

### III. GENERAL MECHANICS BEHIND INTERPRETATION Virgil Warren, PhD

The “big three” in interpretation are (1) the law of harmony, (2) the law of contrast, and (3) the nature of the case. All three amount to one thing—the law of harmony, but we sort them out to stress the peculiar contribution each aspect makes to the whole.

#### A. Law of harmony (analogy)

Two things or two ideas can have varying degrees and kinds of relationship. From one extreme to the other is (1) what is positively determined by something else,

- (2) what fits with something else,
- (3) what is relevant to something else,
- (4) what is foreign to something else,
- (5) what works against something else,
- (6) what is incompatible with something else.

The “law of harmony” in interpretation deals with the first three entries in this list.

The law of harmony equals the “law of context”; it deals with consistency. It asks who is speaking, who is addressed, when something is said, where it is said, what the topic is. Consistency is one test of proper interpretation, although it is a negative test rather than a positive one. A negative test eliminates some error but does not guarantee truth. Consistency is a characteristic of truth, but something may be consistent with known facts without being true. Context relates to the piece of writing (near and distant context), the historical background, and the reality discussed.

Three dots cannot fit with a straight line, but they could fit with a circle, a triangle, and square, and other figures.

(a) Near context (circumstance), which means the immediate subject of discussion—what the author is talking about.

An example of near context comes from Mark 15:47. In the Greek, the reader cannot tell from the context whether “*Mary the \_\_\_\_\_ of Joses*” was his mother or his wife except by distant context in 15:40: “*Mary the mother of James the Less and Joses.*”

(b) Distant context (collation) refers to a widening series of surroundings: the rest of the book, the rest of this author’s writings, the rest of the New Testament, the rest of revelation, the total Christian understanding (what harmonizes with the whole of scripture; note the expression “analogy of scripture”). Distant context brings into view the nature of scripture. If parts of the gospels, for example, are pieced together from all kinds of sources, the resulting crazy quilt cannot provide a context for individual pieces. All we can say is that the redactor saw some connection between the “pieces” when he put them together as the scribes may have done when they “copied out” Solomon’s proverbs and arranged them into the book by that name.

(c) Cultural context means the historical situation at the time of writing, including customs (*Sitz im Leben*).

(d) The nature of the case as learned from experience (Note “gestalt.”)

Consistency applies to (a) the compatibility of ideas and (b) the compatibility of reasoning patterns (“by parity of reason”). A principle of interpretation that cannot be applied consistently should not be applied at all (cp. *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 386-87). Circumstance (context), collation (with other texts), and application belong together. (See “Philosophical and Religious Dimensions of the American Founding,” by Ellis Sandoz in *The Intercollegiate Review* XXX [2, 1995], 38.)

Harmony relates to the biblical-systematic hermeneutic discussed in “Appropriating Scripture.”

**\*\*A concrete example of context appears in the routing of roads in southeastern Kansas. At one point, a driver is on West 57, East 160, and North 69 all at the same time. A similar thing happens near Russellville, Arkansas, and other places. Context shapes the meaning of terms because the contextual subject shifts a word from one application to another. The word *drink* used intransitively means to drink liquor; transitively it means whatever liquid specified by the direct object. *Affair* in the context of a man-woman relationship means sexual involvement by married persons; otherwise, it means any occurrence with something of a negative tone.**

The need for consistency in interpretation can show up in seemingly innocuous matters. **\*\*For example, if we suppose that the twelve were included in the seventy, we implicitly commit ourselves to the possibility of apostasy, because Judas is called the Son of perdition even though Jesus told the seventy when they returned that they should rejoice because their names were written in heaven.**

“Foreign to the context” means that, while not contradictory to what is said, a suggested idea does not arise from the surrounding text. It does not belong with the subject at hand. Statements should be understood in a way that most enhances the flow of thought. In Hebrews 7:8, for example, Christ as the object of tithing brings in an element foreign to the writer’s flow of thought: “*There, one of whom it is witnessed that he lives,*” i.e., Melchizedek.

Keeping statements connected with their contexts helps avoid the problem of “proof-texting.” Statements detached from their setting take on plausible meanings, because the discussion forms a new context that shapes their meaning. Proof-texting is illegitimate because it uses a statement irrespective of its context and noted subject. New content is poured into the extracted words by virtue of the external thought construction of the interpreter; they are “re-contextualized.” **Genesis 2:3, written to Jews, can be combined with Hebrews 4:8 to prove that Saturday is the day Christians should use for worship. Malachi 3:10, written again to Jews, is often misused to show that Christians are expected to tithe.**

Proof-texting comes from taking statements in more than one way. **For example, someone might say, “Everyone falls short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The sentence can mean two things: first, at some time or other every person sins. (The characteristic present means that it happens characteristically to everybody.) Second, people continue to**

fall short of the glory of God. (The characteristic present lies in the ongoing pattern within the same person.) The first is distributive; the second is characteristic. Both ideas are possible ways of understanding Paul's statement. Readers automatically choose one or the other meaning, depending on the topic in mind when they read it. The first one comes to mind if a person is concerned with the universal need for salvation. The second comes to mind if a person wants to argue against perfectionism.

Proof-texting does not refer to combining material from various authors and "lines of tradition" within scripture, because scripture derives essentially from one Author. It refers to applying a text to a subject the reader brings to it in contrast to the subject already there in the context.

The importance of historical context for interpretation can be seen in the gospels because contemporary Judaism anticipated a political Messianic kingdom. As a result, Jesus' statements probably contrast with that belief wherever it is natural to do so—at least more so than he would without that realization. Furthermore, since Jesus' ministry occurred during the jurisdiction of the Mosaic law, some of his statements were directed to the Jews in that setting, but they were not intended to apply to non-Jewish Christians in the church age (cp. "what it means" above under "meaning of *interpret*").

The law of harmony involves taking the ambiguous in the light of the clear. Statements in certain passages could be taken in the way someone is suggesting, but that understanding would controvert clear teaching elsewhere. Harmony involves treating the situational in light of the general, situational being either local *vs.* general or temporary *vs.* permanent. Both situational possibilities are Paul's directives on women's roles at home and church. Situations may be exceptional because they bring in fundamental considerations that warrant overriding normal procedure. Situations may be exceptional because practical considerations dictate expediency considerations that would not apply to most cases.

### 1. Analogy of scripture

*"Scripture interprets scripture."* How the New Testament handles Old Testament texts is a case in point. In some parables Jesus explains the meaning. Other places in scripture deal with the same topic, as in the case of Paul's doctrine of faith and works, found both in Romans and Galatians. "Analogy of scripture" means that different texts treat an issue the same way. It means letting the rest of revelation influence the understanding of this part that might be unclear in itself. It means not treating passages in isolation from each other.

### 2. Gestalt

*"The whole is more than the sum of its parts."* Part-to-whole relationship has a qualifying effect on the potential meaning of a statement because it "shaves off" possible ways of taking an expression and limits it to what fits with the big picture. The whole is not before the parts or the parts before the whole. The whole and the parts are equally present; the parts make up the whole and the whole shapes the force of the parts and gives them coherence. **One recurring problem in Bible study is trying to work with parts aside from the whole.** Perhaps chapter and verse divisions foster this difficulty. Bible studies can be

structured around reading one verse and commenting on it, reading the next and commenting on it.

### 3. Examples of decontextualization and recontextualization

Texts are not to be read as if each verse were a proverb and for that reason amounted to a generality. Proverbs are short, pithy sayings that do not form part of a running context. They are “one-liners.” But most literary genres are not of that sort nor are they to be handled in that way.

**\*\*Preachers can take “the foolishness of preaching” (1 Corinthians 1:21) to mean pulpit proclamation and then use it to “plug” the located ministry. Actually, the foolishness has to do with the thing preached—the message, not the work of preaching.**

**\*\*\*“the whole gospel” (Acts 20:27)**

(1) Interpreters sometimes use this expression to contrast themselves with others who do not consider water baptism to be connected with salvation.

(2) Others use this phrase to advocate seeking the tongue-speaking Experience (glossolalia).

(3) Still others use it in reference to the doctrine of entire sanctification.

(4) Paul probably meant the whole gospel he preached in contrast to the Judaizers’ claim that Gentiles needed to do more—they needed to become Jews by being circumcised and keeping the Law of Moses. Perhaps he meant his gospel in contrast to Gnostic claims to have secret knowledge.

