

READING
THE
WORD OF GOD
in the
PRESENCE
OF GOD

A HANDBOOK FOR
BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION



VERN S.
POYTHRES S

“While many sincere Christians read the Scriptures as personal communiques from God, biblical scholars often treat them as little more than human documents written for people living long ago. Vern Poythress insists neither of these paths reflects how Christ calls his followers to approach the Bible. Everyone familiar with Poythress’s theological reflections knows that he is one of the brightest minds of our day. Everyone familiar with his life knows the depth of his piety. In this book, Poythress offers a glimpse into how he employs both of these gifts from the Holy Spirit as he handles the Bible. His reflections will challenge and inspire everyone who seeks to read the Scriptures in the presence of God.”

Richard L. Pratt, Jr., President, Third Millennium Ministries

“Vern Poythress has given the church a truly comprehensive guide to reading and appropriating Scripture. This unique resource explains both the first steps for beginners and the theological, philosophical, and linguistic foundations for sophisticated interpretation.”

Dan Doriani, Vice President of Strategic Academic Projects and Professor of Theology, Covenant Seminary

“Providing both theological foundations and practical strategies for interpretation, Dr. Poythress explains the simple yet astounding truth that God is present in his Word and speaks to us as we read. With pastoral sensitivity, he combines linguistic theory, hermeneutics, systematic theology, and expert biblical knowledge into a compelling work both instructive for advanced students of the Bible and accessible for beginners. I highly commend this book and look forward to sharing it with my congregation.”

Camden Bucey, Pastor, Hope Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Grayslake, Illinois; President, Reformed Forum

“*Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God* does two very hard things very well. First, it guides a spectrum of readers from an introductory listening to God speaking in Scripture into deeper explorations of the Word’s multifaceted witness to Christ. Second, this book exemplifies a radical, refreshing alternative to mainstream methods of biblical interpretation—an approach controlled at every point by the Bible’s claim to be the very Word of the ever-living, ever-present God.”

Dennis E. Johnson, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“Vern Poythress has done readers a great service by providing an easy to understand guide to the complexities of biblical interpretation. Readers will benefit from his knowledge of the way language works, his emphasis on the divine inspiration of Scripture, and the ways in which every passage relates to God’s unfolding plan of redemption. Here is a trustworthy and practical guide for anyone interested in reading the Bible faithfully.”

Brandon D. Crowe, Associate Professor of New Testament, Westminster Theological Seminary

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VERN S. POYTHRESS

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Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation

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To my wife, Diane

Contents

Tables and Illustrations	11
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Part I

INTRODUCTORY PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETATION

1 Foundations for Interpretation	15
2 Principles for Interpreting the Bible	27
3 Complementary Starting Points for Interpretation	39

Part II

SIMPLE STEPS IN INTERPRETATION

4 Three Simple Steps in Interpretation	47
5 The Three Steps as Perspectives	55
6 Correlation: Comparing Passages	63

Part III

ISSUES WITH TIME

7 Transmission	75
8 Original Contexts	85
9 Original Communication	101

Part IV

ISSUES WITH AUTHORSHIP

10 Dual Authorship	109
11 Difficulties with Authorship	119

Part V

ISSUES WITH LANGUAGE

12 Basic Linguistic Structures 131

13 Understanding Linguistic Subsystems 139

14 Units in Contrast, Variation, and Distribution 153

15 Meaning 165

16 Figurative Language 175

17 Words and Concepts 183

18 Discourse 197

19 Genre 207

20 Using Commentaries 215

Part VI

REDEPTIVE-HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

21 The History of Redemption 223

22 Christocentric Interpretation 233

23 Typology 247

24 Additional Stages Reflecting on Typology 257

25 Varieties of Analogies 263

26 Varieties of Types 275

27 Antitypes 285

28 Themes 293

Part VII

ASSESSMENT

29 Hermeneutics Outline in Detail 305

30 Alternate Paths of Interpretation 311

31 The Fulfillment Approach 323

32 Boundaries for Interpretation 335

Part VIII

EXAMPLES

33	Proverbs 10:1.....	355
34	Psalm 4:8	375
35	Amos 1:3	387
	Conclusion.....	399

APPENDICES

	Appendix A: Redeeming How We Interpret	403
	Appendix B: Secular Views of Meaning	417
	Appendix C: Interpreting Human Texts.....	431
	Appendix D: Redeemed Analogues to Critical Methods	435
	Appendix E: Philosophical Hermeneutics	441
	Bibliography	445
	General Index.....	452
	Scripture Index.....	460

