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Introduction: The Need to Interpret

Every so often we meet someone who says with great feeling, "You don't have to interpret the Bible; just read it and do what it says." Usually, such a remark reflects the layperson's protest against the "professional" scholar, pastor, teacher, or Sunday school teacher, who by "interpreting" seems to be taking the Bible away from the common man or woman. It is their way of saying that the Bible is not an obscure book. "After all," it is argued, "any person with half a brain can read it and understand it. The problem with too many preachers and teachers is that they dig around so much they tend to muddy the waters. What was clear to us when we read it isn't so clear anymore."

There is a lot of truth in this protest. We agree that Christians should learn to read, believe, and obey the Bible. And we especially agree that the Bible need not be an obscure book if studied and read properly. In fact we are convinced that the single most serious problem people have with the Bible is not with a lack of understanding but with the fact that they understand most things too well! For example, with such a text as "Do everything without grumbling or arguing" (Phil 2:14), the problem is not understanding it but obeying it—putting it into practice.

We are also agreed that the preacher or teacher is all too often prone to dig first and look later, and thereby to cover up the plain meaning of the text, which often lies on the surface. Let it be said at the outset—and repeated throughout—that the aim of good interpretation is not uniqueness; one is not trying to discover what no one else has ever seen before.

Interpretation that aims at, or thrives on, uniqueness can usually be attributed to pride (an attempt to "outclever" the rest of the world), a false understanding of spirituality (wherein the Bible is full of deeply buried truths waiting to be mined by the spiritually sensitive person with special insight), or vested interests (the need to support a theological bias, especially in dealing with texts that seem to go against that bias). Unique interpretations are usually wrong. This is not to say that the correct understanding of a text may not often seem unique to someone who hears it for the first time. But it is to say that uniqueness is *not* the aim of our task.

The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the "plain meaning of the text." And the most important ingredient one brings to this task is enlightened common sense. The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of the text. Correct interpretation, therefore, brings relief to the mind as well as a prick or prod to the heart.

But if the plain meaning is what interpretation is all about, then why interpret? Why not just read? Does not the plain meaning come simply from reading? In a sense, yes. But in a truer sense, such an argument is both naive and unrealistic because of two factors: the nature of the reader and the nature of Scripture.

The Reader as an Interpreter

The first reason one needs to learn *how* to interpret is that, whether one likes it or not, every reader is at the same time an interpreter. That is, most of us assume as we read that we also understand what we read. We also tend to think that *our understanding* is the same thing as the Holy Spirit's or human author's *intent*. However, we invariably bring to the text all that we are, with all of our experiences, culture, and prior understandings of words and ideas. Sometimes what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray, or else causes us to read all kinds of foreign ideas into the text.

Thus, when a person in our culture hears the word "cross," centuries of Christian art and symbolism cause most people automatically to think of a Roman cross (†), although there is little likelihood that that was the shape of Jesus' cross, which was probably shaped like a "T." Most Protestants, and Catholics as well, when they read

texts about the church at worship, automatically envision people sitting in a building with "pews" much like their own. When Paul says, "Make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (Rom 13:14 NKJV), people in most English-speaking cultures are apt to think that "flesh" means the "body" and therefore that Paul is speaking of "bodily appetites."

But the word "flesh," as Paul uses it, seldom refers to the body—and in this text it almost certainly did not—but to a spiritual malady sometimes called "the sinful nature," denoting totally self-centered existence. Therefore, without intending to do so, the reader is interpreting as he or she reads, and unfortunately all too often interprets incorrectly.

This leads us to note further that in any case the reader of an English Bible is already involved in interpretation. For translation is in itself a (necessary) form of interpretation. Your Bible, whatever translation you use, which is your *beginning* point, is in fact the *end result* of much scholarly work. Translators are regularly called upon to make choices regarding meanings, and *their* choices are going to affect how *you* understand.

Good translators, therefore, take the problem of our language differences into consideration. But it is not an easy task. In Romans 13:14, for example, shall we translate "flesh" (as in KJV, NRSV, NASU, ESV, etc.) because this is the word Paul used, and then leave it to an interpreter to tell us that "flesh" here does not mean "body"? Or shall we "help" the reader and translate "sinful nature" (as in the NIV, TNIV, GNB, NLT, etc.) or "disordered natural inclinations" (NJB) because these more closely approximate what Paul's word really *means*? We will take up this matter in greater detail in the next chapter. For now it is sufficient to point out how the *fact* of translation in itself has already involved one in the task of interpretation.

