

The Enduring  
AUTHORITY  
of the Christian  
SCRIPTURES  
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## Take, Read

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The title of this chapter, “Take, Read,” comes to us not from Scripture but from the account of one Scripture-mediated struggle with God. Augustine of Hippo’s dramatic reading of Romans 13:13-14 makes two foundational points: it is imperative to take and read, but it is difficult to take and read. As a command, “take, read” summons everyone, including pastors and theologians, to take and read Scripture while giving ourselves to God’s aim in ordaining it, that by reading we might know, love, trust, and follow the triune God (Jer. 9:24; Ezek. 36:28; Heb. 8:11; *passim*). We might wish for an uncomplicated plan for using the Bible: take, read, comprehend, believe, obey. But the story of Augustine suggests that reading is no simple thing.

### The Story of Augustine

According to the *Confessions*, Augustine attended church when duties permitted, read the lives of the saints, conversed with believers, and made “Scriptures . . . the subject of deep study” for perhaps a decade before his conversion. He was, at the same time, such a “slave of lust” that he could not live without a concubine, even while he awaited his formal marriage.<sup>1</sup> His desire for success in worldly affairs was just as strong. A decisive change began when a leading Roman official named Ponticianus visited Augustine’s rented home in Hippo. When Ponticianus noticed a copy of Romans lying open, he regaled them with the story of Anthony, a prominent man who became a solitary monk. More than that, Ponticianus told how the story of Anthony had led to his own conversion and the conversion of his friends. The story filled Augustine with affection for Ponticianus, but reproach for himself.<sup>2</sup>

Augustine suffered spiritual torment, for he wanted to become a new man, yet he feared a conversion that deprived him of his two enthralling mistresses, his concubine, and his career. His “conscience complained” and he gnawed at himself as Ponticianus spoke. Augustine “was violently overcome by a fearful sense of shame.”<sup>3</sup> Yet “the agony of hesitation” continued, even after he realized that God grants the resources necessary for obedience. Weeping and groaning, Augustine stole from the villa he shared with his friend and fellow seeker Alypius, threw himself down under a fig tree, and cried, “How long, how long. . . . Why not an end to my impure life in this very hour?”<sup>4</sup>

At that moment, he heard a child chanting, “Take, read, take, read.” Although he realized it must be part of a child’s game, he chose to interpret it as a divine command. Augustine had carried a copy of Romans with him from the house. He opened it at random and read: “Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts.” He concludes, “I neither wished nor needed to read further.” At once, certainty flooded his heart and the gloom of doubt vanished. A few minutes later, the estimable Alypius joined him in resolving to follow Christ.<sup>5</sup> Augustine quit his career in rhetoric and began to study the Word full time with a band of friends. Soon enough Augustine was ordained as priest and, before long, as bishop.

Clearly, Augustine did not “Take, read” as a naïf. He studied, meditated, and, after a fashion, understood the Bible for years before he yielded himself to the God of the Bible. The command

to take and read had its effect because Augustine had already learned the content of the faith, the doctrine and demands of the gospel, as stated in Romans. If anything, Augustine's case suggests that a naïve reader cannot simply take up the Bible, read it, comprehend it, and follow it.

This chapter considers the way theologians, pastors, and scholars read Scripture from a personal rather than a strictly academic perspective.<sup>6</sup> It studies the commitments and dispositions we have before interpretation begins, the way we do or do not appropriate what we read, and the effect of these on teaching, preaching, and living.

As we study the interpretation, canonicity, authorship, inspiration, authority, and transmission of Scripture, scholars necessarily treat the Bible as an object of their study. Yet before we study the Bible as an object, scholars and pastors must know that we are the objects of God's study. We search for the meaning of the words and the words; meanwhile "the Lord searches every heart" (1 Chron. 28:9). "The lamp of the LORD searches the spirit of a man" (Prov. 20:27; cf. Ps. 7:9; Rom. 8:27; Rev. 2:23). God's word "judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). As we read the Bible, it reads us.

The Bible is normative and more, for it is the norm above all norms, the source that tests and directs all our private and professional activity. Because we have an inspired, infallible, inerrant, perspicuous word from God, it is possible to proclaim "the Bible says" and "God says" and to say both with authority. Our view of Scripture makes real preaching possible; the same cannot be said for every other view.

Some theologians judge unguided reading to be dangerous; everyone believes some preparation is necessary for the most constructive reading. Eugene Peterson says, "It is not sufficient to place a Bible in a person's hand and command, 'Read it.'" That is as foolish and dangerous as putting car keys into an adolescent's hands and saying, "Drive it."<sup>7</sup> The point is defensible but misleading. God gave the Bible *to us*; it is *for us*, individually and corporately. It presents a habitable text, a narrative world, a relational world, that offers a good (and real) place to live in the present and a source of God-centered hope for the future (Rom. 15:4).<sup>8</sup> The Bible is indeed a dangerous book, but it also generates joy in the reading and rereading, in the discovery, the sharing, and the proclamation of life-giving truth. And without minimizing the complexities of interpretation, we must confess that if the Spirit removes the veil that covers unregenerate eyes, Scripture is clear enough that readers can grasp its basic truths and believe.

Besides, the Bible is hardly the only document that is prone to misreading and theologians are hardly the only scholars who disagree. The Internet teems with such distortions of other people's work that we have to wonder if the respondents are fully literate. Even academic exchanges and book reviews regularly cry, "But that's not what I said/meant."

So it is possible, if not necessarily *easy*, to take and read the Bible — or other literature. For example, in 2009 the world panicked over the H1N1 flu, which briefly threatened to become a death-dealing pandemic. Since flu vaccines were a familiar feature of medical care, the public was full of hope for a life-saving vaccine. Epidemiologists warned that it takes time to develop and mass-produce safe vaccines. Before long, the press began to notice alternative views of the flu and epidemiology. Vaccine skeptics began to get some attention. These researchers found serious flaws in studies that allegedly prove the value of flu vaccines. Specifically, some studies claimed that a flu vaccine reduces the likelihood of death in the elderly by 50 percent, possibly more. An eminent researcher declared, "For a vaccine to reduce mortality by 50 percent . . . means it has to prevent deaths not just from influenza, but also from falls, fires, heart disease, strokes, and car accidents. That's not a vaccine, that's a miracle." Surely, some researchers

proposed, the vaccinated and unvaccinated must also differ in education, lifestyle, or general health. Indeed, a set of meticulously crafted studies concluded that the entire benefit of flu vaccines could be explained by the “healthy user effect.” But the response was hardly scientific. The scientific community told the skeptics not to ask such questions, adding that it could damage their careers. Thus, most refused to believe the studies; they refused to take, read, and become disciples. As Thomas Kuhn showed, scientists initially resist evidence that calls prevailing theories into question.<sup>2</sup> Scientists cannot “read” data that lead to unsettling, unorthodox conclusions.<sup>10</sup>

Apparently dedicated Christians can also experience sudden loss of reading skill. Men and women who long espouse orthodox biblical views on topics such as divorce or abortion suddenly change their position when love for their spouse evaporates or a teenage girl gets pregnant. This is no surprise. Indeed, the Bible itself leads us to expect recalcitrant readers.

### The Bible Takes Sustained Interest in the Way It Is Read

It is possible to “take and read” under the right conditions and occasionally the Bible mentions what those are: We must read with an eye for the suffering and glory of the Christ (Luke 24:26-27) and for the way of salvation by faith in Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15). We read for authoritative commands (James 1:22), but also for the Spirit rather than the letter of the law (2 Cor. 3:6).

There are many valid ways to read the Bible. It should be read grammatically, historically, theocentrically, Christocentrically, redemptively, and covenantally.<sup>11</sup> We should read holistically, seeking the message of the whole Bible, while searching for the distinctive themes of each of its sixty-six books. We read repeatedly, accumulating knowledge as we go. We read the Bible for insight into every sphere of life: psychology, education, history, aesthetics, economics, politics, family, and ethics.<sup>12</sup> Scripture addresses every facet of the human person: the body, mind, will, and emotions. It addresses every realm of human responsibility: our duties, character, goals or life purposes, and foundational beliefs. It shapes the way we see the world and the way we live out our vocations.

The Bible is that rare work that takes direct and sustained interest in guiding the people who read it. Most canonical books address the question in some way. The Psalms command God’s people to meditate on the word and so to find life, wisdom, light, righteousness, direction, and blessing (Ps. 1:1-2; 19:7-11; 119:1-16, *passim*). In Proverbs, Solomon implores his readers to “treasure up my commandments” and so to find blessed life (Prov. 2:1; 7:1). James exhorts people, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22).<sup>13</sup> Further, a surprising number of texts show how Scripture should *not* be read.

This interest in assisting and correcting the work of its readers is unusual. The books within arm’s reach in my home library (an unscientific survey, I confess) make the point. In the academic and theological books, most authors spell out their primary and secondary aims in the preface or introduction. This is an ancient tradition, already practiced by Plato and Josephus. But after a few comments on method and the intended audience, the reader is on his own. Volumes on history and social analysis are similar. Most have a short statement about purposes and goals: Stephen Ambrose’s account of D-Day will make full use of 1,380 interviews of combatants.<sup>14</sup> Andrew Cherlin promises to explain the gap between the high marriage ideals that Americans express and their disappointing practices — nearly the highest divorce rate on earth.<sup>15</sup> After the preface and a few remarks on how to draw conclusions from the author’s work, readers must fend for themselves. Novels do even less to guide their readers, other than clues

about genre: When one begins, “This book is largely concerned with hobbits” the reader knows he has a fantasy, and takes it from there.<sup>16</sup> Dense as they are, my volumes on poetry by Billy Collins and Ted Kooser also expect me to find my way. Older works by Plato, Aristotle, Josephus, Philo, and an anonymous Buddhist volume are essentially the same.<sup>17</sup>

But the Bible is different, for three reasons. First, God wants those who read the Bible to know him and become disciples as a result of their reading (Jer. 31:34; John 10:4). It both inculcates and commands love of God, covenant loyalty, faith in Jesus, and obedience to him. Second, the Bible’s writers are constantly aware that their work will encounter willful rejection (Jer. 36:23), wanton distortion (2 Pet. 3:16), and ordinary misunderstanding (1 Cor. 5:10-11). Third, the Bible’s Author and authors have chosen to reach their goals not by straightforward lecture, proceeding proposition by proposition, but through songs and poems, dark sayings, and half-interpreted stories. Jesus interprets some parables (Matt. 13:3-43), but lets us figure out how to read other parables as pictures of the kingdom, of kingdom ethics, and of the King himself (e.g., 13:37).<sup>18</sup> We readers don’t take dictation; we swim in metaphor.

