

let the reader understand

Second Edition

A GUIDE TO INTERPRETING
AND APPLYING THE BIBLE



DAN McCARTNEY
and CHARLES CLAYTON

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“In thy light shall we see light”—Psalm 36:9

CONTENTS

Introduction: God's Word and Human Understanding: What Is the Problem?	1
Part One: The Foundation of Understanding: Presuppositions	5
1. Truth, Language, and Sin	11
<i>The Pillar of Understanding: Truth</i>	
<i>The Vehicle of Understanding: Language</i>	
<i>The Spoiler of Understanding: Sin</i>	
<i>Summary</i>	
2. Knowing God: Presuppositions About the Bible and Creation	31
<i>Is the Bible the Word of God?</i>	
<i>Is the Bible True?</i>	
<i>Is the Bible Coherent?</i>	
<i>The Bible and the World</i>	
3. The Foundation and the Frame: Presuppositions and Interpretation	61
<i>Presuppositions and Method</i>	
<i>Tradition and the Church</i>	
<i>The Holy Spirit: The Ultimate Interpreter</i>	
Part Two: Interpretation in Theory	79
4. The Church and Biblical Interpretation	83
<i>The Early Church: Justin Martyr and Irenaeus</i>	
<i>The Developing Church: Origen and Theodore</i>	
<i>The Middle Ages: Aquinas</i>	
<i>The Reformation: Luther and Calvin</i>	
<i>The Modern Church: From Schleiermacher to Bultmann</i>	
<i>The Literary Turn: From Literary Criticism to Postmodernism</i>	
<i>Summary</i>	

5. The Grammatical-Historical Method: Knowing What It Meant	119
<i>Meaning and Understanding: Semantics</i>	
<i>Culture and Understanding</i>	
<i>Context and Understanding</i>	
<i>Genre and Understanding</i>	
6. Removing the Veil: From What It Meant to What It Means	159
<i>History and Beyond</i>	
<i>Typology and “Fuller Meaning”</i>	
<i>The Bible Interprets Itself</i>	
<i>Redemptive History and Present Application</i>	
<i>Conclusion</i>	
Part Three: Interpretation in Practice	175
7. Studying God’s Word	177
<i>Spiritual Preparation</i>	
<i>Analyzing Passages</i>	
<i>Understanding the Bible on Its Own Terms</i>	
<i>Priorities of Interpretation</i>	
<i>Two Examples</i>	
8. Biblical Genres	223
<i>Theological History</i>	
<i>Law</i>	
<i>Poetry</i>	
<i>Prophecy</i>	
<i>Parables</i>	
<i>Epistles</i>	
<i>Apocalyptic</i>	
9. The Bible in Worship and Witness	243
<i>Scripture and Worship</i>	
<i>Scripture and Witness</i>	
10. Scripture and Guidance	265
<i>Guidance Needs to Be in Context</i>	
<i>What Is “God’s Will”?</i>	
<i>Submission to God</i>	

<i>Understanding God and His Ways</i>	
<i>Understanding God's Sovereignty</i>	
<i>Conclusion</i>	
Conclusion	289
Appendix A: Where Is Meaning?	291
<i>Authorial Intent</i>	
<i>Autonomous Texts</i>	
<i>Reader Response</i>	
<i>Conclusion</i>	
Appendix B: The Historical-Critical Method	303
<i>General Description and Evaluation</i>	
<i>"Scholarly" Methods</i>	
Notes	313
Index of Persons	365
Index of Scripture	371

introduction

GOD'S WORD AND HUMAN UNDERSTANDING: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Recently a campus minister approached a couple in a college Christian fellowship group. The couple had been sleeping together, even though they were not married. When he confronted them with some biblical texts about fornication and marital commitment, they responded: “Well, that’s *your* interpretation; everybody is entitled to their own interpretation.”

How often are those words spoken every day? Many people want to say they believe the Bible, but not so many want to heed its message. “Interpretation” often appears to be a way of getting the Bible to say what someone wants it to say.

Of course, if we want to understand the Bible, we must expend at least some mental effort, and this mental effort is interpretation. And it is true that each person must do his or her own understanding, even if he or she depends on someone else to explain things. So everyone who reads the Bible must be an interpreter. But does this mean that “everybody is entitled to their *own* interpretation”? Is interpretation simply a matter of subjective feelings about the Bible?

Even for Christians, or perhaps especially for Christians, this is a problem. Does the Bible teach something in particular, or is the meaning of a text simply “what I get out of it”? Is a particular interpretation right, and are others wrong? How do we know whether an interpretation is right or wrong? On the other hand, how do we explain how different Christians can read the same text and reach

contradictory conclusions about what it teaches? How can we challenge someone's interpretation and say, "Your interpretation is wrong"?

If we regard the Bible as the fountainhead of our faith, it is *crucial* that we resolve this problem. If we are to obey God, we must first understand what he said. If we are to believe, there must be something there for us to believe.

Perhaps the reader at this point is thinking, "Yes, there are always people who twist and contort the Scriptures to say what they want it to say, but there is a *plain* or literal meaning to Scripture, and the problems come from not paying attention to the plain meaning." But different people see different "plain" meanings in a text. And the "plain" meaning is not always literal. What is the "plain" meaning of "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out"? How does one know that the "plain" meaning here is not literal?

It is with these questions in mind that this book has been written. Hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, is not a lightweight subject. But some modern books on hermeneutics make it far more difficult than it needs to be. They sometimes seem to be dedicated more to "the art of giving incomprehensible answers to insoluble questions"¹ than to helping people understand. But those who trust in the self-revealing God *can* answer these questions, and we will strive to give some comprehensible (though hardly comprehensive) answers.² In the midst of Jesus' discourse on the last things (Mark 13 and Matthew 24) are the words, "Let the reader understand." God himself wants his people to understand his book. It is our prayer that he will use our book to help some of his people understand his book just a bit better.

We have organized our material into three parts. The first part has to do with our presuppositions, the things we assume when we begin trying to understand a text. How these presuppositions operate, how we may critique our *own* presuppositions, and the assumptions that the Bible itself makes, are the topics addressed in the three chapters that make up this section.

The second part deals more directly with the *theory* of interpretation. After a brief look at the way some Christians have in the past dealt with the interpretation of the Bible, we will examine both grammatical-historical exegesis, which is focused on determining

the *original* meaning, and the questions of later meaning and application today.