The need to interpret is also to be found by noting what goes on around us all the time. A simple look at the contemporary church, for example, makes it abundantly clear that not all "plain meanings" are equally plain to all. It is of more than passing interest that most of those in today's church who argue that women should keep silent in church on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 at the same time deny the validity of speaking in tongues and prophecy, the very context in which the "silence" passage occurs. And those who affirm on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 that

women as well as men should pray and prophesy usually deny that women must do so with their heads covered. For some, the Bible "plainly teaches" believers' baptism by immersion; others believe they can make a biblical case for infant baptism. Both "eternal security" and the possibility of "losing one's salvation" are preached in the church, but never by the same person! Yet both are affirmed as the plain meaning of biblical texts. Even the two authors of this book have some disagreements as to what certain texts "plainly" mean. Yet all of us are reading the same Bible, and we all are trying to be obedient to what the text "plainly" means.

Besides these recognizable differences among Bible-believing Christians, there are also all kinds of strange things afloat. One can usually recognize the cults, for example, because they have an authority in addition to the Bible. But not all of them do; and in every case they bend the truth by the way they select texts from the Bible itself. Every imaginable heresy or practice, from the Arianism (denying Christ's deity) of the Jehovah's Witnesses, to baptizing for the dead among Mormons, to snake handling among Appalachian sects, claims to be "supported" by a text.

Even among more theologically orthodox people, however, many strange ideas manage to gain acceptance in various quarters. For example, one of the current rages among American Protestants, especially charismatics, is the so-called wealth and health gospel. The "good news" is that God's will for you is financial and material prosperity! One of the advocates of this "gospel" begins his book by arguing for the "plain sense" of Scripture and claiming that he puts the Word of God first and foremost throughout his study. He says that it is not what we *think* it says but what it *actually* says that counts. The "plain meaning" is what he is after. But one begins to wonder what the "plain meaning" really is when financial prosperity is argued as the will of God from such a text as 3 John 2, "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth" (KJV)—a text that in fact has nothing at all to do with financial prosperity. Another example takes the plain meaning of the story of the rich young man (Mark 10:17–22) as precisely the opposite of "what it actually says" and attributes the "interpretation" to the Holy Spirit. One may rightly question whether the plain meaning is being sought at all; perhaps the plain meaning is simply what such a writer wants the text to mean in order to support some pet ideas.

Given all this diversity, both inside and outside the church, and all the differences even among scholars, who supposedly know "the rules," it is no wonder that some argue for no interpretation, just reading. But as we have seen, this is a false option. The antidote to *bad* interpretation is not *no* interpretation but *good* interpretation, based on commonsense guidelines.

The authors of this book labor under no illusions that by reading and following our guidelines everyone will finally agree on the "plain meaning," *our* meaning! What we do hope to achieve is to heighten the reader's sensitivity to specific problems inherent in each genre, to help the reader know *why* different options exist and how to make commonsense judgments, and especially to enable the reader to discern between good and not-so-good interpretations—and to know what makes them one or the other.

The Nature of Scripture

A more significant reason for the need to interpret lies in the nature of Scripture itself. Historically the church has understood the nature of Scripture much the same as it has understood the person of Christ—the Bible is at the same time both human and divine. "The Bible," it has been correctly said, "is the Word of God given in human words in history." It is this dual nature of the Bible that demands of us the task of interpretation.

Because the Bible is *God's Word,* it has *eternal relevance;* it speaks to all humankind, in every age and in every culture. Because it is God's Word, we must listen—and obey. But because God chose to speak his Word through *human words in history,* every book in the Bible also has *historical particularity;* each document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was originally written (and in some cases also by the oral history it had before it was written down). Interpretation of the Bible is demanded by the "tension" that exists between its *eternal relevance* and its *historical particularity.*

There are some, of course, who believe that the Bible is merely a human book, and that it contains only human words in history. For these people the task of interpreting is limited to historical inquiry. Their interest, as with reading Cicero or Milton, is with the religious ideas of the Jews, Jesus, or the early church. The task for them, therefore, is purely a historical one. What did these words

mean to the people who wrote them? What did they think about God? How did they understand themselves?

