MODULE FOUR

# CORRELATION

The ability to correlate is like puzzle-solving. When we work a crossword puzzle, we formulate a potential answer to a clue and then try it out against the other clues that have already been solved. If the potential answer is correct, it will fit nicely with the rest. If it doesn't fit, then something needs to be adjusted—either our potential answer or the rest of the puzzle. Experience teaches us that usually it's not the entire puzzle that needs adjusting!

**KEY THOUGHT**

***The work of finding answers that fit is called correlation. The puzzle was designed to fit together as a whole, and when it is complete, it makes perfect sense without any forcing.***

The Bible in its varied aspects explains and confirms itself when properly understood.[1]

The discipline of correlation serves as a kind of quality control for the claims we make and the truths we assert when we preach and teach the Word.

**CORRELATION HELPS**

- *Explain* what is hard to understand
- *Confirm or correct* what is partially understood
- *Consolidate* our broader understanding

## THE MIND-SET OF CORRELATION
### Think like a Puzzle Master

We will look at three guidelines and one goal as we consider the discipline of one who "correctly explains the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

1. Use the Bible to explain the Bible.
2. Use the easy to explain the difficult.
3. Cut a clearing to the truth, in order to discern the truth that is always true.

## GUIDELINE ONE
### Using the Bible to Explain the Bible

In many cases, the Bible provides its own explanation or clarification for unfamiliar terms or ideas. Some authors provided simple notes to explain a point that might be significant to future readers.

See **John 7:38–39**; **Luke 20:27**.

*Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth.* (2 Timothy 2:15)

Many times, however, the clarification is found deeper in the Scriptures, and it might be necessary to do some light digging to find our treasure.

> *Paul realized that some members of the high council were Sadducees and some were Pharisees, so he shouted, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, as were my ancestors! And I am on trial because my hope is in the resurrection of the dead!" This divided the council—the Pharisees against the Sadducees—for the Sadducees say there is no resurrection or angels or spirits, but the Pharisees believe in all of these.* (Acts 23:6–8)

*You very rarely have to go outside of the Bible to explain anything in the Bible.*

—Donald Barnhouse[2]

As our experience with the Bible grows, we become more sensitive to the echoes of correlation throughout the Scriptures. It will slowly become second-nature to look for the clues that hold all sixty-six books together.

## GUIDELINE TWO
## Using the Easy to Explain the Difficult

We can all sympathize with Peter when he declared about his fellow apostle Paul that "some of his comments [were] hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). Even Peter had trouble interpreting Paul's teaching!

Other writings in Scripture can be a challenge to comprehend as well. When we come across the occasional difficult passage, it's always important to try to let the straightforward passages guide us as we struggle for understanding.[3]

> *Those who are ignorant and unstable have twisted [Paul's] letters to mean something quite different, just as they do with other parts of Scripture. And this will result in their destruction.* (2 Peter 3:16)

**KEY THOUGHT**

***False teachers usually build their doctrine on one obscure or difficult verse without regard for how their teachings correlate with the rest of Scripture.***[4]

Mark's gospel records a conversation—a confrontation, really—between Jesus and a group of the religious elite who traveled from Jerusalem to discredit Him. They explained away Jesus' spiritual authority and power over demons as accomplished by demonic power. After Jesus pointed out the logical flaw in their reasoning, He said,

> *"I tell you the truth, all sin and blasphemy can be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. This is a sin with eternal consequences."* (Mark 3:28–29)

What are we to make of a sin which is apparently beyond forgiveness? What might such a sin be?

Without correlation, we could fall prey to any number of false notions about who can and can't be forgiven. Using correlation, however, we discover all sinners can be forgiven.

> *Don't you realize that those who do wrong will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't fool yourselves. Those who indulge in sexual sin, or who worship idols, or commit adultery, or are male prostitutes, or practice homosexuality, or are thieves, or greedy people, or drunkards, or are abusive, or cheat people—none of these will inherit the Kingdom of God. Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*
> (1 Corinthians 6:9–11)

See **Luke 23:40–43**; **John 8:1–11**; **Mark 2:1–12**; **1 John 1:8–9**; **Psalm 32:5**.

