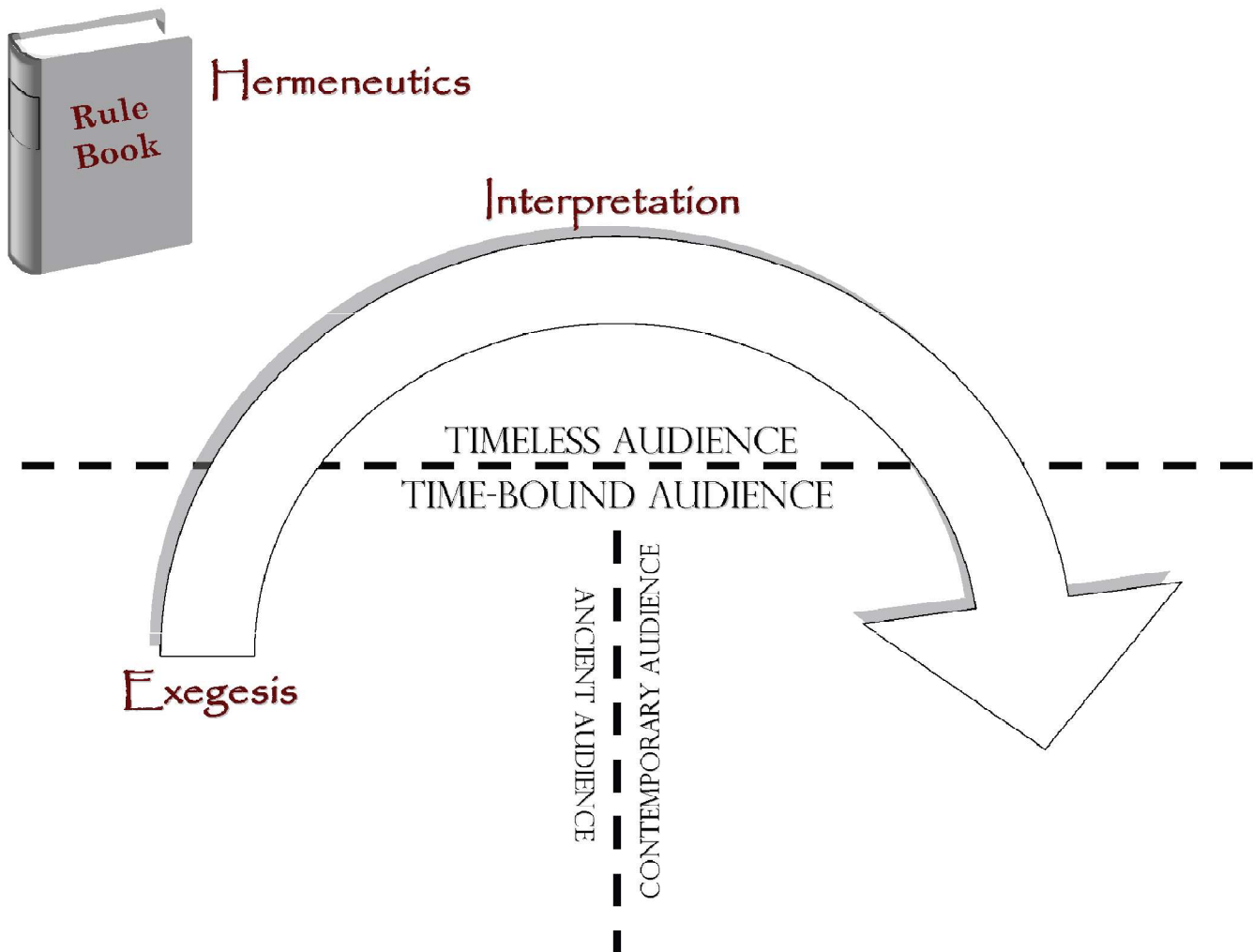


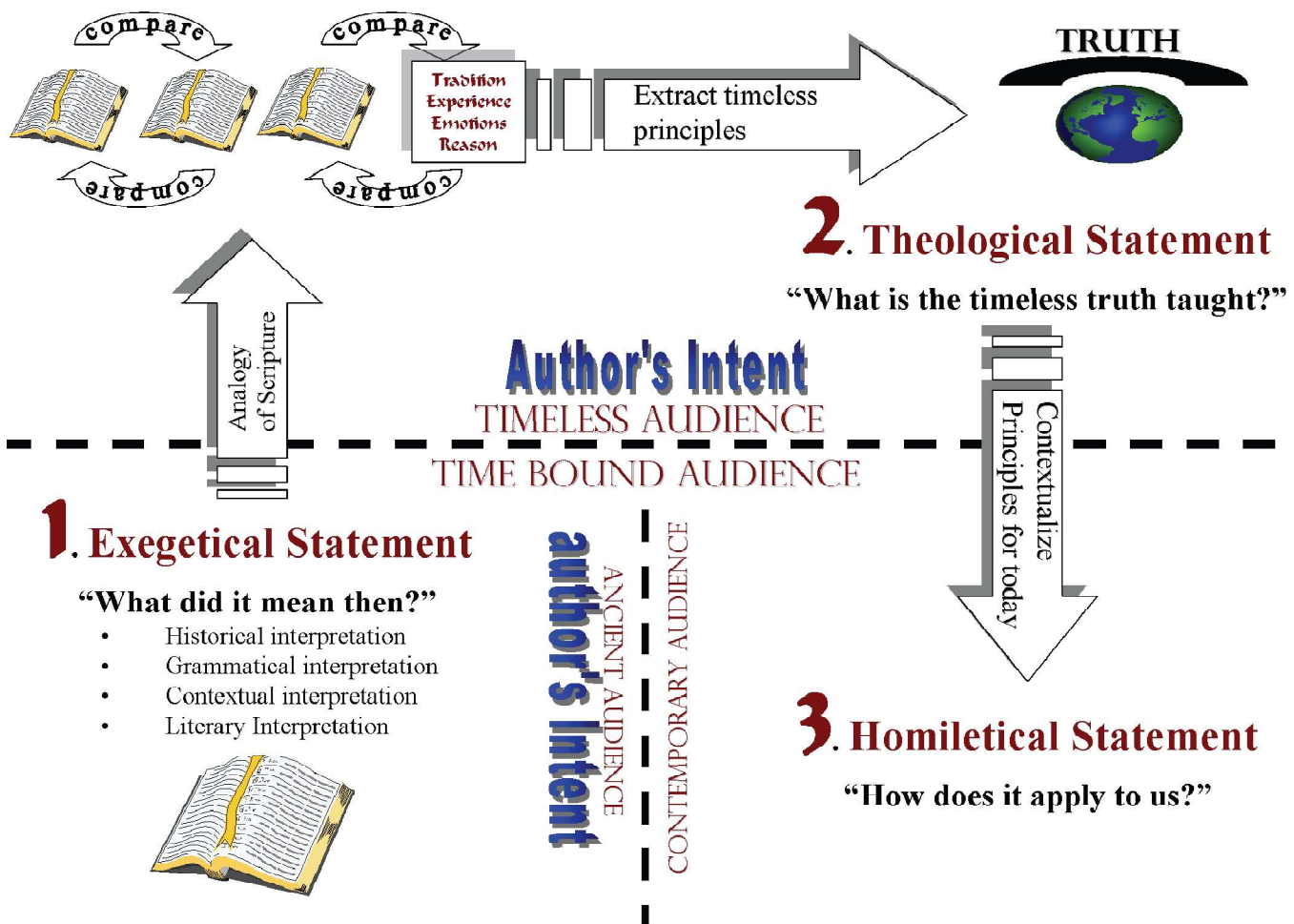
PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

INTRODUCTION

Historical-Grammatical Hermeneutics: The theory of hermeneutics which seeks to interpret the Scriptures by studying the text in its original historical-grammatical context in order to discover what the author's original intent was so that timeless principles can be discovered and applied to a contemporary setting.



(These 2 charts taken from *The Theology Notebook – Bibliology and Hermeneutics* found at [http://bible.org/assets/ttp/bh_notebook\(2005\).pdf](http://bible.org/assets/ttp/bh_notebook(2005).pdf))



GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

1. The Inspiration of Scripture

- Definition: The Holy Spirit wrote through the biblical writers using their own languages, culture and individual personalities, resulting in God's Word without error in the original.
- To say that the Scriptures are “inspired by God” then, means that they contain the very breath or words of God Himself

2 Timothy 3:16-17 ~ All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work

- Inspiration emphasizes that Scripture is the product of the breath of God

“Inspiration”

- Theopneustos
- Theos + pneustos
- God + breathed

2. The Clarity of Scripture

- Definition: This means that the Bible is written in such a way that its teachings are clear enough for the common person to understand
- This has traditionally been known as the “perspicuity” of Scripture – namely that the Word of God is intelligible, understandable, easy to comprehend
- The Bible is an understandable book such that every Christian, guided by the Holy Spirit, can comprehend in its pages all that is necessary for salvation and holy living

Psalm 19:7-9 ~ The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.

