

A Brief History of the Future

Preface

It was not my intention to write another book. Initially, I sat down to write a couple of Q&A articles in defense of the pre-tribulation catching away of the church. But, as is always the case with eschatology, one thing leads to another. And the next thing you know, paragraphs become chapters.

The original book was written in 2001. In those days I used the King James Version of the Bible rather exclusively. But, as time passed I found myself spending more and more time explaining the meaning of archaic words and terminology to the congregation at GCA. That practice was also a standard characteristic of my writing. Then one day, after I had labored for ten whole minutes to explain the meaning of an Old English word, Jeff came up, pointed at his Bible, and said, "Look. My Bible says exactly what you were taking all that time to explain." I looked. Sure enough, his New American Standard Bible translated the text the way I had been working to explain it.

The problem for me was that I "thought" in the KJV. I'd grown up with it. I'd memorized portions of it. And it would be hard to give up. I love the language of the King's English. I like the poetry of the translation. And I clung to that text longer than I probably should have. In any case, I finally gave in when Mike provided me with a NASB version that included the same word studies and Greek references I was so fond of in my favorite KJV. Now, I teach and preach from the NASB -- but secretly I still think in the King James. ☺

So, it became time to update this book. It's been a time-consuming, but very gratifying process. It was good to discover, on re-reading it, that I still agree with myself. And the additional nuance and clarity of the NASB allowed me to refine and expand some of the detail and exegesis.

All of the Bible quotes in this book are from the NASB. The NASB New Testament capitalizes Old Testament quotes. I left the capitalization and italics intact, just as they appear in the original translation.

I hope that this updated version of *A Brief History of the Future* is beneficial to Bible students and all those with an interest in eschatology. It was my goal to make it readable, approachable, and understandable to everyone, regardless of your level of theological education. What I hope you take away from this book is the reality that God is sovereign over the affairs of mankind. He is still on His throne, doing whatever pleases Him. And He has not only demonstrated His control in the events of human history past, but He has told us with equal clarity what to expect in the future.

I hope you reach the end of this book and think, “We serve a wonderful, powerful, Almighty God.” If you reach that conclusion, then I’ve done my job.

A Brief History of the Future

Introduction

Hi.

Let me tell you a few things about myself. I grew up Lutheran. Missouri Synod. Straight laced, zero controversy, services you could set your watch by. I knew when to stand, when to sit, when to recite. I had the “Liturgy” section in the back of the hymnal memorized and could perform an entire service without cracking the book. It was a great source of pride when I was 15. As a high school student I taught Sunday School to 10 year olds and helped with catechism classes. Now, mind you, I was a Biblical novice, but I was a teacher. No one seemed to mind because the pastor and elders never cared much about theology. After all, doctrine leads to controversy. And controversy had to be avoided at all costs.

One day, strictly out of idle curiosity, I asked our pastor about the Antichrist. I had heard the term and thought it sounded intriguing. Well, he was flummoxed. He handed me a Bible dictionary and told me to look it up, adding, “It’s not important.” He left me there with a big book and the realization that my pastor was not familiar with Scripture.

“It’s not important.” I cannot tell you how many times I’ve heard that. It comes in all sorts of disguises; they don’t always come out and say it as bluntly as my onetime pastor. They’ll say, “We don’t major on the minors.” Or, “It’s not a litmus test for fellowship.” Or my favorite cop-out, “I don’t have a position. I’m a pan-millennialist. I figure it will all pan out.” Regardless of how they put it, it always sounded the same to me – “It’s not important.”

Eventually the Lutherans grew as tired of me and my questions as I did of them and their lack of answers. We parted ways. I had never known any church other than the Lutherans and I equated leaving them with leaving the whole church -- the church-at-large. If the church had no answers, I would have to look elsewhere.

I spent the better part of my twenties playing in rock and roll bands, touring, recording, and all the while professing Christianity from my state of relative ignorance. I wore the badge of “Christian” without ever knowing if I actually was one.

Easter. 1982. Around 2:00 a.m. I was in San Rafael, north of San Francisco. Tired of touring, tired of rehearsing, tired of me. I was watching a TV preacher. I

don't like TV preachers as a rule. I sat there waiting for him to say something ignorant so I could make fun of him. He was preaching on the proof of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. I had never given it any thought, really. He had me. All of Christianity revolves around that one, central event. Jesus either did or did not rise from the grave. If not, it's all a sham. But, if Jesus actually rose from the dead, then He has more credibility and authority to speak for God than any man who ever walked in shoe leather. The preacher got done with his proof and looked into the camera. He said, "Settle it."

