



Psalm 119.105

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# Polishing Our Hermeneutical Glasses

21 Principles  
For Interpreting The Bible

by Roderick Graciano



## Herman What?

**T**he Greek verb *hermenevo* appears in passages like John 9.7, and means “interpret” or “translate.” From it we get our English word *hermeneutics*, which is what we call the study and discipline of interpreting texts.

For the serious Bible student and minister, it is imperative to develop a personal set of hermeneutical rules by which he or she *consciously* handles the biblical text. Until a person does so, he or she will tend to interpret and expound biblical passages in an inconsistent and less than compelling manner. On the other hand, those who do consciously embrace a set of interpretive principles will expound the Scriptures more convincingly, and avoid much confusion and unnecessary doctrinal debate.

The following study is presented with these benefits in mind, not to *sell* its 21 principles to you the reader, but to help you start the process of deciding which principles you find compelling enough to add to a personal list of hermeneutical rules. As you continue developing your personal hermeneutics beyond this introductory study, we recommend additional reading like Fee’s and Stuart’s excellent little book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.

May God bless you with fruitful ministry as you strive to understand the Scriptures in order to do God’s will (John 7.17).

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## 21 Principles For Interpreting The Bible

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**PLEASE NOTE: Throughout this document biblical references appear with the 3-letter book name abbreviations used in the *BibleWorks* software program. The book name abbreviations are not followed by a period, but a period rather than a colon separates chapter and verse numbers. For example, *Act 2.39* would designate the 39th verse of the second chapter of Acts.**

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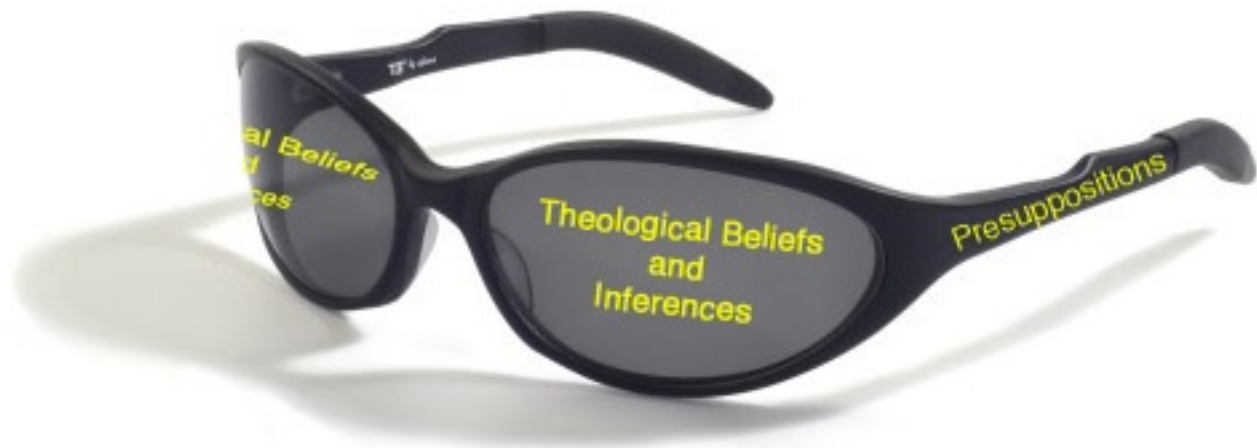
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## Introduction: Our Hermeneutical Glasses

We all wear glasses when we read the Bible. We wear interpretive, or *hermeneutical*, glasses, and we wear them in our minds. We acquired our hermeneutical lenses over the course of time, through our life experiences and by absorbing the ideas of our teachers. The problem is that we rarely “get our glasses checked,” and consequently, fallacious interpretations of Scripture circulate among us. Our interpretive lenses get marred, or may have been defective from the beginning, but they need not remain so. There are principles we can use to polish, or even re-grind them.

Before we begin to polish our interpretive lenses, however, we must pause to acknowledge the importance of our glasses frames. When it comes to interpreting Scripture, the mental frames that hold our mental lenses consist of our presuppositions about God and the Bible. Obviously, if we disbelieve that God exists or that He is omnipotent or personal, our presuppositions will slant our lenses radically as we study the Bible. The hermeneutical principles that I share below are based on the presuppositions that God *does* exist and *is* omnipotent and personal, and that He has inspired the biblical Scriptures. Furthermore, I believe that God sovereignly rules the universe, working all things together for His purposes, and that therefore the universe is rational, that is, agreeable to reason rather than absurd, and that we can apply rules of logic as we study its parts, including the biblical text. If the reader concurs with these presuppositions, if he or she is comfortable wearing these frames, we may return to the matter of our lenses.



# The Seven Unities

## The Theological Foundation

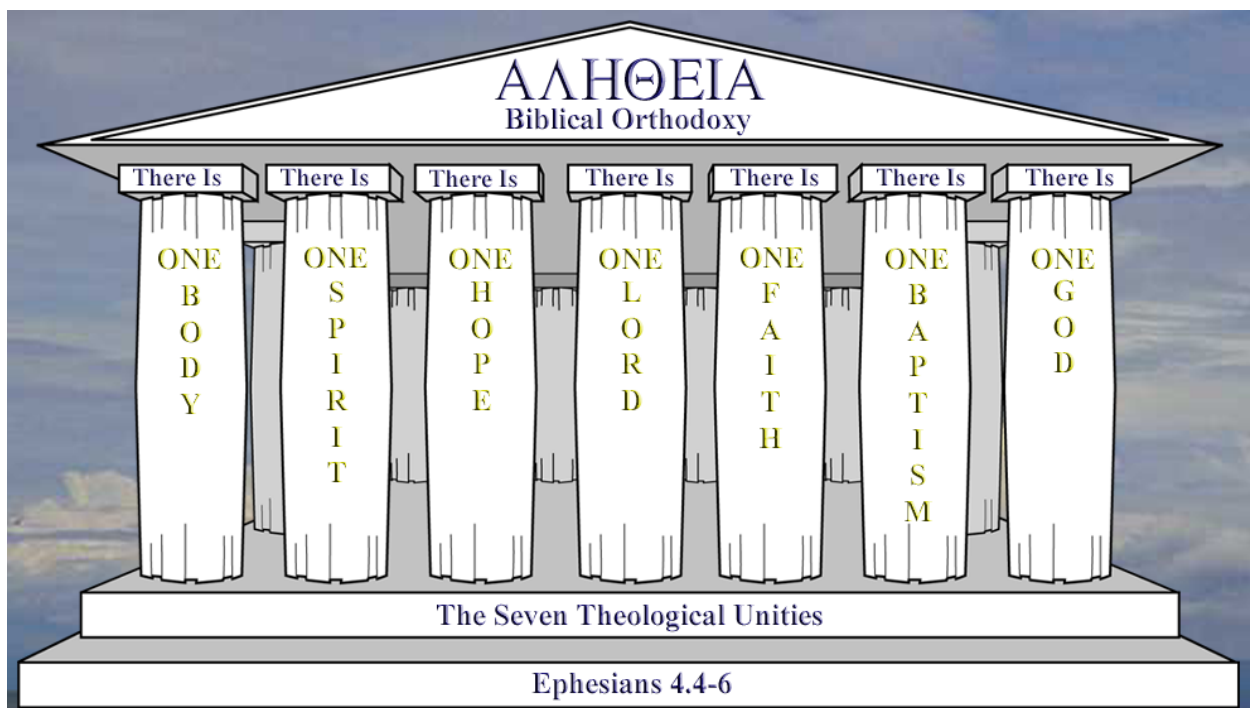
### That Will Guard Us From Fuzzy Interpretations of Scripture

#### The Theological Foundation

Of the various agents we could use to polish our interpretive glasses, the most important ones are theological truths. Of course, there are countless theological perspectives, and even the best theologians' attempts to distill the most important truths of the Bible have often provided us with more information than we can assimilate or know what to do with. So what theological truths should we pick for polishing our glasses? Thankfully, the Holy Spirit Himself has given us a concise list of the most fundamental of all theological principles. They appear in the apostle Paul's epistle to the Ephesians, in chapter 4, verses 4-6:

4 There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called — 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

We call this set of theological principles *The Seven Unities*. We call them *unities* because each item in this list is a thing of which *only a unit* exists. The Seven Unities also have a *unifying effect* upon the people who believe them. Paul's immediate purpose for listing The Seven Unities was to call the Ephesian church to experiential unity among themselves. Since the Ephesian believers were inherently one body, indwelt by one Spirit, ruled by one Lord, etc., there was every reason to work together harmoniously, forgiving one another and avoiding all schisms and selfish agendas. However, The Seven Unities also provide us with excellent material for polishing our hermeneutical glasses. One of my mentors, William Round, helped me realize years ago that Paul's Seven Unities are like pillars that support the edifice of biblical orthodoxy. I have illustrated them as such in the following graphic:





We believe many other theological truths, but any truth that is truly Christian rests upon and amplifies these seven.

But let's return to our lens-polishing analogy: Applying the Seven Unities can take some major flaws out of our hermeneutical lenses. Let's start polishing our glasses with them and see if our interpretive vision improves.

### 1. There Is One Body

Let's apply the polishing agent of the first unity: *there is one body* (Eph 4.4). The body Paul speaks of here is the church (Greek: *ekklesia*), an identification he makes explicit in Eph 5.23 and Col 1.18,24. In God's economy, there is only one spiritual body of the redeemed and that body is called "the church."



With this first of the Seven Unities in mind, let's look at a historically controversial passage, Mat 16.18, where Jesus said:

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Let's consider just one of the controversies connected to this passage, the controversy over the birthday of the *church*, that is, the debate over *when* the entity we call *the church* began. Many Christians have interpreted this prediction of Jesus, "I will build my church," to mean that the church would be born subsequently to the time of that utterance. People who so interpret Mat 16.18 favor the day of Pentecost, described in Acts 2, as the date for the church's birth.

However, the direct implications of a Pentecost birthday for the church are that (a) the church did not exist before the apostolic era and, (b) the church therefore excludes believers who lived out their lives in an earlier time. Many Christian teachers so believe, and affirm that the church not only excludes Old Testament believers who died before the apostolic age, but will also exclude believers who come to faith after the catching up of Christians at the second coming of Christ (1Th 4.16,17).

Contrary to such thinking, there is ample biblical evidence that the church *did exist* before Pentecost and *did include* saints of the Old Testament era. See, for example, Christ's pre-Pentecost reference to the church in Mat 18.15-17, and Stephen's reference to the church (*ekklesia*) as existing with Moses at Sinai (Act 7.38). However, the first thing that should caution us against limiting membership of the church to a narrow chronological era is the first of The Seven Unities: *there is one body*. To propose that the church includes only a part of God's people, is to say that there have been multiple, distinct bodies of God's people through the ages. Such an idea not only violates the first of Paul's Seven Unities, but also the heart and intent of the Good Shepherd who died and rose to form "one flock" under "one shepherd" (Joh 10.16).

Now, there is no denying that God has emphasized different principles to His people in different eras, and that there is a progression in the revelation of God's grace and design for the church. In Eph 3.4-10, Paul speaks of a mystery "which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets." Paul explains that "this mystery is that through the

gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of *one body*, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus...” In other words, though there has always been only *one body* in God’s eyes, people did not understand in earlier ages that this one body, which we know as the church, would eventually include members from all nations, not just from Israel. Thus there has been a development in the personality of the church and in our understanding of it, but a categorically new entity has not been born.

Therefore, the first of The Seven Unities cautions us to read the Bible in the light of the underlying unity of all believers, rather than with an inclination to chop up the great family of God chronologically. The unity of the One Body also sends us back to Mat 16.18, to adjust our interpretation. As we do a little homework and look up the underlying Greek word for the verb “I will build,” we discover that it does not mean “to found,” or “to begin,” but rather to “build, build up or strengthen.” A recent visit to northern England reminded me that many of the ancient church buildings had buttresses or other reinforcements added to them, not when they were first built, but when they began to show signs of weakness or decay. This phenomenon suggests a better interpretation for Mat 16.18. The church of Christ already existed (and awaited the Messiah) in the rabbinical era but had fallen into doctrinal and spiritual decay. Christ announced to His disciples that He would build up and reinforce the church by Peter’s (and their) living testimony of the Messiah’s divine identity and imminent work of redemption. Thus, the first of The Seven Unities has helped us polish our hermeneutical glasses and see Mat 16.18 in a way that is not theologically suspect.

**Read the Bible in  
the light of the  
underlying unity of  
all believers.**

## **2. There Is One Spirit**

Let’s continue buffing our interpretive lenses with the second unity: *there is one Spirit* (Eph 4.4). The One Spirit Paul referred to throughout his epistle to the Ephesians is the *Holy Spirit of God*, by which we have access to the Father (Eph 2.18) and by which we were “sealed” once we believed (Eph 1.13). The Second Unity teaches us that there is only one Holy Spirit, i.e., God has only one divine Spirit, just as a man or woman has only one human spirit.

