

How Should we Read, Interpret, and Apply God's Word?
Part Two

How should we Interpret the Bible?
An Overview of 12 Foundational Principles of Interpretation

"It is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in scriptural language, and your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is 'bibline' and the very essence of the Bible flows from you" (Charles Spurgeon).

(1) The priesthood of all believers and the privilege of private interpretation

It is both the privilege and responsibility of every Christian to interpret the Bible for himself/herself. This principle of *private interpretation*, based on the doctrine of the *priesthood of all believers*, was articulated by Martin Luther in the 16th century.

Several misconceptions concerning the Protestant principle of private interpretation:

1. *Private interpretation does **not** mean that we should rely solely on our own judgments, ignoring the insights and research of others;*
2. *Private interpretation does **not** mean that we have the right to "distort" the Bible in accordance with our own conceptions;*
3. *Private interpretation does **not** mean that we can ignore the history of interpretation in the church.*

(2) The inescapable subjectivity in all interpretation

At the same time as we exercise our God-given responsibility to interpret the Scriptures, we must be aware of the element of subjectivity that influences all interpretation. Interpreting the Bible is not to be compared to a man looking into a fishbowl, but to a fish in his own fishbowl looking at another fish in his! Some of the factors that affect our objectivity in studying the Bible are:

- a. personal prejudice
- b. hidden agendas (personal and theological)
- c. cultural conditioning
- d. historical circumstances
- e. socio-economic factors
- f. unconscious expectations
- g. educational background (the "wet cement" syndrome)
- h. personality distinctives
- i. occupational pressures
- j. pride
- k. interpersonal relational background
- l. sin

As we seek to interpret the Scriptures, we must also keep in mind the contributions of the past. Fee and Stuart remind us that,

"Interpretation that aims at, or thrives on, uniqueness, can usually be attributed to pride (an attempt to 'out clever' the rest of the world), a false understanding of spirituality (wherein the Bible is full of deep truths waiting to be mined by the spiritually sensitive person with special insight), or vested interests (the need to

support a theological bias, especially in dealing with texts that seem to go against that bias). **Unique interpretations are usually wrong** [emphasis mine]. This is not to say that the correct understanding of a text may not often *seem* unique to someone who hears it for the first time. But it is to say that uniqueness is *not* the aim of our task."

(3) Our beliefs about the nature of the Bible govern our interpretation of it

Our approach to interpretation is called **the Grammatical-Historical method**. According to the G-H method, the believer seeks to ascertain the meaning of a text by an analysis of the simple, direct, ordinary sense of grammatical constructions, with special attention paid to the facts of history, cultural milieu, and literary context.

There are three theological assumptions to keep in mind from the outset:

- a. divine revelation is *inerrant*
- b. divine revelation is *accommodated* (it is the **form** of divine revelation, **not its content**, that is accommodated.)
- c. divine revelation is *progressive* (cf. Mt. 5:17; Heb. 1:1-2. Temporally subsequent revelation never contradicts earlier revelation; it may embellish and illuminate, but never alters the truth, of antecedent revelation.)

(4) The Bible is to be interpreted by the same rules and principles that govern the interpretation of all other literature.

(5) It is essential that the interpreter distinguish between meaning and significance.

Meaning is what the original author intended by his words. Significance, on the other hand, points to the relationship between that meaning and a person or a concept or a situation. Thus, we must distinguish between, what the text then **meant**, to the original author (and audience), and what the text now **means**, to us and others. Determining what a text meant is always a precondition for ascertaining what it means. In other words, we must never bypass exegesis on our way to application.

(6) The goal of the interpreter is to reproduce the sense or meaning which the biblical author intended for his original audience.

First, utilize the *grammatical historical method* to determine as best as possible the *authorial will*, i.e., what the original author intended to be communicated by his text. This entails an analysis of the simple, direct, ordinary sense of grammatical constructions (syntax), with special attention paid to the facts of history, cultural milieu, and literary context (this is inclusive of and consistent with figures of speech and symbolism).

Second, whereas the meaning of any text must *begin* with what the original author intended, *it cannot end* there. Every text must be read within the broader context and in the light of God's ultimate purpose in Christ as revealed in redemptive history. In other words, the interpreter must be open to the possibility of a deeper and more expansive *typological* sense in any particular text, hence what is known as the *sensus plenior* or "fuller sense" of Scripture.