I was not versed in the Christian lexicon. I did not have any Bible words at my disposal. I did not know what to say. So, I walked out into the garden and looked up at the dark, starry sky. "Checkmate." That's what I said. "You win."

I used to bounce between San Francisco and Los Angeles. So, I sought out the preacher I had heard during my trips southward. I spent a couple years as a member of his church as my music career wound down. Eventually, I became an intern of the church as I worked in their television production and music ministry.

While I was serving in Los Angeles I began to learn about "eschatology," the study of "end times." I was fascinated. And, I received a pretty sound overview, a good model to work from. I also became a staunch Arminian, decisive Universalist, and believed in salvation by works.¹

What I learned was essentially "dispensational." But, it's taken years to hone and refine those beliefs, reconcile them with Scripture and define them more completely. Historically, two primary hermeneutic views have dominated the interpretive landscape: dispensationalism and covenantalism. These days I don't fit comfortably into either camp. So I coined the humorous phrase "Plank of Wood" to describe my eschatological view, only because no one else was using it, so it didn't come with excess baggage I had to explain or excuse when discussing these things.

Back to my story. The preacher I was studying with used to say, "The older I get the more Calvinistic I become." I had no idea what that meant. But, if he was leaning toward it, I needed to understand it. I started reading. I read bits of Calvin, and – since I used to be Lutheran – bits of Luther. I was challenged. Concepts I held as unassailable were suddenly rather rickety. I read words like "foreordained," "elect," and "predestination." And, much to my surprise, they were all in the Bible. I began to read about a God who was sovereign, definite in His purpose and absolute in His power.

I left the church in L.A.

In October of 1998 we moved to Middle Tennessee to raise our children in a yard with grass, dogs, and room to run. When we settled here, I was like a man without a country. I had no church affiliation. I had no pastor. I had no

connection to anyone but my wife, kids and parents. I took a year and read the Bible. It was the first time in my life I had done that. I had been a Christian since my youngest days. I had taught, I had sung, I had positions of leadership, but I was still Biblically scattered. I had pieces. I had bits. I had out-of-context verses that supported the divergent patches of theology I held. But, I had very little working knowledge of the Bible, how it all fit together, and what it actually said. My motto became, "Whatever is in this book is what I believe. Even if I don't believe it, I still believe it. Whatever it says is what I believe. And, wherever I disagree with what it says, I'm wrong."

At the end of that year I had the framework. I had a sense of how the puzzle pieces fit together. I had an overview, the "big picture." And, I was constantly surprised by what I read. What I knew for certain was that most of what I had learned in church was a far cry from what I'd been reading in the Bible. Fortunately, faithful God provided a Sovereign Grace church within driving distance of our new home and I attended there for six years - teaching, singing, and preaching. I worked as an interim pastor for a church in the vicinity and continued to work out my theology.

Now, I told you all that to tell you this. I am a Sovereign Grace teacher/preacher. I declare the doctrines of grace unabashedly and unashamedly. And, the notion of a sovereign God who controls all things, holds the future in His hands, and declares the events of human history according to His power and good will fit very nicely with my understanding of end time events. I found that Sovereign Grace Theology and "futurist" eschatology went hand-in-hand. God declares the future and then utilizes His omnipotent power to perform all His will. Perfect.

However, that also made me a bit of an oddity. Sovereign Grace Theology grew out of Reformation Theology. It is grounded in the teaching of John Calvin, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Knox and other ex-Roman Catholics. The primary dispute between the Reformers and Rome had to do with "soteriology," the study of salvation. In very simple terms, Rome taught salvation by "works," and the Reformers countered with Pauline teaching of salvation by grace through faith.

Missing entirely from the Reformation was any dispute on the subject of eschatology. For the most part, the Reformers brought their Roman Catholic eschatology with them lock, stock and barrel. Most of the Reformers wrote very sparingly on the subject, but they were decidedly amillennial, allegorical, and given to spiritualizing -- in other words, the opposite of me.

So, I was chided, ridiculed and openly coerced to change my eschatology in order to be a more consistent "Calvinist." The problem was, I had no interest in being a Calvinist. I am a Biblicist. I am a Paulinist. I am a Christian.