Tables and Illustrations

Tables

2.1	Comparing Treaties and Covenants.....	31
4.1	Three Steps: Observation, Elucidation, and Application	48
7.1	Aspects of Verbal Communication.....	77
21.1	Perspectives on God’s Plan for History	231
27.1	Applications to Individual and Community, Now and in the Future	291

Illustrations

4.1	Three-Steps Worksheet	51
4.2	Three-Steps Worksheet, Filled Out.....	52
18.1	Tree for Rhetorical Analysis.....	200
18.2	Tree for Rhetorical Analysis, with Prominence.....	202
23.1	Clowney’s Triangle.....	249
23.2	Clowney’s Triangle for the Sin Offering	250
23.3	Clowney’s Triangle for David and His Men.....	252
24.1	Clowney’s Triangle with Application	258
24.2	Clowney’s Triangle for the Sin Offering, with Application	258
24.3	Clowney’s Triangle for David and His Men, with Application	259

12 *Tables and Illustrations*

25.1 Christ as Mediator..... 264

25.2 The Mediatorial Functions of Christ..... 271

31.1 Fulfilling Old Testament Examples 329

31.2 Fulfillment and God’s Character 330

Part I

**INTRODUCTORY
PRINCIPLES FOR
INTERPRETATION**

Foundations for Interpretation

This book is a practical handbook to help people grow in skill in interpreting the Bible. It illustrates the process of interpretation by considering the stages through which a Bible student may travel in the course of studying a passage in the Bible. Even beginners can use the early stages of our approach (up through chapters 4–6), because we have designed the explanations to make sense to beginners and to be usable. In later chapters we add more complexity, so that beginners can continue to advance. As more details are added, pastors and advanced students may also find helpful insights.

Our approach should also interest experts, because it differs from what has become standard among many biblical scholars (see appendix A). We endeavor to appreciate how communion with God forms the central axis in every stage of interpretation—the beginning, the middle, and the end. We want to interpret the Bible in a way that has its basis in the Bible itself, in the Bible’s instruction about loyalty to God. Both beginners and more mature students can profit from thinking through how to interpret the Bible more faithfully.

This handbook shares much with biblical interpretation that took place in the Reformation and before. The Enlightenment and its fruits have resulted in additional benefits through common grace. But much that has taken place in the modern West has corrupted the process of interpreting the Bible. We must rethink how we work, rather than

passively accept the standards and procedures that are now common in the academic world in the West. At the same time, we can profit from positive insights found in modern thinking about interpretation. This handbook has endeavored to use both ancient and modern insights, but only after sifting good from bad, and placing positive insights in the larger framework of a biblically based worldview.

Loving God

So let us begin.

Jesus indicates how we ought to live with wholehearted love for God:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. (Matt. 22:37–40)

If we love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind, we will be interested in learning more about him. And the Bible is the primary source for knowledge of God.¹ Thus, loving God motivates serious study of the Bible. When we study the Bible, we should be loving God in the midst of our study. What implications does loving God have for the *way* we study the Bible? Amid our studying, we will be asking God to enliven our hearts, to enliven and clarify our minds, to sanctify our attitudes, to teach us, and to empower us to receive and obey what we study. We will also be praising him and loving him and enjoying him and marveling over who he is amid every aspect of our study. We will be repenting of sins when the Bible reveals how we have sinned.

