

How to Study the Bible  
(So It Talks Back to You and Makes You Think)  
by Jim Andrews

Model Text: John 3:16

Penetrate the Original Meaning of the Text

Step One: Orientation

C.S. Lewis once said that one cannot readily understand the meaning of a word until one has met it in its natural habitat. In other words, language always needs to be understood in context. So do people. That is why employers spend a lot of time and money interviewing prospective employees.

If individual words need to be understood in a specific context, certainly the same applies to individual statements, verses, or whole sections of a document.

For that reason the first logical step in orientation to a biblical document is the same as the first natural step in getting to know an individual. *Check out his or her background.* Discover as much as possible about the *historical background* of the document.

One needs to ask, for example, Who wrote the book? To whom? When? Why? Where? Under what circumstances? For what purpose? What more do we know about the original readers? Is there anything known about their culture, environment, local issues, etc., that might illuminate the text? What could the author have assumed about his readers' spiritual status and theological beliefs? Were there issues he was attempting to address? What were they? What literary form does the document take? What are the peculiarities of this genre or form of literature that one must take into account in understanding rightly what the author means? These are *orientation* questions.

The function of these inquiries is simply to do whatever is necessary to recapture (as much as possible) the original horizon or standpoint of the author (and his readers) so that we can position ourselves to understand his words as closely as possible as they would have. We are simply transplanting ourselves back into his circumstances (historical, cultural, theological, and literary frames of references) for the purpose of looking at things from the original perspectives of both author and readers. It is an orientation process not unlike stepping into some unfamiliar city and getting our bearings.

The second natural step in orientation to a book is to get a sense of the whole before micro-analyzing the parts (technically called 'exegesis'). Before the micro comes the macro. We need a good overview of the content of the document. A sense of how the writer ordered his material, i.e., how his thought unfolded.

Read the book through at least once to get a sense of what's there and the progress and development of his content. I suggest you read it more than once. Then look for the major divisions of the book. Where are the major 'seams' in his literary structure? Where does he make his major turns or shifts in focus? This is not an exact science, to be sure. On the other hand, in most books it is not that hard to identify the 'turns' in development. Almost everyone notices, for example, that Ephesians 1-3 and 4-6 are distinctive in their thrust, the first section being primarily doctrinal or theological foundations and the last section a practical application of the first.

In brief phrases try to encapsulate or describe the essence of the main divisions of the book. Afterward sub-divide the main sections in the same way. Usually it is fairly safe to use the paragraph divisions as your guide to the sub-sections. Describe those in a similar fashion.

When you are done, you should have a good feel for the book as a whole. Now you are ready to take on the individual parts. Because you have a context for the texts, you are less at risk of jerking a text up by its roots and distorting its meaning for lack of context. This exercise is by no means fail-safe. But at least you are safer doing so than if you neglected the context.

## Step Two: Observation

Observe what is there in the text. The idea here is to make sure that we look at the text with laser-like intensity. Familiarity can sometimes be the enemy. We can overlook fine points. We may assume too much. Sometimes we just need to come to the text with a fresh set of eyes. One way of doing that is to scrunch up our eyes and really scrutinize the text in all its detail. Look at it the way a jeweler inspects a gemstone. Inspect it with the fine eye a top-notch detective would survey and scrutinize a crime scene.

Some things are too obvious to miss. Other features of a text, perhaps quite significant, might get overlooked in the verbal traffic of bigger ideas.

All I want to accomplish here is to simply get across what we mean by observation and explain by way of illustration why we shouldn't take ourselves for granted in this competency.

Let's start with a very familiar passage to illustrate the point.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life". John 3:16

First, I observe that:

1. The verse begins with “for,” a logical conjunction implying that verse 16 explains something previously said.
2. The subject who “loved the world” is none other than “God” Himself.
3. God is said to have “loved” the world, past tense.
4. God is said to have “loved” the world, not hated it or liked it or cared about it, etc.
5. The object of God’s love is “the world.”
6. The word “so” is connected with God’s “love” in such a way as to imply that this love was special or unique in some way.
7. The text says God so loved the world “that. . . ,” beginning a clause which shows us His way of showing the world His love or His goal or purpose in doing so.
8. *God* gave His only begotten Son.
9. God *gave* His only begotten Son.
10. “[G]ave” is past tense.
11. It was His *Son* that God gave.
12. It was His *only begotten* Son that God gave
13. The text does not specify to *whom* God gave His only begotten Son.
14. The text does not specify the form which God’s giving of His only begotten Son took.
15. The second *that* clearly begins a purpose clause.
16. The beneficiaries of God’s gift are described only as *whoever believes in Him*.
17. The condition of the *whoever* benefiting from God’s gift is that he or she *believes in Him*.
18. This condition of believing is met only by a believing that is *in Him*.
19. The only persons to whom *Him* refers might be God or His only begotten Son.
20. The verbal form “believes” is present tense.
21. God’s purpose in the gift of His Son is first of all that whoever believes in Him *might not perish*.
22. The text does not explain explicitly in what sense the beneficiaries of His gift were subject to perishing.
23. God’s purpose in the gift of His Son includes the design that those who believe in Him *might have eternal life*.
24. There is a life which is *eternal* as opposed to that which is merely *temporal*.
25. The text speaks of “whoever are believing in Him” as *having* eternal life which could imply that it might be possessed in the context of temporal existence rather than acquired after this life is finished.