With this unity of the Spirit in mind, let’s look at another Bible passage. When the apostle John was caught up to heaven, as recorded in the book of Revelation, he saw a richly symbolic vision of God’s throne involving various living entities. In Rev 4.5, John reported that:

...Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.

Someone unfamiliar with the Seven Unities might be confused by this reference to “the seven spirits of God,”<sup>1</sup> and start telling others that God consists of seven spirits rather than just one like humans do. However, we can now hark back to Paul’s declaration in Eph 4.4 that there is *one Spirit*, and affirm that while there is a plurality of persons within the Godhead (more on that later), this plurality does *not* involve a multiplicity of Spirits.

Thus, the second Theological Unity compels us to seek a better interpretation



of “the seven spirits of God” than the one that says God has an inherent plurality of Spirits. As we look again at the phrase in question, we realize that the preposition *of* has other meanings besides *intrinsic to*. The word *of* can also mean *under the jurisdiction of* or *under the special authority of*. The phrase *spirits of God* can refer to “spirits under God’s command,” as it does in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The *War Scroll* (1QM, 4Q491-496), 12.8,9, mentions:

...a host of angels are with our commissioned forces.  
...and the host of His spirits is with our steps.<sup>2</sup>

God’s “spirits” in this context of the scrolls have nothing to do with God’s essential Spirit, but refer to the angelic forces under God’s command. This Dead Sea usage inclines us toward the idea supported in apocalyptic literature that the “seven spirits of God” actually refers to seven archangels,<sup>3</sup> or cherubim, commissioned by God to gather intelligence and carry out His edicts upon the earth (compare Zec 1.8-11).<sup>4</sup> Thus the second of The Seven Unities has helped us see our way clearly toward a better interpretation of another passage.

### **3. There Is One Hope**

Let us keep polishing our hermeneutical glasses with the third Unity: *there is one hope* (Eph 4.4). In his epistles and in his preaching ministry, Paul loved to talk about the believers’ great Hope. For Paul, that Hope is the hope of eternal life (Tit 1.2; 3.7), but for him this did not mean floating about forever as disembodied spirits! The Hope involves the redemption of our physical bodies (Rom. 8.23), that is, physical resurrection (Act 23.6; 24.15; 26.6-8), enabling us to enter the next life as whole persons at the soon appearing of Jesus Christ (Tit 2.13). The redemptive work of Christ is the basis of The Hope and Jesus is Himself *the personification* of that Hope (1Ti 1.1).

With this One Hope in mind, let’s look at Rev 21.9-10, which speaks of the Bride of Christ. The New Testament often alludes to Christ as a “bridegroom,” but not until these verses does it give us a good look at the “bride...of the Lamb”:

9 One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”

10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

Clear the Lamb in the book of Revelation represents Christ, but who or what is His bride? These verses identify the bride as a heavenly city, but no one marries a city, do they? Who or what is this bride-city?

Someone once suggested to me that the bride of Christ spoken of in Revelation represents a future, *elite* group of Christians. While all Christians will go to heaven, they said, the members of this elite group will be rewarded by special heavenly intimacy with Christ because of the superior holiness they maintained while mortals on earth.

Is this a viable interpretation of Rev 21.9-10? *No*. We can immediately reject an elitist interpretation of “the bride” based on the third Unity. Any interpretation of Scripture that posits essentially different destinies for distinct subsets of God’s people

violates the third Theological Unity: there is *one hope*. It is wrong to think or teach that some of God's people can hope for special intimacy with Christ as His bride, while others can only hope for proximity to Christ in heaven. It's true that Christ's parables imply distinct rewards for different individuals on judgment day (e.g., Luk 19.12-27). Also, believers will have differing roles and responsibilities after the resurrection, but the one *ultimate* destiny and hope for all believers is Christ Himself (1Tim 1.1; Tit 2.13; consider also Luk 23.40-43; Joh 14.3; 17.3,25; Phi 1.21-23; 3.8; Rev 22.3-4). There is no hint whatsoever in the teaching of the apostles that believers will be assigned differing levels of access to Christ or to any of heaven's essential glories.

So who or what *is* the Bride of Christ? Well, the *first* Unity points us to the answer. Since there is only one body of the redeemed, and this bride of Revelation is a corporate body, i.e., a city, we have good reason to suspect that this bride is the one body of Christ, the Church. Sure enough, the context tells us (Rev 19.7-8) that the bride is dressed in fine linen that "stands for the righteous acts of the saints." Unless she's wearing someone else's dress, the bride is the corporate body of the saints, the church. Once again, applying the Theological Unities to our interpretive glasses enabled us see a false interpretation and arrive at a better one. The inspired declarations that there is only *one Hope* and *one Body* helped us read the Bible with a sense of the underlying unity of the church and its destiny, and kept us from an interpretation that would exclude some of the saints from the celestial wedding.

#### 4. There Is One Lord

The fourth unity is the one that cost the early Christians so dearly: *there is one Lord* (Eph 4.5). As we read in *The New Bible Dictionary*:

The Roman emperor too was acclaimed as lord (*dominus*) by his subjects and successive emperors increasingly claimed their total allegiance; this was to lead to keen conflicts of conscience for Christians at a later stage.<sup>5</sup>

"Keen conflicts of conscience" indeed! If God's economy had allowed the possibility of multiple Lord's, the Christians of the Roman Empire could have acknowledged Caesar's lordship in good conscience and not been thrown to the lions. Instead they boldly confessed, as the apostles had, that



Jesus Christ of Nazareth was their "only Sovereign and Lord" (Jud 1.4). They often sealed their confession with blood. This history reminds us that The Seven Unities answered practical questions, not just exegetical ones. The Unities supported the edifice of Christian orthodoxy, answering the heresies and competing truth-claims that emerged alongside the New Testament Scriptures.

However, in this article we are focusing on the important hermeneutical purpose that The Seven Unities serve. Applying the fourth Unity will help us see the falsity of any interpretation of Scripture that makes Christ less than *God*. This is so because the doctrine of Christ's deity follows logically from the apostles insistence that there is no more than *one Lord*.

Let's think it through. Paul repeated and clarified this fourth theological unity in

1 Corinthians, ch. 8, where he wrote:

5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), 6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and **there is but one Lord**, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

Notice that the explicit declaration that Jesus Christ is the *one Lord* does not negate the lordship of the Father. Passages like this one just quoted, while mentioning both God the Father and Jesus Christ, do not emphasize the distinction but rather the unity of these two members of the Trinity. If Christ is Lord and God is Lord, Christ and God are one in essence. If Jesus Christ is the one Lord, He must be of the very same nature as the Father.

Paul taught exactly this in passages like Philippians 2, where referring to Christ he wrote:

6 Who, **being in very nature God**, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross! 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that **Jesus Christ is Lord**, to the glory of God the Father.

We see that the lordship of Jesus Christ does not detract from the lordship of the Father, but rather, the lordship of the Father is made manifest through Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> Christ’s lordship and the Father’s lordship is one and the same divine lordship.

Therefore, any interpretation of Scripture that negates the deity of Christ, ultimately violates the unity of the “One Lord.” This is so because proposing that Christ is less than divine would create an essential distinction between Christ and God; it would make Christ one Lord and God another Lord. This, of course, cannot be. The fourth Theological Unity assures us that Christ and God the Father are in essence the same, one divine Lord, and we dare not interpret any scripture in a manner that detracts from the divine lordship of either person.

Polishing our hermeneutical glasses with the fourth Unity will help us repeatedly as we answer the attempts by our culture to undermine the deity of Christ. The fourth Unity will help us see clearly whenever we need to interpret a “proof text” proffered as evidence that Jesus is less than our one *divine* Lord.

**Any interpretation of Scripture that negates the deity of Christ, ultimately violates the unity of the “One Lord.”**

## 5. There Is One Faith

Let us continue refining our lenses with the fifth Theological Unity: *there is one faith* (Eph 4.5). The “one faith” Paul spoke of is the one set of redemptive beliefs through which God extends salvation to mankind (see 1 Tim. 4.6; 1 Cor. 16.13; 2 Cor 13.5; Phil. 1.27; Titus 1.13; 2.2). It is crucial to keep this Unity in mind when interpreting passages that emphasize the newness of the era that dawned at Christ’s first advent. For example, consider these two passages:

Joh 1.17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Luk 16.16 “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.

Some Christians would interpret these two passages as support for the idea that, until Jesus came, people obtained salvation by keeping the law. I hope this alarms you. It grieves me that many American Christians still believe that people in the Old Testament era were saved by offering sacrifices or by keeping the ten commandments, and that only since Jesus came have people been saved by grace.

With these kinds of ideas floating about in our Bible studies, we must be prepared to remind our peers of the fifth Theological Unity: there is *one faith*. Abraham had this one faith in 1800 BC (Joh 8.56; Rom 4.1-3). Job had this one faith also, back in the time of the patriarchs (Job 19.25-27). David had it in 1,000 BC (Psa 51), and Isaiah had this same faith in 750 BC (Isa 53).

It is beyond the scope of this study to give a full exegesis of John 1.17 and Luke 16.16, but suffice it to say that the fifth Unity will help us understand that law and grace (in Joh 1.17), and law and gospel (in Luk 16.16) are two sides of the same coin, not two contrasting “faiths.” The *law* of Moses pointed people in *faith* to the coming grace to be poured out through Messiah’s redemptive work, and in like manner, the *law* and the *prophets* pointed people in *faith* to the Good News that would be fully revealed in Messiah’s death and resurrection. In every case, redemption came by grace through faith in Messiah’s redemptive sacrifice. Polishing our glasses with the fifth Unity helps us see the *continuity* between the covenants as we interpret, rather than imagining an *enmity* between them.

## 6. There Is One Baptism

There are just two more theological spots to polish up on our hermeneutical glasses. Let us continue with the sixth Theological Unity: *there is one baptism* (Eph 4.5). Like the rest, this Theological Unity was intended to unify the church — the countless doctrinal controversies over baptism notwithstanding! Whatever we believe about the mode and secondary connotations of Christian baptism, we must agree that there is only *one baptism* by which we become identified with the one Lord and His one Body. With this in mind, let’s look at Mat 3.11, where John the Baptist spoke of the baptizing that Christ would do:

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

I once heard a bizarre interpretation of this passage. I was helping in a Christian coffee house one night in the mid-1970s when a stranger dropped in. I don't remember much about his appearance other than that he wore a trench coat that made him look like a spy from the cold war. What I remember in some detail though, is our conversation. When I walked over to greet him, he began to talk to me in a quiet voice about what is known in charismatic and Pentecostal circles as the baptism in the Holy Spirit. "These people who call themselves Pentecostals," he said, "are really only *half* Pentecostals. They've been baptized in the Spirit, but they haven't yet been baptized *in fire*." Then to my amazement (I'm not making this up), he pulled a 5 by 7, black and white photograph out of his trench coat that showed a person enveloped in flames! This peculiar visitor to our coffeehouse interpreted Mat. 3.11 as meaning that Christians who were truly spiritual would, in addition to their other baptism (or baptisms) have a baptism in flames, reminiscent of the phenomenon seen over the heads of the apostles on the day of Pentecost in (Act 2.3).



I regret that the scope of this study does not allow us to explore the charismatic doctrine of the "baptism of the Holy Spirit," because I think an application of the sixth Theological Unity may add to our understanding of the issues. However, our purpose here is hermeneutical: what is a proper understanding of Mat 3.11? Regardless of what we believe about "the baptism of the Holy Spirit," the sixth Theological Unity should help us spot the elitist nature of Mr. Trench Coat's interpretation. Any interpretation of the passage implying that there are two distinct Christian baptisms, the second of which makes some Christians superior to others, violates the unity of the One Baptism. Therefore, we return to Mat 3.11 and seek a better interpretation.

As we look again at the passage, the sixth Unity allows for two possible interpretations. Since there is only one Christian Baptism, either John used *Spirit* and *fire* as synonyms both describing the one Christian baptism,<sup>7</sup> or he was describing two distinct baptisms, in which case only one could pertain to Christians. I have heard many teach the former idea, namely, that "to be baptized with fire" is a parallelism, synonymous to the "Spirit baptism" of which John spoke, and alluding to the power that the Spirit would bring into Christian's lives. It's a good interpretation, and satisfies the Unity of the One Baptism, but is it the best interpretation? To decide, we must apply another principle of hermeneutics, the [Rule of Context](#). The theological principle of the One Baptism has steered us away from an elitist interpretation, but now we must check the context of Matthew 3.11 for further insight, and the context will not disappoint us. Both the verse before and the verse after Mat. 3.11 also mention *fire*:

10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. ...

