

The Method-Selection Problem

Hermeneutical Buffets, Doctrinal Retrofitting, and the Search for a Stable Rule

Phil Stilwell

Independent Scholar

ORCID: [0009-0009-3725-8682](#)

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Central claim

Christian communities that call a disputed doctrine simply “biblical” owe readers a rule for choosing among plausible interpretive methods before the favored conclusion is known. Without antecedent rules for scope, priority, defeaters, burdens, and cross-case consistency, a preferred doctrine can select its own method and then cite that method’s output as independent support. This does not make interpretation mechanical or prove rival readings equal; it shifts the burden to public precommitment and symmetrical application.

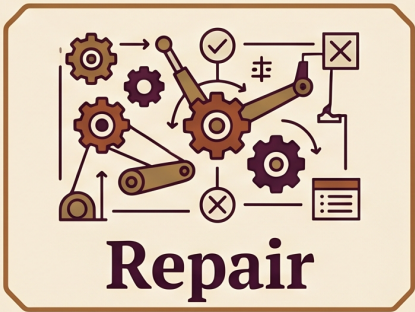
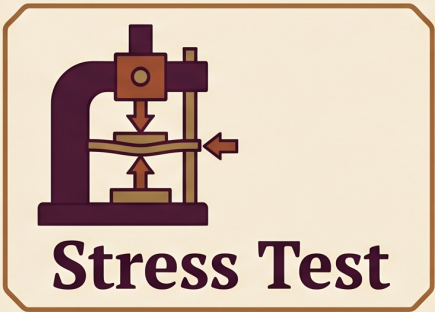
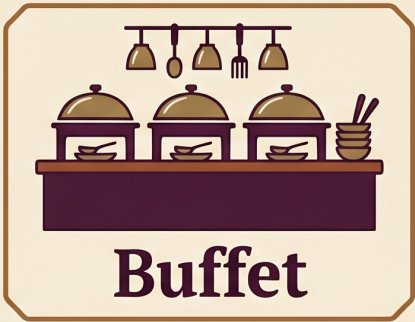
Preview:

Authority claim	Selection pressure	Public test	Calibrated result
A community says Scripture warrants a contested doctrine.	Several respectable methods can rank the same texts, contexts, and theological aims differently.	State scope, priority, defeaters, burdens, and comparison cases before the result is fixed.	A reading gains public warrant when its rules constrain welcome and unwelcome outcomes alike.

The test diagnoses result-sensitive method choice. It does not promise one algorithm, deny judgment, or settle every dispute once a community publishes its rules.

Visual preview:

The Method-Selection Problem



The inherited map moves from text and legitimate interpretive tools to a buffet problem, then to the paper’s repair: an announced rule, stress-tested across cases, and revised when it fails. The image depicts the governance problem, not a verdict on any one doctrine.

Abstract

Christian interpretive disputes often appear to concern the meaning of a passage while a prior choice does more of the work: which interpretive method should control when plain sense, historical context, authorial intention, canonical synthesis, theological coherence, moral trajectory, tradition, and pastoral judgment pull in different directions? Each tool can be legitimate. The public problem arises when a community offers no rule for selecting among them until its preferred doctrinal result is already in view.

This paper develops a method-selection test and applies it to Christian debates over marriage, divorce, and remarriage. The case includes a stable textual field, high practical stakes, and rival scholarly conclusions that give different weights to Gospel formulations, Matthean exceptions, Pauline counsel, historical context, and early Christian reception. The contrast does not show that all readings are equally good. It shows why naming interpretive tools is insufficient when their priority remains adjustable.

The main result is that a disputed reading acquires public warrant only to the extent that its governing rules are stated independently enough to constrain the desired conclusion and are applied symmetrically to comparison cases. A disciplined account should specify scope, priority, defeaters, burden of proof, cross-case consistency, and a visible revision trail. Interpretation will remain judgment-laden, and communities may properly appeal to tradition or theological commitments. The limit is decisive: those commitments must be disclosed as premises rather than presented as conclusions delivered by Scripture alone.