Eugene Peterson’s book on Jesus and language, *Tell It Slant*, commandeers lines from an Emily Dickinson poem, which begins, “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant — ” and continues, “The Truth must dazzle gradually . . . Or every man be blind.”<sup>19</sup>

Peterson rightly observes that Jesus commonly “tells it slant,” not straight. His teaching overflows with metaphor, simile, exaggeration, proverb, riddle, paradox, irony, and uninterpreted parables.<sup>20</sup> He asks loaded questions, expecting answers, while refusing to give a straight answer to half the questions people put to him. “He wasn’t so much handing out information as reshaping our imaginations.”<sup>21</sup> Some biblical literature is more linear, more propositional; Paul’s letters come to mind. But so much is not: apocalyptic literature, poetic prophecies. While some narratives spell out their meaning, a great number in Genesis, Judges, Samuel, and Kings stretch out, page after page, without a first-order declaration of their message. Stanley Fish, sometime radical reader-response theorist, asserts that “it is the reader who ‘makes’ literature.”<sup>22</sup> We deny the assertion but we see why someone might apply it to Scripture.

Yet the Bible is not like the elitist poetry that delights in baffling its readers. God aims to make disciples through his words. When John says he wrote his account of Jesus’ signs “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31), he does not intend to declare the purpose of the entire Bible, but it’s not bad as a starting point. In the poem “Keeper of the Word Hoard,” L. D. Brodsky declares: “I am the words I say / They define my ascending declensions / Identify my person and case . . .”<sup>23</sup> Brodsky has another purpose, but the concept applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to God’s self-revelation. We know him both from his deeds and from the words he says out, words that interpret his purposes when he did this or that. Indeed, God effectively speaks twice and acts once. For he first foretells his acts, partially explaining them, then he acts, and after that he elucidates their meaning more fully.<sup>24</sup>

We justly say the Lord wants readers to understand his word. Yet “whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds,” a veil that is removed “when a man turns to the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:15-16). Further, Jesus occasionally *chooses* to be cryptic: “For those outside everything is in parables.” Matthew explains this is “because seeing they do not see” — that is, sometimes parables are punitive. But Mark explains that parables are causative, too. Jesus spoke in parables “so that they may indeed see but not perceive” (Mark 4:12).<sup>25</sup> Scripture affirms both,

seeing them as complementary truths. Exodus 4–9 asserts both that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exod. 8:15, 32; 9:34) and that God hardened his heart (Exod. 4:21; 7:3; 14:8). The same held in Jesus' day. People hardened their hearts to Jesus' word, for they did not want to hear it — “Because I tell the truth, you do not believe me!” (John 8:45). Yet Jesus also hardened them, punishing unbelief by withdrawing his word. God enlightens “those whom he has freely chosen.” Others are blinded, yet the blame remains theirs, because “this blindness is voluntary.”<sup>26</sup>

Clearly, the Bible must guide its readers. The literature is engaging but cryptic, of supreme importance, yet not inclined to bald declarations of all its purposes. Because readers can innocently misinterpret what is difficult and wantonly pervert what is clear, it is no surprise that the Bible also tells us how *not* to read it.

## Jesus Critiques the Misreading of Scripture

On five occasions, Jesus chides Jewish leaders for misreading Scripture, using the rhetorical formula “Have you not read?”<sup>27</sup> Jesus is questioning neither the teachers' literacy nor their reading habits. He knows they have *read* the Scriptures; he means they failed to grasp their *meaning*.<sup>28</sup> On four of these occasions, their failure hinges on Scripture's testimony to Jesus. The fifth passage, where we begin, chides the Pharisees for following the letter and failing to seek the intent of Scripture.

In Matthew 19, the Pharisees ask, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” (Matt. 19:3). Jesus replies, “Have you not read” that God created humankind male and female, to become one flesh (19:4-6)? Some Pharisees had indeed misread Moses, turning regulations intended to restrain divorce into permission for men to divorce their wives at their volition. They misread Scripture by dwelling on the grounds for dissolving a marriage rather than the ways for restoring it.<sup>29</sup> They read for legal, casuistic rules concerning the grounds for divorce and missed their intent — that husband and wife remain together living as one flesh.

Remaining instances turn on a failure to see that the law and the prophets testify to Jesus. In Matthew 12 the Pharisees charge him with breaking the Sabbath when he permits his disciples to pluck grain from fields as they walk along. By way of reply, he asks, “Have you not read” how David and his companions entered the tabernacle and ate the consecrated bread, which was unlawful, because they were hungry (12:3)? That is, just as human need outweighed sacrificial regulations in David's day, so too something or someone outweighs Sabbath regulations in Jesus' day. He continues, “Have you not read” that on the Sabbath priests toil in the temple and yet remain innocent (12:5)? Jesus' point is twofold. First, the law knows priorities. Human need supersedes Sabbath regulations as does God's service. Furthermore, Jesus declares, “One greater than the temple is here” (12:6). That is, if priests are permitted to serve in the space *representing* the presence of God, the disciples may do what is necessary to assist the anointed one, who *is* the presence of God.

Matthew 22 (// Mark 12:26) is similar, although the focus is on the Father, not the Son. When the Sadducees deny the bodily resurrection, Jesus asks, “Have you not read what God said [in Exod. 3:6], ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob’?” (Matt. 22:29-32; cf. Acts 7:32). Jesus admonishes them because they failed to realize that Exodus 3 signifies that the patriarchs belong to God and God identifies himself with them. They are alive, for the Lord “is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Matt. 22:32b).<sup>30</sup> This reading does not ask too much of the Sadducees. Philo and 4 Maccabees, roughly contemporary sources, use an argument like that found in Matthew 22 and Mark 12.<sup>31</sup> Thus both Pharisees and Sadducees fail to

read Scripture, although the Lord expects us to read and understand (e.g., Acts 13:27; Eph. 3:4; Rev. 1:3).

Jesus' remarks on misreading follow many in the prophets. Indeed, the prophets both *declare* that their words will not be received and *show* how that failure came to pass. For example, at the time of his call, Isaiah learns that Israel will essentially reject his ministry. The people will “be ever hearing, but never understanding” until hearts are hard and the nation ruined (Isa. 6:9-12). In the immediately following passage, Ahaz demonstrates the point (7:1-12). Jesus cites Isaiah 6 to explain why he speaks in parables: “Because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. . . . [T]he prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled . . . ‘You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive, for this people’s heart has grown dull’ ” (Matt. 13:13-15). Similarly, the first oracle that the LORD gives Jeremiah prophesies that the people will reject him and his message and deny their guilt (2:23, 35). And they do just that. They say, “The prophets are but wind and the word is not in them” (5:13), so they refuse to listen to him (6:10-19). Because they trust in the temple and its rituals, they disregard Jeremiah’s warnings (6:14; 7:4) and then plot against him (26:1-11; 11:18-19). Because they hate his message, they question his loyalty, imprison him, and lower him into a muddy cistern (37:1–38:6). Ezekiel and Amos suffer the same disregard (Ezek. 2:3-7; Amos 7:10-17). Even when they act with power, prophets are ill-received, as we see in the lives of Moses (Exod. 17:3-4; 32:1-6; Num. 12:1-2; 14:1-10), Elijah (1 Kgs. 18:17; 19:2), and Elisha (2 Kgs. 2:23-25).

The New Testament adds more cases of bad listening. A rich young man thinks Scripture might tell him what he must *do* to gain eternal life (Matt. 19:16ff.). Herod Antipas listens to John as a kind of intellectual stimulation, but kills him because of a rowdy party (Mark 6:14-29). Stephen is stoned after a provocative speech (Acts 7:54-60). The Athenians hear Paul as a curiosity, but scorn him when he questions their presuppositions (17:22-32). Paul’s trials recount a bitter tale of bad listening. Felix cannot hear Paul because he hopes for a bribe (24:10-26). Festus listens with an ear attuned to politics rather than truth or justice. Agrippa acts surprised that Paul would try to convince him of anything (25:23–26:28). Given all these cases of misreading, how should we read?

## We Read to Find the Great Themes of Scripture

Above all, the ideal reader will follow the stated purposes of Scripture. A quest for a single statement of Scripture’s purpose is roughly like a quest for “the best food.” But we can identify a series of statements that, taken together, show the purpose of Scripture. We may begin with the call of Abraham, which may be the first statement of God’s grand mission. As we know, Genesis 12 says that God called Abraham that he might be blessed and bless the nations. Further, his faithful instruction of his household would be a vital means to that end (Gen. 12:1-3; 22:16-18). Exodus 19–20 and Deuteronomy 6–7 teach readers that God chooses and redeems by grace alone. Because he first loved us, we should love him with heart, soul, mind, and strength. We should hold fast to the truth and the life of the covenant and pass this on to our children. Since many subsequent texts expand these points we may trust that they are central.<sup>32</sup> Thus Jeremiah says Israel and all nations should know God (Jer. 24:7; 31:34). Indeed all the nations shall know “that the LORD is God and there is no other” (1 Kgs. 8:60; Isa 45:5-6, 14, 18, 22; Mark 12:32; see also Isa. 43:10-12; 49:6; Acts 13:47).

From the beginning, the Bible shows that the nations will come to know these things not

through a theological treatise, but by a narrative that threads its way through Scripture, the story of salvation, the drama of a loving Father seeking and restoring lost children. After Adam's rebellion, God promises a child who will crush the deceiver (Gen. 3:15). That son of Abraham will bless the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). That son of David will rule forever (2 Sam. 7:8-16). As the Lord says, "You will be my people, and I will be your God" (Jer. 11:4; 30:22; Ezek. 36:28; cf. Exod. 6:7).

In Jesus the promise comes to fruition. He ransoms people from every nation and reconciles them to himself. Jesus himself declares and the apostles repeat that his death and resurrection, his suffering and glory, constitute the climax of redemption (Luke 24; Acts 4:12; Rom. 8:17; Heb. 2:9-10; 1 Pet. 2:19-25). Various books of the Bible have purpose statements that sound a bit different yet cohere with the passages just cited. Thus John wrote "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31; cf. 1 John 5:13). With the same goal, Paul presents his essential gospel in more than one epistle, in more than one way. We could cite "The righteous will live by faith" or "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (Rom. 1:17; 1 Tim. 1:15 ESV). We might just as sensibly quote texts such as Romans 3:21-28 or Galatians 2:15-20 or various other passages. We must expect the canonical writers to express the most foundational idea — there is a personal and active, creating and redeeming God, and he expects us to respond to him in faith and obedience — in any number of ways. Thus Jeremiah will say "let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD" (Jer. 9:23-24), and Jesus will say "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15 ESV) and they will essentially mean the same thing.