### 4. Correlative terms

In cases of “correlative terms,” the sense in which one term in a set is meant is the sense also in which the other term in the pair is meant:

father-son (physical or spiritual)

prophecy-fulfillment

faith-works

teach-learn (1 Corinthians 14:35; 1 Timothy 2:11)

lost-saved

healed-diseased

headship-submission: In this subject “head” cannot mean source rather than authority, as some suppose, because source does not contrast naturally with submit.

spirit-flesh: if transcendent, then imminent; if figurative, then literal; if intangible, then tangible; if incorruptible, then corruptible

speak in languages—interpret languages; ἐρμηνεύω [*hermēneuō*] means “translate” when paired with γλῶσσα (*glōssa*).

Adam-Christ

revelation-illumination

### B. Law of negation (dialectic)

The law of negation is also called the “law of opposition,” the “law of contrast,” the “law of contradiction,” the “law of exclusion.” The law of negation means that statements are clearest when seen in contrast to parallel alternatives. What a term contrasts with shapes what it means, because it is placed in a common larger category with what it negates. As a result, the law of negation is an aspect of the law of harmony.

There is always a need to read writings in light of their intended alternatives. (a) This approach is natural in all uses of human language by the very nature of how thought and language. The requirements of a specific communication are often more precise than the verbiage current in the language; so speakers rely on context to specialize the meaning of what they say. More than that, (b) in the New Testament many books are a problem-solution writing. They were written to correct difficulties in churches. Those errors and difficulties are that over against which the books’ statements are to be understood.

The law of contrast affects statements and concepts. It affects the way people emphasize words in a text, and it affects the way they conceptualize particular ideas. English speakers indicate that they are intentionally contrasting by stressing the specific word and raising the pitch somewhat.

One reason truths new to people are so “meaningful” is that they can still feel the contrast with the misunderstandings they had before.

Non-instrumentalist writers use “the law of exclusion” and combine it with “necessary inference” in arguing that silence amounts to prohibition in matters of worship.

## 1. English examples of the law of contrast

**\*\*cash vs. check, or charge, or coins, or bartering  
credit vs. cash, debit, discredit**

The return address corner of the return envelope for *World Book Direct Marketing* (annual volume) used to say, “Please Print.” That does not mean that a payer cannot use a return address sticker. We conclude that from the nature of the case and the common knowledge that handwriting is often illegible; the direction reads as it does in contrast to illegibility.

**\*\*“*Worship at the church of your choice.*” “*In America we can worship as we please.*”** People miss the point if say, “*No, worship at the church of God’s choice*”; “*No, worship as God pleases.*” The sentences stand in contrast with governmental control of worship or are intended as encouragements to worship—you are free to do so wherever you decide. They are not calculated to contrast with a desire for truth or divine preference.

**\*\*hard vs. soft, or easy, or slightly (“*I worked hard*”; “*I turned the wheel hard to the left.*”), or insensitive (“*He is a hard man.*”)**

**\*\*old vs. new, or young, or different, or fresh, or modern (rather than traditional)**

**\*\*“Come in!” (allowance) vs. “Come in!” (command)**

**\*\*“Help yourself” (allowance) vs. “Help yourself” (nobody else will)**

**\*\*“Nights are for sleeping.” (vs. “sacking out” in the daytime)**

**“Nights are for sleeping.” (vs. working)**

**\*\*“What in the world are you doing?”** The statement can be read with

different meanings by stressing a different word each time.

- \*\*government furtherance of religion vs. no state church, or allowing religion an open forum
- \*\*basketball vs. softball, or make-it-take-it
- \*\*“Use India ink.” vs. other kinds of ink, or in contrast to typing
- \*\*street light: walk vs. run, or do not walk
- \*\*practical vs. impractical, or theoretical
- \*\*parking vs. standing, or no parking
- \*\*“Print your name.” vs. write, or type
- \*\*right vs. wrong, or left

## 2. Biblical examples of the law of contrast

In Bible reading, it is important to stress the right words. Stressing a word (a) changes the meaning, (b) shows that it is important, and (c) draws attention to it as the point of contrast. Since reading passages with different stresses can shape interpretation significantly, readers must decide whether the statement is contrastive or positive; and if contrastive, which segment should receive the emphasis to mark the contrast.

\*\*Genesis 1:11, 12, 21, 24, 25: “after their kind” vs.

- (1) speciation (non-evolutionary change)
- (2) getting grapes from thorns and figs from thistles
- (3) God’s having to create new ones directly when old ones wear out

\*\*Genesis 2:3 should read with a stress on seventh rather than no stress at all: “*Therefore, God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it because in it he rested from all his work that God had created and made.*” Moses wrote this as a comment into his account of the creation from the standpoint of his own chronological perspective, not from the time perspective of the creation event. The reason there was a rest day was to memorialize of the exodus (Deuteronomy 5:15); the manner of observing it (how) was on the analogy of the presentation about God’s creation rest. Without the emphasis, the text more easily lends itself to the meaning Sabbatarians associate with it, namely, that the reason for the rest day as well as the manner of observing the rest day both derive from the creation event; so it is permanently to be observed.

\*\* Proverbs 23:23 is not a basis for not charging for *Christian literature*. “Not sell it” contrasts with “buying it,” a figure for getting it. Selling means getting rid of it rather than not charging for it.

\*\*Ezekiel 18:20: “*The soul that sins will die*” vs. “*The soul that sins will die.*”

\*\*Matthew 2:4 should probably read, “[Herod] *asked [all the chief priests and scribes] where the Christ would be born.*” The Magi had simply asked where the “king of the Jews” had been born. Herod evidently thought of the Messiah when they used that phraseology, although “king of the Jews” may have been understood as a messianic title: it is the same expression Pilate put as the superscription on the cross later (Matthew 27:37, 29, 42; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19).

\*\*Matthew 5:38-42: turn the other cheek vs. (1) self-protection/pacifism, or (2) a pugnacious spirit/aggression. In Matthew 5:39 “*turning the other cheek*” contrasts with the law of revenge. The notion of pacifism is possible only if you take the expression as a



positive statement without making it a corrective on “eye for an eye” used to justify revenge. “*Turning the other cheek*” means pacifism if you put it in that context, but Jesus’ frame of reference is social relationships, where revenge does not belong.

\*\*Matthew 6:2, 5, 16; Luke 6:24: “*Do not pray like the Pharisees; they have their reward*” vs. “*They have their reward.*” The last option may fit best with the Luke 6:24 parallel.

\*\*Matthew 6:4, 6, 16: Doing righteousness in secret contrasts with doing it to be seen by other people. The statements are not calculated to forbid public prayer, public giving, or group fasting. “To be seen” shows that Jesus is concerned about the motive. Doing these righteous acts in secret would avoid that problem; it is the motive that a person would have in doing it in secret that should be present in public as well.

\*\*Matthew 23:15: “. . . make a Gentile twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.” vs. “. . . make a Gentile twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.” The point is not that the Gentiles are saved in their ignorance.

\*\*Matthew 24:36: “. . . but of that day and hour” vs. “. . . but of that day and hour.” “That day and hour” evidently refers to the day and hour of the second coming in contrast to the time of the destruction of Jerusalem. The contrast is not with 24:41, 44, because “day and hour” are in the same context as a combination (24:36 + 50). The contrast is not then between a general time and a specific “day and hour.”

\*\*Matthew 28:18: go vs. stay, or come, or wait (for the world to come to you)

\*\*Mark 10:45: ransom for many vs. all, or one (Romans 5:18; Mark 10:45), or few (Matthew 22:14; Revelation 17:14; 2 Peter 1:10)

\*\*Luke 15:29: “*You never gave me a kid that I might make merry with my friends.*” vs. “*You never gave me a kid that I might make merry with my friends*” (the correct reading since the father had not given the prodigal a calf).

\*\*Luke 17:20: “*The kingdom of God does not come with observation*” vs.

(1) invisible kingdom that a person cannot see come

(2) military-type kingdom observably established by military means and having geographical dimensions

\*\*Luke 22:15: “*I have certainly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer . . . because . . . I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.*” At least conceptually emphasizing this differentiates between this Passover and the previous ones because it was his last one and was so near to his own sacrificial suffering.

\*\*John 1:9: “*He was the true light that enlightens every man*” (vs. some other savior); “He was the true light that enlightens every man” (vs. limited atonement); “*He was the true light that enlightens everyone*” (a positive, non-contrasting statement that depicts the Word as light).