Keywords: hermeneutics; method selection; biblical interpretation; doctrinal disagreement; divorce and remarriage; public warrant

1 The Claim Behind “The Bible Says”

When a Christian community says that a doctrine is biblical, it usually says more than “our community has chosen this position.” It claims that the text supplies a reason that should matter to people who recognize scriptural authority, including readers not already committed to that doctrine. The force of the claim depends on an evidential direction: the text and a responsible way of reading it are supposed to constrain doctrine. If doctrine instead determines which way of reading will count, the direction is partly reversed.

This reversal need not involve dishonesty. Interpreters inherit liturgies, creeds, trusted teachers, moral intuitions, denominational histories, and practical responsibilities. They also encounter a text through language, genre, translation, and questions shaped by their circumstances. Philosophical hermeneutics has long emphasized that understanding occurs from within historically formed horizons, while reader-response accounts stress the role of interpretive communities (Gadamer 2004; Fish 1980). Those insights expose the fantasy of a view from nowhere. They do not make every reading equally responsible.

The sharper question is whether an interpreter’s commitments remain answerable to the text or merely recruit it. Author-oriented accounts defend constraints on valid interpretation, and theological accounts can combine attention to author, text, reader, and ecclesial practice without treating meaning as infinitely plastic (Hirsch 1967; Ricoeur 1976; Vanhoozer 1998). The present argument does not choose one complete theory of meaning. It asks a narrower governance question that every such theory must face: when several accepted considerations conflict, what decides which consideration controls?

The governing challenge

A list of sound interpretive tools is not yet a method. A method must also state how the tools are selected, ranked, defeated, and applied when they point toward different results.

The intended audience is the serious non-specialist who hears rival doctrines announced as the plain or faithful reading of the same canon. It also includes pastors, teachers, and theologians who want the

claim “biblical” to carry more than institutional force. The paper asks both groups to replace confidence in unspoken selection with a public account of why one interpretive consideration controlled here and whether it would control when the result became unwelcome.

2 Why Texts Do Not Select Their Own Method

Interpretation is unavoidable before controversy begins. Readers identify genres, reconstruct contexts, decide which words are ordinary or technical, relate sentences to larger units, and distinguish description from prescription. Widely used evangelical manuals explicitly teach movement between ancient context and present application, attention to genre, and the integration of local exegesis with wider biblical theology (Fee and Stuart 2014; Osborne 2006; Duvall and Hays 2020). Theological interpretation adds questions about canon, doctrine, worship, and the church’s reading practices (Adam et al. 2006; Thiselton 2009). The menu is not an invention of skeptics. It is already present inside responsible Christian interpretation.

Trouble begins when these considerations compete. Suppose the apparent sense of one passage is qualified by historical setting, another canonical text, a doctrinal synthesis, or a moral purpose attributed to the canon as a whole. A reader must decide not merely what each consideration says but what authority it has in the conflict. The local text cannot perform that ranking without already being interpreted. Nor can the canon settle every priority dispute without a prior account of how local and canonical meanings interact.

This is why “context” is not self-applying. Linguistic context, social history, canonical location, reception history, and contemporary pastoral circumstance may each be called context. More information does not by itself specify the weight of each kind. The same is true of “plain meaning.” Plain to which competent audience, at what stage of the argument, in relation to which genre, and with what treatment of apparent exceptions? A useful principle becomes evasive when its scope remains undefined.

The problem is therefore not plurality alone. A plural method can be responsible if it states how its parts relate. Courts may consider text, precedent, purpose, history, and consequences while still arguing about presumptions and standards of review. A medical team may integrate tests, base rates, symptoms, and patient values while stating what evidence would overturn an initial diagnosis. Complexity increases the need for governance; it does not remove it.

3 The Method-Selection Problem

Let the available evidence include the relevant texts, historical information, linguistic judgments, canonical relations, theological commitments, and practical consequences. Let the accepted interpretive tools include plain sense, authorial intention, historical context, canonical synthesis, analogy of faith, moral trajectory, tradition, spiritual discernment, and pastoral judgment. The method-selection problem occurs when the community lacks a stable enough rule for deciding which tool governs a conflict before it knows which doctrine each ranking will produce.