From these passages it is a short step to statements about the expansion of the gospel and discipleship. So Matthew records Jesus' charge to the apostles, to make disciples in all nations (Matt. 28:18-20). Paul adds that his disciples must entrust the things they heard him say "to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tim. 2:2).

These principles show both insiders and novices how to navigate the sprawl of Scripture. Whatever we think we find as we read Scripture, it must cohere with these themes, explaining, developing, supporting, or expanding them.

## We Read to Appropriate the Great Themes of Scripture

Since it is vital to discover and align our reading with the great themes of Scripture, the Bible insists that we also appropriate those themes. Psalm 1, paradigmatic as it is, blesses the man who delights in the law, meditates on it day and night (Ps. 1:1-3).<sup>33</sup> The Psalms invite (rather than command) us to savor the sweetness of the word, to treasure it, and to let its light search deep internally and guide us externally (19:7-14; 119:1-24, 105). Paul says Scripture "is able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). He then specifies that Scripture has four functions: teaching, rebuking, correcting, training in righteousness (3:14-17). These four functions fall into two categories, creed and conduct. When Paul says Scripture is useful for teaching and refutation, he means Scripture as creed shapes our creeds and refutes doctrinal errors, which promote sin (3:1-9; 4:1-5). Regarding conduct, to say Scripture corrects is to say it rebukes sin. And to say it trains in righteousness is to say it promotes godly deeds. Therefore, we must read Scripture for orthodoxy and orthopraxy, for they are inseparable.<sup>34</sup>

Still, while large portions of Scripture seem quite clear, obstacles remain. Ignorance, lack of training, and the sheer density of the content cause some mistakes, but there is a spiritual aspect



to flawed reading, too. Peter links the two problems when he says Paul’s letters “contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Pet. 3:16).

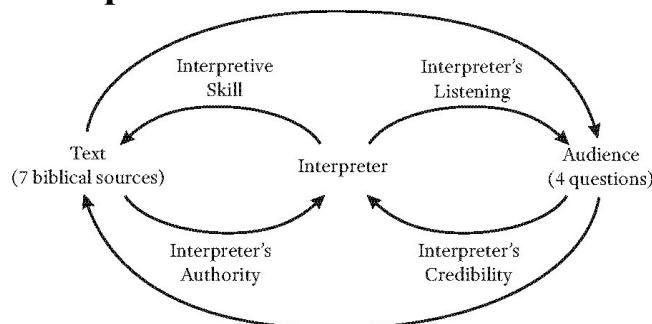
If we may focus on the spiritual dimension, Scripture reveals sin, confronts idols, and lays our secrets bare (Heb. 4:12-13). Proverbs 9:8 says, “Rebuke a wise man and he will love you,” but not everyone is wise. Fools hate a rebuke. Thus the prophets say the word is sweet as honey when they eat it (Ezek. 3:3; Rev. 10:9); yet it becomes bitter or sour in the stomach, because it summons repentance and threatens judgment (10:10). Worse, the people who so desperately need to repent refuse to listen. They disregard the message and punish the messenger (Ezek. 3:1-27; Rev. 11:3-10; cf. Isa. 6:1-12; Jeremiah 20).

Some sayings are hard; they drive the unregenerate and the superficial away (John 6:60). Indeed, rebellion against the word is inevitable among unbelievers, unless God draws them: “The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (Rom. 8:7, cf. John 6:37). Again, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). By contrast, Jesus tells his disciples, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them” (Matt. 13:11). The best reading is the result of God’s supernatural gift. Nonetheless, we can do analytical work, the better to see how to take and read to greatest effect.

## Reading the Bible and the World

Christian pastors and scholars read two texts, the Bible and the world (or culture), and they do so with two goals: their own edification and the edification of their hearers, the congregation or class.<sup>35</sup> A teacher is like a spiritual midwife. We do not give birth but our instruction can assist as God creates — or deepens — spiritual life through the word. Like a midwife, a teacher might be superfluous if all goes well. Men and women can read the Bible for profit without assistance (1 John 2:27). But when complications arise people need interpreters to explain the ancient text to contemporary audiences. We can present the interpreter’s task through this model:<sup>36</sup>

**Figure 1: A model of the interpreter’s task**



Clearly, the scholar (2) reads the text of Scripture (1). But it is also his responsibility to apply Scripture to his hearers (3) and to humanity in general. He must show how the Bible answers their valid questions, such as: What are my duties; that is, what do I owe God and man? What is godly character and how can I find or pursue it? To what goals or causes should I give my energy? How can I see my life and my world as God does?

By dint of study of the geography, customs, language, and worldview of biblical ages, pastors gain interpretive skill (4); they can discover the original message or intent of Scripture. But if they hope to present the truth to good effect, scholars must also be listeners (5), hearing what individuals, groups, and cultures want to know and what they have to say.<sup>37</sup> For this process to be

effective, the interpreter must submit to the Bible's authority, following it wherever it goes (6), whether he particularly likes it or not. Finally, audiences will be more likely to gain from teachers whom they judge to be credible (7) — wise, loving, and good.

Of these seven, I will try to address those that bear most directly on the quest to take and read, beginning with credibility. Let us admit at once that this point creates a problem. A preacher is like a cardiologist with heart disease. We commit the very sins that we decry. The vain preach humility, the temperamental and the obese urge self-control, and the grasping teach contentment. Nonetheless credibility is essential. At point after point, Jesus incarnates the character he blessed. He says, "Blessed are the merciful," and he constantly shows mercy. He says, "Take up your cross and follow me," and he takes up his cross soon enough. Even Paul, the chief of sinners, could say, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me — put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (Phil. 4:9; cf. 1 Tim. 1:15).

Robert Dabney said that if a speaker has intelligence but not integrity, "the plausibility of what he advances will be felt; but the more ability he shows, the more will the people fear to commit themselves to his opinions; for they have no guarantee . . . that he is not employing these forces of his genius . . . to . . . injure them." But if the people are convinced of a preacher's knowledge and affection and his desire for his hearers' benefit, then he has their ear. "Eloquence may dazzle and please; holiness of life convinces."<sup>38</sup>

How might we attain such holiness of life? Beyond our most visible sins, our brokenness also causes us to misuse Scripture. We are ignorant, blind, and stubborn, and that complicates the process of interpreting and teaching. We are never mere conduits for data. Our sources have taught us "facts" that may be falsehoods. And sometimes we want to avoid or obscure the biblical message. What can we do? Among other things, we need to read the Bible in life-giving ways.

### Reading That Promotes Life — *Lectio Divina*

Every occupation has its hazards; the work of pastors and theologians is no different. Lazy students and recalcitrant parishioners may seem like the prime danger, but the misuse of Scripture is a greater problem. Eugene Peterson rightly says,

We pick up the Bible and find that we have God's word in our hands, *our* hands. We can now handle it. It is easy enough to suppose that we are in control of it, that we can use it, that we are in charge of applying it wherever, whenever, and to whomever we wish.<sup>39</sup>

The danger is all the greater when we read the Bible professionally — preparing lessons from the posture of expert and crafting sermons from the posture of spiritual guide. We dream that we can master the text, and then use the results of our study to master others.

Peterson proposes the ancient and venerable plan for reading known as *lectio divina*, which has four elements: "*Lectio* (we read the text), *meditatio* (we meditate the text), *oratio* (we pray the text), and *contemplatio* (we live the text)."<sup>40</sup> Faithful God-centered and Christ-centered reading will also become doxological. While we can detect a natural progression through the four steps, *lectio divina* is not linear. A pastor or scholar may pray before, during, and after reading. As we read the passage again and again, reading and meditation blur.<sup>41</sup> "The process is more like a looping spiral in which all four elements are repeated, but in varying sequences and configurations."<sup>42</sup>

This ancient approach stands in contrast to a view, favored for decades by certain Protestants, that segregates exegesis from the preacher's work of the text's current meaning (or

“application”) and the disciple’s commitment to *live* the text.<sup>43</sup> Krister Stendahl epitomized this view, saying, “[W]hen the biblical theologian becomes primarily interested with the present meaning, he implicitly or explicitly loses his enthusiasm . . . for the descriptive task.” Biblical theology can only advance, he continued, when interpreters retain a sense of “the distance and the strangeness of biblical thought,” and accept “that our only concern is to find out what these words meant,” using methods agreeable to “believer and agnostic alike.” Only when interpreters refrain from mingling the two phases can the Bible “exert the maximum of influence.”<sup>44</sup>

Stendahl rightly insists on the quest for the original meaning of the text. Earlier, Martin Luther said the believer meditates on God’s law, while “perverted people . . . twist the Scriptures . . . and by their own fixed meditation compel the Scriptures” to agree with their empty opinions.<sup>45</sup> Certainly, we should be resolute in determining the original meaning before moving on to contemporary uses. Yet our theory should describe, not rule out, what skilled teachers actually do when they apply Scripture.<sup>46</sup> We reply, therefore, that Stendahl’s sharp disjunction between interpretation and application, use, or response breaks down in practice. For one thing, teachers begin to develop hunches (at the least) about the implications of a passage long before they finish interpreting it. When they do, they may redouble their exegetical work, as they try to judge if their hunch is correct or not.

Furthermore, Scripture itself links exegesis and application. Jesus repeatedly rebukes Jewish leaders for what we might call a failure to *apply* Scripture, while he actually chides them for failing to *read* it (Matt. 12:1-8), to know it (Matt. 22:23-33), and to understand it (Luke 24:44-47).<sup>47</sup> Consider the lawyer who stands up to test Jesus, asking, “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replies, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” (Luke 10:25-26 ESV). The question is not “*What* do you read” but “*How* do you read?” (*pōs anaginōskeis*;). Jesus’ question refers to the lawyer’s heart intent, not his skills.