You will notice that some of these observations are *negative*. In other words, it is sometimes significant what the author did *not* say when he had a choice. We might note that he spoke in the past tense rather than the future or present tense. Singular rather than plural. Jews as opposed to Gentiles. Men as opposed to women. Believers as opposed to unbelievers. Emotional or affective opposites. All that sort of thing is worth

noting its presence or absence. It may or may not turn out to be significant, but you never know unless you take note of what is there.

Obviously there are limits to how far one can go with this process. We have to put some common sense limits on our zeal. However this observation process is a mental discipline we need to cultivate. Dr. Howard Hendricks convinced me (and many others over the years) with an assignment based on Acts 1:8. Our assignment was to make 25 observations about the content of the text.

We scratched around in the text until the next class, trying to come up with something resembling 25 intelligent observations about a verse with only 37 words in our English texts. Most of us managed that (with a few rather dubious 'observations' thrown in the mix as filler material). We came away smug in the assurance that we had mined the mother lode and were prepared to move on.

In class Hendricks invited various students to share the fruits of their scrutiny. It was amazing (and a little unsettling) to find how many things we had missed. That was a sufficient lesson in itself. Not satisfied with this achievement however, Howie then challenged us (next assignment, gentlemen!) to return with 25 *more* new observations. That blew us away. A collective groan. Yet believe it or not, with a great deal more application (plus a little imagination, I must confess) most of us managed to dredge up 25 more observations. Some, I admit, were heroically strained, but we got the point. Familiarity with the text can be the enemy of interpretation. The human eye and the human mind can get awfully lazy and miss seeing aspects of the text and connections in the text that could turn out to be important in the interpretive equation.

Clearly nobody can go through a process like that all the time. Hendricks wasn't suggesting that we should. His assignment was just a shot across our interpretive bow to remind us we can take our knowledge and insight too much for granted. The lesson was that an interpreter needs narrow, ruthless eyes for detail.

### Step Three: Interrogation

At this point we ask what does the text mean? What you are doing is asking yourself, What don't I understand about 'what is there'? Our observations in John 3:16 raised some questions. That is the greatest value of the process. It acts as a kind of 'trip wire'. It surfaces interpretive issues that we might otherwise have overlooked. Some may be theologically serious issues that need careful study and reflection en route to resolution. The goal is always to rightly grasp the author's intent and to teach the Word of God as faithfully and accurately as possible.

In the process of observation we see something and we wonder if it means this or that or why the author put it this way as opposed to that way or why he mentioned this and not that. That mental stimulation is the foundation for this step.

Consider, for example, a few (but not the only) the interpretative questions exposed by our observations above:

1. What statements or assertions in the previous context is John 3:16 intending to explain? (See observation #1)
2. What is meant by *the world*? The physical world or the human world or what?
3. How can God love “the world” if His children are not supposed to love “the world”? See 1 John 2:15.
4. What is meant by *loved*?
5. Is the function of the first *that* clause in the logic of the text?
6. What is meant by His *only begotten* Son? That is, in what sense is Jesus said to be *begotten* and how is Jesus His *only begotten* Son when in a sense all believers have been *born of God*? See John 1:13.
7. To whom does *Him* refer?
8. What does *believe in Him* mean? To assent to the facts presented about Him in the biblical record or more?
9. In what sense would unbelievers be subject to perishing?
10. What is meant by *eternal life*?
11. At what point do believers come into possession of this *eternal life*?

#### Step Four: Investigation (or Research)

Next we have to find the answers. It is never safe to attempt to apply a text until we understand *the text in context*. In biblical interpretation, there are three rules:

1. Study the text in context.
2. Study the text in context.
3. Study the text in context.

Use the tools of interpretation to understand as much as you can of what you didn't understand. This part of the work involves *a posture of godly dependence* and an *exercise of due diligence*.