The third part is on the *practice* of interpretation. Here is the nitty-gritty of exegesis and interpretation, with examples of how, and how not, to interpret. Here too are suggestions regarding the interpretation of various literary genres found in the Bible. Finally, this last section broadens out to the *application* of interpretation, or how to use the Bible, especially with regard to worship, witnessing, and guidance.

Two appendixes discuss the rather technical matters of where the meaning of a text resides, and a description and critique of various “critical” methods of interpretation.

THE FOUNDATION OF UNDERSTANDING: PRESUPPOSITIONS

Can a Christian and a Jew agree on the meaning of Isaiah 53? If they suspend their Christianity and Judaism, are they then able to agree? If so, is it because they have come to the text without presuppositions, or is it because they now share a new presupposition (e.g., rationalism)? Is the new presupposition inherently superior to the Christian or Jewish one?

The Reformer John Calvin began his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with the observation that to know God one must know oneself, and to know oneself one must know God.¹ Something like this is true as well for interpreting the Bible. We must begin by asking who we are who read the book. In other words, we must look at ourselves rather critically, to see what kind of intellectual baggage and what sort of ideological agenda we are bringing with us consciously or unconsciously, and how these presuppositions influence, for good or ill, our understanding of the Bible.

Interpreting any text involves two different types of assumptions. First, underlying all our thinking and interpreting are our *presuppositions* about life and ultimate realities, our worldview.² These provide the basic foundation for how we understand everything. Second are the assumptions that we make about the nature of the text we are reading.

Because they are so central to our understanding, the first of these are held tenaciously; to relinquish or change our basic presuppositions would mean a reordering and reevaluation of our lives. It would call into question all that we think we know.

On the other hand, our assumptions about texts are usually held loosely, and are easily adapted according to the character of a text. When we start reading a book, we have in mind a certain paradigm or preconception of what the book is about. If we think the book is history, and then discover it has the marks of fiction, we simply discard the first paradigm and reorder our understanding of the book according to the new one.

But in the case of the Bible, which deals with the fundamental questions of our lives and worldviews, our assumptions about the text move into the first category of presuppositions. The Christian presupposition is that Isaiah 53 is part of God's revelation in both the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT); the orthodox Jew presupposes that God's revelation is in the Hebrew Bible as mediated through the Talmud. The Christian believes that the OT is primarily a prophetic book that leads up to a historical fulfillment in Christ; the orthodox Jew sees his Hebrew Bible as primarily a law book that provides the constitution for the Jewish people. Hence, the Jew and the Christian are going to see Isaiah 53 differently. And for either one to change views on the nature of the text would mean a complete reordering of worldview.³

But why do we not simply suspend all our presuppositions and stick to the facts? Would this not remove the uncertainty in interpretation and provide an unshakeable ground upon which to understand things?

We will argue later that there is a right way to understand Isaiah 53 or any other passage, and that the right way is indicated by the nature of the text itself. However, discerning this is not a matter of escaping or suspending our presuppositions, but of changing and adapting them. We really cannot escape them. Since the things we presuppose are to us self-evident, we may be unconscious of them, but they still determine our understanding, and without them there is no understanding. Anytime we find meaning in a text, we arrive at that meaning by fitting it in with our previous knowledge. And this involves assumptions or presuppositions about such things as the nature of the text we are reading, the meaning of life, and how we know things. All our interpreting activity in life involves assumptions, just as in geometry each theorem can be proved only on the basis of previous theorems and "self-evident" assumptions.⁴ Presup-

positions form the basis of the interpretive framework by which we understand things.

Jesus says in Matthew 6:22, “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” Jesus was talking about the root commitments around which one orients one’s life—what we are calling basic presuppositions.⁵ If the principles which enable us to “see” and understand are wrong, then our understanding is no understanding at all.

This is a devastating judgment. Which of us has all his or her presuppositions right? Fortunately, we do not have to have *all* our presuppositions right in order to begin. There is a difference between blindness and the need for wearing glasses. But we do need to make sure our eyes are working. In other words, we must make sure that our most basic presupposition, whether conscious or unconscious, is sound. But what should this most basic presupposition be?

For most modern people, the conscious or unconscious starting point is their own existence and their own reason. The philosopher Descartes basically set the tone for the modern way of thinking when he decided that the only thing he could not doubt was the fact that he was doubting, and concluded that, since he was thinking, therefore he must exist. People thus start from themselves, and assume that only their own human reason can decide whether something is true.⁶ But more recently philosophers have realized that reason never exists apart from a person who is reasoning, and thus that reason is subject to other interests of the reasoner. Otherwise, all reasoning human beings would be able to agree on everything.

Further, if humans claim to be the ones who ultimately decide what is true, they are claiming to be able to make an absolute judgment. But to make an absolute judgment,

man will . . . have to seek to make a system for himself that will relate all the facts of his environment to one another in such a way as will enable him to see exhaustively all the relations that obtain between them. In other words, the system that the non-Christian has to seek on his assumption is one in which he himself virtually occupies the place that God oc-

copies in Christian theology. Man must, in short, be virtually omniscient.⁷

But no human can ever have *all* the facts, and further, as we shall point out in chapter 2 (under “The Relationship Between General and Special Revelation”), facts can only be stated in relation to other facts. So how can anyone *know* anything on this presuppositional basis? This is why non-Christians today frequently deny that there is any absolute truth.

The Christian, on the other hand, affirms the validity of human reason, but maintains that it can have a proper ground only if we acknowledge first that God the Creator exists, and that he has communicated with humanity, and that he constituted our reason as an effective tool to comprehend language and everything else in the created world.⁸ This Christian starting point is not a groundless assumption. According to Romans 1:19–21, all human beings are constituted such that they know the essential attributes of God, because the creation screams at them that it, and they themselves, have been made by God. That is, everyone has a built-in ability to recognize the plain, self-evident God by the created universe. But rather than proceed on the basis of this self-evident presupposition, unregenerate men and women prefer other starting points for reason, and in the process destroy the real ground for reason.

