Synthesis and Summary

What I want to do now is attempt to bring everything together that we’ve talked about in all the previous sessions. We’ve discussed hermeneutics and biblical interpretation; looking at hermeneutics as a sort of asking or raising the question: how is it we understand or know something? What do we do when we interpret a text? What do we do when we try to understand a text, in our case, a text from the Old or New Testaments? What are the various theories that explain what we do when we read and interpret something and try to understand something?

Then we saw interpretation more broadly as the application of principles and methods, to the biblical texts in order to understand it and make sense of them. Number one, we have looked at various theories of interpretation and hermeneutical theories, beginning all the way back with the biblical text but also moving through – historically, logically – through author-centered approaches to interpretation, text-centered approaches that focus on the text as the primary locus of meaning and the primary object of interpretation, then reader-centered approaches that locate meaning in the reader and the reader’s ability to make sense of the text, and finally more postmodern approaches and even deconstructive approaches that despair of any meaning at all in the text. But we’ve also looked at various interpretive methods, ranging from historical approaches, and form, source and redaction criticism and looking at traditional approaches of grammar and context and lexical analysis, the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament, theological analysis of the biblical text, and asking how those affect the way we read the text and how they can be implemented into an effective hermeneutical practice or interpretive practice, in understanding the biblical text.
In one sense what we’re doing with the different hermeneutical theories and interpretive approaches is simply recognizing the multi-dimensional nature of the text that as we’re probing the text from different dimensions, as we’ll see in just a moment, we try to integrate all these things into a coherent interpretive approach. The various methods are necessary because they allow us to probe the various dimensions of the biblical text, realizing that as God’s word, the text comes down to us in its historical and cultural rootedness. It’s also a literary composition that requires that we use various techniques to understand it. It comes to us in a specific language, and also, as God’s word. It has a theological dimension. So the various interpretive approaches that we have been discussing are necessary because they help us to probe or come to grips with the different dimensions of the biblical text.

So, having discussed all these various methods and approaches, what I want to do is try to integrate these various approaches, methods, insights and interpretive theories into an evangelical approach to interpreting Scripture, that is, an approach that takes seriously the Bible as God’s word for his people. It seeks to take seriously the Bible as both the words of God but also the words of human authors as well. It’ll have two parts. Number one: we will look at how some of the different theories, especially the historical and more author-centered approaches than we’ll examine more text-centered approaches, and then also even more reader-centered and postmodern, even deconstructive, those post-structuralist approaches and how those might all be integrated into an evangelical approach to interpreting Scripture. It will be one that takes seriously the Bible as God’s word, while at the same time recognizing its historical rootedness as the words of human beings and human authors.

But then there will be a second session asking the question: what might an interpretive methodology look like? What would an approach that gathers up some of these various methods we’ve been discussing, describing, and illustrating, what might an interpretive approach look like? What would an interpretive method look
like?

**General Observations on Methodology**

How do we integrate these various approaches and interpretive theories into an evangelical approach to interpreting the Bible? First of all, I’ll make simply seven or eight observations or comments that are an attempt to reflect the various theories and approaches that we’ve looked at.

**Author’s Intention**

First of all, since the Bible is the word of God; since as Christians we confess that the Bible is inspired Scripture, it’s nothing less than the word of God to his people. Because of that, there must be some meaning that I can get at. There must be another in the text; there must be something outside of myself; a meaning outside of myself; that I can get at to some extent and that I can understand. As I read the Bible, the Bible clearly intends to indicate that God has communicated to his people in a way that he expects his people to not only understand that revelation but also to obey it and put it into practice. If the Bible is something that God expects his people to put into practice and conform their lives to, then there must be some meaning in the text that I can get at, so that complete relativism, that denies any kind of stable meaning misses it. However difficult it may be to get out of that meaning, however provisional or however much we realize that we cannot achieve it perfectly or exhaustively; there must be some kind of meaning that I can get at substantially and to some degree. So it seems that complete relativism is inconsistent with the Bible as the word of God.

