” In other words, there was no “rain” of ruin and calamity in the economic forecast for these wealthy stock market entrepreneurs (businessmen). They believed their fortunes would last forever. But their hopes and dreams were ill-founded since the stock market crashed and literally thousands of people (rich and middleclass) lost their riches, life savings, and their dreams.

As it turns out, Amos was not just “blowing smoke” with idle threats of doom and gloom, but telling the sober truth. Not too long after Amos' prophecy, the northern kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria and its people exiled into strange lands, never again to sleep on beds of ivory or eat lambs from the flock. Not only were their winter homes gone, but their summer homes as well. They were now homeless and without a country of their own. They had forgotten a very important principle of wealth: Wealth is a gift of God to be used for His glory. He has the right to give it, and He has the right to take it away.

As we have seen from this example of historical-cultural analysis of the context, much of the historical situation can be reconstructed from the texts of Scripture themselves. The reader must examine the text carefully for little clues which will help him understand the situation going on at the time of the writer. For example, references to eating lambs from the flocks, sleeping on beds of ivory, and the timing of the prophecy during the reign of a certain king, are all important clues. Other non-biblical references like OT introductions or Edersheim's *Old Testament Biblical History* will also help us tremendously.

## ***2. The knowledge of cultural practices or customs which govern certain actions.***

One example of this is found in Mark 7 in which Jesus criticizes the hypocrisy of the Pharisees. By declaring their material resources “corban,” they avoided the responsibility of helping their parents in old age, thus violating the fifth commandment to honor father and mother. In the practice of corban, they declared all their money given to the temple treasury on the event of their death, thus deceitfully sheltering their money from the needs of aging parents. In this way, the money would be there for their own selfish interests until they died (Virkler, p.79).

Virkler brings up another interesting example by citing Jesus' instructions to his disciples in Mark 14: 12-14. He told them that they would meet a man carrying a pitcher of water. Carrying water was ordinarily done by women, and this would be a secret signal to the disciples without the use of words. Another possible interpretation is that given by William Lane (*Mark*, p.499) who says that only women carried water in jars while it was common for men to carry it in wineskins. Either way, secrecy was important since the Jewish leaders had already put out orders for Jesus' arrest (John 11: 57). It goes without saying that information of this sort may not be available from the Bible itself, but must be gathered from other sources like Alfred Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* or G. Earnest Wright's *Great People of the Bible and How They Lived* (Virker, *Hermeneutics*, p. 80, footnote).

We have already noted that the Pharisees disapproved of Jesus eating with sinners (Luke 15: 2). Why was this so? The social custom of the day indicated that sitting down to eat with someone was a sign of acceptance of that person and an intimate relationship with him. The religious custom of the day did not allow a religious leader to socialize with regular people who had little education (*Getting the Message*, p.45).

Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey just before His crucifixion. Horses were used for war, and Jesus wanted all to know that He was coming in peace.

Jesus' instructions in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5: 40) to allow someone to take your cloak as well as your shirt do not seem to be such radical demands until we understand that the average person in Palestine at this time owned less than ten garments (*Getting the Message*, p.46). Furthermore, the cloak was the outer garment which was used by the very poor to keep warm at night (Ex. 22: 26-27).

The Babylonian siege against Jerusalem during the reign of King Zedekiah lasted about eighteen months (2 Kings 25: 1-2). Why didn't the superior force of the Babylonians just go in and take it? Why did they wait so long? This remains a mystery unless we know something about the topography of Jerusalem. It was a heavily fortified city built on a small mountain which made it difficult to attack, and it had its own water source which enabled the city to wait out a prolonged siege. Rather than attacking a fresh army uphill, the Babylonians decided to delay the attack until Jerusalem was sufficiently weakened with hunger. Famine could become so acute during a prolonged siege that cannibalism occurred (2 Kings 6: 24-30).

### ***3. The spiritual condition of the audience***

Consider the audience of the book of Hebrews. Why do we find so many warnings and exhortations in this book (Hebrews 3: 7-19; 4: 1, 7; 5: 11-14; 6: 4-8; 12: 1-13)? The answer lies in the fact that many of these Hebrews who had professed faith in Christ were in danger of drifting back into the Jewish heresy of disowning their Messiah or marginalizing (minimizing) His importance. Evidence of this fact is found in Hebrews 1-2; 3; and 7 in which the writer demonstrates the superiority of Christ to angels, Moses, and Aaron respectively (in that order). These Hebrews had made a good start, and many of them had suffered greatly for their faith; but they had need of endurance so they would not throw away the riches of the gospel entrusted to them (10: 32-36; 6: 10-12; 12: 14- 24).

Their suffering provides the context for chapter 11, which is devoted to the task of illustrating one important principle: the reward of faith is not given in full measure in this life. Even the greatest saints who ever lived, men and women who were giants of the faith, endured suffering and sacrifice until the end of their lives without receiving the ultimate reward for their faith, the promised Messiah and the glory of the New Covenant. In the words of John Calvin, “A tiny spark of light led them to heaven, but now that the Sun of righteousness shines on us what excuse shall we offer if we still cling to the earth?” (Quoted in Philip E. Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 516).

In the same sense but to a different degree, the era of the Hebrews which is continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a day of delayed rewards. It is true that we live in the reality of the full salvation which we have in Jesus Christ and the blessings of the new covenant (the subject of the book of Hebrews), but we still do not have our glorified bodies, and the earth still lies under the futile effects of man’s sin (Rom. 8: 18-25). One day in the future these unfulfilled promises will also be reality; but until then, we must endure the suffering which will inevitably come to those who belong to Jesus Christ (See Hughes, *Hebrews*, p.517).

In making this evaluation of the spiritual condition of the audience the reader should be alert for “pointed questions and objections, sharp rebukes, and terms of endearment” (Doriani, *Getting the Message*, p.50). This is evident in our evaluation of Hebrews above. By examining 1 and 2 Corinthians, we can also safely conclude that Paul’s relationship with this church was strained because of internal factions, immorality, disunity, challenges to his apostleship, etc. (See your notes on p.26 of Hermeneutics and the following passages: 1 Cor. 3: 1-4; 1 Cor. 5; 6: 1-11; 1 Cor. 10: 12; 1 Cor. 11: 22; 1 Cor. 16: 22; 2 Cor. 13: 1-3; etc.) His urgency is easily detected in the epistle to the Galatians who were headed toward outright apostasy (Gal. 1: 6-9; 6: 17). On the other hand, Paul could be tender when the circumstances allowed (2 Cor. 7; Phil. 4: 1-7, 10-23; Philemon).

### ***III. Special Literary Methods***

Thus far, we have been talking about general principles of hermeneutics. One of those principles, grammatical and syntactical analysis which deals with the Greek and Hebrew languages, will be discussed at a later time. For now, it is most advantageous for those who do not have use of the Greek and Hebrew to discuss “special literary methods” (Virkler’s term) which are commonly used by the writers of the Bible.

#### ***A. Parallelisms***

Parallelisms are not the same as parallel statements or concepts found in the writings of the same author or in the gospels, etc. Parallel statements or concepts have more to do with the context. Similar statements made by Paul in Ephesians and Colossians must be considered within the context of the author’s writings. Similar thoughts and sayings of the Lord Jesus Christ reported in the gospels must be considered within the context of how they are recorded in each of the gospels to determine the full scope of their meaning. One other parallel concept we did not discuss is the quotation of one prophetic author by another prophetic author. There are quotations in Micah which may be attributed originally to his contemporary, Isaiah. Parallelisms do not concern the context. Rather, they are a peculiar literary technique common to Hebrew

poetry. Virkler includes a discussion of parallelisms in his chapter, “Lexical-Syntactical Analysis.” I prefer to treat the subject here because it constitutes a particular literary device or method used by Biblical writers. There are three types.

### ***1. Synonymous parallelism***

This occurs when different lines of a passage present the same thought as the next line in a slightly different way. For example, Ps. 46: 1 says, “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.” The two statements in this verse say basically the same thing in slightly different ways. Other examples of synonymous parallelism are Ps. 22: 27; Ps. 38: 1; 19: 1; 34: 13 and 49: 1; but the Psalms are literally filled with examples of synonymous parallelism. The Proverbs are the same way. Some examples are Prov. 11: 25; 19: 5; 17: 25; and 3: 9, but again, this type of parallelism is characteristic of the Proverbs and are found throughout.

Tremper Longman advocates a different approach to reading the parallelisms. Instead of merely seeing the same idea repeated in two different ways, he suggests that there is progression of thought with the second statement: “A, what’s more B” (*How to Read the Psalms*, p. 97-98). According to this view, the second statement always carries forward the thought found in the first statement. In Psalms 6: 1, the chastening in the second statement goes beyond the rebuke in the first statement. Rebuke has to do with words while chastening has to do with actions and is a more serious matter. In the same way, the healing in v. 2 carries the thought a step beyond the graciousness he pleads for in the first statement.

As we read Ps. 2, the “A, what’s more B” approach seems to capture the natural progression which is implied in man’s rebellion. In verse 1a, the nations are in an uproar. They are upset, but no action is implied. In the second statement (v. 1b) they are carrying their discontent a further step by plotting against someone. Then in v. 2a the leaders of the peoples are taking a stand and in v. 2b they are taking counsel with one another—there is organization in their revolt. Against whom? Against none other than the Lord and against His Anointed king. The progression of thought is that man’s discontent and plotting is done in opposition to God and the one He has enthroned, not in opposition to other mortals. In v. 3, the progression of thought continues because their opposition against the authority of God builds to the point of rage: “Let us tear their fetters apart, and cast away their cords from us!” We can almost sense the rage of the Jews as they were shouting, “Crucify Him! Crucify Him! We will not have this man Jesus rule over us!” Progression is also evident in the Lord’s response to man’s puny rebellion (v. 4). First, the Lord simply laughs at man’s rage, not even bothering to get up out of His chair (“sits”). He then belittles them for their simplicity (“scoffs”). Finally, He speaks in anger which then gives way to terrifying fury.

### ***2. Antithetic parallelism***

This is the opposite of the first type in which the second line stands in contrast to what is stated in the first line. In this sense, the same idea is presented but by using antonyms (words meaning the opposite of another) rather than synonyms (words meaning the same as another) (See Longman, pp. 99-100). For example, “The desire of the righteous is only good, but the expectation of the wicked is only wrath” (Prov. 11: 23). Other examples in Proverbs are Prov. 12: 13; 13: 1; 14: 34 and Prov. 10: 8. This kind of parallelism is very common in Proverbs, but

not as common in the Psalms. Examples in the Psalms are 37: 9, 17, 21; 34: 10; and 34: 15-16. The last example given, Ps. 34: 15-16, is an example of a compound antithetic parallelism in which there are more than two sentences in each member of the antithesis (Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, p. 97). Terry also cites a compound antithetic parallelism in Isaiah 1: 3, 19-20, and 54: 7-8, which indicates that parallelisms should be looked for in any place in the OT where Hebrew poetry is found.

Parallelisms are also found in the New Testament. This is to be expected since the writers of the NT were Jewish (Luke being the only exception) and were familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures. And, of course, Jesus was a Jew, and we find Him using parallelisms in many of His discourses. Consider His instructions on prayer in Matt. 7: 7, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.” Jesus piles up phrase upon phrase to emphasize the importance of being persistent in prayer, but each of the phrases says essentially the same thing in different words. Notice also Matt. 7: 13-14 which is an antithetic parallelism.

The Apostle Paul, also a Jew, thought and wrote occasionally in parallelisms. In Col. 3: 16, he exhorted the church with these words, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” The psalms and hymns and spiritual songs may very well be different words for the same thing. There have been debates among Christians over “exclusive psalmody”, or over whether the church in worship should be sing anything other than Biblical psalms put to music. Other examples in Pauline literature may be found in Eph. 3: 18 and Rom. 8: 35. These are not parallelisms, strictly speaking, but we can see in these examples that Paul occasionally thought in parallel fashion.

### ***B. Similes and Metaphors***

A simile is a comparison using the word “like” or “as”. Generally the comparison made deals with a *similarity* between two ideas. Jesus makes much use of similes when speaking about the kingdom of God. We often encounter His words, “The kingdom of God [or heaven] is *like*...” Notice that He does not make an equation of the kingdom of God with the thing compared to it. He does not say, “The kingdom of God *is*...” but “the kingdom of God is *like*...” (See Matt. 13: 24, 31, 44, 45, 47; 20: 1; 22: 2; 25: 1; Mk. 4: 26, 31; Lk. 13: 18, 20.)

A metaphor is also a comparison but it is not introduced as a comparison; that is, it does not use the words “like” or “as”. Furthermore, there is an intertwining of the subject with the thing with which it is compared. For example, Jesus said, “I am the bread of life,” and “you are the light of the world.” The subject and the thing it is compared with are considered as one but the words are not to be taken literally. Jesus is not literal bread and Christians are not literally light. One main point is stressed by the comparison. In the first metaphor mentioned, Jesus presents himself as the sustenance of our spiritual lives and Christians are (or should be) the models of how life should be lived (Virkler, p. 158-159).

### ***C. Allegories***

Allegories are extended metaphors in which the comparison between the subject and the thing compared to it is not explicitly expressed (there is no “like” or “as”). Furthermore, the subject

and the thing compared to it are intermingled together within the allegory, and “the story and its application are intermingled [mixed] and proceed together (Virkler, pp. 159-160).

Consider the allegory of Ecclesiastes 12:3-7. It is an allegory about old age lived without a relationship to God. It is not, as Milton Terry says, “a good old age” which is described in Prov. 16: 31 and Ps. 92: 12-14, but a sorrowful and tragic old age which suffers the ultimate consequences of a life lived without the knowledge and worship of God. It is the old age of a “sensualist”, one who lived his life for pleasure but now is too old to enjoy such pleasure. Thus, we are warned by the writer (unknown, although believed by many to be Solomon) to avoid this tragic end by remembering the Creator when one is yet young and not to wait for old age. The old adage (saying), “ ‘ Youth for pleasure—age for business—old age for religion’ ” which encourages us to postpone the worship of God for old age when we can no longer participate in youthful pleasures is poor advice. If a person does not pursue his Creator when he is young, neither will he pursue Him when he is old.

The interpreter should notice the many metaphors used in these few short verses which are developed by the author into an extended metaphor or allegory. The “watchman [or keepers] of the house tremble” is a phrase which refers to the hands and the arms which in more youthful days served as the defense of his house. In old age, they tremble and are helpless to keep out intruders. The “mighty [strong] men” which “stoop” refer to the legs which lose their muscular strength in old age and become bowed and crooked. The “grinding ones stand idle because they are few” are the teeth which fall out in old age. “Those who look through windows grow dim” is a reference to the decreasing ability of the old to see and the “doors on the street” refer to the ears which can no longer hear the normal sounds of everyday life (like the grinding mill), but are often alarmed at the sharp, shrill sound of a bird. The phrase, “the daughters of song will sing softly” is most likely a reference to all the organs of sound including the lungs, voice, and the ears which are used in singing. All of these are now weak and unable to make the joyful noises which they once made. (When a person gets old, even his voice is affected.) In v. 5, the writer makes note of the extreme difficulty of any kind of movement. When he was young, the man could run up stairs or hills with the slightest of ease, but now in old age climbing up stairs and slight embankments must be done with great care for fear of falling. Even the simplest obstacles in his path are cause for alarm. The last part of v. 5 is most likely a reference to the appetite. In old age (symbolized by the “almond tree blossoms”—a reference to the white hair which is falling out), the appetite is not what it once was, and the delicacies (grasshoppers and caperberries) no longer taste good (See Matt. 3: 4 and Lev. 11: 22). The end of his life is near at hand, “For man goes to his eternal home...” When he dies, professional mourners (according to Jewish custom) “go about in the street” to make an insincere, public display of grief for an old man they don’t even know or care about—a practice which adds to the tragedy of the moment. The “silver cord and the golden bowl” may refer to a golden lamp suspended by a silver cord (as a chandelier in a palatial hallway). The silver cord breaks and the lamp falls and is dashed to pieces. This could be a metaphorical reference to the light of a man’s life being extinguished. The “pitcher by the well” and the “wheel at the cistern” refer to the elaborate machinery which some wealthy people possessed for drawing water. In the Bible, water is a common reference to life itself and this could be symbolic of the final end of the man’s life when there is nothing left physically to sustain his life. Eventually his body will return to the dust from which it came and his spirit will return to God (not a reference to heaven but to the accountability to God which all men must bear).

It should be noticed that although there are many symbols in this allegory which have independent significance apart from each other, one main point of comparison is made throughout the allegory. It is an allegory about old age lived without proper relationship to God. This is not to say that Christians do not suffer the pains and inconveniences of old age. They certainly do. Yet, their old age is not summed up or categorized by such frailties, but is characterized by the anticipated joy of meeting their Creator.

Most of the analysis of this interesting and arresting allegory has been drawn from *Biblical Hermeneutics* by Milton S. Terry (pp.306-309) and *Ecclesiastes* by Charles Bridges (pp.283-298).

It should also be said that we are not using the illegitimate hermeneutical principle of *allegorizing* to interpret the above passage. The allegory above is made by the writer of Scripture himself and is plain to see within the passage. We may also observe many allegories in the parables of Jesus, the parable of the sower being one notable example in which Jesus identifies each metaphor within the allegory (Matt. 13: 1-23). However, we would not search for allegories in every passage of Scripture. Were we to do so, we would come up with all sorts of fanciful interpretations which actually obscure (hide) the true meaning of the texts.

Allegorization was a method of interpretation which became popular with Clement of Alexandria in the first part of the third century. Using this method, the interpreter would seek the “deeper”, “hidden” meaning of Scripture as opposed to the literal meaning. Clement and other allegorizers (Origen) insisted that this was the *intended meaning* of the text, and that the literal meaning only skimmed the surface. For example, one preacher I heard said that David’s “three mighty men” could be identified as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But there is nothing in the historical narrative to indicate any such fanciful meaning. The three mighty men are just three mighty men, no one else. Another humorous (funny) example of the allegorical method is the notion that Herod’s massacre of the two year old infants of Bethlehem is a warning that only those who hold to the Trinitarian faith will be saved and that Binitarians (who believe in two persons of the Godhead) and Unitarians (those who hold to one person in the Godhead) will perish in hell. The passage teaches nothing of the kind. A careful examination of Matt. 2: 1-12 will reveal that the magi from the east did not see Jesus in the stable, like the shepherds did, but only later when He was living in a house (Matt. 2: 11). In Matt. 2: 7, we learn that Herod determined from the wise men the time in which they had seen the star which led them to the king of the Jews. The star they had seen finally led them (two years later) to a house. The two year time table is determined from v. 16 when Herod plotted to eliminate the new competitor to his throne by killing all the babies in Bethlehem two years old and under based on the information he had received from the magi earlier (v.7). Herod figured that if he killed all the infants two years old and under, he could guarantee the death of this infant king. He was wrong, and Luke, the writer, makes a vivid point of his failure. Instead of the infant Jesus dying, Herod died instead (v.19). One can see that the allegorical method robs us of the true meaning and significance of the text.

On the other hand, we find a notable example of an OT text, an historical text, allegorized by none other than the best of NT exegetes, the Apostle Paul (Galatians 4:21-31). This allegory leads us at this juncture to make a qualification of what was said earlier about the meaning of a text. We said that the meaning of a text is the intended meaning of the original author (See page

3 of your Hermeneutics notes). This is generally a good rule to follow. We also said on p. 3 that Moses, the original author, could not have intended this story to be an allegory of the Old and the New Covenants, one of which he had never experienced. This means that God, the divine author, had *more than one meaning in mind* when He inspired the story of Sarah and Hagar. Notice that one main point is being made in the allegory—the difference between the “products” of the old covenant and the products of the new covenant. The first produces slaves; the other produces free children. Those Israelites who trusted in their obedience to the Law to be right with God were slaves while those who put their faith in the promises made to Abraham and his descendants were free.

Liberal theologians have taken Paul’s allegory in Gal. 4 as an opportunity to cast doubt upon much of his teaching elsewhere in the NT. If Paul used the illegitimate hermeneutical method of *allegorizing* to prove a point of doctrine, should we not examine his other writings for error? (Virker, p.175) But as Virkler is quick to point out, Paul is not sanctioning allegorizing as a method of interpretation. First of all Paul recognizes the actual history of the events surrounding Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. The allegorical method would consider these historical events to be unimportant to the “deeper” meaning of the text.

Secondly, Paul alerts the reader to the fact that he is about to allegorize the text, while the method of allegorizing does not require permission from the Biblical author to interpret the text as an allegory. With the allegorical method, *every* text is interpreted as an allegory. By telling the reader in advance that this is an allegory, Paul indicates that he is not giving an exposition (explanation) of the text as it is to be understood from Genesis. In other words, when we read the text from Genesis, we are not to read it as an allegory, but as an historical account with a literal meaning (Virker, pp. 177-178). We conclude, therefore, that Paul is not sanctioning the allegorical method, a conclusion which is certainly warranted from an examination of his other NT writings in which only a few examples of allegorization may be noted (See 1 Cor. 9: 9 compared with Dt. 25: 4).

The main question which comes up is this: Are non-inspired interpreters of Scripture justified in interpreting other OT historical texts as allegories even if they are not identified as such in NT texts? It is one thing for the Apostle Paul to allegorize an OT text, but is this legitimate practice for today’s preacher? This question does not imply the interpretation of OT texts *primarily* as allegories, as if the hidden meaning is the only meaning, but may they be used allegorically to present a meaning other than that of the intended author? Paul interprets Gal. 4 in a way other than the intended meaning of Moses. Can we do the same with other OT texts? John Frame answers this question in the affirmative. Reflecting on 1 Cor. 9: 9 and Gal. 4, Frame says, (*Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, pp. 198-199).

Thus we find Scripture itself sometimes uses Scripture in surprising ways....We would be perplexed by these uses of the Old Testament if we followed the principle of asking, What did the text mean to the original (human) author or audience? That question is important and useful, but it doesn’t always tell us what we need to know. Most likely, Paul’s use of Deuteronomy 25: 4 did not (consciously) occur to Moses, nor did Paul’s use of Genesis 21. At least we could not use any hermeneutical method of which I am aware to determine that such ideas occurred to Moses. Thus, unless we wish to accuse Paul of misusing the Old Testament at those points, we must find some other principle at work.

The relevant principle, I think, is simply this. The Old Testament texts that Paul used are capable of being used in the ways he used them. Whether or not Moses conceived of Genesis 21 as an allegory, it happens that the text is *suiited* to being used that way. Since it is suited to such a use, we know that this usage was in

the mind of the divine author, even if it was not consciously intended by the human author. God knows and predetermines all the uses that are proper for His inspired Word. And surely the unique double-authorship of Scripture must influence our interpretation of it. The principle, then, is that we may use Scripture in any way that it is suited to be used. And the meaning of any text, then, is the set of uses to which it is suited.

This sort of approach opens the doors of our creativity! It encourages us to make allegories out of other passages too! That is well and good; there is nothing wrong with that. But our governing principle must be to present the gospel clearly and cogently. If an allegorical illustration helps to that end, then no one may forbid it. But obviously we are not warranted to turn theology into an allegorical flight of fancy as did Origen. (Origen's mistake was not that he allegorized Scripture but that he misused his allegorical interpretations to try to prove substantive theological propositions. That is not what Paul is doing in Galatians 4, where he uses his allegory only as an *illustration* of, not as the basis for, his theological point. Paul's basis for his argument, he makes clear, was his own private revelation from God—Gal. 1: 1, 11f.) [emphasis his].

Milton Terry urges more caution in the use of allegory, but his position, written over a century ago, is not much different from Frame's. Commenting on Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar in Gal. 4, he says (pp. 322-323):

Here arises the important hermeneutical question, What inference are we to draw from this example of an inspired apostle allegorizing the facts of sacred history? Was it a fruit of his rabbinical education, and a sanction of that allegorical method of interpretation which was prevalent [common] especially among Jewish-Alexandrian writers, at that time?

That Paul in this passage treats historical facts of the Old Testament as capable of being used allegorically is a simple matter of fact. That he was familiar with the allegorical methods of expounding the Scriptures current in his day is scarcely to be doubted. That his own rabbinical training had some influence on him, and coloured his methods of argument and illustration, there seems no valid reason to deny. . . . But its [Paul's use of allegorical argument in Gal. 4] position, connexion, and use in this epistle to the Galatians gives no sufficient warrant for such allegorical methods in general. Schmoller remarks: "Paul to be sure allegorizes here, for he says so himself. But with the very fact of his saying this himself, the gravity of the hermeneutical difficulty disappears. He means therefore to give an allegory, not an exposition: he does not proceed as an exegete, and does not mean to say (after the manner of the allegorizing exegetes) that only what he now says is the true sense of the narrative." Herein especially consists the great difference between Paul's example and that of nearly all the allegorists. He concedes and assumes the historical truthfulness of the Old Testament narrative, but makes an allegorical use of it for a special and exceptional purpose. . . .

But he never for a moment loses sight of the historical basis, or permits his allegorizing to displace it. And in the same general way it may be allowable for us to allegorize portions of the Scripture, providing the facts are capable of typical significance, and are never ignored and displaced by the allegorizing process. Biblical characters and events may thus be used for homiletical purposes, and serve for "instruction in righteousness;" but the special and exceptional character of such handling of Scripture must, as in Paul's example, be explicitly acknowledged. The apostle's solitary instance is sufficient admonition that such expositions are to be indulged [used] most sparingly.

Notice that Terry says that the historical facts of the passage should not be displaced and must be "capable of typical significance". This was the error of the ancient "allegorists" among the Alexandrian fathers. The historical facts of the passage were deemed unimportant and subordinate to the hidden allegorical meaning. Terry's position and Frame's is just the opposite. The allegorical illustration of the passage is subordinate to the grammatical-historical meaning which serves as the only legitimate foundation of the allegory. Both scholars hold to the position that we do not have to have a NT example of an allegory to justify allegorizing an OT passage,

provided there is typological warrant for doing so. I have often used the story of Mephibosheth (2 Sam. 9) to illustrate the message of the gospel. Mephibosheth, grandson of Saul who was the archenemy of David, is summoned to the king's court. He expects David to execute him as an enemy of the throne and a political threat which was the common practice of eastern kings in the consolidation of their kingdoms. Twice in the story it is mentioned that Mephibosheth is lame in both feet. He is also destitute. In other words, he has nothing to offer David in terms of labor or money. Instead of having him executed, David honors his promise to Mephibosheth's father, Jonathan (1 Sam. 20: 12-17), to be good to his descendents. He feeds Mephibosheth at his own table. I personally believe that this is a picture of what God does with repentant sinners. We are His sworn enemies and opponents to His kingdom, deserving nothing but wrath. We are likewise "lame in both feet" because we are helpless and hopeless in the presence of this all-powerful, holy God who has life and death power over us; we have nothing to offer Him in exchange for our lives. Instead of executing us, He adopts us into his family and takes care of us. Why? The reason is that God honors His promise to Abraham to give him descendents who number as the stars of the heavens (Gen. 15; Gal. 3: 29). This promise is fulfilled to the singular "seed" of Abraham, even Jesus Christ and all those who are joined to Christ by faith (Gal. 3: 16). Abraham believed God and his faith was accounted as righteousness, not for his sake only but for the sake of anyone who has faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 4: 22-24).