When it comes to the Bible, this means that the modern non-Christian’s basic presupposition will result in an approach different from that of the Christian. For non-Christians, statements claiming to have come from God cannot be allowed to escape testing by a human reasoning process that has begun by *assuming that it has no need of God*. They assume that reason would operate the same way whether or not the true God exists. Thus, many modern students of the Bible evaluate whether biblical statements are true on the basis of criteria that are external to the Bible itself,⁹ and this cuts them off from having their own thinking critiqued by God’s Word. This is like children who cannot learn because they believe they know everything already. But Christians are persuaded by the Holy Spirit that the Bible is God’s true voice.¹⁰ Christians, under the Holy Spirit’s tutelage, use reason to decide *what* God is saying in his Word, and their reason, starting from the correct presuppositions,

can recognize the wisdom and truthfulness of what is said,¹¹ but they do not use reason to decide *whether* what he says is true on the basis of some external criteria. What criteria could be more ultimate than God's speech? Are our thoughts higher than God's thoughts?

For Jesus, as well as all other NT writers, Scripture is inviolable ("Scripture cannot be broken," John 10:35). We cannot decide whether it is true on the basis of some external criteria. Yet the evangelists like Paul and Apollos "*argued . . . from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead*" (Acts 17:2–3; see also 18:28; 19:8).

If truth exists outside of ourselves, we will not know it by pretending that we have no presuppositions, nor will we attain it by embracing all our presuppositions as unchangeable parts of ourselves; we will achieve understanding only if we submit ourselves, presuppositions and all, to the One who understands and interprets all things rightly. The goal therefore is to become, not presuppositionless, but presuppositionally self-critical. Obviously, we have been presupposing a great deal. But if the Bible communicates the truth, and if we wish to learn it from the Bible, we must at least share that most basic of its presuppositions, which is that submission to the God who speaks in his Word is the first step in understanding him. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of both knowledge and wisdom (Prov. 1:7; Ps. 111:10).

It is not only our most basic presupposition that should be brought into line with that of the biblical writers; subordinate presuppositions need to be examined as well. Of course, this too is never easy, because our presuppositions are going to influence how we look at our presuppositions—but it is not hopeless. Although it is an exceedingly difficult process, the attempt to recognize one's presuppositions and evaluate whether and to what degree they are in harmony with those of the Bible, must continually be undertaken throughout life. In fact, we could say that *the key to interpreting the Bible is to allow it to change and mold our presuppositions* into an interpretive framework compatible with the Bible.¹² P. Stuhlmacher has written in a similar vein: "Whoever wants to penetrate the texts of the Bible theologically and reach their core of truth must interpret them in the way in which they themselves demand to be interpreted and to be prepared to tailor the method of interpretation to fit the individual character and individual significance of the texts."¹³ We would stress, however, that it

is more the presuppositions about a text than the methods that must be tailored to the text's character and significance.

What causes our presuppositions to change? More to the point, what causes our assumptions regarding the meaning or interpretation of the Bible or a part of it to change? If a paradigm or set of assumptions about a text is yielding little understanding, we may eventually shift to a new set that works better. Elements of discord, or cognitive dissonance,¹⁴ may also provoke a reevaluation of assumptions. In mystery novels, a good detective who is bothered by the "little" discords in the "obvious" solution is often thereby motivated to discover the correct solution. The hermeneutical process is similar. Even if our rock-bottom presupposition is right, constant reevaluation is still a necessary and healthy process, and should continue throughout life. It is what enables us to understand the truth and to grow in our understanding of God's Word.

We can think of this as a "hermeneutical spiral." Although one must know the forest in order to understand the trees, it is also true that a knowledge of the trees builds up the understanding of the forest. Our presuppositions about the overall meaning of the Bible, and life in general for that matter, form the interpretive framework for understanding particular texts of the Bible, which in turn act as a corrective to the overall interpretive presuppositions. This continual interaction moves us up a spiral toward a "meeting of meaning" and understanding of the truth.

Unfortunately, in our day the very relevance of this task is seen as rather questionable. Many people not only deny the existence of absolute truth, but also claim that even if there were absolute truth, it would be incommunicable, because language is relative. Although this notion has been around for quite a while, it is particularly acute in this postmodern era. So our first chapter will look at general presuppositions about truth and language. The discussion may get a bit technical in this chapter, but the reader is urged to persevere, because all the discussion these days about hermeneutics has largely to do with presuppositions about truth and language. In chapter 2, we shall focus on presuppositions about the Bible, and chapter 3 will raise the question of how presuppositions relate to our methods of interpretation.

1

TRUTH, LANGUAGE, AND SIN

When we approach the Bible, there are three aspects of our worldview, of our general outlook on life, that profoundly affect and even determine what meaning we find there. The first of these is our view of truth: is there such a thing as absolute truth, and, if there is, are we capable of knowing it? Truth is the pillar upon which proper understanding is built. Second, how does language, the vehicle of understanding, work? What are our assumptions about how language works? How can a text that is thousands of years old say anything to us today? Finally, we must reckon with the fact of our own sin and the degree to which it spoils our understanding by coloring our desire to read the text one way as opposed to another.

THE PILLAR OF UNDERSTANDING: TRUTH

When the first edition of this book was written in 1991, we asserted that the presuppositions of most people today include: (1) the *ideological* presupposition that man is the measure of all things,¹ and that human reason must be entirely autonomous; (2) the *methodological* assumption that the scientific method is the only valid means for ascertaining truth; and (3) the *attitudinal* assumption that there is no knowable absolute truth, and that truth is always relative to the knower.² Only the last of these is still true. Especially dis-

trusted is the assumption that the scientific method is ultimate, but even the assumption that reason is the final arbiter of truth is no longer so widely acknowledged. This is not because of some return to divine authority or the abandonment of the notion of human autonomy. Rather, a more consistent application of the third assumption has called the first two into question. But the remnants of them all still permeate our thought patterns, and they are still entrenched in modern society.

If we wish to understand the Bible's message on its own terms, however, we cannot use these presuppositions. They are incompatible with the Scriptures, which presuppose that God, not man, measures all things (Job 38–41), that human reason is dependent and cannot penetrate to the very bottom of things, but that ultimate and absolute truth is knowable, by way of personal relationship (1 Cor. 8:2–3). With regard to method, the Scriptures claim that things do not always work the same way, and that some events have nonearthly or supernatural causes (e.g., Heb. 2:4). Now if these claims are true, then it is inappropriate to apply to Scripture a “scientific” approach that assumes in advance that there is no supernatural intervention in the natural world. One cannot evaluate the Bible's claims to truth by using methods that assume in advance that these claims are impossible.

Can We Know the Truth?

There are three great arguments that are now commonly used to argue that absolute truth regarding transcendent realities cannot be known. They are, first, that knowledge is limited to this world; second, that all knowledge is relative to the knower; and third, that language is relative and thus incapable of expressing absolute truth.

