

# **Relational Principles of Biblical Interpretation**

By Rob Fischer

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## Relational Principles of Biblical Interpretation

For the past thirty years, I've been applying the principles of Protestant Evangelical hermeneutics to the study and interpretation of God's Word, the Bible. Simply because God's Word is so rich and full, the longer one reads and studies it, the more "new" insights one discovers. I couldn't begin to reflect on all the times I've uncovered some gem in God's Word and exclaimed, "I've never seen that before!" I always experience a certain thrill of discovery when this happens.

These "new" discoveries have constantly increased my appreciation, trust and love for God's Word. The Bible is indeed a supernatural book, inspired by God's Holy Spirit and it never ceases to be relevant and powerful.

In recent years, I and some other Christ-followers, whom I know well, have experienced a pattern of renewed richness in our understanding of the Word. Our experience in God's Word has caused us to ponder why and how this has come about. We've concluded that the fullness we are experiencing from God's Word has resulted simply from experiencing deeper relationship with God. This result should not surprise us!

This pattern of renewed richness in our understanding of the Word that I'm referring to involves skills beyond traditional principles of hermeneutics. I don't mean by this that our discoveries have emerged in a way that is *contrary* to the principles of hermeneutics. Rather we've realized that traditional hermeneutical principles are not enough for a complete and growing understanding of God's Word.

Hermeneutics is typically defined as, "The science and art of biblical interpretation."<sup>1</sup> The *science* side refers to the study of those rules that govern interpretation of the biblical text and the *art* component refers to how skillfully we apply those rules.<sup>2</sup> But there is a fundamental flaw in relying solely on hermeneutics for interpreting the Scriptures accurately.

Hermeneutical principles are important, valuable and necessary to the study of God's Word. We don't want to proceed without them. But they are not enough. The idea that we can accurately interpret God's Word strictly by *scientific* or *mechanical* means is faulty. Because the Bible is God's *Word*—his communication to us—understanding it must therefore be a *relational* pursuit. Note the highly relational aspect of God's Word from the following passages: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Psalm 1:1-3; Proverbs 30:5-6; John 5:46-47; 14:15; 15:7; 20:31; Romans 10:17; 15:4; 2 Timothy 2:15; 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:12-13; Revelation 1:3.

Unfortunately, we usually relegate the relational side of interaction with God's Word to the *devotional*. Please don't dismiss these principles as purely devotional. These relational principles of biblical interpretation are on par with, if not more important than the application of traditional hermeneutical principles for accurate interpretation of the Word.

Here are what I am calling Relational Principles of Biblical Interpretation:

- The principle of the teaching of the Holy Spirit

- The principle of the character of God
- The principle of interacting with God
- The principle of alignment with God's Word

Perhaps the overriding premise for these Relational Principles of Biblical Interpretation is that we must enjoy a personal relationship with God in order to understand his Word. In the past, we have viewed our relationship with God more like a *ticket* or *pass* that "gets us into the game." But that once we're "in the game" we proceed with hard work, study and logic applying hermeneutics.

But the longer I have known Christ, the more I've come to recognize how crucial and central my *relationship* with him is to my understanding of his Word. In fact, if my relationship with Christ is suffering due to sin or other distractions in my life, my ability to interpret the Word accurately will be greatly hampered despite my application of sound hermeneutical principles.

One of the reasons for the close connection between our relationship with God and our ability to correctly interpret Scripture is that we are a whole person. While we can think about the two concepts (hermeneutics and relationship with God) separately, we cannot actually live them out in isolation from each other. We may try, but our understanding of Scripture will be tainted.

In fact, some readers may be thinking right now that to add a relational aspect to Bible interpretation opens the door to error and subjectivity. I assure you the door is already open and always has been! Adhering solely to the scientific hermeneutical principles for biblical interpretation by no means closes that door or prevents it from opening. I've watched people actually manipulate the Word by regarding their own hermeneutic as infallible and letting it dictate the meaning of Scripture. Wasn't this the failure of the teachers of the law in Jesus' day?