The Bible is a unique book. Human authors penned its documents. However, their Prompter was none less than the Holy Spirit. It was God who gave them their cues and inspiration so that they faithfully recorded within the parameters of their own personalities what God intended to reveal. (2 Peter 1:20-21; 2 Tim. 3:16) The Spirit of God did not dictate their writings, but so superintended the process that what came from their pens accorded with His will and bears God's stamp of approval.

So the Bible, we Christians believe, is more than a human book. It represents a revelation of God and only the Holy Spirit can open it to human eyes in such a way that it

connects, enlightens and truly transforms. Consequently it is foolish to approach the Scriptures with eyes and minds unassisted by the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. A wise believer will acknowledge that without the help of the Holy Spirit, he is totally out of his depth in penetrating the depths and nuances of God's revelation. He will submit the process to prayer and will not lean exclusively on his tools, his own insight and acquired learning, for to do so is a great mistake.

At the same time, as in all areas of Christian experience, understanding the Word of God requires human due diligence or responsibility. God is no enabler of human sloth posing as piety. We must work and sweat to understand. God does not cast pearls before unappreciative swine. So God expects us to validate our love of His light and wisdom by the energy we put into penetrating the secrets He has revealed to us through the Spirit. So we pray and we study and we bring every tool to the task that God in His providence has made accessible to us for that purpose.

Not every believer can own a great library, but most of us can find and afford a few study tools (resource books) that will greatly aid us in finding answers to many of the interpretive questions we raise in the course of observing the text and formulating interpretive issues. A few basic tools for lay Bible study include:

- A Bible Dictionary (or Encyclopedia)
- A Concordance of the Bible
- A Bible Atlas
- A Study Bible
- A Dictionary of Theology

In addition, it would be good to have a set of expository commentaries that cover the whole Bible. Commentaries are hardly infallible. They do not answer all the questions we might have. In fact, they have a maddening way sometimes of waxing warm about the obvious or the secondary and bypassing the issues that really matter. Even so they perform a service. They context the text. They alert us to issues in the text we might have overlooked. They serve as a kind of benchmark to reassure us that our own independent thinking coincides with what others are seeing there. Or, they may 'cool our jets' when we discover that our take on a text finds no support from biblical scholars. It makes us step back and reevaluate before we trot out another 'heresy' for public consumption.

At the very least one should acquire a one-volume commentary on the Bible. Of necessity the latter will be frustratingly superficial in its treatment of biblical texts. It will leave a thousand natural questions unaddressed. However, it will furnish the novice interpreter with an informed starting point in setting the text in its context.

With your tools in hand, answer (preferably in writing) each question you had. By this time you should have a very good sense of the meaning of the text. You are ready now

to expound or explain it to others at the historical level (that is, the sense it had in the mind of its author).

#### Step Five: Explanation (or Exposition or Resolution)

Write out the verse or passage in a paraphrase. In amplified form express what the text seems to say. Ideas are often better digested and internalized (i.e., made your own) if you restate the thoughts of others in your own words.

Sometimes in dialogue or debate with another, as we track carefully with what they seem to be saying, we will respond:

“Let me see if I am hearing you correctly. You are saying, if I hear you right, that . . . (and you paraphrase their ideas in your own language.)”

When we are able to do that, we have it nailed down. We are not as dependent on faulty memory now. Our minds know the concept, whether or not we can recall precisely the way the other party stated it.

This ‘recycling’ of biblical thoughts and ideas in our own words can be very helpful in understanding God’s Word.

Example of an amplified paraphrase of John 3:16:

“God loved the lost people of the world so much that He went so far as to offer up His own precious Son, His Son in that transcendent and unique sense that no one else could ever be, as an atoning sacrifice for our sins so that whoever would simply place his (or her) trust in Him and His atoning work for their eternal salvation might not suffer the wages of sin, i.e. the death sentence, but might receive by faith the free gift of eternal life whereby we share in the very life of God.”

#### Step Six: Distillation (or Summation)

Draw out from the text some of the elements of truth embedded in the text.

Drill into the words, clauses, phrases and sentences of the text.

Distill or extract from them truths that are explicit or implicit in the language and context. Write them out in summary form.

Proceed in the following manner:

1. Isolate or identify ‘nuggets’ of truth contained in the text.

- a. These may be explicit. (For example, see a, b, c, below.)
- b. These may be clearly implied. For example:
  - i. “God is a personal Being.” (Clearly implicit in the statement “God so loved the world. . .”)
  - ii. “God takes an active interest in our human plight.” (Clearly implied in the statement “God so loved the world.”)