12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

In both cases, the fire in view is the fire of judgment! The flow of the passage forces us



to recognize that the baptism of fire in Mat 3.11 is a baptism of judgment. John the Baptist was, in effect, dividing his audience into two groups: those who would receive the coming Messiah and be baptized by His Spirit, and those who would reject the Messiah and be immersed in His judgment. It's not the happiest interpretation, but we can have confidence in it, and the sixth Theological Unity helped us arrive at it by avoiding a bizarre alternative.

## 7. There Is One God

Let us apply the seventh and final Unity to our hermeneutical glasses: *there is one God* (Eph 4.6). No theological principle is more central to the Holy Bible than the truth that there is only one God. Starting with Moses and ending with the apostles, all the prophets declare it:

Deu 6.4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

1Ch 17.20 “There is no one like you, O LORD, and there is no God but you, as we have heard with our own ears.”

1Co 8.4 So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.

Not only does the whole Bible teach that there is only one God, but it consistently condemns as impostors any other beings who pretend to deity. As we saw above, the apostle Paul noted that the world was full of “so-called gods” (1Co 8.5), but Jews and Christians understood that the pagan deities who energized idol worship and even gave supernatural signs at times, were only demons in disguise, deceiving their worshipers:

Deu 32.17 They sacrificed to demons, which are not God — gods they had not known, gods that recently appeared, gods your fathers did not fear.

Psa 106.37 They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons.

1Co 10.20 ...the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God...

How ironic then, that the so-called Jehovah's Witnesses attempt to circumvent the clear testimony to Christ's deity in John 1.1 by saying in their *New World Translation* that “the Word was a god.”<sup>8</sup> They plunge headlong into heresy with this forced translation, for it makes Christ a *second God*! This of course violates the wide theological context of Scripture and flies in the face of the seventh theological Unity.<sup>9</sup>

There is much more that can be said (and has been written!) about the translation of John 1.1,<sup>10</sup> but the point here is that as we study Scripture, the seventh Unity, *there is one God*, will guard us from interpretations that involve any kind of polytheism including:

- The Gnostic and JW idea of a demiurge, that is, of a secondary god through whom the world was created;
- Dualism that attempts to explain the problem of evil by proposing two Gods, one good and one evil; and
- Tritheism, the belief that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three separate and distinct deities.



The last of the Seven Unities constrains us to only two possible understandings of God's nature: either God exists in absolute oneness as in the Muslim conception of Allah, or He has a multiplicity of persons within one infinite essence, as in the Christian understanding of the Trinity. The Bible teaches the latter, and does so with increasing clarity from Genesis to Revelation.

Why then do people have such difficulty with the idea of the Trinity, i.e., the idea of three divine persons in one Godhead? For the simple reason that God is Spirit and we do not understand the "physics" of the spiritual realm. I once spoke to a Jehovah's Witness who held three fingers before my face and challenged me with the question, "How can you make these three into one?" The answer is that no one can make three fingers into one finger, but anyone who thinks of God as flesh and bone (like fingers) is a person to be pitied! God is spirit and not constrained to the laws of material physics. It is no more a problem for God to have a plurality of persons within His one *spiritual* being than it is for the church to have a plurality of persons within its one *spiritual* body.

God being one, however, implies a unity within Himself not only of essence but also of character and purpose. This provides us with one of the most important hermeneutical principles of all: the principle that the Bible does not contradict itself.<sup>11</sup> I will describe this "[Rule of Internal Consistency](#)" in Part 2.

### **Reflection**

I can't help thinking of a relative I have in Mexico. As the family breadwinner, she works six days a week in a tourist hotel to earn \$600 a month. She wears glasses that tourists leave behind in their hotel rooms after checkout time. When she finds another forgotten pair of glasses, she tries them on to see if they feel any better than her current pair, and if so, she trades. Her most recent glasses are not good ones for her. The text still looks fuzzy to her when she reads the Bible. She needs better lenses but she can't afford them.

The biblical text has been looking a little fuzzy to some of us too, but unlike my relative, it's not new *optical* lenses that we need. We just need to polish the interpretive lenses we have in our minds. Yes, that polishing will cost us a little study and disciplined thought, but that is a price we can easily afford.

# Polishing our Hermeneutical Glasses

## Section 2

### The Seven Inferences That Help Us Interpret Scripture Well



The central theology of the New Testament is our hermeneutical starting point. Once we have polished our interpretive lenses by embracing that core of theological truth, we can infer other rules for interpreting Scripture. The additional rules follow logically from our belief in the unity of the Godhead and from our understanding of other attributes of the One God. The first of these rules is:

#### 8. The Rule of Humble Obedience

The seventh unity of Ephesians 4.6, tells us there is “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” Our complete dependency upon this one God for all things implies that we should study God’s Word with the humble recognition that *He* must illuminate His Word’s meaning for us. Furthermore, that there is “one Lord” (Eph 4.5), implies that obedience is required from any of us who seek this illumination. Christ makes this requirement explicit in John 7.17 where He teaches us that we cannot expect to understand the Scriptures until we are committed to obey them. ***So then, we must not only approach the Bible in humble dependence upon God, but also in full submission to Christ’s lordship.***

Bill Round, whom I mentioned above, told me that before he had received Christ he had studied the Bible fruitlessly for 15 years, struggling to grasp its meaning. Only after he bowed to the Lordship of Christ and believed the gospel was he able to make sense of the Scriptures. His experience illustrates the fact that while the intellect is essential in the work of exegesis, the intellect alone cannot discern the essential truths of Scripture. This is so because those truths are spiritually discerned (1Cor 2.14), that is, they are taught to our spirit by God’s Spirit. The rule is that God’s Spirit chooses to teach the humble and obedient, rather than the proud and independent. “He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way,” according to Psalm 25.9. It’s as we apply this most important rule of humble obedience that the Author Himself helps us interpret the Scriptures (1Jo 2.27).

Christians who lack an attitude of humble obedience toward God’s Word, are often tripped up by a psychological law known as “The Law of First Mention.” According to this law, “A student will resist any truth that contradicts what he was first taught on a given subject.” In other words, we all resist repudiating what our beloved parents, teachers and mentors first taught us about God, the Bible and the Christian life. Hopefully, they taught us well and we won’t have to reject what they said. How-

ever, we can all recognize the fallacy of the Muslim who cries, “I *know* Muhammad is the true prophet because my father declared it to me, and his father declared it to him!” Truth must be supported and confirmed by evidence, not simply by what human authority taught it. Nevertheless, we are loathe to let go of what we were first taught, be it right or wrong. Therefore, we must consciously humble ourselves before God, and commit ourselves by His grace to receive whatever He reveals to us in His Word, even if it contradicts what we were taught earlier.

Committing ourselves to overcome “The Law of First Mention” does not imply that we will forever be learning and unlearning in order to learn again. As God Himself continues to teach us by His Holy Spirit, the things we learn will increasingly knit themselves into a coherent fabric of truth that will withstand the challenges of opposing ideas. We have this assurance of arriving at “settled convictions” because God has placed us in a rational cosmos. Paul’s declaration that the One God “is over all and through all and in all” assures us that there is a *unity* and *coherence* to God’s universe, and therefore that we *can arrive* at a true understanding of our place in it.

Furthermore, the statement that God is “over all” speaks of His rule, His sovereignty over both the existence and the actions of created things, whether living or inanimate. God is working His plan in the Universe, and everything in creation is working together for the accomplishment of that plan (cf. Rom 8.28-29). These truths confirm our presupposition that the universe is rational rather than absurd, and that we can apply rules of logic as we study its components and phenomena (see [Introduction](#) above). God’s universal sovereignty obviously encompasses the biblical text. God has sent forth His word to accomplish His eternal purposes and it will not fail to do so (Isa 55.11). Therefore, we can expect a coherent unity in the canon of Scripture and reasonably adopt the next rule:

## **9. The Rule Of Internal Consistency**

***Since we can expect God’s word to be consistent, we should never accept a new teaching or interpretation of Scripture that violates the clear truths of the Bible.*** Like the Bereans in the first century, we must check unfamiliar propositions for consistency with the well established truths of Scripture (Act 17.11). Since the theophany on Mount Sinai,<sup>12</sup> the Israelites had practiced this principle of validating new prophecy or preaching by the touchstone of recognized Scripture. By the time of the prophets, the principle was so well ingrained that Isaiah could appeal to it in the words:

“To the law and to the testimony!  
If they do not speak according to this word,  
they have no light of dawn” (Isa 8.20).

Now we can confidently adopt this Rule of Internal Consistency as part of our own hermeneutics, knowing that even the prophets of old were committed to it. When a new doctrine or novel interpretation of Scripture comes our way, we can test it for consistency with the rest of the biblical revelation. When we ourselves feel we have discovered a new interpretation of a passage, we can check it for consistency with established biblical truths like [The Seven Unities](#), explained above. Furthermore, when we read two passages that seem to contradict one another, the Rule of Internal Consistency will alert us that we need to dig deeper to correctly understand the passages in question.

Skeptics love to point out apparent contradictions in the Bible, but most of their

examples reveal an inclination to read the text over-literally without taking into account cultural idiom and figures of speech. For example, it is well known that Jesus taught that we should love our neighbor, and certainly our parents. Therefore, when skeptics read in Luke 14.26, “If anyone comes to me and does not **hate** his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters — yes, even his own life — he cannot be my disciple,” they gleefully shout, “contradiction!”<sup>13</sup> We ourselves might be puzzled at first by such a strong statement from Jesus, but, we can apply the Rule of Internal Consistency to understand what Jesus did *not* mean, and then apply the [Rule of Literary Genres](#) and the [Rule of Context](#) (both explained below) to help us understand what He *did* mean. The Rule of Internal Consistency alerts us that since Jesus clearly taught us to honor our parents (Mat 19.19), He is not contradicting Himself in the Luke passage and teaching people to hate their own families. We then go to the [Rule of Literary Genres](#) and recognize that Jesus, just like other public speakers, used figures of speech and rhetorical language to make important points. We realize that His jarring call to “hate” must have been a rhetorical way to make a strong statement about something important. Finally, we go to the [Rule of Context](#) and discover that in Luke 14, Jesus was indeed responding to a specific problem, namely, the problem of hangers-on. Crowds were beginning to follow Him, but they were expecting the road of discipleship to be easy, with lots of healings and free loaves and fishes along the way. Jesus, however, foreknew that whoever truly committed to him would very likely pay a steep price with regard to their homes and families. Therefore, He used the strongest possible rhetorical language to warn them that if they were not willing to hate their families *ostensibly*, that is, if they were not willing to *appear to hate* their families in the course of following Him, they should count the cost now and turn back.

It makes me think of the martyrdom of the young mother, Vibia Perpetua, who died for the testimony of Jesus in North Africa in A. D. 202.<sup>14</sup> Perpetua’s father, beside himself over the imminent loss of his beautiful daughter, tried to persuade her to renounce her faith, but she refused. Then, when Perpetua was put on trial, the Roman procurator, seeing her distraught father, urged her, “Spare your father’s white hairs...offer a sacrifice for the safety of the Emperors.” Perpetua remained steadfast in her faith however, and when her desperate father kept trying to intervene, the procurator had him thrown down and struck with a rod. Perpetua afterward wrote in her diary that she was grieved for her father’s plight, “as if I had been struck myself.” She loved her father dearly, but because of her love for Christ, and refusal to deny her Lord, she was forced to *appear to hate* her father in the public eye. This was precisely the personal and relational cost of discipleship that Jesus was warning people about in Luke 14.26. Far from encouraging hatred, Jesus was warning that out of love for Him (and for our families!), we might one day have to *appear to hate* the very people we love. Thus, the Rule of Internal Consistency helps us dig a little deeper when faced with an alleged contradiction in Scripture, and ultimately helps us find a very satisfying interpretation.



The Bible’s internal consistency is truly supernatural, considering that it was composed over the course of thousands of years and by 40 or more authors. Nevertheless, since God is eternal, it makes sense that we find coherence and consistency throughout the books of the Bible, even though the human authors were separated from one another by generations. However, consistency does not imply repetitiveness or



sameness to all the books. Even our first reading of the Bible alerts us that we should adopt:

## 10. The Rule Of Progressive Revelation

We can best observe that God's revelation *is* progressive by studying the time of Christ and the apostles, when new revelation came hard and fast to God's people. Acts 18.24-26 relates the incident of Apollos, a gifted evangelist, preaching the message of John the Baptist, but without having gotten the news that the Messiah — whom John had preached — had already come and accomplished His work. Better-informed believers had to take Apollos aside and bring Him up to speed on what God had done. Note, however, that more recent revelation does not *invalidate* the earlier body of truth, but only renders it *incomplete*.

The greatest progression in God's revelation can be seen in the message about Christ, the Messiah, the coming Redeemer announced from the book of Genesis onward. The prophets of old had a great deal to say about the coming Messiah, and it was all true. Nevertheless, no teaching on the prophets' revelations about Messiah can be considered complete today if it is not supplemented with the words and actions subsequently spoken and accomplished by Christ Himself. As we read in Hebrews 1:

1 In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 ***but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son***, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. [Emphasis added.]

