Let God Be True: Scripture Interpreting Scripture

Introductory Paper in a 12-part Series

by Escape the Mustard Tree

Introduction

Word of the Kingdom theology is the Christian belief system developed and defended across this project's papers. Before anything else, it is a way of reading. It holds that Scripture is built to interpret itself, and that this built-in structure — not an inherited body of teaching laid over the top of it — is how its meaning is meant to be found.

On salvation, it holds that a person is eternally secure the moment he believes, and that this one salvation unfolds across three tenses tied to spirit, soul, and body, with a real and conditional recompense still ahead. That recompense is participation as a co-heir with Christ in His thousand-year reign, awarded at the Judgment Seat of Christ after the Church is removed from the earth ahead of the seven-year Tribulation. It holds that Israel and the Church are two distinct peoples with two distinct callings, neither one replacing the other.

Every one of those claims is worked out in the papers that follow. None of it is taken up here. This paper deals with the question that comes before all of them.

That question is simple to ask and hard to escape: **who gets the final word on what Scripture means?** Is the meaning of the text something that stands on its own, available to any Christian who reads carefully and lets the whole of Scripture bear on each part? Or does it require an ongoing interpretive authority standing over the text — a magisterium, a confession, an inherited tradition — before it can be reliably known at all?

This is not a footnote about method. It is the ground the rest of the project stands on. Every disagreement taken up in the later papers traces back to it. Get this wrong, in either direction, and every doctrinal conversation afterward stops being an argument about the text and becomes an argument about authorities.

The title of this paper comes from Paul, and it states the principle in four words:

> For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. (Rom. 3:3-4)

Paul is answering a question about Israel's unbelief, but the rule he states is general, and it is the rule this paper applies. When what God has said and what men have concluded don’t line up, God's word is the fixed point. Everything else — every creed, every confession, every commentary, every tradition, and every paper in this series — is the movable part.

The Prior Question

Here’s the question in the form that makes the difference visible.

A Christian reads a passage of Scripture. He reads it carefully. He compares it with other passages. He comes away convinced it means something different from what his church officially teaches about it.

Who is right?

Everything in this paper follows from how that question is answered.

The Mainstream Landscape

It would be unfair to treat "mainstream Christianity" as one voice here. It isn't. The traditions split more sharply on this question than on many of the doctrines the later papers take up. Which traditions get named changes from paper to paper, and it changes for a reason. On the question of authority, Reformed and Wesleyan churches answer alike, so they are taken together here as Protestant evangelicalism; Orthodoxy answers differently from Rome, so it is heard on its own. The papers that follow take up doctrine rather than authority — salvation, judgment, the kingdom, the vocabulary of the afterlife — and there the three traditions engaged are Catholic, Reformed, and Wesleyan.

Catholic teaching holds, formally, that Scripture is not the only vehicle of divine revelation. The Second Vatican Council's *Dei Verbum* states that sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture together form one deposit of the word of God committed to the Church (*Dei Verbum* §10), and that both are to be received with equal reverence (*Dei Verbum* §9). The Catechism repeats this without softening it (CCC §97). Final interpretive authority over both belongs to the Magisterium — not an abstraction, but a definable body: the Pope together with the bishops in communion with him, teaching officially on faith and morals (CCC §§80-82). That authority is traced to Christ's words to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven" (Matt. 16:19), and is held to be protected from error under specific conditions.

So the answer to the question above, on Catholic terms, is clear. The individual's reading yields. Not because his sincerity is doubted, but because the Church's interpretive authority is understood to have been given by Christ Himself and to carry a protection the individual's reading does not.

Orthodox tradition reaches a similar destination by a different road. It locates interpretive authority not in a single office but in the consensus of the Church across time — the ecumenical councils, the Fathers, the liturgy, the settled mind of the whole body. There's no pope, but there is still a court of appeal outside the individual reader, and Scripture is understood as the Church's book, rightly read only from inside the Church's tradition.

Protestant evangelicalism formally holds to *sola scriptura* — that Scripture alone is the final court of appeal, and that every creed, confession, and tradition is a useful but correctable human summary, always answerable back to the text. This is close to where this project stands, and the same question posed above gets the opposite answer: if a Christian's careful reading conflicts with his denomination's confession, the confession is what should be tested.

That's rarely how it works in practice. Confessions and inherited readings often function *as though* they carried final authority. Questions considered settled are rarely reopened against the text. A member or pastor who reaches a substantively different conclusion and says so publicly usually

faces correction — sometimes loss of standing — rather than being commended for doing exactly what the doctrine invites. The gap isn't doctrinal. It's the gap between what a church says its standard is and what happens when a member actually applies it.