I read the books they gave me and I tried to approach their arguments with an open mind. As odd as it may sound, I am the type of person who likes to be proven wrong. After all, if we treat the Bible with any respect at all, teaching it in error would be a great injustice. So, if I can be convinced by chapter and verse, I'll turn on a dime, admit my previous error and teach according to my new understanding. But, after volumes of books and countless discussions, they failed to convince me. The thing they seemed to be missing was solid Biblical exegesis. They had conjecture. They had creative theology. They had allegories of words that already had plain, obvious meanings. They had theories supported by tenuous interpretations of out-of-context verses. But, they never brought arguments to the table that were indisputable, Biblical, and contextually sound.

So, I left. Again. I have a history of leaving - but that's a good thing. God knew what He was doing. He took me through several denominations and teachers. He took me through dedication, devotion and heartbreak. He taught me "how to" and "how not to." I have studied eschatology with some of the best teachers on the subject. I have studied soteriology with some of the best teachers on the subject. I have studied systematics: *pneumatology* (the study of the Holy Spirit), *hamartiology* (the study of sin), *Christology* (the study of Christ), and lots of other "-ologies." The last several years I have been concentrating on "*Israelology*," which has had an enormous effect on my eschatology. I have had the privilege of sitting at the feet of some brilliant men and I learned what they knew best. And, in God's good providence, it all fit together into a cohesive, consistent theology. I'm not bragging or boasting. I'm marveling at the grace of God that has led me on this journey.

So, why am I telling you all this? Well, if you're going to venture into this book, you might as well know how we got here. And, you need to know my approach. The simple fact is that - like it or not - most people's education is sadly lacking when it comes to the Bible. And, the waters get even murkier as the marketplace embraces works of "Christian fiction." This is especially true when it comes to the study of "end times."

What we don't need now is another "prophecy" book full of sensationalism and opinion. There are plenty of those to go around. So, how can we approach this subject with any assurance that we are on the right track? We need a game plan. We need ground rules. The primary thing we need to do is to uncover what the Bible actually says; not what we think it says, or hope it says, or have always believed it says. We have to let the original authors tell their story. And, when we disagree with the authors, we have to readjust our thinking.

The best way to expose a crooked stick is to lay a straight stick next to it. So I won't be spending much time pointing at errors and saying, "That's not true." Error is easy to find. It's running rampant these days. Truth is much harder to find. It's at a premium. So, rather than argue against positions with which I

disagree, I will concentrate on laying down straight sticks. Observant folk who care about this subject will be able to sort out fact from fiction for themselves. I will not ignore the fact that there are differences of opinion on the subject. I will try to be fair and introduce the various “sides” of a debate and tell you why I’m convinced of the position I take. You will have to decide whether my arguments have any merit.

My job is not to be a “creative” theologian. God’s word is no place to start imposing self-styled cleverness or to make things up. And, what I hope to end up with is a clear, approachable, systematic progression through the relevant texts, without all the hype and hoopla that normally accompanies this subject.

A Few Words About Bible Interpretation

The science or method of literary interpretation is called “hermeneutics.” The English word is transliterated from the Greek verb “*hermeneuo*,” or its adjective form “*hermeneutikos*,” which denotes “to explain or interpret, particularly in explaining other languages.” The root of “*hermeneuo*” is Hermes, the Greek name for the wing-footed pagan god Mercury. He was regarded as a messenger who spoke for the gods. So, the word that grew from his name came to denote, “to explain the meanings of words.”

You would think that once we had established such a proper-sounding science as hermeneutics, it would be clear-sailing through the Bible. But, that’s not the case. Unfortunately, there are as many hermeneutical methods as there are writers with an interpretive axe to grind. So, it’s important that we establish the hermeneutical method that we will use in this book.

The method used by the first century apostles was called ‘exegesis.’ Our English word is from a Greek ἐξηγεῖσθαι -- meaning “to lead out.” It is a compound of the words “ex,” or “out,” and “*hegeisthai*,” meaning “to lead or guide.” So, the word “exegesis” has come to mean, “explanation, critical analysis, or interpretation of a word or literary passage, especially from the Bible.” The key to understanding “exegesis” is that it means to draw meaning out of a passage or word. That’s important. Far too many interpreters force meaning in to a passage of Scripture.