\*\*John 3:16: God loved the world vs. heaven, or Jews only (Calvinistic interpretation)

The following context individualizes the affirmation: “*he that believes*” (3:18); “*people loved darkness*” (3:19); “*everyone that does evil*” (3:20); “*he that does truth*” (3:21). Jew-Gentile is not a contextual distinction; hence, there is no basis for bringing it into the context.

\*\*In John 6:44 the stress needs to be kept on Father in contrast to being drawn by someone else. The issue here is who is doing the drawing—the Father or the devil; so the stress does not fall on draw as to if to imply that you cannot come if God does not decide to

draw you or make you able to be drawn: “No one can come to me except the Father that sent me draw him” (but note 6:65). Draw contrasts with drive. (Note concept of leadership.)

\*\*John 14:9: “Have I not been so long time with you, Philip, and you have not seen me? He that has seen me has seen the Father.” vs. “He that has seen me has seen the Father.” The latter reading makes it sound more like Jesus and the Father are the same one. Jesus’ point with Philip, however, is that seeing Jesus is as good as seeing the Father. If a person has seen him, he knows close enough what the Father is like; he knows as well as a person could know in this life what deity is like.

\*\*When Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27 say “baptized in/into (the name of) Jesus/Christ,” they are making positive statements rather than contrastive ones. Consequently, they are not to be put in opposition to Matthew 28:18-20. Particularly is this true of Acts 8:16: “only they had been baptized in the name of Jesus” (Does “only” go with Jesus or with baptized?) vs. receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:16), or baptism of John (Acts 19:5), or not being baptized (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27). Obviously, at the very general level, “baptism into the name of Jesus Christ” means identification with Christ in contrast to all other parallel possibilities; but baptism into the name of the Father or baptism into the name of the Spirit is not a parallel possibility since Father-Son-Spirit are one, or at one.

\*\*Romans 1:27: “. . . leaving the natural use of the woman” vs. “. . . leaving the natural use of the woman.” The latter is the preferred reading because Paul is dealing with homosexuality. *Natural* is a non-restrictive adjective in this case.

\*\*Romans 5:12ff.: “Adam” is not a biological category because it contrasts with Christ/“Second Adam,” which is not a biological category. Consequently, Paul does not say or assume or imply that men are physically born into “Adam” any more than they are physically born into “Christ.”

\*\*Romans 8:39 should be read “. . . nor any other creature” rather than “nor any other creature,” because the contrast is not between kinds of creatures.

\*\*Romans 12:18 says, “As much as lies in you, live at peace with all men” (read as indicating that since two parties are involved, one party cannot guarantee peace). Read without emphasis, the statement simply exhorts readers to try as hard as they can to live at peace with all men by not taking vengeance, and so on. Read with this emphasis, the passage assumes that Paul recognized that a relationship problem cannot be solved entirely from one side.

\*\*Romans 14:7: people do not live or die to themselves equals a comment on the fact that we know each other is watching

= we do not live merely as we please

\*\*Romans 15:12: “And again Isaiah says . . .” The emphasis should not go on again because the previous quotation is not from Isaiah, but from the Psalms.

\*\*1 Corinthians 7:15: “in such cases” vs. “in such cases” (7:11 remain unmarried; 7:15 means “is not bound in such cases” so as to imply that when the unbeliever leaves, the believer is not bound in contrast to when the believer leaves. The believer is bound in such cases if he initiates the leaving.)

\*\*1 Corinthians 7:27 says, “Are you loosed from a wife?” Is it loosed vs. bound meaning divorced-unmarried, or simply unmarried.

\*\*1 Corinthians 11:21: “Drunken” (μεθύει, *methyei*) contrasts with hungry and associated with both eating and drinking; hence, it may mean “satiated” or “stuffed.”



\*\*1 Corinthians 14:17: “You are giving thanks all right, but the other person is not being edified.” With the stress on you the text makes a point of the difference between the tongue speaker’s meaningful communication and the lack of meaningfulness going on in the hearer. The pronoun is separately expressed in the original.

\*\*In 1 Corinthians 14:19, 35 does “in church” contrast with “at home,” “in private,” or “in evangelism”?

\*\*1 Corinthians 15:7 recounts, “Then he appeared to James and then to all the apostles” vs. “. . . all the apostles.” All is stressed if James is considered among the apostles; otherwise, apostles is stressed.

\*\*1 Corinthians 15:44: physical vs. spiritual

\*\*2 Corinthians 5:8 puts faith in contrast to sight (cp. Hebrews 11:1-3, 7, 27; 1 Peter 1:8), not knowledge as if the issue were a matter of degree of certainty rather than one of epistemology.

\*\*Ephesians 4:5: one baptism vs. (1) one baptism for Jews and one for Gentiles

(2) three modes of baptism

(3) trine baptism

(4) baptism in the Holy Spirit

(5) baptism of suffering/baptism of blood

\*\*Colossians 1:20: “. . . in him to reconcile all things” vs. “. . . in him to reconcile all things”

\*\*1 Timothy 2:11-12: be in quietness vs. have dominion

\*\*1 Timothy 5:1-2: elderly women vs. elders who are men, or younger women. The contrast is specified as being between πρεσβυτέραις (*presbyterās*, older) and νεωτέραις (*neōterās*, younger); hence *presbyterās* (older women) is not in contrast to *presbyterous* (older men) but in contrast to those who might be called sisters vs. mothers. “. . . older women as mothers and younger women as sisters.” The contrast is not between women and men (elders) or between mothers and sisters. It is a matter of age that informs the contrasts.

\*\*2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All scripture, given by inspiration of God, (is) also profitable.” vs. “All scripture given by inspiration of God is also profitable.”

\*\*Hebrews 6:5: “tasted of the heavenly gift” vs. (1) swallow

(2) imperceptive experience

\*\*“Everyone that loves is begotten by God” (1 John 4:7). Putting stress on love makes a contrast here with the emphasis on knowledge as found in Gnosticism. The person who puts emphasis on love rather than knowledge is the one that is saved. It is the “lover” not the “knower” who is saved. Without stress the text would make a positive, non-contrastive statement that implies that all those who love are saved people. When we say that those who love are begotten by God rather than those who know, we do not mean to say that all who love are begotten by God. When we say that something is true (salvation) of a category (loving) in contrast to another category (unloving), we do not mean to say that every example in that category (loving) has that characteristic (salvation). John’s comment about love could apply to the Stoic or Encratic type of Gnosticism as well, because distancing themselves from the material realm translated psychologically into a superiority attitude, hence, the relevance of comments about hate, despair, looking down on a brother (who

marries, *e.g.*). In the direction of Epicurean, or libertine, Gnosticism, the love corrective ties in with the notion that being begotten by God means a person does not characteristically sin, whereas among libertines the “regenerated ones” were not concerned about ceasing from characteristic sinning.

\*\*In Hebrews 5-7 the recurring quotation of Psalm 110:4 receives a different stress at different times when the Hebrew writer uses it: *priest* is stressed in 5:6, 10; *Melchizedek*, in 6:20; *forever*, in 7:17; and *swore*, in 7:21.

\*\*faith *vs.* works faith *vs.* works (Paul: works of law *vs.* trust in a person)

faith as a work (John 6:29)

faith and works (James 2: works [doing] *vs.* believing) James is not contrasting two kinds of faith—one that works *vs.* one that does not. Consequently, James’ point should not be read as dealing with a faith that works (*vs.* one that does not work), but as dealing with faith alone *vs.* faith and works together.

faith as inclusive of action (Luke 16:10)

\*\*spirit *vs.* (1) letter (intended meaning of words?): 2 Corinthians 3:6

(2) soul: 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 4:12

(3) real: 1 Corinthians 5:3

(4) Father and Son: John 14:16

(5) flesh: Galatians 5:16-24; 6:8. “*Walk by the spirit and you will not be fulfilling the desires of the flesh,*” and so on.

(6) understand: 1 Corinthians 14:15

1 Corinthians 15:50: Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, but people can receive a spiritual body.

Galatians 4:21-31: The Hagar-Sarah contrast parallels a law-grace and flesh-spirit contrast.

John 3:3-15: born of the water/spirit *vs.* born of the flesh

Matthew 26:41: “*the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*”

When *spirit* contrasts with Father and Son, it is natural to capitalize it. When it stands in contrast to *letter*, *soul*, *real*, and *flesh*, it is best not to capitalize it.