Therefore, I'm asking that we proceed in humility before God and each other, begging him to protect us from self-centered or world-centered motives and error. In coming to God's Word we must do so as his children longing to hear a word from our Father. We do this that we may know him more intimately and please him in all we think, say and do.

### **The principle of the teaching of the Holy Spirit**

Many books on hermeneutics mention the fact that the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit is essential to a clear understanding of God's Word. But how does one take advantage of the teaching of the Holy Spirit? How does he teach us? Is something required of us? Does his teaching come automatically as a result of our knowing Christ as Savior? Is his teaching invisible and imperceptible as we study the Word?

Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 2:10-16:

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.

This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

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. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: 'For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ.

According to this passage, only by the indwelling Spirit of God can we understand the thoughts of God and what he has freely given us. Yet Paul agonizes with the Corinthians in the very next sentence, "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly." (1 Corinthians 3:1-3)

Their worldly actions and attitudes rendered them unreceptive to the teaching of the Holy Spirit. Specifically, their jealousy and quarreling among each other demonstrated their *unwillingness* to hear from or yield to the Holy Spirit's teaching in their lives. They chose their own agendas over God's. This very relational choice spilled over into all other areas of their lives.

Unfortunately, we tend to think of such choices in *transactional* rather than *relational* terms. Jesus in John 15:9-12 provides an example of the difference between transactional and relational. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."

On the face of it, this passage may sound formulaic or transactional, but it's not, nor can it be. Jesus is not saying that we fall in and out of favor with God when we disobey him (transactional). Jesus does not cease to love us when we refuse to obey his commands (transactional) any more than we would cease to love our own child if he/she rebels against us (relational). But when our son or daughter disobeys us, they temporarily cease to *experience* and *enjoy* our love, because their attitude and demeanor is set against us. Although our love for them has not changed, they don't recognize it or embrace it. Only brokenness and repentance on their part can restore the relationship (relational). So it is in our relationship with God.

Another example of the difference between transactional and relational is Peter's warning to husbands in 1 Peter 3:7, "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers." Our temptation is to view this as a transactional formula: "If you're inconsiderate toward your wife, God will not hear your prayers." But this passage too is highly relational.

In 1 John 5:1, John explains, "Everyone who loves the father loves his child as well." As a parent, if someone attacks my child they are attacking me! What John is showing us here is that the relational connection between how we treat each other is so closely tied to our relationship with God that the two cannot be separated.

In 1 Peter 3:7, the reason a husband's prayers will be hindered if he isn't treating his wife with consideration and respect, is because his attitudes and actions reveal the quality of his relationship with God himself! If the man is at odds with his wife, he's at odds with God. Our lives are an integrated whole and not compartmentalized. This is all highly relational.

Paul lamented over the jealousy and quarreling of the Corinthians believers because it was spoiling their relationships with each other and with God. They were not open to hearing from God any more than they were open to hearing from each other. In other words, their broken relationships were hindering their ability to understand God's Word (1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

Jesus explained to his disciples that the Holy Spirit would teach us; remind us of the things that Jesus taught; he would testify about Jesus; guide us into all truth and disclose to us what is yet to come (John 14:26; 15:27; 16:13). The nature of the Holy Spirit's ministry in our lives indicates that we need to be humble and teachable as he teaches us and testifies about Jesus. We must stay alert and listen to him when he reminds us what Jesus taught; when he guides us into all truth and discloses to us what is yet to come.

Learning to be humble, teachable, alert and a good listener are all relational skills. They are skills necessary to promote healthy relationships *and* they are learned most readily within the context of relationship.

As with all other relational skills, the relational principles of biblical interpretation are totally interconnected with each other. For instance, basic interpersonal skills include maintaining eye contact, listening actively, picking up and sending appropriate non-verbal language, tone of voice, believing the best of others, etc. For best results, we must learn to practice these skills in concert with each other. Should we neglect any one skill it may negate the others. (E.g., I can communicate a message clearly through my word choice, tone of voice, inflection and gestures. Yet my eyes may convey the opposite message to the listener. The result is either confusion over or rejection of my message.)

