Playing by the Rules:
A Top-10 List of Practical Principles for Reading Scripture

"I have always tried to read [the Bible] like any other book, and because I have done so I have come to the conclusion that it is utterly unlike any other book in the world." (B. F. Westcott)

"We treat [New Testament writings] at first like any other books, in order to show at last that they are above and beyond all other books." (F. G. Kenyon)

"In many ways, reading the Bible is like reading any other book. However, if the Bible is breathed out by God, there are some key differences that we need to take on board right at the start." (Gary Millar)

Because the Bible is both a human and divine book, there are principles for reading it both *like* and *unlike* any other book. The following list of rules provides a general overview of ways to respect the dual nature of Scripture.

Principles for Reading the Bible *Like* Any Other Book

10. Use Your Head: Applying the Laws of Logic

"The main reason why errors in interpretation occur is not because the reader lacks a knowledge of Hebrew or of the situation in which the biblical book was written. The number one cause for misunderstanding the Scriptures is making illegitimate inferences from the text." (R. C. Sproul)

We understand Scripture through the normal route of basic reasoning. In Nehemiah 8, Ezra and his associates read the Scriptures and explained their meaning to the people of Israel. Verse 8 tells us that, "They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." Though it may require some explanation, we seek the plain meaning of the text.

Next, we make meaningful inferences based on that plain meaning. But this is where things get tricky. We need to ensure that our conclusions logically follow from the clear points in the text. We need to construct valid arguments.

New Testament scholar Jonathan Pennington shows how easy it is to succumb to faulty reasoning through the following syllogism:

The disciples in the Bible cast out demons.
We are also disciples.
Therefore, we cast out demons.

The first two lines of the syllogism are true enough. But the conclusion doesn't follow from the premises. Disciples today might cast out demons, but there might be reasons the original disciples performed exorcisms that don't apply to us (e.g., their unique status as apostles, different gifts given to different people, the need to authenticate a new message, etc.).

We see this happen a lot theologically. For example, those who reject God's sovereignty in choosing who will believe often cite John 3:16 and underscore the fact that *whoever* believes in the Son has eternal life. The supposed inference is that people are fully free to choose.

Logically, however, John 3:16 says nothing about the ability or inability to believe. It simply confirms that every person who believes will have eternal life. A logical syllogism might look like this:

Whoever believes in God's only-begotten Son will have eternal life.
I believe in God's only-begotten Son.
I have eternal life.

This text addresses the prerequisite of faith for eternal life, but it says nothing about any prerequisite for faith itself. To suggest otherwise is to draw an illegitimate inference from the text.

We must ask of any interpretation we put forth, *Does this conclusion follow logically from the premises?*

For help recognizing 74 logical fallacies and their avoidance in biblical interpretation, see Henry A. Virkler, *A Christian's Guide to Critical Thinking*.

9. Set the Stage: Locating Historical, Cultural, and Geographical Backgrounds

"Each text is time sensitive, and studying the background of a passage allows us to appreciate the original setting." (Mark Yarbrough)

Scripture often assumes the reader's familiarity with various background matters. Over the course of time, what was known to the Bible's original recipients may have been lost on more recent readers.

For example, we might be quick to judge Jonah's reluctance to preach to the Ninevites until we learn something of their culture. The Assyrian culture was a violent one. King Asshur-banipal wrote of cutting up human bodies to feed animals, tearing tongues out of mouths, and crushing people beneath the weight of statues. They were the kind of nation we'd pray imprecatory Psalms over, but God told Jonah to extend them the divine offer of repentance. Jonah's reluctance, though sinful, is understandable.

On the cultural front, Jesus chided the religious leaders in Mark 7:9-13 for their abuse of Corban. Corban was a culturally accepted religious exemption whereby a man could leave his estate to the temple and thus avoid financial responsibility for aged parents. Jesus exposed this practice as a means of undermining the fifth Commandment.