In the allegorical interpretation of 2 Sam. 9, I have not used the text to prove a "substantive theological proposition" (Frame's terms). That is, I am not using the text to establish a doctrine of scripture which must depend on this text and cannot be demonstrated more conclusively from other texts. I have only used the text to *illustrate* the doctrine of salvation by grace which is demonstrated in many didactic (teaching) texts of Scripture. I have also not displaced the historical factuality of the passages which is fundamental to the allegory. Without the historical fact of the events, the allegory ceases to have any significance. Nevertheless, we must be careful in the use of allegories so that we do not develop formal theological doctrines from them. They are illustrative of established doctrines from more perspicuous (clear) passages. One can see, however, that allegories are enjoyable, and the limited and wise use of the method does open "the doors of our creativity", as Frame suggests.

#### ***D. Parables***

The word "parable" literally means to "place along side of" for the purpose of comparison. Studies as far back as 35 years ago have shown that the word can also mean " 'a saying by the wayside, a proverb, a maxim'" (Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 276). A parable is a metaphor or simile (see above) taken from common, ordinary events of life. There is enough strangeness or interesting material about the parable to stimulate the attention of the hearer and enough information left out to leave the hearer in some doubt about its specific application to life. It is not a fable, myth, or legend which is taken from popular folklore—that is, it is not some fanciful story which is unbelievable. Although Jesus uses an element of the supernatural in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, most parables, as I indicated above, use ordinary events from everyday life to accomplish their purpose. In our study of parables, we will be following Bernard Ramm (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 276-287) and Milton S. Terry (*Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 276-301), with additional analysis from Knox Chamblin (*Matthew*, unpublished class syllabus, pp. 95-96).

### ***1. The Importance of the Parables***

Of the parables of Jesus found in the gospels, Luke has the most and John the least. They represent a major section of the teaching in the gospels which makes their proper interpretation very important for the student of the Bible. Furthermore, their content is didactic (instructional) and includes teaching about “the progress of the gospel in the world, the results of its propagation [its spread], about the end of the age, the dealings of God with the Jewish people and the Gentiles, and the nature of the kingdom of God. Any doctrine of the kingdom or eschatology [future things] which ignores a careful study of the parables cannot be adequate (Ramm, p. 277). Ramm indicates that parables teach the Christian “not to be depressed at the apparent failure of the gospel or the corruption of the gospel; others tell him not to be ambitious beyond which the gospel promises; and still others tell him not to be discouraged because the success of God is secure” (p. 278).

### ***2. The Purpose of the Parables***

The purpose of parables is given by Christ in Matt. 13: 11-17; Mk. 4: 10-12; and Lk. 8: 8-10. First, Christ uses parables to instruct the *responsive* disciple, the one who listens well with the purpose of learning and obeying, the one who has “ears to hear” (Ramm, pp. 277-278). According to Lk. 8: 10, knowledge of God and His kingdom is a gift which is bestowed upon some by grace and withheld from others because of their persistent unwillingness to hear. Christ did not begin His ministry by teaching in parables. The Sermon on the Mount was not in parables, but straight-forward ethical teaching. He begins to teach in parables because of the unwillingness of the multitudes to hear the straight-forward truth. Chamblin draws attention to the distinction between the audience, the condition of the audience, and Jesus’ response to the audience.

There is, first of all, a distinction between the “crowds” and the “disciples” (cf. Matt. 13: 2, 10).

Secondly, the disciples are in a favored condition in comparison to the crowds because they have responded favorably to what they have heard so far, resulting in a firm commitment to Jesus as their master. Not so with the crowds who have listened to His teaching with much resistance.

Thirdly, Jesus responds to the disciples and to the multitudes differently *on the basis of their response to Him*. “For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him.” The disciples have responded favorably to His teaching, and now they will be given more. For them, the parables will serve to illustrate and deepen the truth they have already believed. They not only hear the parables but also the explanation of the parables (Matt. 13: 18-23; 13: 36-43). On the other hand, parables only obscure or hide the truth from the crowds who have resisted the plain-spoken truth of Christ earlier. What they may have had will now be taken away as a means of judgment (*Matthew*, unpublished class syllabus, p. 97).

The second purpose of parables, then, was to hide the truth from those who were *unresponsive* to what they had *already* heard. The parables, in part, are a judgment for unbelief consisting of the judicial hardening of men’s hearts much the same as God hardened Pharaoh’s heart following his stubbornness in refusing the nation of Israel to go free (See Ex. 7: 3; 8: 15, 19, 32; and 9:12).

The reader will notice from these passages that Pharaoh hardened his own heart before God hardened it. Thus, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart by God came as a judicial judgment upon Pharaoh. However, this does not remove the difficulty of the passage since it had always been God's plan to harden Pharaoh's heart in order that the power of God on behalf of Israel might be known throughout the world (Ex. 7: 3; 9: 15-16 with Rom. 8: 17-18; see also Prov. 29: 1). Once again we are faced with the difficulty of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man.

In Matthew, Christ quotes Isaiah 6: 9-10 which is directed toward unbelieving Israel before their defeat by the Babylonians. Just as Pharaoh had hardened his heart, Israel had hardened their own hearts against the continuing messages and warnings of the prophets (See Isaiah 5: 1-7; Jer. 7: 12-15, 25-34; 13: 8-14; 29: 19, 20; 35: 16, 17). Christ now faces the same opposition and hardness of heart. He quotes Isa. 6 not from the Hebrew but from the Greek translation of the OT called the Septuagint (LXX) (Hendriksen, Matthew, p.556-557). It is worthy of note that the passage in Matthew emphasizes the responsibility of the people in hardening their own hearts while the passage in Isaiah emphasizes the sovereignty of God in hardening their hearts. In this there is no contradiction. It is precisely because the people have hardened their own hearts to the truth that God will continue to harden them. God is simply giving them what they wanted from Him—nothing. By understanding this, we can understand Jesus' statement in 13: 12, "For whoever has, to him shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him." In other words, those who have already received Christ' teaching, repented, believed, and begun to obey, will receive more and more understanding. But those who continue to hear Him and refuse to accept His teaching, even the understanding they have will be taken away from them. Their light will be turned into darkness. The judicial hardening which we find in Matthew is the fulfillment of the prediction of the hardening in Isaiah which became a "terrible reality" during Jesus' ministry (See Hendriksen, *Matthew*, pp.554-556, including footnotes.)

For many months, Jesus had been preaching about the kingdom of God and the righteousness of His kingdom, but for the most part, the people had continued in persistent unbelief. So the question is, if they refused to receive His plain teaching, what use was it to give them any more? Christ was simply practicing what He had preached in the Sermon on the Mount, not to throw what was holy to dogs and swine [unbelievers who are entrenched in unbelief] lest they simply trample it under their feet (Matt. 7:6). Consequently, He begins to teach the multitudes only in parables, partly as a judgment against them and partly as a special measure of His common grace to all sinners so as not to increase the guilt of their unbelief and their punishment in hell (Lk. 12: 47-48). The true disciples of Jesus, on the other hand, would from time to time receive the additional instruction which came through Christ's interpretation of the parables.

### ***3. The Elements of a Parable***

A parable consists of four parts (Ramm, pp. 278-279).

**a. The *earthly element*.** Parables are about "farming, marriages, kings, feasts, household relationships, business arrangements, or customs of the peoples." Every parable paints some kind of familiar visual picture in the minds of the audience, which makes them particularly effective for instructional purposes.

**b. The *spiritual element*.** Every parable intends to teach a spiritual lesson or theological truth.

**c. The *analogical element*.** There is always a relationship between the earthly element and the spiritual element. This analogical relationship gives the parable the ability to illustrate and to argue a certain theological position.

**d. The *interpretive element*.** Every parable has two levels of meaning which requires its interpretation. The different earthly elements of the parable (the people, actions, etc.) must be identified if the parable is to make sense. Much care must be taken in this identification to avoid “allegorizing” the parable. When a parable is allegorized, it is made to mean far more than it was ever intended to mean. However, it must be admitted that all parables have an allegorical element or they would not be parables. And it must also be admitted that sometimes many parts of the parable represent significant elements of the story. For example, in Jesus’ parable of the sower (Matt. 13: 3-9), there are several key elements in the story. The seed is the “word of the kingdom”; the “evil one” represents the birds who snatch away the word; the rocky soil represents those who receive the word at first but quickly fall away in unbelief when affliction or persecution comes; the soil with thorns represents those hear the word but become unfruitful because their lives become entangled in worldly living and the deceitfulness of riches; the good soil represents true believers who receive the word and persevere in it, producing various degrees of Christian fruit (Matt. 13: 18-23).

The question arises: How far may the interpreter go in discerning the meaning of each separate element in the parable? For example, in the parable of the ten virgins (Matt. 25: 1-13), who are the ten virgins and where is the bride? Should we see some significance in the fact that they all went to sleep or that there were ten? No answers to these questions are forthcoming from the text, and the meaning of the parable may be sacrificed if we try to force answers to these questions. At the same time, there may well be some significance in the oil which may represent the Holy Spirit and the fact that the oil may not be transferred from one person to the next—the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit in the individual heart. Considerations of this sort—which are reasonably drawn from other clear texts—actually enhance the meaning of the parable rather than obscuring it.

In the parable of the tares and the wheat (Matt. 13: 24-30; explained in 13: 36-43), Jesus gives no special significance to the men who were sleeping, the yielding of fruit, the landowner’s slaves or their questions. These elements are only incidental (minor) to the overall story. We may observe closely how Jesus interprets this parable and the parable of the sower to determine how we should go about the interpretation of all the parables (Terry, p. 284). Nevertheless, as Terry suggests, there are other lessons which Jesus does not mention which are worthy of note. Those seed which have no sufficient root in the first parable (13: 21) and those which are in danger of being rooted up with the tares in the second parable (13: 29), may offer important insights to the interpreter. Chamblin notes that the parable of the wheat and the tares “makes a prohibition against rigorism in church discipline... (J. Knox Chamblin, quoting Gundry, *Matthew*, unpublished syllabus, p. 100). Even though many in the church may show little proof of regenerating grace, unless they are guilty of serious, unrepented offense, they should not be disciplined out of the church (Matt. 18: 15-20).

Determining which elements have significance, and which do not, will not always be easy, and even an experienced interpreter like Terry admits the difficulty (p. 286).

No specific rules can be formed that will apply to every case, and show what parts of a parable are designed to be significant, and what parts are mere drapery and form [that is, those which merely fill out the story]. Sound sense and delicate discrimination are to be cultivated and matured by a protracted [long] study of all the parables, and by careful collation [gathering together] and comparison. Our Lord's examples of interpretation show that most of the details of his parables have a meaning; and yet there are incidental words and allusions which are not to be pressed into significance. We should, therefore, study to avoid, on the one side, the extreme of ingenuity [cleverness] which searches for hidden meanings in every word, and, on the other, the disposition to pass over many details as mere rhetorical figures. In general it may be said that most of the details in a parable have a meaning, and those which have no special significance in the interpretation, serve, nevertheless, to enhance the force and beauty of the rest.... We may also add, with Trench, that "it is tolerable evidence that we have found the right interpretation of a parable if it leave none of the main circumstances unexplained.

Knox Chamblin cautions the interpreter not to force Jesus into a rigid parabolic method to the exclusion of allegories when it is evident that he used allegories extensively in his parables.

While it is helpful to distinguish "parable" from "allegory," we must be careful not to separate them as though a speaker or writer (especially one so free, creative and subtle as Jesus) is prohibited from interlacing them in his teaching. What we find, in fact, is that Jesus uses allegorical features as expressions of his pedagogical [teaching] artistry and within the framework and under the control of his chosen parabolic medium (*Matthew*, p. 96, an unpublished class syllabus).

[The following is a further analysis of the "interlacing" of parable and allegory found in Jesus' parables taken from Chamblin, *Matthew*, pp. 95-96. Additional comments are provided for illustration.]

A parable is an extended simile in which the word "like" is used. "The kingdom of heaven is *like* a mustard seed" or "The kingdom of heaven may be *compared to* a man who sowed good seed in his field." The noun, *parabole*, is composed of the preposition *para* ("beside, alongside") and *bole* ("to cast or throw"). Thus, in order to illustrate spiritual truth, Jesus cast along side of it tangible pictures to provide concrete explanations. These pictures provide "hooks" on which the spiritual meaning can be "hung" or understood. The allegory, on the other hand, is an extended metaphor which does not use the words "like" or "compared to". The word *allegoreo* contains the prefix *allo* ("other") and the base *agoreuo* ("to speak") implying that when one speaks in an allegory he actually implies something "other" than what is said on the surface. Thus, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life", a metaphor which implies that Jesus sustains one's spiritual life, not that he is a loaf of bread. In Gal. 4, Paul treats the story of Sarah and Hagar allegorically, using Sarah as the representative of the New Covenant and Hagar as representative of the Old Covenant. The meaning of Sarah and Hagar is, therefore, hidden beneath the surface of the language.

In the allegory, each detail has meaning and importance for the interpretation. For example, in the allegory of old age in Ecc. 12, "the watchman of the house" which "tremble" are the old man's arms which were once strong defenders of the house but which are no longer any use in defending himself. The "mighty men stoop" is a reference to his legs which are bent from age and the "grinding ones" which "stand idle" are his teeth which are no longer effective in chewing his food. Each word of this allegory has a separate meaning which must be determined for the complete interpretation of the allegory—the need to worship and serve God in one's youth rather

than waiting until old age. On the other hand, in a parable the details serve to fill out the story and make it as realistic as possible. The “merchant seeking fine pearls” (Matt. 13: 45) is an ordinary activity during Jesus’ day. Further, all the details contribute to the *central thrust* of the parable, the one central meaning of the parable, without the necessity of having separate meanings of their own. For example, in the parable of the leaven (Matt. 13: 33), the leaven is the kingdom of heaven which spreads imperceptibly (invisibly) but thoroughly throughout the world, but there is no separate significance to the three pecks of meal or the woman. We should not allegorize the parable by saying that the three pecks of meal stand for the three persons of the Trinity or that the woman represents the church. Allegorizing parables gets us into all kinds of fanciful interpretations.

Nevertheless, we must recognize the allegorical elements in Jesus’ parables. In the parable of the sower, several elements in the parable are identified. The seed is the gospel or the words of the kingdom; the different soils represent people who have different responses to the gospel, the thorns represent the deceitfulness of riches, etc. Thus, in all parables there is an allegorical element which must be interpreted to gain the interpretation of the whole parable. Without these allegorical elements, the parable makes little sense. In the parable of the merchant (Matt. 13: 45-46), the pearl is the kingdom of heaven and the merchant is the person who hears the gospel of the kingdom and imputes to the kingdom its proper worth. He is willing to give up everything else in order to possess the kingdom. Unless the merchant and the pearl have allegorical meanings, the parable is incomprehensible. Yet, the allegorical elements do not stand alone by themselves as they can in an allegory, but without exception contribute to the central meaning of the parable. This is clear from the parable of the sower and the parable of the wheat and the tares in which there are many allegorical elements which exist in a dependent relationship to the main story and the central thrust.

#### ***4. Rules for Interpreting Parables***

Ramm gives us four general principles for the interpretation of parables (pp. 279-286).

##### ***a. Parables must be understood in relationship to the doctrine of Christ and the kingdom of God.***

Parables are intensely Christological in that they are always about Christ who, in turn, is talking about His kingdom. We should never limit the teaching of the parable to a simple moral truth. They teach moral truth, but not truth which exists independently of Christ and the kingdom He has inaugurated (brought into being). When reading the parables we should be asking ourselves the following questions: “How does this parable relate to Christ? Are any of the persons in the parable Christ? Does the parable concern the word or teaching or mission of Christ?” (Ramm, p. 280).

To illustrate this principle, consider the parable found in Luke 14: 15-24. To understand the parable, we need to identify the man who is giving the dinner, the slave, and the people who received the invitation to the dinner. It helps us to know the historical and cultural context of this parable. According to the prevailing Jewish idea, when the Messiah came there would be a huge feast prepared to celebrate His coming. The man in v. 15 is an invited guest in the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. We learn this from the immediate context of this passage

(Lk. 14: 1—Remember, the context can never be ignored even when we are studying special literary devices like parables.) This invited guest, who undoubtedly was a Pharisee himself (since he would not have been invited otherwise), thinks that when this feast is prepared he and all “‘respectable Jews’” will no doubt be the people invited to attend. In response to his statement Jesus tells this parable which answers the question: Who will attend the Messianic feast when the Messiah comes? (See Geldenhuys, *Luke*, p.392)

Another little bit of historical-cultural context is also helpful. According to custom, when a big feast was to be given, the invitations were sent out in advance. When the time of the feast drew near, the host would send out a servant to remind those who had accepted the first invitation that the feast was about to begin. The host of the dinner in this parable is God who had invited His people the Jewish nation to come to the Messianic feast—the kingdom of God—when He arrived. Repeatedly in the OT God had sent out His messengers the prophets to prepare Israel to participate in His kingdom, but always they had refused His invitation. The feast, then, is to be identified as the kingdom of God and the promises of this kingdom which the prophets had foretold. The first invitation had gone out and now the feast was ready. Christ represents the servant who is sent out by the host to remind those who had been given the first invitation that the kingdom promised in the OT is now “at hand” and that they must make haste in entering this kingdom.

One by one they make excuses for not coming to the feast. None of the excuses are adequate and are merely pretenses for their lack of interest in coming. The Jewish people are truly not interested in the message which Jesus Christ is giving them. The host of the dinner (God) gets justifiably angry with them for their disinterest and sends his servant (Jesus Christ in the flesh) to go out and invite those who would not consider themselves worthy to come to such a lavish feast because of their low standing in life. This is why the host tells his servant to “compel” them to come in; otherwise, they would have felt uncomfortable coming to such a rich man’s house. The “poor and crippled and blind and lame” are, of course, the Gentiles whom the Pharisees considered to be unworthy “dogs” and social undesirables who could not possibly be eligible for the kingdom of God. Instead, Jesus teaches in this parable that the Gentiles will make it into the kingdom of God instead of the Pharisees because they accepted His invitation of pardon for their sins while the Pharisees rejected it (Geldenhuys, pp.393-394).

We can see, then, that this parable is all about Christ and His kingdom. Through Christ, who is acting as the subordinate servant, God is calling out once again to His people the Jews, but just like in OT times, the Jews are not interested in God’s offer of grace. Nevertheless, the feast will not be wasted. The Gentiles will readily accept the invitation and will come to the feast in great multitudes so that God’s house will “be filled”(v.23).

The kingdom perspective in the parable emphasizes two things about the kingdom of God. First, the kingdom *has already come*; it is “at hand” and can be entered by faith. Secondly, the kingdom *is continuing until the end of the age until the return of Christ*. Third, the kingdom *will come*. Even though the kingdom is already here, it has not come in its full power and completeness which is reserved for a future time (See Matt. 25 and the parables of the talents and the virgins). Each of the parables includes one or all three of these perspectives. (A sermon on Luke 14: 1-24 is provided at the end of the section on parables as an example of how this text *could* be preached, not necessarily how the text *should* be preached!)

***b. Secondly, parables must be understood in their cultural setting or context.***

The parables are drawn from the real-life experiences of common people living in the land of Palestine. In general, most of the examples and illustrations are drawn from the lives of poor, agricultural peasants; and we will get much help in the interpretation of the parables if we spend time learning the cultural setting employed by the parable. For example, the “measure” in Matt. 13: 33 is about one-fourth of a bushel or eight quarts. Three such measures were 24 quarts or six gallons. Ramm informs us that one tiny speck of leaven was sufficient to make bread to feed 162 people (p. 282). This gives us a better idea of the “penetrating power” of the kingdom of God even in light of its small, insignificant beginnings.

This parable was told in conjunction with the parable of the mustard seed in 13: 31-32. The mustard seed illustrates the *outward* growth of the kingdom of God while the leaven illustrates the *inward* growth of the kingdom (Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p. 565; also Geldenhuys, *Luke*, pp. 377-378). The mustard seed is one of the smallest agricultural seeds which grows quickly into a tree which reaches ten to fifteen feet. Hendriksen observes that the two parables must be understood as a pair and not separated from one another. “...one might say that it is *because of the invisible principle of eternal life*, by the Holy Spirit planted in the hearts of the citizens of the kingdom and increasingly exerting its influence there, that this kingdom also expands visibly and outwardly, conquering territory upon territory” (Hendriksen, p. 565, emphasis mine).

The Jews wanted a Messianic kingdom which would exert its military might as it did in the days of David and Solomon. Even the 12 disciples were confused on this point and demonstrated their confusion on a number of occasions when they argued among themselves who would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18: 1; Lk. 9: 46). Christ could indeed have ridden into Jerusalem on a white horse instead of a donkey, and he could have mobilized a military force. If He had taken this strategy, the kingdom of God would have remained small. He was not interested in exerting His reign merely over the small land of Palestine; He was interested in nothing less than taking over the whole world! The history of Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome, as well as the history of Germany and the Soviet Union has proven that the whole world cannot be conquered by military might. All kingdoms that have risen to power through military conquest and terror have eventually failed and have been overthrown. But the kingdom of heaven begins first in the heart and “conquers” the person by changing his will and his desires. He is not forced into the kingdom against his will, but is wooed into that kingdom by a change of heart.

The kingdom of heaven changes the whole life, and by changing the whole life, the kingdom of God influences everything the person does. It influences his marriage, his family, his work, his relationships with people, and even the way he votes in national elections if he lives in a free society. The “leaven” of the gospel penetrates every aspect of his life. As the kingdom changes one person’s life, it will have an impact on others who are close to this person, especially his or her children and immediate family. Statistics will verify that most of the people who become Christians do so before they are 18 years of age through the influence of one or both parents. Beyond that age, the root of sinful self-centeredness has grown so deep that it is difficult, humanly speaking, to reach them for Christ. In 1 Cor. 7: 14, Paul says that an unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her

believing husband, meaning that the leavening influence of the kingdom penetrates throughout a home in which even one member of the marriage is converted to Christ.

We also have an influence upon people we work with, people we work for, and people who work for us. This is the whole point of Paul's appeal in Eph. 6: 1-9 and Col. 3: 18-25. It does not matter in the least whether we have a high status in life or a low status in life; the important thing is that we exert a Christian influence wherever we are so that the kingdom of God continues to spread like leaven. As this inward influence of the kingdom penetrates deeper and deeper into the whole "dough" of society, the outward manifestation of this kingdom will become more and more visible to everyone else. Some will be drawn to this kingdom by the outward behavior of the kingdom citizens (true believers). Others will hate the kingdom all the more as it reaches every corner of society and threatens the existence of darkness. Whether loved or hated, the kingdom will grow like a mustard seed because, like leaven in a lump of bread dough, nothing can stop the leaven of the kingdom from completing its leavening influence. Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." It is highly unlikely that Jesus would tell us to pray for something which had no possibility of happening, especially since all power is given to Him in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28: 18). Praying for the kingdom is a means of it coming, not a mere academic exercise.

These two parables are important for pastors who often get discouraged in their work. We long to see instant success and growth, but if we review the history of the Christian church, there are only a few periods of rapid growth. Most of the outward growth of the kingdom of God is slow and virtually invisible. Yet, the kingdom is growing and will continue to grow until its consummation at the end of the age. Nothing will be able to stop it. Pastors are also prone to minimize the importance of the small tasks of the kingdom—feeding the hungry, visiting the downtrodden, encouraging the spiritually weak, and correcting those who are caught in sin. These are also the virtually invisible tasks of the kingdom which will accumulate into the large mustard tree which is plainly visible. Most kingdom work is not very flashy and sensational, and much of it is downright distasteful, but when every Christian (including those who are not pastors or lay readers) is involved in the work of the kingdom, the affects will literally change the world—in fact, they already have. But if we fail to do the little things of the kingdom that we don't want to do or things which are inconvenient to do, the church will be irrelevant to the problems which plague our world.

***c. Third, parables must be interpreted according to certain exegetical rules.***

Ramm gives us four specific, exegetical rules for interpreting parables (pp. 283-285).

***(1) Determine the one central truth which the parable intends to teach.***

This is the "golden rule" of the interpretation of parables. The typical parable gives us one single point of comparison, not two, three, or four. Notice we are saying one "central" point. Other lessons may be learned (see below) but generally the parable is spoken with one central purpose in mind, usually determined by the context [See (3) below.]

All the details of the parable are important to a parable's effectiveness, but not all the details have "independent significance". Interpreters throughout the years have used a humorous

analogy to help us remember this principle: “Don’t make a parable walk on all fours.” That is, don’t consider all the details of equal importance in the same way that all four legs of an animal have equal importance. Think of the less important details of a parable as the accessories of a bicycle. The bicycle cannot operate without the tires and the handle bars, but it can operate effectively without the reflectors and the horn.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan in Lk. 10: 30-37, the main point is found at the end in Christ’s own application. The occasion of the parable was the question, “And who is my neighbor?” (v.29) Jesus answers the question with this parable, and at the end He asks His own question, “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” The answer to this question, and the application, was beyond dispute: “Go and do the same.” In other words, “Go and become a true neighbor to *anyone who needs your help*, not just someone of your own race or religious stripe.” This is the main point, but the main point is enhanced by the details given. For example, the man beaten beside the road was bypassed by two Jews—a Jewish priest and a Levite (of the tribe of Levi—those who served in the temple but were not priests). The man who came to his rescue was a despised Samaritan. While the two Jews were afraid of getting involved for fear of their lives or for fear of inconveniencing themselves, the Samaritan expended heroic efforts to save the man’s life with no consideration of the victim’s ethnic or religious background. The important thing was that the man needed help, not whether he was a Jew, Gentile, or a half-breed Samaritan like himself. We can see from this parable that the individual details, while important to the whole parable, cannot stand alone as having an importance all by themselves; they merely contribute to the whole. Interpreted in this way, the Jewish priest and the Levite may very well be singled out as representing the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders and experts in the Mosaic Law, among whom this lawyer was numbered. Knowledge of the law is nothing without obedient application.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son (or the Elder Brother) in Lk. 15, it is clear that Jesus is telling the parable to rebuke the Pharisees and scribes for their hardness of heart and lack of compassion for sinners who repent (See your notes on this parable in Hermeneutics, pp. 19-20). The Pharisees and scribes are represented by the elder brother. If we press the individual details of this parable too much, we would have to conclude that the kingdom of heaven still belongs to them even in their unbelief, for in v. 31 the father says to his eldest son, “. . . all that is mine is yours.” Obviously, this is a conclusion not warranted from the parable. It does not teach that hard-hearted Pharisees like the elder brother will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Although the central purpose of this parable was to rebuke the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, other important truths must not be ignored. It also teaches the true nature of repentance (the prodigal son) and the unrestrained love of the Heavenly Father who is eager to forgive us when we repent. It also teaches us that the angels in heaven rejoice over one sinner who repents, and so should we. The same can be said of the parable in Lk. 18: 9-14 which teaches both the condemnation of self-righteousness and the forgiveness which follows from genuine repentance—both of which really constitute one central idea. At the risk of rigidity, I would recommend following Ramm’s recommendation to look for the once central truth of the parable (See also Terry, p. 282).