In this way, we find in Ephesians 4:29-31 that unwholesome talk, bitterness, rage and anger, brawling, slander and envy all grieve the Holy Spirit. If we live a life characterized

by those things, we cannot expect our relationship with the Holy Spirit to be healthy. In the application at hand, we cannot think we are able to study and understand the precious truths of God's Word by his Spirit when we are causing him grief by our lifestyle. This is relationship 101!

There is a graphic example of this principle in John 5. In this chapter, the Jews (perhaps Pharisees and teachers of the law) are interacting with Jesus and persecuting him. In verses 39-40, Jesus challenges them, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life."

Jesus himself states that these people diligently studied the Scriptures and held them in high esteem. He grants them that. Yet look at what he says about these same people a few sentences earlier, "The Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent." (John 5:37-38) In spite of their intense study of the Scriptures, *they had never heard God's voice, nor seen his form, nor did his word dwell in them!*

How does the Holy Spirit teach us, remind us of the things that Jesus taught, testify about Jesus, guide us into all truth and disclose to us what is to come? He does all this through our relationship with him. As a trusted Friend and Counselor, he jogs our memory. He speaks to us. Through the Scripture he unfolds to us truths about God's character and dealings with us and others that we had not seen or known before. He convicts us of sin. He prompts us to think and treat others as Christ would. He constantly reminds us that we are his.

For our part in this relationship we desire to spend time with him; we constantly place ourselves in a position in which we will be influenced by him; we listen to him; and we yield to him. This is relational, not transactional or formulaic. Our relationship with God is not something we walk away from saying, "I did it, now I can move on to Bible study." Instead, our relationship with him involves remaining in (abiding in, staying connected to, living in, dwelling in) him like a branch to its vine (John 15:5).

### **The principle of the character of God**

A few years ago, I was counseling a couple that was headed for divorce. They were both Christians and had been in fulltime ministry for many years. His pattern had been that of an overbearing, controlling and manipulating husband. He had beaten his wife's spirit down verbally over the years, until one day she snapped and had had enough. She filed for divorce and that's when he realized his desperate situation and came to us.

We worked closely with this man and showed him that regardless of the outcome, he needed to submit himself to God and let God change him. Meanwhile, his wife was so adamant about not giving in to her husband, that she refused all communication with him. She did agree to meet with me twice, however.

The first time I met with her, we soon found ourselves in the middle of what I call a Bible *shoot-out*. She justified and rationalized divorcing her husband based on Bible

passages that she interpreted as giving her that permission. For every verse she shot at me, I'd shoot one back in challenge. This *shoot-out* left the outcome at a draw. Afterward, both the results of our conversation and the process troubled me deeply.

So, I prayed and looked for a biblical precedent for such a scriptural *shoot-out*. My mind turned to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness in Matthew 4:5-7:

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone." Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

At first when I read this passage I thought that Jesus had done just as I had, shooting back verse for verse. But then I realized the purpose of the passage that Jesus quoted. In essence, what Jesus was saying to the devil was, "No, you've got it all wrong. My Father is not like that and my relationship with him is not like that." Granted, the devil pulled the verse he used out of context, but the power of the outcome is not a wrangling with words. The power of the outcome is relational. Jesus knew his Father's *character* intimately. Satan's use of Scripture was misapplied, because it contradicts God's character. This was an amazing principle to me.

I called this woman again, and asked her to meet with me one more time. She reluctantly agreed. When we met, I prayed and then asked her sincerely, "Based on the character of God and what you know him to be like, how do you think he wants you to respond to your husband?" The woman immediately tensed up and became very angry as she thought about what I was asking her. Then, she blurted out, "I don't care. I'm going to divorce him anyway." I was deeply saddened by her response, yet it revealed her true motivations. This experience taught me about the power of God's character to cut through the pretense of Bible exegesis to justify our choices to defy him.

Perhaps an example of this principle that stands out even more clearly is that in Mark 10:2-9:

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?' 'What did Moses command you?' he replied. They said, 'Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away.' 'It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law,' Jesus replied. 'But at the beginning of creation God "made them male and female. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.'