With respect to geography, why did Jesus say in the parable of the Good Samaritan that a man went "down" from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30)? After all, Jericho is roughly 14 miles northeast of the City of David. But the topography of the region is far from flat. In fact, on the route from Jerusalem to Jericho, the elevation drops by 2000 feet. People thus spoke of traveling "down" to Jericho.

A good resource on this front is the *NIV Cultural Background Study Bible*, edited by Craig S. Keener and John H. Walton. Keener is evangelicalism's foremost expert on biblical backgrounds, and anything by him reflects his expertise in this area.

8. Watch Your Language: Paying Attention to Vocabulary, Grammar, and Syntax

"Thoughts are expressed through words, and words are the building blocks of sentences. Therefore to determine God's thoughts we need to study His words and how they are associated in sentences." (Roy Zuck)

We should ideally observe both the forms and functions of words in a given text. In Hebrew and Greek, the meanings of words fluctuate based on inflections tacked on to the beginning or end of a word (or inserted in its middle). Forms of words are best understood with original language helps.

But a knowledge of the biblical languages isn't necessary to observe the functions of words in our English translations.

We should start by analyzing sentences, identifying its parts of speech (i.e., nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, etc.) and structure (i.e., phrases [prepositional and participial] and clauses [independent and dependent]). Look for little words wielding big influence, such as prepositions and conjunctions.

Consider John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

We might start by looking at the meaning of key words. What does it mean that God "so" loved the world? Here an interlinear and Greek lexicon would reveal that the word "so" doesn't signal the degree to which God loved the world as much as the means by which he loved it. The gist is "God loved the world thusly" or "God loved the world in this way."

What about the meaning of "world"? John uses the term several different ways in his gospel, ranging from the entire universe (John 17:5) to the restricted group of the elect (John 17:9). In between it refers to the physical earth (John 13:1), the fallen world system (John 12:31), and the ethnically inclusive grouping of Jews and Gentiles (John 4:42). There's much more to interpreting John 3:16 than meets the eye!

Similarly, we might ask what is meant by the verb "believes." In the context (see principle #6) of John's gospel, the verb "believe" occurs 98 times. About half the time, it emphasizes belief in the right object (belief *that*…) and half the time it highlights the entrusting of oneself to that object (belief *in*…). In other words, belief involves a combination of right content and commitment to it.

"For" connects the verse to the preceding context, where Jesus tells Nicodemus of the need to be born again and alludes to the Old Testament imagery of Moses erecting a bronze serpent in the desert. "That" (2x) signals the means by which God loved the world (i.e., he gave his Son) and the result of his love (whoever believes in the Son will not perish).

"In him" is a prepositional phrase signaling the content of right belief, namely, Jesus. This, of course, in turn raises questions about the identity of Jesus in John's gospel.

We can see how quickly a well-known Bible verse raises complex questions of biblical interpretation. What does the text mean when it says "*believes* in him"? How about "believes *in* him"? Or "believes in *him*"? Observing words and their roles can seem tedious, but it's an indispensable part of faithful Bible reading.

7. Find Your Style: Identifying Literary Genres

"Apart from a correct analysis of the literary form of a text and a correct application of the rules governing that genre, it is impossible to correctly understand the author's meaning." (Robert Stein)

We're all familiar with interpreting content according to genre. What do you think of when you read this headline in the sporting news: "Cowboys Shoot Down Chiefs"? What if the same line headed the section of a book on early American history? One genre demands a figurative interpretation; one doesn't.

Likewise, Scripture employs several genres that affect our understanding. In the Old Testament, we have narrative, legal, wisdom, prophetic, and poetic literature. In the New Testament, we encounter parables, gospels, narratives, epistles, and apocalyptic writing.

Narrative accounts may *describe* things they'd never *prescribe*. For example, Judges 11 describes Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter. Even though the writer doesn't explicitly condemn the action, we hardly have a prescription to make such extreme vows and act upon them.