What unites all three, despite real differences, is that none of them leaves "what does this text mean" entirely to Scripture itself. This project does.

The Word of the Kingdom Position

The governing verse

The method relies heavily on one passage. Isaiah asks who God will teach, and the lines that follow describe both the kind of person taught and the way the teaching comes.

The passage also arrives with a wrinkle, and it's the same wrinkle this paper takes up later at Luke 23:43.

The King James Version renders the last two clauses as the answer to the first two:

> Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little. (Isa. 28:9-10, KJV)

The New King James renders all four clauses as questions:

> "Whom will he teach knowledge? And whom will he make to understand the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts? For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little." (Isa. 28:9-10)

The Hebrew has neither. There are no question marks and no full stop in the text; there is no punctuation in it at all. Both renderings are editorial decisions made by translators, exactly like the comma this paper examines in Luke 23:43 — and here the decision sits in the passage the whole method rests on. A paper that treats inherited punctuation as no part of Scripture cannot make an exception for its own governing text.

So take the two claims separately, because they don't stand or fall together.

How truth comes is not in dispute. Precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little. Truth is assembled, progressively, from across the whole of the sixty-six books. It is not delivered whole in any single verse, chapter, or human authority — which means a doctrine built from one isolated verse is built wrong by definition, no matter who built it. And this is not a claim resting on punctuation at all, because three verses later God takes the same phrase into His own mouth: "But the word of the LORD was to them, 'Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little'" (Isa. 28:13). Whatever the punctuation of verse 10, verse 13 has God describing His own word to that generation in exactly these terms.

Who receives it is the clause the punctuation touches. Read as the King James reads it, verse 9 names them outright: those weaned from milk, drawn from the breasts — ordinary, unlearned people, not a trained interpretive class. Read as a fourth question, the line is sharper and more mocking, but the answer it expects is the same one, since the whole complaint of the surrounding

verses is against priests and prophets who had erred through strong drink and were in no condition to teach anyone (Isa. 28:7-8). Either way, the credentialed teachers of that generation are the ones being set aside, and the unlearned are the ones left.

This runs alongside two other statements. God conceals things on purpose, and searching them out is what He honors: "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter" (Prov. 25:2). And He rewards those who look: He "is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

Nine rules for reading

Nine rules follow from this. They are not claimed as exhaustive, and where a rule rests on observation rather than on a stated scriptural principle, this paper says so.

1. **Read Scripture in the order given, Genesis to Revelation.** The pattern set at the beginning governs what comes after — the seven-day structure of Genesis 1 being the clearest case (Gen. 1:1-2:3). God Himself describes His method this way: "declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done" (Isa. 46:10).
2. **Draw the meaning out of the text; do not read meaning into it.** A passage cannot mean today something other than what its writer intended it to mean for its first readers. Paul calls this "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).
3. **Scripture must interpret Scripture, and is its own best commentary.** This is the rule the rest depend on. Man's commentary is secondary. A theological degree is not required to understand God's Word. Paul describes the method as "comparing spiritual things with spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:13), and Isaiah has already described its shape (Isa. 28:9-10).
4. **Every word is inspired, and therefore every word means something.** This calls for careful word-for-word translation rather than paraphrase. Paul says all Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16); Jesus says man lives "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4), and that not the smallest stroke of the Law will pass away (Matt. 5:18).
5. **Scripture carries more than one legitimate layer of meaning at once.** Paul reads Hagar and Sarah as two covenants while the history stands exactly as written (Gal. 4:22-24), and says Israel's wilderness history happened as real events which "were written for our admonition" (1 Cor. 10:11).
6. **Scripture is deeply typological**, with earlier persons and events prefiguring later ones. Jesus says the bronze serpent prefigured His own lifting up (John 3:14-15); the tabernacle is called a copy and shadow of heavenly things (Heb. 8:5); the feasts are "a shadow of things to come" (Col. 2:17).
7. **Scripture is one story, and Christ is its subject.** He said so of the Old Testament while standing in front of men who had it memorized: "You search the Scriptures... and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39; cf. Luke 24:27).
8. **Take the literal sense first, unless the text itself signals otherwise.** The safeguard here is that Scripture supplies its own interpretations of its figures. John tells the reader that "temple" meant Christ's body (John 2:21). Jesus explains the sower Himself (Matt. 13:18-23). Revelation names the stars and lampstands within four verses of showing them (Rev. 1:20). The reader is not left to guess where the figures are.
9. **The first appearance of a word or concept tends to establish its pattern** — often called the Law of First Mention (unfortunately called a “Law,” which is a misnomer). This is an observed regularity, not a rule Scripture states about itself, and it should be treated as a

strong pointer rather than a proof. It is useful for finding where to look; it does not settle a matter on its own.