When the New Testament writers put pen to paper, they used Scripture to interpret Scripture. They based their theology and exegesis on what was already written and plainly stated. Without that basis in existing Scripture, their interpretation would have had no weight or clout. As a gospel writer and author of the Acts of Apostles, Luke was adamant that every word Paul and the apostles taught should be checked against the extant canon.

The brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the

Jews. Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily *to see* whether these things were so. (Acts 17: 10-11)

So, here's rule number one:

Scripture Interprets Scripture

That is the safest, and ultimately most consistent, way to approach the Bible. We must understand each passage in light of its context and connection to the historic text. The Bible covers thousands of years. God's personality, attributes, and divine plan are revealed piece by piece through the gradual revelation of Scripture. But, when we extricate God's words from their context, we open the door for wild speculation. We've all seen it. The preacher starts with a simple text and starts digging around for hidden meaning. The next thing we know, he's proclaiming things that have no connection to the actual words on the page. Strict adherence to the context limits that sort of "creativity."

Context is critically important. Let me give you an anecdotal example of what I mean. Let's say that one day two friends, Tim and Ed, are driving in the car together. Suddenly, a woman careens out of a side street and nearly sideswipes them. Ed exclaims, "What a crazy woman!" Later that day, Tim's wife calls Ed and invites him to dinner. When Tim gets home, his wife informs him of her invitation to Ed. Tim replies, "I know. Ed said, 'What a crazy woman!'"

Was Tim telling the truth? Well, yes and no. Ed actually had said those words. But, the context was wrong. And, that lack of proper context changed the whole meaning of Ed's quote. That, unfortunately, is what happens far too frequently with Bible expositors. They quote verses accurately, but they place them in entirely wrong contexts.

In my opinion, one of the most harmful things that happened to our overview of the Bible was its division into chapters and verses. While I understand the purpose of the design - so that we could refer to a particular segment of the text - it has had the negative side effect of subdividing the writers' original intentions into little snippets, which are now pulled from their context and commented on at length as though they were independent, singular thoughts. The first readers of these epistles saw them as whole documents, meant to be understood in their contextual entirety. That way, the theology of the original author was more evident, leaving less room for personal interjection and opinion -- or, at least, making them more obvious.

As well, in the Hebrew and uncial Greek manuscripts there were limited methods of punctuation such as we find in English. The punctuation and verse divisions in

the Bible are not “divinely inspired.” The translators and publishers added them. And, sometimes they do damage to the original text by leading us to sense that a thought or passage is complete when it is not. When that happens, the punctuation can lead us into an interpretation that may not be the writer’s intention, but suited the translator’s intention. The only way to sort these details out is to look at any passage or word usage in light of the subject and point of the larger surrounding text.

If we want to get a feel for what improper context can do, we need only remember that when Satan tempted Jesus he quoted out-of-context Scripture, trying to trip Jesus up and cause Him to sin.

Then the devil took Him into the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'HE WILL COMMAND HIS ANGELS CONCERNING YOU'; and 'ON *their* HANDS THEY WILL BEAR YOU UP, SO THAT YOU WILL NOT STRIKE YOUR FOOT AGAINST A STONE.'" (Mat. 4:5-6)

The passage Satan referred to was Psalm 91:11-12. And, he quoted it pretty accurately. Using these plain words, removed from their context, Satan posed his test. But, just as Satan mishandled God’s word, Christ corrected him with properly used Scripture.

Jesus said to him, "On the other hand, it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT PUT THE LORD YOUR GOD TO THE TEST.'" (Mat. 4:7)

My point is simple: Removing God’s words from their original context leads to all sorts of mischief.

Once I heard a preacher teaching about prayer and the necessity of praying fervently. I agree wholeheartedly that we Christians ought to pray and James speaks of “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man” (James 5:16), so I was hanging with him. Then, he declared, “Because the kingdom of Heaven suffers violence and the violent take it by force.” The preacher went on to say that we should pray with a “righteous violence” until we bring down blessings, answers, etc. The problem is that the preacher was referencing Mat. 11:12, which has nothing to do with prayer. And, if he were using this verse properly, it would have been the only verse in the New Testament where faithful Christians are referred to as “the violent.” (!!!)

Proper context would have cleared up the confusion. John the Baptist was in prison and had sent his disciples to ask Jesus if He was the Messiah or if they should look for another. John was about to be beheaded. Jesus was about to be crucified. Like all the prophets before them, they would suffer at the hands of men.