**(2) *Second, determine whether Jesus Himself provides an interpretation of the parable.***

Sometimes He does so for the sake of His immediate disciples. The parable of the sower is interpreted by the Lord in Matt.13: 18-23. The parable of the tares (weeds) among the wheat is explained in 13: 36-43. We should take note of the fact that in His explanation, Christ makes a one to one correspondence of the symbol and the thing symbolized. The one who sows the seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world. The good seed refers to the sons of the kingdom and the tares or weeds to the sons of the devil. The one who sowed the weeds is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. All of these details are essential to the parable. However, Christ assigns the parable one primary meaning: at the end of the age, Christ will send His angels to weed out unbelievers from the field to reveal the glory of His people (v.40-43).

Some expositors have interpreted the field in this parable as the church, an interpretation which would lead us to believe that our conception of the church should include the inevitability of an unbelieving membership within it. While it is certainly true that there are unbelievers who are members of the church, this parable does not sanction the notion that unbelievers are part of the church by *definition*. Ekklesia (the Greek term for “church”) means called out ones—that is, those who are *called out of the world*. Nor does the parable eliminate the responsibility of believers to “weed out” those members who are living in open disobedience to covenantal obligations (See 1 Cor. 5; Matt. 18: 15-20). Jesus does not say that the field is the *church*; He says that the field is the *world*. At the same time, Chamblin’s comments lend credibility to the idea that Jesus has the church in view (*Matthew*, unpublished syllabus, p. 99).

The *word* “church” (*ekklesia*) does not appear in the passage; but the *concept* of the church is present, as the community in which the Rule of God is realized during the time between the advents of Christ. Moreover, the church is here represented as a *mixed* company, consisting of true believers (“the sons of the kingdom”) and false (“the sons of the evil one”). It is not enough to think of “the sons of the evil one” as standing in the world, outside (or alongside) the church; for the picture speaks of the sowing of tares *among* the wheat, and the explanation speaks of the angel’s *weeding out of his kingdom* “all who do evil.” (emphasis his).

John Calvin also includes the church within the scope of Jesus’ words, and with his characteristic wit, offers this application (*Harmony of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Vol. 2, pp. 121-122):

All that he [Christ] intended was to exhort those who believed in him not to lose courage, because they are under the necessity of retaining wicked men among them; and, next, to restrain and moderate the zeal of those who fancy that they are not at liberty to join in the society with any but pure angels.

[For other examples of interpreted parables, see the parable of the dragnet (Matt.13: 47-48; explained in 13: 50-51), and the parable of the vineyard owner (Mk. 12: 1-9; explained in 12: 10-12).]

**(3) *Third, study the context of the parable to determine whether the context provides clues for interpreting the parable.***

We can never get away from the importance of the context. Just as we must read the context to determine whether Christ interprets the parable for us, we must also read the context for the occasion or reason why Christ tells the parable in the first place. As we have seen, the parable of the Prodigal Son is told because some of the scribes and Pharisees were murmuring about Jesus’ association with and acceptance of sinners (Lk. 15: 2). The story of the Good Samaritan is presented to the expert in Mosaic Law who was wishing to excuse his own apathy (Lk. 10: 25-

29). The parables of the fig tree (Matt. 24: 32-34), the thief (Matt. 24: 43-44), the slaves (Matt. 24: 45-51), the ten virgins (Matt. 25: 1-13), and the talents (25: 14-30) are interwoven within the fabric of Jesus' teaching on His second coming in judgment (See Matt. 23: 37-24: 31; Matt. 24: 34-42; Matt. 25: 31-46; this last reference is also given in parabolic form). Their purpose is the same—to encourage readiness and alertness. The parable of the wedding feast (Lk. 14: 8-11) is given in response to the Pharisees seeking to exalt themselves by picking out the places of honor at the host's house (14: 7). Likewise, Jesus told the parable of the big dinner in response to the self-satisfied Pharisee seated with Him who probably believed that no respectable Jew would be left out of the celebrations when the Messiah came (Lk. 14: 15-24). Jesus warned him that the Messiah had already come, but Jews like him would be left out of the celebrations because they failed to recognize Him as their Messiah. The rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16: 19-31) is told in the presence of the Pharisees who were "lovers of money" (16: 14). These same Pharisees were also demanding that Jesus produce a sign so they could believe in Him (Lk. 16: 31 compared with Lk. 11: 16, 29; Jn. 2: 18; 6: 3).

***Sermon on Luke 14: 1-24***  
***(Preached at All-Saints Church and Nyamitiabora Church, Mbarara, Uganda)***

***Introduction***

Does it matter to you *where* you eat lunch? Does it matter to you *with whom* you eat lunch? I'm sure there are many people in the city of Mbarara that we would not want to be seen with, especially eating with. It never mattered to Jesus. He would eat lunch anywhere and with anyone. In this chapter we find Him accepting an invitation to eat at the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees. And He did this even though He knew that the Pharisees had opposed him from the very beginning of His ministry, and even here they were attempting to trick him into healing a man on the Sabbath Day to find fault with Him.

In Luke 15: 1 and 2, we find Jesus eating with the tax-collectors and sinners who were despised by these same Pharisees. And we know who the tax-collectors were; they were the corrupted government workers who collected tax revenues for the Roman government and who often charged the people more than was really due to pad their own pocket books. Does this sound familiar? You see, there is nothing new under the sun, is there? It was just as common in those days for government workers to skim off the top as it is today.

And we also know who the sinners were. Luke uses the word often for people who lived an openly immoral lifestyle. Remember in Luke 7 a woman who was known to be a prostitute wiped Jesus' feet with her hair which was dripping wet with expensive perfume and tears of repentance. The prodigal son of Luke 15 was a sinner who wasted his father's inheritance on prostitutes and loose living, but who repented. The tax-collectors were also "sinners", and Jesus told a parable of a tax-collector's prayer and the prayer of a Pharisee. When praying the Pharisee lifted up his head and congratulated himself before God that he was not like the sinful tax-collector, while the tax-collector begged, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." Luke also tells us of the story of Zaccheus, the tax-collector, another sinner, who repents of his sinful corruption and extortion and receives Christ as his savior.

We have to read the whole Gospel of Luke to get a good picture of what is going on here in Luke 14. Jesus was a man who ate with and got close to sinners who *knew* they were sinners, and *these were the very people who were coming to faith in Christ*. But He was also a man who ate with and got close to the religious leaders, those who thought of themselves as "good and respectable" people of the Jewish society. These are the people *who hated Him and did not believe in Him*. But Jesus accepted all invitations, no matter who they were from, so that He could get close to people and challenge them to enter the kingdom of heaven.

***Verses 1-6***

He was not naïve. He knew that the Pharisees had purposely arranged for the sick man to be in the house when He got there, and He knew that they had purposely invited Him to eat with them on the Sabbath to see if He would heal the man. Jesus took full advantage of the situation. He not only healed the man, but also exposed the hypocrisy of Christ's Community Study Center—Mbarara, Uganda—mcneildf@gmail.com—July, 2012

the Pharisees. Any of the Pharisees would pull their own ox or donkey out of a well on the Sabbath day. (Some later manuscripts use the word “son” instead of “donkey”.) The meaning of the text is not altered by the different readings. The point Jesus is making is that the Pharisees would not hesitate to protect their own selfish interests on the Sabbath day, whether to protect their own child or even their own animals. They claimed to be strict followers of the Law of Moses, and Jesus clearly refers to that law which makes many allowances even for the protection of animals (See Ex. 21: 33-34; 23: 4; Dt. 22: 1, 4; 25: 4). Well, if God is interested in protecting animals, He is certainly interested in protecting people.

We can make all kinds of rigid rules and regulations about what we can do and what we cannot do on Sunday, which many believe is the new replacement of the Jewish Sabbath. What is often missed is that Jesus is here, and He is greater than the Sabbath Day. He is Lord of the Sabbath, and *He* said, “Man is not made for [the benefit of] the Sabbath, but the Sabbath for [the benefit of] man” (Mk. 2: 27). Here was a sick man who needed help. The most appropriate thing Jesus could do was to relieve this man of his misery on the Sabbath day.

The Sabbath was not made to be a day of gloom and doom, a day of rigid rule-keeping, but a day of celebration. The Book of Hebrews (3: 12-19 through 4: 1-11) tells us that it is a day which reminds us that we are to rest from all our labors to save ourselves. We should not attempt to save ourselves physically by working ourselves to death and getting no rest. And we should not attempt to save ourselves spiritually by keeping all the rules or even the Law of God because man cannot save himself by keeping the Law of God. He is a sinner in his thoughts and in his deeds and always fails to measure up to God’s perfection. We must rest and trust in the only one who can save us both physically and spiritually, Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Sabbath and the fulfillment of the Sabbath.

And this is just what the Pharisees had failed to understand about the Sabbath. They saw it as a means of earning their own salvation rather than as a means of resting in God’s salvation by faith in His promises. Now in their very presence is Jesus who is the fulfillment of all the promises of God made to the Jewish people throughout the OT, including the promise of a Sabbath rest. And rather than looking to Him in faith and repentance, they are depending on their good works, including Sabbath-keeping, to be accepted by God.

Could it be that many of you this morning are depending on your church attendance to get you to heaven? You may be coming here every week because you think somehow that you are earning credit with God by being here. But your Sunday attendance cannot save you any more than keeping the Sabbath could save the Pharisees. Your faith must not be in what you do to save yourselves, but in what Christ has done already to save you—by dying on the cross and paying the penalty of your sins. To you Jesus says, “Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and My load is light” (Matt. 11: 28-30).

### *Verses 7-11*

After hearing Jesus’ argument, the Pharisees responded in the usual way they responded to all His arguments—they are speechless and make no response at all. But Jesus is not through with the Pharisees yet and sees another opportunity to correct their thinking. He was a keen observer of human behavior, and He noticed that the *invited guests* were picking out the best places to sit at the table, places of honor. Now this scene should be readily understandable to the average Ugandan. You have all been to parties and celebrations, and there is generally a certain recognized order in the seating arrangements. The seats in front at the tables are for the honored guests while the other seats going all the way back to the back can be taken by anyone. And sometimes those who sit in the back are later asked by the host to come to the front and sit. So it was here.

And Jesus noticed that the invited guests were arranging themselves not necessarily according to what the *host* thought of them, but according to what they thought of *themselves*. And he gives them this illustration to correct their thinking.

Now we need to be careful in our interpretation. Jesus was not concerned here with a little bit of social manners or protocol (See Geldenhuys, *Luke*, p. 389). Considering the broad scope of eternity and the multitudes of men’s souls hanging between heaven and hell, He could not have cared less where people sit at a wedding party. Furthermore, He was not encouraging anyone to be falsely humble. Some people may have the habit of purposely sitting toward the back so that the host can make more of a show of bringing them to the front while everyone else is looking. This

is not humility but pride, and Jesus would not have been blind to such false pride. Humility is like a slippery fish; the second you think you have it, you have lost it.

The key to understanding what Jesus meant is found in v. 11, “For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.” In other words, the honor given to us in the final judgment when God evaluates all of our work will not depend on what we think of ourselves, but what God thinks of us.

The host of the wedding party in this illustration is God, and every member of the human race is invited to the party. The people in this world who like to push themselves to the front by being the big men and big women of this world will be told by God to return to the back seat, but those who honestly see themselves as little people on the grand scale of things, and those who see themselves as unimportant players in God’s purpose, will be asked by God to come up to the front. It does not matter what you think of yourself or what others think of you. What really matters is what God thinks of you. All of this pushing and shoving to the front for the purpose of being noticed by people will do you no good in the end. When Jesus comes back to judge the world of men, He will simply tell you to give your seat to someone else.

I also want us be clear about another thing in this illustration. The best seats in the house—the places of honor—are heaven, but the worst seats are *not* a lesser place in heaven. The worst seats in the house are in hell, a place where those who exalted themselves before men in this life are humbled forever. This becomes clear to us when we examine the parallel phrase in Lk. 18: 14. In that passage, the proud, self-righteous Pharisee bragged about his achievements and did not go down to his house justified or forgiven. People who are characteristically proud do not get into heaven. The question is not whether we are ever proud; we all are from time to time. *But do we walk continually in pride?* That is the question we must ask ourselves. It may be a question we should ask others about ourselves, for other people can often see pride in us which we cannot see in ourselves.

Heaven, on the other hand, is entered only by humble people like the tax-collector who cried, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner.” Some Christians are surely more humble than other Christians when they enter heaven, but all true Christians are humble in one degree or another *before* they enter heaven. Their proud hearts have been humbled by the grace of God, and they realize that they have nothing to be proud of except the cross of Jesus Christ.

### ***Verses 12-14***

In verse 12, Jesus turns to the host who had invited Him to dinner. He is now ready to teach yet another lesson about the kingdom of God. He tells the host that when he invites people to dinner, he should not invite those who can pay him back: his friends and relatives or his rich neighbors. Rather, he should invite those who cannot repay him: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind—people who because of their inability to make a good living would most likely belong to the lowest and most undesirable level of that society.

At this point in the conversation, Jesus begins to dig more deeply and painfully into the rotting flesh of human pride. He sets aside the surgical scalpel and takes out the butcher’s knife to expose the cancer of human pride which eats away at all of us. When you go to your next party, look around carefully. Who will you see? For the most part, you will see people just like yourself: clean, shaven, and neatly dressed. Some will be expensively dressed. All the ladies will have their best “hairdos”, and the men will be sporting their best ties. And if a person has an automobile, they will be sure to show up at the party driving it, freshly washed. These are the kinds of people we want at our parties—the only kind of people we actually invite to our parties—people who measure up to some unofficial standard of respectability; people we can count on in the future who will serve as social assets or insurance for us; people who will invite us to their parties, loan us money, help us in time of need. The kind of people we want as our guests are those who will boost our status in society.

But next time look more closely. Where are the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind? Where are the people who cannot repay us for the invitation? They aren’t there, are they? They were never invited. I’ve been to a fair number of parties in Uganda and the United States. I never see any poor people or anyone much lower than the status of the person hosting the party. I never see people who are dirty or in shabby clothers. After all, what can such people give us back in return? How useful can they be to our future success? Not much.

Now I understand, and I want you to understand, that Jesus has more in mind here than making out a guest list. He is talking primarily about the kingdom of God, and that will become clear soon enough. I also don’t think Jesus is

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telling us *never* to invite our friends, relatives, or any rich neighbors to our dinners. After all, His very presence at the dinner indicates that He did not shun the invitations of the rich and powerful. He loved them, too, and so should we.

But take special note of the fact that this parable has a present, earthly application which cannot be ignored, and we should not lose Jesus' words as a mere illustration of what will happen at the end of time. Make no mistake; if you only spend time with "your kind" of people or people who are *useful* to you in one way or another, people who elevate your social status or self-esteem, then you're a hypocrite. Now certainly you will spend the majority of your time with friends and people with whom you have more in common. This is understandable and acceptable. But do you *ever* reach out to the poor and lowly? Do you *ever* invite them to dinner—not just to feed them outside on your door-step but at your table with your children? Do you *ever* do something for them knowing they will never be able to repay you? Jesus did, and He tells us in no uncertain terms to do the same.

Take special note, also, of the *way* Jesus is telling us to reach out to the poor. It is so easy just to hand them a few shillings on the street and walk away feeling good about our compassion for the poor. Many of us have done this a number of times, and often we are no better than the self-righteous Pharisees. But this is not what Jesus is telling us to do. Quite literally, He is telling us to invite them into our homes to give them a meal.

Now what does this accomplish? It forms a relationship with this person. It earns the right to speak to this person about the gospel of Christ. These people may have never heard about Jesus Christ, and this is our opportunity to tell them. Furthermore, by showing real interest in this person, you may be able to discover the spiritual problems which cause his poverty. Now, the reason he is poor may be perfectly innocent. He may be unable to work. Notice Jesus' words: "crippled, lame, or blind." In such cases, he has a legitimate reason why he is not working. On the other hand, he may be poor because he is lazy, and sinful in which case he needs much more than food, but the gospel.

By forming relationships with people, even members of your own family, rather than throwing them a few shillings, we can truly help them. By inviting them to dinner, we can invite them into the kingdom of God. And if we do this, Jesus promises us a reward by saying, "...for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (v. 14b). You see, if we do not require repayment in this life, we will instead be repaid in the resurrection. God never forgets what you do for His sake.

### ***Verses 15-24***

Now when Jesus mentioned the resurrection of the righteous, one invited guest at the dinner exclaimed, "Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" The prevailing Jewish belief at the time was that there would be a long continuous feast when the Messianic kingdom was established on earth after the resurrection. And guess who would be coming to that feast? The Jews, of course, and particularly the good Jews, the Pharisees who were sitting at the table with Jesus. Certainly no law-abiding Pharisee would be left out of this feast.

Then Jesus tells the parable of the big dinner. The meaning of the parable is very simple. God is the one giving the big dinner. For thousands of years He had been inviting His people, the Jews, to come to Him in repentance and faith, and for thousands of years they had rejected His gracious invitation. Finally, God sends the invitation *one more time* through His Son who is represented by the slave in this parable. The Jews are the people in the parable giving one excuse after another for not coming to the dinner—I've bought a piece of land; I've bought some oxen; I've gotten married. Time after time Christ is entreating the Jewish people to repent of their sins and to believe in Him, even producing miracles among them to entice them to believe, but just like the Pharisees eating dinner with Him, they are persistent and stubborn in their unbelief. Finally, the one giving the dinner has enough of excuses and sends his slave into the streets of the city to offer the invitation to anyone who will come, including "the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame."

Unlike those who had been first invited to the feast and who had scorned the invitation, these poor, crippled, blind, and lame people do not feel worthy of such an invitation, and many of them must be compelled to come to the feast—that is, they must be convinced that the feast is for anyone who is willing to come and not just for those who deserve it or have something to offer.

You can see where Jesus is going with this. The Pharisees scorned the message of Jesus and took advantage of every occasion to find fault with Him, just as they were attempting to do on this occasion. On the other hand, the Christ's Community Study Center—Mbarara, Uganda—mcneildf@gmail.com—July, 2012

tax-collectors and real sinners were repenting by the dozens and coming to Jesus in repentance and faith—like the prostitute who washed His feet, and like Zaccheus who gave back what he had taken by extortion. After Pentecost, the gospel would be offered to the Gentile people who would come to Jesus by the millions and who now make up most of the NT church throughout the world.

Meanwhile, what will happen to the Jews who rejected the invitation to come to Jesus for salvation? Jesus tells us in v. 24, “For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.” For the most part, salvation has been taken away from the Jewish people and given to the Gentiles who were considered by the Jews to be undesirable people. The Jews were so *proud* of their heritage as the chosen people of God that they would never have believed that God would now favor the Gentiles instead of them.

Now, we need to see the connection between this parable and Jesus’ previous instructions earlier in the chapter. There He tells us to invite into our homes the “poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,” people who cannot repay us, people who do not deserve our kindness. In the parable of vv. 16-24, God does the same thing. He invites into the kingdom of God people “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” who *do not deserve* to be there, people who have *nothing* to offer God. The ones *left out* of the kingdom are those who believed they deserved to be there, those who believe they have earned the right to be there—the so-called good people, the Pharisees.

The parable is a continuation of what Jesus was teaching earlier when He said, “For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.” The Jews were convinced they would be the ones enjoying the feast when the kingdom of God came on earth. What they failed to realize is that the kingdom of God had already come and was right under their noses in the person of Jesus Christ. They also failed to realize that only those who were humble enough to recognize their *need for a savior* would ever taste of God’s salvation. These are the people who have to be compelled to come in because they are like the penitent tax-collector in Lk. 18 who says, “God be merciful to me, the sinner”—not one sinner among many sinners, but *the* sinner.

Now the question I have for you is this: Which of the people in the parable represent you? Are you the self-satisfied Pharisee who believes that you deserve to get into the kingdom of God? And what excuses are you now making for not accepting the gracious invitation of eternal life through Jesus Christ? Perhaps you think you are too young to be a Christian. Youth is for fun; middle-age is for work; and old age is for religion. There is no hurry, you may think, and I don’t want to spoil my fun by becoming a Christian. Or maybe you think you are too rich to become a Christian. Christ may make too many demands upon your money or how you spend it. Whatever your excuses, if you keep making excuses you will never taste of the feast of salvation and others will take your place.

Or, do you see yourself as the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind—a person who is helpless and undeserving; a person who must be compelled to come to Christ because you do not believe that anyone as sinful as you are could ever be invited into the kingdom of God? If you do not see yourself among the undeserving sinners of this world, you will never taste of God’s salvation. But if you do, there is good news for you. Jesus bids you come to His banquet and taste of the goodness of the Lord. He is no respecter of persons. If you are poor He says, “Come and eat with the rich.” If you are rich, He says, “Come and eat with the poor.” To all of us he says, “You don’t have anything to offer me, but I have something to offer you.”

### ***E. Types and Symbols***

This is one of the most interesting studies in hermeneutics because it involves the study of Biblical Theology, the study of progressive revelation in the history of salvation. Since the Bible is the history of Christ and His relationship to His redeemed people, we should not be too surprised to see pictures (types) of Christ throughout the OT literature. Ramm’s observation on this point is helpful.

The heart of typology is the similarity between the two Testaments. If the two covenants are made too dissimilar [as in dispensational theology] then the justification of typology is either weakened or broken....

It is also apparent that there is a fundamental harmony between the Old Testament theology and the New....It is shown by Paul that the act of faith is the same in both Testaments (Romans 4); that the process Christ’s Community Study Center—Mbarara, Uganda—mcneildf@gmail.com—July, 2012

of justification is the same (Romans 4: 22-24); that the same basic system of sacrifice underlies both Testaments (Hebrews 9, 10); that the life of faith in the Old Testament is the model for the New Testament saints (Hebrews 11); that the doctrine of sin is the same...(Romans 3); that the Messiah of the Old Testament is the Savior in the New (Hebrews 1). It is this profound similarity of the two Testaments which makes predictive prophecy and typology a possibility (Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 229, my note in brackets).

A type is basically a resemblance of some person, thing, place or event to some other person, thing, place, or event which occurs at a future time. Berkhof says this is one of the features which distinguish a type from a mere symbol. A symbol is a sign which represents something *past, present, or future*, but a type always represents something in the *future* (Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 144). But this distinction is sometimes difficult to determine. For example, when Moses lifted his staff above his head in the battle against the enemies of Israel, the Israelites prevailed. When he lowered his staff, their enemies prevailed (Ex. 17: 8-13). This event is obviously symbolic of the fact that the Lord was fighting their battles, and that His blessing was necessary for their future well-being. But it appears also typical of the fact that God's people are delivered in the same way today, by God's power and not by human strength. However, I think we would be mistaken to find in this event a type of some moral mandate in the NT—for example, the lifting up of hands in prayer (1 Tim. 2:8).

Goliath, the giant Philistine who taunted the armies of Israel, could very well symbolize the strength of the enemies of God's people, and in that general sense he is also a type. When Moses struck the rock in the wilderness and water spilled out (Num. 20: 11), this was a type of Christ, who is the rock and the water of life (1 Cor. 10: 4). Other examples of types in the OT are the following:

1. The serpent in the wilderness (Num. 21: 1-9 and Jn. 3: 14)
2. King David (2 Chronicles 6: 16; 7: 18 and Acts 2: 25-36)
3. Solomon, the son of David chosen to reign over Israel (a type of Christ, the chosen son of God to reign over the world)
4. Moses, a type of Christ who delivered Israel from slavery (Dt. 18 and Acts 3: 22)
5. Moses, a type of all true believers who would rather suffer the afflictions of God's people than enjoy the pleasures of the world (Heb. 11: 24-25)
6. Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem (Gen. 14 and Heb. 7)
7. Samson (Judges 16: 30b; Samson is a type of Christ in one specific sense. As with all the other judges of Israel, he delivered Israel from their enemies. We must not stress the type too strongly to include the sinfulness of Samson and the sinfulness of the other judges. This principle must be followed in the interpretation of all the types.
8. Abraham, who is a type of all believers who are justified by faith (Rom. 4: 3 and Gen. 15: 6)
9. The Aaronic priesthood and the OT sacrificial system (Hebrews)
10. The wars of devotion against the Canaanites (a type of God's warfare against sinners— Eph. 6: 10-18)
11. The flood (a type of the total destruction of unbelievers—2 Pet 3: 1-9)
12. The nation of Israel (a type of the Church—Gal. 3: 29; 6: 16; Rom. 9: 6-8)
13. Moses' intercession for Israel (a type of the intercession of Christ—Ex. 32 and Heb. 7: 25)
14. The peace of Solomon's reign (a type of the victory of Christ over His enemies—1 Kings 4: 24; Ps. 2)
14. The Law (a type of disciplinarian which leads us to Christ—Gal. 3: 24)

**15.** The physical creation (a type of the new creation in Christ—2 Cor. 5: 17)

**16.** Joseph who is rejected by his brothers and ill-treated (a type of Christ who is rejected by his kinsmen and put to death)

These are only a few of the types we can find in the OT. A *type* is a picture in the OT of a future reality in the NT which is called the *antitype*. For example, Moses is the *type* of Christ who is the *antitype*. In all of the examples given above, notice that there is a NT reference which can be given which identifies the antitype of the type. A type always has a NT reference. Whether this NT reference must be stated in the NT is a matter of debate. From my handling of Mephibosheth, it is obvious that I do not believe that something has to be specifically mentioned in the NT as a type before it can serve this purpose. Mephibosheth is not mentioned in the NT as a type. We'll be talking about this more later.

### ***1. Essentials of a Type***

Terry gives us three essentials for a type (*Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 337-338).

#### ***a. There must be some notable point of resemblance or analogy between the two.***

Terry goes on to say that there may also be dissimilarities (points of difference). For example, Adam is a type of Christ in that he is the federal head of the human race, and now Christ is the federal head of God's elect people (Rom. 5). This is the "notable point of resemblance." But this is the only point of similarity. Adam was a sinner and Christ is sinless. Also, in Adam, all die while in Christ all who believe in Him will live (1 Cor. 15: 45-49). Therefore, the dissimilarity can be as important as the similarity. We will also find in the antitype something higher and nobler than in the type. David was a good king, but he is nothing in comparison to Christ; nevertheless, David is a type of Christ. Solomon was the wisest man in all the earth, and was, thus, a type of Christ. But Solomon became unwise and built heathen altars in honor of his many foreign wives.