So what does it look like to study in this way? We will endeavor to work out details in good time. But first we need to consider briefly some foundational questions: the nature of love, the nature of God, our own nature, and the nature of our needs. These are deep ques-

¹ The Bible comes to us in contexts that the Lord has given us in his providence. The contexts include many modern contexts: our social contexts, our previous spiritual history, our personal struggles, our church, words from Christian friends, the preaching that we hear in church, and the other means of grace (such as prayer and the Lord's Supper). Each of these contexts can function at times as either a help or a hindrance (we can even pray or receive the Lord's Supper in a disobedient way). We cannot here explore all these influences in detail.

tions. We will consider them only in a brief way, leaving it to other books to work out the foundations in a more thorough way.² We are condensing our discussion of the foundations so that we can give more attention to how their implications work out in the actual practice of Bible study.

The Centrality of Love

First, let us consider the centrality of love in responding to God. In addition to what Jesus says about love, the apostle Paul indicates that all the commandments of God can be summed up in the second of the two great commandments, the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself:

for the one who loves another has *fulfilled the law*. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and *any other commandment, are summed up* in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is *the fulfilling of the law*. (Rom. 13:8–10)

For *the whole law is fulfilled* in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Gal. 5:14)

In a sense, God is our closest “neighbor,” so this commandment implies loving God as well as our human neighbors.

God’s will can also be summed up in the first and great commandment, to love God, because loving God implies loving your neighbor as well:

If anyone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:20–21)

The Bible also indicates that if we love God, we will keep his commandments:

²There are many resources. I would refer readers especially to Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1999), and then to other books that John Frame and I have written (see bibliography).

For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.
(1 John 5:3)

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. (John 14:15)

Among the commandments is the commandment to love your neighbor. So it makes sense that loving God is the “great and first commandment.” By implication, it encompasses all the other commandments of God and sums up our entire duty to God. Therefore it also sums up our duty when we interpret the Bible.

Redemption

How can we love God with all our heart? In our fallen condition, as children of Adam, we are in rebellion against God and in slavery to sin: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). At heart, we hate God rather than loving him. God himself has to rescue us. That is why he sent Christ into the world:

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:9–11)

Other books explain God’s redemption through Christ.³ Here, we will explore how his redemption affects our interpretation of the Bible.

God as Trinity

We can love God only if God himself empowers us. This empowerment begins when we are born again through the Holy Spirit:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and *the Spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is *born of the Spirit* is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, “You must be born again.” (John 3:5–7)

³See especially J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993); John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2006).

This principle is confirmed by other verses that indicate that God takes the initiative:

We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he [Christ] has poured out this [the Holy Spirit at Pentecost] that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. (Acts 2:33)

The Holy Spirit empowers us to love: “The fruit of the Spirit is love . . .” (Gal. 5:22). Loving God leads in turn to communion with him: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). Jesus says that both he and his Father will dwell with anyone who loves him. In the context of this verse, he also indicates that the Holy Spirit will dwell with believers (v. 17). Communion with God is communion with the one true God who is three persons and whose communion with us takes place through the mediation of the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁴ This communion takes place only with those who belong to Christ, who are united to him by faith.

Since the Bible is God’s word, his own speech to us,⁵ his speech functions as one way in which he has communion with us. Through his word, God works sanctification: “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). God’s communion with us always harmonizes with his own character. We have communion with our *Trinitarian* God. So we can think about how his Trinitarian character affects our communion with him.

As we have indicated, when we are united to Christ and trust in him, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit come to dwell in us, and this indwelling expresses God’s communion with us. The work of the Holy Spirit is particularly prominent in this indwelling. Romans 8, in teaching about the Spirit’s indwelling, calls him “the Spirit of God”

⁴Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), chapter 15.

⁵See Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig, with an introduction by Cornelius Van Til (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1948); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010); J. I. Packer, “*Fundamentalism*” and *the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958).

and “the Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9). The Father and the Son make their home in a Christian specifically through the Holy Spirit.

We experience fellowship with Christ as we are buried and raised with him, according to Romans 6:3–11. We experience his lordship and control both through his commandments and through having his work applied in our lives. By God’s work we begin to love him and to express our love in faithful obedience.