Is knowledge limited to this world? After Plato, philosophers generally made a distinction between ultimate or transcendent truth (the “ideal” world) and worldly or proximate realities (the “real” or phenomenal world, which our senses experience), and they assumed that both could be known and were capable of being understood by reason. The philosopher Immanuel Kant, as a child of the Enlightenment, was committed to the sovereignty of human reason, but he showed, at least to the satisfaction of most philoso-

phers since, that pure human reason, proceeding by *a posteriori* argument, could not by itself penetrate to any ultimate truth, certainly not to the transcendent realm of morals and theology. Knowledge, in Kant's view, was a synthesis of sense experience and the structures of understanding coming out of a person's mind.³ So Kant drew a line between the "ideal" and the "real" much more sharply, dividing knowledge between the *noumenal* world (the world of mental structure) and the *phenomenal* world (the world of sense experience). The only knowledge achievable by critical scientific investigation is knowledge of the phenomenal world. It is limited to our synthetic understanding of this world, and all knowledge of this world must be acquired through (inductive) reasoning, not by way of any external authority. On the other hand, God, the soul, freedom, etc., are noumenal constructs, "ideas," pure *a priori* concepts that are beyond the possibility of experience, being innate to the human mind.⁴ In this view, ultimate realities are not discoverable, but only believable, and thus whatever knowledge we do have of them is subjectively determined. Nietzsche drew this to its logical conclusion, that any speaking about truth is illusory:

What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are: metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power.⁵

The Enlightenment began with hopes of finding absolute truth without a God who acts in this world.⁶ It ended up denying the possibility of truth.

But was not the Enlightenment validated by the subsequent history of human thought? The physical sciences have been rather successful in their inductive analysis of, and resultant control over, the physical world; the world seems to be reasonable and knowable as long as we stay within the bounds of reason and science.⁷ On the other hand, philosophy and theology have become increasingly

confused and confusing, often degenerating into exercises in sesquipedalian obfuscation.⁸ As a result, increasing numbers of people have come to view science as the only source of truth, and think that truth is limited to this world.⁹ Such things as God or ultimate meaning are regarded as simply unknowable, or knowable only by intuition or subjective feeling, and so should be left alone.

But in spite of this, people cannot stop thinking about reality beyond the physical world, and many strange cults and a plethora of religious ideas have cropped up, demanding and often obtaining the allegiance of large numbers of people who are dissatisfied with the purely materialistic scientific approach. Certain elements of experience (not just thought), particularly those having to do with human relationships, cannot be fit into the purely material universe, and yet are undeniably real. Personality is more basic in the universe than physics.¹⁰ Further, science itself is starting to recognize that even in the physical universe there are limits to what rationality can accomplish.¹¹ The existence of truth which transcends this universe can no longer be denied simply because science cannot analyze it.

Is all knowledge relative? But even if this be true, is not all human knowledge, even that of the physical world, relative to the knower? Knowledge necessarily entails a paradigm or theory of order (an *a priori*; a person always knows facts in relation to other facts that he knows), and since everyone's total knowledge and experience is different, each person's total worldview is unique, and hence his or her knowledge of something is never identical to any other person's knowledge of that same thing.

It must be acknowledged that human knowledge is always relative to the knower, and is always based on that human being's experience and presuppositions, but *there is an important distinction between knowing an absolute truth and knowing a truth absolutely*. Humans can know an absolute, transcendent truth if that truth is known by an absolute Person whose knowledge does not depend on experience, and if that absolute Person shares his knowledge with humans. It is a conviction or basic assumption of the biblical writers that such a Person does indeed exist, and that he has communicated truth in Scripture.¹² Scripture writers assume that God is there, and that he has spoken. Thus, we may know absolute truth,

albeit not absolutely; we may know it truly, even though only partially and imperfectly. The atheist or agnostic may cry “presupposition” at us, but we may point out that they are presupposing that God has *not* spoken.

In fact, the proponent of the idea that “all truth is relative” really can say nothing, for if all truth is relative, then the statement that all truth is relative must be relative, which means that no such absolute statement can be made. The difference between the Bible and the modern approach is that the modern person regards knowledge as the provenance only of beings who are finite and relative, and thus for them “truth” can only be a relative term. But the Bible recognizes One who transcends relative knowledge and knows absolute truth, and he speaks to his people, so they may know it.¹³

Can truth be expressed in language? Perhaps the most forceful argument against the knowability of absolute truth is the argument that, since human language is always relative, language is incapable of expressing or formulating an absolute truth. An extreme form of this view was held by the great linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*,¹⁴ he asserts, “Ethics cannot be put into words” (6.421), and he declares a little later, “God does not reveal himself in the world” (6.432). Wittgenstein does acknowledge that there are “things” which cannot be put into words, which he calls “the mystical” (6.522), but since they cannot be put into words, no certain knowledge can be had of them, nor can they be shared via language. Thus, the final section of his *Tractatus*, on the mystical, consists of a single sentence that simply disclaims that anything can be said.

From a different perspective, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger also challenges the possibility of knowing absolute truth because knowledge is linguistic and always “on the way,” being disclosed in language. In his most influential work, *Being and Time*,¹⁵ Heidegger insists that language reveals “Being,” but every disclosure of Being is also a concealment. Any language that speaks of positive and absolute truth as something that can be possessed rather than striven for is “fallen” and inauthentic, because it is not anchored in the existential moment.¹⁶

Once again, both Wittgenstein and Heidegger are operating on

a presuppositional base that excludes direct communication by the transcendent God.¹⁷ In this way, Heidegger, although he denied being an existentialist and wished to distance himself from Sartre and Jaspers, really ends up in the same place. A God who reveals truth, he says, destroys human freedom. On such a basis, they are being consistent in rejecting the knowability of absolute truth.¹⁸

But although modern presuppositions lead to a denial of any absolute truth, biblical presuppositions affirm and support the view that there is indeed truth that is absolute and transcends the relativity of human knowing. What God has said is absolutely true. If we wish to know that truth truly, our only avenue is to know the One who knows absolutely, and this means adopting an attitude of submission to God and recognizing what reason cannot do. It means cultivating our relationship to God if we wish to increase our understanding of the truth. It also means maintaining humility, in recognition that, while by God's grace we may know some absolutes, we shall never know them perfectly.¹⁹

How Do We Know Transcendent Truth?