#### ***b. There must be evidence that the type was designed and appointed by God to represent the thing typified.***

This principle is tricky, and I agree with it only with qualifications. As in our discussion of allegories, we must be cautious not to let our imagination run away with us and allow us to come up with fanciful comparisons. Otherwise, Biblical typology is lost and we see everything as a type. How do we avoid this error? We must ask the question: Does the Scripture itself indicate a typological relationship? I do not believe this requires a formal statement in the NT that something is a type, but it does require evidence from the NT which is "clearly apprehended" (Terry, p. 340). In other words, can the type be seen clearly without straining the typological relationship? Some types are clearly identified. The manna which the Lord gave the Israelites in the wilderness is a type of Jesus Christ who is the "bread of life" (Jn. 6: 26-58). But such an identification need not be so explicitly stated in the form of "this is a type" (See Heb. 11: 19). The relationship can be more subtle (less explicit) and still be valid. For example in Col. 2: 11-13, Paul implies that circumcision in the OT is a type of regeneration in the new covenant, though this relationship is not expressly stated as a type/antitype relationship.

Some expositors, such as Marsh, have insisted that nothing can be considered a type unless the NT specifically designates it as a type. The strictness of this principle is unacceptable and has been debated on the basis of the fact that the NT and the OT are interconnected (See Ramm's quote above, p. 54 in notes). On Marsh's terms, we would have to wait for the fulfillment of a prophecy in the NT before we could declare it to be a prophecy in the OT. Further, if the tabernacle of the OT is a type (something attested by Hebrews), then the different parts of the Tabernacle were also types. The golden lampstand of Ex. 26 and the seven lampstands of Rev. 2 are obviously connected. The one typifies the nation of Israel being the light of the world, something which is now a reality in local or regional churches (seven lampstands) so long as churches are true to their Lord, otherwise their lamps will be removed. However, Ramm warns us against an unrestrained imagination which interprets all actions of the priests and all elements of the sacrifices, etc. as types. Not all of these "have precise New Testament counterparts". He also warns us against using types to prove a point of doctrine. They are better used to "illustrate New Testament truth" (Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 220-221, 230-231).

***c. The type must prefigure something in the future.***

In Col. 2: 17 Paul indicates that the food laws of the OT, the festivals, new moons, and Sabbath days are a "shadow" of what was to come in the new covenant while the "substance" of these things is found in or "belongs to" Christ. Therefore, a type is a shadow of a future reality.

***2. Classes of Types***

Terry gives us five principal classes of types in the OT (pp. 338-340). We will cover four of them here.

***a. Typical Persons***

Adam, Abraham, Moses, Goliath, David, and Solomon have already been mentioned. To these two may be added Elijah who ascended into heaven on a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2: 1-11) thus typifying the ascension of Christ. Elijah was also a type of John the Baptist (Mk. 9: 13). One other typical function of Abraham is His depiction in Gen. 22 as a type of God the Father sacrificing His only begotten son. Joshua is a type of Christ in leading the Israelites into the land of Canaan, the land of promise, even as Jesus (the NT name for Joshua) leads His people into the new heavens and new earth. Solomon is a type of Christ because he was "wiser than all men" (1Kings 4: 29-34; at least, he was wiser until his foreign wives turned his heart away from God).

***b. Typical Institutions***

This category includes all the sacrifices of the OT economy. Peter specifically attributes the redemption of God's people to the blood of Christ who is the "lamb unblemished and spotless" (1 Pet. 1: 18-19). Even the case laws of the OT have typological significance. The cities of refuge provide the person guilty of involuntary (accidental) manslaughter a place of protection from the revenge of family members (Num. 35: 9-34). In this function it is a type of the gospel which provides protection from the consequences of sin which is death. The Sabbath "is a type of the believer's everlasting rest (Heb. 4: 9)" (Terry, p. 339.) The OT Passover is a type of the

Lord's Supper in which the Lord invites us to fellowship with Him in peace. He is not at war with His people as He was with the Egyptians and is now with all unbelievers. The theocracy of Israel is a type of the kingdom of God in the NT, a kingdom inaugurated by Christ, progressively realized in history, and consummated in the return of Christ and the judgment of the world.

### *c. Typical Offices*

All the prophets of the OT were typical of Christ in that they proclaimed the word of the Lord—"Thus says the Lord." Jesus Christ was the fulfillment of the entire line of prophets since He was the Word of God in human flesh (See Dt. 18: 15). The priests were typical of Christ as those who officiated at the altar, particularly the high priest who alone was allowed into the Holy of Holies once a year with the blood of the atonement for the sins of the *whole nation*. When Jesus went into the Holy of Holies at His death, He entered with his own blood to make atonement for the whole *elect people of God* (Heb. 9). The kingly office of David is a type of Christ and the kingdom of Christ is its fulfillment. In fact, all the kings of the OT in the Davidic line were typical of Christ, those who were wicked included. If a king was righteous, his righteousness pointed to the righteousness of Christ. If he was wicked, his failure as king highlighted the success of the kingdom of Christ in displaying the honor and glory of God. God methodologically allowed many kings to fail so that the King which He was later to install on Mt. Zion would display His glory (Ps. 2). No king of Judah was perfectly righteous. David, a "man after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13: 14) committed adultery and murder; and Solomon, the wisest man on earth, reverted to idolatry in his old age (1Kings 11: 1-8). The regal (kingly) failures point to the necessity of a king over Israel (the people of God) who is not merely a man beset with sin, but the God-man who is sinless. Christ unites all the offices of the OT into one person, the God-man Jesus Christ who is prophet, priest, and king.

### *d. Typical Events*

The flood is a type of the eternal destruction of the wicked; the covenant made with Abraham in Gen. 15 is a type of the new covenant in Christ; the sojourn in the wilderness a type of the Christian's sojourn on earth; entrance into the land of promise is a type of the entrance into heaven; the conquest of Canaan is a type of the total victory of God over the world of sinners and the devil; Abraham's call out of Ur of Chaldea is typical of the Christian's call out of the world into the kingdom of God (Ekklesia means "called out ones"); Abraham's inheritance of Canaan is typical of the Christian's inheritance of the new heavens and the new earth. When Moses was hidden from the wrath of Pharaoh, this event was a type of Herod's attempt to kill the infant Jesus. Mephibosheth, I believe, is a type of all sinners, hopeless and helpless, standing before the awesome majesty of God. Again, this is only a small sampling of typical events which could be cited.

### *F. Prophecy*

Prophecy is perhaps the most difficult genre (form) of Biblical literature to interpret, and one about which there is the most disagreement among evangelical scholars. Ramm highlights this difficulty in the following quotation:

The prophetic material of Scripture is to be found from Genesis to Revelation. To assemble each passage, to thoroughly digest its meaning, to arrange the passages in a prophetic harmony, would involve a

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prodigious [amazing] memory, years of exacting work, a masterful knowledge of Biblical languages, an exhaustive reading of prophetic literature, a keen exegetical sense, a thorough knowledge of the histories of many peoples and a knowledge of all relevant archaeological materials. And yet some claim that prophetic Scripture is as easy to interpret as the prose passages [ordinary form of written or spoken languages] of the New Testament! (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 245).

Berkhof has defined prophecy as “the proclamation of that which God revealed”. The prophets were ordained of God to explain the meaning of past events, clarify events which were taking place in the present, and predict what was going to happen in the future. Normally people think of the prophets as simply predictors of the future. Actually, most of the prophetic literature has little to do with predicting the future and mostly to do with admonition, rebuke, and warning to those who persisted in sin, as well as comfort and encouragement for those who were willing to forsake their sin and repent. In this more limited sense of the word—declaring the word and will of God rather than predicting the future—the prophetic gift continues.

### ***1. The institution of prophecy***

Allan Harman (*Approaching the Psalms: Judges to Poets*, unpublished syllabus, pp. 68-69) mentions many heathen practices of the Canaanites in use when the Israelites entered into the Land of Promise:

- Passing through the fire, a practice connected with the worship of Molech (2 Kings 23: 10; Jer. 32: 35)
- Divination (Ezek. 21: 21; Gen. 44: 5: 15)
- Magic or sorcery (Dt. 18: 10, 14; 2 Kings 21: 6)
- Spiritists, mediums, or necromancers who spoke from within a person (Lev. 20: 27) and who got messages from the dead for the living (1 Sam. 28: 1-20)

In contrast to these illegitimate means of discerning the will of God, the Lord had promised Israel a prophet in whom He would put His words (Dt. 18: 9-22). Moses, who had received the will of the Lord through the Law given at Sinai, was the first of such prophets. The prophet coming after him would be like him. He would be an Israelite, not a foreigner (Judges 22: 24). God would put his words in his mouth, and the Israelites were commanded to listen to everything he says. This was the means of God communicating with His people and supplying additional information to them which Moses did not supply. All other forms of discerning the will of God were forbidden.

We know from Acts 3: 22-23 and Acts 7: 37 that Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise of a prophet for Israel, but it is clear from the history of Israel that the promise of Dt. 18 applies to the entire institution of prophecy scattered throughout OT history. Every true prophet of Israel, including Moses, is a type of Jesus Christ, and every true prophet had something to contribute to the ongoing instruction from the Lord. In this sense, the prophetic institution was similar to the ongoing priestly institution. Just as the priestly institution pointed to the priesthood of Christ, all the prophets from Moses onward pointed to the prophetic ministry of Christ.

### ***2. The function of the prophet***

***a. As the priest represented man before God, the prophet represented God before man.*** He was God’s spokesman (Amos 7: 14-16).

***b. Secondly, the prophets guarded the theocracy (the kingdom of God)—that is, they applied the Law of Moses to the contemporary situation of Israel.*** This can be seen in the way Amos preached against the oppression of the poor during the reign of Jeroboam II. There were many provisions for the poor in the Law of Moses, all of which were being neglected during the time of Jeroboam II. (See your Hermeneutics notes, pp. 39-40). Harman makes a very interesting observation concerning the relationship between the prophetic office and the kingly office (pp. 69-70, emphasis mine).

Though the institution [of prophet] was promulgated [made known officially or publicly] in Deuteronomy 18, yet the prophets only came to the fore at the time when the theocratic kingdom received an earthly ruler. The idea of the kingdom was a dominant theme thereafter, and the task of the prophets was to keep it as a true representation of the kingdom of the Lord. The office of prophet was needed to keep Israel in a true covenant relationship. ***The presence of a king promoted the greatest possible source of breach [break] of covenant relationship, as a centralized bureaucratic office would seek solutions to problems in purely political terms.***

A corollary [a truth which follows from the one above] of this is that a clash between the kings and prophets was inevitable [certain to come]. This was because the prophet was a spokesman for the Lord, and constantly the prophets had to intervene in the life of the nation and advise the king on political matters. ***They were not content to accept the separation of religion from politics.***

Many examples of this adversarial (antagonistic) relationship between kings and prophets occur in OT history, the most notable being the strained relationship between Samuel and King Saul (1 Sam. 13). Later the theocracy is threatened by David's adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, and God summons Nathan the prophet to remind David that he is not a law unto himself but stands under the Law of God and subject to its demands (2 Samuel 13; in v. 13 the prophet seems to imply that failure to repent would have meant death). Another well-known example is the relationship between Ahab and Elijah, who challenges the prophets of Baal to a "duel" (1 Kings 18) and rebukes Ahab and Jezebel for murder and theft and pronounces their future judgment (1 Kings 21 compared with 1 Kings 22: 24-28 and 2 Kings 9: 29-36). Throughout the OT witness, the so-called "divine right of kings" to do whatever they wish is flatly denied. God alone was the absolute king under whose rule all earthly kings must submit (See also Dan. 4 and 5).

These examples prove that the word of God is never subordinate to the rule of men—even powerful men. The opposite is true; men are subordinate to the rule of God's law. This principle has been a very important one throughout the history of mankind and continues to be today. The preaching of the word of God is not limited to private citizens, but must be applied to kings, presidents, senators, representatives, and members of parliament. No man is a law unto himself but must one day stand in judgment for the kind of public leader he has been, whether good or bad. He will be held more accountable than the average citizen for the privileges of rule he has been given. This heightened accountability is implied in the OT prophecies in which kings are addressed as "shepherds" who have led the people of Israel astray (Jer. 23 compared with Jer. 22).

Samuel Rutherford, a Scottish theologian of the seventh century, challenged the common opinion of his day that kings were absolute rulers who could operate outside the boundaries of the law of God (*Lex Rex*). His views were radical at the time (his book was ordered by the king to be

burned) but they laid the groundwork for the future democracy of the United States. In the US, the misinterpretation of the first amendment to imply the separation of the state from religion has led to the radical secularization of society. The first amendment simply meant that the State (i.e. the federal state) had no right to establish a certain form of religion throughout the country. At the time it was written, several individual states or colonies already had established denominational forms of Christianity already in place. The New England states were primarily congregational while the southern seaboard states were primarily Catholic or Anglican. The framers of the Constitution of the United States did not wish to grant powers to the federal government to establish one form of religion throughout the nation to the exclusion of others. This is why the US has always had freedom of religious expression throughout its history. For the last several decades, however, the first amendment has been wrongly interpreted by historical and legal revisionists (those who distort history) to mean the separation of the State from religion. When deciding legal and political issues, references to the Bible are censured as violations of the separation of church and state. The right to prayer and Bible reading in public schools is also hindered.

It should be obvious that there can be no absolute separation of religion from the state. Everyone is religious in one sense or another. If a person is an atheist, he is still religious; his god is man rather than the God of the Bible, and his views on politics, family, economics, and every other area of life will be influenced by his atheism. The claim that the state and religion can be separated is like saying that people can be separated from ideas and values—an impossibility since all people necessarily have ideas and values which influence their lives and which they use to influence others. The question is not *whether* religious values will be imposed in the realm of government and politics; the real question is *whose* values will be imposed. Secularism, the belief that religion should not influence public life, is itself a form of religion. This was the battle that the prophets of the OT fought when they opposed the kings of Israel and Judah; it was the battle that Samuel Rutherford fought when he wrote *Lex Rex (The Law and the King)*; and it is the battle which Christians must continue to fight in our day. Either the law of God will give direction to the practical laws of society, or man's law will be imposed without the checks and balances of the law of God, leading eventually to totalitarianism and anarchy (lawlessness). History has already given us classic demonstrations of what happens to societies in which the rule of man reigns supreme—the French Revolution of 1789 in which thousands of political dissenters were beheaded; the former Soviet Union in which millions of people were executed or systematically starved to death by despotic rulers; and the thousands of other despotic regimes current today which have no standard of rule other than the rule of men.

The continual desire of fallen man is to be his own god, and it is within the halls of human government that this desire reaches its peak and appears within his grasp. Many theologians believe the beast of the Book of Revelation to be the opposition of human government to the divine rights of Jesus Christ and the gospel. Throughout the history of the church, there has been no greater enemy of the church than powerful men in government who wish to say with the kings of Ps. 2, “Let us tear their [the Lord's and His Anointed's] fetters apart, and cast away their cords from us!”

**c. Thirdly, the prophets wrote the history of the theocracy.** The books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings were designated as “the former prophets” by Jewish readers. The prophetic authorship of these books helps explain the divine perspective presented throughout

their contents—for example, “And he [Jeroboam II] did evil in the sight of the Lord...” (2 Kings 14: 24).

### **3. Periods of prophetic activity**

**a. From the prophet Samuel (1050 B.C. [?]) to the time of the writing prophets of the eighth century (750 B.C.).** During this time the prophetic message was only oral and not committed to writing. This would include the ministry of Samuel as well as Elijah, Elisha, Nathan, and anyone who belonged to the school of the prophets (1 Sam. 10: 5, 10-11; 1 Kings 18: 13). Their messages are simply embedded in the historical books of the OT.

**b. From the eighth century (about 750 B.C.) to the end of OT history (about 425 B.C.).** This was the major history of prophetic ministry which included oral and written prophecy.

- Prophets to Israel—Hosea, Amos
- Prophets to Judah—Isaiah, Joel, Micah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel
- Prophets to reunited Israel after the exile—Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi
- Prophets to the Gentile nations—Jonah, Nahum, Obadiah

### **4. Characteristics of Prophecy**

Berkhof gives us several characteristics of prophecy in *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 148-151. (His headings and comments have been paraphrased, and as usual, I have provided additional detail and illustration.)

#### **a. Prophecy has an organic character that is progressively realized in history.**

For example, we have the prophecy of the coming of the Messiah as far back as Gen. 3: 15, but this promise receives a more definite character progressively in the history of redemption. For example, Isaiah 53 is a much more definite and explicit promise of the Messiah, as is Micah 5: 1-4. Consider the illustration of the seed and the tree. The seed doesn't look much like a tree, but all the genetic materials of the tree are present in the seed. Genesis 3: 15 doesn't look much like the promise of Christ, but in the mind of God, the whole promise is there in “seed” form, waiting to germinate and grow.

#### **b. Prophecy must be understood in its historical setting.**

As we have said before, context is one of the most important principles of Biblical interpretation. It continues to be important in the study of prophecy. To understand their prophetic message to us, it must first be acknowledged that their message was first of all to the audience living in their own day. The prophets were the watchman (guards) upon the walls of the city ready to warn the inhabitants when their enemies were coming (Ezek. 33: 1-11). However, the enemy the prophets were watching was the enemy already within the gates, namely, the enemy of sin and apostasy which threatened to destroy the people spiritually from within.

For the reader to understand Jeremiah and Ezekiel, he must consider the captivity of the Israelites in foreign lands, and Obadiah must be understood within the context of Israel's relationship with Christ's Community Study Center—Mbarara, Uganda—mcneilldf@gmail.com—July, 2012

Edom. Habakkuk prophesies the judgment of Israel by the Babylonians, a people more wicked than they, and it parallels the inclusion of the Gentiles in the kingdom of God. The Jews could not have comprehended either of these possibilities (Ramm, p. 248).

How are we to understand Haggai's rebuke in Haggai 1: 1-11? Did he get a good night's sleep the night before? Was he feeling ill that morning, or did he have a fight with his wife the night before? What did the people of Israel do to deserve such a sharp rebuke on the first day (?) of Haggai's prophetic ministry? The answer lies in the historical context of the book of Haggai. The year was 520 B.C. (520 years before Christ was born). King Cyrus, who defeated the Babylonians in 539 B.C., had issued a decree in 538 B.C. His decree stated that the Jews could leave Babylon, the country of their exile, and return to the land of Judea to rebuild the temple (2 Chronicles 36: 22-23; Ezra 1). All of this had been prophesied by Jeremiah before the fall of Judah in 587 B.C. (Jer. 25: 12; 29: 10) and by Isaiah whose ministry ended about 100 years before the fall of Jerusalem and 150 years before the decree of Cyrus (Isa. 44: 28; 45: 1).

Some of the Jews had taken advantage of this opportunity and returned to the land to rebuild the temple. They had successfully laid the temple's foundation when building progress stopped due to harassment and opposition from the people already living in the land (Ezra 4: 1-7; for a broader context, read Ezra 4-6). Sixteen years passed from the time the rebuilding started until Haggai began to prophesy along with the prophet Zechariah who began his ministry two months later (Compare Hag. 1:1 with Zech. 1:1). It is not known how long it took them to rebuild the foundation, so we don't know how long the Jews were negligent in their duty to rebuild the whole temple. During that sixteen year period, nothing was being done on the temple, but apparently the returned Jews were not doing so badly with their own building programs (Hag. 1: 4). They were able to build for themselves "paneled houses", words which indicate homes embellished (decorated) with a large degree of elegance and luxury. These fine homes stood out in "disgraceful contrast with the unroofed, unwallled foundations of that house that ought to have been the noblest in the city" (T. V. Moore, *Haggai*, p.59).

An addition to this self-serving hypocrisy was the fact that the decree of Artaxerxes did not forbid the rebuilding of the *temple*, but only the rebuilding of the *city* (Ezra 4: 21). Nevertheless, the returned exiles used this opposition as an excuse to halt the building and concentrate on their own private kingdoms—their personal comfort and affluence (Hag. 1: 2). The Lord, on the other hand, was not impressed with their excuses and sent Haggai and Zechariah to command the people to commence work on the temple immediately. Their preaching was obviously effective, because the temple was finished in the short period of three and a half years. Haggai began to preach in the *second* year of Darius on the first day of the *sixth* month (Hag. 1:1). The temple was completed in the *sixth* year of Darius on the third day of the month Adar, which is the *twelfth* month (Ezra 6: 15 with Esther 3: 13).

The temple in the OT was the symbol of the kingdom of God and His rule and reign over the hearts of His people. If the returning exiles were not concerned about the completion of the temple, it was clear that they also were not concerned about His kingdom and their worship of the King. Today God is not so much concerned about the construction of church buildings as He is the fact that all people throughout the world should be worshipping Him and obeying Him but aren't doing so. Instead, the vast majority of the world's people are going their own way worshipping and serving everything but God. The only way to correct this problem is to "go

therefore and make disciples [learners] of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I [Jesus Christ] commanded you....(Matt. 28: 19). In other words, Christians are to be strenuously engaged in missions and discipleship (another word for training). The two things go hand in hand. We have not obeyed Jesus' command until we have made disciples, not just nominal converts who really don't understand the Christian faith and, therefore, produce none of its fruit.

Now the question is, how does the prophecy of Haggai apply to the situation in the US and Uganda? In the US, many Christians are more interested in maintaining expensive life-styles than they are in giving to missions and discipleship. They stretch their finances thin through the purchase of more expensive cars, bigger homes, finer furniture, club memberships, and hobbies. When the appeal for missions is made, they have little money left to send a missionary overseas to make disciples who worship and serve the living God. Besides, they must also save up for their future retirement so they can live out the last fifteen to twenty years of their lives traveling around the world, playing golf, or watching TV. A recent article in *World* magazine reported that Protestant churches in the US give only two cents of every donated dollar to the church to missions ("Who gives two cents for missions?", Gene Edward Veith, *World Magazine*, Oct. 22, 2005, p. 28).

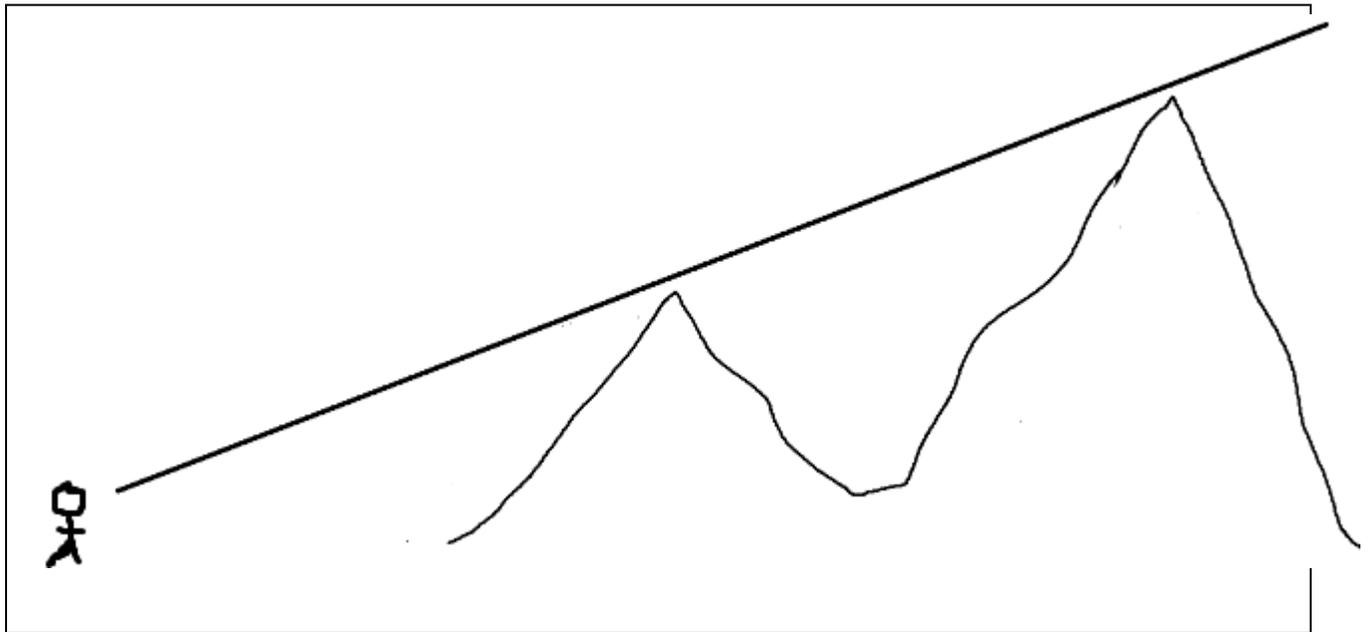
The attitude in Uganda is not much different. There is little money left over at the end of the month to finish church buildings necessary for the corporate worship of God, to pay lay readers and pastors their stated salaries, or to educate young people for future leadership in the church. But to be sure, there is plenty of money to throw one more party for a baptism, an ordination ceremony, a wedding or wedding anniversary, a graduation, or for any number of events which appear to be a lot more important to Ugandans than the kingdom of God and His righteous rule in the hearts men, women, and children—even if the money has to be borrowed from friends and relatives with little intention of repayment. (And some Ugandan Christians also have plenty of extra money to build that bigger house and purchase that finer automobile. It seems that most wealthy church members in Uganda are much like most of the wealthy church members in the US—they do not give sacrificially.) So, it seems to me, the situation here is exactly the same as in the US, although the cultural dress is a little different. We need the prophetic voice of Haggai speaking to us, "Is it time to throw parties and live beyond our financial means when the kingdom of God is being neglected?"

***c. It is difficult to determine the time-frame between the prophecy and its fulfillment.***

Often, momentous historical events which will later occur over a large segment of time are seen by the prophet at a glance as if they occur in a short length of time. This is called the "prophetic perspective" or "prophetic foreshortening". If we were to visit the Rwenzori Mountains in west Uganda, we would see the peak of Mt. Stanley at a huge distance. Several other mountain peaks which are shorter than Mt. Stanley would be seen in front of it which would appear only a short distance away from it. In reality, the several peaks would be separated by many miles with valleys in between which cannot be seen. When the prophet reported his visions or dreams, he could see the final event (the tallest mountain) along with several other events leading up to it (shorter mountains). All the events seemed to him to take place in short succession to one another, while in reality, they were separated by many years.

To illustrate this prophetic foreshortening, consider Isaiah’s prophecy in Isa. 9. In that chapter, he prophesies both the birth of Christ, His first advent (first coming), and the final consummation of the Messianic kingdom in which Christ reigns with power and glory (second coming). One would think by reading the passage that this child is born into a noble family, lives the life of a prince, and immediately begins to reign. No doubt this caused confusion among some of the Jews of Jesus’ day who were looking for a military king to deliver them from Roman oppression.

As it has turned out, the birth of Christ and the consummation of the kingdom in His second coming have been separated in time for 2000 years now and still counting. In between His birth and the final consummation (His return) are His humiliation, suffering, death, and resurrection, none of which are mentioned in the context of the passage. Consider Jesus’ birth (v. 6a) to be the first mountain peak and the consummation attended by great power and might to be the last (tallest) mountain peak (vv.6b-7). In between these two peaks is the great valley of the death and resurrection of Christ which is not mentioned at all. On this occasion, Isaiah saw the two peaks as if they were not separated by the enormous valley which spans 2000 years (and possibly much more). He prophesied of the valley of humiliation and death later, as in Isa. 53.



Note: I realize that in a spiritual sense as Christianity the kingdom of Christ will be His feet.