2. Translate or paraphrase these truths in simple sentences and plain words.

- a. By His gracious actions God has demonstrated His love for lost sinners.
- b. God showed the depth of His love in offering up His Son as an atoning sacrifice for sinners.
- c. The One God sent to die for sinners is no less than His special Son.
- d. God’s purpose in sending His Son was redemptive.
- e. The sole condition of salvation is trusting in His Son.
- f. The consequence of not trusting in His Son is perishing.
- g. The result of believing in His Son is the gift of eternal life.

Notice that each of these kernels of truth is embedded in the text. All we have done is earmark the separate elements of truth bound up in the text.

So where do we go from here?

Probe the Contemporary Significance of the Text
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Step Seven: Implications (or Discovery of Relevance)
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To me, this is where the feet hit the floor. Here is where we begin to ask that all important and compelling question: “So what?”

At this point, allow me to detour a moment from methodology to definitions. It is crucial that you grasp the difference between the historical significance of the text and its personal or contemporary significance(s). Meaning is concerned with the question: “What sense did the author intend for his readers to attach to his words?” Significance is concerned with: “So what?”

Any so-called ‘Bible teaching’ (or study) that fails to come to terms with this question misses the mark. Never confuse what the text *meant* to them *then* and what its *significance* is for us *now*. What the authors of the Scripture meant *then* is fixed (despite

those literary theorists who would like us to think otherwise). They meant what they meant.

Your first task is to try to penetrate their original meaning. Technically speaking, this is known as *exegesis* (leading out the meaning that the author intended). Unfortunately, too many students and teachers of the Scriptures confuse exegesis with the end or goal of Bible study. Actually, it is just the beginning or starting point.

*Exposition* (not to be confused with exegesis) is the next step. Exposition marries contemporary significance to historical meaning producing a ‘contextualization’ of revelation that causes the Word to meet us where *we are* and not to pull up short by stopping where *they were*. By ‘contextualization’ I mean approximately what people mean by ‘application’. In my frame of reference, ‘contextualization’ means getting beneath the historical veneers (‘particularity’) of the revelation of God to its timeless principles and precepts and showing how the latter relates to the issues and circumstances of modern life. ‘Contextualization’ is a modern ‘prophet’, as it were, taking the Word as it was spoken to *them then* and showing how it speaks to *us now*. In fact, that is exactly what the ancient prophets did with the Law. They were contextualizers. They related the Law to the contemporary situations of their day.

Meaning, I repeat, is historical and changeless. Significance is contemporary and variable from person to person, from time to time, from situation to situation. Let me illustrate the difference.

I get up, turn on the TV weather channel early in the morning for a weather report. Shortly I hear that heavy rains are forecast for the next two days, an inch to two inches each day. What the weatherman *means* by what he said is clear enough. For the next two days, he means, there will be a ton of precipitation (for the Northwest) to the tune of one to two inches each day. He is saying, “Expect to get dumped on. It won’t be sprinkles. It will be rain and lots of it.” That is his basic meaning. That meaning won’t change a 100 years from now.

For his listeners however that report has various significances, depending on their situations at the time.

For instance, if we have been in a drought situation, the *significance* of that forecast for a farmer may be that his crops might be saved.

For a person planning a big outdoor barbecue, one significance of that forecast is that he or she had better postpone it or find a way to shelter it.

If one lives on a flood plain, then a significance of that news might be to prepare for a flood.

If I were planning a roofing job in the next two days, the significance may be that the timing is really bad and I should delay the project.

Now let's illustrate this distinction between meaning and significance from one of our truths distilled from John 3:16. Take this one:

“God has demonstrated His love for lost sinners.”

The meaning of that proposition is set in stone. It doesn't change. Of course there could be different interpretations of those words. But interpretations are only attempts to state the fixed meaning. The *contemporary significance* of those words resides in, abstractly put, *any important relationship the meaning has to somebody's personal situation*. Hence the significances of the meaning for me equal the number of important relationships that meaning has for my current circumstances. Now let's be more concrete (and illuminating).

For example, if my mental image of God is that of a hard-as-nails, never-cut-them-any-slack cosmic Cop, then one significance of this text is that God is very different than what I thought He was; He is a loving, compassionate God who cares for those who care nothing for Him and seeks those who are not seeking Him. A corollary import is that I need a radical paradigm shift in my conception of the God who is there.

Suppose a person is mad at the world and feels unloved by anyone who matters. For that individual a significance of this text is the good news that, contrary to their perceptions, the most important Being in the universe, the Sovereign Creator and Sustainer of all things, has demonstrated His love for them with a love that passes understanding.