Though we yet have much to learn about Christ, we understand Him much better now than we could have before His first advent. He revealed Himself and His redemptive work spectacularly in the gospels, and the apostles further illuminated His person and work in their preaching and epistles, as the Spirit enabled them. The Messiah is unveiled to us more and more in the Bible, right up to the last book. Someone has well said, "God saves the best for last!"

In view of such progressive revelation, we must recognize that ***an early passage of Scripture may not exhaust the Bible's teaching on a given topic***. God's progressive revelation, developing through all 66 books of the Bible, requires that we check the epistles on a topic before finalizing a doctrine rooted in the earlier books. For example, we wouldn't want to establish a doctrine of circumcision in our church, based on Genesis 17.10 without first studying Galatians 5.2!

For another example, Malachi 3.10 is a favorite preaching text, often used by pastors to teach their congregations the principle of tithing:

10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

It's a great text which teaches important principles for us today, but it had *direct application* only for agrarian Israelites during the time when a temple stood in Jerusalem. We really must answer a handful of questions before trying to apply this passage to a contemporary Christian congregation: First of all, are Christians still obligated to keep the Mosaic law, including the law of tithing? Secondly, since Malachi's command is to

bring the *whole* tithe, which for the Israelite amounted to somewhere between 19% and 27% of all his increase, is it correct to teach only a 10% tithe from this passage?<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, since under Mosaic legislation no tithes were collected during the sabbatical (seventh) year, should we take every seventh year off from tithing?<sup>16</sup> Finally, and most importantly, whether we tithe 10% or more, should we feel that with regard to giving we have done our whole Christian duty once we have dropped our check in the offering plate? All of these questions are addressed in the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament, and the Rule of Progressive Revelation urges us to study these relevant later passages before teaching tithing from the Old Testament. Taking the time to do so will bring greater depth and power to our exposition of Malachi 3.10.

From the consistency and coherence of God's word, it also follows that we should heed:

## 11. The Rule of Context

***We must interpret the details of a biblical passage consistently with its general theme and intent.*** The most extreme violation of this rule occurs when people close their eyes and stick their finger on a random verse, hoping to get a personal "word from the Lord." God *could* sovereignly speak to one of His children in this manner if He chose to, but unless He provides corroboration for such "a word," it is dangerous to follow this kind of "guidance." What if a person's finger landed on a verse like Galatians 5.12? I would not wish to pluck that verse out of its textual context and assume it applied to me! The only way we can apply a scripture to our lives with confidence is by applying it in a manner consistent with the overall direction of its context.

Along with the thematic context, we must also take into account the historical and cultural context of a passage's author and original audience. Because the Bible records how God revealed himself in and through history to a historical people, it's reasonable to assume that *a biblical text cannot mean something contrary to what it meant to its original target culture*. Many hermeneutical mistakes arise today from Christians reading the Bible as though it were written in 20<sup>th</sup>-century America. Since we have all experienced the rapid change of language and word meanings in our own generation, we must stop to realize that the connotations of many biblical words and phrases have changed significantly over the last 2,000 years (and 6 to 8 thousand miles). To properly understand the biblical message, we must take the time to understand what those biblical words and phrases meant in biblical times to the biblical people.

**A biblical text cannot mean something contrary to what it meant to its original target culture.**

The people of the Bible were predominantly Hebrew. Even the writers of the New Testament were all Hebrews with the possible exception of Luke. Because the Hebraic way of thinking is quite different from that of Westerners, many passages in the Bible cannot be understood apart from an awareness of Hebraic thought modes. In other words, understanding a biblical passage's cultural context includes understanding the thinking patterns of the author and his first audience. To that end, please see my related article, available on the Timothy Ministries website, and entitled, *Making The*



*Invisible Visible: An Introduction to The Distinctives of Hebraic Thought and Their Implications For Interpreting The Bible.*

We have already noted God's supremacy over all things. That supremacy implies that there is no limitation upon God's ability to communicate with His subjects. Therefore, we need not fear any ambiguity, or vagueness in God's word, but should adopt:

## **12. The Rule of The Literal Sense**

***We should interpret a scripture passage according to its literal sense unless it is obviously figurative or idiomatic.*** The archaeological discoveries that corroborate biblical texts, as well as the literal fulfillment of numerous Bible prophecies (like the origin of Messiah from Bethlehem, Mic 5.2), establish this rule. It is a constant temptation for innovative preachers to produce a novel, allegorical interpretation of a biblical passage, but instead they should apply Ockham's Razor as they study. The Razor, also called *the principle of parsimony*, states that "entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity." That's philosophy-speak for "don't seek a bizarre explanation if a simple or obvious one will do." When it comes to interpreting Scripture it has been put this way: when the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense.

While the unity of God implies the *coherence* of His revelation, and God's supremacy implies the *clarity* of that revelation, neither imply a woodenness to His word. God's inherent creativity and other attributes lead us to expect aesthetic expression in the transmission of His revelation. Indeed, God delights to use the whole range of human modes of communication to convey His message to man. Therefore, we should learn:

## **13. The Rule of Literary Genres**

***While we expect God's word to communicate literally, we must also take into account the literary genre of the biblical passage we're interpreting.*** We must take note of any figures of speech, or idiom in a passage, along with any didactic or rhetorical devices it may employ. Remember that poetic books are rich in metaphor (e.g. Psa 91.4), and apocalyptic books abound with symbols (e.g. Rev 1.20).<sup>17</sup>

Along these lines, we must also take into account the use of paraphrase and indirect quotation in the biblical text. For example, a comparison of Matthew 26.18 with its parallel passages in Mark and Luke make it apparent that Matthew *summarized* Christ's instructions about the venue for the Passover, rather than quoting the Lord's words exactly. Jesus obviously did not say, "Go into the city to a certain man..." verbatim. The disciples could not have followed such an instruction. Jesus had to have identified the man somehow, which Mark (14.13-15) and Luke (22.10-12) assure us He did. Matthew's "quotation" is a summary or paraphrase, but the presentation of it in our translations as direct discourse enclosed in commas makes it look as though Matthew is quoting Christ's exact words. Realizing that the evangelists sometimes summarized and paraphrased will help us harmonize passages and clear up some seeming discrepancies. This realization will also warn us that discourses, like the Olivet Discourse (Mat 24; Mar 13; Luk 21), probably did not come down to us in their absolute entirety but in a form shortened by inspired summary and paraphrase.

One of the greatest stumbling blocks for Christians who don't understand the Rule of Literary Genres is the proverbial saying. The proverbial saying (Hebrew *mashal*) is an ancient linguistic vehicle for conveying a principle of life. A proverb is a pithy saying that's like a walnut shell; a principle of life is contained within the saying even

as the meat is contained within the walnut shell. The important thing to understand is that a principle tells us what *should* happen, not what *will* happen. A proverb is *not* a promise. Unfortunately, many biblical proverbs have been claimed as promises from God. As a result, grieving parents have come into the pastor's office, angry at God, because they had claimed the "promise" of Proverbs 22.6, but their grown child turned his back on Christianity and shows no sign of coming back to the faith. "Doesn't God keep His promises?" Yes, He does, but Proverbs 22.6 is not a promise from God that our children will not depart from the Way; it is a proverbial saying that teaches us the wisdom of training our children, as opposed to the foolishness of leaving our children to their own devices.

The beauty of Scripture with its rich metaphors and ancient figures of speech, does render some passages obscure for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader. Rather than just deciding what we'd *like* such passages to mean, however, we must adopt:

#### 14. The Rule of Beginning With An Explicit Text

If you were to ask me what American state I was born in, I could answer you explicitly and say, "California." The great thing about an explicit statement is that it leaves no ambiguity; it can only be interpreted one way. However, we often communicate *implicitly*, and implicit statements only *imply* their information. I could have answered the question by saying, "I was born in the city of San Jose." For many people, that answer would *imply* that I had been born in the state of California, which is true, but for others it could imply that I had been born in Texas or New Mexico, or even Illinois. Half a dozen states have a city called San Jose, and so my *implicit* answer would leave a great deal of ambiguity — *as every implicit statement does*. Therefore, to avoid ambiguity and confusion when interpreting Scripture, **always use explicit statements to interpret implicit ones, and clear statements to explain the obscure ones — not vice versa!**

1 Corinthians 13.8-10 is a scripture that requires the application of the rule. In this passage, Paul declares that charismatic gifts like prophecy, tongues, and [the word of] knowledge will pass away when "that which is perfect (the Greek adjective is *teleios*)" has come. Some interpreters have decided that the "perfect" thing Paul speaks of in this passage is the completed canon of the New Testament. From this interpretation, they argue that charismatic gifts, at least the troublesome ones, passed away when John completed the New Testament by writing down the book of Revelation. This interpretation commends itself to all of us who admire the *perfection* of the New Testament and of the Bible as a whole. The problem is that it is an interpretation without an explicit foundation. The idea that the "perfect" thing is the completed New Testament is only *implied* by Paul's words to *some* interpreters.

Now let us apply **the rule of using explicit or clear statements to explain the implicit or obscure ones**. The first step is to find other passages using the term in question, Paul's adjective, *perfect* (*Gk. teleios*). Is there a passage where Paul used this word unequivocally? The answer is yes; actually there are several passages in which he used *teleios* unambiguously and to communicate parallel ideas to those he expressed in 1Co 13.10. Let's look at one, Ephesians 4.11-13 (NASB):

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a **mature** [*Gk. teleios*] man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

Note that just as in 1Co 13, the context has to do with the exercise of spiritual gifts *until* a certain time when a perfect thing arrives. In this passage, however, Paul left no doubt as to what the perfect thing is; it is a perfect, or rather, a *perfected* Christian believer. Paul declared plainly that the Lord gave spiritual gifts by which to equip believers until they all attain to *perfect* maturity in Christ.

When we look again at 1Cor 13, we see that this is exactly what Paul spoke of in that passage as well:

10 But when that which is **perfect** has come, then that which is in part will be done away.

11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

Spiritual gifts are to be used until Christian believers are no longer childish but have attained *perfect* maturity in Christ.

Consider two other passages where Paul used the adjective *teleios*:

Phi 3.15 All of us who are **mature** [*teleios*] should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you.

Col 1.28 We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone **perfect** [*teleios*] in Christ.

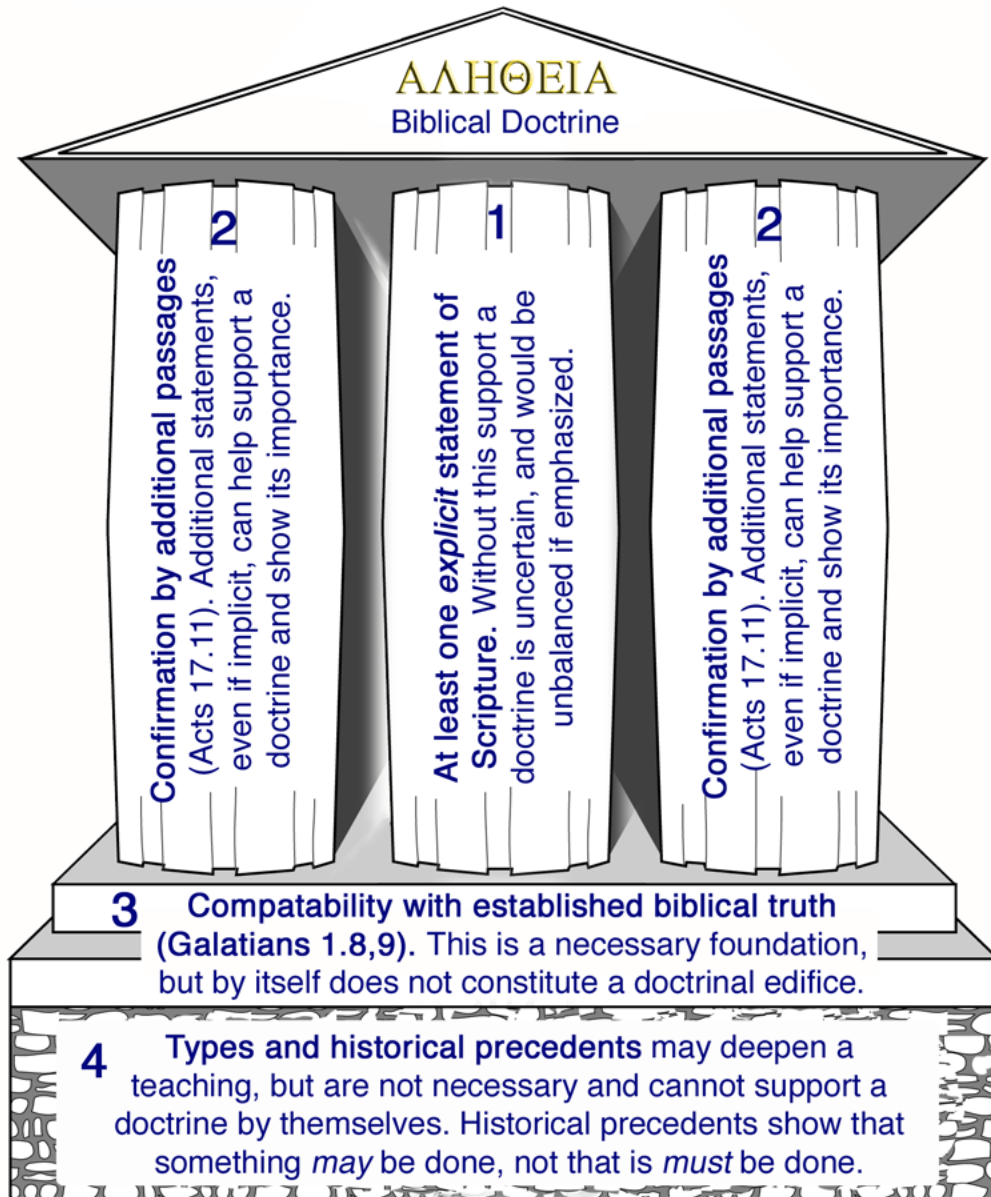
When we begin with these unambiguous occurrences of the word *perfect* (*teleios*), and then return to interpret its seemingly more obscure use in 1Co 13.10, we are able to do so with confidence. When we interpret the “perfect” in this passage as *maturity in Christ*, we see that our interpretation not only makes *perfect* sense in its context, but that it also echoes and complements Paul’s teaching in his other epistles.