Christ's birth (Isaiah 9: 6a)

Christ's humiliation, suffering, and death (Isaiah 53)

Christ's second coming (Isaiah 9: 6b-7; Isa. 11:6-10)

Prophet's line of vision

Christ's glorious return when He puts all His and our enemies under His feet.

Sometimes the fulfillment of the prophecy depends on whether or not certain conditions are met by the people to whom the prophecy is directed. For example, in the prophecy of Jonah, the

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2000 years and counting

prophet declared that in 40 days the city of Nineveh would be overthrown because of its wickedness (3: 4). Then something unexpected happened. The inhabitants of the city actually repented (vv. 5-9), and God decided not to destroy the city. Could it be that the king and the people had already heard of Jonah's miraculous deliverance from the belly of the fish (1:17- 2: 10)? Was their repentance genuine? Jesus said that it was and used the story of Jonah to condemn the unrepentant Jews of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matt. 12: 41; see 11: 20-12: 45 for the broader context). One would think Jonah would be delighted. After all, he was a missionary to the city of Nineveh, and what good missionary would be disappointed when his preaching gets positive results?

Some commentators have attempted to attribute his disappointment to pride. His prophecy that Nineveh would be destroyed in 40 days did not come true, and he was discredited as a prophet of the Lord. But this conclusion is not likely based on Jonah's remarks in 4: 2 in which he complained to the Lord that he was afraid all along that the city would repent because God was a compassionate God and slow to anger (Ex. 34: 6). Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord in the first place (1: 3) because he knew that the city was likely to repent. There must be some other reason. The reason, I believe, resides in Jonah's hatred for the Ninevites who were known for their aggression and cruelty. It was the principal city of the Assyrians whose cruelty in warfare and policy of expatriation (exile of conquered nations from their homelands) was notorious (unfavorably well-known). His hatred was so acute, he even held on to unfounded hopes that God would destroy the city anyway (4: 3). The object lesson at the end of the book exposes Jonah's hypocrisy and self-centeredness. He was more concerned for temporary shade than for the eternal welfare of thousands of Ninevites, including small children who did not "know the difference between their right hand and their left hand..." (v.11).

Out of His tender mercy for Jonah, God had grown a large plant to shade him from the heat of the sun, an act of grace since Jonah hardly deserved it. But Jonah figured that God owed him this kindness because he, after all, was a Jew, a descendent of Abraham, and a prophet of the Lord. These Ninevites were merely Gentile heathens who deserved to be wiped off the face of the earth. Why should God spare such a dreadful people? His anger toward the Lord is mentioned three times in the text for emphasis and is an interesting contrast to the compassion of God, who alone had a right to be angry with the Ninevites. Besides, if Jonah's wish for vengeance had been fulfilled, God may very well have put him back into the belly of the fish—and, this time, left him there!

This short prophecy has many applications. For one thing, the Book of Jonah proves that heathen nations are subject to the law of God and will endure its curse if disobedient. The God of the Bible is not territorial but rules over the whole earth. Further, Jonah's lack of mercy and hatred toward the Ninevites is a type of the Jewish hatred of the Gentiles throughout their history as a nation. The Gentiles were "dogs", a designation which even Jesus uses for affect (Matt. 15: 26). But all along the way, God had shown mercy to the Gentiles who were willing to repent. Uriah, a more righteous man than David, was a Gentile Hittite. Rahab the prostitute was a Gentile and an ancestress of Christ saved from Jericho's destruction by her faith (Heb. 11: 30-31). Ruth, the wife of Boaz and also the ancestress of Christ, was a Moabite Gentile. God had told Abraham from the very beginning that he would be a blessing to the nations (plural), not just one nation (Gen. 12: 3).

The nation of Israel was supposed to be a light to the nations as “missionaries”, a fact which is well-attested in the prophecy of Isaiah (Isa. 2: 2; 9: 2; 42: 6; 49: 6, 9; 51: 4; 60: 1-3). Simeon clearly recognized in the baby Jesus the hope of salvation for the Gentiles (Lk. 2: 32). The nation of Israel was to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation—a priestly representative of the Gentile nations before the true God (Dt. 7: 6-7; 14: 2; 1 Pet. 2: 9). But because they did not read the signs of God’s compassion for the Gentiles and became inwardly focused, they became God’s “frozen chosen”, incapable, reluctant, and indisposed to reaching out to the nations—typified by Jonah’s poor example. Their religion became formalized and external, and its leadership incapable of recognizing their long-awaited Messiah. Consequently, God has taken the kingdom away from the Jews and given it to the nation (the Gentiles) “producing the fruit of it” (Matt. 21: 43).

Jonah is a warning to the Church against the tendency of introversion, the sin of thinking that God’s kingdom revolves around “our church”, just as the Israelites thought God’s kingdom revolved around Israel. His kingdom was bigger than Israel and is much bigger than the church in the US or the church in Africa. He is not bound by culture or geography and will not rest or be satisfied until the whole earth is filled with the knowledge of God (Isa. 11: 9). If a church is not concerned for missions, for taking the gospel to different cultures and nations so that God can be worshipped, it will not prosper. The individual Christian who is unconcerned for unbelievers becomes stale and stagnant in his faith. The corporate church is no different if it is not concerned for missions. It becomes stale and stagnant and religion becomes formal and powerless.

Since my wife and I began pursuing our calling as missionaries in 2000, we have been struck by the lack of African-American Christians in the US who are pursuing a calling in missions. It appears that 40 years of national focus on the needs of black Americans has had both good results and bad results. The good result is that they have begun to receive the rights and privileges they should have enjoyed their entire history in America but were denied through racial prejudice. The bad result, perhaps, is that even black Christians have become inwardly focused on themselves instead of the needs of developing nations which need the gospel. The Christians in Africa need to get into the forefront of missions to other Africans, especially African Muslims who have never clearly heard the truth claims of the gospel. This should be done rather than relying on muzungu missionaries from the west. By doing so, they can set the example for African-American Christians in the West.

Other examples of prophecies which were conditional upon a response are Jer. 26: 12-19; 1 Kings 21: 17-29; and 2 Kings 20: 1-7. See also Virkler’s analysis of Jer. 18: 7-10 (p.198). A careful study of these cases, including Jonah, will reveal that conditional prophecies referred only to events in the near future and not to events which were to take place in the distant future (Berkhof, p.150). Prophecies of distant events obviously could not be contingent (dependent) on the actions of people who would not even be alive when the prophecy was fulfilled.

The story of King Josiah presents us with interesting questions about the conditionality or unconditionality of OT prophecies. When Hilkiah the high priest found the lost book of the law (the Law of Moses), he sent it to King Josiah by Shaphan the scribe who read the book in the king’s presence (2 Kings 22). When King Josiah heard the law of God, he was horrified and tore his robes as a sign of repentance. He then sent for Huldah, one of four prophetesses mentioned

by name in the OT, to inquire of the Lord what wrath was in store for Judah for sinning against the Law. Huldah gave Josiah the grim picture of what would happen to Judah. Judah would become desolate, just like Israel, but because Josiah had showed humility and repentance, the destruction of Judah would not come in his days, but later in the history of Judah. Josiah reigned from 640 B.C. to 609 B.C. and during his reign many reforms took place which eliminated idolatry from Judah and restored the true worship of God (2 Kings 23). But the harm had already been done, and the judgment against Judah was irreversible. During the reign of King Hezekiah (716-687 B.C), ending 47 years before the beginning of Josiah's reign, Isaiah the prophet had already predicted that all the treasures of Hezekiah's house would be taken away to Babylon (See 2 Kings 19-20 for context). This prophecy was the implied judgment upon the nation of Judah. If his treasures were to be taken away to Babylon, then Judah would fall to Babylon. Was this a conditional prophecy or an unconditional one? Hezekiah was a good king (2 Kings 18: 1-6). Why then, was Isaiah pronouncing judgment upon Judah? Keep reading the story!

Manasseh, Hezekiah's son and Josiah's grandfather, was one of the most wicked kings of Judah who practiced witchcraft, used divination, and even made one of his sons pass through the fire (human sacrifice). He seduced (tempted) the people of Judah to do more evil even than the nations whom the Lord had destroyed. As a consequence of his wickedness, the prophets of the Lord (who are not named in the passage) prophesy the destruction of Jerusalem (2 Kings 21). Josiah's good reforms, recounted in much detail in 2 Kings 23, do not succeed in reversing the judgment that had already been pronounced upon Judah earlier during the reigns of Hezekiah and Manasseh. By reading the story, we can see that Isaiah's prophecy of implied judgment (20: 17) was grounded upon the certainty of Manasseh's apostasy and Judah's participation in it (21: 9-16). Thus, in spite of Josiah's reforms, the "fierceness of His [God's] great wrath" was not turned away from Judah, and it was judged and taken away into Babylonian exile (23: 26-27). The prophecy of Isaiah, then, was *conditional* upon the reign of Manasseh whose apostasy confirmed the destruction of the nation (23: 26). Of course, in the mind of God, everything is certain, but God generally works through means, sometimes sinful means, including the apostasy of a king. He will not judge the nation upon a whim (a sudden, unreasonable fancy), but because the nation has broken His covenant (Dt. 28).

The ultimate fate of a nation, any nation, is not the result of good luck or bad luck, but each nation is judged according to faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the moral law of God.

Quoting Girdlestone, Ramm remarks, "It is probable that hundreds of prophecies, which look absolute as we read them were not fulfilled in their completeness because the words of warning from the prophet produced some result, even though slight and temporary, on the hearts of the hearers. God does not quench the smoking flax" (Ramm, p. 250).

***e. Symbolic language is common in prophetic literature, but it is not used throughout the prophecies.***

Therefore, it is a grave mistake to think we can discover some kind of prophetic formula for certain words or phrases which is consistent throughout any particular prophecy. Berkhof gives the negative example of Fairbairn (who is usually a sound exegete) who says that "nations" are a common word for worldly kingdoms in the OT prophets and the Revelation to John. "Stars"

represent ruling powers. Nations in political upheaval and turmoil are “roaring and troubled seas”. “Trees stand for the higher levels of society and “grass” the lower levels of common people, etc. (p.151). Such hermeneutics will quickly lead us astray into all kinds of fanciful interpretations. It is better to consider locusts as locusts, the moon and stars as the moon and stars. The context will usually indicate when something should be taken symbolically, as for example in Dan. 7 and 8. Thus, the language of the prophets should be understood literally unless there is good reason to interpret it otherwise.

An examination of Haggai will reveal that the prophet speaks in prose and poetry but not with symbolic language. His contemporary, Zechariah, on the other hand, uses a mix of language in his prophecy, much of which is symbolic visions difficult to interpret. For example, compare chapters 1-6 with chapters 7-8.

There is much disagreement among evangelical scholars concerning the issue of literal versus non-literal (spiritual or mystical) interpretation. Ramm helps us to put the issue in proper perspective (pp. 243-244).

If we may provisionally define the spiritual as the non-literal method of the exegesis of the Old Testament we may further state that the issue is not between a completely literal or a completely spiritual system of interpretation. Amillennial writers admit that many prophecies have been literally fulfilled, and literalists admit a spiritual element to Old Testament interpretation when they find a moral application in a passage, when they find a typical meaning, or when they find a deeper meaning (such as in Ezekiel 28 with reference to the kings of Babylon and Tyre). Nobody is a strict literalist or a complete spiritualist.

Virkler concurs (agrees) with this analysis by providing the humorous illustration of the woman on seven hills in Rev. 17: 9. Either these are very small hills, he suggests, or this is a woman of a “very unusual figure” (p. 196). Are we to conclude from Revelation 19: 12 and 15 that Jesus is some kind of monster who has a sword coming out of His mouth and flames of fire flickering out of his eyes? Even literalists do not believe this. Jesus is a man like us, and His divine nature does not alter His physical appearance. The whore (prostitute) of Babylon in Rev. 17 is not a literal woman. What she symbolizes may be debatable but her non-literal meaning is not debatable. The “weeks” in Daniel 9: 24-27 are admitted by both literalists and non-literalists interpreters to stand for something besides literal weeks. Either they are weeks of years (e.g. 7x7=49 years) or they stand for “the fullness of a specified time” (R. J. Rushdoony, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p.65) or some other “symbolical number” (E. J. Young, *Daniel*, p. 206).

The above observation leads us to the sixth character of prophecy enumerated by Berkhof.

***f. Biblical prophecy uses forms, terms, and events which would have been familiar to the audiences of their day.***

The prophets did not speak or write, first of all, for 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans or Africans. They prophesied for Israel, or in the case of Jonah, for the Ninevites. They therefore used language and terms which were familiar to their audience; otherwise, the communication would have been incomprehensible. If the visions given to the prophets had been clothed in symbols familiar to the modern mind, it would have been incomprehensible even to the prophet. If it turns out that prophecies have a distant fulfillment (for example, prophecies pertaining to the end of this age) we should expect their actual fulfillment to look quite different from the prophetic picture given

in the Bible. For example, if there is a *physical* battle to take place at the end of the age at Armageddon, something which is debatable, it most likely will not take place with horses but with tanks and airplanes (Rev. 14: 20).

When Isaiah predicts the coming of the Messiah in Isa. 11, he prophesies his reign as the signal of the deliverance of Israel from all of its *then-known* enemies. At the time he wrote, Assyria was the greatest threat to Israel, and the reader will notice that Assyria is mentioned first on the list (v.11). The description given is the dispersion (scattering) of Israel to many foreign lands, a dispersion which had not yet happened. Thus, Isaiah is predicting the future of Israel when it will be scattered all over the then-known world as a result of her apostasy. But he is also predicting the regathering of Israel into one unified nation which is no longer divided between the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah (v.13).

When was Israel gathered together from all the nations of her dispersion? There was a partial regathering in the land of Palestine when the Jews returned from Babylon (Ezra), but this receives a broader fulfillment in Acts 2. Shortly after the ascension of Christ, the Holy Spirit fell upon the disciples who then began to preach the gospel to thousands of Jews who had come from distant lands to celebrate the Passover (vv. 9-11). Many of these were converted and united under the rule of their one true King, Jesus Christ (vv. 41-47). Gone was the enmity (hatred) between Israel (represented by Ephraim) and Judah. Under the “banner” (“standard”) of Christ at Pentecost, they are now one in Christ Jesus.

So far, the interpretation given would satisfy the literalistic demands of many dispensational scholars. The dispersed Jews are *literally* brought together on the Day of Pentecost. But then what are we to make of the other figures given in the chapter which describe the Messiah’s reign as a military victory (vv.14-16)? Certainly during and after the ministry of Christ on earth there was no such military victory, and Christ expressly said that His kingdom was not of this world and that no such violent uprising should be expected of His disciples (Jn. 18: 36). Isaiah is clothing his prophecy in terms which would be meaningful to the fearful Jews of His day who dreaded the onslaughts of enemies like Assyria and its old enemy, Philistia.

All these figures are drawn from the existing condition of things. The people of God had been surrounded by external foes, which had been conquered by David, and which had rebelled and at one time or another had vexed Israel and Judah. The picture is of complete reversal of conditions, not to take place in Palestine, but *in the greater field of the world*, a reversal which would consist in the people of God reaching out to bring *all men* and make them captive to Christ (E. J. Young, *Isaiah*, p. 399, emphasis mine).

Young’s emphasis upon the mission to the Gentiles is striking throughout his interpretation of Isaiah 11. In v. 12, he applies the regathering of Israel not primarily to the physical nation but to all of God’s elect people (Young, pp. 396-397).

The Messiah would be the standard to which the Gentiles might rally. Here also we learn that the Lord will lift up a sign for the heathen, and through the work of Christian preaching and Christian missionaries He will draw them unto Himself...

Great has been the dispersion! To the four corners of the earth the people have been scattered...Our Lord was reflecting upon this passage when He said, “And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other” (Matt. 24: 31).

It is clear that Young, representative of many OT scholars, does not approach this passage with the hermeneutic of a wooden (rigid and inflexible) literalism in which the chronology of events in Isaiah 11 are linear (happening one after another). Indeed, we will get into a quagmire (difficult position) of interpretive problems if we do. For instance, how do we interpret vv. 6-10 which describes a world of perfect peace and harmony in which wolves and lambs lie down together, cows and bears graze together, lions eat grass, and infant children play with cobras and not get hurt? Such imagery describes a world which is untainted by sin, a world in which the effects of Adam's fall and God's curse are no longer in operation. It is a restored universe as described by Paul in Romans 8: 18-25 and not the world of the returned exiles in Jerusalem or even the world of the victorious risen Christ at Pentecost. It would seem safe to say that Isaiah mixes the figures of several periods of history and of the final world to come (and not in exact order) to give us a full description of the consummation (completion) of Christ's kingdom. It includes the return of the Jews from exile to Palestine (v.16); it also includes the Day of Pentecost and the conversion of many Jews to Christ (Acts 2); and it also includes the total restoration of the universe (vv. 6-10) which, not incidentally, comes first in the picture Isaiah presents us. The picture he gives us is the kind of picture common in the prophets which is true to the progressive revelation of the Bible in the historical narratives. What the prophets do, which the historians don't do, is give us telescopic views of where history is going and how it will end. But the views they give us conform to the world of their day and not ours.

The prophet Micah does the same thing in Micah 5: 1-6. The Messiah, born in Bethlehem, will deliver the nation from the siege of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrian attack upon Judah takes place about 700 years before the birth of Christ during the reign of Hezekiah in which God promises and accomplishes a mighty victory (2 Kings 19) typical of the victory of Christ against the real enemy of God's people, sin.

***g. Occasionally, the prophets transcended (moved beyond) the limitations of their times and cultures to speak in ways characteristic of the new covenant in the future.***

The more spiritual blessings of the NT church are evident in these prophecies, such as that found in Jer. 31: 31-34. As we should expect, they occur more often in the later prophets than the earlier prophets. God is revealing more and more of His plan of redemption as the day of Christ's coming approaches.

***h. Sometimes the prophets communicate their message through the use of actions and not just words.***

Isaiah is told to strip naked and walk barefoot through the streets of Jerusalem (Isa. 20). The command is not as radical as it sounds. Most likely, Isaiah still had on his undergarments (See 2 Sam. 6: 20; Jn. 13: 4; 21: 7), but his appearance was uncovered sufficiently enough to draw attention to his message. At the time, Judah was trusting, not in God, but in the help of Egypt and Cush (modern-day Ethiopia) to protect them against the power of Assyria. Isaiah's actions were designed to demonstrate in vivid fashion the "nakedness" of their hope in these two countries. As an additional meaning, he wished to show that the king of Assyria would lead away the inhabitants of Cush and Egypt naked and barefoot.

Ezekiel is told to take a brick, write the name of Jerusalem upon it and lay siege against it to symbolize the siege which is coming upon the city by a foreign power (Ezek. 4). Other symbolical acts follow such as digging through the wall and carrying his luggage through the hole to signify Judah going into exile (Ezek. 12: 1-7). Hosea is told to marry Gomer the prostitute, an action so radical that some commentators prefer to interpret this action as a vision and not an actual fact. However, the action loses its impact if it is only a vision. But we must let God be God in such cases and realize that He is not subordinate to His law, but above it. God alone is absolute and sometimes He allows special provisions for the broader interests of His kingdom. In this particular case, Hosea is a symbol of Jehovah and Gomer is a symbol of Israel who prostitutes herself to all the false gods of the nations. In the end, Gomer's illegitimate lovers fail to care for her or protect her from slavery, and Hosea must purchase her from the slave market and take her home. The picture is that of Israel who worships every god but the true God and ends up destitute and barren. But God is merciful and constantly restores her to favor. Agabus, a NT prophet, binds his feet and hands with Paul's belt to show that he would be bound by the Jews in Jerusalem (Act. 21: 10-11).

Through the dramatic actions of the prophets, God's truth is impressed upon the Israelites (and now us) in ways which capture the attention and aid the memory.

### ***5. Rules for the Interpretation of Prophecy***

In addition to the special characteristics of prophecy, Berkhof gives us five rules for its interpretation (pp.152-153)

***a. The words of the prophets should be taken in their usual literal sense, unless the context or the manner in which they are fulfilled clearly indicate that they have a symbolical meaning.***

For example, the locusts in Joel do not refer to a heathen people. Refer back to e. above under 1. "Characteristics of Prophecy."

Ramm encourages the interpreter to pay careful attention to "proper names, events, references to geography, references to customs, references to material culture, references to flora [plants] and fauna [animals], references to climate." The use of Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, or commentaries is advised to sort out the precise meanings of these references. They must be taken in their literal meaning unless the context of the passage indicates a symbolic or figurative sense of the word. On the other hand it must be admitted by all that prophetic literature contains many figures of speech and much of it is in poetic style and not prose (everyday speech used in ordinary conversation). Further, the symbolism of Daniel, Ezekiel, et al, is obvious to any reader (Ramm, p. 246). We may not insist on either complete literalism or complete symbolism in any given prophecy, and this is what makes its interpretation so difficult.

***b. In studying the figurative descriptions that are found in the prophets, the interpreter should make it his aim to discover the fundamental idea expressed.***

We have already discussed Isa. 11 with its descriptions of wild and domesticated animals grazing together and children sticking their hands in cobra pits. The fundamental idea in the passage is the perfect peace which will be obtained in the new heavens and new earth, a world without sin

and the effects of sin. The main focus of Joel 2: 28-32 is the coming of the Holy Spirit upon all flesh, an interpretation which is given to the passage by the apostle Peter on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2: 14-21). The other details of the prophecy (vv.30-31) may have occurred during and after the crucifixion of Christ seven weeks earlier (Lk. 23: 44-45; Matt. 27: 45, 51-53). After His death, the sky turned dark during the middle of the day and the moon could have appeared blood red (Leslie C. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, p. 103, citing F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, p.69). However, these details may have a future fulfillment, and their absence at the time did not prevent Peter from announcing that the prophecy of Joel was fulfilled in the coming of the Spirit.

***c. In the interpretation of the symbolical actions of the prophets, the interpreter must proceed on the assumption of their reality, i.e. [that is] of their occurrence in actual life, unless the connection clearly proves the contrary.***

In other words, when the Bible tells us that Isaiah walked naked through the streets of Jerusalem (probably with his undergarments) and that Hosea married a prostitute, we have no reason to believe that these were only visions.

***d. The fulfillment of some of the most important prophecies is germinant, i.e. [that is], they are fulfilled by installments, each fulfillment being a pledge of that which is to follow.***

Prophecies do not have two or three meanings or senses, but they may have a two or three-fold fulfillment. Consider the predictions about the second coming of Christ in Matt. 24. A careful examination of this passage will reveal that Jesus is answering two questions at the same time (vv. 1-2). The disciples want to know when the temple will be torn down and what will be the sign of His coming and of the end of the age. They figured that the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the end of the age must be the same event. As it turns out, they are not the same event. Jesus describes two separate events, one of which is the destruction of the temple by Titus in 70 A.D. during the siege of Jerusalem by Roman armies. Before the siege, believers, who are given previous warnings in this chapter (vv. 15-20), flee Jerusalem and are saved. But Jesus also tells of events surrounding His second coming, events which are very similar to those which occurred during the destruction of the world by the flood. Terry insists that all the events of Matt. 24 must have occurred when Jerusalem was destroyed (*Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 451-453), but this is very doubtful since the return of Christ in judgment is likened to the flood. Unless we are willing to admit that the flood was a local catastrophe instead of a world-wide catastrophe, the analogy does not hold up. Besides the description of the second coming given by Jesus, we have that of Peter in 2 Pet. 3: 10-13 which hardly describes a local event, but rather, the destruction of the whole world akin to that of the flood (2 Pet. 3: 1-9).

The best way to understand Matt. 24 is to reason that many of the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem were similar to what will happen at the end of the world. Jesus believed it justified to treat the two subjects together, but He was not obligated to give exhaustive details.

***e. Prophecies should be read in light of their fulfillment, for this will often reveal depths that would otherwise have escaped the attention.***

We are now able to read Joel 2: 28-32 in light of its fulfillment on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. If Peter said that Joel's prophecy was fulfilled, who are we to say that it wasn't? We may read

Isaiah 53 in light of the suffering and atonement of Christ. Psalm 2, a Messianic psalm, may be read in the light of the consummation (fulfillment) of the kingdom of Christ when all the enemies of Christ and His people will be finally vanquished (conquered) and the kingdoms of the earth will become the kingdom of God and of His Christ (Rev. 11: 15).

There is need for caution in this matter however. Not all prophecies refer to specific historical events. Sometimes they refer to general principles which are fulfilled in a variety of ways. In the interpretation of Revelation, we go astray to find in each prophecy a specific reference, but instead find the general principles of good and evil, warfare, etc. which could refer to hundreds of historical events which bear a resemblance to the prophecy. To narrow the fulfillment down to one single event would severely narrow the scope of the Book of Revelation, as well as the scope of many OT prophecies. Also, as we noted in **f.** on p. 82, the prophet used terminology which was familiar to his audience. Therefore, prophecies are not always fulfilled in the same way that they are uttered by the prophet. In our study of Isa. 11, the reign of Jesus is described in terms of an earthly kingdom akin (similar) to the Davidic kingdom. This kind of kingdom will come at the consummation, but until then, Jesus reigns in a different way in the hearts and minds of His people.

### ***6. Additional principles of interpretation***

I have taken several interpretive principles from Ramm (pp.249-269) which complement those of Berkhof. The numbering of these principles is not the same as his, and I have provided additional illustrations for each principle.

#### ***a. Determine whether the prophecy is cited in the OT or NT as fulfilled.***

We have already cited the prophecy from Joel which is found in Acts 2. Other examples include the prophecy of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem (Micah 5: 2 with Matt. 2: 6); the death of the Israelite children during the time of Herod (Jer. 31: 15 with Matt. 2: 18); the preaching of John the Baptist (Isa. 40: 3 with Matt. 3: 3); the ministry of Jesus in Galilee (Isa. 9: 1 with Matt. 4: 15-16); the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem riding on a donkey (Zech. 9:9 with Matt. 21: 5); Jesus' announcement of His ministry to the downtrodden (Isa. 61: 1 with Lk. 4: 18-19); the coming of a Redeemer to save the nation of Israel (Isa. 59: 20-21 with Rom. 11: 26-27); the session of Christ at the right hand of God the Father (Ps. 110: 1 with Acts 2: 34-35).

I found all these fulfillments of prophecy just casually flipping through the Bible. A good study Bible is very helpful because OT prophecies are indented in the text or set apart from the other script in such a way that the quotations are easily identifiable. The reader can then find the reference in the margin.

Much of the time, we will find the fulfillment of prophecy within the OT era. For example, God promised Abraham that his seed (descendants) would become as numerous as the stars of the heavens (Gen. 15: 5). He also promised him that he would give him the land of Canaan (Gen. 15: 18). All of these promises were fulfilled in the multitudes of Israelites coming out of Egypt and the conquest of the land of Canaan under Joshua (Joshua 21: 45). Many dispensationalists are still waiting for the fulfillment of these promises during the millennial kingdom of Christ.

The fact is, these prophecies have already been fulfilled, and we don't need to wait for their fulfillment.