The Spirit as teacher

Behind all nine sits one vitally important claim: the Christian's actual teacher is the Holy Spirit, not an institution standing between him and the text.

Paul says the Spirit "searches all things, yes, the deep things of God" (1 Cor. 2:10), and that Christians have received "the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God" (1 Cor. 2:12) — a knowledge conveyed by comparing spiritual things with spiritual (1 Cor. 2:13), not by appeal to an outside authority. Christ promised that the Spirit of truth would "guide you into all truth," speaking whatever He hears from the Father (John 16:13), and that this Spirit — not a later teaching office — would testify of Him (John 15:26).

If the Spirit given to every Christian is what secures right understanding, then no human authority has to be added to secure it.

John puts it more bluntly still: "the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you" (1 John 2:27). That sentence needs its context, and giving it in full makes it stronger rather than weaker. John is writing about deceivers who were trying to lead his readers astray (1 John 2:26). He isn't abolishing teachers; he's telling ordinary Christians that they already have what they need to recognize a false one. Which is precisely the claim this paper is making.

Scripture Demonstrating Its Own Method

Everything so far could be answered with a shrug: *that is your preferred method.* It is Scripture's own, practiced in the text by Jesus and by the apostles, and commended in ordinary people who had no standing whatsoever.

Jesus answers Scripture with Scripture — including Scripture quoted correctly and used wrongly. In the wilderness, Jesus answers each temptation the same way: "It is written" (Matt. 4:4, 7, 10). The second exchange is the one that matters here. Satan quotes Psalm 91 accurately: "He shall give His angels charge over you," and "in their hands they shall bear you up" (Matt. 4:6). The words are right. The application is not. And Jesus does not correct him by asserting who He is or by appealing to an office. He answers with another passage: "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the LORD your God'" (Matt. 4:7).

It is written again. A quoted verse, correctly quoted and wrongly applied, corrected by a second verse. That is comparing Scripture with Scripture, performed by Christ, against the most capable misuser of Scripture there is. No stronger endorsement of the method exists.

Jesus interprets Himself out of the Old Testament. On the Emmaus road, "beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27). Later that day He tells the eleven that everything written about Him in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms had to be fulfilled — and then "He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44-45). Not a new revelation replacing the text. The existing text, explained from itself, with understanding opened.

Ordinary people are commended for checking an apostle against the text. This is the passage that should end the argument:

> These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. (Acts 17:11)

A synagogue congregation with no office, no credential, and no teaching authority audits the preaching of Paul against Scripture — and Luke commends them for it. Not tolerates. Commends. They are called *more fair-minded* than the group that didn't. If an apostle's teaching was subject to that test by ordinary people, no later authority is exempt from it.

Scripture claims to be enough. Paul tells Timothy that the Scriptures he had known since childhood are "able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15), and that Scripture equips "that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). *Complete* is the whole argument in one word. If something further were required to make the man of God complete, Paul chose the wrong word.

Two Worked Examples

Method claims are cheap until they are shown doing work. Here are two small cases where an inherited assumption, not the text, is carrying the weight.

The comma no one wrote

Jesus' words to the thief are punctuated, in most English Bibles, like this:

> Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise. (Luke 23:43)

Read that way, it promises entry into Paradise that same day. But the Greek manuscripts carried no punctuation at all. The comma is a translator's decision. Move it one word later — "Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise" — and the sentence instead has Jesus saying something on that day about a future that is not dated.

Both readings are available from the identical Greek. Neither changes a letter of the text.

There are arguments on both sides. Against the later comma: the phrase "assuredly, I say to you" appears dozens of times in the Gospels and is never elsewhere followed by "today," which makes the construction unusual. In its favor: "I command you today" and its variants are a standard Hebrew idiom, common throughout Deuteronomy (e.g. Deut. 8:11), so the construction is hardly foreign to Scripture's own habits.

The point of the example does not depend on which reading wins, and it is stronger for that. **The point is that the question is open, and that nothing but a printing convention has been closing it.** A reader who has never considered the alternative hasn't weighed the evidence and chosen; he's inherited a typesetting decision and mistaken it for the words of Christ. Whatever the right answer is, it has to be reached from the text.

Three words, one English word

The second example is not about punctuation but about translation, and it is not disputed by anyone.

Open an English Bible to the word "hell." In the King James Version it renders three different Greek words, and a Hebrew one besides.