The spirit-flesh contrast encompasses physical and political (Israel) and legal (works) because a political nation operates by a legal system and physical people make it up. Much of the use of *spirit* in the New Testament ends up amounting to interpersonal. The Great Commission is, then, a directive to proclaim a message to people so as to win them by persuasion rather than a commission to make war on the nations to force them to become followers of the true God.

James 5:13-20 has been taken by some to mean a contrast between praying for physical healing yourself *vs.* calling the elders of the church for misfortune in circumstances or spiritual condition.

\*\*Matthew regularly substitutes “kingdom of heaven” for “kingdom of God” in the other synoptics perhaps to emphasize the non-political nature of the Messianic kingdom (“heaven” could also be a euphemism for “God”; note Luke 15:18, 21).

\*\*Israel *vs.* Egypt, or Esau, or Judah, or church

\*\*hate *vs.* love: hate = a negative term (ex. Jacob I loved; Esau I hated;  
hate = neutral term Jacob loved Rachel, hated Leah;

Love God; hate father and mother.)

The two alternatives have in common the lack of psychologically being drawn to a person. Antonyms are used to affirm the lesser rather than the opposite.

\*\*In *De magistro I*, Augustine fails to apply the law of contrast properly when he takes the secret closet to mean the mind, despite Jesus' contrasting it with praying on the street corner.

\*\*In the Golden Rule (which equals the Second Great Commandment), love includes both inner and outer factors: the attitude of the heart and the characteristic behavior that issues from it. Paul's ode to love in 1 Corinthians 13 indicates the patterns of behavior that flow from the right inner disposition.

### One of two big issues in the New Testament is

**\*\*(1) the nature of the kingdom as interpersonal vs. political (the Jewish expectancy/legal).** Jesus' parables of the kingdom contrast with the prevailing view of Judaism, which Jesus was trying to correct through storytelling. The kingdom of heaven is to be received as a little child in contrast to military-political process and trying to enter into the kingdom of heaven by force. People cannot bring in the Messianic kingdom by force; they cannot establish it militarily. "*Everybody since John is trying to take the kingdom by force*" contrasts with receiving it the way a little child receives things. As per the law of opposition, the kingdom of heaven is interpersonal in kind, operation, origin, and growth (influence). These features contrasted with Jewish expectancy of a kingdom that was of a political sort, carried on by legal processes, and established and spread by military operations. In one kingdom parable, Jesus told about a man that planted seed but did not know how it grew and bore fruit. In contrast to military expansion, the spread of the gospel is natural, somewhat automatic, and in a way mysterious. It goes forward by degrees (vs. a military takeover at a given time) both in its spread and depth; its spread is a mystery ("knows not how"), deliberate (planted the seed), yet automatic (bears fruit of itself).

**\*\*(2) the nature of salvation as interpersonal vs. epistemological/ontological (Gnosticism/informational).** The interpersonal vs. political nature of the Messianic kingdom in *ecclesiology* correlates with salvation by faith vs. works in *soteriology*. People's being in the kingdom and their place within the kingdom are not the result of force. Appropriately, circumcision was a physical mark of membership in a physical-political-national kingdom, but baptism as an act of faith for identifying with Christ is the correlating mark of membership in a spiritual-interpersonal kingdom.

\*\*Γῆ (*gē*) vs. *sea* is translated "land."

Γῆ vs. *sun* is translated "earth."

\*\**Heaven* vs. *earth* means "sky." In contrast to sky, it means "God's dwelling place."

\*\*The Bible contains some rhetorically nice statements of contrast, especially in the Book of Hebrews: 1:1-2; 7:16; 9:13-14.

3. Words and phrases can be used positively rather than contrastingly; a statement may be positive rather than restrictive. They are positive in the sense that they are not consciously contrastive or restrictive. A positive statement implies nothing about whether the point made is also true outside the category the speaker is addressing. When speakers stress a word or sentence element not meant to be stressed, they commit the "fallacy of accent." By stressing the word, they make it contrastive and therefore restrictive (vs. non-

restrictive) and technical. Interpreters have to distinguish restrictive and non-restrictive statements. They do so by the law of harmony plus the nature of the case. The issue applies to non-restrictive nouns, adjectives, adverbs as well as relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and prepositional phrases.

**\*\*Proverbs 13:24:** “Spare the rod and spoil the child” (the idea that parents should use a rod instead of a paddle or switch when disciplining their children)

**\*\*Proverbs 22:6:** “*Train up a child in the way he should go . . .*” vs.

*“Train up a child in the way he should go . . .”*

This verse has been used to say that a person should not try to make a child into a personality type that is not natural for the child. There is not a separate pronoun expressed in the Hebrew for *he*. Whatever may be true about this idea, it is not the point of the text.

During the period of the divided kingdom, Israel became the technical term for the northern kingdom and Judah became the technical term for the southern kingdom. Outside of this setting, however, there is no reason to suppose an intended distinction between the terms.

**\*\*Jeremiah 7:22** says, “*I did not speak to your fathers about sacrifices when I brought them out of Egypt.*”

**\*\*“You have oppressed the stranger wrongfully”** (Ezekiel 22:29). Oppressing a stranger could not be other than wrong. “Wrongfully” re-enforces the idea carried already in the verb.

**\*\*Matthew 5:43:** “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*” vs.

(1) personal enemy

(2) non-Jew (Parable of the Good Samaritan)

(3) neighbors (The idea is supposed to be that the Christian should select one neighbor and concentrate on that person as the object of love.)

(4) “*Love your neighbor as yourself*” as a non-contrasting statement.

The second great commandment was originally given within the framework of the nation of Israel. To use it then in contrast to Gentiles is foreign to the frame of reference; that is, non-Jews are not in view at all. Obviously, the singular is not in contrast to a plural; it is a positive rather than contrastive statement. Jesus means “neighbor” in a kind-of-person sense rather than as an identity.

**\*\*Acts 2:29** could be read “*and his [David’s in contrast to Christ’s] tomb is with us to this day.*”

**\*\*Acts 19:2:** “*Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?*” vs.

“*Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?*” (taken to argue that a person can also receive the Holy Spirit before or after baptism). Paul is referring to some time back; hence, he is not contrasting times that are very close together as would be the case between the time of believing and the time of being baptized.

The “we” passages in Acts do not imply that the author was with Paul only on the occasions where “we” occurs,

**\*\*Romans 1:27:** “*the natural use of the woman*”

**Romans 16:16:** Culture-bound imperatives are all non-restrictive statements: “Salute each other with a holy kiss.”

\*\*1 Corinthians 11:7: Man is in the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of the man. Is woman not in the image of God? Is woman indirectly in the image of God because of being created after and from the man? Genesis 1:26-27 seems to put image at the corporate level; Paul would be putting it at the individual level.

\*\*Theologians sometimes use 1 Corinthians 15:3 to argue for limited atonement: “*Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures*” (vs. dying for everyone’s sins). That contrastive take is by no means a necessary reading of the verse; consequently, it is by no means a basis for espousing “definite atonement.”

\*\*2 Corinthians. 6:14: “*Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers.*” The point is not that we can be equally yoked with them, but that being yoked with unbelievers is an unequal situation.

\*\*Ephesians 5:19: “*Speaking to one another in hymns . . . making melody in your heart*”

\*\*1 Timothy 3:8: “*not given to much wine*” vs. a little wine is okay (for deacons)—not a contrasting statement

\*\*Does 1 Timothy 5:23 forbid the use of anything but wine for stomach troubles and infirmities?

\*\*1 Timothy 6:17-21: “*Charge them that are rich in the present world that they not . . . have their hope set on uncertain riches*” (KJV). The commandment is not calculated to approve sure-fire investments only.

Hebrews 12:1: “*lay aside . . . the easily besetting sin*” surely means to lay aside sin, which so easily besets us, not just the sin that easily besets and let the rest go. Sin easily besets in the real testing times of life.

\*\*“*To the one that knows to do good and does not do it—it is sin*” (James 4:17). Restrictively read, this passage implies that only those who know to do good have sin reckoned against them. Non-restrictively read, it might mean that the author has the knowing-to-do-good people in mind and those not knowing are simply not in mind for the moment. He may mean it is doubly natural for the knowing to be regarded as sinners.

Does James 5:14 forbid calling a doctor when we are sick? It says call the elders of the church.

\*\*Revelation 1:1, 4, 9-10: John the prophet vs. John the elder (2 John 1; 3 John 1). This passage represents a technical vs. general usage of terms *prophet* and *elders*. Decisions on this point here affect the authorship question on the Apocalypse.