Therefore, the author’s intention is still a valid goal; again, however imperfectly it may be arrived at, however much we cannot achieve absolute certainty regarding the author’s intent, however elusive it might appear to be at times. At the same times it appears that it still is a worthy goal and a necessary goal – that we pursue the author’s, at least probable, intention. That is, our interpretation of the text must be justified in light of what the author could have intended and what the author probably intended. Again, although we cannot
perhaps uncover it perfectly or exhaustively, we can substantially and adequately. This does not mean that we uncover the author’s thought process or the author’s mind, especially when we’re dealing with authors that are no longer around to consult. We’ve already looked at the problematic nature sometimes of consulting authors that are still living. But nevertheless, the author’s intention appears to be a worthy goal. Not uncovering the author’s mind but uncovering the author’s probable intention and likely intention based on the text that we have. It is the author’s intention as revealed in the text.

So, it seems that the corollary of understanding the Bible as God’s word is that there must be some meaning that God intended to communicate to his people that he expects them to observe and obey; and that at some level we can get at, however imperfectly or exhaustively. It is a worthy goal to pursue the meaning of the text and the meaning that the author intended to some degree.

**Focus on the Text Itself**

Second, in relationship to understanding the Bible as inspired, going back to one of our earlier sessions, we saw that when we confess that the Bible is inspired we’re primarily focusing on the text itself – the finished product – as nothing less than the very word of God. Whatever human processes that authors went through to write scripture, the end product was nothing less than what God wanted to communicate to his readers. It could be to some extent identified as the first…in some way identified as the very word of God. Since the Bible is the word of God in the written text, the final product is nothing less than the word of God, those methods that focus on the text are valid and to some degree necessary.

That is, methods that focus on, for example, the grammatical dimension of the text (we talked about the grammatical analysis), lexical analysis that deals with the wording of the text, and the lexical inventory, the vocabulary of the text and what that means. Other approaches such as redaction criticism, asks how the author has brought the different forms and sources together and put them together into a coherent whole. Contextual analysis, and literary approaches again, look at
the details of the text and the workings of the text. Genre criticism asks: what kind of text is this? What is the literary form of this text? Those methods that put one in contact with the text; those approaches that deals with the text in itself as it stands, and deal with the details of the text are both valid and necessary. Structuralism fits with the text-centered approaches.

They all put us in context in contact with the biblical text itself. The Bible as a text, which we claim is the word of God, is therefore consistent with approaches that deal with the text itself and look at the details of the text, as opposed to approaches that merely look at the origins of the text and the different sources and the history that produced it. Approaches that deal with the text itself and put us in contact with the text as it stands seem to me to be both valid, necessary and consistent with the Bible as the word of God. The text of the Old and New Testament itself is the word of God to his people.

**Importance of Historical Approaches**

A third implication of what we discussed, and a third principle in integrating these various approaches into an evangelical approach to Scripture that takes seriously the Bible as God’s word is: since the Bible claims to be a record of God’s acts in history, historical approaches are both valid and necessary. That is, approaches that are ahistorical, some literary approaches that are not interested in or even reject the history behind the text, or the historical world outside of the text that the text might refer to, such ahistorical approaches are only interested especially when we looked at a lot of literary approaches that are either not interested or sometimes even reject the historic—especially some approaches that might treat the Bible as purely fictional literature or something like that— they are to be rejected, since the Bible itself claims to be a record or God’s revelatory acts in history, or God’s redemptive acts in history on behalf of his people.

Because of that, historical approaches are both indeed necessary and valid. So, approaches related to historical criticism – that reconstruct the historical background and circumstances (the historical/cultural background) asking
questions of the historicity of the text, doing things like harmonizing the gospels, asking about the validity and the nature of the historical events that are referred to in the biblical text – are necessary because the Bible claims to be a record of God acting in history for and on behalf of his people.

However, we’ve also seen historical approaches need to be tempered by an approach that allows for and is open to divine intervention in history. It must therefore allow for such things as resurrections, and miracles, and God becoming incarnate as a human being, and God’s divine intervention into history. Historical-critical approaches that operate with a cause-and-effect assumption, that do not allow divine intervention and simply see valid historicity as that which is analogous to my modern-day situation; those approaches that simply rule out a supernatural divine intervention are to be rejected and are inconsistent with the biblical text, which again claims to be witness to and record of God’s revelation of himself in history.

So, historical criticism must be tempered by an approach that allows for the supernatural, but on the other hand, as I’ve already said, historical approaches also remind us, then, that any hermeneutical and interpretive approaches that are entirely ahistorical, that is, they deny any historical referentuality referring to a world outside of the text, or approaches that are not interested in the historical dimension of a text, or whether certain individuals actually existed or certain events took place are to be rejected as well. So certain literary-critical, certain narrative approaches would fall under this category. So, as a text that claims to record God acting in history it requires, demands and validates historical approaches to the biblical text.