This very short survey of Bible passages speaks about forgiveness of a multitude of sins. What, then, is the unusual feature of the sin that is beyond forgiveness described in Mark 3:28?

What is the unpardonable sin?

## GUIDELINE THREE
## Cutting a Clearing to the Truth

In his book *Searching the Scriptures*, Chuck Swindoll explains why the phrase "correctly explains" eloquently represents Paul's advice to Timothy:

> *Work hard so you can present yourself to God and receive his approval. Be a good worker, one who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly explains the word of truth.* (2 Timothy 2:15)

The Greek word translated "correctly explains" is a verb that means "to cut straight." The image is that of a road being cut through the countryside. Paul wanted Timothy to make it easy for people to see the truth of the gospel message through careful and accurate use of the Scriptures.

When that is done faithfully, those who genuinely seek the truth will discern four kinds of truth.

## Biblical Truth over Human Opinions and Traditions

Beware of valuing opinions and traditions over biblical truth.

**CORRELATION GUARDS AGAINST:**

- Human opinions and traditions
- Selfish whims and fancies
- Wild extremes
- Treacherous teachings

## Divine Truth over Selfish Whims and Fancies

God's Word may make specific demands of us that we would prefer not to obey.

Additionally, God's Word may teach a truth we would prefer not to accept.

## Balanced Truth over Wild Extremes

The discipline of correlation protects Christian communities from being swayed by wild ideologies and keeps them balanced and gracious.

## Reliable Truth over Treacherous Teachings

Jesus denounced the Pharisees because they were like "blind guides" (Matthew 15:14) who were leading their followers to destruction. Likewise, Paul had a strong warning about any who would try to preach a different gospel.

> *I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to himself through the loving mercy of Christ. You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ. Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you. I say again what we have said before: If anyone preaches any other Good News than the one you welcomed, let that person be cursed.* (Galatians 1:6–9)

John also wrote his own warning to the church.

> *And who is a liar? Anyone who says that Jesus is not the Christ. Anyone who denies the Father and the Son is an antichrist. Anyone who denies the Son doesn't have the Father, either. But anyone who acknowledges the Son has the Father also. So you must remain faithful to what you have been taught from the beginning. If you do, you will remain in fellowship with the Son and with the Father. And in this fellowship we enjoy the eternal life he promised us. I am writing these things to warn you about those who want to lead you astray.* (1 John 2:22–26)

False teachers have always been a threat to the church. The only way to arrive at true, reliable understanding is to make certain all the pieces of the Scripture puzzle fit without forcing them or twisting them.

## THE GOAL OF CORRELATION
### Discern the Truth That Is Always True

Throughout the Bible, we discover and discern truths about God and humankind. Some of these truths are local and specific while others are universally true.

When God acts in history, *what He does* might be specific to the place and time, such as when God issued the Mosaic law. When we try to discern a truth that is universally true, we are looking for the characteristic of God or of humankind that is related to why He did it.

**KEY THOUGHT**

***Universal truths are statements of reality based on God's Word that are always true. The discipline of correlation steers us toward the goal of finding these universal truths.***

> *As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. For God says,*
>
> *"At just the right time, I heard you.*
> *On the day of salvation, I helped you."*
>
> *Indeed, the "right time" is now. Today is the day of salvation.*
> (2 Corinthians 6:1–2)

## An Example of a Universal Truth

James commanded, "You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry" (James 1:19), and he based his command on this truth: "Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires" (1:20).

See **Psalm 37:8**; **Proverbs 14:29**; **29:22**.

Because human anger seems to be universally discouraged throughout the Bible, we can confidently suggest that this is a statement that can be applied today and is always true.