Speech-act theory offers a helpful way of thinking through the distinction between hearing the word and responding faithfully to it. Speech-act theory notices that the distinction between speaking and doing is overdrawn, for we *do things with words* — we promise, pardon, warn, urge action, and much more. Speech-act theory therefore distinguishes the *locution*, the words spoken or written, from the *illocution*, the author’s aims, goals, or intended effects as he or she spoke or wrote. Next, we consider whether hearers or readers respond as the author intended (the *perlocution*).<sup>48</sup> Did he or she believe the promise, receive forgiveness, heed the warning, or act obediently? One advantage of this scheme is that it is more refined than the traditional meaning-application distinction (in part because it distinguishes the different senses of “meaning”).<sup>49</sup>

For reasons like this, John Frame wants to erase the distinction between meaning and implications. He says, “The meaning of Scripture is its application.”<sup>50</sup> That is, we understand Scripture only when we know how to use it. Try, for example, to separate the *meaning* from the *application* of the eighth commandment. Suppose someone duplicates copyrighted materials, cheats on his taxes, and misrepresents products that he sells. If he claimed he obeyed the law since he never *stole* anything, we would not say he failed to *apply* the command; we would say he did not *understand* it. Frame holds that theology, rightly conceived, never seeks to discover abstract “truth-in-itself.” Theology is “the application of the Word of God by persons to all areas of life” to promote godliness and spiritual health.<sup>51</sup>

Frame certainly helps us correct Stendahl’s sharp claim that “our only concern is to find out what these words meant” and that only then can the word have “influence.” Yet there is a

distinction between the meaning and the implications of texts. Frame rightly argues that one should not claim to understand “Thou shalt not steal” if one embezzles funds or steals ideas. But by choosing a limpid command he makes the situation look simpler than it is. Many a passage, indeed, many a law, demands painstaking labor before we can be sure of its sense, let alone its penumbra of implications. For example, why does Moses thrice forbid cooking a kid in its mother’s milk (Exod. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 14:21)? And how might the commands to honor boundary stones bear on current theories of property and economics (Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Prov. 22:28)? Some enthusiastic capitalists detect a direct endorsement of a free market economy, a conclusion that runs afoul of laws and prophecies that prohibit the accumulation of land and property (Lev. 25:13-43; Deut. 15:12-18; 24:19-22; Isa. 5:8; Mic. 2:8-9).<sup>52</sup>

When Frame relaxes or blurs the boundaries between meaning, theology, and application, he stands with Calvin, who, being a biblical theologian, knew that theological formulations are never ends in themselves. In the *Institutes*, Calvin constantly, deliberately moves from biblical theology to the use or benefits of biblical truth. For example, as Book 12, chapter 15 explores the offices of Christ, prophet, priest, and king, he repeatedly pauses to name the “heavenly benefits” or “efficacy” of the doctrines. Because Christ is king, the church is “secure in . . . frightful storms” and assured of “everlasting preservation . . . no matter how many strong enemies plot to overthrow the church.”<sup>53</sup> Even when Calvin does not explicitly draw implications from biblical doctrine, he puts his pronouns to effortless and subtle use. Thus, in explicating the work of Christ as priest, he says God’s righteousness “bars *our* access” to God; that Jesus’ sacrifice “blotted out *our own* guilt”; that by Jesus’ intercessory work “*we* obtain favor.”<sup>54</sup> This approach pervades the *Institutes*. After presenting the biblical doctrine of God’s sovereignty, he pens an entire chapter, eighteen pages of impassioned pastoral counsel, titled “How We May Apply This Doctrine to Our Greatest Benefit.”<sup>55</sup> He even insists on the “usefulness” and “very sweet fruit” of the doctrine of predestination.<sup>56</sup>

The concept of a seamless transition from truth to its “use” should hold for the ethical passages in Scripture too. Imagine an exposition of Matthew 5:22: “Anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says ‘You fool’ will be in danger of the fires of hell.” Naturally, the teacher is obligated to explain what “Raca” and “Fool” mean:

The term “Raca” expresses contempt for the head — something like “You stupid idiot!” “Fool” shows contempt for the character. It means, “You scoundrel.” “Raca” means “You have no brains.” “Fool” means “You have no heart.” Together, they imply, “You’re worthless. Good for nothing.” When someone cuts us off in traffic and we mutter “idiot!”; when someone fails us and we whisper, “He’s worthless,” Jesus calls it murder. We’re saying they don’t deserve to live. Even Christian parents can talk this way. By this standard, most of us are murderers — and the carnage may not remain internal. Murder in the heart permits murderous actions such as abortion, euthanasia and neglect of the poor. People take lives of the unborn and neglect the needy because they make a judgment: “This life has no value. They might as well be dead.” Jesus says such thoughts, even without action, make us liable to judgment.<sup>57</sup>

Through close reading, we can detect where the speaker shifted from exegesis to its uses or implications, but the boundary is permeable. Stated another way, if someone said, “I won’t call anyone ‘Fool’ but I see no problem with ‘worthless,’ ” we would have to say they misunderstood Jesus.

This phenomenon, readily observable in the work of skilled preachers and teachers, returns us to the *lectio divina*. It advocates that we *read* the text as skillfully as possible. But we also *meditate*; when we do we enter the world of the text and become empathetic with it. Luther says that to meditate is “to think carefully, deeply, and diligently . . . to muse in the heart.” The one who meditates is “moved in the innermost self,” asks questions and longs for understanding. When we delight in the law “meditation will come of its own accord.”<sup>58</sup> Peterson says we also *pray* the text because we realize “God has spoken to me; I must answer.” If we read and pray the text we can also *live* the text in the noisy demands and dull duties of life.<sup>59</sup> As we shall see, efforts to live the text normally drive us to reread it. Then the cycle begins again, for the goal is never reading alone. If we merely read words, they become marks on a page, saying the same thing over and over. But if God gives us ears to hear (Matt. 13:9, 16), we can read, meditate, pray, and live the word. The word remains fresh as we constantly put new questions to it, so we can live it.

I experienced this reading-meditating-living nexus in a surprising way while teaching one week at a seminary in northern India. One morning I read and considered the proverb, “A gentle answer turns away wrath” (Prov. 15:1). We had some free time that afternoon, so our hosts, Americans who had lived in India for decades, took us to visit a deserted British cemetery in the southern Himalayas. After we had walked around for a while, a custodian rushed at us, shouting vehemently, “What are you doing here, you trespassers! Grave robbers! How did you break in? This cemetery is closed. Get out of here or I will set my dogs on you!”

To my astonishment, our polite, soft-spoken host bellowed right back, roaring our innocence. They stood inches apart shouting on top of each other, spraying each other with saliva. After a minute, the clamor diminished, though both men still yelled. In another minute, the tone became milder still, even genial. Momentarily, we had an invitation to tea! When we were alone again, I asked my friend to explain why he had shouted at the custodian and how, it seemed, the yelling had calmed him. He explained: “The caretaker doesn’t have much to do; it’s his job to shout a little. I yelled back because that’s how you establish sincerity and innocence here. If I backed down, he would have decided that we *were* trespassers.”

The proverb “A gentle answer turns away wrath” came to mind. Obviously, my host had turned away wrath; his loud protest had served as a gentle or “gentling” answer, in his cultural context.<sup>60</sup> Deliberately exercising self-control, he had yelled in order to turn away wrath. Because my friend had learned to live or contextualize the proverb in his society, I reconsidered and surmised that the proverb’s intent is not to monitor volume, but to turn away wrath. A whisper can be inflammatory and a shout can be calming. Since this was more insightful guess than exegetical conclusion, I asked my peers (my interpretive community) if they concurred (they did). I also recalled occasions when whispers caused wrath and shouts brought calm. I scanned dozens of Proverbs and saw that many aim for a goal or result, not just a behavior. For example, the proverbs on fools aim to warn readers neither to be a fool nor to trust one. Next, standard lexical study showed that the term translated “gentle” (*rak*) means tender or soft, but not necessarily “quiet.” Finally, I consulted a skilled commentator who said the phrase “gentle answer” may connote “a response that in both substance and style soothes and comforts the listener.”<sup>61</sup> Thus he agreed that the proverb speaks to the *goal* of speech more than the *decibels*.

This case study illustrates the multifaceted character of interpretation. We make use of certain technical skills, but we also come to texts with our needs, questions, and heartaches. As we read, something touches upon a life issue and we begin to apply the text to ourselves before we

finish reading exegetically. Listeners, likewise, fasten upon a teacher's most incidental and unplanned side comments, if they connect with burning life issues. A good sermon, people often say, is one that gives them something to think about. That "something" typically touches their relationships, aspirations, or secrets. Therefore reading, in the fullest sense, requires technical skill, accumulated knowledge, artful analysis, and spiritual concentration or alertness. When we want to *heed* the word, we see better how to *read* the word.<sup>62</sup>

But the quest to read, contemplate, pray, and live the text occurs in a world that disrupts the process in both internal and external ways. Our efforts to read Scripture are hampered by our individual or idiosyncratic sins on one side and by corporate or cultural problems on the other. Internally, sins of laziness and distraction intrude. And focus dissipates when we read texts that challenge cherished beliefs or fond habits of sin. (How *did* the medieval church justify its accumulation of vast wealth?) Externally, every culture clashes with God's ideals, making it more difficult to take, read, and live the text. When a reader's native culture finds elements of the biblical worldview or lifestyle absurd, it is harder to read the Bible at that point.

### Reading and the Culture

In ways we can never fully detect, we operate within our culture's dominant thought world. It can be easy to see where ideas clash, but it may be harder to resist anti-Christian patterns of thought. Every culture has answers to questions such as: What topics are interesting or difficult enough to merit our attention? What counts as a valid reply to the questions of the day?