Perhaps some wounded believer is in a vindictive mode. She is retaliating by hurting those who have hurt her and hating those who hate her. For her, a significance of this truth is that if our God and Father loved those who despise Him, one would expect His child, His spiritual offspring, His moral progeny, to follow suit. How can one operate on a lower moral standard and still credibly claim spiritual kinship?

Hopefully these explanations and examples give you a feel for the difference between the *historical meaning* of the biblical text and its *present and personal significance(s)*.

Let's return now to methodology.

At this stage we bore in on the significance(s) of the truths (or propositions) that we have distilled from the text. The idea is to probe them for their implications or the contemporary significance.

You can do this in two steps. In the first phase you start with drawing an inference from the truth statements or theological propositions you have crystallized from the text.

Inference is “if. . .then” logic. One extracts new information from old or given information. Here is the way you proceed:

You place “IF”<sup>1</sup> before a given truth statement (or proposition), making it the first clause (called a ‘prodisis’) of a conditional sentence. Then you tack “THEN” onto the beginning of the last clause of the conditional sentence (called the ‘apodosis’). Complete the apodosis with an inference or deduction that logically follows from the prodisis (or IF statement).

Now you have an ‘implication’ (or inference). You have deduced a new (or unsurfaced or unstated) fact from a given or stated fact. You and I practice implicatory logic everyday as naturally as we breathe. Let me illustrate this.

Someone says to me as I start home, heading south on I-5, “An accident on I-5 south has closed the freeway.” That has commuting implications for me. I don’t have to be a rocket scientist to draw the logical inferences from this fact. So I say to myself:

“IF (or since) an accident has closed I-5 south, THEN I should consider an alternative route home.” From an ‘old’ fact, I found a logical implication. I need to go home another way (unless I am fond of sitting in traffic going nowhere for hours until the freeway re-opens).

The same mental process we apply so naturally to the facts of everyday life, we can apply also to the propositions of Scripture.

Now at this point I should point out that this reasoning process in search of contemporary implications is not fail-safe. We can reason badly. Therefore the risk of misapplication of the Scriptures remains. But this process significantly reduces that danger, I believe. Let me explain.

A colleague of mine once exclaimed when I was explaining my method in a faculty seminar at the seminary:

“But, Jim, that could be dangerous!”

“Of course, it could,” I responded. “All interpretation is dangerous. All application is dangerous. We are always susceptible to errors at every level. I am just showing you *a safer way* to be dangerous.”

That’s really the point. This methodology will by no means preclude leaps of logic and flaws in interpretation. However it shows you a more disciplined way of going about the process. If it will not eliminate, it can certainly curtail the inevitable blunders that

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<sup>1</sup> In this case “if” is logically equivalent to “since” or “because”. It states a given. It is *not* hypothetical.

attend the slipshod, unregulated, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants approaches to interpretation and application that one typically encounters.

Now let me illustrate how we can probe the implications of truths distilled from John 3:16. Again, here is the format:

IF (a distilled truth), THEN (what implications or significance does it have for me personally, for my family, my church, my business or occupation, or my world?)

Answer this question in specific terms.

For example, IF (or since) by His gracious actions God has demonstrated His love for lost sinners, THEN (implication) His children should emulate His love in seeking to draw lost sinners to Him.

Or, IF by His gracious actions God has demonstrated His love for lost sinners, THEN the amazing love of God ought to keynote our message to the lost.

Or, IF by His gracious actions God has demonstrated His love for lost sinners, THEN God has nothing to prove to His detractors who point to evil in the world as evidence that He doesn't deserve to be served.

Or, IF by His gracious actions God has demonstrated His love for lost sinners, THEN we can be assured of His favor when we cooperate with His redemptive purposes in attempting to reach the lost.

Or, IF by His gracious actions God has demonstrated His love for lost sinners, THEN we ought to be more aggressive and intentional in aligning our ministries with Christ's mission.

This is where the teaching starts to transcend the sterile, coldly cognitive approach that fails to touch bases with the heart. This method refuses to content itself with speaking to the head alone. It insists on going deeper, pressing the implications of the Word home to the heart and the conscience.

Too much that passes for Bible teaching is an exercise in pedantry. Teachers and students too often handle the Bible in such a way that we are merely eavesdroppers on what the authors said *to them then*. The prophetic aspect (*where it pinches our foot now*) is entirely wanting. Too much of the time we never allow the Word of God to get really *personal* with us. Rather, all we hear is Moses talking to the Israelites or Paul speaking to the Corinthians. Not that we should bypass that. Indeed, we must start there. But we cannot stop there. What is most necessary is that we hear the Word of God speaking *to us now* through what the Spirit said to them *then*.