Old Testament wisdom literature is filled with axioms that generally hold true, not promises that are fully guaranteed. We can train a child in the way he should go, yet he might in old age turn from it (despite Proverbs 22:6).

Old Testament poetry is replete with figurative language and must be interpreted accordingly. Similarly, New Testament parables are a form of figurative speech. This means we shouldn't get bogged down in interpreting every little detail. In Matthew 13:31-32, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a mustard seed that grows into a tree and nests birds in its branches The takeaway is that the kingdom of God starts out small and ends up big. Trying to identify the birds in the branches is probably an act of futility at best and a distraction from the main point of the parable at best.

The gospels represent a transitionary stage between the Old and New Covenants. On the one hand, Jesus is seen throughout the gospels observing Jewish feasts. On the other hand, he repealed Jewish food laws (Mark 7:18-19). Of course, the church as we know it did not yet exist in the gospels.

Acts is likewise a transitionary narrative, though the church has now been established. We thus see groups of believing people who had not yet received the baptism of the Holy Spirit (e.g., the Samaritans in Acts 8). Failure to see Acts through a transitionary lens might lead one to think that there is a gap in time between conversion and baptism in the Spirit for some.

Epistles are filled with arguments for correct thinking and behavior. They're thus full of logical connectors between words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. Look for small words with big influence, like "so," "but," and "for." Make special note of every occurrence of "therefore." For example, Ephesians 4:1 says, "Therefore… walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." The "therefore" harkens back to chapters 1-3, connecting our *practice* of righteous living (to be unpacked in chapters 4-6) to our *position* in Christ (explicated in chapters 1-3).

Revelation is apocalyptic literature that makes repeated allusions to Old Testament texts. While some have interpreted Revelation 9:7-9 to mean that locusts are helicopters waging chemical warfare through their tails, there were no helicopters in the Old Testament. There were, however, locusts, and we should look to passages like Joel 2:1-11 for our understanding. The point of connection between locusts in Joel 2 and Revelation 9 does indeed seem to be an invading military brigade. But the locusts of Revelation 9 emerge from "the shaft of the bottomless pit," which in the apocalyptic genre refers to the underworld. Revelation uses the word 7 times, always referring to the place of torment. The locusts are thus demons who are unleashed for warfare on the earth.

6. Location, Location, Location! Reading with Sensitivity to Context

"Any portion of Scripture must be read within the context of the sentence, paragraph, larger discourse unit, and entire book…. Attempting to understand or apply a particular biblical phrase or verse without reference to the literary context is virtually guaranteed to result in distortion." (Robert Plummer)

There are several levels of context that we might view as a set of concentric circles. In the center is the immediate context, which considers the surrounding words, phrases, sentences and paragraph.

The next level is the document context, which refers to an author's whole book. In *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, author Grant Osborne suggests asking 4 key questions: (1) Who wrote the book? (2) When was the book written? (3) What group was the book addressing? (4) What is the purpose or theme of the book? At this overview level, a source like *Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps and Charts* is useful. It helps the reader grasp the "big picture" of a given book.

A good example of accurately interpreting a verse according to context is Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." It's often cited as motivation for those who want to achieve great things athletically, academically, and the like. But in context, Paul has made clear that "all things" relates to the subjects he's just raised in the preceding verse: "I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need." Through Christ, he could handle "all [these] things."

Next is the author's context. By this we mean all of the known biblical writings of an author. By way of example, it's important to note the different ways "righteousness" is used in Matthew vs. Paul. Generally speaking, righteousness in Matthew is used in an ethical sense, whereas Paul often uses it in a soteriological sense. That is, Matthew is concerned with behavioral norms in the community of faith, while Paul frequently (though not exclusively) emphasizes a forensic declaration of right standing with God. It would be a mistake to blend the two uses into one "biblical" category.