All the above might give the impression that reason or the mind has nothing to do with knowing the truth, and that truth is simply apprehended mystically. But although our *basis* for knowledge is a relationship to God, the actual *acquisition* of knowledge involves communication, thinking, and a conscious, positive response to the knowledge acquired. In other words, it involves reason, language, and faith, which we shall now consider in reverse order.

Faith. Anselm rightly said, "Credo ut intelligam," "I believe in order that I might understand,"²⁰ referring to Isaiah 7:9. Anselm recognized that unless we approach knowledge, especially knowledge of the Scriptures, from a standpoint of submission to its teaching, we will not be able to understand it properly.²¹ But in some sense the reverse is also true: we must understand in order to believe. Faith is a response to something, not to nothing. True faith is not an irrational leap in the dark, a submission to nothing in particular or to the "mysterium tremendum et fascinans."²² It is a knowledgeable response to God's communication with us.

We are thus confronted with another circle, or spiral.²³ If true

knowing requires faith, and faith requires knowing, how does one get started on the spiral? The answer is twofold. First, every human being, by virtue of being in the image of God, has an awareness of deity as soon as he or she has self-awareness. This *sensus deitatis*, which is built into people, provides a ground for knowledge, whether it is acknowledged or not. All creation, including humanity itself, shouts of its Creator, and thus everyone knows enough about God to be condemned for not obeying him. The problem is that people suppress this awareness, and by doing so they distort the truth they know (see Rom. 1:19–23).

Second, God initiates a special relationship with his people by special revelation (see chap. 2, under “The Bible and the World”). “No one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11:27). It was quite appropriate for the father of the demon-possessed boy to cry out, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). Faith stops suppressing the truth and instead seeks it and is nourished by it.²⁴

Language. In order to understand what anyone is saying, one must first of all have some idea of what the other person is talking about.

Words produce understanding by appealing to experience and leading to experience. Only where word has already taken place can word take place. Only where there is already previous understanding can understanding take place.²⁵

How then is communication possible?

When a child learns language, he must already know something about the language in order to know what to make of the diverse sounds. But in order to know the language, he must first learn it.²⁶ How do children get started on this “linguistic competence spiral”? They must have some innate linguistic capacity, an inherent recognition which places them already in the spiral of understanding. Even non-Christians recognize this inherent linguisticity in children, although they cannot explain it.²⁷

The Bible indicates that humans are created in God’s image. This implies many things, but it certainly includes our ability to

communicate with God and each other,²⁸ and this involves competence in language, as well as the ability to understand concepts.

Reason. Like linguisticity and faith, and implied by them, our reasoning and understanding capacity also come from God and act as responses to God. The book of Proverbs lays down the principle that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning [i.e., the starting point] of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7). God calls to Israel, “Come now, let us reason together” (Isa. 1:18). The context in Isaiah indicates that God is not inviting Israel to argue with him, but to consider and understand his redemptive purposes.

Language and reason are inextricably linked. One might even argue that they are simply two aspects of the same innate human ability.²⁹ Reason must work with predications or statements about reality. Even the law of noncontradiction,³⁰ the most basic predicate of rationality, is a linguistic entity. And evaluating, relating, and ordering predications—that is, using reason—all happen linguistically. There is indeed prelinguistic perception, but the “making sense” of such perception is the process of putting it into language. Raw sense experience must be linguistically interpreted.

Likewise, faith and reason are linked, and, when properly understood and used, are not in opposition, but are cofunctional. Even for those who disclaim Christianity, some belief system, some presuppositional framework of understanding, provides a basis for reason, and reason applied to data within that framework provides the content for their belief. If faith and reason are perceived to be in opposition, it is because of a dichotomy between the faith upon which one’s reasoning is based and the faith which is professed. The mind must be used (1 Peter 1:13), but it must also recognize its dependence and its limitations (Isa. 55:8–9; 1 Cor. 1:18–25).

In summary, our knowledge is possible because (1) God first creates us as thinking and speaking beings with self-awareness and awareness of him, (2) he speaks to us, and (3) he enables us to believe. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8, it is not the one who thinks he knows who knows as he ought to know, but the one who *loves* God who is known by him. We know because God first knew us, just as we love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). Those who do not know God only “know” on borrowed capital; they really do know

things, but only because they are made in God's image. They have no justification for their knowledge.

THE VEHICLE OF UNDERSTANDING: LANGUAGE

Although we noted above that language is one of the elements involved in knowing the absolute Knower, the problem of language is of special importance, first, because it has all but taken over philosophical thinking in the West in the last century, and second, because questions about how to interpret a book are going to be directly affected by the theory of language adopted. Although we cannot now expound much on the intricacies of this subject,³¹ we do need to address two related questions, at least in cursory fashion: what is a text, and what and where is its meaning?

What Is a Text?

Sometimes a text is defined simply as "a piece of language." This may appear obvious to some degree, but it is also misleading, because it obscures the more personal nature of a text.³² Like speech,³³ serious writing is *communication*,³⁴ a means of conveying thought and feeling and of facilitating the sharing of experience, and hence the broadening of experience and knowledge.³⁵ When an author writes, he produces a linguistic representation or reflection of his thought.³⁶ When a reader reads, this analogue is "represented" in his mind.³⁷ Thus, the reader communes with the author's ideas. Even if the reader criticizes or rejects those ideas, he first attempts to understand, or set up in his own mind thoughts analogous to, those of the producer of the text.³⁸ He aims for a "meeting of meaning" with the author.

We might illustrate this by means of the now almost obsolete vinyl record. The little waves and ripples in the groove are not music, nor are they a perfect analogue to the performance, but they do truly convey the music. Just as a reader converts the little black marks on a page into words, and the words into a sequence of ideas and arguments, so a record player "reads" the waves and ripples and converts them into musical sounds, so that the listener experiences an analogue to the original performance. The listener may reject

the music as being too raucous or incomprehensible, or may reject the performance as too lush or too austere, but first the music must be reestablished from its analogous form on the record.

Now this illustration has certain weaknesses, because it too is an analogy. A vinyl record cannot even theoretically be as good as the original performance, no matter how high the quality of the reproduction equipment. Further, the author's thought may in fact not even exist apart from its linguistic form. If thought needs language in order to be formed in the first place (see p. 18), then a language event cannot simply be an externalization of a nonlinguistic or prelinguistic thought. Language, along with the rest of the experience of the thinker, provides the interpretive framework for thought, not just its encoding form.³⁹ Nevertheless, the vinyl record is like language in its being an analogous, but imprecise medium of conveying human expression.