As these men were going *away*, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft *clothing*? Those who wear soft *clothing* are in kings' palaces! But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.' Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen *anyone* greater than John the Baptist! Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John." (Mat. 11:7-13)

Obviously, this was not Jesus' treatise on prayer. To yank His comment about the violence that was building against His kingdom from its natural context and apply it to Christians praying hard to bring down blessings misrepresents both Christ's words and the proper methods of prayer.

Context matters.

This would be a good juncture to discuss –

Philosophical Presuppositions

Everyone approaches the Bible with a catalog of concepts that we assume to be true. Those convictions cannot help but influence the way we read Scripture. Here's a common example: plenty of folk recite the adage "God helps those who help themselves" as though it were a Bible verse. It isn't. In fact, it is not even a Biblical concept. Christian salvation is based on the precept that God helps those who cannot help themselves. Nevertheless, some individuals are so enamored with the concept of God helping those who help themselves that they will quote it, try to live it, and even convince themselves that it's true. When they approach the Bible, they bring that belief with them and might even find verses that they claim substantiate their belief.

{FYI: Although that saying is usually attributed to Ben Franklin, quoted in *Poor Richard's Almanac* in 1757, it actually originated with Algernon Sydney in 1698 in an article entitled *Discourses Concerning Government*.}

Individual presuppositions do more damage to Biblical consistency than any other factor. Let me tell you why. Human beings have a great capacity to "believe" things. And, as a society, we try to make allowances for everyone's personal beliefs. You can tell a person a simple truth and supply them with adequate proof of its veracity, but it will all be for naught if that person responds,

“Well, I just don’t believe that.” And, we are expected to give “due respect” to their belief and not trample on their right to believe whatever they believe.

The problem is: the Bible never allows for that sort of broadmindedness. The Bible does not invite us to believe what we will. It declares the truth and adjures us to get in line with that truth. In fact, the Apostle Paul was willing to say that anyone who taught anything other than what he taught was fit for judgment.

But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed! (Gal. 1:8-9)

Paul would have a hard time satisfying our contemporary notions of “political correctness.” The Bible states truth categorically and absolutely. It does not allow us to impose our personal preferences on it. That makes people uncomfortable. We want our opinions to count for something. We want the Bible to bend to what we “believe.”

Our English word “faith” is a translation of the Greek noun “*pistis*” (πίστις). It means, “firm persuasion; a conviction based on hearing.” Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith it is impossible to please God. There is also a verbal adjective form of “*pistis*.” It is “*pistos*,” normally translated “faithful.” And there is a verb form of “*pistis*.” It is “*pisteuo*.” But, that’s where the English language fails us. We have no verb form of the word “faith.” So, “*pisteuo*” is translated “believe.” And, that’s where the confusion starts.

It is easy to see from the Greek forms of the word that *pistis/pistos/pisteuo* are inextricably tied together. They all have “firm persuasion and conviction” at their root. But in the English language, “faith” is a firm persuasion, while “belief” can be anything from following superstitions to admitting that something exists. There is a world of difference between believing in God (giving mental ascent to the notion that He may actually exist) and having faith in God (to cast one’s self wholly and completely on Him, confident in His ability to save). But, in the Greek language, there is no such difference. Christians have faith, the firm conviction of Christ’s finished redemption; they are faithful, having the attributes of such confident conviction; and they are actively driven by that faith, acting on their conviction, living and dying under its persuasion.

Get my point? The Bible does not allow for your personal set of “beliefs.” What you “believe” is of no value if it does not align with the Scriptural declarations. The Bible is only concerned with what God believes. And, it declares God’s criteria for faith. Anything other than an absolute conviction to the truth of God’s revelation of Himself is not called “individual belief.” It is called “*apistis*.” Dis-faith. No faith. Faithless. It is an “unpleasing to God” form of presumption against His declaration of truth.

I know that's not a popular stance. But, I can't help it. That's the way it is. So it is important that we analyze what we hold as true - what we "believe" - and see if it aligns with God's word. The best way to do that is to stand toe-to-toe with the Bible and read it. Whenever it contradicts what we believe, one of us is wrong. Guess who.

Do not interpret Scripture on the basis of what you believe. Understand the Bible in light of what it actually says. Do not be led by your "philosophical presuppositions." In order to have a consistent, honest understanding of Scripture we must adjust our theology to bring it into conformity with the Bible.