\*\*Situations can also be contrastive or non-contrastive. An adult Bible class voted to send \$100 to a campus ministry. A couple months earlier they had voted to send \$50 to a Christian college. That does not mean they appreciated the campus ministry more than the college, because the one situation was not decided in light of the other. Such cases can offend people unnecessarily because they read them as “put-downs”; they “take it personally.”

\*\*“*He brought his ‘young’ wife to church with him.*”

“*He bought his ‘beautiful’ wife a rose.*”

\*\*“*Young people ought to pay attention to adults, who know what young people are up against.*” vs.

“*Young people ought to pay attention to adults who know what young people are up against.*”



*\*\* “Disregard the first two false readings.”* This sign appeared on the heart-rate meter at Kansas State University’s recreation complex. The sign meant to disregard the first two readings; they would be false; hence, it had a non-contrastive, or non-restrictive, use of *false*.

#### 4. Relative/limited/restrictive negative (“the existential fallacy”)

Relative negative and absolute negative are often worded the same way. It happens in biblical as well as everyday speaking: (1) “a-not-b” has the sense of (2) “not so much a as b” or (3) “not only a but b also.” Relative negative is often cast in the form of absolute negative. By the nature of the case, the hearer can usually tell that the meaning does not match the form of expression. Sometimes *a* bears a part-to-whole relationship with *b*; at other times *a* has a preliminary relationship to *b*, which chronologically or logically succeeds it.

Relative negative can be relative (a) because one factor is more important than another one in producing an effect, (b) because one factor is more directly involved in producing it, or (c) because one is the inspiring source of the other.

*\*\*Matthew 5:17* may use relative negative when Jesus says, “*I did not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it.*” The uncertainty lies in the meaning of the word *destroy*. Does it mean “annul” or “treat as false?”

*\*\*Matthew 9:13* (= Mark 12:33) draws on Hosea 6:6 (= 1 Samuel 15:22) to say that God desires mercy, not sacrifice, when, as a matter of fact, God had prescribed any number of sacrifices for the Israelites to observe. “*I desire mercy and not sacrifice*” means “*I desire mercy more than sacrificed animals.*”

*\*\** In Matthew 9:13 again, Jesus goes on to say that he did not come to call righteous people but sinners to repentance. Obviously, there are no absolutely righteous people that need no repentance, and so he called the relatively righteous to their appropriate degree of repentance as well.

*\*\* “It is not [so much] you that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaks in you”* (Matthew 10:20). (1) A not B would apparently mean here that the Holy Spirit takes over the speech mechanisms. Meanings that fade into the two alternatives would be (2a) repeating the audible words the speakers hear from the Spirit, or (2b) expressing the ideas supernaturally placed in the mind by the Spirit, or (2c) bringing to bear a truth believed from previous revelation, or (2d) explaining ideas resulting from supernatural enablement of human abilities used to analyze current experience. (cp. “Five Models of a Completely Reliable Text”)

*\*\* “I did not come to send peace on the earth, but a sword”* (Matthew 10:34; note purpose-result conflation also).

*\*\* “Whoever receives me does not [so much/just] receive me but him that sent me”* (Mark 9:37).

*\*\*Mark 13:11:* “*You are not the ones speaking, but the Holy Spirit.*”

*\*\* “Do not weep for me, but for your children”* (Luke 23:28).

Relative negative is a way of handling the variant comments in John’s gospel as to whether Jesus came into the world to judge it (John 3:17; 12:47; cp. 8:15). He did not so much, or primarily, or first, come into the world to condemn it, but to save it. Rejection of that initial effort does lead to subsequent judgment (as God’s back-up concern).



**\*\*John 4:42:** *"We do not believe because of your word, because we ourselves heard. . . ."*

**\*\****"You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you at some of the loaves and were filled"* (John 6:26:).

**\*\*John 7:16** shows that limited negative can fade into direct-indirect at times: *"My teaching is not mine, but his that sent me"* (cp. 14:24).

**\*\****"He that believes on me, does not believe on me, but on him that sent me"* (John 12:44).

**\*\****"I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world"* (John 12:47; cp. 3:17).

**\*\****"The word that you hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me"* (John 14:24).

**\*\****"I do not call you slaves/servants, but friends"* in John 15:15 must mean *"I do not so much call you servants as friends,"* because elsewhere he does call them servants and because his disciples did not know very much—much less all—that Jesus was doing: *"It is not for you to know the times and the seasons. . . ."* (Acts 1:7).

**\*\*John 15:16** says, *"You did not choose me, but I chose you."* Relative negative takes this to mean, *"It is not so much that you have chosen me as it is that I have chosen you."* In light of the Messianic situation in contrast to the political-leader situation Jews expected, Jesus' statement better harks back to the special, individualized calling Jesus extended to the twelve. In general, people make men their leaders by willingness to follow them. Without the followers' willingness to follow, the leader would not be the leader. This situation is not exactly the case in Messianic matters. The Christ is the leader by divine appointment. The only question left is who is willing to follow. In other words, Christ does not need followers to make him a leader, which is the unconscious approach people take toward all leaders including a Messianic leader. Jesus' ministry amounted to a time, not in which he was trying to win the Messianic role, but in which he was revealing himself as Messiah as per God's call to him. Even here, there is the choosing to follow him. In the case of the apostles, Jesus called them to be his disciples, which did not necessarily have anything to do with their eternal destiny—remember Judas.

**\*\*Peter** tells Ananias, *"You have not lied to men, but to God"* (Acts 5:4).

**\*\****"He is not a Jew that is one outwardly; neither is it circumcision that is outward in the flesh, but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart—in the spirit, not in the letter, whose praise is not from men, but from God"* (Romans 2:28-29).

What would happen if we put a relative negative between faith and works? *"We are not so much saved by what we do as by the other in whom we have placed our trust."*

**\*\****"Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach"* (1 Corinthians 1:17; cp. Matthew 28:19-20). Another rendering may be preferable: *"God did not send me to perform baptisms."*

**\*\****"The wife/husband does not have power over her/his own body, but the husband/wife does"* (1 Corinthians 7:4).

**\*\*1 Corinthians 9:9:** *"God does not [so much] care for oxen [in making this commandment, as he expresses concern for people]"*

On the basis of Isaiah 28:11-12, Paul says (1 Corinthians 14:22) tongues are for unbelievers and prophesying is for believers. He could mean it in a relative negative sense: *“Languages are particularly appropriate for unbelievers while prophesying is particularly designed for believers.”* The possibility seems likely because of 14:5, where he says that he is willing for them all to speak in tongues, but he wants tongues to have the effect of prophesying so the church may receive edification. Furthermore, the Old Testament citation refers to foreigners speaking to Israel in foreign languages, not supernatural languages. In Paul’s mind, then, the apologetic force does not seem to lie in the supernaturalness, but in the foreignness. The apostle proceeds to say that unbelievers coming into a language-speaking situation will think the people are crazy, even though he has just said that tongues were for unbelievers. So the tongues-for-unbelievers point must lie in the fact that they do communicate to the hearers if they understand them, but they create the adverse effect if hearers do not understand them. The apologetic angle must relate to the idea that God is standing on someone else’s side, which is something perceived as much by the content of the message (cp. prophesying) as by the foreignness of the languages used to communicate it. (See “Opposing Compatibles.”)

\*\**“I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me”* (1 Corinthians 15:10).

\*\*2 Corinthians 5:7 says that we walk by faith, not by sight, which implies that we know (how to walk) by trust in another rather than by personal experience. We conduct our lives to a certain extent by direct experience, but in regard to more things and at the level of the whole we walk by trust in God.

\*\**“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that am living, but it is Christ who is living in me”* (Galatians 2:20). Paul’s point is not self-negation in the sense of self-annihilation. That would be more like an Eastern religious concept.

\*\**“No man ever hated his own flesh”* (Ephesians 5:29).

\*\**“. . . each of you not looking to your own things, but each of you looking also to the things of others”* (Philippians 2:4).

\*\**“Therefore, those who reject do not reject people, but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you”* (1 Thessalonians 4:8).

\*\*Is the prohibition in 1 Timothy 2:9 against the wearing of pearls and elaborate hairstyles an example of limited negation?

\*\**“No longer be [so much] a drinker of water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and for your frequent infirmities”* (1 Timothy 5:23).

\*\*1 Peter 3:3-4 says that a woman’s adorning should not be the outward adorning of hair, and so on, but with the hidden qualities of the heart—a quiet spirit: *“Whose adorning let not [so much] be the outward adorning of braiding the hair and wearing jewels of gold or of putting on apparel, but let it be the hidden man of the heart. . . .”* This text must mean limited negative; otherwise, Paul would be forbidding her to wear clothes.