Imprecision in a vinyl record means that something is lost. But imprecision in language is in some ways its strength. Ambiguity and open-endedness mean that language is flexible enough to express thought accurately.⁴⁰ Indeed, if language were totally unambiguous, precise, and exhaustive, then words about God would be sufficiently inadequate to make them idolatrous. The flexibility of the elements of language is what enables sentences to be perfectly, though not exhaustively, true. Of course, the difficulty at the other end remains; the interpreter can never understand perfectly the exact original thought of the writer, even though the theoretical possibility of such understanding remains forever in the text. But, just as any record player can reproduce the original performance with some fidelity, so can any reader reproduce the original thought with some degree of fidelity. And finally, a text, like a record, is permanent, so that the thought, like the performance, can be reproduced over and over again, each time deepening the total apprehension of the original on the part of the hearer, coming ever closer to a "meeting of meaning."

This is quite a different matter than how reality is transmitted through an author's language. When an author transmits his perception of reality, the transmission is not identical to the reality itself, because he is using a medium, language. A text is, to use P. Ricoeur's words, not a reproduction of reality, but a re-presentation of it.⁴¹

Thus, Ricoeur likens a text to a painting, rather than to a photograph.⁴² If we stayed with our record player illustration, it would be more like the relationship of the performance that is recorded to the notes written on the composer's manuscript. A conductor represents the "reality" of the composer's product. But a good rendering of a symphony requires the conductor to be musically competent himself. Solti, Szell, Toscanini, and Furtwängler all gave valid, but quite different readings of Beethoven's symphonies, because they themselves were musically competent. But we have all heard performances that simply lack the vitality of the symphony, even though the musicians may get all the notes right.

The application to the Bible should be clear. Language is adequate to convey God's thought accurately and truly, though not comprehensively,⁴³ because our ability to receive it is always imperfect. But the advantages flowing from the fact that any reader can get some more or less faithful understanding (just as any record player can play any record, albeit with greater or lesser fidelity), and the fact that the message can be heard over and over, mean that the textuality of the Bible is not its weakness, but its strength. Further, like the several conductors, different biblical writers may re-present the same reality differently, and yet each presentation may be a valid rendition (such as with the four Gospels). On the other hand, to achieve a valid and faithful reading requires the interpreter to be linguistically competent. He must know both language and life, just as the orchestra conductor must know both how to read a score and what is musically coherent.

So a text is first of all an encoding of thought in such a fashion that it may be "replayed," re-presented, reexperienced. But texts are also intentional acts.⁴⁴ Just as a conductor makes a recording for some purpose (such as to register his ideas on how a piece should be performed or to make money), so texts are "uttered" by people who wish to accomplish something by their utterance. They can project a world (as in fiction), they can assert things, and by such projections or assertions they can attempt to generate changes in behavior or perception in their hearers. This is certainly true of the Bible: "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose" (Isa. 55:11).

Now if a text is an act, does it follow that meaning is the intent of the initial actor, i.e., the author? Where does the meaning of a text lie? Again, at first glance this appears to be obvious, but the issue is not as simple as it seems.

What and where is meaning? The word *meaning* is somewhat slippery. In general, the meaning of a word is that to which it points: if x means y , then x points to y . But there are different kinds of pointing. Most often, if someone asks, “What do you mean?” he is requesting an expanded paraphrase or rephrasing. It is the idea of sense or thought that is most commonly identified with meaning. But the question “What do you mean?” could also be used to ask someone to specify the referent, or the specific application of the sense to which the speaker is pointing. (More of this is discussed in chap. 5, under “Word and Sentence.”)

Meaning can also point to what something entails. “This means war!” expresses the idea that an act *entails* war. Meaning can also be the *value* of something. For example, “My job means a lot to me.” And sometimes the purpose or *intention* of the speaker or author is indicated by the word *meaning*. If I tell my daughter, “The milk is sour,” my meaning is that she should not drink it.⁴⁵

But most often the meaning of a word or utterance, especially in a written context, is taken to be its more general linguistic sense. In oral speech, it is true, meaning is often identical to the referent, the specific person, thing, or circumstance that is being talked about. But in the case of written and public texts, although they are frequently generated by a specific referential circumstance, their meaning is taken as applicable to more general circumstances. The meaning, then, is how a discourse, sentence, or word functions in language as a whole. With this notion of meaning in mind, we can ask, “Where is meaning?” or “Where does meaning come from?”

One of the aims of the Enlightenment was to get back to “the sources,” to recover the original ideas of early writers. Theologians of the late Middle Ages had tended to read even the ancient pagan philosophers through a Christian grid, placing the most Christian interpretation possible upon their works. This was rejected in the Enlightenment. The meaning of a text was to be understood only by reference to the original author and his immediate audience. The

assumption was that the author's intent is what one should attempt to uncover in the process of interpretation.⁴⁶

But this focus on the author as the source of meaning was a feature not only of the Enlightenment. As we shall see in chapter 4, the Reformers also rejected the authority of traditional interpretation and strove to recover the meaning intended by the original authors of Scripture. Unlike the Enlightenment secularists, the Reformers recognized that God was the ultimate author of Scripture, and that he, as the author, was the source of its meaning. But they looked to the original human author's situation and intent as the basis for discovering God's meaning. To understand the divine sense of a text, it was necessary to recover as much of its original human referent as possible, as a contextual guide to that sense. Any alleged sense of Scripture that was unrelated to the original referent was suspect. Focusing on the author's intent provided both a key to meaning and a control over it.

But does "author's intent" cover all there is in the meaning of a text? An objection sometimes raised is that, if the author is deceased or unavailable for direct comment, the only meaning possible is a reconstruction on the part of the reader. Thus, the author's intent cannot be a criterion for evaluating a text, because that intent is knowable only by way of a reading.⁴⁷ Although the authoritative meaning may rest in the author's thought, we have no way of accessing that thought except through the actual words and what we know of the situation of the original hearers. In the case of the Bible, if the text had any authority for its original hearers, it must have been expressed in a way that was understandable to them, so that they would be responsible to act on the teaching.