- “sure” = certain, raised above all doubt, reliable, stable
- “pure” = clear, lucid

Psalm 119:130 ~ The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple.

3. Accommodation of Revelation

- Definition: Scripture is the truth of God accommodated to the human mind so that it can be understood
- God the infinite communicates with man the finite and, thus, God uses items which are familiar to men in order to make truth understandable to them
- That God accommodates His revelation to people means that He unfolds its meaning through the use of illustrations, analogies, anthropomorphisms, etc.
- Examples:

Ps 34:15 ~ The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous And His ears are open to their cry.

Ps 89:13 ~ You have a strong arm; Your hand is mighty, Your right hand is exalted.

John 6:48 ~ I am the bread of life.

John 10:7 ~ So Jesus said to them again, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.

John 10:11 ~ I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.

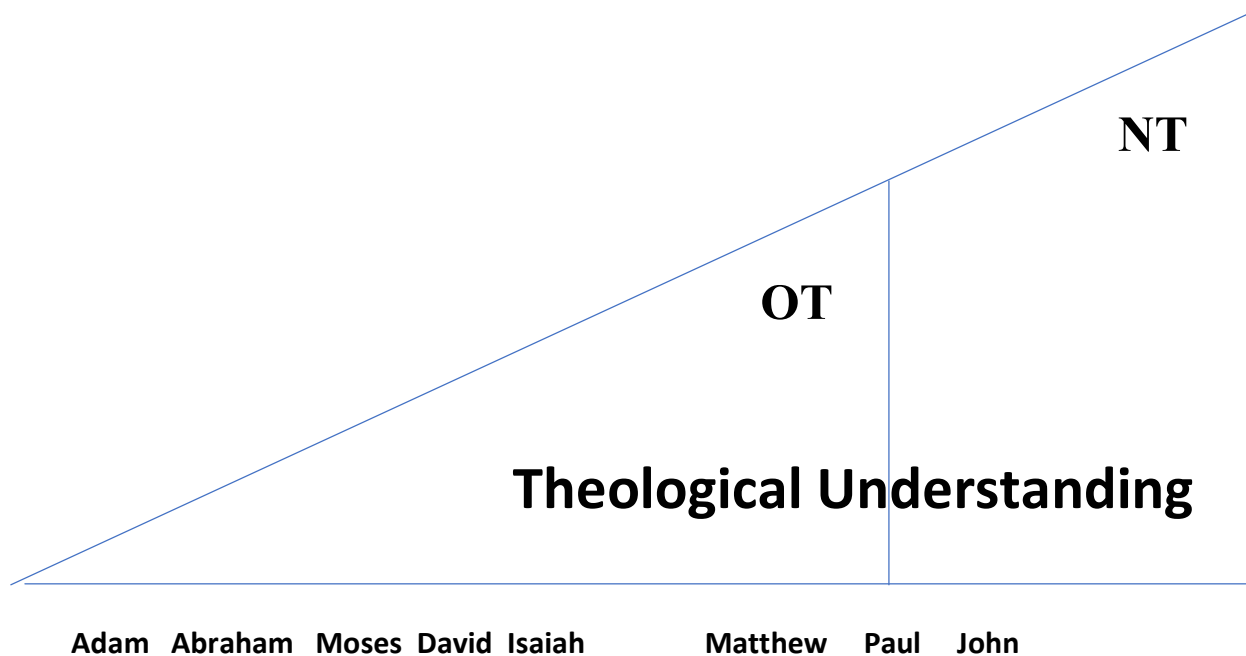
4. Progressive Revelation

- Definition: God does not reveal Himself all at one time but does so gradually over the course of time
- God initiated revelation, but He did not reveal His truths all at one time...it was a long and progressive process
- As the books of the Bible were written, God progressively revealed more truths about many subjects
- This does not mean that the Old Testament is inferior to the New Testament or that the Old Testament doesn't contain any mature ideas
- Rather, it points to the general trend that while there were truths that were only partially revealed, discussed, or developed in the Old Testament, in the New Testament those truths have been more completely understood
- Themes in the Bible become clearer the farther we move from Genesis to Revelation

Hebrews 1:1-2 ~ God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

- Verse one shows that Old Testament revelation was uneven in its progress through time. Revelation came sporadically with the method of revelation varying greatly.