Finally, we have the canonical context. It's critical that, while allowing individual authors to speak for themselves, we see Scripture as a non-contradictory, unified whole. This means, among other things, that a difficult verse or two can't overthrow a predominant biblical theme. For example, groups opposed to the deity of Christ are quick to cite problem texts like John 14:28: "The Father is greater than I." Not only are there exegetically satisfying answers to such a problem text; the whole of the New Testament so overwhelmingly affirms the deity of Christ that a text like John 14:28 is hard pressed to argue against it.

Principles for Reading the Bible *Unlike* Any Other Book

5. Come to Jesus: Reading Christocentrically

"[The Old Testament is] a witness, foreshadowing, anticipation, and promise of salvation as it has now been accomplished by the work of the triune God in Jesus Christ Incarnate.'" (Vern Poythress)

In Luke 24, Jesus tells two disciples on the road to Emmaus that the Hebrew Scriptures pointed forward to him. Following the encounter, Jesus said in v. 44: "Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." The reference to the threefold division of the Law, Prophets, and Psalms shows that Jesus believed the entire Old Testament testified of him (cf. "Moses and all the prophets" in v. 27).

Likewise, Jesus told the religious elite of Israel in John 5:9 that, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."

Jesus is probably not claiming that every single Old Testament pericope points to him, but rather that each major section of the Hebrew Scriptures anticipates him. We might say that every pericope demands an ethical response, and as the perfect God-man Jesus fulfilled that ethical response in his earthly life. In that manner, each and every paragraph points to Christ in a way that doesn't hijack the original historical context. Each unit of thought reflects a facet of the prismatic image of Christ, and all of them combined reveal a complete picture of the Messiah.

All of this entails reading the Bible through a *typological* lens. Typology is beyond the scope of our study. Suffice it to say that typological interpretation involves noting patterns and historical correspondences between persons, places, and events, and showing how those things created expectations ultimately fulfilled in the person of Christ. For a recent and thorough treatment of the subject, see James M. Hamilton Jr., *Typology: Understanding the Bible's Promise-shaped Patterns*.

A redemptive-historical example of Old Testament foreshadowing of the Messiah is the Passover lamb in Exodus 12. The lamb had to be an unblemished male and its blood was presented to God for the covering of sins. This sort of parallel with Christ is relatively direct.

An example of Jesus fulfilling the ethical demands of a text not directly foreshadowing him would be Genesis 22 and the story of Abraham and Isaac. Abraham trusted God's promises and proved it through testing—a testing that required an allegiance to God stronger than any family bond. What's more, faithfulness to God despite the price is exemplified in Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son. All of these things are exemplified in Jesus' obedience to the Father on his way to the cross.

Note the upshot of Christological interpretation of the Old Testament: Christ is not exhausted by the gospels or the New Testament epistles. A robust, holistic view of Jesus requires knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures in their entirety, as well as the whole New Testament.

4. Set the Standard: Reading According to the Rule of Faith

"In the early days of the church (broadly the first five centuries of this era—antiquity), during and soon after the days of firsthand witnesses of Jesus Christ and his apostles, the basis of doctrine was the *regula fidei* ("rule of faith"), perpetuated by the authority of the Church Fathers and Councils (*truth handed down in tradition*). The rule of faith governed what would be read as Scripture and what would not (and, later, how Scripture itself would be read) in the days before the canon was finalized." (Abraham Kuruvilla)

The Bible didn't fall out of heaven—leather cover, gilded edges, and all—and land in a Crossway warehouse. It was produced over time. And for the very first Christians, it didn't exist in completed form until decades after their conversion. This didn't mean they weren't instructed in basic Christian theology. Indeed, apostolic teaching—particularly regarding the person and work of Christ—circulated widely before a page of Scripture ever met a Christian's eyes.

This content regarding Jesus' identity and ministry is often referred to as the Regula Fidei or "Rule of Faith." It was the apostolic interpretation of the Christ event, the gospel explained in a nutshell.