Use of Various Critical Methods

Fourth, since the Bible is a human document as well, the various criticisms and some of the other approaches are also valuable and necessary. Those approaches that focus on the human author, and the process of composition. So, many of the criticisms, such as form criticism, even source and redaction criticism,
again, historical approaches that try to reconstruct the historical background of the text, the different critical methodologies, when stripped of their destructive and negative assumptions, are valuable tools in that once again they put us in touch with the historical author; with the author of the biblical text. So again, for example, a genre criticism, which focuses on common literary types that the author would have used, we’ve already said redaction criticism explores the way the author takes up sources and forms and edits and arranges them to communicate his theological intention. Those approaches that focus on the author as the one who puts the text together seems likewise therefore to be valid because the Bible claims to be a human document. Again, when stripped of their destructive tendencies or presuppositions, these approaches can be helpful in helping us to deal with the human author and the activity of the author producing the text. So we don’t need to fear critical approaches to the biblical text; again, they seem to be justified because the biblical text is the words of God but also the words of human beings, and so various critical approaches are valid and necessary, when removed from and divorced from the destructive and negative assumptions that sometimes accompany their usage.

**Importance of the Theological Dimension**

Fifth, also because God’s people claim the Bible is the word of God because it is the Scriptures of the Church, we must also explore the theological dimensions of the text. Likewise we need to be cautious of approaches that ignore the theological dimensions of the text. Purely logical approaches or purely literary approaches that do not take into consideration the theological nature of the biblical text are to be avoided.

Instead, we must ask what the text says theologically. We also, as we have seen, must take the Old and New Testament text and place it within the broader overarching story of the Bible, of God’s redemptive activity in behalf of his people and in behalf of all of creation. So the Old and the New Testament have a theological dimension as the Scripture of the church, as the word of God to his
people, that should be explored, and so a theological analysis must be part of the interpretive enterprise.

**Reader Response to Humility and Listening to Others**

Six, even more radical reader response approaches, where meaning is, in a sense, solely in the eyes of the reader, and even more postmodern and deconstructive approaches to the biblical text might still have something to say to Christian interpreters in that they function to chasten the pride and arrogance of the interpreter. Primarily, they can function to foster humility, to recognize that no one arrives at an interpretation that has a pure, perfect and pristine connection with the meaning in the text. It functions to remind us that no one comes to the text void of presuppositions and any theological understandings. No one comes to the text with a blank slate just waiting to be written on. We all come from our own perspectives, and these different – the reader-centered approaches and even deconstructive approaches – can function to remind us that we all come to the text with our predispositions that affect the way we read it. We all see the text through a certain perspective.

Now, I would argue that that does not mean therefore that we are doomed to failure; that we’re simply doomed to find in the text what we bring to it. Instead, using some of the other approaches that were allowed, or that perspective can be challenged and changed. That text can be transformed; we can discover a meaning outside of ourselves, something that is other. But at the same time, these types of approaches serve to remind us that, interpretation is sometimes a messy process. The “author’s intention” or the meaning of the text at times can elude us, and reminds us for the need for humility in interpreting the word of God. There’s no place for arrogance and pride. Also, reminding us of the need to be aware of using interpretations in oppressive ways.

But instead, we come to the text with our own perspectives, but hopefully we allow the text to transform and challenge these perspectives in the interpretive process. So, even more reader-centered and even more deconstructive approaches
can function in a helpful way, in reminding us of the provisional nature of our interpretations at times, reminding us of the need for humility, reminding us of the fact that we approach the text with different assumptions and predispositions. I think that the person who comes to the text aware of that is probably in a much better position to interpret the text and not to allow those perspectives to override the text than someone who simply says “I simply come to the text in an objective way without any presuppositions or biases.” That person is probably in more danger of allowing those to affect and influence the way he or she reads the text.