Hades is the unseen realm of the dead — the realm whose gates Jesus said would not prevail against His church (Matt. 16:18, where the King James reads "the gates of hell"), and the realm entered by Christ Himself, as Peter says in Acts 2:27, quoting David: "You will not leave my soul in Hades." *Gehenna* is a different word entirely — the Valley of Hinnom, a real location outside Jerusalem with its own grim history in Israel, used in Matthew 5:22, 5:29-30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15 and 23:33, Mark 9:43-47, Luke 12:5, and James 3:6. *Tartaroō* appears once, of angels who sinned being "cast down to hell" and delivered into chains of darkness (2 Pet. 2:4). And behind the Old Testament instances stands the Hebrew *Sheol*, rendered variously "hell," "the grave," and "the pit" in the same translation.

Four distinct words. One English word.

Nobody disputes the underlying facts here — this isn't a contested reading; it's a matter of opening a lexicon. Some modern translations have corrected part of it; the NKJV transliterates *Hades* rather than flattening it. But the flattened version is the one most English readers absorbed, and it produced a single, undifferentiated idea of "hell" that Scripture itself never presents in that form.

Consider what follows. Any doctrine built on the English word "hell" is built on a category the Greek text does not have. Every conclusion drawn from it inherits the collapse. And the reader who assembled that doctrine never made an interpretive error at all — he read his Bible carefully and trusted it. The error entered before he opened it.

Keeping those four words apart stops being illustrative and starts carrying weight when this project reaches the *aion* and *aionios* word study and the vocabulary of the afterlife, where whole doctrinal conclusions turn on exactly this kind of distinction.

A Translation's Own History

The comma shows one convention mistaken for the text's own authority. The same thing happens at institutional scale, in the production of the translations most English readers simply call "the Bible."

The King James Version did not come out of a theologically neutral process. James I convened the Hampton Court Conference in 1604 to hear Puritan grievances against the Church of England, and rejected nearly every reform requested. One exception came almost as an aside: John Rainolds, the Puritan president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, proposed a new English translation. James seized on it — not because he favored the Puritans' own Bible, the popular Geneva Bible, but because he disliked its marginal notes, which he read as politically seditious. One note on Exodus praised the Hebrew midwives for disobeying Pharaoh, which James took as encouragement to disobey kings. The translation he commissioned was aimed, in part, at sidelining the very Bible its proposer preferred.

That motive shows up in the instructions he gave. Rule 3 of the fifteen governing the project required that "the old ecclesiastical words" be kept — naming "church" specifically, not "congregation" — though Tyndale and the Geneva Bible had both rendered the Greek *ekklēsia* as "congregation." The difference was not accuracy. "Congregation" carried a gathered-believers understanding of the church that implicitly reduced the standing of bishops, and the king's instruction preserved the reading that supported the structure he headed. Rule 4 went further, telling the translators that where a word had more than one possible sense, they should prefer whichever reading had been most used by the eminent Fathers, "being agreeable to the Analogy of Faith" — settled consensus, rather than a fresh reading of the text on its own terms.

None of this makes the King James Version untrustworthy. On the whole it is careful and scholarly work, and it has served the English-speaking church for four centuries. The point is narrower and it applies to every translation ever made, this one included: a translation is a series of decisions made by men, and some of those decisions were made for reasons that had nothing to do with the Greek or the Hebrew. The reader who says "I just read the Bible" is always reading someone's decisions. The only question is whether he knows it.

That is the method, the warrant for it in Scripture's own practice, and two demonstrations of what goes wrong when inherited decisions are left unchecked. What remains is to locate the disagreement precisely — and that begins with what is not in dispute.

Where They Align

The disagreements set out below are real, and it would be easy to read this paper as though everything were in dispute. Very little is. Quite a lot is shared, and naming the shared ground first makes the actual disagreement easier to see.

- Every tradition compared here affirms Scripture's inspiration and authority without qualification (2 Tim. 3:16). The disagreement is not whether Scripture is God's word. It is what, if anything, stands beside it with comparable authority.
- All agree that Scripture has a fixed extent, though they do not agree on what that extent is. Catholic Bibles contain seven books absent from Protestant ones — Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, and 1 and 2 Maccabees — together with longer forms of Esther and Daniel, a list fixed at the Council of Trent in 1546. Orthodox canons are larger still and vary between national churches. This paper works from the sixty-six-book canon, and a reader who works from a longer one should know that at the outset rather than discover it later. The difference matters more for a method like this one than it might first appear: if Scripture is to interpret Scripture, then how much Scripture there is to compare is not a side question.
- Catholic teaching affirms that Scripture materially contains the full revelation of Christ (*Dei Verbum* §§7-8). The dispute is over final interpretive authority, not over the sufficiency of Scripture's content.
- Protestant evangelicalism, in its stated doctrine of *sola scriptura*, is substantially aligned with the position taught here. The divergence is a matter of consistent practice more than of stated principle.
- All agree that the Holy Spirit is involved in a Christian's understanding of Scripture. The question is whether that involvement is sufficient on its own or requires institutional backing to be trusted.