Rule number two:

The Bible Says What It Means And Means What It Says

While that may appear simplistic at first glance, our spiritual antennae ought to go up every time someone reads a verse and says, "Now, what that means is..."

The original authors of the New Testament were writing letters to friends, to fellow believers, or to the church-at-large. They were not purposefully being obtuse or confusing. They were imparting great truths of overwhelming eternal importance and they expected to be understood and believed. They told the truth as carefully and as exactly as they could. Granted, they were writing in a different, and (some would argue) more complete language than English, but the fact is that they were intending to be obvious and understandable in their writing.

This method of approaching the Bible is called the Literal Method of interpretation, as opposed to the Allegorical, Spiritualized, or Realized methods. The Literal Method takes the author's words at "face value" and understands them according to their most common, natural usage. Consequently, this method is sometimes called the Natural Method of interpretation.

Now, the Natural Method recognizes that the Bible frequently speaks in metaphors and symbols. Metaphors are usually obvious and can be easily understood in their context. For instance, when Jesus said in John 10:7, "I am the door of the sheep," He was not implying that He was on hinges with a doorknob. It's a standard metaphor. The Bible uses metaphors to teach spiritual truths by forming comparisons to things with which we are naturally acquainted. The notion that Jesus was the sole means of entering God's presence was a radical idea to His first century audience. But, they understood that a door was the only means of entering a home or building or sheepcote. So, He compared Himself to something with which they were familiar - a door.

Meanwhile, the words that construct the metaphor continue to be understood in their most natural, normal, customary sense. In other words, knowing that Christ

is not a literal door does not give us license to construct extraordinary meanings of “door” and build theology around that new meaning. I can just hear it - “Jesus is not any old, ordinary door. He’s an automatic, electric garage door! And, it’s up to you to push the remote control!”

Likewise, when we come across imagery or phrases that are clearly symbolic, we must understand the symbols in accordance with how they appear in other passages. If a symbol occurs only once in Scripture, it must be understood in light of the larger context and in harmony with plain verses and concepts. The interpretation of symbolic language has led to all sorts of fantastic conclusions. But, again, only the Bible has the authority to interpret itself.

Admittedly, the Bible is a “spiritual” book. The original authors experienced and explained genuinely spiritual events and revelations. But, when they sought to convey their spiritual insights, they used common language. The reality of their spirituality does not grant us permission to impose our sense of spiritual reality onto their words.

Was that confusing? Let me state it this way. On those occasions where the Biblical authors explain things in a “spiritual” sense, we can only understand their explanation by reading their words in their most natural sense. They may write of angels, Heaven and revealed mysteries. But, that does not mean that we should assume a similar level of spiritual insight and start imposing our spiritualized understanding of their words onto their statements. We must recognize that they were guided by the Holy Spirit as they wrote. We are guided by the Holy Spirit as we read. They conveyed the information. We are to understand and accept the information.

The most spiritual revelation can only be understood when we get closer to what the authors actually said. When we “spiritualize” the words they chose to use, we get further from actual understanding, because every individual is going to impose his own meaning according to his own spiritual state and creativity. And of course, that leads to disunity and multiple understandings of a passage.

A “literal” understanding of Scripture can lead to very “spiritual” conclusions. But, our conclusions must be in line with the author’s conclusions. Otherwise, we’re just making stuff up. The Bible says what it means and means what it says.

Along those same lines, the third rule is:

Being able to find a spiritual fulfillment of a prophetic passage does not necessarily preclude a literal or physical fulfillment of that same passage

That’s a mouthful. Allow me to clarify by way of an example. In Genesis 3, God meted out judgment on Adam, Eve and Satan for their disobedience in the Garden. He said to Satan --

"Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all cattle, and more than every beast of the field; On your belly you will go, and dust you will eat all the days of your life; And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." (Gen. 3:14-15)

In that single passage, God laid out the panorama of Earth's history in advance. As sin entered into the world, God declared that Eve would bear a descendant. Because of the enmity that God placed between Satan's descendants and Eve's descendants, a conflict would ensue that would bruise Satan's head - a lethal blow - but it would only bruise the heel of the conquering seed.