The lordship of Christ over our lives expresses the lordship of God the Father as well. God the Father, as Creator and sustainer, represents the ultimate source of authority. He makes moral claims on our lives. His claims have relevance when we are studying the Bible.

Perspectival Triads

The lordship of Christ has implications for the process of interpretation. John M. Frame, by meditating on the biblical teaching on God’s lordship, has summed up the nature of God’s lordship using three overlapping themes: authority, control, and presence.⁶ He uses and expounds these themes in understanding God’s lordship over all creation and all history. But the themes also apply to God’s lordship over the lives of believers. When we have communion with God through Christ, we experience his lordship as he applies Christ’s work of salvation to us.

Frame also indicates that the three categories of lordship reflect the work of the three distinct persons of the Trinity. Authority belongs to the Father, control to the Son, and presence to the work of the Holy Spirit.⁷ Since, however, the three persons of the Trinity indwell one another, and since they all act in all of God’s works in the world, the three categories of lordship function as perspectives on one another, rather than being separable. And even though we can associate one distinct person of the Trinity more closely with one category, all three persons are active in all the aspects of lordship.

Each perspective on lordship points to the other two and presupposes the other two. For example, if we start with the perspective of control, we can see that God’s control implies control over my loca-

⁶ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 21–115.
⁷ John M. Frame, “Backgrounds to My Thought,” in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2009), 16.

tion and my heart, which means that God is present with me. Control implies control over standards for authority, and so implies that God has ultimate authority. If we start with presence, we are dealing with the presence of God, who also makes present his moral standards, and therefore makes present his ultimate authority. His power to be present represents a form of power and therefore of control.

The interlocking and interpenetration of the perspectives on lordship reflect the inexhaustible mystery of the Trinity, which we can never understand completely. God understands himself completely because he is God (1 Cor. 2:10). We as creatures can understand truly and genuinely, as God gives us ability and reveals himself through Christ. But we never come to understand him exhaustively and we never dissolve all mystery. The mysteries concerning God only deepen as we deepen our understanding. They should stir up our awe and praise, rather than frustration.

When God acts, he expresses his authority, control, and presence. All three—authority, control, and presence—come to expression when he speaks to us in Scripture. So these perspectives on lordship describe how we have communion with God in our reception of Scripture. By specifically thinking about these perspectives as we read, we may stir up our hearts to praise and to stand in awe of him, and at the same time remind ourselves that Scripture contains mysteries. The ultimate mystery of God himself always remains.

We can further explore what it means to listen to Scripture by using a second triad of perspectives, namely the triad consisting in the normative, situational, and existential perspectives. John Frame has developed this second triad of perspectives for analyzing ethics.⁸ The normative perspective focuses on the norms for ethics, which are summarized in God's commands. Parts of Scripture with explicit commands are further explained and deepened by the surrounding Scriptures that contain other kinds of communication. The situational perspective focuses on our situation, and asks how we may best promote the glory of God in our situation. Loving our neighbor offers one

⁸John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2008); an earlier and shorter explanation can be found in John M. Frame, *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999); Frame, "Backgrounds to My Thought," 16.

way of glorifying God. So as an aspect of the situational perspective, we may ask how we may best express love for our neighbors and how we may best help and bless them. Finally, the existential perspective focuses on the people in the situation and their motivations. The primary motivation should be love.

These three perspectives, when rightly understood, interlock and reinforce one another. Each functions as a perspective on all of ethics. Rightly understood, each not only points to the others but even encompasses them. For example, the normative perspective starts with God's commands. But God's commands include the command to love, and so this perspective tells us to pay attention to motivations and attitudes. Thus it encompasses the existential perspective, which focuses on motivations and attitudes. Next, suppose that we start with the existential perspective. We start with the emphasis on loving God. If we love God, we will keep his commandments, and so we also have to pay attention to the commandments, which involves the normative perspective. Loving our neighbors means paying attention to how we may bless them in their circumstances, and so leads to the situational perspective on their circumstances. If we start with the normative perspective, the commandments of God imply that we should pay attention to the circumstances in order to act wisely. So the normative perspective leads to the situational perspective.