Where They Diverge, and Why

The single fork

Everything traces to one question: is the correct interpretation of Scripture entrusted to an ongoing teaching authority, or is it available in principle to any Christian reading carefully with the Spirit's help and the whole canon in view? Catholic and Orthodox tradition answer institutionally, by different routes. This project answers that the text, read whole and allowed to interpret itself, is sufficient on its own.

The historical root

This is not only a methodological preference. It is tied to history. The same account developed elsewhere in this project out of the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (Matt. 13:31-33) — that the leaven was at work in the assemblies from the apostles' day, and that the church's post-Constantine merger with imperial authority gave it reach— bears directly on this question. A centralized teaching authority standing over the ordinary Christian's reading is not incidental to that corruption. It is part of what made it possible, because a message maintained by institutional authority rather than by the text's own clarity is far harder for ordinary Christians to check and correct.

Practice versus principle

Where the formal doctrine already agrees, the disagreement is about practice rather than stated belief. A denominational confession, once settled, routinely functions as the boundary of acceptable interpretation — performing quietly the same authority-bearing role that Catholic teaching assigns openly and formally to the Magisterium. The difference between them is whether the mechanism is stated openly, not whether one exists.

Answering the Objections

That's where the disagreement sits. What follows is what the other side says back.

A position held against most of Christendom had better be able to take the return fire, and to take it in the strongest form the other side can put it. Six objections follow. The first goes straight at the passage the method rests on.

"Your method verse is a taunt"

This objection goes at the foundation rather than the building, which is what makes it the sharpest of the six.

The charge. The context of Isaiah 28 is this: Isaiah is speaking to a nation about to be invaded. The chapter opens against the northern kingdom, whose capital Samaria would fall to Assyria within a few years, and then turns to the rulers in Jerusalem. The men addressed in these verses are Israel's own priests and prophets, and Isaiah's charge is that they're drunk while doing their work:

> The priest and the prophet have erred through intoxicating drink... They err in vision, they stumble in judgment. For all tables are full of vomit and filth; no place is clean. (Isa. 28:7-8)

Immediately after that description come the two verses this paper leans on:

> Whom will he teach knowledge? And whom will he make to understand the message? Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts? For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little. (Isa. 28:9-10)

On the most common scholarly reading, those are not God's words at all. They are the drunkards' words, thrown back at Isaiah, and the tone is contempt: *Who does he think he's teaching? Babies just off the breast?* On the same reading the famous phrase in verse 10 is mimicry. The Hebrew is a clipped, sing-song repetition, and the mockers are imitating what Isaiah's preaching sounds like to them — a teacher drilling toddlers, one syllable at a time.

Now the part that presses hardest on this paper, which is where the passage goes next:

> For with stammering lips and another tongue He will speak to this people, to whom He said, "This is the rest with which You may cause the weary to rest," and, "This is the refreshing"; yet they would not hear. But the word of the LORD was to them, "Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little," that they might go and fall backward, and be broken and snared and caught. (Isa. 28:11-13)

Two things there need drawing out.

"Stammering lips and another tongue" is not a description of unclear preaching. It means a foreign language, and in this setting it means the Assyrian armies — God telling a people who would not listen to His prophet in their own language that they would next hear from Him in the speech of an invader they could not understand. Moses had warned of exactly this centuries earlier, of a nation coming against them "whose language you will not understand" (Deut. 28:49).

And then verse 13 takes the mockers' own sing-song phrase and puts it in God's mouth, attached to an outcome: they go, and fall backward, and are broken and snared and caught.

So the objection concludes: this project has taken a drunkard's taunt, whose stated outcome in the very passage is stumbling and capture, and made it the governing description of how God teaches. That is not building a method on Scripture. That is building it on a passage read backwards.

The answer. It begins with a concession. The mocking reading of verses 9 and 10 may well be right, and nothing here needs it to be wrong. The words may indeed have started in the mouths of men who despised Isaiah's preaching. Grant it completely.

Then read verse 13 again, and notice who is speaking.