Jeremiah prophesied that Shallum, one of the sons of Josiah, would be led away into a foreign land and would never return to Jerusalem, but would die away from his homeland (Jer. 22: 11-12 with 2 Kings 23: 30-34; 1 Chron. 3: 15). Micaiah the prophet predicted the death of Ahab (1 Kings 22: 27-28 with 1 Kings 22: 34-37). Isaiah predicted the rebuilding of the temple according to the decree of Cyrus 150 years before the event (Isa. 44: 28-45: 1). The seventy years of Babylonian captivity is prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer. 25: 11) and fulfilled during the time of Daniel (Dan. 9: 1-3).

***b. Find out what prophetic passages parallel each other.***

Several prophetic words and phrases are repeated in different prophecies: “the day of the Lord, the remnant, the shaking of the nations, the outpouring of the Spirit, the regathering of Israel, and the millennial blessings...” (p. 249). An exhaustive concordance is indispensable for tracing down parallel passages. Two prophecies which immediately come to mind are Isa. 2 and Micah 4.

***c. Determine whether the prophecy is predictive or whether it deals with moral, ethical or theological truth.***

As we have said earlier, the prophets spend a great deal of time in providing moral instruction for their hearers. This instruction can occur right in the middle of passages which are predictive in nature. Notice that the first six verses of Zechariah are didactic (moral instruction) but beginning in v. 7 through the rest of the chapter, a vision is received by him. The prophecy of Amos is a scathing denunciation of the wicked life-styles and idolatry of the nation of Israel during a time of economic and political prosperity. He also includes the predictive element of Israel's demise (See your notes on “Historical-Cultural Context” in Hermeneutics, pp. 39-40).

***d. Observe carefully how the NT writers use the OT scriptures (pp.261-269).***

***(1) Sometimes the NT writers use the OT to prove a point.***

In Stephen's sermon before his accusers in Acts 7, he gives a summary of the OT wilderness wanderings and Israel's rebellion against Moses, God's appointed leader. At the end of the sermon, Stephen uses the history of Israel to illustrate the same rebellion of the Jews in his day. “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing *just as your fathers did*” (Acts 7: 51; See also vv. 52-53). His point? The Jewish people had not improved from the time of their forefathers. After years of judgment and exile, they still didn't get it (they still didn't understand).

***(2) Sometimes the NT writers use the OT to clarify or illustrate their teaching.***

The writer of Hebrews uses the awesome and fearful thunder and lightning of the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai as a contrast to the more favorable conditions of the new covenant (Heb. 12: 18-24). Paul uses a case law of the OT to support his argument that those who preach the gospel are entitled to be paid by the congregations they serve (1 Cor. 9: 9). This is a very interesting use

of the OT and it proves that much of the value of the OT in providing illustrations of moral principles is lost if we do not allow this typological element (See the discussion of “Allegories” in your notes, pp. 45-50).

No doubt many would say that we cannot do the same kind of typologizing that Paul did, who was inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is true that Paul had insight unique to Him as an inspired apostle, and, granted, we must exercise extreme care in this matter. However, the NT provides us with so many examples of typological uses of the OT that we are warranted from this methodology to look for additional OT illustrations with moral instruction not found in the NT. If we fail to use the OT this way, it simply becomes a history book of redemption without practical usefulness for Christian faith and practice. This naturally leads us to the third topic under this heading.

***(3) The NT writers recognize a clear continuity (continuation) between Israel and the church.***

Paul formally recognizes this relationship in his parting words to the Galatians, “And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God” (6: 16). Paul is not speaking to ethnic Jews or even Jews who had become Christians. He is speaking to all believers regardless of nationality who have embraced Christ as their savior. This is obvious from the broader context of Galatians which denies any merit in circumcision (a Jewish rite) and instead places the importance where it belongs, saving faith in Christ—“this rule.” If Paul had wished to single out the ethnic Jews from the Gentiles in this statement, he would have contradicted his whole argument (Ramm, pp. 263-264) (For further study of this point, see Gal. 3: 29 and Rom. 9: 6-8; 2: 28-29).

One of most convincing texts of the analogy between the church and Israel is found in 1 Cor. 10: 1-13 in which Paul explicitly makes use of every event of the wilderness wanderings as a moral object lesson for Christian behavior. “Now these things [namely, the sinful history of Israel and its consequences] happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved” (v. 6). He says it again for emphasis in v. 11, “Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”

Much of the weakness in modern evangelical preaching today is its unwillingness to take seriously the analogy which the NT writers make between the nation of Israel and the church. By separating the NT church and Israel, as if they are completely separate people with distinct purposes in the plan of God, they fail to reckon with the covenantal responsibilities of the NT church and the curses which fall upon it through persistent and unrepentant sin. Indeed, the consequences of sin demonstrated in the nation of Israel had already been demonstrated in the church at Corinth before Paul wrote his letter. Just one chapter later in his letter to the Corinthians, Paul informs the Corinthians that some of their number had died because of their immoral, careless participation in the Lord’s supper (vv. 17-34).

This should be enough to convince us that the God of the NT and the God of the OT are the same, a God who is a consuming fire and not to be trifled with. The greater grace and benefits of the new covenant do not imply that God is now obligated to overlook sin. The same covenantal obligations of obedience apply today; the difference is that we are given more ability through the indwelling Spirit and a regenerate heart to comply with those demands. The eventual demise

(downfall) of the seven churches in Asia Minor (even the few good ones) is testimony to the ongoing requirements of covenantal faithfulness (Rev. 2-3). Asia Minor is now modern day Turkey. I have a good friend now living in Turkey who tells me that Christians there are scarce. The once thriving church of Asia Minor is no more.

After being a Baptist for many years, my study of the prophets convinced me that there was more continuity between the church of the OT (Acts 7: 38—*ekklesia* or “church”) and the church of the NT than I had previously realized. The church today, seen as a whole, is just as formally religious and institutionally blind as the nation of Israel, putting more emphasis in ritual and formal worship than practical obedience. Consequently, I became a Presbyterian, a position which takes more seriously the alarming similarities between Israel and the church, although beset with some of the same problems as Baptists. One cannot read the prophets without seeing an accurate picture of his own local church—and even more frightfully, himself—assuming he has any real discernment. As I have attempted to demonstrate with the prophets Jonah, Isaiah, and Haggai, the prophetic material is just as relevant today as the day the prophet strolled into Israel proclaiming his message from the Lord.

At the same time, the encouragement and hope given by the prophets to the believing remnant of Israel—who were looking for the hope and consolation of redemption in their Messiah—are also relevant for the NT believer. Their message was not merely gloom and doom for the impenitent, but blessings and salvation for the OT believer which applies equally to the NT believer (Rom. 15: 4). Take for example the prophecy of Jer. 31: 27-34. This same prophecy is quoted in Heb. 8, and the blessings of the new covenant mentioned throughout Hebrews are applied to NT believers. In fact, the old covenant made with Israel is superseded (surpassed) by the new covenant and is made obsolete. This does not mean that Jeremiah was lying to the OT people in his prophecy in which he applies the new covenant to Israel and Judah. Since Israel and Judah may also partake of the new covenant blessings through faith in Christ, the prophecy belongs to them as well. In fact, salvation is of the Jews and is first offered to the Jews by Christ and the apostles (Rom. 1: 17). Clearly in Heb. 10: 15, the blessings of the new covenant made with “them” (the Jews) are addressed to “us” (vv. 15-16), believers in the NT era who are warned in this epistle not to go backwards to the types and shadows of the old covenant. There is only one new covenant for everyone, not two—one for the church and one for Israel. Whenever we partake of the Lord’s Supper, we partake of the new covenant in His blood (Lk. 22: 20) (Ramm p.264).

In Isaiah 2, we read of the prediction of universal peace brought about through the teaching of God’s ways (v.3). All the nations of the earth will stream to the mountain of God, Mt. Zion (v.3), and there will no longer be hostility and war between the nations (v.4). Strict literalists would apply the blessings to the Gentiles in this passage to a future millennial age when Christ is sitting on His throne in Jerusalem (Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 134.) It is more accurate to apply the passage to the “last days” which include the first and second advents of Christ, His first and second coming (See Acts 2: 17; Heb. 1:2; James 5:3; 1 Pet. 1: 5, 20; 2 Pet. 3: 3). After the first coming of Christ, the nations (the Gentiles) begin to hear the gospel (the “ways” of God) as never before in the history of the world. They begin to stream to the mountain of the house of the Lord to hear His word—a mountain which is not the literal Mt. Zion of Jerusalem (as the dispensationalists maintain), but His spiritual church, the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim. 3: 15a). Remember that the prophets often saw events which were

separated by many years, even hundreds of years, as if they were the same event (prophetic foreshortening). The first and second advents of Christ are often seen as one event and are described as such. The same is true of this prophecy which is why Christ is presented as a ruler who will judge between the nations (v.4), something He did not do in His first advent but will do in His second advent. This is a very similar depiction of the coming of Christ found in Isa. 11 in which the prophet sees the first and second coming of Christ as one event. Truly, when the kingdom of Christ is consummated in the second coming, He will put an end to war, and universal peace and righteousness will prevail throughout the whole world. At any rate, if one recognizes the continuity between Israel and the church, he will admit the possibility that this and many other such passages refer to the triumph of the gospel through the church rather than through the presumed thousand year physical reign of Christ in Jerusalem. (For a thorough treatment of this passage from an Amillennial perspective, see E. J. Young, *Isaiah*, from which much of the above discussion is taken).

#### ***IV. Interpreting the Psalms***

One of the principles for interpreting the psalms has already been covered under “Parallelisms” (See pp. 40-41 of your notes on Hermeneutics). There are other considerations which must be covered to give us a well-rounded approach. Some of these will be taken from Berkhof’s *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 154-157. Others have been gleaned from two excellent sources on the Psalms, *How to Read the Psalms* by Tremper Longman, III, and the unpublished class syllabus *Approaching the Psalms* by Alan Harman who now has a book published on the Psalms.

##### ***A. The Character of the Psalms (Berkhof, pp. 154-155)***

The lyric poetry (poetry suitable for singing) of the psalms has an individual element in which the author expresses personal experiences of joy, sorrow, expectation, disappointment, trust, confusion, etc. This personal element is revealed in many of the superscriptions of the psalms or headings such as that found at the beginning of Ps. 3, “Morning Prayer of Trust in God”, or Ps. 6, “Prayer for Mercy in Time of Trouble.” What must be understood, however, is that the personal content of the psalms becomes the property of all of God’s people throughout the ages. This is obviously so since the writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write what they wrote. They belong as much to every believer as the first letter to the Corinthians belongs to every believer and not just to the Corinthians when the letter was written. This is the “representative character” of the psalms in which the writer is aware of his solidarity or connection with the rest of mankind. His struggles are in a very real sense the struggles of every human being, and particularly the struggles of every believer. The psalms, therefore, go beyond their personal and historical setting and become universal in scope. Berkhof expresses this eloquently.

And in view of the fact that this communal life has its fountain-head in God, the lyrical poet descends to still greater depths, or mounts to ever loftier heights, until he rests in God, in whom the life of humanity originates and who controls its joy and sorrow. Arising out of these depths, his song is, as it were, born of God.

##### ***B. Strategy for Interpreting the Psalms***

###### ***1. Study the historical setting of each psalm.***

One of the most helpful rules for interpreting the psalms is to interpret them in light of their historical context (Berkhof, p. 156).

Psalm 3 was written when Absalom, David's son, rebelled against him and sought his life. Psalm 32 was written after Nathan the prophet rebuked David of his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. All the elements of this event seem to be present: his attempt to cover it up (v.3), and his open repentance after Nathan's rebuke (v. 5). Psalm 51 is a more detailed account of David's repentance concerning his adultery. It makes good sense when interpreting these psalms to go back to the appropriate passages in Samuel and study their historical context.

Psalm 90 is written by Moses. When we recall the life of Moses and the many difficulties he faced leading the rebellious people of Israel, many of his laments in Ps. 90 make more sense to us. For example, "For we have been consumed by Your anger, and by Your Wrath we have been dismayed....For all our days have declined in Your fury; we have finished our years like a sigh" (vv. 7, 9). When we remember God's description of Himself to Moses in Ex. 34: 6-7 in which He emphasizes His "lovingkindness," we can better appreciate Moses' plea in vv.13-15 of Ps. 90, "Do return, O Lord; how long will it be? And be sorry for Thy servants. O satisfy us in the morning with Your lovingkindness, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days You have afflicted us, and the years we have seen evil."

The difficulty in doing this is, of course, that the psalms are not like the prophets which are written during a specific period of history. When Isaiah wrote his prophecy, we can pinpoint the general time-frame of the prophecy and what was happening on the national and international scene. Not so with the psalms which are written by many writers each of whom had multiple personal situations they were experiencing when they wrote. Therefore, the historical situation of each psalm has to be considered separately from the other psalms (Harman, p.10).

## ***2. Understand the theology of the psalms***

Harman points out that the psalms reflect the practical theology of the Old Testament. In a variety of ways, the religious convictions of the people are placed on display in the psalms. This is a "popular theology" and is not written by theologians in abstract propositions but in concrete, down-to-earth ways. It is this aspect of the psalms which make them appealing to so many people.

He also maintains that the grouping of the psalms may have important significance theologically. Psalms 3 and 4, 42 and 43, 142 and 143 have similarities and are placed together; and Psalm 9 and 10 may have originally occurred as a single psalm.

The theological theme for the whole Psalter (Book of Psalms) is found in Ps. 1 and 2. Psalm 1 establishes the basic distinction between the righteous and the wicked, the blessedness which belongs to the righteous, and the judgment which will come upon the wicked. These are the "two ways" which Christ also teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, one way leading to life and the other leading to death (Matt. 5-7—particularly 7: 13-14). The two ways are also found in Ps. 2, the way of rebellion and refusal to acknowledge the Lord as king (vv. 2-3), and the way of obedience for those who "worship the Lord with reverence" (v. 10-12) (Harman, pp. 10-11). In these two ways we may distinguish the covenantal framework of the psalms even though the word "covenant" occurs only 14 times in the Psalter (Harman, p. 22). The distinctions between

the righteous and the wicked in Ps. 1 transport us back to Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal in Dt. 27 and 28, in which the blessings for obedience were pronounced on one mountain and the curses for disobedience on the other. We cannot ignore this covenantal context when interpreting the psalms.

### ***3. Pay Attention to the Grouping of the Psalms***

The Psalms have been arranged in a certain order, but this order is not chronological (according to the time they were written). For example, Ps. 90 was written by Moses who lived slightly less than 300 years before David. Psalm 126 and 137 are written during the period of the Babylonian exile, but there are other psalms found at the end of the Psalter which were written before them. Generally speaking the psalms of David occur in the first half of the Psalter but one psalm of David (138) occurs after the psalm of exile in Ps. 137.

Five separate books have been combined to make the whole Psalter which may be an imitation of the five books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy). These five divisions are given in your *Reformation Study Bible*.

- Book One—Psalms 1-41
- Book Two—Psalms 42-72
- Book Three—Psalms 73-89
- Book Four—Psalms 90-106
- Book Five—Psalms 107-150

Each of the divisions ends with a doxology (See Psalms 41: 13; 72: 18-19; 89: 52; 106: 48). This pattern is different in the last book in which the entire Ps. 150 serves as the doxology for Book Five (Harman, pp. 17-18).

### ***4. Pay Attention to the Collections within the Psalms***

These collections were brought together before they were combined with each other in the whole Psalter. These collections were made over the space of centuries and were put together in their present form after the exile. The stages in the development of the Psalms are suggested by the preference of one name for God over another. Yahweh, the covenant name for God, is preferred in Book One while Elohim is preferred in Book Two. (Harman, p. 19). Refer back to the names for God in your Systematic Theology syllabus.

- |  |                            |
|--|----------------------------|
| Davidic Collections  | Psalms 3-41                |
| Korahite Collections<br>(2 Chron. 20: 19)                                    | Psalms 42-49; 84-85; 87-88 |
| Elohistic Collections<br>(using the name of Elohim<br>for God)               | Psalms 42-83               |
| Asaphite Collection<br>(a singer during David's reign<br>1 Chron. 15: 16-19) | Psalms 73-83               |
| Kingship Psalms  | Psalms 93-100              |

Praise Psalms	Psalms 103-107
Songs of Ascent (used on pilgrimage to Jerusalem or on return from exile)	Psalms 120-134
Hallelujah Psalms (beginning or ending with “Hallelujah”)	Psalms 111-118; 146-150

### ***5. Notice the Different Genres of the Psalms***

This is similar to the reference to “collections” in the Psalms but we will go into more detail following the work of Tremper Longman in *How to Read the Psalms*, pp. 19-36. A genre is a “group of texts which are similar in their mood, content, structure or phraseology” (p. 20). In the Bible as a whole, we have many genres of literature such as the historical narrative of Kings and Chronicles, the prophetic genre of the major and minor prophets, the didactic (teaching) genre of the letters of the apostles in the NT, the gospel accounts of Matthew and Mark, and the genre of poetry found in Psalms and Proverbs.

In the Psalms there are many different types or genres having a specific purpose and style. Determination of the genre of a specific book will help us in interpreting the book. For example, we need to read the *Revelation to John* differently from John’s epistles; otherwise we come away from the book with the mistaken notion that at the end of time, there will be numerous violent struggles involving monster-like creatures. Proper interpretation of the psalms is no less dependent upon the identification of different genres within the Psalter. For example, what are we to make of the psalmist’s statement in Ps. 73: 3-5; 12-14? Are we to believe his statement literally? Are all the wicked prosperous, and are their lives trouble-free and easy as the psalmist suggests? If so, his statement is a direct contradiction of Ps. 1: 4 and 37: 1-2. To avoid contradiction, we must read this psalm differently from Pss. 1 and 37.

There are seven genres of Psalms.

#### ***a. The Hymn***

Recall the discussion of the collection of psalms above. One collection is known as the praise hymns. These are characterized by joyful praise of the Lord (Ps. 103). The basic structure of the

hymn includes the following:

- a. a call to praise—Ps. 103: 1
- b. reasons why God should be praised—Ps. 103: 2-19
- c. further calls to praise—Ps. 103: 20-21.

The same pattern can be seen in Ps. 105. The call to worship appears in vv. 1-5, the reasons why He should be praised are found in vv. 5-45a, and a further call to praise appears in v. 45b.

The praise hymns are not limited to the collection mentioned above from Pss. 103-107. Notice that Ps. 113 is also a praise hymn with the same structure. The call to praise is found in vv. 1-3, the reasons for praise in vv. 4-9a, and a further call for praise in v. 9b. The same can be said of

Ps. 115 with the call to praise in v. 1, the reasons in vv. 2-16, and further call to praise in vv. 17-18.

The reasons God is to be praised are not vague (hard to understand), “abstract qualities” but for his mighty acts of creation and providence (Ps. 104: 2-30) and the ways He has intervened in the lives of individual believers (Ps. 103: 3-6) and in the corporate life of His people (Ps. 106: 4-46; Ps. 105: 5-44).

By way of application, the psalmists are calling upon us, the Church, to praise God for the many things He has done and the kind of God He is. Most of the content of the psalms of praise is taken up with giving *reasons* why He should be praised. In other words, an appeal is made to the mind of the believer. Giving praise is the most reasonable thing we can do in light of His attributes of power, love, justice, mercy, grace, etc. and in light of the exercise of His attributes in creation, providence, and the new creation in Christ Jesus. Failure to do so is unreasonable. In Romans 12: 1, Paul exhorts us “to present [our] bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is [our] *spiritual* service of worship.” The word used in the Greek text for “spiritual” is *logikos*, from which we get the word, “logical”. The *New King James Version* (see the *Reformation Study Bible*) translates the word “reasonable” which is a better translation than the *NASB*. We cannot dispute that the presentation of our bodies as a holy sacrifice is a spiritual service, but that is not what Paul is emphasizing here, and it is not the word he uses here. John Murray makes this observation (*Romans*, Vol. 2, p. 112).

Reasonable or rational is a more literal rendering. No doubt the presenting of the body as a living sacrifice is a spiritual service, that is to say, a service offered by the direction of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Pet. 2: 5). But there must have been some reason for the use of this distinct term used nowhere else by Paul and used only once elsewhere in the new Testament (1 Pet. 2: 2). The service here in view is worshipful service and the apostle characterizes it as “rational” because it is worship that derives its character as acceptable to God from the fact that it enlists our mind, our reason, our intellect. It is rational in contrast with what is mechanical and automatic....The lesson to be learned from the term “rational” is that we are not “Spiritual” in the biblical sense except as the use of our bodies is characterized by conscious, intelligent, consecrated devotion to the service of God.

The words, “Praise God!”, seem to flow naturally off the lips of most Ugandan Christians, and this desire to praise Him should be appreciated. However, a word of caution may be offered here. We should be careful that we are not using the words tritely (worn out by common usage) as a normal greeting or as a means of inspiring enthusiasm in a church gathering without consciously reflecting on the attributes and works of God which enlist our praise. “Praise God!” should not become another “Hello” or “Goodbye” unless we really mean what we say.

### ***b. The Lament***

The opposite of the hymn is the lament. While the psalmist is on top of the mountain in the hymns of praise, he is in the bottom of the valley in the lament. But this is proof that the psalms are realistic of their expression of the lives of believers. One moment we may exult in praise for what the Lord has done for us, but the next hour, or even the next moment, we may be “down in the dumps” over something that has just happened or over a lingering problem which comes back to our consciousness. Perhaps this is why David reminds us in Ps. 103: 2 to “forget none of His benefits.” Longman draws our attention to three kinds of laments found in the Psalms (p. 26).

### ***(1) Three Kinds of Lament***

#### ***(a) The psalmist may be troubled by his own thoughts and actions.***

Neither Longman nor Harman include Ps. 73 as a lament in their texts, but it has the marks of a lament over the seeming disparity between the righteous and the wicked. (See also the comments below on “Combinations”.) It appears to the psalmist that the righteous have the worst of life and the wicked have the best of it. He even comes to the point of saying that his belief in the Lord appears to have been in vain (vv. 13-14). Such thoughts about the vanity of serving the Lord deeply trouble him as is clearly seen in vv. 2, 15-16, and 21-22. If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that we have had similar thoughts. The magazines and newspapers are strewn with stories of the rich and famous, some of whom are publicly known to be scoundrels; yet many of the righteous whom we know personally appear to barely get by in life. But we are deeply troubled when we are tempted to believe that our faith is futile. Happily, the issue here is resolved in the same Psalm when the psalmist comes into the sanctuary of God for prayer. Through prayer he is reminded that the prosperity of the wicked is a short-lived and fleeting thing and that their permanent end is destruction (vv. 17-20). He is also reminded that the primary blessing of God consists not in the material wealth He gives us, but the gift of Himself (v. 25-26, 28).

Psalm 51 is a well-known lament of David concerning his adulterous actions with Bathsheba followed by the encouraging hope of forgiveness for the sinner who has a broken and contrite heart (vv. 16-17). Psalm 38 would also fall within this category.

#### ***(b) The psalmist may complain about the actions of others against him (the “enemies”).***

One of the best-known laments is Ps. 22 in which David complains about being surrounded by his enemies (vv. 12-13, 16-17). It is immediately apparent that this psalm is also a prophecy about the crucifixion of Christ with descriptions of the physical torture not even in use at the time this psalm was written. Other examples of this kind of lament are Ps. 35; 36; 42: 10; and 41.

#### ***(c) The psalmist may be frustrated by God himself.***

Psalm 60, as the superscription indicates, is a lament over the defeat in battle followed by words of encouragement that God would once again lead the armies of Israel into victory. As Christians, we are often confused when the enemies of church seem far more powerful than God’s people. This psalm, typologically, is about the ultimate victory of the church (See v. 12 and also Matt. 16: 18). Psalm 44 is similar and demonstrates in greater detail the feeling of the psalmist that God has forsaken his people without cause (vv. 17-21).

***It is possible for a psalm to contain all three of the elements listed above.*** Psalm 42 and 43 very likely are a single psalm. Evidence for this is found in the common refrain found in both psalms (42: 5, 11; 43: 5). The psalmist is troubled by his own thoughts and actions in the three verses just mentioned. He complains about his enemies in 42: 3, 10; 43: 1, 2b; and he feels abandoned by God in 42: 9; 43: 2a (Longman, pp. 26-27).

### ***(2) Elements of a Lament***

Seven elements may be found in laments though seldom will all seven be found in the same one (Longman, p. 27). These may not occur in the order they are listed here.

- (a) Invocation [(a) and (b) may be considered together]
- (b) Plea to God for help
- (c) Complaints
- (d) Confession of sin or an assertion of innocence
- (e) Curse of enemies (imprecation)
- (f) Confidence in God's response
- (g) Hymn or blessing

Curses upon one's enemies are called *imprecations*. Their explanation will be treated in a separate place below. Notice that at times the psalmist confesses his guilt (Ps. 51: 3), and at other times he protests his innocence (Ps. 44: 17-22). It is important to note that all laments include some expression of hope in God's deliverance and mercy, even in those where guilt is acknowledged (Ps. 51: 7-17). The sorrow of the psalmist is turned to joy because of the kind of God he worships. The focus of the lament is the complaint before God which motivated the psalmist to pray (Ps. 22) (Longman, p.28-29).

Other laments may be found in Pss. 3, 7, 13, 17, and 26, which are individual laments, while Pss. 12, 44, 60, 74, and 83 involve the community of God's people as a whole (Harman, p.29; Longman, p. 29).

Laments serve a very important function for the child of God. They teach us to be honest before God with our feelings, and that our honest feelings should motivate us to pray. Somehow we have learned to be very guarded before the Lord with feelings of forsakenness and anger for fear of dishonoring God. Surely God is holy and must be approached with awe; yet, we have clear examples in the laments of complaints to God about treatment which is considered by the psalmist as undeserved. He honestly does not understand why God is doing something, and he is troubled and perhaps even angry about it. We can sense the anger of the psalmist in Psalm 73 when he says, "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, and washed my hands in innocence; for I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning." The modern American equivalent of this would be, "What's the use! I might as well grab whatever good I can get out of this miserable life because unbelievers have it better than God's people!" But after he gets this "off his chest" he checks himself and says, "If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' behold, I should have betrayed the generation of Thy children." In other words, "I would have put a stumbling block in front of other believers. My words would have been scandalous and damaging to sensitive souls." But it was good to get it off his chest (in private prayer) and admit his feelings to God. God already knew his feelings anyway, so why not go ahead and admit them? This is precisely what we ought to do. Admit our feelings of confusion, forsakenness, and anger, and then let the Holy Spirit speak to our feelings by reminding us of forgotten truth—for example, the inevitable justice of God and the eternal portion of the believer in the presence of God (Ps.73: 17-28).

### ***c. Thanksgiving Psalms***

In many laments, the psalmist makes a promise to God that he will give thanks to Him if God will hear his prayer and deliver him from the present distress (Ps. 6, 13). The thanksgiving psalm is the psalmist's response to answered prayer, so there is a close connection between the

lament and the psalm of thanksgiving. In the thanksgiving of Ps. 18, there is a restatement of the lament found in vv. 4-5 along with the acknowledgement that his lament was heard and his prayer answered (vv.6-19) (Longman, pp. 30-31).