For example, Western culture currently scorns supernatural explanations of dramatic events. We no longer see plagues as acts of God. After an earthquake, we do *not* say, "God wants to warn of impending judgment" and "the will of God" does not *count* as a valid explanation of such events. Our era says it is fitting to offer *scientific* explanations of disease and disaster. In 2004 and 2009, strong earthquakes caused massive destruction and loss of life in Indonesia and Haiti, respectively. In 1755 a far more powerful earthquake struck near Lisbon, capital of Portugal, on a Sunday morning.<sup>63</sup> Many thousands perished while gathered for worship. In Lisbon alone, about 50,000 died from the buildings that collapsed and the tsunami that arrived thirty minutes later. Religious Europeans — and almost all were religious — took the event as a sign of God's wrath or as a warning of impending judgment. Voltaire denied the notion that there could be divine justice in earthquakes or "volcanoes seething." In his "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," Voltaire asked:

What crime, what sin, had those young hearts conceived  
That lie, bleeding and torn, on mother's breast?  
Did fallen Lisbon deeper drink of vice than London, Paris or sunlit Madrid?  
In these men dance; at Lisbon yawns the abyss.<sup>64</sup>

Voltaire privately believed that earthquakes prove that God is either nonexistent or indifferent to humanity. He publicly argued that capricious quakes cannot represent God's justice. Voltaire's voice, once so lonely, has won the day. The victory of antisupernaturalist explanations is so thorough that I have seen mature pastors groan reflexively when "unsophisticated" Christians dare to connect such disasters to God's judgment. Yet they might rescind their reaction if they remember that the Bible *does* view them as signs in Isaiah 29:6, Ezekiel 38:19, Matthew 24:7, 27:54, and Revelation 6:12, 11:13 (et passim). Nonetheless, we are viscerally inclined to adopt the naturalistic explanation of earthquakes.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, our perspective may be so far from the eighteenth-century worldview that we struggle to attain "a wholly reliable understanding of what

the Europeans” felt when the Lisbon quake struck.<sup>66</sup> And if it is a struggle to reach the eighteenth century, how much more the ages of Scripture? The questions people ask and the criteria for plausible answers vary from culture to culture.

What seems interesting, what seems to require comment, and what seems reasonable depends on our basic commitments, our worldview, and the community within which we live and think.<sup>67</sup> It cannot be a surprise that prevailing convictions and habits make it difficult for audiences to hear and accept what the Bible says about gender roles and sexual morality. That complicates the teacher’s work. Some, knowing this, shirk the more difficult questions.

## Character and Reading

The culture of higher education allows professors to challenge the culture, and biblical theology requires pastors to be bold, but that is easier said than done. Church leaders can easily let misguided fears or craving for praise or success debilitate their preaching and teaching. If the congregation is full of wealthy, powerful, or attractive people, it is tempting to minimize warnings about greed, the abuse of power, and vanity. It is all too easy to say next to nothing of the sins visible in one’s own church — gluttony, laziness, deception, pride, or premarital cohabitation. How bold it seems to denounce the errors of absent opponents and to flatter our allies.<sup>68</sup> When we lack the courage to address local sins, we may blind ourselves to those sins. If we refuse to say what we see in Scripture, we may find that we can no longer see it. Thus sin corrupts the reading of Scripture. Thus I suggest that the courage to declare whatever we find in the word is an aspect of “reading.”

Preachers and teachers need godly character to let the Bible say what it means, to see the world as it is, and to address the difference. The temptation to cowardly silence assails us weekly, as our preparations urge us to say things that may offend. If the subject is murder, we must say it is murder to call people good-for-nothing idiots, even if saying so indicts dozens in the audience. If the subject is sexual purity, we must say extramarital sex is a thieving lie, as well as adultery, since extramarital sex is a life-uniting act that has no life-uniting intent.<sup>69</sup> Whenever we rebuke sins such as materialism or careerism, we know that many will feel pangs of guilt, or will silently or even angrily disagree. Some of those people feed us and our families.

Peer pressure may also induce us to adjust our remarks. Imagine a gathering dominated by secular people. The topic of homosexuality comes up and someone asks our opinion. The desire to sound reasonable, to be likable, can feel overwhelming. But if God has spoken and appointed teachers to declare his word on his behalf, then we must declare the truth, whether that feels comfortable or not. We are heralds for the one God who has spoken through Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles, so we must be a faithful steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1-2). We should ask *how* we might speak, to be persuasive, but not *whether* we should speak. The courage to speak is, again, an aspect of “reading.”

## The Right Posture toward Scripture Strengthens Our Reading

The last section assumes a view of Scripture, which I want to explore briefly, so we can see its bearing on the question of reading. Consider therefore the postures an interpreter may take toward Scripture. First, the critical reader stands *over* the Bible as the judge of its truth claims. Second, a reader may stand beside the Bible, roughly as a peer, in dialogue. Third, pastors and scholars may stand under the authority of God, expressed in his word. In short, readers can stand over, under, or beside the Bible.

## *The Reader Is over the Text, as Critic: The Reader Has the Last Word*

Critics may profess admiration or animosity for biblical religion. They may regard it as a noble spiritual system or as a naïve or repressive element of a superannuated worldview. They may long for a simple pre-critical faith or they may wish to liberate society from an oppressive orthodoxy. Regardless, critics say, no thinking citizen can trust an alien authority that posits a three-story universe with angels in heaven, demons in hell, and mankind in between. For modern man, this mythical view of the world is literally incredible.<sup>20</sup> A return to simple pre-scientific faith is impossible. Furthermore, the critic says, even if someone should choose such a faith, it is *their* decision. Like it or not, each individual is the final arbiter of his beliefs.

## *The Reader Is Beside the Text, in Dialogue:*

### *The Reader Has the Last Word, but Hesitates to Say So*

On this view, readers of Scripture have existential encounters with past believers and their experience of God. Thus, when someone hears Scripture, his world meets another world and no one can prejudge the result. The reader may be changed by the text, or he may, perhaps reluctantly, reject it.<sup>21</sup> If we define a critic as someone who is willing, in principle, to say, “The Bible says ‘x’ and the Bible is wrong,” the existential position is still critical. Yet this view shares the conservatives’ belief in the power of the Bible to surprise, transform, and lay the heart bare. It holds, with conservatives, that while the Bible can insist on its authority, it ordinarily operates by “a non-violent appeal” to the imagination.<sup>22</sup> Thus this is truly an intermediate position.<sup>23</sup>

## *The Reader Is Below the Text, in Submission:*

### *The Text, or, the Lord Who Wrote It, Gets the Last Word*

This reader bows to the God who reveals himself in Scripture and accepts whatever it says. If the Bible overthrows a cherished conviction, we say, “I stand corrected.” Facing a difficult text, we may redouble our exegetical work, but if we confirm that it means what it seems, then we yield to the Lord, who speaks with authority.<sup>24</sup> So we are willing to submit to Scripture.

But there is a difficulty with this view. To confess “I submit to Scripture” is one thing; actual submission is another. Sadly, this view can be perverted by this series of notions:

I believe whatever the Bible says.

Whatever the Bible says, I believe.

I know what the Bible says.

Therefore, what I believe *is* what the Bible says.

Therefore, if the Bible seems to say something I don’t believe, it must not really mean that.

While the professor may glimpse this line of illogic in the academy, it is all too evident in churches that affirm the authority of Scripture. In Bible studies, people glibly assert what they believe, however thin the biblical evidence, because they once heard it from some authority. Meanwhile they ignore all that clashes with their beliefs. Thus they profess the authority of Scripture but function as if impervious to it.

The essential point for our study is this: it is possible for putatively submissive teachers to think they have the Bible’s message under control and so to seal their ears. They are unwilling to read with true openness for they are too committed to their own opinions. *They blind themselves to anything that contradicts them, since their pledge to submit to Scripture would obligate*



them to believe and do things they want neither to believe nor do. Meanwhile, the “dialogical” or existential teacher may be more willing to read what the Bible actually says since he (erroneously) claims the right to reject it.

There is a better way to read. First, whenever we read a passage, however familiar it seems, we should confess that we do not understand it as fully as possible. Second, we should remind ourselves that we probably do not believe this passage as purely as we should. Therefore, third, we must be willing to let every passage correct our thoughts and our deeds.

So, then, we are prepared to read well if we believe that the living God has spoken in Scripture, giving us truth that supersedes human wisdom and corrects human misconceptions and misdeeds. To read the Bible well, scholars and pastors need linguistic, analytical skills and historical knowledge, but we also need faith. In addition, we need to read the world well.

## Understanding of the World Deepens Our Reading

The better we read the culture, the better we will read the Bible, and so fulfill the task of pastors and theologians, which is to lead God’s people to hear his word and to participate in the divine life, individually and corporately.

John Frame says, “The law is necessary to understand the world” and “The world is necessary to understand the law.” That is, we must know something about the world or we cannot apply the law.<sup>25</sup> I cannot understand, that is, *apply*, the command “You shall not steal” if I don’t know what property is mine and what is my neighbor’s. I must study animals, plants, and minerals so I know how to tend and subdue the earth. We don’t know what Scripture means — we don’t know how to live it — unless we understand the world, for “the meaning of Scripture is its application.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, to read the Bible properly we need skill at reading the world.

In *Everyday Theology*, Kevin Vanhoozer provides categories and questions that enhance an interpreter’s ability to read a culture, to “catch” more of what is happening. We catch more if we describe phenomena in thick, multi-perspectival, non-reductionistic ways. This holds for high culture — serious books, movies, operas, and paintings — but also for “everyday” culture — entities such as a prom or a grocery store checkout line. A reductionist may see proms in terms of social and economic power. But the prom is also a social and historical event, one that affirms friendships and inaugurates or solidifies relationships. To apply Scripture to “the prom” in a credible way, we need a handle on the several aspects of what a prom is.<sup>27</sup>

Vanhoozer restates the familiar distinction between the locution, the illocution, and the perlocution of a text, then reformulates it as “the world behind, of, and in front of the cultural text.” This is “general hermeneutics.” Vanhoozer continues: “Just as various types of literary criticism can focus on authors or texts or readers, respectively, so various schools of cultural criticism emphasize either the producers, the cultural products themselves, or the consumer of these products.”<sup>28</sup> Thus when we review a movie, we know we should consider its message and artistic merits, but Vanhoozer would also consider why its creators made it and how they intended to affect their consumers.

Take James Cameron’s 2009 film *Avatar*. Behind the text we have Cameron’s technical genius as a director and as inventor of camera systems. Behind the text we also have Cameron the egotist, the man with well-known anti-Christian and anti-American views. In the film itself we have a dazzling visual experience joined to a pedestrian plot and dull dialogue that fail to enhance Cameron’s subtle-as-a-sledgehammer nativist message. All this serves sales, Cameron’s name, and, possibly, his personal views. This analysis is painfully short, but it

explains why some culturally aware believers thought the film was good-old Hollywood entertainment and others judged it abominable.