This is truly a remarkable passage. Moses in the Scripture had indeed permitted a man to divorce his wife. From a purely exegetical viewpoint, the Pharisees' interpretation stands as valid. Jesus does not deny that, but goes on to expose a higher standard for

marriage based on the character of God and his original desire for his creation as explained in Genesis.

There are passages and principles from Scripture that we sometimes exegete to a conclusion that is inconsistent with the character of God. Doing so denies our relationship with him and what we know him to be like. Especially in situations regarding church discipline or Christian liberties, we wield the Scriptures in a manner not befitting the character of its Author. Our personal relationship with God, in which we spend time with him, get to know what he's like and come to recognize his voice is essential to correctly understanding and applying his Word accurately.

By the way, someone might argue that to rely on God's character for proper interpretation of the Word involves circular reasoning, because it is chiefly from the Word that we learn about his character. This is true in part, but God reveals himself to us in other ways as well, to which the Scriptures attest. He reveals his character to us through creation (Romans 1:18-20), through his works (Psalm 66) and through his followers (1 Peter 2:11-12). Also, relying on God's character as an aid to understanding the Scripture is no more circular than the valid premise, *Scripture interprets Scripture*.

### **The principle of interacting with God**

Have you ever studied a passage of Scripture quite thoroughly, applying the principles of hermeneutics with all diligence, and yet the meaning of the text still seems to elude you? We walk away from a challenging text asking God to reveal to us its meaning and significance. We may spend hours, days or weeks praying over and meditating on this difficult text, when all of a sudden—often in a totally unrelated context of life—God's Spirit reveals to us the meaning of the passage.

I've called this principle *interacting* with God, because it involves prayer, meditation and relating with him in the context of daily living. Peter's experience in Acts 10 and 11 provides an interesting example of this interaction with God that led to his understanding of the vision God gave him.

Acts 10:9-16 records the vision that Peter had while praying on the roof of Simon the tanner in Joppa. In the vision, Peter was told by the Lord to eat unclean animals, which Peter adamantly refused to do. This scene occurred three times. Peter, however, did not immediately understand the vision or its significance. Notice the process Peter went through to come to a full understanding of this vision.

Immediately following the vision, the text comments, "While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there." (Acts 10:17-18) Then, in verses 19-20, Luke records, "While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, 'Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.'" So far we understand that Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision and continued thinking about it for some time.



Meanwhile, Peter meets the three men from Cornelius and invites them to spend the night. The next day they head back toward Caesarea and arrive there the day following that (Acts 10:23-24). So it's now two days since Peter had seen the vision. When Peter and his three guides reach Cornelius' house, Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. Peter enters his house and finds a large gathering of people.

Notice how he addresses this gathering, "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean." (Acts 10:28) Apparently, over the past two days, Peter had come to an understanding of the meaning of his vision. But look what happens next.

Cornelius then explains to Peter about the angel who told him to send for Peter (Acts 10:30-33). At this, Peter responds, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right." (Acts 10:34-35) Peter's experience with Cornelius here takes him one step further in his understanding of the vision, and more importantly, his understanding of God's character and purposes.

Peter then explains the Gospel to his audience and the response is overwhelming! "The Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God." (Acts 10:44-46)

Some days later (Acts 10:48), Peter goes up to Jerusalem where the circumcised believers criticize him for going into the house of uncircumcised men and eating with them (Acts 11:1-2). Peter then explains to them the vision he had had (now about a week ago) and his experience at Cornelius' house. Peter reasons, "So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.'" Peter refers to the outpouring of God's Spirit on Cornelius' household as crucial proof of the meaning of the vision God had given him.

We see from this example that God may use a wide variety of interactions with him to lead us to an understanding of his Word. In Peter's case, thought, musing or meditation, the element of time, clear leading of the Holy Spirit and obedience to God's Spirit, interaction with Cornelius and his messengers, circumstances and open demonstration of the Spirit's working in others all contributed to his understanding of the vision God had given him. We wonder at the magnificence of God in orchestrating all of this!