This definition makes three distinctions. First, a method-selection problem is not merely disagreement. Two communities may announce different governing rules, apply them consistently, and disagree because their starting commitments differ. Their dispute is then visible. Second, the problem is not cured by naming every consideration after the fact. A retrospective explanation can be accurate, but it does not show that the stated reason constrained the result. Third, “before” need not mean temporally prior to every historical encounter. Mature traditions already have results. It means logically independent enough that the rule exposes the doctrine to a real risk of revision.

Consider four warning signs:

1. A principle appears prominently when it supports a favored doctrine but disappears in a comparison case.
2. An apparent exception is treated as decisive in one dispute and as local, compressed, or culturally bounded in another without a stated difference-maker.
3. Every possible textual outcome can be absorbed: clarity confirms the doctrine, tension deepens it, silence implies it, and contrary evidence triggers a new level of synthesis.
4. The community can explain why its conclusion is correct but cannot say what evidence or method failure would require reconsideration.

These signs do not prove bad faith. They show that the interpretive process lacks independence from its output. If the desired doctrine may select a compatible tool from a sufficiently rich buffet, the tool's agreement with that doctrine cannot then function as fully independent confirmation.

4 Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage as a Stress Test

Christian disputes over marriage, divorce, and remarriage are useful because the textual field is finite, familiar, and practically consequential. Mark 10:2–12 and Luke 16:18 present strict sayings; Matthew 5:31–32 and 19:3–12 include an exception associated with *porneia*; and 1 Corinthians 7:10–16 addresses separation, mixed marriages, and an unbelieving spouse's departure. Genesis, covenant imagery, ancient legal practices, early Christian reception, pastoral protection, and the moral purposes assigned to marriage can all enter the analysis.

A permanence-first reading may give controlling weight to creation language, the stricter Gospel forms, and the church's historic discipline. A Matthean-exception reading may treat Matthew as supplying a genuine qualification to compressed parallels. A Pauline-development reading may take 1 Corinthians as authoritative application to a case not directly addressed in the Gospel sayings. A context-rich reading may reconstruct Jewish and Greco-Roman divorce conventions and conclude that ancient hearers assumed grounds left implicit in the shorter formulations. A pastoral or purposive reading may ask whether an absolute rule would preserve covenant goods or expose a spouse to grave harm.

These are not imaginary options. Instone-Brewer argues from the social and literary context toward a wider set of legitimate grounds, including neglect or abuse, and distinguishes valid from invalid divorce (Instone-Brewer 2002). Das's recent study surveys the same broad historical and textual territory yet argues that early Christianity did not approve remarriage after divorce (Das 2024). The point here is not to declare either work methodologically pure or exegetically victorious. It is that serious, textually engaged scholarship can assign different weights to wording, background, intertextual reconciliation, and reception, then reach materially different conclusions.

The stress test therefore asks a prior set of questions. When a strict Gospel form and an apparent exception conflict, does the exception qualify the general rule or does the general rule narrow the exception? When Paul addresses a new circumstance, is he extending a principle or preserving it within a limited pastoral case? When historical reconstruction broadens an ancient audience's assumptions, how much evidence is required before implicit background can qualify explicit wording? When later tradition supplies a stable rule, what authority does that tradition have, and is that authority part of the public premise?

None of these questions answers itself. A community may give defensible answers. The diagnostic failure occurs when the answers change with the preferred marital policy, or when the policy is called simply biblical while the decisive traditional, historical, or pastoral premise remains hidden.

5 The Public Precommitment Test

A publicly disciplined hermeneutic should expose enough structure that its choices can be evaluated before every application is known. The following ledger is deliberately modest. It does not demand a universal algorithm. It requires a community to state the defaults and exceptions it actually invokes.

Table 1: A public ledger for testing whether method selection constrains doctrine.

Commitment	Question to answer	Why it matters
Scope	Under what textual, historical, canonical, or pastoral conditions does this principle apply?	Prevents a useful label from expanding or shrinking only when convenient.
Priority	What normally controls when this principle conflicts with another accepted principle?	Converts a menu of tools into an ordered practice.
Defeaters	What evidence can override the default, and how strong must it be?	Gives an unwelcome result a genuine route to change the conclusion.
Burden	Who must justify an exception, and what kind of reason is sufficient?	Blocks silent transfer of the burden to whichever side lacks institutional power.
Symmetry	Which comparison cases should receive the same rule despite different preferred outcomes?	Reveals selective literalism, contextualization, trajectory, or pastoral concern.
Revision trail	Was the rule announced or used elsewhere, and what would count as its failure?	Distinguishes principled development from an explanation fitted only after the result.