**Eclectic Approach**

Seventh is: probably the best approach is an eclectic one, that is, all these different methods, even the way I’ve described them, we can see sometimes certain approaches have value (for example, historical/critical approaches have value), but there are also inherent weaknesses if they are applied exclusively to the text, ignoring other interpretive methodologies and other dimensions of the text. So an eclectic approach allows us, as I’ve said, to probe the different dimensions of the text. All these different approaches allow us to get at different facets of the texts. So an eclectic approach allows the different methods to balance each other out. For example, literary approaches are extremely valuable in that they deal with the text as it stands, they deal with the structure of the text, and how the text is put together, the inner workings of the text; but literary approaches at the same time can have inherent weaknesses when they are applied exclusively and exclusive of historical and theological approaches to the text as well. What we’re calling for, in a text, is an approach that is eclectic, in that it allows the different interpretive methods to balance each other out and hopefully come up with the most plausible and the fullest interaction with the text possible.

This might also be the place to say as well that in an approach that is eclectic as possible, it’s important to also listen to the interpretations of others, and listen to what others have said about the text, especially those who come to the text from a very different perspective than us. This is particularly true of those
who are marginalized or come from a certain situations that in fact may indeed be
closer to the situation that the biblical text itself is addressing. Sometimes by
listening to others, who have interpreted the text from a very different perspective,
sometimes that can function to help us see blind spots in our own interpretation. It
can help to challenge us.

Back up to number six, with more reader/response and deconstructive
approaches sometimes it’s listening to interpretations of others that can help
challenge our own, where we might be – our interpretations might be colored by
our own perspective. Again, there’s actually, an offshoot now of more liberation
approaches, liberation theology and liberation exegesis. One of the offshoots of
that – we didn’t spend a lot of time talking about it – is what is called cultural
interpretation, that again interprets the text and reads it from various cultures and
situations. Again, that could often be valuable in at least exposing, our own
narrow-sidedness and how our own perspectives might influence the way we read
the text. Again, with the goal being not simply to value plurality for the sake of
having as many interpretations as possible, but to have perspectives that might be
closer to the actual perspective of the biblical text, that helps us to get closer to
what the author was actually intending.

So all that again is just to say: be aware of and listen to how others have
read the biblical text, and how that might, perhaps, be more in line with the
intention of the text itself in its original historical context.

**Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy**

Then finally, the eighth observation to make regarding all these methods is
since the Bible is the word of God and since as God’s people we confess it is the
word of God, it must ultimately function to transform us. That is, we must respond
in obedience. We must respond to it in the very way called for by Scripture as
God’s word. As sometimes it is put, it’s not enough to understand the Bible, but
we must also stand under the Bible.
So it’s not enough to simply conform to orthodoxy, but it’s important to advocate orthopraxy. In other words, to me it seems to be inconsistent for someone to claim that the Bible is the inspired word of God, yet they actually betray their disbelief in that when they fail to do what it says. So application is the ultimate goal of interpretation.

So, these eight principles I think, seem to me to be some of the broader more general insights derived from looking at all of these previous methodologies and theories (hermeneutical theories) relating to how we approach the biblical text, and I simply try to integrate them into what I see as an evangelical approach to interpreting scripture, that takes seriously the word of God as God’s very revelation, but at the same time the words of human beings and God’s revelation in all of its historical and cultural rootedness.

**Process Description: Hermeneutical Spiral**

Now, what might the process of interpretation look like? Again, my purpose is not to establish a detailed methodology, but to simply, again, try to put this information together in a format that might be useful for actually approaching a biblical text. But two things I want to say:

Number one is – kind of two sides of the same coin – number one is we should avoid looking at this as simply a checklist of things to do, or even a series of steps, as if one can move through them mechanically like one does a recipe, and the end result, then, is the meaning of the text as the author intended it. Or to see it as a series of stages that you do one stage and then you’re done, and you move onto the next stage, and then you’re finished, and then you move on to the next stage, and then you’re finished with that, and you just work through all the steps and your final product is your interpretation of the text. So I want to avoid, on the one hand, a mechanical approach that would simply see this as a series of steps, as in a recipe that is mechanically performed so that you arrive at the end with the end product.
Instead, on the other hand, what I want to say is: On the other hand, the interpretive process is probably best envisioned as many interpreters and discussions of hermeneutics, biblical hermeneutics, have seemed to have gravitated towards, and that is to understand the interpretive process more using the metaphor of a spiral. That is, the interpretive process can be seen more as an interaction with the text, kind of a back and forth. We come to the text, we enter its world, we try to make sense of it, but we do so with our assumptions and our presuppositions and our baggage and our theological background. We try to make sense of the text, we allow the text – as we continue to explore it in its original context – to challenge those assumptions and to transform those perspectives and bring them in line with the text, and so it’s kind of an interaction back and forth that allows us to get closer and closer to the biblical text, and to the meaning of the text as most likely intended by the author in its historical context. Also that means, too, that these different interpretive methods, or stages in the interpretive process, are not ones that we complete and then we’re done with them but they continue to interact with each other and they continue to affect how we do the others. They continually impinge upon the interpretive process.