Other examples of thanksgiving psalms are Pss. 32 and 34 which have the following structure (Harman, p.29).

- a) praise of the Lord or a blessing
- b) testimony to God's goodness in his life
- c) often there is a restating of the lament
- d) a description of God's salvation

If we are honest (and we often are not) we will admit that much of our prayer life consists in asking for things rather than thanking God for what He has done for us already. The psalms of thanksgiving remind us to thank God for the many benefits received. All of us like to be thanked for favors we have given others, and we are often offended when we fail to receive it. We feel that we have been taken for granted. We should not be surprised, then, if God is offended by our inattentiveness to the many answered prayers which we have received from Him. Ingratitude is one of the glaring characteristics of the wicked (Rom. 1: 21), and it is a sure way of quenching (or grieving) the Holy Spirit (1 Thes. 5: 18-19).

#### ***d. Psalms of Trust or Confidence***

Psalms in this category would include Pss. 11, 16, 23, 27, 91, and 125 (Harman, p. 30). Longman adds Pss. 121 and 131 (p. 31). Harman includes four common features of psalms of trust (p. 30).

- a) while their structure is not the same they share a common content
- b) in the face of enemies there is a calm trust in the Lord
- c) their declarations have a ring of certainty about them
- d) they use a variety of metaphors to describe God ('refuge', 'rock', 'shepherd', 'help').

The value of the psalms of confidence for the believer is obvious. No matter what the circumstances are, God can and should be trusted. Notice that in all of these psalms, the element of danger is present. Our trust in God is not that He will remove us from danger or eliminate the danger. He has never promised us freedom from danger in this life, therefore, we are ill-advised by some health and wealth preachers to trust him for something He has never promised. Our trust is that we will be *finally and ultimately protected* from whatever danger confronts us. But how can we claim this protection when it is blatantly obvious that believers are persecuted and killed? There have been more Christians persecuted and killed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than all the combined centuries since the first advent of Christ.

The answer lies in the ultimate hope of the Christian to rest secure in the presence of God. Note the following passages from the psalms of confidence: "The Lord is *the portion of my inheritance* and my cup....Indeed, my heritage is beautiful to me" (16: 5a-6b). "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for *Thou art with me*....Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and *I will dwell in the house*

*of the Lord forever*” (23: 4a, 6). “One thing I have asked form the Lord, that I shall seek; that *I may dwell in the house of the Lord* all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to meditate in His temple” (27: 4). Exegetically we may not force upon the psalmists the full-blown doctrine of eschatology and the hope of immortality in heaven, but the hope of the psalmists (in seed form) is the same hope (as a full-grown tree) of the Apostle Paul who said, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, *shall be able to separate us from the love of God*, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8: 38-39). Paul’s hope was not that the Lord had made him *indestructible*, but that he and the Lord were *inseparable* even in his death (See 2 Tim. 4: 6-8).

### ***e. Psalms of Remembrance***

Psalms of this type were used to commemorate (celebrate the memory of) certain historical events in the corporate life of Israel. As such they have a “specific historical setting” (Longman, p.32). They recount in story form the wonderful deeds of the Lord in Israel’s behalf and consequently they include some of the longest psalms in the Psalter including Pss. 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136. The distinguishing features are the following (Harman, p.29):

- (a) retelling the great events in Israel’s history
- (b) focusing attention particularly on the Exodus from Egypt
- (c) stressing the faithfulness of God to his covenant promises
- (d) doing this to call forth praise or to encourage future generations to trust in the Lord

Two other features should be added to these four:

- (e) covenantal ***unfaithfulness*** of the Israelites.
- (f) stressing the faithfulness of God to his covenant curses

God is not only faithful to his promises of blessing, but he is equally faithful to his warnings of covenant curse for disobedience (see my commentary on 2 Tim. 2: 13 in ***The Pastoral Epistles***).

Not all the psalms of remembrance contain these two elements, but only a sketchy reading of Pss. 78 and 106 will reveal that their primary content is the rebelliousness of the Israelites in the face of God’s faithfulness.

The purpose of these psalms was not to provide history lessons, but to ensure the praise of God in present and future generations of Israelites (78: 5-7) in contrast to the forgetfulness of past generations (78: 8-58). The refrain (repeated words) of Ps. 136 gives evidence of this purpose, “For His lovingkindness is everlasting” (Longman, p. 32).

These psalms bring us face to face with at least two needed corrections in the corporate worship and education of the Church. First, there is the need for corporate repentance of unfaithfulness. We are much too busy with our own personal kingdoms to pay attention to the pressing concerns of the kingdom of God despite the Lord’s command, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” The way we frivolously spend the money God has given us to manage will be a witness against us on the Day of Judgment. It is common liturgy in PCA churches to make a corporate confession of sin after which the pastor pronounces comforting words of forgiveness from the Scriptures. Confession is made in generalities which *generally* are not too

uncomfortable for most concerned. What is missing are the particulars of our sin which would cause us to squirm in our pews. What we notice in Pss. 78 and 106 is that the psalmist does not speak in generalities but drives the sword where it hurts, mentioning the specific shortcomings of the Israelites for which they were severely judged.

Second, there is the need for the teaching of church history which would help us celebrate the mighty acts of God, not only in Biblical history, but throughout the history of the Christian Church. God did not stop acting in behalf of his corporate people when the Bible was completed. He continues to act to this very day, but Christians are often ignorant of the grand motions of providence between the first century and the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The famous quotation, “Those who do not learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them,” applies to the Church as well as the general society. There are many errors being made in the Church today which were made hundreds of years ago simply because the lessons have not yet been learned. I would contend that the Church’s emphasis upon hyper-institutionalism and professionalism (ministry by a few) rather than the organic functioning of the whole body of Christ (ministry by every member) expressed in spiritual gifts is one of those errors we keep repeating.

#### *f. Wisdom Psalms*

This category of psalms shares some of the same features as the books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, and the Song of Solomon. Harman includes four characteristics of these psalms (pp. 29-30).

- a) a concern for the practical issues of life
- b) a clear distinction between the two ways which face us in life
- c) a struggle with the problem of why the wicked seem to prosper as compared with the righteous
- d) hints that the final solution lies in the life to come

Psalms 73 and 37 are two such psalms (though Ps. 73 has also been included in the category of the lament). We have already seen how Ps. 73 would demonstrate all the characteristics listed above. Ps. 37 deals with the same question of the prosperity of the wicked, but unlike Ps. 73, the answer to the question is given at the beginning of the psalm rather than toward the end (vv. 2, 9a, 10, 13, 12-15, etc.). On the surface of things, the wicked seem to have it better than the righteous, but we should not be fooled by appearances. In due time, the wicked will be no more, and even if we make strenuous efforts to find him, we won’t be able because he will be cut off from the blessings of the righteous (vv. 10, 13, 20, 36, etc.).

Throughout this psalm the promise is made to the righteous of “inheriting the land” or “dwelling in the land” (vv. 3, 9, 11, 18, 22, 29, 34). Because of its repetitive emphasis we should be alert to this concept and seriously inquire into its significance. The answer is not difficult to find since the land represented all the covenant promises which God had given to His people, beginning with Abraham. Yet this emphasis is not without its problems since it is patently (clearly) obvious that many of the world’s righteous live in poverty, not owning so much as a square foot of ground, and there are many true believers who are poor. Commenting on v. 25 when David says, “...I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his descendents begging bread”, a friend of mine once remarked, “David ought to get out more often.” The seeming contradiction found in Ps. 37 has challenged the best of Christian minds that cannot help but notice the

disparity (difference) between David's comment and what is often observed first hand in the harshness of real life. Charles Spurgeon (the most famous preacher in England during the 1800's) said of v. 25, "It is not my observation just as it stands, for I have relieved the children of undoubtedly good men, who have appealed to me as common mendicants [beggars]. But this does not cast a doubt upon the observation of David. He lived under a dispensation more outward, and more of this world than the present rule of personal faith. Never are the righteous forsaken; that is a rule without exception. Seldom indeed do their seed beg bread..." (*The Treasury of David*, Vol. 1, p.176).

A fuller answer lies in the eschatological and typological significance of the psalm. The land promised to the seed of Abraham did not represent merely a piece of real estate in the Middle East, as much as current events would lead us to believe. It represented (typified) the future and final inheritance of all the people of God, the new heavens and the new earth. This is clear from the epistle to the Hebrews in which Abraham's sojourn throughout the land of promise is described as the wanderings of a pilgrim who was looking for a city whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11: 9-16). It is in the new heavens and earth that we find this city which is reserved for the people of faith who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 21-22, especially 22: 14). "Outside [this city] are the dogs and sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying" (Rev. 22: 15). "And nothing unclean and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life" (Rev. 21: 27).

The contrast in Revelation between the righteous and the wicked is the same in Psalm 37 in which the wicked will be "cut off" from the land of the inheritance (vv. 9-10, 22b, 28b, 34b, 38). Notice in Ps. 37: 11 that the "humble will inherit the land," which brings to mind the promise of Christ in the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5: 6). Thus, the comment by David in v. 25 will withstand the test of time. The righteous will never be forsaken for they will inherit eternal life in the new heavens and the new earth restored to its intended glory at the restoration of all things described by the Apostle Paul in Romans 8: 18-25.

We will spend more time later with the interpretation of the wisdom literature of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon which can be quite confusing and apparently self-contradictory (See Proverbs 26: 4-5). As we have seen with Ps. 37: 25, the contradictions are only apparent and not real, but they do require some serious study. If the student wishes to further his understanding of the future inheritance of believers, he may (and should) read the classic work of Patrick Fairbairn, "The Inheritance Destined for the Heirs of Blessing", *Typology of Scripture*, Vol. 1, pp.329-361).

Other examples of wisdom psalms include Ps. 119 which extols the wisdom of the Law of God and also Ps. 1 which sets forth the "two ways" of the wicked and the righteous, the theme for the whole Psalter.

### ***g. Kingship Psalms***

As the title indicates, these psalms speak of God as the king. Psalms in this category would include Pss. 20, 21, 29, 45, 47, 93, 95-99 and have the following characteristics (Harman, p. 30, Longman pp. 34-35).

- (a) the assertion that the Lord ('Yahweh') reigns
- (b) that this rule was from of old
- (c) that this rule is not only over Israel but the whole world
- (d) in Zion the God of Israel is extolled as universal king

In Ps. 29, the word *Yahweh* (Lord) occurs 18 times in only 11 verses. In Ps. 47, the emphasis is shifted from the name of *Yahweh* to *Elohim*, the latter name being used eight times and the former only once by itself and one more time in combination with *Elyon* (God Most High). Notice that the word "king" (*melek*) occurs three times in the space of nine verses. The emphasis is placed upon the exalted God as king of the nations and the whole earth. Notice also v. 5 and its similarity with 1 Thes. 4: 16 which speaks of Jesus Christ the Messiah, the king, "descending" (rather than "ascending") with a "shout" and "the sound of a trumpet"—further evidence of the identification of Yahweh in the OT with the Lord Jesus in the NT. The student is advised to review the names for God in the Systematic Theology syllabus when studying the psalms since much of their interpretation will depend upon a knowledge of the names for God in the OT. He is also advised to use a study Bible which will indicate which name for God is used in each verse.

### ***h. The Imprecatory Psalm***

I have saved this category for last because of its difficulty. Harman and Longman do not include the imprecatory psalm as a separate category although Longman mentions imprecations as one of the seven elements of a lament (See p. 81 of your notes, "Elements of a Lament"). It could, therefore, be argued that they do not constitute a separate genre of psalms although Pss. 35, 69, and 109 would surely merit close attention for this possibility. Whatever view we take, they are troublesome for many Christians and have to be reckoned with one way or the other. Whether we wrestle with them as a separate genre or as an element of laments is neither here nor there.

An imprecation is the act of calling down a curse upon someone. This fact is especially troublesome for African Christians who have grown up in a culture whose pagan past (and present) is filled with stories of witch doctors being employed by others to curse their enemies. These Africans, who have been correctly taught by their Christian pastors and teachers to depart from such pagan practices and to love their enemies, are then confronted with seemingly the same practice by no less a figure than King David himself, a man after God's own heart, who said, "Let his [the wicked man's] days be few; let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children wander about and beg; and let them seek sustenance far from their ruined homes....Let there be none to extend lovingkindness to him, nor any to be gracious to his fatherless children....[etc.] (Ps. 109: 8-10, 12). Also attributed to David is the statement, "O God, shatter their teeth in their mouth; break out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord" (Ps. 58: 6). Huh? What was that, David? And how does that square (reconcile) with our Lord Jesus' command to "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous....Therefore you are to be

perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5: 44-45, 48)? And how can these words be reconciled with the admonitions of the Apostle Paul who told us to “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. . . . Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom. 12: 17a, 19); and “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to *all* men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Gal. 6: 10).

New Testament passages like these have caused many Christians to banish the imprecations of David to the dim and murky past of the OT when the saints didn’t know any better and were not informed by the superior NT principle of loving one’s enemies. But this explanation is much too simple and drives a wedge between the Old and the New Testaments. For *one* thing, it fails to account for the same acts of charity which are evident in the OT even by the same person who utters the psalmodic imprecations. David spares the life of his mortal enemy King Saul on at least two occasions (only two are recorded), and he shows kindness to Saul’s grandson, Mephibosheth, when the standard procedure at the time was to eliminate any potential enemies of the crown (1 Sam. 24 and 26; 2 Sam. 9). (See also L.C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms*, p. 18).

**Secondly**, it fails to reckon with the fact that the author of these imprecations was no hard-hearted sinner, but David, a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13: 14), a man who was spiritually capable of writing a large portion of the psalms of praise, thanksgiving, and wisdom. He was not perfect, to be sure, but his spirituality is not subject to serious scrutiny (examination). Further, David was not having a bad day spiritually when he wrote these imprecations. In the *same* psalm in which he says, “Pour out Thine indignation on them, and may Thy burning anger overtake them,” he also says, “For the Lord hears the needy; and does not despise His who are prisoners. Let heaven and earth praise Him, the seas and everything that moves in them” (Ps. 69: 24, 33-34).

**Third**, this view fails to reckon with the imprecations of the NT. “It is rather surprising that the New Testament has striking points of similarity in the conduct of exemplary individuals, whose course of conduct has always been regarded as being model” Leupold mentions Paul’s remark concerning Alexander the coppersmith (2 Tim. 4: 14); his rebuke of Ananias in Acts 23: 3; and Peter’s rebuke of Simon Magus in Acts 8: 20 (Leupold, p. 20).

**Fourth**, some of the imprecations in the psalms are quoted in the NT as predictions of what would befall the *enemies of Christ*. Peter applies the imprecations of Ps. 69: 25 and Ps. 109: 8 to Judas in Acts 1: 20. In Matt. 23: 38, Jesus applies the same imprecation of Ps. 69: 25 to the unbelieving Jews of Jerusalem. Likewise, Paul condemns the unbelieving Jews of his day with the imprecation of Ps. 69: 22-23 (Rom. 11: 9-10). If the imprecations were beneath the dignity of the NT Christian, it is doubtful that Peter and Paul, and Jesus Himself, would have employed them to make their point.

It is this last point which moves us toward a solution to the interpretation of imprecatory psalms. The imprecations are not to be interpreted as the personal vendettas (personal acts of revenge) against one’s enemies. When David (or another psalmist) called upon the Lord to punish his enemies, he should be understood as the *spokesman for Christ* or *for the corporate people of Christ*. The imprecations of the psalms are not in any sense comparable to the curses which are

called down upon one's *personal* enemies by a local witch doctor (or priest) working for hire—a purely selfish venture. Speaking of this practice in his day John Calvin laments,

How detestable a piece of sacrilege is it on the part of monks, and especially the Franciscan friars, to pervert this psalm by employing it to countenance [approve] the most nefarious [wicked] purposes! If a man harbour malice against a neighbor, it is quite a common thing for him to engage one of these wicked wretches [the friars] to curse him, which he would do by daily repeating this psalm. I know a lady in France who hired a parcel of these friars to curse her own and only son in these words (*Calvin's Commentaries*, Vol. 6, Psalm 109, p. 276).

By employing another human being to avenge the evil against us, we take matters into our own hands, quite the contrary of what Paul does with Alexander the coppersmith by saying, “The **Lord** [not I] will repay him according to his deeds” (2 Tim. 2: 14). This is the same spirit in which Paul speaks when he says, “Never take your *own* revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, **I** will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom. 12: 19). Paul’s imprecation against Alexander was not a prayer of personal vengeance, but a prayer against him as the enemy of *a chosen instrument of God in spreading the gospel—Paul, the Apostle*. When Alexander persecuted *Paul*, he persecuted *Christ*. This observation leads me to the following conclusions below.

The imprecatory psalms are *prophetic* of all the enemies of Christ who persecuted Him while He was here on earth and who persist in persecuting the people of Christ to this very day (Acts 9:4). The persecutors of Christ are the *enemies of God*, a fact which is clear from Ps. 69: 9, “For zeal for Thy house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach *Thee* have fallen on *me*.” When Jesus cleansed the temple of the money-changers, His disciples realized that His actions were a fulfillment of this psalm (Jn. 2: 17). They did not sufficiently understand the second half of the verse. Those who reproached God and the house of God would also reproach Christ by rejecting His message and nailing Him to a cross, the agony of which is prophesied in the same psalm (vv. 4, 7-8, 20-21, 26). But the persecutors of Christ would not be satisfied in putting Jesus to death, but would persist in harassing and putting to death the followers of Christ: “If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you” (Jn. 15: 18; see also Rev. 12: 17). But they will not prevail against God’s people any more than they were able to prevail against Christ Himself. They crucified Him, but He rose from the dead and sits at the right hand of God until the Father makes His enemies a footstool for His feet (Ps. 110: 1; Matt. 22: 44). ***This is precisely why personal vengeance is condemned.*** The real offense is not against us, even though we are always tempted to take it personally and often do so. If the offense is real at all, rather than imagined through our own self-centeredness, ***it is first and foremost an offense against God, and He will deal with it in His own good time and in His own way.*** This gives us the psychological and spiritual freedom to love our enemies and to pray for those who mistreat us. Rather than calling down fire from heaven (Lk.9: 55), we should fear for their safety and pray for their repentance knowing that our heavenly Father takes serious offense at their mistreatment of His children.

Given what has been said above, what is the *present application* of the imprecatory psalms for Christians today? I have already said that they are not relics of an age long-past, but were employed by Jesus and His apostles in the NT, and ***they should be employed today when the honor of Christ is at stake, when the gospel is hindered, or when the actions of wicked men threaten the Church, the people of God,*** etc. Many scenarios could be imagined in which such

psalms would be appropriate, but three examples, one from Scripture, one from history, and one current example may be sufficient for explanation.

When Peter and John healed the man who was lame from birth (Acts 3), they were apprehended by the priests and Sadducees who put them in prison (Acts 4: 3). The next day as they appeared before the Council, they were told to speak no longer in the name of Jesus, or they would suffer the consequences (4: 17-18). They replied to this threat by saying, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard” (4: 19-20).

Fearing the repercussions of a popular uprising, they let the disciples go. When Peter and John came together with other disciples, they reported everything that had happened, a report which elicited a quotation from Ps. 2, a psalm of imprecation against anyone—particularly leaders—who would dare lift a hand against the Lord or against His Anointed One (4: 25-26). Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Gentiles, the people of Israel and their religious leaders had fulfilled the prophecy of Ps. 2 by gathering themselves together against Jesus Christ and putting Him to death (4: 27). But they did not know that this was all part of God’s plan (4: 28).

What follows in v. 29 is an imprecation, “And now Lord, ***take note of their threats***, and grant that Thy bondservants may speak Thy word with all confidence, while Thy dost extend Thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Thy holy servant Jesus.” ***The phrase, “take note of their threats,” is a reference to Ps. 2: 3*** which is the threat of all religious and political leaders against the rule and reign of Christ whom they repudiate, the same threat being made by the Council against Peter and John. The disciples were not concerned about their personal safety. ***They were concerned that their work as heralds of the gospel would be hindered by wicked men.*** In response to these threats, their fellow disciples repeat the imprecation of Ps. 2 which is a warning to all not to challenge the authority of Christ. In the same way, we have the privilege, indeed the duty, to call upon God to “take note of the threats” of godless men who would dare stand in the way of the gospel of Christ and our work as messengers. What God does to the wicked in response to our request is His business. He may choose to remove them by death, or He may choose to allow us to die a martyr’s death as He did in Stephen’s case (Acts 7). Whatever He does, the end result will be the same, the progress of the gospel (See Acts 8: 1-4 in which the persecution of believers resulted in their dispersion to different places, preaching the gospel as they went.)

Using an historical example, we all remember the trail of death and destruction left by the regime of Idi Amin, a man who attempted to convert Uganda to the Muslim faith by torture and execution. (Of course, his motives were not religious, but purely political with his nefarious connections with Mohamar Qaddafi in Libya.) ***Christians living during this holocaust would have been obliged to pray for his removal.*** How God chose to remove Him, whether by a bullet between his eyes or by conversion to Christ would be left to Him, but his removal was necessary for the survival of the Church and the progress of the gospel in Uganda. God chose to dislodge Amin through popular resistance and the aid of Tanzania, and though he lived to old age, God “took note of his threats” against His Church, and Amin was never again a danger to God’s people. He has now received the “reward” for all his labors, an eternity in hell. He did not heed the warning of Ps. 2: 10-12 to “kiss the son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way.”

For a current application, Christians in the US could be praying for the removal of all the Supreme Court justices who support the wicked practice of abortion and for them to be replaced by God-fearing men and women who are pro-life. How God chooses to do that (or if He chooses to do that) is His business. I am hoping that they may get converted, change their views, retire from office, get sick, or even die a natural death or by a car accident if that is what it takes to give millions of unborn babies the chance to live. This may sound radical to many Christians, but it is not as radical as first degree, premeditated murder. Christians in Uganda must likewise be clear about *who* are the enemies of Christ and His church, and pray that God would remove them—either by giving them repentance and faith (for this is one way to remove them), or by popular election, or by sickness or death. In no sense am I condoning (approving) taking matters into your own hands through violent means. The **Lord**, not individual Christians, will choose what to do with such people. Our responsibility is to *pray*—through *imprecations* like those of Peter in Acts 4—that the gospel is not hindered.

The conclusion, then, is this: the imprecatory prayer is still appropriate and useful to the child of God, and still more useful and appropriate for the *corporate church to employ as a means of God's protection of His Church and His gospel, to the end that King Jesus might reign wherever the sun shines, that God's will be done, and His kingdom come, on earth, as it is in heaven.*

### *i. Combination of Categories*

As we have seen above, it is often the case that a psalm may be classified in more than one way. Psalm 73 has the marks of a lament but is also a wisdom psalm. Psalm 78 is a wisdom psalm and a psalm of remembrance. Psalm 45 is a kingship psalm, a wisdom psalm, and a hymn. As Longman notes, “Genres are not written on tablets of stone; they are flexible. Psalms may be profitably studied under more than one of our stated genres” (p. 35).

### **Conclusion**

Much more could be said about the interpretation of the psalms, but this would go beyond the scope of this syllabus. The student is advised to read the works of Harman and Longman on the psalms, as well as good commentaries.

### **V. Wisdom Literature: Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes**

We have already discussed the wisdom Psalms, but much more needs to be said about the wisdom literature of the OT which often presents the interpreter with many enigmatic (confusing) statements. One reason for this confusion is that wisdom literature has its foundation more in the general revelation of creation rather than the special revelation of redemption and prophecy which includes law. In the Law and the Prophets we are confronted with absolute truth in the form of “Thus says the Lord,” while in the wisdom literature we find simply the observation of human experience which needs the explanation and corroboration (further support) of other Scriptures (See also Daniel M. Doriani, *Getting the Message*, p. 235; R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, p.89; and especially Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom: Israel's Wisdom Literature in the Christian Life*, pp. 74-76).

Furthermore, the lens of human experience through which reality is seen and through which much of the wisdom literature comes to us is often jaded human experience worn out from the trials and disappointments of life. For example in the book of Ecclesiastes we are bombarded with the constant refrain, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” Well, is it? Surely the Christian cannot say this. Even in light of all our difficulties, not *everything* is vain and absurd (the meaning of the word is closer to “meaningless”—see my *Wisdom Literature* notes). As a matter of fact, through His providence God works *all things* for our good (Rom. 8: 28). But care must be taken how we read the book of Ecclesiastes. The writer did not have the benefit of the full revelation of Christ or the NT scriptures, and we must not impute this NT theology into his worldview. He lived and wrote with the knowledge he had as an OT believer who was honest with himself about life’s struggles. (And he *was* a believer. Just read the end of the book.) Nevertheless, even disadvantaged by partial revelation, the book of Ecclesiastes strikes a responsive chord in all of us who are not living in the denial of a Pollyanna-Christianity in which everything comes up smelling like roses—or at least we claim that it does. The truth of the matter is: life is tough and often confusing, and sometimes it doesn’t seem worth living. It takes a book like Ecclesiastes to convince us that God understands our darkest moments, and that we are not forsaken in the midst of them.

In the book of Job, we actually learn wisdom from the opposite of what is being preached by Job’s friends. This is not to say that they are not correct in much of what they say, but that their “wisdom” of poetic justice (a person always gets what he deserves, whether good or bad) is mistaken. Suffering, though often the result of personal sin, is not always God’s payback for being naughty. Job’s friends thought they had God in a neat little box which could easily be explained if only Job would listen to their superior wisdom. But God’s actions, it turns out, are not always explainable, nor does God feel in the least bit obligated to explain them, something which Job found out the hard way.

Examples of what has been said thus far will soon follow. For a thorough treatment of wisdom literature, the student is directed to the work of Graeme Goldsworthy. From this work, as well as the other works cited, we will now develop a strategy for interpreting Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes.

### **A. Proverbs**

[Note: See my concise commentary on *Proverbs* in *Wisdom Literature*.]

A proverb is a “clear, memorable statement of truth learned through the distillation [condensing something to its essence] of extended human experience” (Dorani, p. 234). Terry defines proverbs as “short, pithy sayings, in which a wise counsel, a moral lesson, or a suggestive experience, is expressed in memorable form” (*Biblical Hermeneutics*, p.329).

***Proverbs do not have the force of moral absolutes which allow no exceptions, but are general principles for godly living gathered from human observation.***

Proverbs 16: 3 may be used to illustrate this point. “Commit your works to the Lord, and your plans will be established.” This is a general rule, and we can take comfort as Christians knowing that we have the resources of prayer in asking for God’s guidance in planning for the future. The

verse also gives us the admonition of committing everything we do to the glory of God. But does it promise us success in every venture we take? If I go into business, is God giving me a guarantee of success? If this was true, most of the world's wealth would be controlled by Christians, something experience appears to prove otherwise. Every Christian has had multiple experiences of making plans and committing those plans to the Lord only to find those plans turned upside down through unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances. Jim Eliot, famous missionary to Ecuador in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, spent years establishing a school for the Indians only to see it swept away by a flood—a flood caused by God. He made his plans and he committed those plans to the Lord, but they were not established. The Apostle Paul planned to take the gospel to Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit wouldn't let him. Did he not pray enough about it? Was he going with the wrong motives? Nothing from the text seems to indicate a lack of prayer or misplaced motives. God simply wanted him to go to Macedonia instead of Bithynia (Acts 16: 7-9).