We apply this principle of interacting with God by living in such a way that our relationship with God is fully integrated into all of the realms of our life. When we see him as Lord and an active Agent in all of life, we become conscious of his workings and dealings with us and others in even the mundane and routine.

In my own life, I can think back to specific passages and how God led me through interaction with him over time to come to an understanding of them. One such instance occurred over 20 years ago. My wife and I were missionaries in Austria and I was leading the men of a newly forming church through a study in Matthew's Gospel. We came to chapter 25, verse 31-46, where we see a future picture of Christ on his throne separating the sheep from the goats.

Some of the men were still struggling in the mindset of a works-based approach to salvation. And when we came to this passage, it seemed to imply that an individual's works determine one's eternal destiny. To the sheep Jesus says:

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Matthew 25:35-36

From a hermeneutical and doctrinal perspective, I knew from the rest of Scripture that this passage is not teaching salvation by works. But I wanted to explain that truth to the men from *this* passage. At the moment, their questions caught me by surprise, so I asked for time and told them that I would seek to understand its meaning.

So, over the next week, I set myself to studying, praying and simply asking God to reveal the meaning of the passage to me for these men. Several days into my interaction with God, I was on a run out into the countryside and I began dialoging with God about the passage. Suddenly, the key to understanding this passage occurred to me with a sense of sharp clarity, peace and rightness. For I suddenly realized I had been looking at the events in the passage out of order.

Here's what I saw. In this text, Jesus separates the sheep from the goats *before* he speaks of their respective acts of righteousness or wickedness. This places the emphasis on *who* they are, not *what* they've done. So, we understand that sheep behave as sheep and goats behave as goats. The sheep aren't sheep *because* they did these righteous deeds. They did the righteous deeds because they are sheep and that's what sheep do.

I checked this understanding against the text and saw something else I had not seen before that further supported this new understanding. Both the sheep and the goats respond with surprise to Jesus' comments. Neither the sheep nor the goats were aware of their deeds or their impact. This gave further credence to the understanding that sheep perform "sheep deeds" and goats "goat deeds."

Since that time in Austria, I've experienced God revealing his Word to me often in a variety of ways as I've interacted with him through prayer, meditation, dialog, asking him questions, giving him time to respond, observing his working in my life and that of others and simply abiding in or remaining in him. Our relationship and interaction with God play an essential role in our understanding of his Word accurately.

### **The principle of alignment with God's Word**

By alignment with God's Word, I mean our submission and obedience to his Word. As we align ourselves with God's revealed purposes and designs for us, he continually reveals more of himself and his plan to us. Conversely, if we stiff-arm God and his Word we refuse further communication with him and fail to recognize all he has given us.

Jesus drew attention to this relationship between alignment with God's Word and understanding his Word in three distinct ways in Matthew 12 and 13. First, when some Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus for a miraculous sign, Jesus responds that their request is "wicked" and that they had already been given a number of signs that they had not heeded (Matthew 12:38-42). In other words, they had stubbornly refused to act on the truth already given them, so further truth would be withheld.

Next, while Jesus is speaking the above, someone mentioned to him that his mother and brothers were standing outside wishing to speak to him. Jesus responds to this comment by pointing at his disciples and saying, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:46-50). He is drawing attention to the powerful link between obedience to God's Word and intimate relationship with him.

And finally, following the parable of the sower, Jesus' disciples ask him why he speaks to the people in parables. Jesus' responds:

The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'  
(Matthew 13:11-13)

Clearly and in three distinct ways, Jesus explains that our ability to understand God's truth is linked directly to our obedience to him.

We find this principle applied to the *study of* and *exposition of* the Word to others in Paul's second letter to Timothy, chapter 2. We are probably most familiar with verse 15, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." We often quote this verse emphasizing the need to study God's Word. While this emphasis is accurate, it is but one element of several that Paul is teaching here. We find in this passage that handling the Word accurately also requires a godly lifestyle. That is, doctrinal purity does not exist in a vacuum. The truth of God's Word always walks in the company of one who is obedient to God (see verses 20-21).