- By contrast, in verse two, God has spoken his final word through His Son and so brought into existence His full revelation in the New Testament



- Progressive revelation means that some commands were changed later
 - Circumcision, given to Abraham as a sign of the covenant (Gen 17), was later rescinded (Gal 5:2)
 - The law of Moses has been superseded (2 Cor 3)
- We must be careful to not read the NT back into the OT; to not force NT meanings into the OT
- For example, we can't read the statements in the NT about the church being included into the New Covenant as evidence that the church has replaced Israel

5. Scripture Interprets Scripture (The Cross-Reference Principle)

- Definition: One or more Scripture passages help interpret the right meaning in another text
- Or another way to say it: Obscure passages in Scripture must give way to clear passages
- We may rest assured that God did not reveal an important doctrine in a single, ambiguous passage
- All essential doctrines are fully and clearly explained - either in the immediate context, or somewhere else in the Bible
- Two important principles of Scripture interpreting Scripture can be noted:
 1. A difficult or obscure passage should never be interpreted in a way that contradicts a clear or easily understood passage
 2. A complex, novel, or ingenious interpretation for a passage should not be given preference over a more simple or natural explanation of the passage

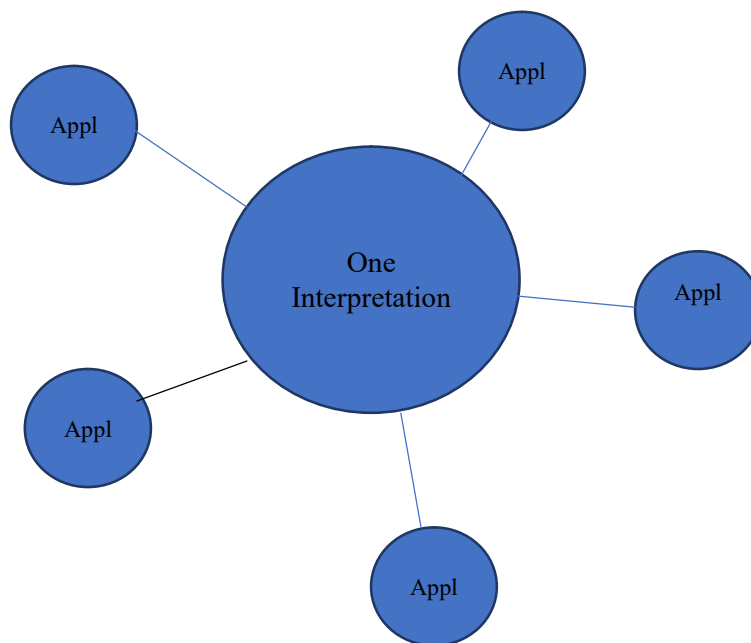
6. Analogy of the Faith (The Harmony of Scripture Principle)

- Definition: There is one, unified, consistent, harmonious system of belief in the Bible such that no point when correctly understood will contradict another
- This principle is similar to the previous one but there is a legitimate distinction - The analogy of faith is not the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, but that *all Scripture is in agreement and will not contradict itself*.

- Even though the Bible was written over a period of 1500 years by nearly 40 authors, it agrees with itself
- In this principle, we see what the Scripture harmoniously teaches on some subject or on related facets with a total unified picture. Once we see this on the subject, we realize that there is overall agreement as the parts fit into the picture, each in its own contribution
- There is one system of truth contained in the Scripture and, thus, all doctrines must agree with each other
- Therefore, if two or three different interpretations of a verse are equally possible, any interpretation that contradicts the clear teaching of any other scriptures must be ruled out from the beginning
- Proper application of hermeneutical principles will resolve **apparent** conflicts
- This principle is the foundational assumption of *systematic theology*!