We would spare the church a great deal of controversy by consistently adopting this **rule of beginning with the explicit and the clear**. The most enduring doctrinal disputes in Christianity involve propositions based on implicit rather than explicit texts. The controversy over the time of the rapture<sup>18</sup> relative to the time of Great Tribulation<sup>19</sup> is a case in point. The “pre-tribulation rapture” doctrine, popular as it has become, has left many scholars unconvinced because it must first be assumed and then supported with passages that have only an *implicit* connection at best with the translation of the saints.<sup>20</sup>

Let us make an important observation at this juncture. The lack of an explicit passage in support of a doctrinal proposition does *not* prove that the proposition is false. However, it *does* prove that the proposition is neither a teaching that the Bible emphasizes, nor a cardinal doctrine of the faith. We may choose to believe in a pre-tribulation rapture if we like, but if we disfellowship someone for not believing in it, we have become distinctly *unbiblical*.

In fact, if we wish to remain truly *biblical* in our teaching and preaching, we will give attention not only to biblical *truth*, but also to this matter of biblical *emphasis*. It is **the rule of beginning with the explicit and clear**, together with the simple matter of the number of times an idea is repeated in the canon, that will help us recognize what the Bible emphasizes and what it does not. To avoid wasting the church’s time with inconsequential teachings, we should always be able to support the main propositions in our sermons and lectures with at least one explicit text of Scripture (see no. 1 in the illustration below). Once we have an explicit passage as the main pillar to support our message, we may use implicit passages (no. 2) along with complementary

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truths (no. 3) to bolster our argument. We may add further depth to our proposition by illustrating it with types or historical precedents (no. 4).<sup>21</sup> All of these elements help build a doctrinal proposition and establish its emphasis in the Bible, but they all collapse into imbalance and unimportance if the explicit pillar is not first in place.

On another doctrinal front today, Charismatics question the importance of the Pentecostal doctrine of “tongues as the initial evidence” of the baptism of the Holy Spirit *precisely* because it lacks an explicit biblical support. British Pentecostal leader and adherent of the doctrine, Donald Gee, succinctly summarized *his* basis for the proposition in his article *Speaking in Tongues: the Initial Evidence of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit*:

Now the doctrine that speaking with other tongues is the initial evidence of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit rests upon the accumulated evidence of the recorded cases in the book of Acts where this experience is received. Any doctrine on this point must necessarily be confined within these limits for its basis, for the New Testament contains no plain, categorical statement anywhere as to what must be regarded as THE sign. Nevertheless, the circumstantial evidence is quite sufficient to clearly reveal God’s mind and will in the matter.<sup>22</sup>

While the Assembly of God still officially subscribes to this distinctive doctrine,<sup>23</sup> Gee and other Pentecostal teachers overestimated the willingness of subsequent generations of Pentecostals and Charismatics to promote an idea based solely upon “circumstantial evidence.” When other evangelicals criticized Charismatics for using suspect exegesis to support the “tongues is the evidence” doctrine, an editorial in the May/June 1976 issue of the Charismatic Logos Journal sniffed in reply:

Most Southern Baptist scholars admit true exegesis of the Scripture forces them to conclude that the gifts of the Spirit — including tongues — are just as valid today as they were at Pentecost, or in the house of Cornelius. They quickly add, however, that tongues should not be considered the initial evidence — or even *the* evidence — of the filling of the Spirit. **We agree, and so do most charismatic scholars. Denominational leaders who criticize the charismatic move on these points are to be pitied for their ignorance.** (Bold emphasis mine.)

Clearly the Logos editors did not wish to be pigeonholed as adherents of the “tongues is the evidence” doctrine, and I can understand why: defending the doctrine to one’s friends can become embarrassing. I’ll never forget the time a young Pentecostal friend tried to explain the biblical basis for the “tongues is the evidence” doctrine to me. When I asked him how he knew that tongues was the evidence of the baptism in the Holy Spirit, he replied, “On every occasion in the book of Acts when people were baptized in the Spirit they spoke in tongues.”

“What about the Samaritan converts in Acts 8.17,” I asked. “They received the Spirit but there is no mention of tongues in the passage.”

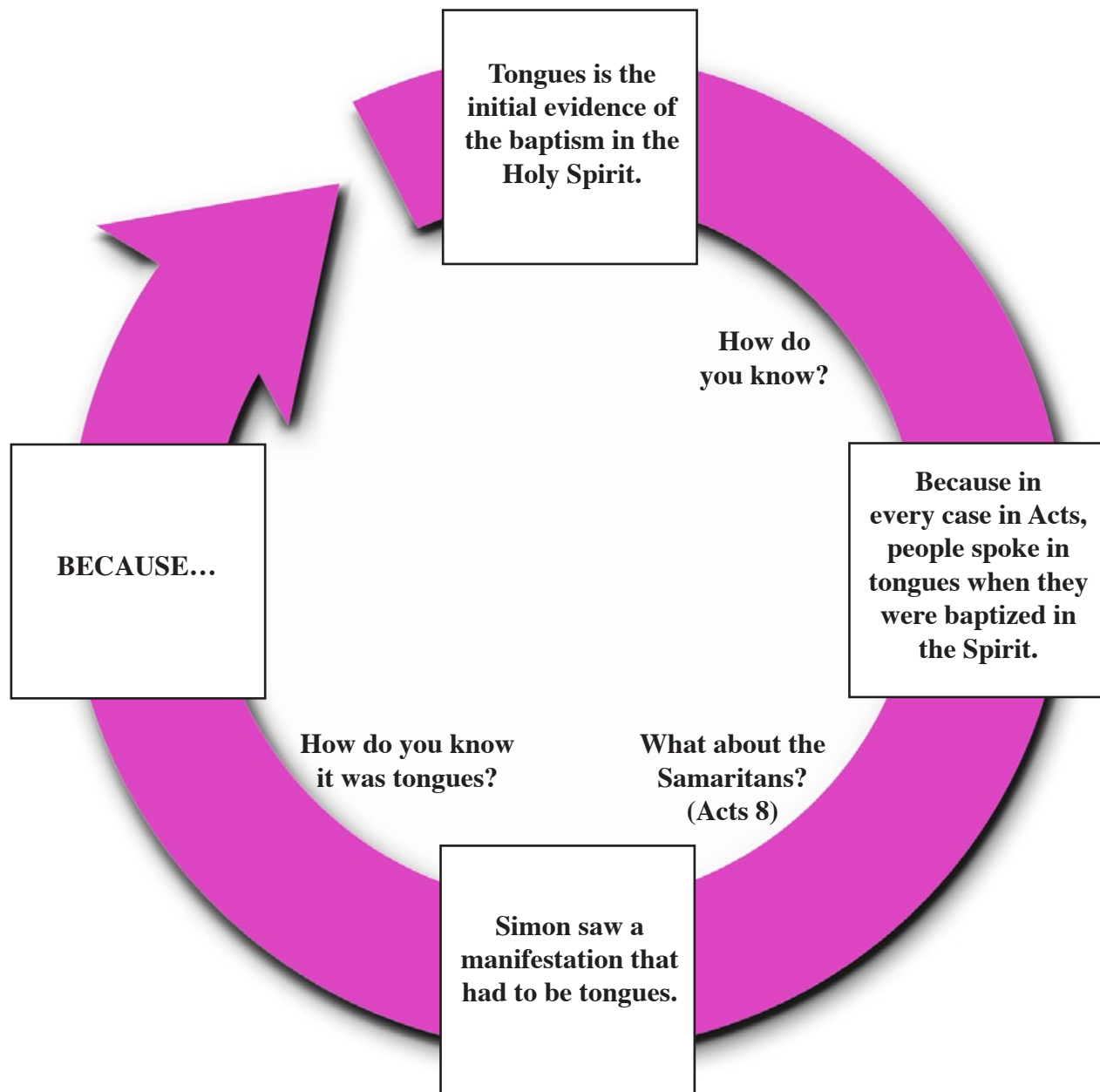
“True,” my friend said, “but Simon the sorcerer saw a manifestation of the Spirit’s coming, and that had to be tongues.”

“But that manifestation could have been a different spiritual gift,” I objected. “How do you know it was tongues?”

“Because,” said my friend, “in every case when people were baptized by the Spirit in the book of Acts, they spoke in tongues.” And thus he brought his argument for “tongues as the evidence” to a full circle. He did the same with regard to Saul of Tarsus. When I pointed out that there is no mention of Saul speaking in tongues when he was filled with the Spirit (Act 9.17-18), my friend replied that Paul told the Corinthians that he *did* speak in tongues (1Co 14.18). “Yes,” I said, “but how do you know he spoke in tongues *at the time* he was initially filled with the Spirit?” He replied, “Because in every case when people were baptized by the Spirit in the book of Acts, they spoke in tongues.”

It is just this kind of circular reasoning and circumstantial evidence, used in lieu of explicit biblical statements, that *unnecessarily* stirs up doctrinal controversy.<sup>24</sup> I *believe* that the Holy Spirit baptizes believers, and I believe in the contemporary exercise of the gift of tongues, but I also believe that there is a sound way to formulate the principles of our pneumatology so that those principles challenge, rather than alienate, non-charismatic evangelicals.

Pneumatology (the study of the Spirit) has always been controversial in the church, and eschatology (the study of last things) has divided evangelicals almost as much. Therefore, before we finish our hermeneutical polishing, it behooves us to give some attention to how we interpret Bible Prophecy. Let us consider seven more principles that pertain specifically to the prophetic Scriptures.





# Polishing Our Hermeneutical Glasses

## Section 3

### The Seven Corollaries That Help Us Interpret Bible Prophecy



#### Checking Our Frames Again

As we focus upon the eschatological Scriptures, we must pause once again to examine *the frames* of our interpretive glasses. Until we become consciously aware of our presuppositions about Bible prophecy, we will tend to apply hermeneutical rules inconsistently. In order to help you become aware of your presuppositions about Bible prophecy, let me share mine with you. As you read these propositions, you can decide whether or not to keep them on your personal list of beliefs.

#### **A. The Bible Is A True Record of God's Dealings With Man**

If the Bible is *true* it means that God has really spoken through His prophets and we can have confidence in their reports and their predictions as accurate and consistent with one another. This means that the Bible stands as its own final authority for interpreting the prophecies within its pages; no other book or prophet can interpret one biblical passage in a way that conflicts with other biblical passages.

#### **B. God Intervenes In Human Affairs**

Following directly upon belief in the truth of the Bible is the belief that God does not stand aloof from His creation, but readily intervenes in human affairs. Among other things, this means that phenomena which we call *supernatural* (because they involve an injection of spiritual power into the natural order) are a real and plausible aspect of human existence. Therefore, we need not relegate the supernatural events of the eschatological scriptures to allegory or metaphor. The cosmic signs and wonders, as well as the battles of angels and demons, *can actually happen* and we must not interpret them as allegorical without a compelling reason to do so.