Further, an author's intent or purpose is not quite the same as the sense, as was noted above. When a young child asks "Why?" the intent may simply be to keep the person talking, although the meaning or sense of *why?* is "What are the causes behind the previous assertion?" Finally, not everything that an utterance or text might legitimately mean in every situation has to be in the author's consciousness.⁴⁸ As a historical phenomenon, a text, like any other thing in history, can mean something on its own. The Battle of Hastings means something, not because an author "wrote" the battle, but because it had and has a determining effect on the present.

Similarly, a classic text changes things, and has a determining effect on the present. The way a text has influenced history might have little to do with an author's conscious intent.

These problems led to the development of three more modern theories of interpretation: the autonomous text theory, the reader-response theory, and the sociolinguistic-community theory. The autonomous text theory finds meaning in the text itself, apart from author or reader. The reader-response theory argues that meaning is found only in the mind of the reader. Even the author becomes only another reader on this view. The community theory argues that meaning is generated unreflectedly by the conventions and expectations of the sociolinguistic community to which the reader belongs.

A more detailed discussion of these theories may be found in appendix A, but at this point we would simply suggest that although these theories have certain aspects of truth, they also suppress other aspects. In particular, many of them frequently understress the fact that all texts, like other utterances, are forms of personal communication, and therefore bear the character of interpersonal acts,⁴⁹ which necessarily involve both speaker and hearer, as well as the medium of communication. But more importantly, the question not just of the locus of meaning, but even the very possibility of meaning, cannot be answered without reference to a truly transcendent interpreter, whose interpretation is both completely objective and truly subjective. Meaning and understanding presuppose order, coherency, and purpose. For there to be order, coherency, and purpose, there must be One who orders, holds things together, and intends. The understanding that this One has makes possible the communication of meaning in language. By itself, this does not help us to know what the true meaning of a text is, but it does provide a basis for expecting that there is a knowable, true meaning outside of ourselves (see pp. 14–15), a universally valid standard of meaning toward which we must strive. There is a determinate meaning; it is the meaning intended by the author, the meaning inherent in the text within its context, and the meaning apprehended with more or less fidelity by the more or less informed reader, all of these being under the linguistic standard of God's interpretation of all acts, linguistic and otherwise.⁵⁰

However, each of these loci functions in a somewhat different way. The author is the one who made certain choices regarding what to say. The language or social environment may determine what *way* he or she says something, but it does not determine *what* is said.⁵¹ Thus, the meaning that inheres in the reader's mind strives for congruity with the thought of the author, and the text itself has meaning only as a tool to establish communication between an author and his audience.

When it comes to the Bible, this matter becomes even more crucial, because the Bible professes itself to be, and the church confesses that it is, God's own utterance. For most of the church's history, it was assumed by Christians that the Bible had been authored by God, and that the human authors were to a greater or lesser degree simply mouthpieces for God's speech.⁵² So interpretation was a matter of understanding what God meant. The assumption was that God expressed absolute truth in language. The interpreter tried to hear God speaking in Scripture. But after the Enlightenment, divine authorship, although not always explicitly denied, was deemed more or less irrelevant to the task of ascertaining the meaning of Scripture. Interpretation focused on the human author exclusively.

If the Bible is God's word, is not he, rather than the human author, the one who gives it its determinate meaning? But if this is the case, how can we know that determinate meaning? All speech with which we are familiar here on earth occurs in human contexts, and the meaning of a set of words uttered in one context is different from that same set of words uttered in a different context. For this reason, even the Protestant Reformers, such as Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, emphasized that the meaning of a text had to be rooted in the human author's situation and linguistic environment.⁵³ Unlike the later Enlightenment figures, however, they did not regard the human author's situational meaning as the limit of the text's meaning, but rather as *the foundation for our knowledge* of that meaning. Certainly the biblical authors themselves, when they used earlier biblical materials, almost unreflectively assumed that the words addressed to previous generations in earlier circumstances were nevertheless also addressed to them (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 9:10 and 1 Peter 1:12).

In conclusion, God as the ultimate author of Scripture is the one who determines its meaning, not only because he is its author (and thus the “author-ity” behind it), but also because he is the sovereign God who interprets all things rightly, and because he invented language and created humans with their linguistic capacity. Since Scripture functions in human contexts, *our access to its divine meaning can only be by way of the human authors and their contexts*. The human author’s meaning and his concrete sociolinguistic situation provide the starting point for understanding God’s meaning for all his people. We get to know the human author’s “point” in order to grasp God’s “point.”

THE SPOILER OF UNDERSTANDING: SIN

What has sin to do with interpretation? In most people’s minds, sin has to do with behavior, whereas interpretation has to do with understanding. Thus, most modern literary criticism avoids deriving from any text an ethical teaching about life in general. Such “didacticism” is derogated as “moralism” and is shunned as not being a critical task. But texts themselves, both biblical and nonbiblical, are valuable to people only as they provide help in dealing with life. Even artistic or entertainment texts are appreciated by us because they in some way help us cope with life, and so the implied moral questions, questions about what is right (not just within the narrative structure, but in life generally), are as important to a real-life understanding of the purpose of a text as is the analysis of its own internal meaning. Hence, interpretation of any serious writing sooner or later focuses on ethical questions.

We have argued that texts are communicative acts, and communicative acts are acts of the will. Thus, there is a motive behind the production of a text, and motivation can never be morally neutral. Further, a communicative venture involves not just the utterer or author, but also the hearer or interpreter. Just as the author’s act cannot be morally neutral, neither can interpretation be ethically neutral. This should be obvious at certain levels. Deliberately misconstruing a text to misrepresent its author is a morally reprehensible act; it is a kind of lying, a “bearing false testimony.”

The ethicality of interpretation is supremely important when it comes to interpreting the Bible. The Scriptures repeatedly warn that wrong thinking is ethically and morally evil, and ineluctably leads to more evil and less understanding.⁵⁴ Thus, misinterpreting Scripture is sin. Since the Bible frequently addresses questions of behavioral morality, misunderstanding can lead to incorrect behavior,⁵⁵ and thus more sin. Further, since the Bible's subject matter directly addresses our behavior, our interpretation is bound to be heavily influenced by our attempts to justify ourselves. Finally, biblical interpretation touches directly on questions of truth, and truth and ethics are inseparable.⁵⁶ A false interpretation of a true statement is a lie, and lies are evil. A false interpretation of a true statement that is a matter of life and death is therefore a great evil. The Bible even declares that a lie told by the Serpent was the sin that perpetrated the fall of man (Gen. 3), and Jesus castigates the devil as "the father of lies" (John 8:44). Bad interpretation is bad.