7. *The Single Meaning of Scripture*

- Definition: Although a text may have many different applications, it has only one meaning – the meaning intended by the original human author, moved by the Holy Spirit
- There is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study, but a given text may speak to a number of issues...“Interpretation is one, application is many”



8. *Interpretation as Distinct from Application*

- Definition: Though closely related, interpretation and application are not the same; Interpretation
- Many errors and wrong interpretations of God’s Word have unfortunately occurred because of a failure to recognize the principle that *interpretation* and *application* are distinct
- The incorporation of application into the hermeneutical process leads inevitably to multiple meanings for a single passage
- Certainly, the application of the scripture is essential to the proper study of God’s Word; indeed, the application of the Bible is the reason why God gave it to us; He did not intend for us to simply study His Word academically but never allow it to change our lives; on the contrary, we should be eager to change our thinking and behavior as a result of studying and hearing the Word; so, application is a very important part of Bible study
- But the interpretation of the Bible is the foundation upon which application can stand securely

9. Normal/Literal Interpretation

- Definition: When interpreting Scripture, assume the most natural, obvious meaning of a word or phrase taking into consideration the history, culture, and author
- Thus, we take the Bible at face value – we read the Bible following the reading practices we would consider normal for any other important document
- This is the common sense approach since we generally take everyday things in life as literal or at face value

If I send my wife a note telling her that I would like to have lunch with her on Tuesday and that I would like to meet her at 12:30 pm at Logan's Roadhouse, she does not read a mystical, secret meaning about spiritual appetite into it.

- So, the golden rule of interpretation is: “When the plain sense of the scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.”
- This is the usual practice in interpreting literature and only in literal interpretation is there a control check, or curb on the abuse of Scripture by eisegesis
- Therefore, take every word at its primary, usual, meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and fundamental truths, clearly indicate otherwise.

10. Genre

- Definition: Genre is a literary term having to do with the category or "genus" of literature under consideration
- Proper interpretation must take the general literary category of any given passage into consideration
- Are we dealing with poetry or prose? Are we dealing with history or prophecy?
- Here are some books of the Bible and their respective genres:
 - Psalms – Poetry
 - Proverbs - Wise Sayings
 - Isaiah - History and Prophecy
 - The Gospels - Biography and History
 - The Epistles - Teaching and Doctrine
 - Revelation - Eschatology and Prophecy

11. Priority of the Original Language

- Definition: This principle simply means to consult the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek to find first-hand what really is said
- Part of the accommodation which God employed when He communicated His Word to mankind was the use of written human languages, including a specific vocabulary, grammar, and any of a number of literary devices
- You are probably well aware of the limitations of a translation - Whether it is a spoken translation or a written one, there are nuances of language and communication that are lost in a translation
- At this point we need to be careful not to give the impression that someone who does not understand biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek cannot interpret the Bible
- This is not true! - However, the depth, accuracy, and certainty of one's interpretation of God's Word can be greatly enhanced when one can read the Bible in the language in which it was originally written.

John 21:15-17 ~ So when they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you love (agape) Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love (phileo) You.” He said to him, “Tend My lambs.” He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love (agape) Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love (phileo) You.” He said to him, “Shepherd My sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love (phileo) Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love (phileo) Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love (phileo) You.” Jesus said to him, “Tend My sheep.