Now, theologians have rightly pointed to Christ's death and resurrection as the victorious event that dealt a fatal spiritual blow to Satan's dominion. But, we would all admit that the devil exists and his work of tempting and confusing men continues to this day. In the book of Revelation, however, we read of the final destruction of Satan when he winds up in the Lake of Fire. That is the literal fulfillment of that same prophecy. Both the spiritual and the literal fulfillment are true. And, the fact that the spiritual fulfillment precedes the literal fulfillment does not in any way negate the later, literal fulfillment.

Or, let's view another example. Baptism is an essential Christian doctrine. Paul laid out a few fundamentals of baptism in his letter to the Church at Rome.

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection. (Rom. 6:3-5)

Jesus died a literal death and was placed into a physical grave and rose wearing His actual resurrected body. Paul finds a spiritual parallel of those types in each individual Christian's baptism. Now, follow me. Even though we are baptized into the likeness of Christ's death, we will still die a physical death. And, though we are planted under the water, we will nevertheless be planted in the grave. And, even though we rise from the water to walk in newness of life, we will still be raised in the resurrection to obtain perfect bodies like Christ's. There are both figurative (or, spiritual) and physical (or, literal) fulfillments of each of these types.

Okay, rule four is:

Partial prophetic fulfillment does not preclude the completion of the same prophecy years, decades, or millennia afterward.

Sometimes this concept is known as “The Now and the Not Yet.” In other words, some Old Testament passages find their clear, undeniable fulfillment in New Testament circumstances. Yet a portion of the total Old Testament prophecy may remain, yet to be completed with the same obvious, literal fulfillment as the first part of the prophecy.

Here is an example of “The Now and the Not Yet” principle: In the Acts of the Apostles we read of the Holy Spirit descending on the day of Pentecost, indwelling the Apostles. When they began to all speak in various languages and dialects, they were mocked by naysayers who accused them of being drunk. But, Peter stood up and corrected them -

"For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is *only* the third hour of the day; but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel: 'AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,' God says, 'THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS; EVEN ON MY BONDSLAVES, BOTH MEN AND WOMEN, I WILL IN THOSE DAYS POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT and they shall prophesy. AND I WILL GRANT WONDERS IN THE SKY ABOVE AND SIGNS ON THE EARTH BELOW, BLOOD, AND FIRE, AND VAPOR OF SMOKE. THE SUN WILL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD, BEFORE THE GREAT AND GLORIOUS DAY OF THE LORD SHALL COME. AND IT SHALL BE THAT EVERYONE WHO CALLS ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED.'" (Acts 2:15-21)

Peter defended their actions by quoting from Joel 2:28 and claiming that particular day and that move of the Holy Spirit as the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. No one can argue with Peter's interpretation. He was speaking by the Spirit of God. But, since the day of Pentecost until today, some of that passage remains unsatisfied. The sun has not been turned into darkness and the moon has not turned to blood. We have not seen the wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath, blood and fire, and vapor of smoke.

Yes, yes...I know that some would say that these things actually have occurred in some “spiritual” form or dimension. But, Peter was defending physical men who were having a literal experience when the actual Holy Spirit fell on them and they spoke in known, intelligible, literal tongues. Peter argued for a literal fulfillment of this passage. From the text we can deduce that Peter probably expected the rest of the signs and phenomena to immediately attend those first gifts he was witnessing.

Nonetheless, John saw these identical events occurring as part of his Apocalypse in Revelation 6:12. And, they have yet to actually appear. So, we

find Peter contending that Joel's prediction was becoming reality "now," and we have God's own promise, via John, that it will be finished...but "not yet."

Another phenomenon of Old Testament scripture is that the prophets often wrote of events that would span years, decades or millennia as though they were concurrent happenings. But, in actuality there may be large gaps of time between one part of a prophecy and the successive parts.

Old Testament prophets often wrote of the Messiah's ministry as though it were one continuous event. We know in retrospect what they did not realize - that Christ would visit the earth once and would ascend to Heaven with the promise to return at the end of the age. We can plainly see what those Old Testament writers could not - the "gap" of time between His first and second incarnations.

Here's an example of such a "gap." Beginning at Luke 4:16 we read of Jesus attending the synagogue in Nazareth --

And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:17-21)

But, when Isaiah recorded that original prophecy, he did not stop where Christ stopped. Isaiah 61:2 reads --

"To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn."