Now you should take this probing technique one step further for the best results. If the first step was *inference*, then the second is *reference*. What you do here is *refer* your inference or the truth statement from which it is drawn to the contemporary context, to put it in general terms.

At this point your aim is to bring biblical truth and contemporary thought and culture into constructive collision at the intersections of individual consciousness. For this to happen a *referencing* process, as I call it, must take place. Here's how to go about it:

You follow the ABC's of the *referencing* process. A stands for Areas of Contradiction, B for Bases of Consolation and C for Cases of Correspondence, D stands for Deposits of Wisdom and E stands for Elements of Doctrine.

Here's the way it works:

You use each of these categories as reference points. *Refer* the implications of a truth statement (or a free-standing proposition) to any one of these five categories (the order doesn't matter). What you do here is simply this: You bring your proposition or inference to a given category and ask the questions appropriate to each. The answer you get surfaces one layer of significance. Let's illustrate.

1. Ask, for example, if you see any AREAS OF CONTRADICTION between your truths (or their implications) and what you (your family, church, your business, your contemporaries etc.) are doing, saying or believing.

In this particular case you are in a discovery mode. You are looking for 'erroneous zones' in our behaviors or the life of the mind that collide or conflict with a truth in the text (or any of its implications). Does this truth (or an implication thereof) bring to mind a contradiction in modern life? How does the text reprove or correct something that some today (it may be me) are in the habit of saying, doing or thinking?

Again, let me illustrate this step:

For example, IF by His gracious actions God has demonstrated His love for lost sinners, THEN (implication) His children should emulate His love in seeking to draw lost sinners to Him.

***Area of Contradiction*** (focusing on the implication): As we Christians become more polarized from the world in this so-called 'post-Christian' era, we sometimes fall into the posture of mutual enemies. . . of warring camps. We start looking at and treating unbelievers as the enemy rather than the victims of war. It is true that they may be *our* enemies and treat us as hostiles. This is one danger, I think, of trying to change the country by political activism. In the fight, it is easy for us to start hating rather than loving the lost who blindly oppose what we know to be right and just. There is a fine line here.

We must be careful that we do not return their hostile fire, so to speak. We should oppose evil, but be gracious to sinners. We must be careful to make a mental distinction between evil ways and lost people who are trapped by sin and blindness in their evil ways. God loved them enough to give His only begotten Son for them. We too should reach out in love to them to draw them to Christ.

Or, IF by His gracious actions God has demonstrated His love for lost sinners, THEN God has nothing to prove to His detractors who point to evil in the world as evidence that He doesn't deserve to be served.

*Area of Contradiction (focusing on the implication):* It is so common for skeptics today (and in the past) to rail at God in times of disaster as if His sovereign permission of these calamities is evidence that He is unworthy to be served. (Cite examples at this point.) God has already demonstrated a love that passes understanding. He is not on trial. The atoning death and subsequent resurrection of Christ is His vindication. His critics will have to find another explanation of human suffering. This slander won't fly in the face of the facts.

Or, IF by His gracious actions God has demonstrated His love for lost sinners, THEN we can be assured of His favor when we cooperate with His redemptive purposes in attempting to reach the lost.

Or, IF by His gracious actions God has demonstrated His love for lost sinners, THEN we ought to be more aggressive and intentional in aligning our ministries with Christ's mission.

*Area of Contradiction (focusing on the implication):* My experience in Christian institutions during my years of ministry reminds me that too often I have seen ministries driven, not by a passion for fulfilling Christ's mission, but simply by the desire to do whatever it takes to survive or draw a crowd. In both cases, leaders seem willing to settle for whatever is expedient or to do whatever seems to work, whether it is right or not. It appears to me that modern church leaders will tweak the Gospel in any way necessary, and de-horn it as much as required, to fill the pews and find a message that pleases people whether it actually converts the lost or not. It seems to me that our business is neither to survive nor to grow per se, but to bring the message of redemption aggressively to the perishing on God's terms.

Now, for the sake of variety, let's shorten the procedure a bit. It isn't imperative to move *beyond* a truth statement to strike oil. True, it is *more* penetrating to probe the implications of biblical propositions (or truth nuggets). However, *all* truth, explicit or implicit, pulsates with contemporary significance. The bottom line is it is certainly possible to leave out the THEN step in this process. Truth statements can stand alone as a take-off point for probing significance and we can ponder their relevance as they stand.

Let me give some examples of this abridged procedure. This time I will draw upon different propositions (or truth statements) earlier distilled from John 3:16 (see Step Six: Distillation).