To the point of this essay, analytical tools such as these help us read/obey commands such as “Test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 John 4:1 ESV) and “Test everything; hold fast what is good” (1 Thess. 5:21 ESV). The better we read the culture, the better we will read the Bible and so fulfill the task of pastors and theologians: to mediate God’s word to God’s people so they can participate in the divine life. The teacher’s goal is to form the speech, thought, judgment, and behavior of the church, collectively and in its individual members. As Vanhoozer says elsewhere, “Theology exists” that we may understand “what God has said/done in the world for us and . . . what the church must say/do for God in response.”<sup>79</sup>

## Character and Reading

Some reading skills are intellectual and philosophical; others have more to do with wisdom and character. Some skills help us listen to the culture and our communal life; others help us listen to individuals and so to mediate, as midwife, God’s word to them. Several character traits foster the art of listening to individuals.<sup>80</sup> *Love* wholly attends to others in their sin and neediness. It quenches the desire to tell our story, to show our analytical skill and pithy wisdom, and to speak last. *Truthfulness* leads us to see and address the situation as it is, not as we prefer to imagine it. *Wisdom* knows how to cut through blather and excuses until we hear the truth. *Mercy* listens tenderly, so that we diagnose in order to render aid, not to criticize. *Patience* listens quietly to the story of people just like us, and people utterly unlike us. These traits deepen our listening, so that our reading-for-teaching acquires authenticity and drills real issues in real terms, so that people do not say “I enjoyed your talk” — a troubling compliment for preachers who hope to create some constructive misery — but rather, “I know exactly what you mean.”

Humility also makes us better readers. A preacher is a diagnostician who detects in himself a deadly yet curable disease that he finds in his patients. The herald of grace is a sinner saved by grace. We “hold out the gospel in contaminated hands.”<sup>81</sup> Therefore, we should approach every text penitently, *confessing* our need for its rebuke and correction, and *behaving* meekly as well. Humility assists communication, but it deepens interpretation even more. Humility leads us to read Scripture from inside the covenant of grace, so that as we read the text, the text reads us. When we have wrestled with sin, and lost a round or two, a realism, an awareness of the difficulty of faithfulness, suffuses our work.

But, to come to *lectio divina* from another angle, character has yet another role. Specifically, when we take our sin seriously and let it humble us, it will lead to a hunger and a thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6). That hunger will make us better interpreters. When we first begin to read-for-teaching, most of us have a simple, unarticulated model of the way it goes. Its basis lies in the activities that might appear on a weekly work report, together with a statement of the purpose of that work: pastors or scholars have a topic (by choice or assignment). They study it, then arrange what they know so that it is an acceptable discourse, whether sermon or lecture. The people listen, learn, and, one hopes, change their practices. The model is linear.

### Figure 2: A naïve model of interpretation

Study → Knowledge → Lectures, sermons → Audience edification: knowledge, practice

This model is not completely invalid. It is true, for both teachers and hearers, that *what we know shapes what we do*. As Paul says, “Do not be conformed to the pattern of this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2a). But this model does not recognize that

what we *do* also affects what we know. As Paul immediately adds, “Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is” (12:2b). That is, when we try to obey the word, we put it to the test. When it passes the test, we know it better because experience has confirmed it.

When he was teaching at the feast of tabernacles and the crowds were debating whether Jesus was a good man or a deceiver, Jesus said, “If anyone wills to do God’s will, he will know whether my teaching is from God or whether I speak on my own” (John 7:17, author’s translation). Jesus says the central issue is volitional not intellectual: If the crowd wants to *do* God’s will, they will recognize that Jesus’ teaching comes from God (John 7:14-18). That is, the crowd objected to Jesus’ teaching not because flawed study methods misled them, but because they did not want to follow him. Jesus’ word of truth is self-authenticating for those who commit themselves to it. Thus, a renewed mind promotes godly action, but godly action also renews the mind and brings conviction of the truth (cf. Mal. 3:10). As the saying goes, “Do, and you will know.”

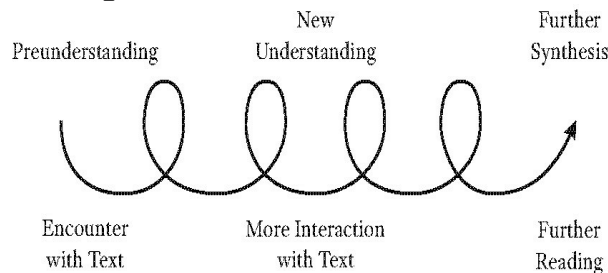
Everyone realizes that people gain knowledge gradually, typically by coming at something again and again. Two thinkers, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Maurice Blondel, analyzed how the process works. Schleiermacher’s contribution today has the label “the Hermeneutical Spiral.”<sup>82</sup>

### The Hermeneutical Spiral

The phrase “the hermeneutical spiral” evokes the idea of open-ended movement. A reader has a certain position before he or she encounters a text, but the text opens new vistas for those who are willing to learn and even to change their views. Yet views change slowly; a text may not do all its work in one sitting. Instead, readers spiral ever nearer to the author’s meaning by refining their understanding when they repeatedly return to it.

One scholar described it this way: “I am . . . spiraling nearer and nearer to the text’s intended meaning as I refine my hypotheses and allow the text to continue to challenge and correct those alternative interpretations, then to guide my delineation of its significance for today.”<sup>83</sup> This idea has merit, but it sounds too narrowly cerebral. It misses the link between knowing and doing (just above). It misses the earlier lesson that life forces us to consider relevance long before we finish the mental process. The earlier account of the shouting in India makes this point.

#### Figure 3: The hermeneutical spiral



### Adjusting the Hermeneutical Spiral

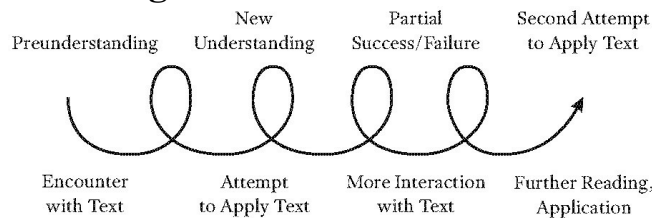
The philosopher-theologian Maurice Blondel observed that interpreters gain understanding of Scripture through attempts to apply it, not merely by round after round of reflective reading. As we attempt to obey the Scripture we understand it better, even if the exegesis is incomplete.

Blondel observes that humans both ponder and act. Aside from customary or habitual actions, we are planners. After premeditated actions we ask, “Did I act correctly? Did I obtain my goal or not? Could I have been more effective, more virtuous?” There is typically a gap between the

goal and the result of our plans. In sophisticated projects, we rarely achieve precisely what we intend. The gap between our self-imposed demands and our success then prompts us to ask, “What went wrong? How can I avoid repeating my errors? How can I build on my success?” As we attempt to close the gap between plans and results, we progress toward our goal.<sup>84</sup>

As we read the Bible, we encounter many worthy goals: to turn away wrath, to do justice, to show mercy. The attempt to *fulfill* a text by reaching its goals helps us grasp what it means. Consider Titus 3:10: “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.” Surely the pastor whose church is roiled by gossip and slander will most carefully consider several questions: Who is a divisive person? How do we effectively warn him? What does it mean to “have nothing to do with him”? The pastor will work hard to read both the text and the world. Thus the desire to live the Bible helps him understand it.

**Figure 4: A new model: knowledge and action stimulate each other**



Conversely, if we refuse to practice what we know, we sever motives for reading well. If anything, inaction causes us to avoid knowledge, because it stirs our guilt. On the other hand, proper actions confirm halting steps in the right direction. An upward spiral develops, as small successes breed confidence, and confidence prepares us for the next challenge.

Wise theologians know this. Calvin said pupils of Scripture must “apply themselves teachably” to the word and “reverently embrace” its witness. He concluded, “[N]ot only faith . . . but *all right knowledge of God is born of obedience.*” So for Calvin the quest for obedience advances the knowledge of God and his word.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, Luther said interpretation requires “the experience of the heart” as well as skill with Scripture.<sup>86</sup> Wesley said that only the Bible could establish a doctrine but that experience does “confirm a doctrine which is grounded on Scripture.”<sup>87</sup>

More recently, Gordon Fee said, “The ultimate aim of all true exegesis is spirituality,” first for interpreters, then for their hearers.<sup>88</sup> Before exegesis starts, we give the text permission to bring us up short, to astonish and admonish us. Through exegesis we invite the text and its Author to exegete our soul and the souls of our hearers.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, Moises Silva said we cannot help but bring our failures and questions to the Bible:

It is proper and even necessary to approach the Bible with a strong sense of our needs. The problems faced in the gospel ministry often alert us to truths in Scripture that might otherwise remain veiled to us. Proper exegesis consists largely of asking the right questions from the text, and the life of the church can provide us with those very questions.<sup>90</sup>

So spiritual formation both precedes and follows interpretation. A feedback loop connects knowledge and practice: knowledge guides Christian living, but Christian living also verifies knowledge. A passion for righteousness spurs teachers on to deeper study, and enriches the hermeneutical spiral.<sup>91</sup> As we speak hard truths in love, we learn what “speaking the truth in love” means (Eph. 4:15). When we respectfully submit to a difficult or foolish boss we learn what it means to submit to a harsh master (1 Pet. 2:18). Thus a practical question may sensitize

us to aspects of the text we might otherwise miss. It is possible that the question, “How does this apply; what does it mean *now*?” can lead to deeper inquiry into the question, “What did it mean *then*?”

True knowing entails doing. After he washed the disciples’ feet, Jesus said, “Do you understand what I have done for you? . . . Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. . . . Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:4-17). James, as we saw, says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22). With diagnostic sarcasm, he extols those who affirm orthodox theology without acting on it: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe [that] — and shudder!” (2:19 ESV). The author of Hebrews chided the church, because their failure to practice what they knew had dulled their minds, so they could hardly follow his teaching. He concludes, “Solid food is for the mature, who by *constant use* have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Heb. 5:11-14). They should have matured by applying their prior Christian experience to their current crisis.<sup>92</sup> If they had even tried, their imperfect attempts would have prepared them for their new struggle.<sup>93</sup>

People do not genuinely understand the Bible unless they can apply it. If a congregation has a flawless ecclesiology, but ignores visitors from other social and ethnic groups, do they understand the church? If a man memorizes Ephesians 5:25 but domineers his wife at every turn, does he “know” what it says?