The ledger should be filled with concrete claims, not ceremonial words. “We follow context” is too vague. A usable entry might say that a local command receives its ordinary historical meaning unless another canonical text explicitly narrows its scope, with the burden on the proposed qualification and the same burden applied to welcomed and unwelcome moral conclusions. Another community might give received tradition a rebuttable presumption, state what level of textual and historical evidence can defeat it, and identify past cases in which that defeat occurred.

The entries need not be permanently fixed. New evidence can expose a bad rule. Moral learning can reveal that an inherited priority hid victims or treated a dominant group’s interests as neutral. The discipline lies in recording why the rule changed and applying the change beyond the case that prompted it. Honest development says, “This experience revealed a defect in our former priority, so here is the revised rule and its consequences elsewhere.” Retrofitting says, “This outcome is correct, and the method that reaches it is therefore the faithful one.”

6 Why Independence Matters

Evidence supports a conclusion by doing work the conclusion did not already supply. If a doctrinal preference determines which method counts, and that method then yields the preference, the apparent support contains a loop. The text may still be relevant, and the conclusion may still be true, but the claimed evidential gain is smaller than advertised.

The structure can be stated as an every-outcome problem. Suppose a community treats surface agreement as confirmation, surface conflict as a prompt for contextual qualification, canonical tension as an invitation to theological synthesis, and moral difficulty as a call for redemptive trajectory. Each response can be legitimate. But if no conditions govern which response activates, then every textual state can preserve the doctrine. A process compatible with every possible result does not discriminate among results.

The independence fork

Either the community's selection rules can produce an unwelcome doctrinal revision, or they cannot. If they can, state the conditions and accept the test across cases. If they cannot, the rules may express a coherent tradition, but they cannot also be presented as independent public evidence that Scripture selected the doctrine.

This fork is not an argument against tradition. It is an argument for accurate bookkeeping. A church may openly say that a creed, teaching office, or inherited rule controls its reading. That statement makes the relevant premise visible. Readers can then ask whether the authority claim is justified. The epistemic problem arises when a conclusion substantially fixed by tradition is advertised as though any competent reader would derive it from the text without that premise.

Nor does the fork require certainty. A rule can constrain without forcing one answer. Courts disagree under shared standards; historians disagree while recognizing source criticism; scientists disagree within common evidential norms. Public discipline is compatible with judgment. Its mark is that some moves are ruled out, some burdens remain stable, and contrary evidence can cost the interpreter something.

7 Cross-Case Consistency

One case cannot reveal whether a principle is genuinely governing. Symmetry requires comparison. A community that invokes historical context to qualify slavery passages should explain whether and when comparable contextual reasoning applies to gender, divorce, wealth, violence, or sexuality. A community that insists on surface wording in one sexual-ethics dispute should explain why apparent surface wording does or does not govern divorce and enemy love. A community that invokes moral trajectory should name the textual and theological features that distinguish legitimate development from projection.

The cases are not identical. Symmetry does not mean that every passage receives the same answer. It means that differences in treatment require relevant differences in text, genre, historical setting, canonical relation, or governing theology rather than the attractiveness of the outcome. "These cases differ" begins the explanation; it does not complete it.

A cross-issue ledger can therefore record, for each dispute, the relevant passages, the default method, the method displaced, the stated defeater, the assigned burden, and the closest comparison case. The ledger should be public enough that an outsider can see whether a rule survived contact with an unwelcome result. It should also include cases in which the community changed its mind. Past revision is not embarrassment to hide; it is evidence about whether a method can learn.