So again, I think a spiral might be one of the better metaphors we can come up with that would describe the interpretive process of this back and forth continuing to probe the text and allow it to speak and challenge our assumptions with the hopes that we get closer and closer to a plausible reading of the biblical text that conforms to what the author most likely intended and his readers would have understood in the historical context. Those that advocate such a method are clear that this is not a vicious circle, by using the metaphor of a spiral, the spiral gets tighter and tighter as it gets closer to the meaning of the text itself.

So, having said that, what might an interpretive approach look like? Well, first of all what I want to do is discuss again eight and one could develop these in more detail, some might arrange this a little bit differently – I simply try to follow what I find to be sort of a standard, almost logical, way of putting these different
approaches together. So one might arrange these slightly differently, but what I
want to do is simply spell out what I think reflects common interpretive
methodology but seems to be a fairly logical approach as well to applying these
methods to the biblical text.

**Process: 1. Being Aware of Our Own Presuppositions**

Number one is – and hopefully you’ll be able to identify these and draw
connections back to the different methods and approaches that we’ve studied.
Number one is one needs to, first of all, when one comes to a biblical text, identify
and be aware of your presuppositions and your beliefs that might influence the
way you read the text. So ask yourself: what theological commitments do you
bring to the understanding of the text? What specific background, or what specific
cultural background do you bring to understanding the text? What understanding
of this text do you have already that you bring to it? What prior understanding of
this text might you have that could influence the way you read it? What in the text
is unfamiliar to you? Is there anything else that might influence the way that you
read this text?

So this is simply being aware of our own assumptions, our own
background, our own beliefs, and laying that out on the table, because this will
help us to understand the text, but at the same time we need to be aware that these
do influence the way we read it. We need to be open to allowing the text to
challenge those, and be aware of how those might be influencing the way we read
the text.

Before we look at the next one, as an aside (this could be another step) but
more of an assumption of the rest of these approaches or these methods, is that the
assumption is that you will consult several good English translations throughout
the interpretive process, throughout the entire process. I’m assuming no
knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. If one knows Greek and Hebrew, one will
obviously want to work with those texts, but for those that don’t, mainly this
interpretive method is primarily geared to those who have no knowledge of
Hebrew.

2. Historical and Social Background of the Text

So the second step in the interpretive process is to study the social and historical world of the text, that is, one wants to enter the world of the text and try to understand historically, socially, religiously, politically, the context that produced or lies behind the biblical text. There are two things that I think make up part of this interpretive process: number one, you need to study the history behind the text, that is, studying things like the author – everything you could know about the author, everything you could know about the readers, what you could know about things like dates, when that’s important; the apparent purpose of the book, and the problems that are being addressed. Some of this information could be found in the text itself. By reading the biblical text, the Old in New Testament text, one can sometimes infer the situation or find specific references to the author or reader or the purpose of writing. One must also consider any other extra-biblical resources that will help you put together a plausible reconstruction of the history behind the text: what were the historical/cultural factors that the text appears to be addressing? What is the broader historical/cultural context of the biblical text?

And then second, we’ll return to this one, but be aware of the history in the text, that is, specific references to historical or cultural or socio-religious issues or references in the text itself. Beginning to be alert as to how that might make a difference in the way you read the text is significant.

3. Literary Genre

The third stage of the interpretive process is to identify the literary genre, or the form of the text you’re dealing with. What type of literature is it? We talked about various types in the Old Testament, is this narrative? Is this poetry? Is this wisdom literature? Is this prophetic? Is it law and legal literature? Is it epistolary? Is it apocalyptic? Being able to identify the literary genre or the form of the text you’re studying, and then second, be able to identify what interpretive principles
grow out of that literary form? As we’ve seen, every literary form demands that you treat it differently, so that you need to ask what methods particularly will be necessary based on this literary form. What questions, what unique questions should be asked? What principles need to be applied given the literary form?