As for the specific content of the Regula Fidei, opinions differ on its extent. Some would say it closely aligns with the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Others say it's a summary of Peter's speeches in Acts. Whatever it was specifically, it was basic and Christ-centered. Over the first five centuries of the church, this widely embraced interpretive principle would become robustly Trinitarian.

Of course, when the first Christians began to hear or read inspired letters from the Apostles and their associates, they filtered the information through what they already knew. They filtered it through the grid of the Regula Fidei. The Regula Fidei formed their presuppositions.

None of us approach the Bible as a blank slate. We all bring presuppositions to the text. The best we can do is become aware of our presuppositions and bring the right ones to our reading of Holy Writ. This might sound like the Regula Fidei is controlling the text, but that's not the case. Rather, the Regula Fidei constructs boundary markers within which the text must be understood. It thus shapes the questions we ask of the text.

Take, for example, John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Regula Fidei provides some boundaries for our interpretation. First, the Regula Fidei is fiercely monotheistic. So whatever we make of the text, we know it's not saying there are two Gods. Second, because the Regula Fidei grew to include the Incarnation, we can interpret the text in at least a binitarian way. That is, Jesus is distinct from God while simultaneously identified as eternal God. This pushes us in a Trinitarian direction. Any attempt to skirt the deity of Christ in John 1:1 violates the Regula Fidei.

The Regula Fidei is a summary of orthodox doctrine centered on the person and work of Christ. As such, it serves as an interpretive guideline for texts touching on the identity and mission of Jesus, with implications for Trinitarianism and the atonement. It does not address many so-called secondary matters of theology, such as church governance, spiritual gifts, or the finer points of eschatology. The use of this principle is thus limited and selective. But it is vital to properly interpreting relevant Christological texts.

A deep dive into the subject is found in R. B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis*.

3. Know Your Place: Reading in Light of Progressive Revelation

"As the books of the Bible were written, God progressively revealed more truths about many subjects. This does not mean that what was given earlier was in error; it means it may have been incomplete." (Roy Zuck)

From Genesis to Revelation, Scripture is like looking at truth through a telephoto lens that provides an ever-clearer image as the zoom ring is turned.

Some call this the epigenetic theory of Scripture. This theory compares the development of revelation in the Bible to the growth of a tree from acorn to sapling to sprawling oak. Throughout its life, the oak tree might be perfect at every stage. But it's not complete until it's a fully-grown tree. Likewise, Scripture matures from Genesis to Revelation, but this does not imply imperfection at any step along the way. The progress is not from error to truth, but from truth to more truth.

Some things in progressive revelation are clarified as suggested by Romans 16:25-27: "Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ!"

Some things in progressive revelation are set aside. For example, Old Testament food laws described in Deuteronomy 14:1-21 are repealed by Jesus in Mark 7:14:23. Likewise, circumcision, which was commanded in Genesis 17:10-12 is excused by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:17-19.

When reading a passage of Scripture, it's important to ask yourself, *Where am I in the progress of revelation?*

Case in point: When David confessed his sin in Psalm 51, he prayed, "Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me." When David wrote, the Spirit would rest upon special individuals to empower them for a particular calling. But since the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit has permanently indwelled every believer for the general calling of obedience to Christ. Some modern praise choruses have riffed on Psalm 51:11, but we need never utter the prayer that David did. The Holy Spirit is with us to stay.

2. Strive for Unity: Letting Scripture Interpret Scripture

"If we believe that all the Bible is inspired by God and thus noncontradictory, passages of Scripture that are less clear should be interpreted with reference to those that are more transparent in meaning." (Robert Plummer)

It's been said that every sub-Christian cult is based upon the *possible* interpretation of a few difficult passages. These interpretations are then held forth as the lens through which the rest of the Bible is read. This is exactly backwards.

As faithful readers of Scripture, we're looking for the most *probable* explanations of the text. And we're looking for clear passages to help interpret unclear ones. This means, among other things, bringing to bear the whole array of relevant verses. This is what it means to let Scripture interpret Scripture.