This discipline matters institutionally. Leaders can otherwise deploy strictness against outsiders, mercy toward insiders, context for embarrassing texts, and literalism for identity markers. James Barr's critique of fundamentalist appeals to scriptural authority remains pertinent because complex interpretive choices can disappear behind simple public claims (Barr 1984). The danger is not confined to conservative communities. Progressive readers can also announce trajectory, inclusion, or moral center without stating constraints that would prevent those principles from becoming permissions to ratify current preference.

8 Strong Objections**8.1 "There is no neutral place from which to precommit."**

Agreed. Every rule is interpreted and every community begins inside a history. The test does not ask for neutrality. It asks for disclosed starting points, stable burdens, and comparisons that expose selective use. A chess rule is not neutral between chess and another game, yet it constrains moves within the

practice. A tradition-shaped hermeneutic can likewise be nonneutral without being result-sensitive at every turn.

Precommitment is also a matter of degree. No community will foresee every conflict. It can still state defaults, identify authorities, name defeaters, and compare new judgments with earlier ones. The absence of perfect independence does not erase the difference between a rule that risks correction and a rationale invented only after success.

8.2 “The Spirit or the church, not a public method, guides interpretation.”

A community may hold that spiritual illumination, ecclesial authority, or faithful performance is essential. Theological hermeneutics often makes such commitments explicit rather than reducing interpretation to a technical procedure (Adam et al. 2006; Vanhoozer 1998). The public test does not forbid those premises. It asks what they authorize, how rival claims to illumination or authority are assessed, and why one ecclesial judgment should bind a dissenting reader.

If the answer is finally confessional, it should be named as confessional. “Our church teaches this and we trust its authority” is clearer than “the Bible simply says this” when the decisive move is the church’s ranking of texts and principles. Clarity about the source of warrant protects both theology and public reasoning from equivocation.

8.3 “Flexible judgment is a virtue, not a defect.”

Yes. Rigid rules can ignore genre, new evidence, trauma, and exceptional circumstances. Practical wisdom is not reducible to a flowchart. But flexible judgment still owes reasons. A physician who departs from a guideline names the patient’s relevant difference; a judge who distinguishes precedent identifies the feature that changes its force. The hermeneutical analogue is not mechanical uniformity but accountable exception.

The proposed ledger makes room for defeaters precisely because sensible rules need exceptions. Its demand is that the exception have a stated basis, bear a stable burden, and remain available in comparable cases. Flexibility without those constraints is indistinguishable from convenience at the point where trust matters most.

8.4 “A true interpretation can be reached by a messy process.”

Certainly. A person may guess correctly, inherit a true conclusion, or reach it through inconsistent reasoning. The argument concerns warrant, not truth by luck. If a community asks others to accept a doctrine because Scripture supports it, the route from Scripture to doctrine must add a reason. A result-driven process may land on truth, but it cannot establish that the text rather than the preference did the selecting.

This distinction also prevents overclaiming. The diagnosis of retrofitting does not prove the doctrine false. It defeats or weakens one advertised ground for believing it. The doctrine may have other textual, philosophical, historical, experiential, or ecclesial support. Those grounds should be offered directly.

8.5 “The stress test avoids deciding the divorce question.”

That limit is deliberate. Deciding the question would require sustained exegesis, historical analysis, moral theology, and engagement with lived harms. The present comparison serves a different inference: competent interpreters can agree on many relevant sources while disagreeing about which considerations control. The case therefore reveals the need for method governance even if one reading eventually proves substantially better.

Avoiding a verdict does not make the stress test empty. A community can apply the ledger now: identify its default reading of Gospel and Pauline material, state what historical context can defeat,

declare the weight of reception and pastoral purpose, and test the same priorities elsewhere. That work would improve the warrant of whichever conclusion survives.

9 From Buffet to Accountable Method

A stable hermeneutic need not be a single hierarchy for every genre and question. It can be a family of publicly stated defaults indexed to conditions. Narrative, law, parable, prophecy, epistle, and apocalyptic writing may require different procedures. Historical claims and moral applications may carry different burdens. Local authorial purpose and canonical theology may interact differently in descriptive history and direct exhortation. The essential step is to make those distinctions before they become escape routes.

Five practices would move a community toward accountability.

First, publish a concise method charter. Name the authorities the community actually recognizes, the default relations among them, and the kinds of evidence that permit departure. Manuals already teach interpretive tools; a charter adds governance.