#### **C. Creation Is The Battleground For A Cosmic War**

As part of His holy and eternal plan, God sovereignly permitted the rebellion of Satan and the fall of man. He has also permitted the ensuing battle for the souls of men that will conclude at the end of the Millennium (the thousand-year reign of Christ described in Rev 20). The *release* of Satan, after he has once been bound (Rev 20.7), underscores the fact that God has deep purposes in the outworking of the cosmic battle between His Kingdom and the Kingdom of Satan. Therefore, we should not dismiss descriptions of apocalyptic battles as purely metaphorical or as apocryphal and unworthy of a loving God.

#### **D. The Church Includes All Believers of All Time**

As Paul tells us in the Seven Unities of Ephesians 4.4-6, there is only *one* body of believers. It is variously referred to in Scripture as the Church, the elect, the saints, the body of Christ, etc., but it is one flock made up of Jew and Gentile, with one Shepherd



(Joh 10.16). The unity of the one body does not negate the cultural distinctions of its members nor the diverse historical contexts of their redemption, but it underscores the one and only basis of their redemption, namely, the atoning sacrifice of Messiah.

#### **E. God Has Never Renounced His Promises To National Israel**

The fact that Jews who do not receive Jesus as Messiah are “broken off” from Messianic blessing (Rom 11.19-20), does not imply that God has renounced His love or His intentions for the Jewish nation, “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11.29). In fact, Israel is the test case for God’s promises. God said in Jeremiah 31.35-36:

Thus says the Lord, Who gives the sun for light by day, And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; The Lord of hosts is His name:

“If this fixed order departs From before Me,” declares the Lord, “Then the offspring of Israel also shall cease From being a nation before Me forever.”

If God were to renounce the nation of Israel before changing the fixed order of the cosmos, we would all question whether any of His promises were secure. The fixed order of the cosmos has not changed, however, nor has God cast off the Israelites as a people, a fact powerfully demonstrated in our century by the reestablishment of a Jewish state in the Holy Land. God’s faithfulness to His promises to Israel stands today as one of the most powerful apologetics for the truth of the Bible.

Israel is not only a living testimony to God’s faithfulness, but remains a chosen vessel for the outworking of God’s redemptive plan for planet earth. As such, Israel has an important role to play alongside the church in the spectacular upheaval of the End Time (a short period of time at the very end of our present age, Dan 8.17; 11.35,40; 12.4).

#### **F. Jerusalem Is The Geographical Center Of Eschatological Scriptures**

Not only does Israel retain her calling and special role in God’s eschatological plans, but Jerusalem also retains her status as the city of Messiah, the Coming King. As Benjamin Newton wrote, “The facts of prophetic history are made by Scripture to revolve around Jerusalem as their centre — and therefore any system of interpretation which violates this cardinal principle will soon find itself lost in inconsistency.”<sup>25</sup> It is in Jerusalem that the final battle of the apocalypse will be fought, and it is on her Mount of Olives that Messiah’s feet will touch down when He descends from heaven (Zec 14.4).

Because Jerusalem is the geographical focal point of the eschatological scriptures, we should recognize that prophetic references to “the earth” or “the land” may refer only to the land of Israel, and that references to “the world” probably refer to the “prophetic world”, that is, the known world of the prophets’ day. Unless there is clear indication in the text that *the earth* or *the world* refers to a greater region, we should probably take it as referring to *ha-eretz yisrael*, the land of Israel, or at most the greater Mediterranean world. (For a thorough demonstration of the Bible’s “limited” geography, please see my treatise entitled, *The Beast At The Center Of The World*, available on our Timothy Ministries website.)

### G. “The End Of All Things Is At Hand...”

At first glance it seems sensational to declare that the end is near, but the apostle Peter said it explicitly in 1 Peter 4.7. John, believed to have been the longest-lived of the apostles, also spoke strongly of the near end of the age (1Jo 2.18): “Children, it is the *last hour*; and just as you heard that antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have arisen; from this we know that *it is the last hour*.” Indeed, when John recorded his vision of the apocalypse, he was told (Rev 22.10), “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for *the time is near*.” Were the apostles mistaken, just like modern-day date-setters? After all, nearly two thousand years have passed since they wrote their declarations of impending cataclysm. Were they wrong?



Well first of all, they did not set a date for the end, they only wrote that the end was coming soon. Secondly, they defined what they meant by *soon*. In 2 Peter 3.8, the apostle exhorted, “But do not let this *one fact* escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” To understand his meaning, let’s read the fourth verse of Psalm 90 to which Peter alluded:

“For a thousand years in Thy sight  
Are like yesterday when it passes by,  
Or as a watch in the night.”

The context of 2 Peter 3, together with the allusion to Psalm 90, clarify Peter’s point: *soon* for God can mean *a long time* for us. Time is relative and we who dwell on earth experience it quite differently from God who dwells in eternity. Nevertheless, as God considered the entire scope of world history from beginning to end, and the long ages already past in contrast to the relatively short period that remained in His program for the world, He rightly declared through His apostle that the end would come soon.

Peter understood this prophetic time scale well. On the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted the prophet Joel to the effect that the pouring out of the Spirit, which they experienced in Jerusalem that day, marked the epoch of “the last days,” a period of time which would close with the darkening of the sun and the moon and the arrival of the “great and glorious day of the Lord” (Act 2.16-21; cf. Heb 1.1-2).<sup>26</sup> Peter realized that he had lived to enter that very last era before God’s judgment of the world and the restoration of all things (Act 3.19-20). However long the “last days” might continue, they constituted the final epoch of human history, and, unlike the saints of all previous generations, Christians could now say, “the end of *all things* is near!” A global remaking was at hand that was more radical than that accomplished by the flood of Noah which only destroyed “all flesh.”

If it was true that the end of all things was near in Peter’s day, it is truer in ours. As Paul wrote, “...now salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand” (Rom 13.11-12). Since these things are true, we should heed Christ’s words when He tells us in John 9.4, “We must work the works of Him who sent Me, as long as it is day; night is coming, when no man can

work.” Part of accomplishing that work is to rightly interpret the prophetic Scriptures to our churches and to our world.

Now, having sorted through some presuppositions, let us proceed with polishing our interpretive lenses using these last seven principles:

### 15. The Spirit of Prophecy Rule

In Revelation 19.10, an angel states a vital principle: “the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” In other words, “the testimony of Jesus” is what gives life and meaning to prophecy. But what is “the testimony of Jesus”? Other passages in the Revelation clarify that “the testimony of Jesus” is simply the public announcement about who Jesus is and what He has done. Therefore, we can substitute terms and say that “the disclosure of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” If we then compare this idea with James’ parallel formula about faith, “as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (Jam 2.26), we realize that prophecy without the disclosure of Jesus *is dead!* This means that ***we have missed the whole point of biblical eschatology if we fail to study it primarily for what it reveals to us about Christ.***

As American Christians we have probably broken this rule of interpreting eschatology more than any other. We tend to study Bible prophecy primarily for the sensational perspective it lends to world events, and to satisfy our curiosity about the future prospects of our own personal peace and prosperity.

Symptomatic of this smudge on our hermeneutical glasses is our common error of referring to the final book of the Bible as *The Book of Revelations* (plural). It is not a collection of disparate visions, however. It is *The Revelation* (singular) of *Jesus Christ*. This title is lifted from the beginning of verse 1, “The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ,” and the word *apocalypse* is simply the Greek word for an *unveiling*, i.e., a *revelation*. When I teach *The Revelation*, I ask my students if they would like to experience an apocalypse (now). With some hesitation they usually say yes. I then briefly remove the veil from a picture I’ve painted. I replace the veil quickly and ask the students if they missed the apocalypse. The point sinks in: an apocalypse, by definition, is an unveiling,<sup>27</sup> and the final book of the Bible, according to its own title *draws back the veil from Jesus Christ*.<sup>28</sup>

As an unveiling of Jesus, it is an awesome answer to one of the Apostle Paul’s prayers. Around AD 61, Paul had prayed for the Christians in Ephesus, saying “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and *revelation*, so that you may know him better” (Eph 1.17). The ultimate answer to that prayer came nearly 40 years later through the ministry of the Apostle John who sent *The Revelation* from the island of Patmos to the church in Ephesus. The Ephesian Christians were struggling at that time with maintaining a proper spiritual focus in spite of their hard work for the gospel and steadfast witness. Paul’s prayer that they would experience a deeper glimpse of Christ through the Spirit of wisdom and revelation was answered at a crucial time in their history with a book that revealed more about Jesus than the church at large had theretofore understood. Now that *we* understand its purpose, we must

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not squander this treasure so cherished by the first-century Christians. We must neither ignore the Book of Revelation nor fail to see its Christocentricity.

Its Christ-centeredness does not negate the fact that *The Revelation* does disclose future events. Bible prophecy *does* reveal the future, but first and foremost it reveals Christ! Bearing this in mind will make our study of eschatology much more fruitful, and it will also help us avoid all kinds of wasteful debates over secondary issues.

With regard to the disclosure of future events, it is crucial that we come to understand the next rule:

## 16. The Rule of Cumulative Fulfillment

***Biblical prophecy is often fulfilled by cumulative events.*** Not infrequently, multiple events will combine, over a long stretch of time, to fulfill a biblical prophecy. This does not mean that biblical prophecies have *double* or *hidden* meanings. Beecher<sup>29</sup> has attempted to express this principle by speaking of a *generic prophecy* “which regards an event as occurring in a series of parts separated by intervals, and expresses itself in language that may apply indifferently to the nearest part, or to the remoter parts, or to the whole—in other words a prediction which, in applying to the whole of a complex of event, also applies to some of the parts.” Mickelsen speaks of “typological predictions” that “refer to something prior to New Testament times although it finds its highest application of meaning in the events, people, or message of the New Testament. The betrayal of Christ for thirty pieces of silver is an example of this kind of prediction (Mat 27.9-10; Zec 11.12-13). In Zechariah it was the prophet himself, acting as a shepherd for his people in Jehovah’s place, who was evaluated for thirty pieces of silver.”<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the better way to understand prophetic fulfillment is as a process like the painting of a picture. One event may supply the background of the painting, another some of the foreground setting, but the picture is not finished, i.e., the canvas is not fulfilled as intended, until the primary subject of the picture is finally painted into the foreground. Zechariah’s prophecy of the thirty pieces of silver is a good example of this process; the prophecy of the virgin-birth of Isaiah 7.14 is another. The virgin-birth prediction began to be fulfilled by the birth of the prophetess’ son in Isaiah 8.3. It was not finally fulfilled, however, until the virgin birth of Jesus (Mat 1.23).

We find the same principle in biblical typology. We may think of biblical types as “predictions in 3-D.” It’s easy to see a type and its simple fulfillment in examples like that of Isaac carrying the wood for the sacrifice on his back (Gen 22.6 = type), and Jesus carrying his own cross for the ultimate sacrifice (Joh 19.17 = fulfillment). However, there are more complex biblical types, like the flood waters (1Pe 3.20) which begin to be fulfilled by a subsequent,

*corresponding type* (Greek = *antitupos*), in this case baptism (1Pe 3.21), which points to the *ultimate fulfillment* (an inner cleansing through the resurrection of Christ, 1Pe 3.21). The writer of Hebrews uses this same pattern of “type > corresponding type > fulfillment” in describing the blueprint for the tabernacle (Greek = *tupos*, Heb 8.5), the man-made sanctuary (Greek = *antitupos*, Heb 9.24), and finally the real sanctuary of heaven itself (Heb 9.24).

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The prophetic and typological pattern of “type > corresponding type > fulfillment” has direct application in interpreting the apocalyptic predictions concerning the antichrist and the abomination of desolation. Daniel predicted both the antichrist (implicitly) and the abomination of desolation (explicitly). Many commentators see a fulfillment of these predictions in the profanation of the temple by Antiochus IV “Epiphanes” in 167 B.C. 1 Maccabees 1.54 supports their interpretation: “On the fifteenth day of Chislev, in the one hundred and forty-fifth year, they erected a *desolating sacrilege* upon the altar of burnt offering.” However, Jesus Christ, in AD 30 spoke of the “abomination of desolation” as yet future (Mat 24.15). We solve this puzzle by recognizing that Antiochus IV *did* fulfill Daniel’s prophecy, but as an *antitypos*, i.e., a corresponding type, that yet looked ahead to an ultimate fulfillment in the one whom Paul called “the man of lawlessness” (2Th 2.3-4), i.e., the final Antichrist.

Remembering that the fulfillment of biblical prophecy is often a *process* will keep us from discarding end-time prophecy as something that has already been fulfilled by events in history and has no relevance for the future. Likewise, as we learn how future events mirror past *and present* realities, eschatology will help us understand what we already possess as believers in Christ.