It therefore seems strange that so much of biblical studies and even books on biblical interpretation operate on the assumption that interpretation can be an ethically neutral and value-free scientific enterprise. There is no escaping the fact that the Bible addresses moral truth, and this automatically means that no reader who understands its message can remain neutral in his or her understanding.

Actually, we have probably understated the difficulty. Sin is the central problem addressed by the Bible. If the chief subject matter of the Bible is the relationship between God and man, the chief obstacle to that relationship is not man's finitude or God's invisibility, but man's sin.⁵⁷ A more difficult matter is the question of what sin is. This is not the place to address this question, but we hold to the view of Augustine of Hippo and Luther that the Fall has resulted in a moral inability of man to do good, and that this inability is more in view when Paul speaks of "sin" than individual acts of rebellion. In the contrary view of Thomas Aquinas, mankind has had and still has an undetermined will, and righteousness was a gift added to Adam on top of his moral neutrality. What Adam lost in the Fall was his added righteousness, not his ability to choose between good and evil. The Fall was thus a metaphysical change rather than a change in man's will itself. In this

view, one could perhaps present a stronger argument for the possibility of neutrality in interpretation. But if Paul is any guide, sin has destroyed the *ability* to do right (Rom. 7:13–25), and thus to interpret aright, without divine intervention. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).

Now if sin is such a problem, one should expect that it is going to be a hindrance in any communication, especially in interpretation. Recognition of this may not help directly in the practical matter of determining the correct interpretation of a passage, but it does help indirectly. It means first that our ability to communicate linguistically, as well as in other ways, is weakened. The story of the Tower of Babel illustrates this graphically. It also means that it is extremely unlikely that any interpretation we make will be entirely free from error. Our interpretation is too inescapably beset by unconscious motivations of self-interest. Thus we learn to hold our interpretations, particularly on matters on which the church has very little consensus (such as infant baptism or the millennium), more or less tentatively, and we are slow to brand those who hold differing interpretations as willful suppressors of the truth.

We are also able to understand why certain problems may not admit of tidy solutions. For example, in the history of the church, the issue of divine sovereignty and human responsibility has often generated more heat than light. The Bible affirms both, and does not try to accommodate one by weakening the other. Sometimes well-meaning Christians misstate this as though it were a contradiction, that God is both sovereign and not sovereign. But this is not what Scripture does. Only if God is sovereign, and exercises that sovereignty, does any act of man have purpose. Man's responsibility is established, not undermined, by God's sovereignty.

The juxtaposition of divine sovereignty and human responsibility was not a problem for Jesus Christ (and would not have been for humankind, had Adam not sinned); he was fully responsible for his actions as a human, his temptations were real (Heb. 4:15), and yet he was unalterably God's chosen Messiah. Interpretation would not be a problem for us, were it not for our sin. False interpretations are sinful and are generated by sin. But as we say this, we also reemphasize that an interpretation different from our own may not be sinful; it might be our interpretation that is sinful.

But are not at least some texts in the Bible plain and clear? It often appears to Christians as they read the Bible that its meaning is plain—and we will indeed argue later that Scripture is indeed “per-spicious.” But what is plain to one person may not be plain to another—and in fact may be totally false. The “plain” meaning of Matthew 5:29 appears to be that one should mutilate oneself in order to isolate oneself from temptation, but few would suggest that this is the correct meaning. In fact, most people would not even call this the plain meaning, since the passage is plainly not meant to be taken literally. But there are no explicit indications in the text itself that its meaning is nonliteral. Again, we are warned against concluding that, because others do not see what is obvious to us, they are the ones who are willfully suppressing or sidestepping the truth. What is obvious to us may be wrong.

In other words, recognition of the problem of sin in interpretation should produce a deep humility about our own interpretations and a recognition of our need continually to repent of the sinfulness that we may not even recognize in our interpretive endeavors. Perhaps this is why James warns teachers so harshly in James 3:1. When one teaches, one passes on one’s interpretations, and the falsity within those interpretations is perpetuated. However, humility should not lead to inaction. To withhold the truth also brings judgment, for “where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint” (Prov. 29:18 NIV), and “my people go into exile for want of knowledge” (Isa. 5:13). God’s people yearn for revealed truth, and if this yearning is not satisfied, they may accept its counterfeit. Fortunately God is gracious and has provided a sacrifice for all our sins, even our sinful misinterpretations.

SUMMARY

We have been examining how presuppositions, our worldview, and our expectations of the Bible affect and determine our understanding of it. Our understanding of what truth is, whether it is absolute or relative, and whether it is knowable, sets the stage for our approach to Scripture. We argued that Scripture’s own understanding is that truth is indeed transcendent and absolute, and that it can

be known because God makes it known, and because he has created us with minds capable of receiving it. But we also observed that our knowledge of absolute truth is not itself absolute. Our knowledge is derivative and dependent. Although everyone, by virtue of the indelible awareness of God and the ineluctable force of general revelation, has some knowledge of the truth, to know truth truly is impossible apart from an attitude of faith and a recognition of the limits of human reason. Therefore, we must affirm both the objectivity of truth in itself and the subjectivity of our apprehension of it.

We also looked at the problem of language as a medium of communication. We concluded that language events such as texts are interpersonal communicative acts. Meaning is a function of the entire matrix of the author, the author's linguistic community, the text, the reader, and the reader's linguistic community. But the direction of interpretation is the reader seeking to understand the author, for which reference must be made to the author's context. If the reader seeks simply to understand himself, there is no communication, but only solipsistic omphaloskepsis (navel contemplation).

In the case of the Bible, the ultimate author is God, and so he determines the meaning of the whole. However, since we can determine the meaning of any utterance only by reference to a human situation, the starting point for understanding the divine meaning is always the attempt to recover the meaning determined by the context of the human author.

Finally, we noted that interpretation is an inherently and inescapably ethical activity, particularly when the subject of interpretation is the Bible, which purports to instruct us on ethics and truth. Interpretation is never value-free, just as it is never presupposition-free, and making decisions on what is right and wrong is necessarily as ethical as acting upon those decisions. Because of this, if the Bible is correct in its evaluation of sin as the chief problem of man, sin becomes the chief problem of interpretation. We also warned that this should result not in the condemnation of those who disagree with us, but in a recognition of the sinfulness inherent in our own interpretation and a constant need to subject our interpretations to reevaluation in the spirit of repentance.