## Blessed Reading

It is indeed vital to read the Bible expectantly, anticipating that we will find answers to life’s questions as we keep turning Scripture over in our minds. A personal story makes the point. One day, after a frustrating attempt at disciplining our then eleven-year-old daughter, my wife said, “I don’t know what to do. She’s too old to spank and grounding punishes me as much as it punishes her. Take away privileges? She hardly watches television, and her activities are constructive. What is left?” Like a good scholar I promised to look into it. Eight weeks later my wife was still awaiting my reply when I reread Exodus 21:18-25 and noticed something I had previously overlooked in the *lex talionis*, “eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” I knew that the law seeks justice and forbids vindictiveness and revenge: “If you hit me, I’ll kill you” (per Gen. 4:23-24). But reading as a parent, I saw a principle that held promise for our disciplinary problem: let the punishment fit the crime and be proportional to it. The principle of proportional discipline implies that food crimes deserve food punishments. If a child, misbehaving, knocks over his juice three consecutive days, he can go without juice for three days. Property offenses deserve property discipline. If a child leaves her book bag on the floor several days, she can carry her books to school in a grocery bag for several days. If children refuse to stay in bed, they can stay up, doing nothing for a while. Children readily see the justice and learn from this. Recently my children, now in their twenties, were reminiscing about childhood blessings; they fondly mentioned this very principle because it seemed so fair and because they never suffered arbitrary “grounding.” Thus a desire to be a godly parent led to an expectant sort of reading of Scripture, which produced a lifelong, multigenerational blessing. That is what the word can do.

Now it seems fitting to close with a short study of the way the Bible itself says the Word should work. Many passages present themselves as options, but James 1 seems fitting for scholars and teachers.

## James Describes Godly Reading (James 1:18-25)

James 1:18 says God “chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.” This is another aspect of a point made just above. While the regenerate are able to grasp the word, the means God uses to regenerate is the “word of truth” (1:18). The phrase “word of truth” appears five times in the New Testament. In Paul, the phrase clearly means “the gospel” in each case (e.g., Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5b-6a ESV). The gospel is the word of truth that gives us life. As Peter says, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. . . . And this word is the good news that was preached to you” (1 Pet. 1:23, 25b ESV).<sup>94</sup>

James continues, “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry. For man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (1:19b-20). Obviously, we learn more by listening than by speaking, and it’s hard to hear a thing when we are angry. But the context seems to indicate that James is talking about listening to the word, not listening in general. His point, then, is that anger leads away from righteousness because the angry do not listen to God.

Therefore, James continues, we should “put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” (1:21 ESV). The order of James’s commands is unexpected. We hear *second* that we should receive the word “with meekness.” That is, we listen well, shun argument, and become docile and teachable before the word.<sup>95</sup> But it seems that this should be the *first* command, for no one can obey the first commandment and “put away filth and wickedness” on his own. One must hear and heed the first command and receive the implanted word “which is able to save your souls” (1:21 ESV). *Then* we can put away wickedness. Surely moral reform is not a precondition to hearing the word. The word, implanted in our heart, enables us to put off wickedness. Why does James have the opposite order?

By “put away filth” James means we must put off the old, sinful way of life. In Scripture, filthy clothes represent sin (Isa. 64:6; Zech. 3:3-4). To change clothes is to convert and reform (Zech. 3:4-9; Eph. 4:22-24; 5:26-27). But how does this happen? As he said in 1:18, God gives birth to us through the word of truth, the gospel. The word discloses our true condition — our “moral filth and rampant wickedness.” So it describes our need of God’s mercy and, by the gospel (“the word of truth”), directs us to that mercy.

Rereading James 1:21, we wonder why it says “put away all filthiness” *before* it says “receive . . . the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.” Surely, the theologian thinks, James has the wrong order. First we receive the word, which saves the soul, and *then* we put away moral filth. But James is addressing “beloved brothers” (1:19), who were already born of (or birthed by, *apokyeō*) the gospel (1:18). Second, James seems to be speaking pastorally and experientially. As the eye sees things, a desire to break free from wickedness often precedes an interest in God’s word. New converts often say (in the slang of the day) that a desire to get their lives in order led them to go to church or read the Bible.

Yes, the Holy Spirit imparts every genuine desire for reform. Nonetheless, unbelievers still ought to aspire to lay aside wickedness. As should we, if we would be good listeners. Notice that James says “receive the implanted word,” not “work at removing sin.” We put away moral filth and “live as believers” in Christ (2:1) when the implanted word takes root within us and purifies us (1:21, 27). It brings conviction of sin and assurance of mercy. It instills faith and creates new life, so that good fruit grows. This will not be easy, for wickedness is “rampant”; it grows prolifically, like noxious weeds, against which we wage war.

The church's chief weapon against sin is the word, which does three things. First, it gives us birth, so we become God's first fruits, uniquely dedicated to him (1:18; cf. Exod. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 26:2; passim). Second, it promotes righteousness (1:20). Third, it saves our souls (1:21). Whatever we find in our studies, we must remember that the word aims to bring life and holiness.

However zealous the church may be about small groups and service teams, it is entirely possible to form happy relationships and remain utterly lost. On the other hand, everyone who preaches to large congregations, writes books, teaches at conferences, or posts messages knows that total strangers write and say, "Your message changed my life. As you spoke, it seemed that you were reading my mind. How did you know?" We didn't know, but God knew and chose to express his truth in his word. That word of God, applied by the Spirit, saves lives and redirects behavior. As we redeclare that word (cf. Matt. 16:19; 18:18), it saves from past sinfulness, it saves in this present life, and it saves for our future life with God.

Therefore, while teachers of the word labor to present it to others, James says that we ourselves must listen to the word (James 1:19), receive it (1:21), and do what it says (1:22-25). But scholars and pastors are prone to professionalize their reading of Scripture, applying it to everyone but themselves. Consider how that may happen to a potential pastor called Jason.

When Jason converts and becomes serious about the faith, his initial style of reading will be *naïve and devotional*. He devours Scripture, underlines everything, and feels that God is speaking directly to him.

In time, Jason becomes a *sophisticated and devotional* reader. He still feels that God speaks to him in the text, but he has learned some rules of interpretation. He reads texts in their contexts, understands that biblical truth unfolds progressively, and reads Bible dictionaries and commentaries. He begins to appraise the quality of his sources. He realizes that each Bible translation has a strategy and begins to use that awareness to get at the original text.

Next Jason goes to seminary, where he becomes a *technical reader*. He toils at the Greek and Hebrew text and consults scholarly sources. He respects the distance between his world and the Bible's. His zeal for cultural backgrounds grows. He pursues what the word originally *meant* and may begin to neglect what it means today, to *him*.

After ordination, Jason knows that his study has the edification of the church as its goal. He continues to read technically, but his study now has a definite use in view. As he preaches, he both shares and proclaims his findings to his church. So he becomes a *technical and functional* reader. He organizes his discoveries and offers them to others, but his soul may be detached at a personal level. He is teaching the church but he profits less.

Jason needs therefore to become a *technical and devotional* reader. Every technical skill remains, but he returns to his first love and immerses himself in the word again, letting it speak directly to his heart. He finds what Paul Ricoeur calls a "second naiveté." Jason is both technically astute and meek. He both receives God's word and expounds it. In this way, he finds strength to endure trials (1:12), to check the growth of sin (1:21), and to know he is blessed by a living faith (1:25).

Since the word both saves the soul and removes wickedness (1:21), James adds that we must "be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (1:22 ESV). The NIV paraphrases crisply, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." The verb *ginomai*, rendered "*be doers*" could be translated "*become doers*," since the more active "become" fits James's usage in 1:12, 2:4, 2:10, and 2:11.<sup>96</sup> Reading that fails to lead

to obedience is self-deceptive. “For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks [intently] at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like” (1:22-24 ESV). But if we truly hear the word, we obey it (1:25; Rom. 2:13). In subsequent chapters James insists that knowledge must lead to practice; faith must lead to deeds (2:14-26). Those who are wise must *show it* by their life (3:13). Anyone who knows the good he ought to do and does not do it, sins (4:17).

If we fail to connect creed and conduct, James says, we *deceive* or *defraud* ourselves (1:22). Both translations are plausible contextually and lexically. We *deceive* ourselves if we say we hear the word, but don’t follow it. We *defraud* ourselves if we fail to heed the word, for we rob ourselves of the fruit of obedience.

Again, James compares the careless reader to a man who peers into a mirror only to forget what his face looks like (1:23-24). Scripture truly is a mirror for the soul. We gaze in a physical mirror to inspect and perhaps improve our physical appearance. So we should gaze into Scripture to inspect and improve our spiritual condition. James concludes: “But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets, but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing” (1:25 ESV).

Since Scripture, as mirror, discloses our sin and the promise of grace, we ought to remember what we see and amend what is amiss. But we gaze carelessly. When I was in seminary, my pastor had unruly hair and he sometimes used pins and barrettes in the morning to tame it. One morning he inserted a large silver barrette to control his hair, but forgot to remove it. When he got home that night, his wife gaped. He had gone through the day and seen hundreds of people with that barrette firmly in place, for he looked in the mirror and forgot what he saw. He suffered transitory embarrassment, but we will fare far worse if we gaze at the word and fail to remedy our sin. Paul says, “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). Let us therefore take and read this mirror to the soul, see our flaws, and turn afresh to the Lord, who loved us and gave himself for us. We should read to know him, love him, and follow him.

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 53 (4.2.2), 109 (6.15.25).
2. Augustine, *Confessions*, 141-44 (8.5-6.12-15).
3. Augustine, *Confessions*, 144-47 (8.7-8.16-19).
4. Augustine, *Confessions*, 147, 151-52 (8.8-12.20, 27-28).
5. Augustine, *Confessions*, 152-53 (8.12.29-30).
6. I use the terms “theologian,” “teacher,” “pastor,” and “scholar” almost interchangeably; all are exegetes and teachers, although their spheres of labor do vary.
7. Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 81.
8. My phrasing is shaped by a fellow contributor to this collection, Mark Thompson.
9. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
10. Shannon Brownlee and Jeanne Lenzer, “Shots in the Dark: Does the Vaccine Matter?” *The Atlantic* 304, no. 4 (November 2009): 44-54.
11. It is beyond the scope of one essay to attempt to define these concepts and practices.
12. On the spheres touched by salvation, see Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 73-81.
13. The NIV is periphrastic, but it captures the terseness of the command.
14. Stephen Ambrose, *D-Day* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 8.
15. Andrew Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 3-4.
16. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), 19.
17. Josephus does orient readers to his themes with prefaces to *Antiquities* and *Wars*. Philo is constantly concerned with right interpretation of Scripture, but not with the right interpretation of his own work.
18. Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), esp. 313-24. As with the parables, dense apocalyptic interrupts itself to offer *occasional* hints on proper interpretation of its symbols (e.g., Rev. 1:20; 12:7-12).



19. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1955), 506.
20. Robert Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teaching*, rev. edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 4-59.
21. Eugene Peterson, *Tell It Slant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 12.
22. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 67.
23. L. D. Brodsky, "Keeper of the Word Hoard," in *The World Waiting to Be* (St. Louis: Time Being Books, 2008), 35.
24. Gerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 6-7.
25. Matthew 13:13 says Jesus spoke in parables *because (hoti)* seeing they do not see, so that parables punish sin. Mark 4:12 says Jesus spoke in parables *so that (hina)* seeing they might not see, making parables a reflection of God's decision.
26. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of Matthew, Mark and Luke*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 2:107-8.
27. In all, the question appears ten times in five passages, for it is repeated in Matthew 12, and four times the question is doubled in parallel passages. The list: Matthew 12:3, 5 // Mark 2:25; Luke 6:3; Matthew 19:4; Matthew 21:16 // Mark 12:10; Matthew 21:42 // Mark 12:26; Matthew 22:31 (no parallel). The verb *anaginōskō*, ordinarily "I read," appears each time, but the phrasing varies slightly. It is *ouk anegnōte* in Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31, and Mark 12:26; but *oudepote anegnōte* in Matthew 21:16; 21:42; Mark 2:25; *oude . . . anegnōte* appears in Mark 12:10, Luke 6:3.
28. The question has precursors in prophetic and rabbinic literature. Rabbis distinguished between reading and interpreting, between what a text says and what a reader learns. David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1956), 427-32.
29. *The Mishnah*, trans. Herbert Danby (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 307-21, devotes pages to regulating divorce, but includes nothing about preserving marriage. Here is part of a law regulating bills of divorce (Gittin 2:3-6, pp. 308-9):  
It may be written with anything: ink, red dye, gum, copperas, or whatsoever is lasting; but it may not be written with . . . fruit juice or whatsoever is not lasting. It may be written on anything — on an olive leaf, or on a cow's horn (and he must give her the cow). . . . All are qualified to write a bill of divorce, even a deaf mute, an imbecile or a minor. All are qualified to bring a bill of divorce, excepting a deaf mute, an imbecile, a minor, a blind man or a Gentile. . . . If it was received from the husband by a minor who (later) became of age, or by a deaf mute whose senses (later) become sound, or by an imbecile who became sane . . . it is still valid. But if (given by) one of sound senses who then became a deaf mute and again became of sound senses, . . . or by one who was sane who then became an imbecile and again became sane, it is valid. . . . If at the beginning and at the end an act is performed knowingly, it is valid.
30. Exodus 3:6, Mark 12:26, and Acts 7:32 lack the copula, but Matthew 22:32 has the verb *eimi* in the present tense; he *is* their God.
31. Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 528-29; N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 424-25.
32. Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 61-68, 191-221.
33. Mark Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 58-75. Futato argues that Psalms 1 and 2 introduce the purposes of Psalms.
34. Paul exhorts the church to guard the gospel and to do good works with roughly equal frequency. He never asserts the primacy of orthodoxy over orthopraxy. Dead orthodoxy and blind activism are equally problematic (cf. Rev. 2:1-7; Luke 10:38-42).
35. I use "teacher," "reader," and "interpreter" interchangeably; "pastor" and "scholar" are nearly so, for both are exegetes and teachers, although their spheres of labor differ.
36. This portion of the chapter adapts some themes from my monograph, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 18-24, 59-77.
37. Kevin Vanhoozer, Charles Anderson, and Michael Slesman, *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).
38. Robert Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1870, 1979), 261-63.
39. Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 81-82.
40. Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 91.
41. Meditation here has the typically Christian sense of extended contemplation of an idea, rather than the Buddhist sense of emptying the mind of ideas.
42. Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 91.
43. I use "application," "implication," "use," and "response" almost interchangeably. The term "application" can be imprecise, not least because it leads to a disjunction between "original meaning" and "significance" or "application," which I address below.
44. Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," in *Interpreter's Bible Dictionary*, ed. George A. Buttrick et al. (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1962), 1:419-22.
45. Martin Luther, "Psalm 1," in *First Lectures on the Psalms*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 10, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1975), 18.
46. Anthony Thistelton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 357-58, 372. Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 11, 14, 23.

47. Notice implicit rebukes in John 5:36-40; 7:37-42; 10:24-39. Similarly, in Matthew 2, the scribes know where the Christ was born, yet fail to go to worship him.

48. To illustrate, “Is there any salad?” is a locution that, if spoken at a dinner table, has the illocutionary force of requesting salad, leading to the perlocutionary response of someone passing a salad bowl.

49. Speech-act theory has been put to especially fruitful theological use by Kevin Vanhoozer in, for example, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 63-68, *passim*.

50. John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 67, 97.

51. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 81-84.

52. Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 85-97.

53. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.15.2-5.

54. Calvin, *Institutes* 2.15.6; emphasis mine.

55. Calvin, *Institutes* 1.17.1-11.

56. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.21.1-2.

57. See Daniel Doriani, *Matthew* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 144.

58. Martin Luther, “Psalm 1,” in *Psalms*, in *Luther’s Works*, 10.17.

59. Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 92-117.

60. In fact, both this encounter and the discourse on “raca” and “fool” could both be considered exercises in contextualization.

61. Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 613.

62. Gadamer says that the understanding of a text is tested by one’s ability to see its significance for new situations. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1997), 277-305. Of judicial and biblical law he says, “To understand the order means to apply it to the specific situation to which it is relevant” (298).

63. The Indonesia and Haiti earthquakes were roughly 7 on the Richter scale, whereas seismologists estimate the Lisbon quake had to be nearly 9, hence almost 100 times more powerful.

64. F. M. A. de Voltaire, *Poèmes sur le Désastre de Lisbonne et sur La Loi Naturelle avec des Prefaces, des Notes etc.* (Genève, n.d. [1756]), in *Selected Works of Voltaire*, trans. Joseph McCabe (London: Watts & Co., 1911), 1-2.

65. The dominance of naturalism is visible everywhere. A best-selling historical novel, Ken Follett’s *World without End* (New York: Dutton, 2007), meticulously reconstructs the *material* world of the fourteenth century, but the author cannot let his hero think of collapsed cathedral walls or bridges in supernatural terms.

66. A. J. Conyers, *The Eclipse of Heaven* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 15.

67. See D. A. Carson, *The Gaggling of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), and Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

68. Luke Timothy Johnson warns teachers about sins they can commit while expounding the word. Public speech before a frequently captive audience can, he says, tempt us “to virtually every form of evil speech: arrogance and domination over students; anger and pettiness at contradiction or inattention; slander and meanness toward absent opponents; flattery of students for the sake of vainglory” (*The Letter of James*, AB 37a [New York: Doubleday, 1995], 263).

69. Lewis Smedes, *Sex for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 109-36.

70. Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. R. M. Fuller (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 1-44; John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 70, and many others.

71. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 302ff.; Thistelton, *The Two Horizons*, 307-10.

72. Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation,” *HTR* 70 (1977): 37.

73. While dialogue is the wrong posture toward Scripture, it is apt for the relation between pastor and church or teacher and class. The Second Helvetic Confession does say that the preaching of the word of God is the word of God, but Bullinger certainly did not believe that every sermon has the same authority as Scripture. Because sin and ignorance infect every teacher, the listening church should heed 1 Thessalonians 5:22, “Test all things, hold fast to what is good.”

74. Critics sometimes accuse conservatives of biblicism, which makes sense to them since they separate God from the Bible. But if the Bible is God’s word, the charge falls away. To submit to Scripture is to submit to the Lord who reveals himself in it. Notice Romans 9:17, which begins, “For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘I raised you up for this very purpose . . .’” This is from Exodus 9:16, where *God* speaks to Pharaoh. Thus for Paul “Scripture says” = “God says.” Believers respond to the Author through his word. Yet it would be a deadly error if someone related to Scripture in itself and missed God himself.

75. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 66-67.

76. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 66-68.

77. Vanhoozer et al., *Everyday Theology*, 45-46, 63ff.

78. Vanhoozer et al., *Everyday Theology*, 44-53, quote on 48.

79. Kevin Vanhoozer, “A Drama of Redemption Model,” in *Four Views on Moving beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Gary Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 161.

80. Jesus repeatedly shows an ability to read minds: see Matthew 9:4; 12:25; Luke 5:22; 6:8; 7:39-40; 9:47; John 2:25. Perhaps

this was God-given prophetic insight or a manifestation of his omniscience. But he often chose not to exercise his divine prerogatives (Matt. 24:36), so perhaps his selfless ability to focus on others enabled him to read minds.

[81.](#) Cornelius Plantinga, “Preaching Sin to Reluctant Hearers,” *Perspectives* 12 (December 1997): 11-12.

[82.](#) The original term (from Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*) was hermeneutical *circle*, but the image of a circle is too static; *spiral* better expresses the idea of refinement and movement. See Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, 327-56; Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 6-8, 366-415.

[83.](#) Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 6. Osborne’s position is subtle, but hermeneutical theorists can give the impression that protracted cogitation precedes application.

[84.](#) Maurice Blondel, “Letter to Pere Auguste Valensin,” quoted in *Introduction to Maurice Blondel: The Letters on Apologetics and History and Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. Alexander Dru and Illyd Trethowan (London: Harvill Press, 1964), 96; John Macquarrie, “Maurice Blondel,” in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 1:323-24.

[85.](#) Calvin, *Institutes* 1.6.2.

[86.](#) Martin Luther, in Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. Robert Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 70.

[87.](#) John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1872), 5:132-33, cf. 129.

[88.](#) Gordon Fee, “Exegesis and Spirituality: Reflections on Completing the Exegetical Circle,” *Crux* 31, no. 4 (Dec. 1995): 30.

[89.](#) Fee, “Exegesis and Spirituality,” 31, 34.

[90.](#) Moises Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 22.

[91.](#) Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Bridgepoint, 1994), 254-55.

[92.](#) William Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1991), 131, 139.

[93.](#) Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 154.

[94.](#) The verb in this sentence is *euangelizomai*, “preach the gospel” or “preach the good news.” Unlike most translations, the NIV fails to show that the word that is preached is the gospel.

[95.](#) The Greek is *prautēs* — meekness, gentleness, or humility. Cf. Matt. 5:5; 11:29; 21:5.

[96.](#) Johnson, *The Letter of James*, 206.