### **17. The Rule of the Already/Not Yet Tension (The Ladd Rule)**

In his book *The Presence of the Future*, as well as in his outstanding *A Theology of the New Testament*, George Eldon Ladd developed the idea, now widely embraced by evangelical theologians, that an “already/not yet” tension attaches to many of the Bible’s eschatological truths. For example, the Kingdom of Heaven has not yet come in its fullest manifestation (Luk 22.18), but it is already a present reality (Mat 11.12; 12.28). Likewise, we are not yet enthroned with Christ in glory (Rev 3.21), but we are already, in a very real sense, seated with Christ in heaven (Eph 2.6). The greater future realization does not negate or diminish the important present reality.

We Americans are familiar with this “already/not yet” tension in our presidential election years. The new president is elected in November, and we begin to speak of him as our new president, but he does not actually take office until January. He is technically only the “president elect,” but he begins to attend White House meetings and soon becomes “the president” in every respect except the final authority that comes with inauguration. He is “already” the president by mandate of the people, but has “not yet” assumed the full authority of office. This is exactly the status of our Lord Jesus. By His death and resurrection he has already legally won the Lordship of planet earth, but He has not yet returned to assume the full honor of reigning directly over the human race.

***Recognizing the “already/not yet” aspect of prophecy will help us learn its present lessons and applications, while not losing sight of its future fulfillments.***

Of course, any lessons and applications we derive from Bible prophecies will be arbitrary at best, if we do not adopt:

### **18. The Rule of Literal Fulfillment**

Paralleling the [Rule of the Literal Sense](#), we should ***expect a literal fulfillment of biblical predictions***. Jesus was literally born of a virgin (Isa 7.14), he was literally born in Bethlehem (Mic 5.2), and he was literally pierced (Zec 12.10). The scores of Old Testament prophecies that have been precisely fulfilled, even when one might have



expected the laws of nature to preclude their fulfillments, teach us to expect a literal unfolding of those biblical predictions that have not yet come to pass.

This does not imply that we should expect a literal fulfillment of prophetic metaphors. For example, we should not expect a literal seven-headed monster to crawl out of the Mediterranean Sea (Rev 13,17). That would be like expecting the literal arrival of a ship when a friend colorfully describes his imminent inheritance, “my ship’s coming in!” It is the essential meaning of a prediction that will be literally fulfilled, not its symbolic or metaphorical packaging (see [The Rule of Apocalyptic Symbols](#) below).

The prophetic Scriptures *will* be literally fulfilled, but some Bible students have become skeptical about this because they expected prophetic predictions to be fulfilled at a certain time and they weren’t. The problem, however, is with the date-setter, not with the prophecy. In order to avoid chronological errors while interpreting Bible prophecy, we must keep in mind:

## **19. The Rule of Eternal Perspective**

### **A. Recognize the Use of the Prophetic Aorist Tense**

Many biblical predictions are given or described in a past tense (often the aorist tense in Greek passages). This does not imply that the events had already happened when the prophecy was written, but only indicates that the events had already been seen in the prophetic vision and by the eternal eyes of God.

### **B. Expect A Telescoped Chronology**

Because God, living above time, sees the total history of the universe in one eternally *present* glance, He often gives visions in a compressed or telescoped form. God declares multiple future events to a prophet as though all those events happen at once, because that’s the way God sees them. It falls to the prophet and to subsequent interpreters to stretch out the chronology of a prediction so it can be properly understood from an earthly point of view.

Failure to correctly extend the chronology of a prophetic “packet” leads to serious errors. Perhaps the greatest failure to unpack prophetic chronology was committed by the first-century religious leaders who expected the Messiah to come both in humility and glory all at the same time. It was easy to misinterpret the messianic prophecies that way. However, Jesus Himself sets a better example for us. When he read aloud the prophecy about Himself in Isaiah 61, he stopped at exactly the right spot, mid-verse and mid-prophecy, before announcing, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luk 4.16-21). Jesus understood that Isaiah had received a revelation that was telescoped together, but only the first part of the prophecy applied to that present moment in Christ’s ministry.

**God declares multiple future events to a prophet as though all those events happen at once, because that’s the way God sees them.**

### **C. Don’t Assume A Consecutive Chronology.**

When we watch a movie, we see one frame at a time. From God’s eternal perspective, He sees the whole “movie” of history at once. Therefore, we must not assume that a series of visions coming from God, or a series of events in a prophecy, necessarily follow

a consecutive chronological order. We may be looking at snapshots, i.e., single frames taken from different points in the movie. A prophecy may describe two separate frames from the movie without describing the intervening frames; one scene may follow the other, yet without the two being consecutive.

In many cases the content of Bible prophecies is narrated in a chronologically reciprocating manner, moving back and forth in time setting. One vision may provide a sweeping panorama of the future as did Nebuchadnezzar's vision of the image (Dan 2), and then subsequent visions may return to different chronological settings to provide detail about specific events within the greater panorama (Dan 8). Similarly, a prophecy may look to the distant future and then return to describe events that will occur much sooner (see Luk 21.12).

#### D. Look for Definite Chronological Markers

Where the chronology or order of events is important in Bible prophecy, the Holy Spirit makes it unmistakable with clear language (e.g., Mat 24.29: "*immediately after* the tribulation of those days").

#### E. Recognize the Multiple Meanings of *Then*

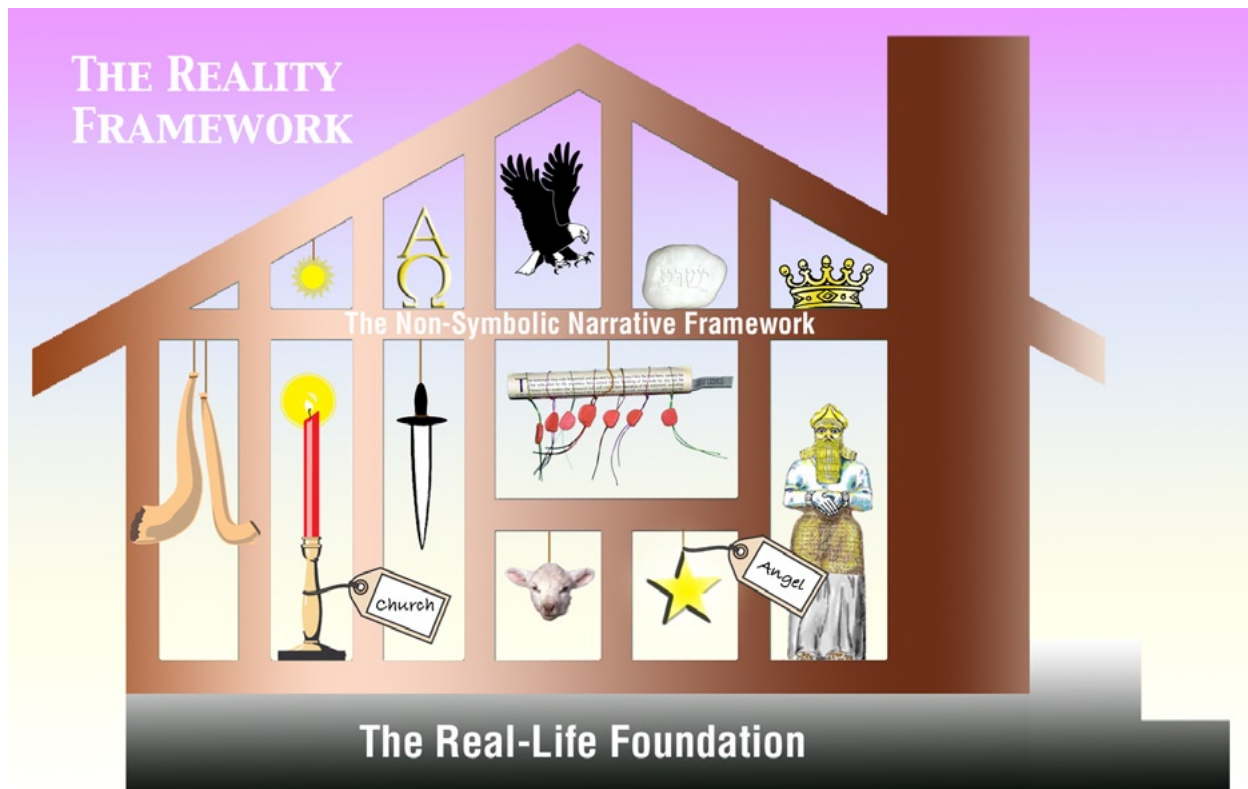
There are at least nine different Greek words translated *then* in the NT. Most of them have no chronological meaning but simply indicate an inference or the continuation of a thought. Of the three terms with chronological meaning, two of them (εἰτα, 1Ti 3.10; ἐπειτα, Jam 3.17) indicate succession and mean *thereafter*; while the third (τότε, Mat 24.9-10) means *at that time*.

Once we have taken into account the complexity of eschatological chronology, we must learn:

### 20. The Rule of Apocalyptic Symbols

To understand the rich use of symbolism in apocalyptic literature, we must keep four principles in mind. **First, symbolic entities attach to and depend upon a framework of reality.** In any apocalyptic passage, the author may well describe a mixture of his real-life setting, together with both symbolic and non-symbolic entities from his dream or vision. The real-life setting provides the foundation, and the non-symbolic entities provide the framework that gives structure and meaning to the symbolic ones (see illustration below).

For example, Daniel chapter 7 opens with Daniel's description of the time and circumstances of a dream-vision. This introduction (Dan 7.1-2a) provides the real-life setting (foundation) for what follows. We recognize that the date ("first year of Belshazzar"), king Belshazzar, Babylon, Daniel himself, and Daniel's bed are not symbols in the text, but intended to be read literally. So far so good. Then Daniel describes four bizarre beasts (Dan 7.4-8). Since Daniel describes these four beasts as elements of his vision, and as strangely different from any real-world animals, the literary cues make it pretty obvious that the beasts are symbolic entities that require interpretation (a fact confirmed by the interpretation given in Dan 7.17 — the symbolic animals represent entities other than animals). Now in this passage we have a literal, real-world setting plus symbolic entities from Daniel's vision. However, as Daniel keeps watching his vision unfold, he sees the Ancient of Days, His throne, a river of fire, and books being opened (Dan 7.9-10). Is the Ancient of Days a symbol for something else? No. His appearance at this point in the vision has important meaning, but the meaning



The Reality Framework illustrates how apocalyptic symbols are based upon a real-life setting, and appear within a non-symbolic narrative context that sometimes attaches interpretations.

is not conveyed by symbolism. The Ancient of Days is the Ancient of Days, God. He is a non-symbolic entity in the vision that provides meaningful context for the symbolic ones. So, at this point we have all three ingredients of an apocalyptic vision: (1) the real-life setting, (2) symbolic entities of the vision proper, and (3) a non-symbolic entity that provides part of the vision's meaningful framework.

We have no difficulty thus far, but now things may get tricky. In these same verses in which we meet the Ancient of Days (Dan 7.9-10), is His throne symbolic? Is the river of fire symbolic? Are the books symbolic? The question is not whether these elements connote additional meaning; thrones, fire and books all direct our thoughts to *judgment*. The question, however, is whether the throne symbolizes an object other than a throne, or the books objects other than books. Does the throne represent the heavenly realm? Do the books symbolize angelic witnesses of human history? Probably not. The throne and the books are very meaningful elements of the vision, but probably not symbolic entities like the four beasts.

The point is that we must not *over interpret* an apocalyptic vision as though every entity symbolizes something else, but recognize that non-symbolic entities will be mixed in with the symbolic ones. If we fail to recognize the non-symbolic entities of a vision as elements to be taken at face value, our exegetical framework collapses and we leave the meaning of the vision completely up for grabs.

The second principle to bear in mind with regard to apocalyptic symbols is closely related to the first. It's a principle that should be obvious but even great scholars have overlooked it to the enduring confusion of their readers. ***This second principle of apocalyptic symbols is that we should not interpret interpretations.*** Like the book of Daniel, the Revelation abounds with symbols, many of which are interpreted

in the text. Where the symbols are *not* explicitly interpreted for us, we appropriately interpret them ourselves on the basis of biblical clues. However, where the text *does* supply an interpretation, we must not interpret the interpretation, as though it were itself a new symbol.

For example, the first chapter of Revelation presents us with a great deal of symbolism, including the symbols of the seven stars and seven lampstands. The text interprets these two symbols in Rev 1.20 as the “angels (Gk *messengers*) of the seven churches” and “the seven churches” respectively. While it is appropriate to ask whether the individual identities of the angels and churches can be discovered, it is *not* appropriate to try to interpret the angels and churches as symbols for something else. The churches, for example, do not represent the seven heavens. The angels are angels, whether human or celestial, and the churches are churches, the latter identified specifically in the following chapters as real congregations of first-century Asia Minor. As a further example, we do well to note that “the seven spirits” in the Revelation are not a symbol, but *the interpretation of symbols* in Rev 4.5 and 5.6. The seven spirits do not represent something else, like the one Holy Spirit; they are seven spirits. We can discuss the specific identities of these seven spirits, but we cannot turn them into an altogether different entity anymore than we can turn “the seven churches” into the one Church of Jerusalem, or the like.