\*\*1 John 4:10: *“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us.”*

\*\**“Jesus isn’t the reason for the season; he is the reason for every day.”*

\*\*What possibilities would there be for saying that salvation by faith not works is a relative negative?

## 5. Biblical interpretation needs to deal with technical vs. normal terminology.

Technicalizing terminology is also called “over-specialization.” It takes terms in more specialized fashion than normally meant; it is the opposite of “under-specialization,” which can occur in periphrastic translation.

Two kinds of mistakes can happen. (a) The author may be using a general term in a specialized way (*teach* in 1 Timothy 2:12, *e.g.*), while the reader may be reading him in a generalizing way. (b) The author may be using a term in a general way (Romans 16:2), while the interpreter reads him in a specialized way.

**\*\* “Best man” in a wedding vs. “May the best man win” illustrates technical and general usage. (See “Pitfalls of Interpretation.”)**

**\*\*apostle**

**\*\*elder**

**\*\*prophet**

**\*\*deacon**

**\*\*minister**

**\*\*teach (1 Timothy 2:12)**

Relying too much on word studies creates the impression that all the meaning is carried in the words and under-regards syntax, context and systematic viewpoint. For this reason, resources like the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* does not provide an ultimate resource for dealing with matters of interpretation.

6. Descriptors can be negative, neutral, positive: immoral, amoral, moral; legal, non-legal, illegal
7. Be careful about opposing compatibles (dichotomizing)

Things treated as mutually exclusive can be complementary truths that qualify one another and present a more complete picture.

**\*\*The old Miller Lite commercial where the participants argued whether it was less filling or tasted great.**

**\*\*Since fasting is never done in scripture except as a religious exercise, someone might conclude that it would be wrong to fast for other reasons like weight loss or as an aid to developing self-control.**

**\*\*Because sex is for procreation, some have concluded that sexual relationship without the intent of procreation is contrary to nature and therefore sinful.**

**\*\*To say that tongues had apologetic purpose (1 Corinthians 14:22) does not in itself eliminate them from having edification value (14:5). 1 Corinthians 14:22 could be a relative negative.**

**\*\*Wearing jewelry, apparel, braided hair does not eliminate inner holiness (1 Timothy 2:9-10; 1 Peter 3:3-6).**

**What of Paul’s claim that the unmarried person pleases the Lord, and the married one pleases the spouse (1 Corinthians 7:32-35)?**

**We need not put in opposition items like interpersonalism and authority, interpersonalism and force, justice and love. They can coexist as long as each is done in a way that does not eliminate the other.**

- People take general principles as contradictions to practical exceptions:
- (1) Mark and Luke have no divorce clause while Matthew **19** does;
  - (2) Genesis **1** supposedly shows husband and wife equal while Genesis **3** involves hierarchy;
  - (3) Leadership by interpersonal dynamics is put in opposition to hierarchical arrangement.

### C. Nature of the case

Nature of the case requires reality thinking. Reality thinking contrasts with (a) analogical reasoning and (b) word-based argumentation. It is what people mean by not comparing apples and oranges. Reality thinking helps avoid allegorizing and overly depending on the word picture; both can become straightforward descriptions when they are meant only as comparisons. Interpretation must get behind words and statements and work in terms of the nature of the thing or situation itself. Nature of the case overcomes dependence on words by accessing experience. Language refers only to part of the referent; language puts the reality in front of hearers' minds. When they think in terms of the whole referent, they are less likely to make erroneous inferences. Correct understanding depends on experience to provide information about the referent aside from the statement. Nature of the case contrasts with illustrations (vs. examples or cases), analogical reasoning, and formal logic.

Nature of the case approximates intuitive thought vs. discursive reasoning. Distinguishing apples and oranges does not reason to a conclusion; it recognizes intuitively the difference between them.

Nature of the case is illustrated by interpersonal experience. Horizontal experience with other persons helps understanding vertical relationship to God. Vertical relationship a personal God motivates proper horizontal relationships.

With nature of the case comes a warning for interpretation and reasoning in the scriptures. If our perception of the reality is off, we will be adding to biblical content those "assumptions" that skew the resulting combination. Besides, we tentatively assume the "correctness" of a writer's idea as a whole beyond what the writer actually says.

Words vs. referents is comparable to symbols vs. sounds. Homophones have the same sound with different meaning: *as bow and beau look different but refer to the same sound so also different words can refer to the same thing. The g in distinguish correlates with the c in distinction; even though the two letters look nothing alike, the difference is that the first is voiced and the second is not.* Getting behind the symbols allows a person to see an oral connection behind those words that would not exist visually on paper.

Working from first principles is better than working from statements. Working from words is what most people are doing when people stress "logic." They are taking advantage of the wording of a text instead of listening to the meaning of the context. The problem with statements is that words are relatively imprecise. Reality thinking gets behind the imprecision of words and deals with the implications of the nature of the thing itself. Of course, mental inference can err here too because the mind may not adequately know the real nature of the object of consideration, but language compounds the problem by adding the imprecision of words to the lack of awareness of the reality.

The importance of the nature of the case can be illustrated by examples of equivocation—treating unlike things as they were alike. *Some have equated unlike things in*

arguing that the commandment against eating blood prohibits blood transfusions. They have either misconstrued the meaning of the word *eat* or misgeneralized it from the commandment to a foreign application (what it meant to what it means). Eating blood is not like transfusion, because eating of blood would have been animal blood; many times it would have been involved in pagan worship rites. Worshipers might drink the blood of a slain bull as a way of ingesting the power of the animal. Transfusions are not for revelry. The Hebrew word for “eat” could not include transfusions, because such a practice did not exist in biblical times. Eating and transfusions have a different psychology in that eating blood may contribute to barbarism. Finally, transfusions are for saving life, which is not the reason for eating blood.

To think properly on any subject, an interpreter has to have a correct model of the item. “Model” contrasts with analogy because the point is to think about the whole reality, not just the part highlighted by a statement. We cannot understand one kind of reality adequately by applying to it the characteristics of another reality. A person does not understand conditionality by trying to think of it as causality (as used in everyday speaking). Conditionality moves only in the realm of interpersonal relationships, where attitude (as well as sheer act), unquantifiability, will, and emotion, apply. Conditionality does not have the characteristics of logical sequence, natural necessity, or magical causality; nor is it like antinomianism or recognition.

What we are calling “nature of the case” Jesus referred to as “righteous judgment” (“judging rightly”; John 7:24) rather than superficially. The Pharisees should not judge by appearance or “after the flesh” (John 8:15; 1 Samuel 2:3; 16:7; 1 Kings 8:39; 1 Chronicles 28:9). Judgments are shallow when based on tangible elements without considering motive and intent—spirit. “True judgment” envisions the whole, real picture.

Profitable exegesis gets beyond biblical positivism; that is, it gets beyond affirming truthfulness and authority of a text even if a person does not know what it means. Verbal positivism has no practical value because it is contentless. Understanding requires (a) getting to the referents of words and (b) seeing how the parts of the whole interconnect. Biblical interpretation seeks understanding, which requires proper perception of the relationship of ideas, not just atomized facts in unrelated texts affirmed in theory.

One concept of unity from a doctrinal standpoint is based on this notion of biblical positivism. Under this approach people affirm the claims of scripture and say that scripture is true theoretically in regard to whatever it means. Anything that speaks of trying to understand the ideas themselves gets labeled “speculation.” Christians, however, must believe the truth and mean the truth itself insofar as the expression of it is clear.

“Biblical positivism” can mean something healthy if it indicates a person’s accepting points of revelation that do not derive deductively from systematic considerations. The idea here links up with one value of inerrancy. Regarding commandments, what does not arise from the nature of the case must arise from authoritative pronouncement through positive commandment. In this case, “positive” means not necessarily implied by some more basic factor.

Nature of the case is the aspect of harmony that deals with the reality under view, rather than the words used. It embraces consistency. In given situations, nature of the case combines with other aspects of the law of harmony and with the law of negation. Paul’s intent of meaning in “husband of one wife,” for example, is clear from the word blameless in the near context of the Titus 1—before and after the phrase at issue. It establishes the frame of reference as a moral concern. Distant context indicates that whether a person is married



lies outside the moral frame of reference. From the nature of the case, then, the interpreter eliminates the necessity of marriage—and other amoral considerations—from the scope of the apostle's intent in this qualification.