On the other hand, there are those who think of the Bible only in terms of its eternal relevance. Because it is God's Word, they tend to think of it only as a collection of propositions to be believed and imperatives to be obeyed—although invariably there is a great deal of picking and choosing among the propositions and imperatives. There are, for example, Christians who, on the basis of Deuteronomy 22:5 ("A woman must not wear men's clothing"), argue that a woman should not wear slacks or shorts, because these are deemed to be "men's clothing." But the same people seldom take literally the other imperatives in this list, which include building a parapet around the roof of one's house (v. 8), not planting two kinds of seeds in a vineyard (v. 9), and making tassels on the four corners of one's cloak (v. 12).

The Bible, however, is *not* a series of propositions and imperatives; it is not simply a collection of "Sayings from Chairman God," as though he looked down on us from heaven and said: "Hey you down there, learn these truths. Number 1, There is no God but One, and I am he. Number 2, I am the Creator of all things, including humankind"—and so on, all the way through proposition number 7,777 and imperative number 777.

These propositions of course are true, and they are found in the Bible (though not quite in that form). Indeed such a book might have made many things easier for us. But, fortunately, that is not how God chose to speak to us. Rather, he chose to speak his eternal truths within the particular circumstances and events of human history. This also is what gives us hope. Precisely because God chose to speak in the context of real human history, we may take courage that these same words will speak again and again in our own "real" history, as they have throughout the history of the church.

The fact that the Bible has a human side is our encouragement; it is also our challenge, and the reason that we need to interpret. Two things should be noted in this regard:

1. One of the most important aspects of the human side of the Bible is that, in order to communicate his Word to all human conditions, God chose to use almost every available kind of communication: narrative history, genealogies, chronicles, laws of all kinds, poetry of all kinds, proverbs, prophetic oracles, riddles, drama, biographical sketches, parables, letters, sermons, and apocalypses.

To interpret properly the "then and there" of the biblical texts, you must not only know some general rules that apply to all the words of the Bible, but you also need to learn the special rules that apply to each of these literary forms (genres). The way God communicates his Word to us in the "here and now" will often differ from one form to another. For example, we need to know *how* a psalm, a form often addressed *to God*, functions as God's Word *to us*, and how certain psalms differ from others, and how all of them differ from "the laws," which were often addressed to people in cultural situations no longer in existence. *How* do such "laws" speak to us, and how do they differ from the moral "laws," which are always valid in all circumstances? Such are the questions the dual nature of the Bible forces on us.

2. In speaking through real persons, in a variety of circumstances, over a 1,500-year period, God's Word was expressed in the vocabulary and thought patterns of those persons and conditioned by the culture of those times and circumstances. That is to say, God's Word to us was first of all his Word to them. If they were going to hear it, it could only have come through events and in language *they* could have understood. Our problem is that we are so far removed from them in time, and sometimes in thought. This is the major reason one needs to learn to *interpret* the Bible. If God's Word about women wearing men's clothing or people having parapets around houses is to speak to us, we first need to know what it said to its original hearers—and why.

Thus the task of interpreting involves the student/reader at two levels. First, one has to hear the Word they heard; you must try to understand what was said to them back *then and there* (exegesis). Second, you must learn to hear that same Word in the *here and now* (hermeneutics). A few preliminary words are needed about these two tasks.

The First Task: Exegesis

The first task of the interpreter is called *exegesis*. Exegesis is the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning. This is basically a historical task. It is the attempt to hear the Word as the original recipients were to have heard it, to find out what was *the original intent of the words of the Bible*. This

is the task that often calls for the help of the "expert," a person trained to know well the language and circumstances of a text in its original setting. But one does not have to be an expert to do good exegesis.

In fact, everyone is an exegete of sorts. The only real question is whether you will be a good one. How many times, for example, have you heard or said, "What Jesus *meant* by that was . . ." or, "Back in those days, they used to . . ."? These are exegetical expressions. Most often they are employed to explain the differences between "them" and "us"—why we do not build parapets around our houses, for example—or to give a reason for our using a text in a new or different way—why handshaking has often taken the place of the "holy kiss." Even when such ideas are not articulated, they are in fact practiced all the time in a kind of common-sense way.