4. Literary Context

Fourth, is then to study the broader literary context of your passage. We spent some time talking about and giving examples of asking the question: “How does your passage fit within the overall structure and argument of the book?” At this point some people find it helpful to outline the book. I’m all for outlines as long as they are interpretive and as long as they help reveal the structure of the text and what’s going on. So it’s important to understand where your text fits within the broader plan and structure of the book. How does it fit within the author’s main argument in the book? As I’ve said before, this is where it is important to ignore chapter and verse divisions when you’re dealing with a biblical text. As I’ve said numerous times, they’re there simply to help us get to the same place, especially in longer books, but they are not necessarily indicative of divisions in the Bible itself. So you largely have to ignore chapter and verse divisions when it comes to understanding the structure, but attempt to understand how does your passage fit within the overall structure and plan of the book.

But second, how does it relate, more specifically, to what comes before it and what comes after it? How does your text grow out of the section that comes before it, how does it prepare and fit with what comes after it? What would be missing if your text was not there? How does it fit within the argument of the larger section in which it occurs? In my opinion, you are not prepared to go on to the other stages of exegesis until you can answer this question. Any meaning in the text must be coherent with – consistent with – the broader literary context of the work in which it appears.
5. Analysis

The next stage in interpretation, then, is to begin to analyze the details of the text in a sense that you can see logically that interpretation sort of begins broadly, providing the framework and understanding of the text and then narrows down to begin to examine the details of the text. As we’re working through these stages, it’s important to realize that you don’t just complete literary context and drop it and go on to the next stage, but that provides a framework for interpreting the details. Sometimes the details will cause you to go back and revise your understanding of the context and even historical context, that’s part of this hermeneutical spiral of moving back and forth even between the details and the whole of the text that other interpreters have recognized. But with this fifth stage, now we begin to analyze the details of the text itself applying the appropriate methods for the literary genre.

So, for example, identify key terms, or key words for study. We talked about lexical analysis, and examining the vocabulary, the words of the text, and how that can make a difference in meaning, and some of the pitfalls to avoid. Identify key grammatical issues and their function. Here, unless you know Greek and Hebrew, you’ll probably want to rely on a very literal, wooden translation; a formally equivalent translation, but also on commentaries and any other tool that helps expose you to the grammatical features of the text.

Analyzing important connectors: the “and’s” and “but’s” and “therefore’s” and those things that function to show how different sentences or different paragraphs are connected to each other. Identify any other issues and interpretive problems in the text that you need to deal with. What problems or issues do you need to solve before you can arrive at an understanding of the text?

But, as we said, also, it’s important to understand how the literary genre affects the way you examine the details. For example, if I’m dealing with narrative, I will focus more on the relationship of paragraphs, outside of speech and narratives, I probably won’t be quite as concerned with the detailed logical
flow and the tight argument from sentence to sentence or clause to clause; although that can be important. Instead I’ll focus more on the paragraph level and on much larger units of text. Poetry, we said you’ll focus more on things like parallelism and metaphorical speech; letters, you’ll ask the question what was the occasion, for his vote the writing of the letter? Here you’ll more carefully trace the argument from sentence to sentence and clause to clause. With apocalyptic literature you’ll focus more on symbolism, the symbolism in the text and what the symbolism meant, what it referred to. With gospels you’ll utilize tools such as form and redaction criticism, and other tools of narrative analysis such as plot and characters, and those things that you would apply with literary and narrative type approaches. With the Old Testament, you will also ask questions of the use of the Old Testament in the New, whether that’s by direct quotation, or more allusion, or more by way of echo, and ask what the Old Testament text, what the understanding of that text contributes and how the author has used it.

5. Analyzing Textual Details

And finally, within number five, within this stage of analyzing the details of the text, you will also want to consult any commentaries or other helps to help you identify any other details or any other issues in the text that you might have missed. By the way it’s important when you’re examining the details of the text, to always be asking the question, “What difference does this make in reading the text?” It’s not enough to simply unearth the details so that they simply lie there flat on the page. As you’re looking at the vocabulary and the grammar and the connectors and the different features of the genres in the text, and the – when you’re asking the questions of the Old Testament use in the New, in every stage you must continually raise the question “What difference does this make in interpreting the text? What does this contribute to my understanding of the text?” It tells me nothing to just move through and label certain parts of the text or isolate words and their meanings you must continually strive to relate this to the meaning.
of the text itself—what does this contribute to my understanding of the text?