Nevertheless, the general principle must not be lost in the exceptions. Committing our works to the Lord by seeking His guidance and desiring His glory is a strong preventative to failure. Furthermore, the ultimate hope of every Christian is to be pleasing to God, so if our plans get turned on their head in favor of God's better plans, our ultimate plan has indeed been accomplished. The important point for us to remember in this example is to avoid easy, simplistic interpretations (and conclusions) to the Proverbs.

Another example would be Proverbs 10: 3, "The Lord will not allow the righteous to hunger, but He will thrust aside the craving of the wicked." As a general rule, God's people are the continual recipients of His kind providence, and all of us have had the experience of seeing His material provisions of food and money arrive in the brink of time to deliver us out of some tight spot. But is this a guarantee that none of God's people will ever starve to death, and should the victims of starvation always be classified as "the wicked"? If we take this proverb as an absolute, we will force ourselves into this corner. We will also be at odds with the teaching of Scripture elsewhere. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, it was Lazarus, the poor man who we may presume to have died of starvation or exposure, who is said to have gone to heaven (Lk. 16: 19-31). There are also laws in the OT which provide for the hungry along with many NT scriptures which encourage mercy to the poor. Looking at the second part of the verse, is the craving of the wicked *always* thrust aside? Have we not all seen the "prosperity of the wicked" which bothered the psalmist and us as well (Ps. 73)? People get filthy rich from selling illegal drugs and running prostitution rings, and dictators get rich by stealing money in the millions from the public coffers and executing opponents. (Fidel Castro, brutal communist dictator of Cuba, is estimated by *Forbes* magazine to be worth \$500 million [cited in *World* magazine, April 2, 2005, p. 11].) And does not the Bible itself teach us that God "causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5: 45) and that we as believers should "do good to *all* men, and especially [but not exclusively] to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6: 10)?

Proverbs 10: 4 says, "Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich." Who can deny the wisdom of this statement? Much poverty is directly related to sloth (laziness), and prosperity is the direct result of energetic work. There are countless millions in the world who aimlessly waste away precious hours on the street corners when they could be working or at least looking for work. There are many who envy the rich and claim that

their riches are the questionable fruit of exploiting the poor, but if the truth was known and admitted, many of the rich, and perhaps most of them, have earned their riches through eighty-hour-work weeks and wise investment of the profits. But again we are confronted by a proverb which has exceptions. There are many rich people who have scarcely lifted a finger for their money, inheriting it from more productive parents. There are others who have exploited the poor for their riches and still others who could have paid their deserving employees better wages and better benefits, but instead chose to increase their personal profits and the profits to their investors. (One such example is Home Depot in the US which pays its chief executive officer \$25,000,000 per year in income and benefits while its employees, some of whom I know, are overworked and underpaid. This is my personal observation after spending much valuable time in Home Depot waiting in check-out lines to buy materials for my remodeling business.) Many people in the US and Africa work hard and long hours to make the little that they have. Their diligent labor is hardly making them rich but only getting them by from day to day. Once again, we could throw up our hands in confusion and skepticism, drawing the conclusion that this proverb does not “work.” But this would be mistaken for the reasons we have already mentioned. Besides, even the book of Proverbs gives us an exception by praising the poor man who has integrity (Prov. 19: 1).

In Proverbs 16: 7 we read, “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with Him.” Again, this is a general principle outlining the wisdom and practical advantage of being obedient to the Lord. Certainly one’s moral integrity is a strong deterrent to being falsely accused by people who would enjoy bringing a good man down but can find no credible accusation against him. However, even good men are often slandered. Naboth was accused of blasphemy and stoned to death (1 Kings 21), and David was hounded unmercifully by King Saul. Many a pastor knows what it is like to have his words twisted and distorted to such an extent that they bear little resemblance to what he originally said. Small wonder that the average stay of a US pastor in the local church is only two years. Of course pastors are not perfect, but Jesus stands as the ultimate example of the perfect man who was pleasing to the Father in every sense, but also one who was despised and rejected of men and maliciously slandered. He also told us that even as He was hated, we too would be hated and persecuted. Yet the general principle remains inviolable (indestructible), and we do well to imitate the attitude of the Apostle Paul who did his “best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men” (Acts 24: 16). The problem arises when we fail to recognize the exceptions and burden ourselves with unnecessary guilt when men and women, even Christians, despise us.

We can see that a rigid interpretation of the proverbs as *absolutes allowing no exceptions* will get us into “deep weeds” hermeneutically. Better to accept them as general principles of human observations which make no attempt to cover the exceptions. Doriani states the matter well.

Proverbs are not promises. Proverbs describe life as it is in brief, graphic bursts, using figurative language to catch the attention and remain in the memory. They make their mark by being bold, without stating exceptions, qualifications, or nuances [variations of meaning]. Consequently, proverbs articulate [state] probable truth, not absolute truth; general truth, not automatic rules; tendencies, not guarantees from God. They are the way of wisdom, even shrewdness, in the world, not the way of guaranteed success (*Getting the Message*, pp. 234-235).

In a very pithy statement of his own, Doriani says that “The book of Proverbs describes wisdom for a *sunny* day, a normal day. They say, ‘Live this way and life will, *ordinarily*, go well for you’” (emphasis mine).

Goldsworthy gives us another word of warning, “The appeal of the simple, practical nature of Proverbs may be deceptive” (*Gospel and Wisdom*, p. 74). He illustrates this warning with the comic book story of a young bookworm named Basil who was always reading books of great learning and then testing their wisdom in practical ways. Basil comes upon the statement, “Still waters run deep” and reasoning that swift waters must be shallow, he confidently walks into a the current of a rapidly flowing creek, only to be swept under.

The proverb contains wisdom distilled from one or a number of actual experiences, but the way it is constructed may give it the appearance of being a general law of nature or rule of life. Ironically it is this apparent generality which appeals to us, and yet the proverbial form was *never intended to function in this way* (p. 75, emphasis mine).

If we approach the proverbs as Basil did, we will soon find ourselves holding our breath for dear life and gasping for air when we bobble to the surface.

Part of the problem we have with wisdom literature, Goldsworthy maintains, is the way we often interpret the verbal inspiration of the Bible. A “rigid” view of inspiration fails to reckon with the fact that the humanness of the authors was not suspended or temporarily disconnected from the real world as they wrote scripture. The exceptions to this rule would be those relatively rare occasions in which a prophet would be caught up in a trance or immersed in a dream, but most of the scriptures, including the wisdom literature, were written while the author was in full control of his mental faculties and fully susceptible to the physical, societal, and psychological forces which affected his thinking and writing. Unlike the prophet who proclaimed, “Thus says the Lord,” the wisdom writer was not conscious of the fact that God was speaking through him. Solomon was not putting words in God’s mouth when he said, “All is vanity,” and Job was not conscious of being quoted when he said, “...I desire to argue with God.” Both of these men were at the time broken with the circumstances confronting them. At the same time, their words were inspired by the Holy Spirit who governed what they wrote and influenced them to say exactly what God intended them to say.

The same is true of the more positive wisdom statements, “Where there is no guidance, the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory” (Prov. 11: 14). In making this observation, the writer is not laying down a commandment requiring multiple opinions before making a decision, he is simply drawing from years of experience, his own and others, that two or three points of view are generally better than one. The wisdom sayings are not “laws given by direct revelation from God but rather are human observations from life’s experiences.” This is one reason it is ill-advised for Christians to treat the Proverbs as practical details of “the ethical content of the ten commandments.” They were never intended as a substitute for the Ten Commandments, but as illustrations of the *way* wisdom is learned. “Wisdom is presented as both a human task and a divine gift....” (p. 76).

They could be said to supplement the priest’s instruction in the law. Thus, while the law says: ‘You shall not commit murder’, wisdom means learning from experience and wise counsel how to avoid the multitude of situations that could conceivably lead to murder....Wisdom learns from the experience of the

multiplicity of life's situations so that we are better able to cope with their subtleties [things which are not obvious or easily discerned] (p. 76).

The overall emphasis of wisdom is that we do not become passively dependent when we trust the Lord. Wisdom is telling us that not all our knowledge comes from direct revelation (p. 80).

Wisdom tells us that God has spoken and acted with sufficient clarity for us to perceive the nature of reality when we humble ourselves before a gracious God. God will not enter into our lives to do our thinking for us. He shows trust in us by giving us the equipment and then leaving us to learn about life (p. 86).

We cannot learn wisdom simply by reading the Ten Commandments or any other part of the Bible. We learn it through practical obedience to the truth (Heb. 5: 14). This is why the term "elder" in the NT Church implies the necessity of having spiritual leaders who "have been around the block a few times," have taken their lumps and bruises, spiritually speaking, and learned from it, to provide spiritual oversight for the church. Instead, we have overemphasized (at least in the US) the necessity of a cognitive (intellectual) understanding of the faith regardless of the practical ability to use it. Passing Presbytery exams in the US is almost exclusively a function of the memory, being able to outline books of the Bible and answering questions of theology (some of them obscure) to satisfy other teaching elders who at one time had to pass the same exam.

### ***B. Job***

[Note: See my concise commentary on *Job* in *Wisdom Literature*.]

The book of Job is basically about *theodicy*, a justification of the ways of God with men. Technically, a theodicy is a vindication or argument which clears God of any blame for allowing evil to exist. Specifically, Job is about a theodicy which clears God of any blame for allowing the righteous to suffer. Notice that it is a book *about* theodicy; it is not being said here that it *is* a theodicy simply because no claim is being made in the book that God's ways with men need to be vindicated. Christians seeking an answer to the question of why the righteous suffer or demanding an explanation of why God allows certain things to happen will certainly be disappointed with this book. At the end, Job does not receive such an answer, even though he often seeks it earnestly during his ordeal (Job 7: 20).

At the same time, the book is certainly not a rebuke to those honest but humble Christians who wish to ask, "Why?" As Goldsworthy notes, "We cannot suppose that the entire middle section of the book containing Job's search for understanding is put there so that it can be ruled out of order. Here is a piece of true wisdom in which the search for an understanding of God's ways refuses all trite [simplistic] answers which suggest either that we know it all or that we can know nothing" (p. 92). On the one hand were Job's friends who thought they knew it all. For them, the reason for Job's downfall was, beyond dispute, some personal moral failing (Job 5: 6; 8: 6, 20; 11: 13-14). On the other hand are the pantheists and eastern mystics who accept suffering without question as being an inevitable and natural part of life without any reference to human failure and man's relationship to a holy God. The answer to human suffering, in their estimation, is that there *is* no answer and that there *need be* no answer.

But knowing *everything* and knowing *nothing* are both impossible and unacceptable alternatives for the Christian. It is impossible to know *nothing* about the ways of God because some knowledge is instilled in man by virtue of his being created in the image of God. Paul says “that which is known about God is evident within them; [how?] for God made it evident to them. [By what means?] For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1: 19-20). It is also impossible to know *everything* about the ways of God because man is created, which means he is not God. Adam wished to know everything independently of God, which is just the same as wishing to be his own God. To know everything about the ways of God is to be God. By God’s providence, Job was included in the canon of Scripture so that the believer can know something of how God deals with his people, though not exhaustively. God wishes to make Himself known without going to the extreme of disclosing all of His mystery, a mystery which is too big for man in the first place.

It is not saying too much that the wisdom of Job’s counselors was confined [limited] to the wisdom of Proverbs. Remember that the wisdom of Proverbs does not cover every situation, and God never intended it to. Job’s friends would have been correct in saying that suffering is *often* the consequence of personal sin, and prosperity is *often* the result of righteous living. These facts are affirmed in Proverbs and much of what these friends say is in total agreement with the Proverbs. Their mistake was taking the view that suffering is *always* the consequence of personal sin, and that life always sprouts roses for those who behave themselves. They make the mistake of allowing no exceptions. By giving us the book of Job, God did us a great favor by balancing the wisdom of Proverbs with the wisdom of Job (and the wisdom of Ecclesiastes). Life is often confusing because Proverbs doesn’t always seem to “work” in our experience. Of course, this is not the fault of the Proverbs, but in the way it is often interpreted as fixed rules which have become “fossilized” (Goldsworthy, p. 96).

At the end of the day, this is a blessing in itself, because if Proverbs always “worked” and life were always predictable, we would worship God only for the benefits we could see and touch and not because of who He is and what He has done for us in redemption. God would become our genie in the bottle Whom we could command to bless us whenever we produced the prescribed behavior. However, if only the wisdom of Proverbs were operating in the universe, we would never be blessed by His grace whenever our performance was lacking. Every Christian has had the embarrassing experience of having a “beastly” day of sinning (Ps. 73: 21-22) only to be blessed all over right down to his socks at the end of the day. Some of my most blessed opportunities of sharing the gospel have come to me shortly after a ghastly outburst of anger when things were not going well at work. Thankfully, most of these were private explosions while I was doing carpentry or plumbing and no one else was blasted away. But the Spirit was grieved, and after repenting I walked slump-shouldered for some time wondering how God could love the likes of me. On days like this, when my self-sufficiency was at its least, the gospel meant the most, and I could explain it better than other days. Under a fixed system of retribution (the payback of good for righteousness and evil for unrighteousness), grace is not placed in bold relief against the backdrop of our unworthiness. God never intended Proverbs to tell the whole story, a mistake Job’s friends made by “hardening the general patterns of retribution into a rigid dogma [doctrine] of cause and effect” (Goldsworthy, p. 106).

To his credit, Job shuns the counsel of his foolish wife to curse God and die (Job 2: 9-10), and continues to hold on to his hope that one day he will share a future with the God who has afflicted him (Job 19: 25-26). Deprived of any of the insider information given to the reader in chapters 1: 1-13 and 2: 1-6, Job doesn't have a clue about what is going on, but he trusts God just the same. "Wisdom is aware of its limitations and it is ready to admit that there is much of God's order that is hidden from us" (Goldsworthy, p. 98). Job doesn't have to have the whole picture (See J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 91-93). This is true wisdom, the kind we need to imitate when life falls apart. His friends, on the other hand, thought they had the whole picture. To them life was a seamless tapestry of God's order easily discernible to those with the eyes and good sense to see it. Job was just acting like a dumb brute. By observing the predictability of a moral universe, they were able, they thought, to formulate a doctrine of God which could be consulted on any occasion and in any circumstance. Thus formulated, God was then obligated to conform to their understanding of who He was. As Goldsworthy notes (pp. 101-102),

It is a short step from seeing God as the creator and sustainer of order to thinking of God as himself bound to our simplistic notions of order. When we begin to give independent status to things like order, justice, goodness and truth, it is not long before we also begin to insist that God should conform to them. We then build up a picture of a just and good God on the basis of the supposedly self-evident ideas of justice and goodness. The biblical picture is the opposite. God reveals what he is like and in so doing shows us what justice and goodness are. So with order; the revelation of God must define it for us. God is not a creature subject to a higher independent principle called order. Order is what it is because God is what he is, and because he made it so.

Job, then, learns of God as the God who is above the order which is perceptible to man....The knowability of God must never be stretched so as to eliminate the mystery of God's unknowability....We must always allow that God is infinitely greater than our understanding can grasp both in his being and in his ways.

This kind of wisdom is needed whenever we are confronted with the many mind-boggling sections of the Bible: Hosea being commanded to marry a prostitute, the book of Hebrews commending Rahab the harlot who saved the Israelite spies by telling a lie, etc. God does not always conform to our preconceptions of Him or of truth. Getting wisdom is the means by which we realign our conceptions to match the truth of who God is and what He requires of us.

At the end of the book, God rebukes Job's friends for their attempt to simplify Him and to put Him in a neat box (42: 7-9). It is striking that He does not rebuke them for accusing Job falsely, perhaps because that offense paled in comparison to the former. He also rebukes Job for demanding an explanation for his suffering from the God who created the universe. Job could no more understand why God does everything He does than he could understand how He made the world out of nothing. His wise providence over all things, people, and events would be no less incomprehensible than the latter. As a mere mortal, Job needed to know his limitations (Chps. 38-39; 40: 1-2, 6-24; 41: 1-34). Having much to say earlier and wishing to challenge God to a debate (13: 3, 15), Job is now speechless (40: 3-5) except to admit that he had been chattering on about things he knew very little (42: 3). Not wishing to argue any longer, he is ready to listen and be taught (42: 4). Up to now his knowledge of God had been too theoretical, but now he was just beginning to understand. He repents in dust and ashes (vv. 5-6) and has now begun his quest for true wisdom: to let God be God.

### *C. Ecclesiastes*

[Note: See my concise commentary on *Ecclesiastes* in *Wisdom Literature*.]

Ecclesiastes is one of the most difficult books in the Bible. The reader will possibly testify that he can count on one hand (or one finger?) the number of sermons he has heard from this book. A brief reading of the book will reveal why this is so, and a careful reading of the book will confirm it. The author, most likely Solomon (v. 1), moves back and forth between statements which hold out a glimmer of hope for his sanctification and those which could be spoken by Hugh Hefner (the joys of free sex), Maynard on the old “Doby Gillis Show”(the disadvantages of hard work), or Donald Trump (money is everything). A few quotations will illustrate.

### ***Sex and money***

Also, I collected for myself silver and gold, and the treasure of kings and provinces, I provided for myself male and female singers and the pleasures of men—many concubines....And all that my eyes desired I did not refuse them. I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure, for my heart was pleased because of all my labor and this was my reward for all my labor (2: 8, 10).

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves abundance with its income. This too is vanity (5: 10).

Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life, and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun (9:9)

### ***Life's Labor***

Thus I hated all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun, for I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the fruit of my labor for which I have labored by acting wisely under the sun. This too is vanity. Therefore I completely despaired of all the fruit of my labor for which I had labored under the sun....For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? (2: 18-20, 22).

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and to do good in one's lifetime; moreover, that every man who eats and drinks sees good in all his labor—it is the gift of God (3: 12-13).

He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap....Sow your seed in the morning, and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good (11: 4, 6).

### ***The Reward of the Righteous and the Wicked***

There is futility which is done on the earth, that is, there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked. On the other hand, there are evil men to

whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I say that this too is futility (8: 14).

It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean, and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear (9: 2).

The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity" (2: 14-15).

There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink ;and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen, that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him? For to a person who is good in His sight He has given wisdom and knowledge and joy, while to the sinner He has given the task of gathering and collecting so that he may give to the one who is good in God's sight. This too is vanity and striving after wind (2: 24-26).

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them."...The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil (12: 1, 13-14).

It was the preacher's purpose from the very beginning of his journey to obtain wisdom (1: 12-13a; 17a; 7: 25). His conclusion at the end of his quest is that comprehensive wisdom is impossible to achieve, an admission he makes at the first of the book (1: 17b) and toward the end (8: 16-17). The reason for this admission is that there appears to be a "confusion of order" (Goldsworthy's terms) in contrast to the retributive justice (rewards for righteousness and punishment for unrighteousness) seen in Proverbs. According to his own personal observations, it is difficult to determine whether righteousness pays or not. Sometimes it clearly pays, but at other times there seems to be no difference in the fate of the righteous and the fate of the wicked (See the verses quoted above; also Goldsworthy, p. 110).

We have seen this same dilemma before in Psalm 73 (See your notes on the Psalms). The difference there is that the psalmist finds his solution in the future salvation of the righteous and the final judgment of the wicked. Since God resolves everything redemptively in the future, the complexities and confusion of the present situation should not cause us to despair. The righteous man will be saved from this present evil world and the wicked will get what is coming to him. What happens to us in this life becomes almost irrelevant. However, the value of Ecclesiastes is that the writer does not immediately draw upon the future resolution of all things in the redemptive plan of God, and by not doing so, he refuses to take the edge off the tensions that we face in the present (Goldsworthy, p. 113). The "preacher" will not allow us to get away with the "pie in the sky" theology which masks over the deep trauma (hurt) that we all feel when we are earnestly seeking to please God, but everything we do seems to turn to mush. Added to this

confusion is the seemingly simple life of those who have no inclination at all to please or worship the God who apparently awards their spiritual apathy (indifference) with sunshine and rain (Matt. 5: 45).

“Qohelet [the preacher] is a rebuke to the false optimism which comes from a simplistic view of wisdom’s goal” (p. 113). And what is this goal? The goal of wisdom is not to figure it all out and take the mystery (the tension) out of life. It is not to find “God’s perfect will for your life” and thus avoid all the pitfalls which less spiritual people suffer because they are too dense to read all the directions. And this statement is not an encouragement to be lazy in the scriptures or in keeping God’s commandments, something the preacher encourages us to do (12: 13), but only a recognition that keeping all the rules will not vaccinate us from all or even most of the ills of living in a fallen world.

The student will find J. I. Packer’s analysis of Ecclesiastes very helpful (*Knowing God*, “God’s Wisdom and Ours”, pp. 89-97). In this chapter, Packer uses the analogy of the York signal box in England to illustrate the presumption of some Christians who believe that God takes the mystery and confusion out of a person’s life when they become Christians. In the signal box, which sits high above the tangled web of train tracks coming into York, the train controller can make sense of everything going on below him and give instructions to the hundreds of trains coming into the station at a given time. This is because he sees the whole layout of train tracks and the incoming and outgoing trains (represented by blinking lights on an electronic board) all at once. The spectator on the ground has a completely different experience, seeing only a mass of confusion and not being able to make sense out of any train movement going on simply because he does not and cannot see the whole picture at a glance. The mistake of many Christians, Packer laments, is that they believe that their faith in Christ puts them inside the signal box lifted up above the confusion on the ground. They can know with some measure of confidence and certainty what God (the Controller) is doing with their lives on a week by week or even a day by day basis. In this way, Romans 8: 28 (“God causes all things to work together for good...”) would not have to be a matter of *faith*, but of *sight* since they could actually see it all happening in front of them. We’ll let Packer explain where this kind of thinking leads (p. 92).

Such people spend much time poring over the book of providence, wondering why God should have allowed this or that to take place, whether they should take it as a sign to stop doing one thing and start doing another, or what they should deduce [conclude] from it. If they end up baffled, they put it down to their own lack of spirituality.

Christians suffering from depression, physical, mental or spiritual (note, these are three different things!) may drive themselves almost crazy with this kind of futile enquiry. For it is futile; make no mistake about that. It is true that when God has given us guidance by application of principles He will on occasion confirm it to us by unusual providences, which we recognize at once as corroborative [supporting] signs. But this is quite a different thing from trying to read a message about God’s secret purposes out of every unusual thing that happens to us. So far from the gift of wisdom consisting in the power to do this, the gift actually presupposes [assumes without proof] our conscious inability to do it....

Wisdom, then, does not consist in the ability to discern God’s purpose in everything that happens to us; it is just the opposite. It is the ability to know that much of what God is doing with us cannot be analyzed with any degree of accuracy. The kind of wisdom taught in Ecclesiastes is the kind which helps us do the right thing at the right time. Packer uses another illustration to make his point (p. 93). When driving down the road, the driver does not needlessly bother

himself with questions which have no apparent answers: why the road suddenly takes a sharp curve or why the on-coming driver is taking his half of the road out of the middle (something Ugandan truck drivers enjoy doing, especially at night). Even if such questions could be answered, the answers would not help us survive to our desired destination. The good driver simply responds appropriately to the situation in front of him and does the right thing at the right time. He slows down in the curve and moves to the shoulder of the road to avoid hitting the truck driver, who hasn't slept for the past two days. This is what Biblical wisdom is like. It realistically sees life as it is, which is sometimes not too pretty, and it enables us to respond to the many unforeseen difficulties and sorrows we are confronted with on a daily basis, trusting that God understands everything and has a purpose for everything even if we don't know what it is and possibly never will.

Having lived and worked in Uganda for a short year and a half, I have come to believe that Africans are far more inclined to accept difficulty and sorrow than Americans. Americans (including me) demand a reason for everything partly owing to their philosophical Enlightenment past which optimistically and naively taught that man was going to come up with the scientific explanation for everything. Such explanations didn't materialize (come to pass), but the roots of Enlightenment thinking die very slowly. Americans like to "fix" things and fix them quickly with simple solutions. When they fail, they simply go on to the next "fix." But life is not fixed so easily, and many people in America who have at one time professed faith in Christ have drifted into unbelief because God did not perform according to their expectations—like the man I talked to one time who did not believe in God after his young son died of heart disease. Having seen many such children in the hospital ward suffering as his son did, he reasoned that with so much suffering among innocent children, God either did not exist, or if He did exist, He could not be a God of love worthy of our worship.

If Africans were as easily dissuaded (persuaded against something) from the Christian faith, there would be very few African Christians, many of whom have seen far more suffering than the average person both personally, economically, and politically. Based on my very limited observation and understanding of African Christianity, it hangs on to the faith far more tenaciously than this man. Where Africans seem to fail is in accepting the will of God (His plan) without recognizing that man's responsible or irresponsible actions are included in this plan. God's plan is the ultimate cause of everything, but He generally works out His plan by means of secondary causes which include human involvement, both good and bad. While it is true that human suffering is part of "God's plan," it is also part of God's plan that we relieve much human suffering by keeping His commandments. When we fail to keep His commandments as individuals and corporately as a nation, more suffering is the result. If this were not true, we would be machines living in a meaningless, automated universe. (The student is referred to the notes on *Systematic Theology*, "God's Decrees," for further discussion.)

But Ecclesiastes purposely views life from the limited perspective of human observation and not divine providence; and the preacher's complaint, "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity!" is to be expected. If we cannot discern the purpose in what we do, what profit is there in doing anything (1: 3; 2: 11, 22; 3: 9; 5: 16)?

It is to this pessimistic conclusion, says the preacher, that optimistic expectations of finding the divine purpose of everything will ultimately lead you (cf. 1: 17f.). And of course he is right. For the world we live in is in fact the sort of place that he has described. The God who rules it hides Himself. Rarely does

this world look as if a beneficent Providence were running it. Rarely does it appear that there is a rational power behind it all. Often and often what is worthless survives, while what is valuable perishes. Be realistic, says the preacher; face these facts; see life as it is. You will have no true wisdom till you do (Packer, p. 95).

If wisdom is not the ability to figure everything out (8: 16-17), then what is it? The preacher provides the answer. It is recognizing that you are accountable to God for all your actions (11: 9; 12: 14). It is preparing yourself spiritually while you are still young so you will be able to enjoy old age with all of its inconveniences and so you will be able to look death in the face with confidence and courage (12: 1-7; see a discussion of this passage under “Allegories” in *Hermeneutics*). It is enjoying everything as God’s good gifts to you, especially the work which He has given you to do (9: 7-9; 3: 12-13; 11: 1-6). Finally, and conclusively, wisdom is to “fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person” (12: 13). We may not understand the reason behind all the commandments either, but God does, and we will be wise to think dependently upon Him rather than trying to go it alone.