## An Example of a Truth That Is Not Universal

Deuteronomy 14:1–21 contains instructions and laws that set apart God's people as "holy to the Lord" (Deuteronomy 14:2). Surely that is a commendable ideal. The passage lists various foods as either okay or not okay to eat. *Are these dietary distinctives for a time and place, or are they always true for the people of God?*

> *He saw the sky open, and something like a large sheet was let down by its four corners. In the sheet were all sorts of animals, reptiles, and birds. Then a voice said to him, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat them." "No, Lord," Peter declared. "I have never eaten anything that our Jewish laws have declared impure and unclean." But the voice spoke again: "Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean."* (Acts 10:11–15)

See also **Mark 7:18–19**; **Acts 15:28–29**.

In these three distinct passages we learn that the food restrictions presented in Deuteronomy 14 are not an abiding, always-true expression of God's requirements for holiness. They were updated and revised at times. The implications of that fact remain to be discussed, but the point is clear that some statements are always true while others are limited to a time and place.

Our task is to distinguish universally true principles and decide what to make of them by way of application, which we discuss in the next session.

## MODULE FOUR REVIEW

We must keep these three guidelines in mind as we seek to correlate any passage in the Bible:

- Let the _____ explain the Bible wherever possible.
- Let the _____ _____ explain the hard passages.
- Cut a clearing to the truth.

The goal of correlation is to be able to clarify, confirm, or correct our understanding of what the passage teaches us. We are trying to settle on the universal, always-true statements seen at work in the text.

## MODULE FIVE PREVIEW

In the next session, we will gather the fruits of our observation, interpretation, and correlation skills and ask ourselves, *What difference does this make today?* It's time to *apply* the truths of Scripture to the truths of our lives in the twenty-first century. As pastors and teachers, it is essential that we work hard to find relevant and appropriate applications. When we do, our congregations can understand the Bible's timeless message in a way that genuinely changes their lives and grows their faith. Strong application makes for strong churches.

## ASSIGNMENT
### Preparation for Module Five: Application

Go back to your chosen passage from the beginning of the seminar and evaluate it in terms of always-true propositions. What is at work in your text that is simply for that time and place, and what are the underlying truths that will always abide?

## MODULE FOUR CORRELATION
## How Does It Fit?

### Context

- **Pre-text**: Jesus' ministry is validated in the wilderness, and He establishes an early reputation in the synagogues of the north.

- **Post-text:** Jesus' ministry is rejected by the Jews of Nazareth because He intentionally draws their attention to the fact that God can also show grace to Gentiles. The idea is offensive to Jews under Roman occupation.

### The Fulfillment of Prophecy

- **Isaiah 61:1–2** is the key passage, but the omission of verse 2b is significant. The hint is that Jesus has come to offer grace this time but not wrath or vengeance. That part of Isaiah's prophecy awaits.

- **Isaiah 9:1–2** is cited in Matthew 4:13–17. Inaugurating His ministry in Galilee was anticipated for the Messiah, perhaps signifying a revived united kingdom of twelve tribes, since the ten northern tribes had been decimated by Assyrian invasion within Isaiah's lifetime (722 BC).

### The Ministry of Jesus

- **Matthew 10:5–7:** When Jesus chose the twelve apostles and first sent them out, He explained the sequence: *"Don't go to the Gentiles or the Samaritans, but only to the people of Israel—God's lost sheep. Go and announce to them that the Kingdom of Heaven is near."*

- **Matthew 15:24:** Jesus was inclined not to help the Canaanite (Gentile) woman who begged for Jesus' help because: *"I was sent only to help God's lost sheep—the people of Israel."* Jesus conceded to rescue her daughter from demonic power because of her faith.

- **Romans 15:8–9:** Paul understood that Christ's mission was first to the Jews. After the resurrection it became clear that His mission extended also to the Gentiles.

### Universal Truth

***Jesus is, first, the Messiah to the Jews; His plan is precise.***