In sum, we may profitably consider Scripture using Frame's perspectives, because Scripture itself invites us to reflect on aspects of God's lordship and aspects of our obligations to God.

Unity and Diversity in Humanity

To appreciate more fully what it means to listen to God's word in the Bible, we have to consider who we are as *recipients* of God's word. So let us consider our humanity. The reality of God's Trinitarian nature has implications for our understanding of humanity. We are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27). God is one God in three persons. He has unity and diversity in himself. We as human beings are creatures, not the Creator. But we also have unity and diversity, though unity and diversity operate on a different level and in a different way than with God himself. (For example, we do not have the ultimate mutual indwelling

or “coinherence” belonging only to the persons of the Trinity in their relation to each other.)

The unity of humanity consists in the fact that we are all human—we are all made in the image of God, and we share common ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. But we also show diversity. Each of us is a distinctive human being, unlike anyone else in details. Sin makes diversity contentious, but a certain kind of harmonious diversity was present with Adam and Eve before they sinned. And redemption brings back harmonious diversity: diversity in the church blesses every member of the body of Christ. The church is one body with many members (1 Corinthians 12). We have a diversity of gifts, which in their diversity bring health and growth to the one body (see also Eph. 4:1–16).

This diversity among human beings expresses itself in how we understand the Bible. We find ourselves at different stages of growth. Not everyone pays attention to exactly the same verses or the same aspects of the verses. Not everyone understands with equal depth or acuity. We can also see diversity in the human authors of the Bible. The four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—have fascinating differences in emphasis. They have four distinct human authors, though we should be quick to add that it was God who raised up these four authors in their distinctiveness, and the distinctions express God’s will and receive God’s authorization. The Gospels did not arise merely from human individuality, in a way independent of God.⁹

Unity and diversity show themselves in our study of Scripture as well. Some people memorize more Scripture than others. Some people find themselves drawn to the Psalms, while others pore over Matthew or Romans or Revelation. God equips some people with gifts of teaching (Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28–29; Eph. 4:11), and they explain Scripture to others or write commentaries that help others. Some people have the gift of helping (1 Cor. 12:28; see Rom. 12:7), and their practical acts of helping bring home the implications of Scriptural passages that talk about practical service.

When all the people in the church are following Christ, all their efforts work together to build up the church, which is the body of Christ

⁹Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (reprint; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), 47–49.

(1 Cor. 14:12; Eph. 4:12–16). But the church as a whole suffers when some members suffer (1 Cor. 12:26). This interaction of unity and diversity expresses God’s plan for the church and for the members in the church—for every Christian believer.

The unity and diversity in the church have a role when we consider studying the Bible. We have already mentioned the gift of teaching. Teachers play a leading role in guiding the whole church into understanding the Bible more deeply and faithfully. Not everyone is a teacher, so we have a diversity here. The whole church profits from godly and gifted teachers, so the church has a unity as well. All believers grow in knowing Scripture in common ways, because the Bible is the word of God, from the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Believers share doctrines in common (Eph. 4:5: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”).

But we meet diversity as well. In the first century of the church, and in some cultures of the world even today, some of the believers cannot read, or do not have access to a printed Bible of their own. They rely on hearing from others, perhaps as the Bible is read in a church meeting or as they listen to a radio or a TV or a recording that has a reading from the Bible. Even in situations where believers have access to the Bible and other aids such as concordances, Bible atlases, and commentaries, we must reckon with diversity in the body of Christ. Not everyone will read and study according to the same exact pattern.¹⁰

Means of Growth

The Bible prescribes one central “method” for learning: Christ himself is “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). Christ is the “method.” But of course he is a person, not a mechanical list of steps. When we hear the word *method*, we may think of a fixed series of steps that guarantees a particular outcome. For example, we follow the instructions for putting together a new bookcase; and if we follow them carefully, we obtain a finished bookcase. Or, the recipe for cooking muffins leads to tasty muffins.