In order for Christ to be able to proclaim, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," He could not refer to "the day of vengeance of our God." That day had yet to arrive, though Isaiah saw every element of Christ's ministry as one unified event. But, there's a gap. Isaiah's words were complete in Christ's day, up to a point. Then the gap of nearly 2,000 years occurred. The last portion of his prophecy will be fulfilled just as certainly and literally as Christ declared the first part fulfilled. But, not yet.

Here's rule number five:

Prophecy "Works" Because the Future is Definite!

God does not live in “time.” He lives above it. He created it. But, He is not limited by it. Consider these verses --

"Remember this, and be assured; Recall it to mind, you transgressors. Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; *I am* God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.'" (Isa. 46:9-10)

I know that everything God does will remain forever; there is nothing to add to it and there is nothing to take from it, for God has *so* worked that men should fear Him. That which is has been already and that which will be has already been, for God seeks what has passed by. (Ecc. 3:14-15)

There are plenty of other verses that promulgate this same concept. God sees all of time in an instant. The reason He knows the future is because He has already proclaimed what it will be. And, unlike the seers, astrologers or soothsayers of this world, God does not claim to look down the long corridor of destiny with some infinitely long telescope and then report on what He sees coming up. No, the God of the Bible declares the end right from the start. And, He has the power to see to it that His declarations come to pass.

As well, God reveals Himself to be a God of “set times.” In the Old Testament, God set particular times during which every man of Israel who could travel was required to come to Jerusalem. God “set” various multiples of “time” before His people. He determined that the Israelites would do no work every seventh day. They would let the ground lay fallow every seventh year. He instructed that every fifty years all of Israel’s possessions and land were to return to their God-assigned owners. And, His Son appeared on the stage of human history at a very specific “set time.”

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son ... (Gal. 4:4)

Each event that occurs in God’s universe occurs according to God’s economy of time.

There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven. (Ecc. 3:1)

He is a God who sets time and is a God of “set times.” So, every word of prophecy will be complete --- in His time.

Okay, one last rule:

No man since the apostles has had a more complete understanding of the visions and images that they saw than they themselves had.

This is fundamental. The apostle John, for instance, saw what he saw, heard what he heard and wrote what he was told to write. Since the moment he received the visions that he included in his writing, God has not entrusted any other man with a greater vision of John's revelation than John himself had. If any interpreter of the Biblical prophets must oppose, contradict or confuse the text in order to make it fit their "pet scheme," or claim some special or superior knowledge of the text that is not evident from the text itself --- run. They are making stuff up. Only exegetical chaos can ensue.

Final authority always rests with the revealed word, via the folk to whom God chose to reveal it. We must build on their foundation, not a new one more to our liking.

I was listening to a preacher once who liked to spiritualize Scripture. He read from Revelation 20, "I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand, and he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years."

"Now," he began, "does anyone here believe that the Devil can be bound with a literal chain, like a bicycle chain or one of those chains from a swing set?" Of course, the congregation answered in the negative. He had them. It was a classic bait and switch. "Well then," he continued, his confidence brimming, "you can't believe that John is talking about a literal one thousand years." Uh-oh. "After all, if it's not a literal chain, then this verse is not meant to be taken literally."

After the service I walked up to the preacher and asked, "Was it a literal angel?"

"What?" I caught him off guard.

"The angel that John saw. Do you think John literally saw an angel and was it a literal angel?"

He should have been more cautious. "Yes," he started, "I believe John saw a literal angel."

"Then by your logic, the whole passage is literal, including the thousand years, because it's a literal angel."

He was not happy. He stammered and sputtered and accused me of twisting his words. But the fact is, John saw what John saw and John wrote it all down. No one since John has greater insight into John's visions than John himself had.

In Summary

Bible interpretation must be done carefully, considerately and without encroachment on God's right to say and to do what He sovereignly pleases. We must pray for understanding and insight, because all the fleshly intellect and manmade wisdom this world can offer will never accomplish true spiritual insight.

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5)

In all, we are standing before the inexhaustible riches of divine wisdom. Let us approach with humility and a heart that seeks only for revealed truth, eternal truth, and the One who is the living embodiment of The Truth.

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." (John 14:6)

Let's dig in. This book is designed to build step-by-step, "precept upon precept." Sometimes the details may be a little overwhelming. That's OK - keep plowing forward and they will fall into place one-by-one like an enormous jigsaw puzzle.

Engage your brain. Have fun. Enjoy your study.

¹ For a fuller treatment of these terms and how they relate to Sovereign Grace theology, please see the author's book, "By Grace Alone."