The most important applications of the nature of the case come in connection with the items below: inference from what is actually said and application to situations not originally envisioned.

(a) Understanding comparisons, as in metaphors, similes, type-antitypes, and parables; nature of the case helps eliminate allegorizing comparisons.

(b) Consider an expression figurative or literal; knowing the nature of the case separates fact from figure.

(c) Reasoning in the scripture; the interpreter decides whether different statements in the Bible relate to each other

(d) Selecting between alternative meanings of a text

(e) “Theological interpretation,” which attempts to generalize specifics addressed in scripture and to deal with the crucial issues of modern life through principles extracted from those biblical specifics (“what it meant” vs. “what it means”). The nature of the case applies to inferences made from statements said. Successfully working this system avoids transposing first-century cultural expression of the gospel into the twenty-first century practice (eating with sinners) and culturalizing the heathen instead of evangelizing them.

(f) The significance to be attached to silence

Did you ever try to wear out a mirror?

\*\*In Matthew 20:28 (= Mark 10:45) the word “ransom” must be taken figuratively by the nature of the case, because Christ's giving his life did not pay anyone.

\*\*In The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), the prodigal was a son while he was living riotously in the foreign country, but he was not a spiritual son. There is a relevant difference between physical and interpersonal sonship.

\*\*Acts 20:7 uses the phrase, “*The first day of the week.*” The with a date does not mean “every” so as to argue for weekly communion. The definite article with a date amounts to “every” only if on other grounds we know the author is talking about a recurring date. In other words, it depends on the situation. The women came to Jesus' tomb on “*the first day of the week*” (Luke 24:1). That was not a recurrent event.

\*\*Ephesians 2:1 uses the expression “*dead in trespasses and sins.*” Some have argued on this basis that a sinner is as insensible to spiritual matters as a corpse is to its physical surroundings. Paul means “insensitive” to spiritual matters and therefore “dead.”

\*\*Some have used Ephesians 5:18 to say that a person under the influence of the Holy Spirit cannot control himself any more than a person drunk with wine can control himself. Paul has contrast in mind, not comparison as 1 Corinthians 14:32 shows.

\*\*A long-standing analogy used to support evolutionary philosophy has been that one monkey given enough time could sit at a typewriter and eventually produce the works of Shakespeare in the correct order. The problem is that the illustration is not like what it illustrates: entropy (the tendency in nature toward disorganization, deterioration, unavailability of energy) is left out of the picture. So to speak, entropy comes along and removes some of the letters from the manuscript. Besides, the illustration pictures straight-



line series rather than the interdependence of parts in living organisms. Interdependent parts cannot originate in sequence.

### 1. The concept of necessity, possibility/impossibility

Necessity may apply to different degrees, different kinds, and different subjects. As to kinds, necessity can be interpersonal, legal, natural, logical, or situational. As to subjects, necessity relates to purpose; so the necessity may differ from purpose to purpose. The kind and degree of necessity arises from the nature of the case.

There is also a difference between necessary and sufficient. Some factor may be crucial to an effect but other factors may be crucial as well.

A number of words and phrases relate to necessity: “must needs do” such and such, “it is necessary,” “it needs to be,” “it must,” “it behooves,” “it is appropriate.” Relevant Greek terms are δεῖ (*dei*), ἀνάγκη (*anangkē*), ἀναγκάζω (*anangkazō*), ἀναγκαῖον (*anangkaion*), ἔξεστιν (“*is possible/impossible*” *exestin*). The kind and degree of necessity and impossibility depends on the nature of the situation and the kind of thing the author is talking about. There can be legal necessity, natural necessity, interpersonal necessity, logical necessity, practical necessity, or consequent necessity coming from a previous consideration that is itself variable (contingent). As to kinds and degrees of necessity, “*It was necessary for him to do this*” is light enough to mean “*He needed to do this*” or “*It is appropriate for him to do this.*” Δεῖ (*dei*) covers even practical necessity, which allows for other possibilities for dealing with a practical problem. Necessity, then, includes appropriateness and moral obligation in addition to inherent necessity. The word δεῖ is broad enough for something akin to “what will happen.”

#### Δεῖ (*dei*)

**\*\*Many unfortunate events had to happen, and the gospel had to be preached throughout the Mediterranean world before the end of the age would come (Matthew 24:6 = Luke 21:9; Mark 13:7, 10).**

**\*\*Matthew 26:51-53: Jesus had to die to fulfill scripture (practical necessity; given prophecy, he had to die); yet 26:54 says that he could have called twelve legions of angels (hence, not inherent necessity). He had to die given God’s intention to call on Christ’s disciples to die; otherwise, his disciples would have been above their Lord. A leader does not call on his followers to do what he is not willing to do (Matthew 10:38; 16:24 = Mark 8:34 = Luke 9:23; Luke 14:27; Romans 8:29, 31-39).**

**\*\*In Luke 13:16 Jesus told the ruler of the synagogue that it was necessary for “this daughter of Abraham” to be released from the demon that had bowed her over for eighteen years. It was appropriate that she be released—given rest—on the Sabbath.**

**\*\*The father of the prodigal son told the older brother that it was necessary for them to make merry (Luke 15:32).**

**\*\*Jesus told Zacchaeus that he needed to stay in his house that night (Luke 19:5). Jesus could have spent the night in any number of other places.**

**\*\*When Jesus left Judaea to go to Galilee, John 4:4 says, “*And he had to go through Samaria.*” He “had to” go through Samaria if he went due north, but he did not have to go north. He could have taken the typical route eastward down across the Jordan, up the**

river on the other side, and back across just south of the Sea of Galilee. Necessity here exists only as a function of a prior consideration.

\*\*According to Acts 5:29 the apostles had to obey God rather man, yet in fact most people do not do that. They had to obey God to be consistent with their convictions.

\*\*The Lord tells Ananias that Paul had to suffer many things for Christ's sake (Acts 9:16; 10:6).

\*\*According to Acts 17:3 in Thessalonica Paul reasoned that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer. His point may not argue for an inherent necessity of substitutionary suffering but for a necessity based on the prediction. In light of the predictions that he would suffer, it was a necessary mark of Messiah that he suffer (cp. Matthew 15:21; 26:54; Mark 8:31; Luke 9:22; 17:25; 22:37; 24:7, 26, 44, 46; John 3:16; 12:34; Acts 17:3)

\*\*People have to help the weak (Acts 20:35) necessary in the sense of moral obligation and basic decency.

\*\*It was necessary for the sailors to have listened to Paul on the voyage to Rome, but they did not listen (Acts 27:21).

\*\*Paul had to be brought before Caesar (Acts 27:24; cp. 25:10).

\*\*The laborer must be the first partaker (2 Timothy 2:6).

\*\*“It is ‘necessary’ for the servant of the Lord not to quarrel” (2 Timothy 2:24). The idea seems to be appropriate more than necessary.

\*\*A higher degree of necessity is evident in the circumstance described by the Hebrew writer (11:6) when he says that “*without faith it is impossible to please God, because he that comes to God must believe that he exists and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.*” A person will not be coming to God unless he believes that he exists.

\*\*Several passages are translated “ought” or “should”: Matthew 18:33; 25:27; Mark 13:14; Romans 8:26; 12:3; 1 Corinthians 8:2; 2 Corinthians 2:3; Ephesians 6:20 = Colossians 4:4; 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:7; 1 Timothy 3:15; 5:13; Titus 1:11b; Hebrews 2:1; 2 Peter 3:1

ἀνάγκη (*anankē*)

\*\*“*Offenses must come*” (Matthew 18:7), meaning “*offences are going to come. Count on it.*”

\*\*One guest invited to a banquet would not come because he had to go see some land he had bought (Luke 14:18).

\*\*Pilate “had to” release a political prisoner at the Passover feast, a custom he himself had originated to placate the hostility of the Jews against his rule (Luke 23:17).

\*\*According to 1 Corinthians 9:16, Paul had necessity laid on him to preach the gospel—something that was actually a sense of moral obligation.

\*\*In Jude 3 he says that he needed to write.

ἀναγκαῖον (*anankaion*)

\*\*According to Acts 13:46, it was necessary to preach the gospel to the Jews before preaching it to the Gentiles. The point was that for the sake of appropriateness or practical advantage, it was best to do it that way. God had already prepared them to hear it.

\*\*The more feeble parts of the body are necessary (1 Corinthians 12:22).