It also means giving the text a chance to speak for itself. For example, if we want to know the meaning of certain parables Jesus told, we need only wait for his subsequent explanation to his disciples (Matthew 13:36-39). If we hang on until chapter 22, Revelation tells us the identity of the Great Red Dragon introduced in Revelation 12: Satan. John waits until the penultimate chapter of his gospel before telling us why he wrote: that readers might believe Jesus is the Christ and have life in his name (John 20:31).

1. Power Up! Reading Supernaturally

"As we approach the Bible, we need to realize that sin affects all of our being—our emotions, wills, and rational faculties…. We need the Holy Spirit to instruct and guide us." (Robert Plummer)

The basic meaning of the biblical text is universally accessible. It's why Paul reasoned from the Scriptures in the synagogues. Believers don't have a monopoly on a mental grasp of the text.

This means the Spirit is no guarantee that a believer will arrive at the right interpretation of a given text. It's certainly no excuse for laziness. As scholar Robert Stein has noted, "If we do not know the meaning of a biblical word, all the prayer in the world cannot substitute for a Bible dictionary."

However, an unbeliever can arrive at the right interpretation of a text and yet miss its significance and immediate implications. Consider the religious elite in first-century Palestine. Jesus suggested they knew the Scriptures' contents, but they didn't understand their significance. As a result they knew the words of Scripture but they didn't know its God.

This is true in much of biblical scholarship today. I have learned plenty from technical commentaries written by those who don't share my evangelical convictions. I've even been corrected a time or two by them! Nonetheless, there's a level on which they don't really know the Scriptures.

It's probably true that demons understand the text better than most of us. Indeed, on a strictly cognitive level, their understanding of the text might be near perfect. I would suggest that reading supernaturally, reading in tune with the Spirit, is a matter of disposition before God. And if we want to get the most out of Scripture—indeed, if we want Scripture to get the most out of us—we'll foster an attitude of dependence on the Spirit.

For starters, we should see our Bible reading as an act of worship. This means my ultimate goal in reading is not informational; it's transformational. I want the text to shape me ever more into the image of Christ as an act of obedience before him. I must read with the aim of personal and corporate life-change.

This means that I'll approach the text in prayer. I'll ask for eyes to see myself in light of the text. I'll ask about ways my life doesn't match the text. And I'll ask for enablement to live out its principles. This all requires a kind of understanding that only the Spirit can ultimately produce.

After prayer and reading, I need to meditate on the text. There is a time and place for reading large swaths of Scripture at a time. But understanding of the text requires an additional approach. It requires extended, repeated periods of contemplation on smaller passages. Martin Luther explains:

"You should meditate not only in your heart, but also externally, by actually repeating and comparing oral speech and literal words of the book, reading and rereading them with diligent attention and reflection, so you may see what the Holy Spirit means by them. Take care you do not grow weary or think you have done enough when you have read, heard, and spoken them once or twice, and that you then have complete understanding. You'll never be

a particularly good theologian if you do that, for you will be like untimely fruit which falls to the ground before it is half ripe."

As we pray over and meditate on the text, we'd do well to remember one more thing. We're accountable to God to think *for* ourselves, but we mustn't think *by* ourselves. We should thus avail ourselves to the wisdom of the ages. What have previous generations believed and taught about the text? Is my interpretation to be found among any of them? If not, then I have good reason to question my understanding. In addition to reading *with* the church through the ages, I should read *in* the church of which I'm currently a part. Others see things we miss. They can be particularly helpful in my understanding of ways the text affects my own walk with Christ and present life circumstances.

Finally, all of our reading and study should be a search for the glory and majesty of our triune God. We are reading for our vision of God to deepen and our joy in him to grow. When we see his glory in the text, we should thank him for it, bask in it, and pray to reflect it in our lives. Then we'll have experienced the ultimate reason for reading the Scriptures.