> But the word of the LORD was to them, "Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little." (Isa. 28:13)

But the word of the LORD was to them. The "but" marks a turn, and the turn is the point. Whatever the drunkards meant by the phrase, Isaiah doesn’t leave it with them. He takes the mocked description and states it as fact: this is how the word of the LORD actually came. The relocation from sneer to description is performed inside the text, by the prophet, three verses later. No interpreter had to do it.

Which means the objection, pressed all the way, proves less than it wants. If verse 10 is a taunt, then Scripture answers the taunt by confirming it. *Yes. Precept upon precept. That is exactly how it came.*

The stumbling attaches to the hearers, not to the method. Verse 13 does end in falling backward, being broken, snared, and caught — but read the verse before it for the reason. God had said to these same people, "This is the rest with which You may cause the weary to rest," and, "This is the refreshing"; and the verdict is five words long: "Yet they would not hear" (Isa. 28:12). The same word that offered rest to those who would hear it broke those who would not. The manner of delivery did not change between the two groups. The hearing did.

That pattern is stated all over Scripture and is not in dispute anywhere. The identical message is "the aroma of death leading to death" to one group and "the aroma of life leading to life" to another (2 Cor. 2:15-16). The same stone is precious to those who believe and "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense" to those who are disobedient (1 Pet. 2:7-8). Jesus' own parables both revealed and concealed, and He said so while quoting Isaiah (Matt. 13:10-15). A method that hardens those who refuse it is not thereby discredited; that's what every word from God has always done.

Paul reaches into this very passage for doctrine, and does it twice over.

Writing to Corinth about the use of tongues in the assembly, Paul says this:

> Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. In the law it is written: "With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; and yet, for all that, they will not hear Me," says the Lord. (1 Cor. 14:20-21)

The quotation is Isaiah 28:11-12, the verses about stammering lips and another tongue. Three things follow.

Paul calls it "the law," his term for authoritative Scripture, and quotes it as God speaking — "says the Lord." He isn't treating this paragraph as a transcript of what some drunks once said. He's treating it as God's word, and drawing a doctrine out of it for a church centuries later: as foreign speech came to Israel as a sign to people who would not hear, so tongues function as a sign to unbelievers rather than a display for the assembly.

And notice the sentence immediately before the quotation. Paul tells the Corinthians not to be children in understanding, but to be babes in malice. He reaches for the infant image in the same breath in which he reaches for Isaiah 28 — the same image the mockers of verse 9 had used as an insult. Paul evidently had the whole paragraph in view, insult included.

So the passage the objection wants to quarantine as a drunkard's exchange is a passage an apostle mines for instruction, quotes as the Lord's own speech, and echoes the vocabulary of. If Isaiah 28 is usable in verses 11 and 12, the objection cannot fence off verses 9, 10, and 13 as unusable. It is one paragraph.

And the insult itself is one Scripture keeps. Grant that the mockers meant *he is teaching us like infants.* That charge is not denied anywhere in the New Testament; it is adopted. Jesus thanked the Father for hiding these things "from the wise and prudent" and revealing them "to babes" (Matt. 11:25). He said whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will not enter it at all (Mark 10:15). Paul says God chose the foolish and the weak things to shame the wise and the mighty (1 Cor. 1:27). Peter tells Christians to desire the pure milk of the word "as newborn babes"

(1 Pet. 2:2). The drunken priests of Isaiah 28 sneered at being taught like children. Scripture's answer, across both Testaments, is that being taught like a child is the only way anyone is taught at all.

One clarification, since this paper elsewhere cites Hebrews on milk and solid food. The infant image cuts two ways in Scripture and the two aren't in conflict. Receiving like a child is commended (Mark 10:15; 1 Pet. 2:2); staying an infant when a man ought to be teaching is rebuked (Heb. 5:12-14). Isaiah's mockers despised the first. Hebrews addresses the second. They are different failures.

Last, and most important: the method does not rest on this verse. Isaiah 28:9-10 is the compact statement of it — a useful summary, and nothing more than that. The method itself is established by Scripture's own practice, laid out earlier in this paper: Jesus answering a correctly-quoted verse with a second verse (Matt. 4:7), Christ expounding Himself out of Moses and the Prophets (Luke 24:27), the Bereans commended for auditing an apostle against the text (Acts 17:11), Paul describing his own procedure as comparing spiritual things with spiritual (1 Cor. 2:13), and Scripture claiming to make the man of God complete (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Strike Isaiah 28 out of this paper entirely and that section stands untouched. The objection, at its very best, costs a slogan. It does not touch the argument.

