

## The Basic Rule (Hermeneutics)

You will recall from chapter 1 that we set out as a basic rule the premise that *a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers*. This is why exegesis must always come first. It is especially important that we repeat this premise here, for this at least establishes some parameters of meaning. This rule does not always help one find out what a text *means*, but it does help to set limits as to what it *cannot* mean.

For example, the most frequent justification for disregarding the imperatives about seeking spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 14 is a particular interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:10, which states that “when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away” (RSV). We are told that the perfect *has* come, in the form of the New Testament, and therefore the imperfect (prophecy and tongues) have ceased to function in the church. *But this is one thing the text cannot mean* because good exegesis totally disallows it. There is no possible way, Paul could have meant that—after all, his readers did not know there was going to be a New Testament, and the Holy Spirit would not have allowed Paul to write something totally incomprehensible to them.

(How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible, 2nd. Ed., by Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993 [1981], 64-65)