The problem with much of this, however, is (1) that such exegesis is often too selective and (2) that often the sources consulted are not written by true "experts," that is, they are secondary sources that also often use other secondary sources rather than the primary sources. A few words about each of these must be given.

1. Although everyone employs exegesis at times, and although quite often such exegesis is well done, it nonetheless tends to be employed *only* when there is an obvious problem between the biblical texts and modern culture. Whereas it must indeed be employed for such texts, we insist that it is *the first step in reading EVERY text.* At first, this will not be easy to do, but learning to think exegetically will pay rich dividends in understanding and will make even the reading, not to mention the studying, of the Bible a much more exciting experience. But note well: Learning to think exegetically is not the *only* task; it is simply the *first* task.

The real problem with "selective" exegesis is that one will often read one's own, completely foreign, ideas into a text and thereby make God's Word something other than what God really said. For example, one of the authors of this book once received a letter from a well-known evangelical, who argued that the author should not appear in a conference with another well-known person, whose orthodoxy on a point was thought to be suspect. The biblical reason given for avoiding the conference was 1 Thessalonians 5:22: "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (KJV). But had our brother learned to read the Bible exegetically, he would not have used the text in that way. For this is Paul's final word in a *paragraph* to the Thessalonians regarding charismatic utterances in the community. What Paul really says, in current English, is: "Do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject whatever is harmful" (TNIV). The "avoidance of evil" has to do with "prophecies," which, when tested, are found not to be of the Spirit. To make this text mean something God did not intend is to abuse the text, not use it. To avoid making such mistakes one needs to learn to think exegetically, that is, to begin back then and there, and to do so with *every* text.

2. As we will soon note, one does not begin by consulting the "experts." But when it is necessary to do so, one should try to use the better sources. For example, in Mark 10:24 (Matt 19:23; Luke 18:24), at the conclusion of the story of the rich young man, Jesus says, "How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" He then adds: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." You will sometimes hear it said that there was a gate in Jerusalem known as the "Needle's Eye," which camels could go through only by kneeling, and with great difficulty. The point of this "interpretation" is that a camel could in fact go through the "Needle's Eye." The trouble with this "exegesis," however, is that it is simply not true. There never was such a gate in Jerusalem at any time in its history. The earliest known "evidence" for this idea is found in the eleventh century (!) in a commentary by a Greek churchman named Theophylact, who had the same difficulty with the text that we do. After all, it is *impossible* for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, and that was precisely Jesus' point. It is impossible for one who trusts in riches to enter the kingdom. It takes a miracle for a rich person to get saved, which is quite the point of what follows: "All things are possible with God."

Learning to Do Exegesis

How, then, do we learn to do good exegesis and at the same time avoid the pitfalls along the way? The first part of most of the chapters in this book will explain how one goes about this task for each of the genres in particular. Here we simply want to overview what is involved in the exegesis of any text.

At its highest level, of course, exegesis requires knowledge of many things we do not necessarily expect the readers of this book

to know: the biblical languages; the Jewish, Semitic, and Greco-Roman backgrounds; how to determine the original text when early copies (produced by hand) have differing readings; the use of all kinds of primary sources and tools. But you can learn to do good exegesis even if you do not have access to all of these skills and tools. To do so, however, you must learn first what you can do with your own skills, and second to use the work of others.

The key to good exegesis, and therefore to a more intelligent reading of the Bible, is *to learn to read the text carefully and to ask the right questions of the text.* One of the best things one could do in this regard would be to read Mortimer J. Adler's *How to Read a Book* (1940, revised edition, with Charles Van Doren [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972]). Our experience over many years in college and seminary teaching is that many people simply do not know how to read well. To read or study the Bible intelligently demands careful reading, and this includes learning to ask the right questions of the text.

There are two basic kinds of questions one should ask of every biblical passage: those that relate to *context* and those that relate to *content.* The questions of context are also of two kinds: historical and literary. Let us briefly note each of these.

The Historical Context

The historical context, which will differ from book to book, has to do with several things: the time and culture of the author and his readers, that is, the geographical, topographical, and political factors that are relevant to the author's setting; and the occasion of the book, letter, psalm, prophetic oracle, or other genre. All such matters are especially important for understanding.