"Your method produces chaos"

The charge. This is the objection most people actually feel, and it is usually stated as a question: if Scripture is clear and self-interpreting, why do sincere Christians with the same Spirit reach contradictory conclusions? Point at the number of Protestant denominations and let the fact speak.

The answer. The fact is real. The conclusion drawn from it is not.

The method never promised unanimity. Isaiah's own description rules that out — precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little (Isa. 28:9-10) describes labor spread over time, not instant agreement. The curse in Eden set the terms for every kind of harvest: "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread" (Gen. 3:19). The writer of Hebrews rebukes readers who ought to be teaching and still need milk, and says solid food belongs to those "who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Heb. 5:12-14). Exercised. Used. Nothing in that describes a text that yields its meaning to a first, casual reading.

Scripture also concedes the difficulty outright, and its response is the most instructive thing in this whole discussion. Peter says some things in Paul's letters are hard to understand, "which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:16). There it is: misreading, named by an apostle, in writing. And what is his remedy? Not an interpretive office. He tells his readers to beware and to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:17-18). The problem is being untaught and unstable. The solution is to stop being untaught and unstable.

What the method actually promises is not unanimity but **accountability**. Every claim made from Scripture is checkable, by anyone, against Scripture. That's a real and rare property. Under an institutional model, a disputed teaching is settled by the body with the authority to settle it, and

the ordinary Christian's recourse ends there. Under this one, the recourse never ends, because the standard is a text everyone can open.

And disagreement is not evidence against a standard's existence. Courts disagree about laws without anyone concluding the statute has no meaning. Doctors disagree about diagnoses without anyone concluding the body has no condition. Disagreement shows the subject is hard. It does not show that it is unknowable, and it certainly does not establish that whoever has the authority to end the argument must be right.

"No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation"

The charge. This is the verse most often set against the position:

> knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (2 Pet. 1:20-21)

The answer. Read the second verse. Peter explains himself in it, and the explanation isn't about readers. The word "for" ties the two together: no prophecy is of private interpretation *because* prophecy never came by the will of man. His subject is where Scripture came from. The prophets didn't supply their own private sense of things; they spoke as they were carried along by the Spirit.

Peter is describing the origin of Scripture, not licensing an office to control its reading. A verse about how the Bible was written can't be turned into a verse about who is allowed to read it, and the sentence Peter attached to it says so.

"You have simply built your own magisterium"

The charge. Twelve papers of interpretation, arguing a specific system, asking to be believed — how is that different from a confession? If a reader concludes this project is wrong somewhere, what recourse does he have?

The answer. Every recourse — and that's the whole point. The objection has real force, and the standard it implies is one this project accepts.

These papers are commentary. Rule 3 covers them exactly: **man's commentary is secondary**, and this project's own commentary is not exempt from its own rule. Everything taught here is offered to be tested against Scripture, not received on the strength of who wrote it. If a claim in any paper in this series cannot survive being checked against the text by an ordinary Christian with a Bible, it should not survive at all.

The difference between commentary and a magisterium is not how confident it sounds. It's whether the reader is authorized to overturn it. A magisterium settles a question; commentary submits one. The Bereans were commended for testing an apostle (Acts 17:11), and nothing written here stands higher than an apostle. Test it the same way.

"Your teaching comes first and Scripture follows"

This objection comes at the project from a different angle than the last one. That one asked who is authorized to overturn a claim. This one asks which came first — the system or the text.

The charge. A project claiming that Scripture interprets itself has produced twelve papers of interpretation to explain what Scripture says. If the text really were self-interpreting, none of this would be necessary; a Christian could simply read. The volume is the evidence. And the shape of the volume is worse than its size: a doctrinal system is stated, and the verses arrive afterward, arranged to support what has already been claimed. Rule 2 of this paper's own nine says to draw meaning out of the text rather than read meaning into it. By its own rule, the project stands accused.

The answer. Two charges are folded together there, and they come apart cleanly.

Length is what the method costs. The first charge answers itself out of the passage this paper already leans on. Precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little (Isa. 28:10) describes a subject assembled from pieces scattered across sixty-six books. Assembling it takes room. Paul calls his own procedure comparing spiritual things with spiritual (1 Cor. 2:13), and comparing means setting one passage beside another, which cannot be done in a sentence. The writer of Hebrews says solid food belongs to those "who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Heb. 5:14). Exercise takes time. Length is what gathering costs, and a short book on this material would be evidence of gathering less.