***Truth Statement: The sole condition of salvation is trusting in God's Son.***

***Area of Contradiction*** (focusing on the truth statement itself): Today Christian theology has been so 'dumbed down' that the critical core of the Gospel is often absent from our evangelistic appeals. So absent in fact that it is remarkable how little we in our churches even speak of Christ, but nebulously talk to people about 'God' and urge them in some vague way 'to trust in God' without ever talking about the work of Christ on the Cross for them and inviting them specifically to place their trust in Him as Savior.

When we ask people to 'trust God', what are we asking them to trust in with respect to God? Where does Christ, the Cross, the Atonement and the Resurrection enter the message? How can one trust in God and not come to terms with the Person and Work of Christ? And how can we bypass all that and expect them to trust in God in the way the Father demands of sinners?

***Truth Statement: The sole condition of salvation is trusting in God's Son.***

***Area of Contradiction*** (focusing strictly on the truth statement): It is common for unbelievers to wave off the Gospel dismissively as only one way to God among many. Religions are viewed as equal opportunity vendors. You can get the same product, as it were, at any of them. They just come in different packages. Hardly. John here reveals through the Spirit that "whoever believes in Him [God's Son] will not perish, but have everlasting life." The rest of the New Testament clearly teaches what this text implies: Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man comes unto the Father except through Him." (John 14:6)

2. Ask if you see any BASIS OF CONSOLATION in the truth(s) you have earmarked in the text. Does the truth of this text offer any comfort or encouragement to the discouraged or the despairing? What hope is here? Is there a promise or assurance embedded in the text that may give hope and strength to the hurting?

***Truth Statement: God showed the depth of His love in offering up His Son as an atoning sacrifice for sinners.***

Here are just two examples of Christian encouragement that can be inferred from our observation of the great love of God.

a. IF God showed the depth of His love in offering up His Son as an atoning sacrifice for sinners, THEN He will spare nothing to keep us.

b. IF God showed the depth of His love in offering up His Son as an atoning sacrifice for us sinners when we were His enemies, THEN consider how much He loves us now that we are His friends. (Compare Roman 5:12 and following.)

3. In *narrative passages*, ask if you see any CASES OF CORRESPONDENCE between people, institutions, actions and events in your passages and people, institutions, actions and events today.

For example, what did the human figures in this narrative say, do or think that (in principle at least) God always approves or disapproves?

Does this narrative portray any human behavior or attitudes that are *like* behavior or attitudes we see today? (You may have to scrap off the historical veneers to get down to the inner principles to determine this. For example, I don't know anybody in our culture who is likely to scoop honey from the carcass of a lion, as Samson did. Even if they did, I doubt that I would condemn them for it. My wife, of course, would only want to know if he washed his hands!)

Is God represented as doing, saying or thinking something *then* that under similar circumstances we can rightly expect Him do, say or think still *today*?

Do we see anything in this narrative indicative of the timeless character of God? Or, of the typical character of unbelieving men or of believing men?

Is there anything here applicable to *every* man?

Simply put, you are looking at the narrative to find out if anything going on in those events is *like* (in principle) what still goes on around us today. Where do we see the similarities, either on the part of man or on the part of God?

Illustration:

In John 3:16 we are not dealing with a narrative passage, of course. However, there is plenty of narrative in all the Gospels. Take, John 2:23-25:

“Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, beholding His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because he did not need any one to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man.”

Here we have a passage where the idea of “believing” is used in a superficial and accommodating sense just as the term “disciple” is similarly used in John 6: 61, 66 of those who, as it turned out, merely professed to be His ‘disciples’, but soon proved otherwise.

Those who ‘believed’ in Him in John 2:23-25 were not for real and Jesus knew it. He did not return their ‘rootless’ response because He knew that it was not the real McCoy.

Now, do we see from this text any *case of correspondence*? For example, did Jesus act in any way here that *in principle* He always acts? Did the people involved in this scenario do anything that is *typical* of human behavior in certain situations? In other words, do we see anything happening there that *in principle* at least we see replicated in human conduct still today? Yes.

Example:

Wherever the Gospel is preached, one always finds this false start phenomenon where people appear to believe in Christ, but in the final analysis they lack any real root. Their ‘faith’ was fatally superficial. They do not follow through. (See Matthew 13:20-21.) This phenomenon should not discourage us. It goes with the territory. Jesus anticipated it in the parable of the sower.

4. Ask if you discover in the text any timeless DEPOSIT OF WISDOM either in the form of timeless prescriptions for moral or ethical conduct, or principles of guidance in the other practical matters of life, such as marriage and family life, social relationships, success and failure, financial issues, etc. Maybe there is a word of warning about the negative outcomes of certain behaviors.