Second, attach a method note to major contested teachings. The note should identify the controlling texts, the method given priority, the strongest displaced consideration, and the reason for displacement. It should state which premise is textual and which is theological, traditional, historical, or pastoral.

Third, maintain the cross-issue ledger. A rule applied to divorce should be visible beside its application to other disputed practices. The aim is not to collapse differences but to make the difference-makers inspectable.

Fourth, invite adversarial review from informed readers who do not share the desired outcome. An opponent may not possess a veto, but that reader is well placed to notice shifting burdens and convenient exceptions. A tradition confident in its method should welcome a test designed to find where preference entered.

Fifth, record revision without laundering it into timeless obviousness. Communities learn. They respond to better history, stronger arguments, testimony from harmed people, and moral insight. Acknowledging those causes does not discredit development. It prevents a later settlement from being falsely narrated as the only reading the text ever allowed.

These practices would change the force of “biblical.” The word would no longer mean that a doctrine has been placed beside citations. It would mean that the community has disclosed a route from text to conclusion, allowed the route to face serious alternatives, and shown that its rules survive comparison with outcomes it would rather avoid.

10 Conclusion

The hermeneutical buffet is not the existence of many interpretive tools. Text, language, history, authorial intention, canon, tradition, theological coherence, moral trajectory, and pastoral judgment all may contribute to responsible reading. The buffet problem is the absence of a public rule for choosing among them when they conflict. In that setting, a desired doctrine can select a method, and the method’s agreement can be mistaken for independent confirmation.

Marriage, divorce, and remarriage expose the structure because the textual field is stable while serious interpreters assign its elements different priority. Their disagreement does not establish relativism. It establishes a governance burden. A community that claims scriptural warrant should state scope, priority, defeaters, burdens, symmetry conditions, and the history of revision clearly enough that the rule can cost it a favored result.

The principal limit remains: no ledger will eliminate judgment, and no procedure guarantees truth. Tradition, theology, and spiritual commitments may legitimately shape interpretation. But public honesty requires naming those commitments as premises. Readers should therefore ask one question when-

ever a contested doctrine is announced as simply biblical: what rule selected this method, and would that rule still govern if it threatened the conclusion? Until that question receives an inspectable answer, confidence may express community loyalty, but it has not yet shown that the text did the choosing.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

The central inference concerns public warrant rather than the truth or falsity of any particular doctrine.

- P1.** When a community presents Scripture as evidence for a disputed doctrine, the interpretive route from Scripture to doctrine must constrain the doctrine independently enough to supply evidential support.
- P2.** A route supplies such constraint only if its governing choices among accepted interpretive methods are fixed by stated features of the text, context, canon, theology, or case rather than by the desirability of the doctrinal result alone.
- P3.** A community with no antecedent rules for method scope, priority, defeaters, burdens, and cross-case consistency can select different accepted methods after seeing which result each produces.
- P4.** When the desired result can select its own accepted method, that method's agreement with the result is not independent evidence for the result.
- P5.** Some Christian doctrinal disputes exhibit this adjustable method-selection structure, as shown when the same textual field supports rival rankings that communities cannot distinguish by a public rule.
- P6.** Requiring disclosed rules and symmetrical comparison can reveal whether an interpretive route genuinely constrains preferred and unpreferred outcomes, although it cannot guarantee a uniquely true interpretation.
- C.** Therefore, in disputes exhibiting adjustable method selection, a community has not established public scriptural warrant for its preferred doctrine until it supplies and symmetrically applies rules that constrain method choice independently enough to risk revision.

The inference is valid as a conditional diagnosis: P1 and P2 state what evidential support requires, P3 and P4 identify the loss of independence, P5 places some disputes within that structure, and P6 states the limited repair. Validity does not establish the premises. P1 and P2 are epistemic claims about evidential support; P3 and P5 require documentary and cross-case evidence about a community's actual practices; and P6 is a defeasible claim about the value of public accountability. The conclusion neither proves any doctrine false nor promises that transparent communities will agree. It withdraws one public claim of warrant until the missing constraint is supplied.

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