1. It simply makes a difference in understanding to know the personal background of Amos, Hosea, or Isaiah, or that Haggai prophesied after the exile, or to know the messianic expectations of Israel when John the Baptist and Jesus appeared on the scene, or to understand the differences between the cities of Corinth and Philippi and how these differences affected the churches in each. One's reading of Jesus' parables is greatly enhanced by knowing something about the customs of Jesus' day. Surely it makes a difference in understanding to know that the *denarius* ("penny" KJV!) offered to the workers in Matthew 20:1–16 was the equivalent of a full day's wage. Even matters of topography are important. Those raised in the American

West—or East for that matter—must be careful not to think of "the mountains [that] surround Jerusalem" (Ps 125:2) in terms of their own experience of mountains!

To answer most of these kinds of questions, you will need some outside help. A good Bible dictionary, such as the four-volume *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ed. G. W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995]) or the one-volume *New International Bible Dictionary* (ed. J. D. Douglas [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999]) or *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. David Noel Freedman [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000]), will generally supply the need here. If you wish to pursue a matter further, the bibliographies at the end of each article in these dictionaries will be a good place to start.

2. The more important question of historical context, however, has to do with the *occasion* and *purpose* of each biblical book and/or its various parts. Here one wants to have an idea of what was going on in Israel or the church that called forth such a document, or what the situation of the author was that caused him to speak or write. Again, this will vary from book to book, and it is somewhat less crucial for Proverbs, for example, than for 1 Corinthians.

The answer to this question is usually to be found—when it can be found—within the book itself. But you need to learn to read with your eyes open for such matters. If you want to corroborate your own findings on these questions, you might consult your Bible dictionary again or the introduction to a good commentary on the book (see the appendix on p. 265). But make your own observations first!

The Literary Context

This is what most people mean when they talk about reading something in its context. Indeed this is *the* crucial task in exegesis, and fortunately it is something you can learn to do well without necessarily having to consult the "experts." Essentially, *literary context* means first that words only have meaning in sentences, and second that biblical sentences for the most part only have clear meaning in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences.

The most important contextual question you will ever ask—and it must be asked over and over of every sentence and every paragraph—is, "What's the point?" We must try to trace the author's train of thought. What is the author saying, and why does he or she

say it right here? Having made that point, what is he or she saying next, and why?

This question will vary from genre to genre, but it is *always* the crucial question. The goal of exegesis, you remember, is to find out what the original author intended. To do this task well, it is imperative that one use a translation that recognizes poetry and paragraphs. One of the major causes of inadequate exegesis by readers of the King James Version and, to a lesser degree, of the New American Standard Bible, is that every verse has been printed as a paragraph. Such an arrangement tends to obscure the author's own logic. Above all else, therefore, one must learn to recognize units of thought, whether they be paragraphs (for prose) or lines and sections (for poetry). And, with the aid of an adequate translation, this is something any good reader can do with practice.

The Questions of Content

The second major category of questions you need to ask of any text relates to the author's actual content. "Content" has to do with the meanings of words, the grammatical relationships in sentences, and the choice of the original text where the manuscripts (handwritten copies) differ from one another (see next chapter). It also includes a number of the items mentioned above under "historical context," for example, the meaning of denarius, or a Sabbath day's journey, or "high places," etc.

For the most part, these are the questions of meaning that people ordinarily ask of the biblical text. When Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:16, "Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer" (NASB), you should want to know *who* is "according to the flesh"—Christ or the one knowing him? It makes a considerable difference in meaning to learn that "we" know Christ no longer "from a worldly point of view" (TNIV, NIV) is what Paul intends, not that we know Christ no longer "in his earthly life."

To answer these kinds of questions you will ordinarily need to seek outside help. Again, the quality of your answers to such questions will usually depend on the quality of the sources you use. This is the place where you will finally want to consult a good exegetical commentary. But note that from our view, consulting a commentary, as essential as this will be at times, is the last thing you do.

The Tools

For the most part, then, you can do good exegesis with a minimum amount of outside help, provided that the help is of the highest quality. We have mentioned three such tools: a good translation, a good Bible dictionary, and good commentaries. There are other kinds of tools, of course, especially for topical or thematic kinds of study. But for reading or studying the Bible book by book, these are the essential ones.