This aspect is not present in John 3:16 except for an implicit word of warning about the threat of perishing in the case of unbelievers.

Every element is not necessarily present in a given text. These perspectives are all enumerated here simply as possible angles of relevance from which one may view given texts and discover the significances that might be embedded in them.

A book like the Proverbs is a treasure chest of practical wisdom. But wisdom can be found everywhere in Scripture for one seeking practical guidance in the everyday affairs of life.

Example:

In Romans 13:14, believers are admonished to “make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.” This is a word of warning. One of the most common mistakes Christians make in overcoming bad habits and avoiding temptations is that we “make provision for the flesh.” That is, we provide the flesh some advantage, or give it some leverage. If a man has a drinking problem, he shouldn’t keep liquor in the house, for example.

5. Finally, ask if you discover in the text any ELEMENTS OF DOCTRINE or theology that express beliefs or convictions that any Christian should confess, practice and defend against all contradiction.

In our text (John 3:16) there are all kinds of doctrinal elements present. For example, we see clearly that:

a. God is not like Voltaire’s “clock maker” Deity, a kind of impersonal Deity-force who set everything in motion and went off and left it to run by itself. He is a personal Being who is active in His Creation and in human history. He is a God who ‘breaks into’ our affairs and has a saving concern for His creatures.

b. God is a loving God. He gave His own special Son to create the possibility of our salvation.

We could go on and on with theological ‘seeds’ implanted in the text. Some are explicit. Some are implicit. But the text is a garden from which we harvest the propositions which formulate what Christians believe and should defend.

Prescribe the Needed Response to the Text
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#### Step Eight: Prescription (or Application or Internalization)

Prescribe what you (or others to whom it is applicable) should do about these implications to the extent that these significances beg for practical adjustments in speech, attitude, belief or conduct.

Examples:

1. If you see an **Area of Contradiction** in some aspect of your life or thinking that collides with biblical truth, define for yourself what steps in conduct or adjustments in thinking that you need to make to reconcile *your* reality with *God’s truth*. You can extend this application to areas of contradiction you see today perhaps in your gender, your family, your church, your business or profession, your social circle, your school, your government.

2. If you see a **Basis of Consolation** in some aspect of biblical truth you find in a given text, prescribe for yourself how you ought to respond to that truth. Perhaps it will be simply to stay the course you are already on with renewed faith or perhaps the hope or encouragement you have found prompts you (or suggests to other afflicted or discouraged persons) to make some mid-course adjustments in behavior or attitude.

3. If in *narrative passages* you see something in some group, person, action, event, institution or ritual that is similar to or corresponds *in principle* to some group, person,

action, event, institution or ritual in today's world (**Case of Correspondence**), prescribe or define the response (in behavior or attitude) that is appropriate in light of the analogous situation.

Let's say, for instance, that Samson did something wrong in eating honey from the carcass of a lion when he was en route to Philistine territory and compounded his offense when he shared some of his "take" with his unwitting parents. What sin(s) did Samson commit? Now what sin(s) in modern life would *in principle* correspond or compare to his wrongdoing? In other words, what sort(s) of behaviors or attitudes would constitute the moral equivalent of Samson's disobedience in our modern context? Prescribe what steps we must take to rectify or to avoid replicating in spirit or principle his error(s) in his ancient context.

4. If you find something that strikes you as a nugget or **Deposit of Wisdom** in a text, identify some concrete situation where that wisdom applies in your own life (or in that of others). Then prescribe or define how this pearl of wisdom should be applied or implemented where it applies.

5. If you recognize in a text teaching that is a significant component or distinctive element of our Christian belief system, doctrinal content that we as Christians are obliged by faith to confess, practice and defend (**Element of Doctrine**), prescribe or define for yourself what you should do about that teaching. Maybe you need to adjust your beliefs to square with the Scriptures; maybe you need to be more vigilant in safeguarding the "deposit of faith." Perhaps all its recognition calls for is be reassured that the theological ground which you already hold is solid.

The whole idea in this "prescription stage" is simply to internalize truth. Not only do we need to get beyond the historical meaning and down to the contemporary significance of that meaning, but we must press the issues into Monday morning practice. We must go the extra mile and push ourselves to live up to what we know.

Final Remarks:

Hopefully you will find this process as helpful in your study as it has been in mine. Nothing is perfect and neither is this. All methods are fallible. Nothing is failsafe and none is any substitute for prayer and the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. But other things being equal, it is better to use a good method than to fly by the seat of our pants.