"One approved" describes one with proven character and in verse 19, Paul goes on to explain, "God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness.'" Our ability to correctly handle God's Word is intimately linked to the quality of our relationship with him.

In verses 22-26, we see that even the *manner* in which we communicate God's truth to others must be in alignment with God's character and his Word.

Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

A number of years ago, I disregarded this principle of alignment with God's Word in my life in one particular area—money. I flagrantly turned from Jesus' warning that it is not possible to serve *both* God and Money (Matthew 6:24). I had listened to a lie of the evil one that argued it was possible to serve both God and Money *if* one were mature enough in Christ and careful about it.

Over the space of a year, both my relationship with God and my finances suffered greatly. During that year, my understanding of the Word and its application in my own life and that of others through my ministry became stale, powerless and impersonal.

The remedy to my disobedience and a renewed sense of vitality and power in God's Word was for me to come before God in brokenness and humility and submit to what he had said all along. I needed to worship and serve him alone. Our understanding of God's Word is inextricably linked to our relationship with God.

Peter speaks about the necessity of aligning ourselves with God's Word in order to fully understand it. In 2 Peter 3:14-16 he writes:

So then, dear friends, since you are looking forward to this, make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him. Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His 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.

Interestingly, the Greek words *ignorant* and *unstable* are only used here in all of the New Testament. However, both are adjectives formed from their respective verb origins and then rendered negative with the prefix "a". By looking at the verbs from which these two words are derived, we gain a clearer sense of what Peter means here.

The word *ignorant* is *amathes* (adj.) and comes from the verb *manthano*. This verb appears in a number of New Testament books. For instance, in Matthew 11:29, Jesus

said, "Take my yoke upon you and *learn* from me" (emphasis mine). And in 2 Timothy 3:7, Paul warns Timothy how people will turn from God in the last days. He says of them, "they are always *learning* but never able to acknowledge the truth" (emphasis mine). We see that the *ignorant* spoken of in 2 Peter 3:16 are not the less fortunate, but those who have *chosen* that path for themselves.

We find a similar pattern for the word *unstable* in 2 Peter 3:16. Its Greek is *asteriktos* and stems from the verb *sterizo*, meaning to make stable; to confirm one's mind. This verb is also commonly used in the New Testament. In Romans 1:11, Paul explains to the Roman followers of Christ, "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift *to make you strong*" (emphasis mine). Likewise in 1 Thessalonians 3:2, "We sent Timothy,...*to strengthen* and encourage you in your faith" (emphasis mine). And in Revelation 3:2, Christ urges the church in Sardis, "Wake up! *Strengthen* what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God" (emphasis mine). So, again we recognize that the *unstable* in 2 Peter 3:16 are so by *choice*, by their disobedience. They are not passive victims of some calamity outside their control.

The common practice for those who choose to be ignorant and unstable in their faith is distortion of the Scriptures leading to further ignorance and instability. Therefore, our ability to accurately understand the Word hangs on the authenticity of our relationship with Jesus Christ and our obedience to him. As John puts it, "The man who says, 'I know him,' but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But if anyone obeys his word, God's love is truly made complete in him. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did" (1 John 2:4-6).

### **Summary**

Coming full circle, we see that as we: rely on the teaching of the Holy Spirit in our lives; read the Scriptures through the lens of God's character; learn to interact with God about his Word; and humbly submit ourselves to align ourselves with his Word, God eagerly reveals himself and the truth of his Word to us.

Finally, we must not neglect or forsake the principles of hermeneutics. But at the same time, know that they alone are insufficient to provide us with the tools we need to understand God's Word accurately. For without a living, growing relationship with God, we will be like the teachers of the law in Jesus' day. They diligently studied the Scriptures, but would not submit to Christ. Consequently, they could not hear his voice nor did his word dwell in them.

"I rejoice at your Word, as one who finds great spoil." Psalm 119:162 NASB

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Henry A. Vercler, *Hermeneutics, Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation*, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Vercler, p. 16.