Christ as a person is actually the opposite of having a “method” in this sense, because we cannot reduce the person of Christ to a mechani-

¹⁰On the use of multiple perspectives from multiple human beings, see Poythress, *Symphonic Theology*.

cal method, nor can we as human beings guarantee beforehand merely by our own will or power that we will always be faithful to Christ and his lordship as we study his word. Precisely because we do not have a simple, fail-safe “recipe” for interpretation, a recipe that would work independently of our religious commitment and our spiritual health and our moral obedience, it is all the more important that we affirm that Christ is the *way*. He is the way to eternal life, the way to understanding God. We may add that he is also the way to understanding Scripture, because we need him and the power of his Spirit to arrive. We can never reduce any human person, let alone Christ, to a list of steps. Personal interaction creates rich relationships, including surprises.

God has made the world with regularities in it. We have regular ways of multiplying numbers. People, as we said, are much richer, and the text of Scripture is much richer, but here too we may speak of regularities. Scripture itself indicates that the word of God, now contained in Scripture, has been designed by God himself as a key means for our growth in knowing him:

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:17)

For I have given them the *words* that you gave me, and they have received them and have come *to know in truth* that I came from you; and they have *believed* that you sent me. (John 17:8)

Your word is a *lamp* to my feet
and a *light* to my path. (Ps. 119:105)

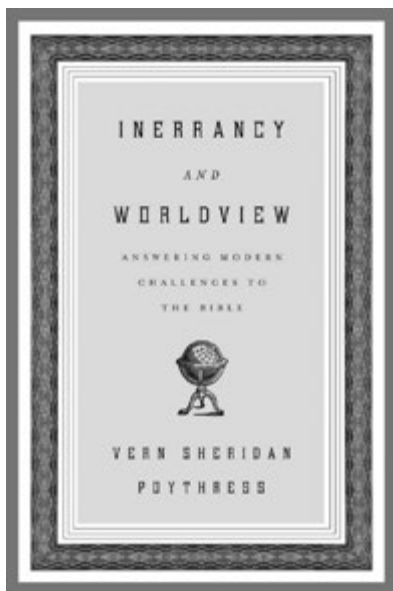
All Scripture is breathed out by God and *profitable* for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for *training in righteousness*, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16–17)

Accordingly, theologians have described reading and listening to Scripture as a *means of grace*. A means of grace is a means or a path by which God gives grace and blessing to those who seek him. The study of Scripture stands alongside other means of grace: prayer, the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper), and fellowship with God’s people. All the means of grace reinforce one another.

In addition, we may say that God has established ways for engaging the means of grace that Scripture itself is. Because of what Scripture is, God has established ways or paths that believers may travel to receive and absorb Scripture properly, in communion with God who gave it and who continues to speak it. We must only add, to balance what we have already said, that the ways and paths for studying Scripture offer a unity amid the diversity of different readers and reading strategies. We do observe a diversity in human reception of the Bible. But there is also a fundamental unity in how people ought to approach the Bible: they should all submit unreservedly to God who speaks. Neither unity nor diversity reduces to the other; but at their best they presuppose and fortify each other.

In short, Christian growth begins by being born again by the Spirit of God. It continues as we grow in holiness and in conformity to Christ. One of the main means of spiritual growth that God uses is the Bible, which is his word.

The Case for Biblical Inerrancy

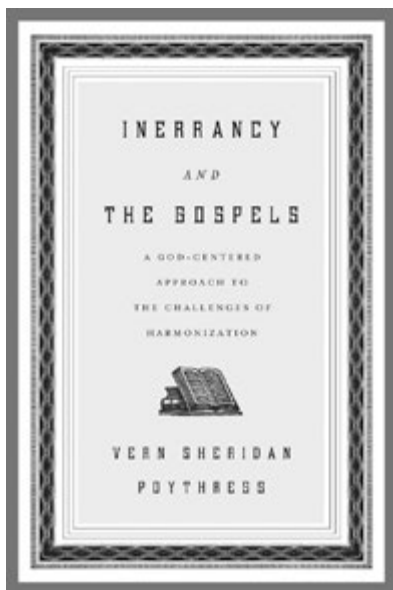


"This book gets deeper into the question of inerrancy than any other book I know."

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