Because a good translation (or better, several good translations) is the absolutely basic tool for one who does not know the original languages, the next chapter is devoted to this matter. Learning to choose a good commentary is also important, but because this is the last thing one does, an appendix on commentaries concludes the book.

The Second Task: Hermeneutics

Although the word "hermeneutics" ordinarily covers the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis, it is also used in the narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts. In this book we will use it exclusively in this way—to ask the questions about the Bible's meaning in the "here and now"—even though we know this is not the word's most common meaning.

It is this matter of the here and now, after all, that brings us to the Bible in the first place. So why not start here? Why worry about exegesis? Surely the same Spirit who inspired the writing of the Bible can equally inspire one's reading of it. In a sense this is true, and we do not by this book intend to take from anyone the joy of devotional reading of the Bible and the sense of direct communication involved in such reading. But devotional reading is not the only kind one should do. One must also read for learning and understanding. In short, you must also learn to study the Bible, which in turn must inform your devotional reading. And this brings us back to our insistence that proper "hermeneutics" begins with solid "exegesis."

The reason you must *not begin* with the here and now is that the only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found *in the original intent of the biblical text.* As noted earlier in this chapter, this is the "plain meaning" one is after. Otherwise biblical texts can be

made to mean whatever they mean to any given reader. But such hermeneutics becomes total subjectivity, and who then is to say that one person's interpretation is right and another's is wrong? Anything goes.

In contrast to such subjectivity, we insist that the original meaning of the text—as much as it is in our power to discern it—is the objective point of control. We are convinced that the Mormons' baptizing for the dead on the basis of 1 Corinthians 15:29, or the Jehovah's Witnesses' rejection of the deity of Christ, or the snake handlers' use of Mark 16:18, or the prosperity evangelists' advocating of the American dream as a Christian right on the basis of 3 John 2 are all *improper* interpretations. In each case the error is in their hermeneutics, precisely because their hermeneutics is not controlled by good exegesis. They have started with the here and now and have read into the texts "meanings" that were not originally intended. And what is to keep one from killing one's daughter because of a foolish vow, as did Jephthah (Judg 11:29–40), or to argue, as one preacher is reported to have done, that women should never wear their hair up in a topknot ("bun") because the Bible says "topknot go down" ("Let him that is on the housetop not go down" [Mark 13:15 KJV])?

It will be argued, of course, that common sense will keep one from such foolishness. Unfortunately common sense is not always so common. We want to know what the Bible means *for us*—legitimately so. But we cannot make it mean anything that pleases us and then give the Holy Spirit "credit" for it. The Holy Spirit cannot be brought into the process to contradict himself, and the Spirit is the one who inspired the original intent. Therefore, the Spirit's help for us will come in our discovering that original intent and in his guiding us as we try faithfully to apply that meaning to our own situations.

The questions of hermeneutics are not at all easy, which is probably why so few books are written on this aspect of our subject. Nor will all agree on how one goes about this task. But this is the crucial area, and believers need to learn to talk to one another about these questions—and to listen. On this one thing, however, there must surely be agreement: ***A text cannot mean what it never meant.*** Or to put it in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken. This is the starting point. How we work it out from that point is what this book is basically all about.

Someone will surely ask, "But is it not possible for a text to have an additional [or fuller or deeper] meaning beyond its original intent? After all, this happens in the New Testament itself in the way it sometimes uses the Old Testament." In the case of prophecy, we would not close the door to such a possibility, and we would argue that, with careful controls, a second, or fuller, meaning is possible. But how does one justify it at other points? Our problem is a simple one: Who speaks for God? Roman Catholicism has less of a problem here; the magisterium, the authority vested in the official teaching of the church, determines for all the fuller sense of the text. Protestants, however, have no magisterium, and we should be properly concerned whenever anyone says he or she has God's deeper meaning to a text—especially if the text never meant what it is now made to mean. Of such things are all the cults born, and innumerable lesser heresies.

It is difficult to give rules for hermeneutics. What we offer throughout the following chapters, therefore, are guidelines. You may not agree with our guidelines. We do hope that your disagreements will be bathed in Christian charity, and perhaps our guidelines will serve to stimulate your own thinking on these matters.