6. Theological Approach

Number six, then, is to analyze the theology of your text. What key themes, what key theological terms or themes are evident in the text? How are they developed in the text? How does your passage contribute to that theme and its understanding? But also ask, how does your text fit within the broader overarching theological story of the Bible? Recognize that the ultimate context for your text is the broader biblical theological canon, consisting of the Old and New Testament that now stand in an organic relationship to each other. So this stage of analyzing the theology of the text is simply to recognize the ultimate final context being the theological broader canonical context of your passage. So, ultimately, you need to ask the question of how your text fits within that story. Where does it fit? How does it relate and contribute to that ongoing story? Reading the New Testament in light of the Old Testament, especially when there are clear allusions or quotations, but also reading the Old Testament ultimately in light of the New Testament, to see how it finally gets fulfilled in the climax of God’s redemptive activity in the person of Jesus Christ.

7. Summarize the Main Idea

Seventh: the seventh stage, then, is to summarize the main idea, in one or two complete sentences. Be able to summarize, synthesizing everything you’ve done up until this point, based on the broader context, the historical background, examining the details of the text, the theological dimension of the text. Now, see if you can summarize your passage by stating the main thrust or the main idea of your text. What exactly is it saying? In one or two complete sentences—not abstract thoughts—but in one or two complete sentences, what do you perceive as the meaning of the text? These sentences should focus on the meaning and function of the text, not the content merely, but should reveal what the text means and how it functions. What is its purpose? It should also account for all the details. All the details in the text should be subsumed under and summarized under
your main summary. It must be specific to the text and not just general. To come up like a general statement that we should obey Jesus or that God wants his people to obey him, that could fit virtually every text in Old and New Testament. So it needs to be specific to that text, as it’s functioning in its context and is consistent with the purpose of that passage. And again, as I’ve said, it must be interpretive. It must focus on the meaning of the text, not merely just repeat and summarize the content. So, until you can do this, you have not yet sufficiently wrestled with the text itself until you can summarize meaning in one or two sentences.

8. Application

Then finally, number eight is you should then reflect on valid application. Maybe I should say you should reflect further on valid application, because number eight is not a step to be tacked on the end, but is the very goal of interpretation. It is something that one is probably already drawing possible corollaries and correspondences between the world of the biblical text and our own world. But ultimately then one needs to, in light of one’s understanding and interpretation of the text, you need to sit down and reflect on valid application. What analogies emerge between the ancient text and the world of the biblical text and our own modern-day world? What principles seem to emerge from the text that might be applied cross-culturally? Are these analogies, these principles or these applications, consistent with the broader context of the biblical text? Are they consistent with the purpose and intention of the text? And then to state specific application for the people of God today, not just individually what one should do, but how one lives out life within God’s people, the church.

So, in concluding the discussion of these interpretive principles in this list, as I’ve said, it’s important to realize that this is not simply a series of eight steps that one works through mechanically, that one simply performs each stage, and then leaves it aside and moves on to the next one, but instead it’s more of a dynamic process. These stages should be distinct as one moves through them, but at the same time you recognize that at times the other stages affect the way you do
one stage, and having performed one stage might require you to go back and review another one. So again, it’s a constant interaction with the text, like a spiral as we attempt to come closer and closer to the meaning of the text, as most likely intended by the author in its original historical and literary context.

**Creativity**

At the same time, too, I think it’s important to add that when we interpret the text, we do so in a way that demands creativity. Again, the other side of merely treating this as like doing a recipe, moving through the eight stages, is that interpretation requires to some extent the creativity of the interpreter. It depends on your ability and your creativity, not so much in creativity in coming up with wild or different meanings, but your ability to creatively and insightfully apply these methods to the biblical text.

So at the end of the day the goal then is to arrive at a plausible interpretation; one that is consistent with what the author most likely intended, and one that is consistent with the historical/cultural context of the biblical text. One that is consistent with the literary context of the text, of the biblical text, one that reflects the theology of the text, and one that equips the church to live out its life in the world, one that equips the interpreter to live out his or her live in the world and in the church.

So I’m convinced an interpretive process such as the one just outlined at least provides us with a starting point of beginning methodology that will help us to engage the biblical text in a way that will help us to understand it in the way that God intended through his human authors to communicate his revelation to his people, whether it was in the first century, or earlier, or whether it was God’s people today.