A 19th century eschatology scholar I greatly admire, Benjamin Wills Newton, stumbled over this principle in his interpretation of Revelation 17. Newton, erroneously took the seven hills of Mystery Babylon in that passage as symbolic and requiring interpretation. In his justified eagerness to disabuse his contemporaries of the idea that Mystery Babylon is the Roman Catholic religion or the papacy, he fastened his mind too hastily on the idea that Mystery Babylon was none other than Mesopotamian Babylon. He therefore had to interpret the seven hills as non-literal, because Iraqi Babylon has no hills. Mr. Newton reasoned this way:

“the woman is said to be seated on (1) many waters, which are explained to mean many peoples and multitudes, (2) on a beast, [and] (3) on seven mountains. Now, inasmuch as no one has ever thought of inferring from the first two of these statements that Babylon physically was builded either on waters, or on a Beast, so it should never have been inferred that Babylon physically was builded on seven mountains.”<sup>31</sup>

The logic of Newton’s argument is sound, but he failed to take one very important thing into account, and that is the distinction between vision and interpretation. Mystery Babylon is seated upon many waters and on the beast *in the vision*. That the waters represent “many peoples and multitudes,” and that the seven heads of the beast represent “seven mountains” are part of the angel’s *interpretation* of the vision. If we interpret “the seven hills” as representing something else, we have turned the interpretation into a new symbol! If we do that, consistency would demand that we interpret the “many peoples and multitudes” as symbolizing something else as well. However, such a reinterpretation of the angel’s interpretations would be absurd. The “seven hills” are just that, the famous seven hills *not of Mesopotamian Babylon* but of Rome, Italy.

***Thirdly, the fantastic symbols of apocalyptic literature must not be understood as expressions of physical appearance, but of the spiritual and relational character of the entities they represent.*** For example, the seven-headed beast of Revelation 13 and 17 will have a physical manifestation, for the Spirit tells us explicitly that its seven heads represent seven kings (Rev 17.10). Nevertheless,



the beast symbolism does not describe the physical appearance of these kings, but rather emphasizes their spiritual and relational character. The beast symbol reveals the federation of these kings (since the heads attach to the same body), the savage character of their political alliance, and their common geographical setting, namely, the Mediterranean Sea.

While recognizing this use of material symbols to emphasize spiritual and relational character, we must not thereby conclude that all material elements in apocalyptic passages are symbolic. Remembering the first principle of apocalyptic symbols, namely, that they depend upon a contextual framework of reality, the Revelation leads us to expect real demonic manifestations attached to actual real-world objects (e.g., the breathing, speaking image, Rev 13.15) and actual divine miracles performed by and upon real human beings (e.g., the resurrection of the two witnesses, Rev 11.11) in the time of the end.

***Fourthly, as we study apocalyptic passages we must remember that one symbol may represent different objects, and one object may be represented by different symbols.*** For example, the same symbol can represent both a king, and his kingdom (as do the parts of the image in Dan 2.39-44). In another example, the same symbol can represent both hills and kings (Rev 17.9-10). Similarly, one entity can be symbolized by two or more different symbols. The one and only Jesus Christ is represented in the Revelation by manna, a white stone, a lamb, the crystal sea, the golden altar, etc.

Because multiple prophetic symbols and names can point to the same object, we must be careful to practice our final rule:

## **21. The Rule of Documenting Distinctions**

**We must avoid making a distinction between similar names or objects unless we can document the distinction in the Biblical text.** Observing accurate distinctions is essential to understanding the scriptures. However, we often find distinctions where they don't really exist, and fail to see distinctions where we should.

For example, many contemporary expositors have made an eschatological distinction between what the New Testament calls the "Kingdom of Heaven" and the "Kingdom of God." The gospels clearly use these two phrases interchangeably, however (cf. Mat 13.31 and Mar 4.30), and it's easy to understand why: the gospel writers used *heaven* as a euphemism for the sacred title *God*. Since the two terms were synonymous in the minds of the evangelists, we would be foolish to emphasize a distinction between them.

In another example of this problem, B. W. Newton (mentioned above) distinguishes the 144,000 of Revelation 14 from the 144,000 of Revelation 7, making the two passages speak of different groups. The distinction seems arbitrary, however, since both passages describe groups who are redeemed from the earth, and who are of the same number, and who have the same seal on the same part of their bodies. There is no compelling reason in the text to decide that the two passages describe different entities.

Nor is there a compelling reason to interpret the 144,000 of Revelation as representing someone other than whom they are called: members of "children of Israel" (Rev 7.4). Much has been made of the fact that the listing of the Israelite tribes in Revelation 7 differs from traditional tribal listings by including Levi and Joseph, and excluding Ephraim and Dan. This, however, is not enough reason to declare that the



persons in view are not Israelites at all. On the contrary, the same phrase, “children of Israel,” used in Rev 2.14, makes it clear that literal Israelites are in view. When an entity in one passage of prophecy looks just like the entity in another passage, it is safest to accept them as indeed the same.

However, sometimes Bible prophecy will use the same name for different things. In Revelation 17, John describes Mystery Babylon the Great. Our initial assumption, based on rules we have already learned, should be that John referred to the Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar and Daniel, the ruins of which lie in present-day Iraq. However, the context of Rev 17 goes on to make explicit that the city in view is actually Rome, the “great city which [reigned] over the kings of the earth” at the time of the prophecy (Rev 17.18). Therefore, we make a distinction between the Babylon of Revelation and the Babylon of Daniel, but only because we can document the distinction in our text.

### **Conclusion**

Speaking of making distinctions, the essential idea in the Hebrew word for *discernment* (בִּיָּר) is *separation*. The discernment so commended in the book of Proverbs (Pro 3.21) has to do with the ability to *separate* or *distinguish* between alternatives and choose the best one. In other words, a discerning person knows how to make distinctions between holy and unholy, good and bad, wise and foolish, proper and improper. Because we live in the information age, when new ideas about anything and everything — including new ideas about the Bible and its teachings — are bombarding our society at the speed of light, it is more important today than ever before that we have a discerning heart and mind when we read and interpret Scripture. I hope this study will have helped the reader polish his or her hermeneutical glasses and move forward toward that goal.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The seven spirits are mentioned also in Rev 1.4, 3.1 and 5.6.
- <sup>2</sup> Wise, Abegg and Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, (HaperSanFrancisco), 1996.
- <sup>3</sup> Named Suru'el, Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Saraqa'el, Gabriel, and Remiel. See 1 Enoch 20.1-7 and notes in Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 1 (Doubleday, 1983).
- <sup>4</sup> Some interpreters prefer to understand the seven spirits of God in Revelation as “another way of speaking of the [one] Holy Spirit,” noting that “the number seven suggests completeness, ‘the Holy Spirit in his fullness of life and blessing.’” The problem with this interpretation is the lack of biblical precedent for speaking of the fullness or completeness of a thing by referring to it as *seven things*.
- <sup>5</sup> The New Bible Dictionary, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1962.
- <sup>6</sup> Interestingly in the New Testament, the title *Lord* is very rarely conferred upon “God” or the “Father” but almost always upon the God-Man, Jesus Christ. In those passages where the word *Lord* does refer to “God” or “the Father,” it is usually a translation from the Old Testament of God’s personal covenant name, YHWH. In those passages where the New Testament uses the word *Lord* as a title, with its full biblical connotations of ultimate and universal sovereign, it is as the title of Jesus Christ of Nazareth (Act 2.36).
- <sup>7</sup> It may be argued that John the Baptist was not speaking of “Christian baptism” at all, but only of the distinct phenomenon of “the baptism in the Holy Spirit.” I fear, however, that this interpretation creates more problems than it answers, in light of passages such as 1Co 12.13.
- <sup>8</sup> The JWs appeal to Greek grammar to make their case for this translation. A woodenly literal rendering of John 1.1 would look like this: “In beginning was the word, and the word was with the God, and God was the word.” Notice that the definite article, *the*, appears before the first occurrence of the word *God* in the Greek original, but not before the second occurrence of *God*. When there is no *definite* article, *the*, before a noun, Greek grammar allows the translator to supply the *indefinite* article, *a*, should context warrant it. What is the contextual basis for the JW’s translation? None but their own heretical presuppositions! The immediate context of John 1.1-4 indicates that the Word is the Creator of Genesis 1.1, i.e., the One God.
- <sup>9</sup> To be sure, the JWs endeavor to explain away this violation of the One God principle. They propose that John’s reference to Christ as “a god” (Joh 1.1) and Thomas’ exclamation, “My Lord and my God!” (Joh 20.28) just refer to Christ’s exalted *position* without speaking of his essential *nature*. However, such an idea betrays their shallow understanding of first-century Jewish culture, and of John’s writing style and purpose. Either Christ is the one God or he is no God. He cannot be *a god* who already existed in the beginning (John 1.1), who created all things (Joh 1.3) and who has life inherently in himself just like the Father (Joh 1.4; 5.26) and yet isn’t THE GOD!
- <sup>10</sup> I highly recommend Leon Morris’s treatment of John 1.1 in his *New International Commentary: The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995), including his footnote on translating the Greek on pp. 68 and 69.
- <sup>11</sup> Of course, this principle is also implied by the second and fourth Unities, and assumes a belief that the Bible is God’s inspired revelation.
- <sup>12</sup> For the hermeneutical and apologetic importance of the Sinai theophany, see the author’s article, *Mountains of Evidence*, at <http://www.tmin.org/pdfs/mountains.pdf>.
- <sup>13</sup> J. Sidlow Baxter handles this passage nicely in his little book, *Studies In Problem Texts* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1960).
- <sup>14</sup> The full and wonderfully instructive account can be read among Tertullian’s works in an edition of the Ante-Nicene Fathers.
- <sup>15</sup> The explanation of the Mosaic tithing legislation provided to us by Josephus, based on Deuteronomy 14.28-29; 26.12, etc., is that the Jews were bound to pay two tithes every year, one to the Levites, and one for the festival sacrifices at Jerusalem, and then on the third year to add a *third* tithe to the first two, which would provide for the indigents, the widows, and the orphans. Tobit 1.6-8 illustrates this practice of paying a *triple* tithe. The Holman CSB version makes a serious error by translating “10 percent” in Mal 3.10.

## Notes (Continued)

- <sup>16</sup> See the entry on the **Tithe** in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.
- <sup>17</sup> Poetic books also utilize repetitive and symmetrical sentence structures. We once had a guest speaker at our church who made much of the five “I wills” of Lucifer in Isaiah 14. He went on to build his message on the correlation of these five “I wills” with the five giants of Numbers 13.22. Whether or not there are actually five giants referred to in Numbers 13.22, the fact that Isaiah 14 is written in poetry should caution us to not read too much into the repetitions in the passage.
- <sup>18</sup> The catching up of the saints, 1 Thessalonians 4.17.
- <sup>19</sup> Matthew 24.21.
- <sup>20</sup> Revelation 3.10, for example, often offered in support of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture, promised the first-century church of Philadelphia a deliverance from a time of testing that would come upon the Mediterranean world. There is no explicit connection to the end-time tribulation or rapture of the saints.
- <sup>21</sup> For the special problem of interpreting biblical patterns and precedents, see the author’s article, *The Problem With Patterns And Precedents*, at <http://www.tmin.org/pdfs/patterns.pdf>.
- <sup>22</sup> December 12, 1925, issue of the Pentecostal Evangel.
- <sup>23</sup> [http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200004/092\\_full\\_consummation.cfm](http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/200004/092_full_consummation.cfm).
- <sup>24</sup> And leaves serious Christians skeptical, not only of the proposition, but of their teachers!
- <sup>25</sup> Newton, Benjamin, *Aids to Prophetic Inquiry*, p. 11.
- <sup>26</sup> The End Time, mentioned above, is the final part of The Last Days.
- <sup>27</sup> The term *apocalypse* has of course taken on more sensational connotations because of its association with end-time catastrophes. Also, as the adjective, *apocalyptic*, it identifies a whole style or genre of literature, both biblical and apocryphal, that focuses upon the final judgment and its associated upheavals.
- <sup>28</sup> The veil is Christ’s humanity, and it was drawn back briefly once before on the Mount of Transfiguration.
- <sup>29</sup> Quoted in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, (Baker, Grand Rapids, 1970), p.252.
- <sup>30</sup> A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting The Bible*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1963), p. 300.
- <sup>31</sup> Newton, Benjamin Wills; *Babylon: Its Future History and Doom* (The Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony, London, 1890), pp. 118, 119.

## Index Of References To Biblical And Other Ancient Literature

The entries in this index are listed in alphabetical rather than canonical order. Also, they employ zeroes as placeholders where necessary to keep the correct sequence of chapter and verse references. Therefore, the fourth verse of John chapter one, for example, appears as Joh 01.04. Page numbers appear to the right of each entry.

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