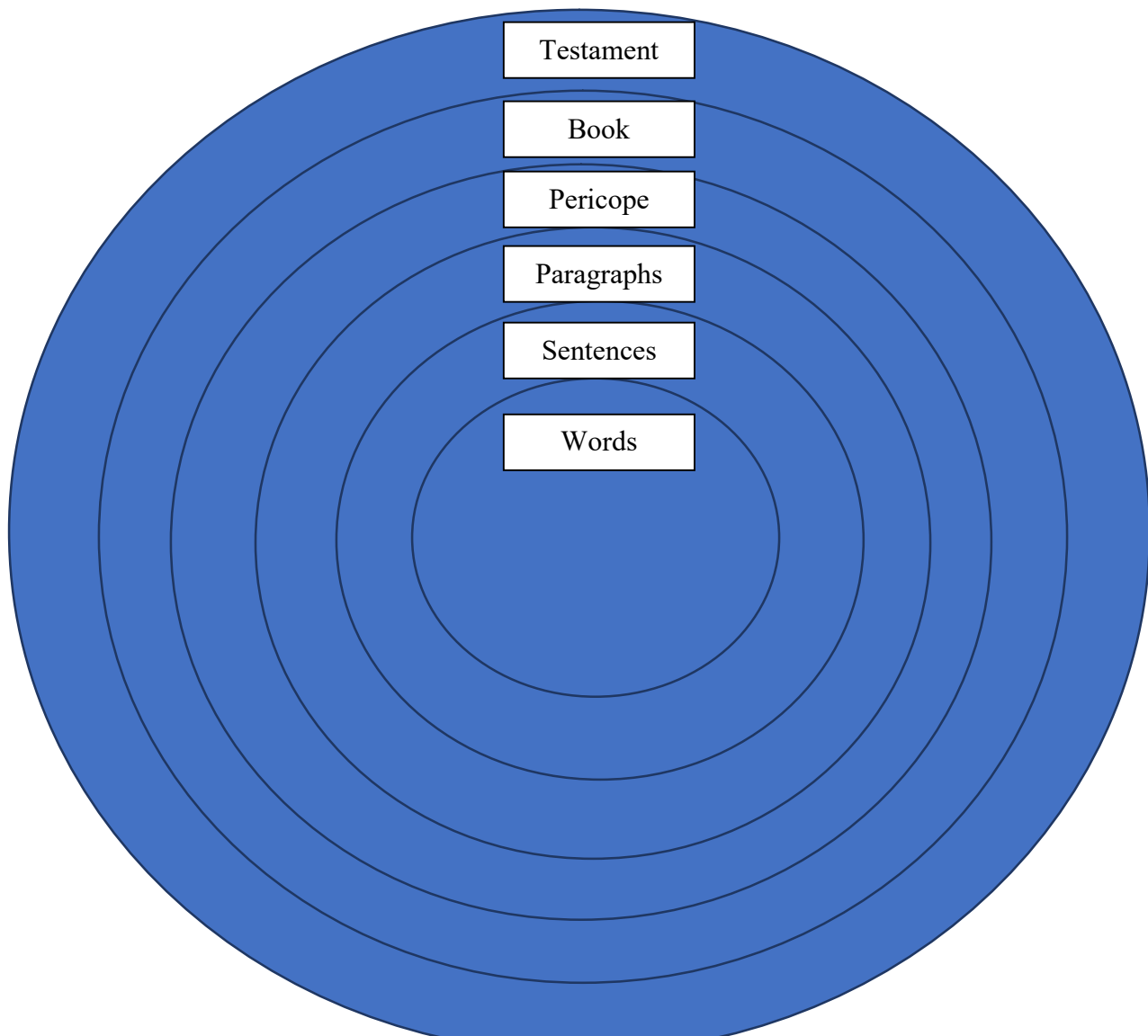
12. Context

- Definition: A text of Scripture is given its true meaning only when it is considered in relationship to the words around it
- “A text without a context is a prooftext”

Matthew 18:19-20 ~ Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.”

Philippians 4:13 ~ I can do all things through Him who strengthens me

Revelation 3:20 ~ Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me.



13. Historical Appropriateness

- Definition: Since Scripture originated in a historical context, it can be understood only in light of biblical history; thus, we must interpret a passage in such a way that our treatment of it is fitting, appropriate, or in harmony with the historical situation at that point in Scripture
- The Bible was composed in a specific culture at a particular point in time...while they are universal in application, the truths in the Bible can most fully be realized only when taking the surrounding culture and history into account
- This principle is related to the principle of progressive revelation – what would they, given the light God allowed them to possess at that point, have most naturally understood a statement to mean?

14. Word Study

- Definition: To understand a passage of Scripture, key words within that passage must be defined accurately
- The detailed and thorough study of the individual words of a passage can yield amazing fruit in our understanding of a text
- Words are the most basic building blocks of communication
- Words themselves can communicate complex ideas or simple grammatical concepts, but one of the most important steps in understanding an author is to understand the meaning of the words he uses

15. Grammar and Syntax

- Definition: Grammatical interpretation deals with the arrangement of words into sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and books
- If words are the units of language, then sentences are the units of thought - a sentence is a complete thought, and when sentences are organized and arranged in a paragraph, very complex and profound thoughts can be expressed
- The human authors, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, have arranged the sentences, paragraphs, etc. in such a way that the exact meaning that God intends is found in the text
- Therefore, in order to understand the mind of God in the Scriptures, the grammar of the text must be understood correctly

16. The Checking Principle

- Definition: It is good for a student to check his understanding of a passage against the interpretations of Bible scholars from the ages of Christianity
- It is impossible for us to know all of the geographic, historical, and interpretational issues in a passage – information Bible scholars spend a lifetime accumulating
- Bible dictionaries, commentaries, and other Bible study tools can shorten that process considerably
- Notice that this principle is last on the list – there is a reason for that
- As a rule it is best to do your own study on a passage and then compare it with someone else's