## 2. The concept of inability (“cannot”/“is-not-able,” δύναμαι [*dynamai*])

Inability has a number of kinds and degrees. Besides (a) inherent inability it can mean (b) not being allowed (“may not”), (c) circumstantial inability, (d) given certain assumed conditions. The last two entries are matters of consistency. “Cannot,” then, may mean cannot naturally, morally, legally, circumstantially, cannot without much difficulty, cannot without certain undesirable consequences (“*I cannot rise*,” that is, without embarrassment?; Genesis 31:35), cannot in the sense that “I do not want to,” or cannot in the sense that “I do not know how.”

**\*\*Judges 12:6** says that the Ephraimites could not say *Shibboleth*.

δύναμαι (*dynamai*)

**\*\*Matthew 26:42** records Jesus as saying, “*If this cup [crucifixion] is not able to pass from me . . .*”; but he told Peter later (26:53) that he could call twelve legions of angels. The cup was not able to pass from him in the sense that it could not and scripture yet be fulfilled.

**\*\*Mark 1:45** says that Jesus was not able any longer to enter into the cities in Galilee.

**\*\*Mark 2:19<sup>2</sup>** says that the sons of the bride chamber cannot fast as long as the bridegroom is with them (cp. Matthew 9:15). Luke 6:39 goes ahead to say that you cannot make them fast in such circumstances.

**\*\*At the height of Jesus’ popularity**, people were pressing in around him so hard that he and his disciples could not even eat (Mark 3:20).

**\*\*Mark 6:5** says Jesus could not do any mighty works in Nazareth because of the people’s unbelief; yet he replaced the ear of Malchus in the Garden of Gethsemane when Peter cut it off.

**\*\*In Tyre and Sidon** Jesus was not able to be hid (Mark 7:24), but he was able to hide himself on more than one occasion in the crowds in Jerusalem.

**\*\*Mark 9:39** says that someone who does a mighty work in Jesus’ name cannot quickly speak evil of him. This is a behavioral observation on the psychological character of persons.

**\*\*The man of the house** tells the neighbor knocking at his door that he cannot get up to get him any bread (Luke 11:7); yet Jesus adds that because of their friendship the man will get up and get bread for his friend (11:8). In this case, “cannot” equals “really does not want to.”

**\*\*The man who had gotten married** “could not” come to the feast because he had married a wife (Luke 14:20; cp. Deuteronomy 24:5; 1 Corinthians 7:33).

**\*\*People cannot be Jesus’ disciples** unless they “hate” their family and their own life, take up a cross, and gives up everything they owns (Luke 11:14, 26-27, 33).

**\*\*The landowner** told the unjust steward that he could not be steward any longer (Luke 16:2); that is, he would not be “allowed to.”

**\*\*Jesus said** that he could do nothing of himself (John 5:30), meaning obviously that he could do nothing on his own and be son.

**\*\*Supposedly the world** was not able to hate Jesus’ disciples (John 7:7) even though most of them were martyred.

**\*\*John 14:17:** “. . . whom [the Spirit] *the world cannot receive because it cannot see him*. . . .”

\*\*“*Without/apart-from me you cannot do anything*” (John 15:5). *Cannot* in this case may be taken circumstantially rather than ability-wise. Nothing of lasting value is done aside from Christian orientation. *Cannot* could be in a relative sense here along with *anything* in a relative sense as well.

\*\*Jesus did not tell his disciples everything up front because they were not able to bear them at the time (John 16:12; cp. Mark 4:33; 1 Corinthians 3:1).

\*\*The Sanhedrin members they could not deny the apostles’ healing of the lame man at Gate Beautiful (Acts 4:16).

\*\*In Acts 4:20 Peter tells the rulers of Israel that he and the other apostles could not help speaking what they had seen and heard.

\*\*Peter asked whether anyone could forbid water for baptizing the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:47).

\*\*In Acts 17:19 the Areopagites ask whether they could know what Paul was teaching—another case of ability in the sense of permission.

\*\*In Caesarea Paul claims that no one could turn him over to the Jews for trial (Acts 25:11), obviously meaning that they could not do so without breaking Roman law regarding the privileges of Roman citizenship.

\*\*Paul could not do anything against the truth (2 Corinthians 13:8).

\*\*Some good works cannot be hid (1 Timothy 5:25).

\*\*The saints of Ephesus were not able to bear evil men (Revelation 2:2).

ισχύω (*ischyō*)

\*\*In Luke 16:3 the unjust steward says he is not able to dig.

ἔξεστιν/οὐκ ἔξεστιν (*exestin/ouk exestin*)

Hebrews 10:4: “*The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin*”; yet to the Old Testament people God clearly said that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sin. The difference lies in the sense and circumstance of usage—inherent necessity vs. conditional necessity.

Matthew 19:11: “*Not all men are able to receive this saying [that it is better not to get married].*”

### 3. The role of silence

The role of silence depends on convention, the nature of the case, and literary genre.

Silence may or may not be significant silence. It may be significant on the basis of (a) the nature of the case. In some situations, one option necessarily eliminates all parallel possibilities; in others it may not. Silence may create presumption of significance if there is (b) strong relevance to the topic in the context. The limitation here is that not all things apparently relevant need be addressed or cited in a presentation. If the body of literature is large enough, the significance of the silence may be enhanced. Usually, however, in matters approached under this second form of significant silence, silence confirms, not proves. Silence can be meaningful as shown, for example, by what is called a “zero ending” on words.

To evaluate appeals to silence, the reader needs to ask whether one would expect scripture—or this scripture—to speak on the topic. Does it lie right in the path of what certain contexts address?

The silence of scripture has been brought to bear on a number of issues including:

- \*\*the normativeness of New Testament church polity (Baptists, Christian church).

- \*\*the prohibition of instrumental music in worship

- \*\*the prohibition of church buildings, choirs, Sunday schools, parachurch agencies in general.

- \*\*not making public appeals for financial support

The “we” passages in the Book of Acts show when the author was present with Paul. The absence of “we” in other places does not necessarily show that Luke was absent.

All New Testament books were written before the fall of Jerusalem because none of them mention this most significant event in the history of God’s dealing with Israel.

Sexual unfaithfulness is the only grounds for divorce because no others are mentioned.

the belief that we are under all the Old Testament laws except the ones that have been specifically withdrawn

the idea that what is not prohibited is okay

the idea that what is not commanded does not have to be done

\*\*What does the absence of a sign reading “no right turn on red” mean? The “silence” may mean the driver may turn right or it may mean he cannot turn right. (a) If the general principle in the traffic regulations permits right turns on red when the way is clear, the absence means the driver may turn. (b) If traffic law prohibits as a general principle passing into an intersection during a red light, the “silence” reinforces the prohibition against the right turn. In the first situation, it takes a special sign to prohibit the turn; in the second it takes a special sign to permit the turn. The role of silence here ends up being determined by convention, context, and the nature of the case. (c) Silence as meaningful silence is illustrated by zero endings in word inflection.

\*\*whether there is a positive commandment that reserves a certain area for authorized behavior only (Hebrews 7:14 re worship, *e.g.*). Nature of the case might not require authorization for approval, but God does have the authority to specify behaviors in such areas. The point is whether he does so.

\*\*Pro-choice activists argue that since the New Testament does not include abortion in its lists of proscribed behaviors, the matter is up to the mother as to what she wants to do. The weakness of the argument on this topic is that the silence may be accounted for on other grounds besides approval. We could even argue that silence regarding pro-abortion means it was not acceptable. It may not have come up as a vice to be prohibited because all Christian readers in the first century were agreed on it. Perhaps it was assumed under prohibitions against murder. Maybe it was not a procedure that a common person even had access to.

If basketball players are warming up before a game, the coach does not tell one of them to quit hitting warm-up shots because they will use them up before the game begins.

For application of “the nature of the case” as an argument against the literalness of substitution imagery in atonement theory, see *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 54-69, and related essays elsewhere in our internet materials.

#### 4. Double verb for composite idea (hendiadys)

There are three possibilities when two verbs appear: (1) composite idea (part-to-whole), (2) sequential ideas, or (3) parallel ideas.

“*See God and live*” may mean see God while alive rather than seeing God would kill a person.

Acts **10:46**: “*spoke in languages and glorified God*” probably means glorifying God by the speaking in languages rather than two actions (cp. Acts **19:6**).

1 Timothy **2:12**: “*teach or exercise authority over a man*” likely means teach authoritatively (hendiadys) rather than teach as one act and exercise authority as another.