The apostles taught at length from the text. Extended teaching from the text is what the apostles did, and Luke reports it without embarrassment. At Thessalonica, Paul "as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead" (Acts 17:2-3). Three weeks of sustained teaching out of the Old Testament, and Luke calls it his custom. The letter to the Hebrews runs thirteen chapters and is built almost entirely out of Moses, the Psalms, and the prophets. If long teaching from the text contradicted the sufficiency of the text, Paul's ministry would be the first casualty and Hebrews the second.

And ordinary people checked them while they did it. The Bereans are the answer, and they sit in the same chapter as Paul's three Sabbaths. They didn't tell Paul to stop teaching at length. They "searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11). What made the arrangement work wasn't that the teaching was brief; it was that the teaching was checkable, and that the men hearing it went and checked. Extended teaching and a self-interpreting Bible are not rivals. One is tested by the other.

On the order of things, the charge is checkable. The second charge is the serious one, and protesting sincerity is no answer to it. What answers it is that the charge can be settled by anyone willing to do the work — and that these papers are built to make settling it easy. Every doctrinal claim in these papers carries its address inline, because a claim without one cannot be checked. A system that wanted its conclusions to sit above the text would do the opposite: assert broadly, cite thinly, and keep the reader at the level of summary. Printing the references is handing over the means of conviction.

And there is a reason the pile is this high. The papers are long because so much has been laid on top of the text, not because the text is unclear. Most of the labor in this series goes into words a reader already thought he understood — hell, forever, kingdom, inheritance, saved. Removing an overlay takes more pages than reading would have taken if the overlay had never been laid down.

That is a comment on four centuries of English Bibles and inherited teaching, and the two worked examples earlier in this paper show it happening word by word.

"This makes teachers unnecessary"

The charge. If every Christian has the Spirit, the whole canon, and no human authority standing over his reading, then the pastor is an optional convenience — and Scripture supplies the counter-example itself. Philip found the Ethiopian eunuch reading Isaiah and asked whether he understood it, and the man answered, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31). That is the reply of a reader who needed more than a text in front of him.

The answer. The position does not make teachers unnecessary, and it shouldn’t be caricatured that way — or defended that way.

God gave teachers to the Church on purpose: "He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:11-12). *Equipping.* A teacher's job is to hand the saints the tools and get out of the way, not to stand between them and the text.

The eunuch's answer sounds decisive for the other side right up until the next few verses. Philip is not an interpretive office — he’s one of the seven appointed to serve tables (Acts 6:5). He holds no teaching authority. And what he does is described exactly: "beginning at this Scripture, $$ he $$ preached Jesus to him" (Acts 8:35). He explains Isaiah 53 from the rest of Scripture. Then the eunuch is baptized, Philip is taken away, and the man "went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39) — with no supervisory relationship, no ongoing authority over his reading, and no institution in sight.

That’s the model. Teachers who open the text and hand it over. Not gatekeepers who hold the key.

None of these six answers asks to be taken on trust. Each one can be checked against the passages it cites, which is the only kind of answer a paper making this particular case has any right to give.

The position has now been stated, compared, and defended. One question is left: what difference does any of it make? The answer is the twelve papers that follow.

Why It Matters — Downstream Effects

This paper is the hinge for the rest of the series, because it accounts for every later paper's willingness to set aside majority Christian opinion when the text, compared with itself across the whole canon, says something different:

- **The tripartite man and the three tenses of salvation** rest on reading Genesis, 1 Thessalonians, Hebrews, and the Judgment Seat passages together as one witness, rather than deferring to a single tradition's settled system.
- **The Judgment Seat of Christ, kingdom timing, and the vocabulary of the afterlife** all depend on letting less-emphasized passages carry full evidentiary weight against more familiar, tradition-shaped readings — and, as the "hell" example above shows, on refusing to let translation decisions do doctrinal work.
- **The critique of institutional Christianity** in the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (Matt. 13:31-33) is this paper's case carried to its historical conclusion: when interpretive authority migrates from the text to an institution, doctrine drifts from what the text says.

Conclusion

The disagreement mapped here is not about whether Scripture is trustworthy, inspired, or sufficient in content. Every tradition compared in this paper affirms all three.

It is narrower and more structural than that. It is about whether a living human authority is required to reliably reach what Scripture means, or whether the text — read in full, in order, and against itself, by a Christian indwelt by the Spirit who wrote it — is enough on its own.

Jesus answered Satan with a second verse rather than an assertion of office. A synagogue full of ordinary people were called more fair-minded for auditing an apostle against the Scriptures. Paul told Timothy the text makes the man of God complete.

This project is a wager that they meant it. Every paper that follows is offered on those terms — to be searched, tested, and overturned if it will not stand. Let God be true, and every man a liar.

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