Third, a decisive factor in ascertaining a text's meaning is the interpretation and application of that passage in the New Testament. See Galatians 3:16, 28-29 for an example.

Never forget that whereas a text can have only one meaning, it may have numerous applications (cf. 2 Cor. 12 and Paul's "thorn in the flesh").

(7) Each text is to be interpreted according to its literal sense.

- a. the meaning of a text is to be determined by the normal or accepted standards and rules of grammar, speech, syntax, and context

b. the literal sense is not necessarily the literalistic or physical sense (i.e., literal interpretation does not exclude figures of speech, symbolism, typology, etc.)

(8) Each text is to be interpreted according to the Analogy of Faith

a. Definition

1) No part of Scripture should be interpreted in such a way as to place it in conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture.

2) No single statement or obscure passage in one book of Scripture should be allowed to set aside a doctrine which is clearly established by many passages in several books (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:29; Acts 2:38; 1 John 3:6).

b. Basis

1) The inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible

2) Unity of thought in the midst of diversity of expression

3) The coherency, rationality, and general clarity of Scripture

(Observe the difference between paradox, mystery, and contradiction)

c. Limitations

1) The analogy of faith does not mean that a statement in Scripture lacks authority unless it has support in other statements (cf. 1 Tim. 5:3ff.; 1 Cor. 11 and the Lord's Supper).

2) Neither can we set aside a legitimate inference from a statement of Scripture on the ground that the inference is unsupported by other parallel statements.

3) Therefore, unless a statement in Scripture is clearly *excluded* by several other equally explicit statements, one positive declaration of God's Word is sufficient to establish either a fact or a doctrine.

d. The authority and value of texts in the analogy of faith vary.

1) The analogy of faith is stronger (but not necessarily more authoritative) when the doctrine is found in ten rather than in two texts.

2) The value of the analogy will be in proportion to the agreement of the passages on which it is based (be sure that parallel passages are truly parallel).

3) An analogy that depends largely upon obscure passages is of dubious value (don't interpret one obscure text on the basis of another obscure text).

4) The distribution of passages is also important. If the analogy is based upon texts derived from a single book, it will not be as strong as one based on texts found in both the OT and NT, dating from various times and coming from different authors.

e. Other principles related to the analogy of faith

1) The implicit is to be interpreted by the explicit (cf. Rev. 2-3 [the "angel" of the church] and the issue of church government).

- 2) The unclear is to be interpreted by the clear.
- 3) Historical narratives are to be read and interpreted in the light of didactic literature (cf. the relation of Acts to the Epistles; however, this is not to say that doctrine cannot be gleaned from narrative literature).
- 4) Be sensitive to the nature of progressive or cumulative revelation:
 - a) the analogy of antecedent Scripture (the meaning of a word or passage is to be determined in the light of that Scripture which has preceded it in the sequence of revelation)
 - b) the analogy of subsequent Scripture (the more complete interprets the less complete; i.e., the NT interprets the OT).

All Scripture is organically interrelated:

seed --- sprout --- root --- stem --- bud --- flower --- fruit

The fruit will tell you far more about the seed than the seed will tell you about the fruit.

(9) The critical importance of *literary genre*

An essential part of interpretation is determining the *genre* of the literature you are studying. *Genre* refers to the kind or type of literature. For example, if an author has written a fairy tale, you don't interpret it as if it were historical narrative. Similarly, one must not assume that the principles or rules that govern the interpretation of the gospels will apply equally to the book of Revelation.

The NT contains 4 basic genres of literature:

1. The *Epistles*, for the most part, are comprised of *paragraphs* of argument or exhortation. Here the interpreter must learn, above all else, to trace the flow of the writer's argument in order to understand any single sentence or paragraph.
2. The *Gospels* are comprised of *pericopes*, individual units of narrative or teaching, which are of different kinds, with different formal characteristics, and which have been set in their present contexts by the Evangelists. [Many would argue that *parable* is a separate genre of literature within the gospels, with its own set of special characteristics and rules of interpretation.]
3. *Acts* is basically a series of connected shorter *narratives* that form one entire narrative interspersed with *speeches*.
4. The book of *Revelation* is basically a series of carefully constructed *visions*, woven together to form a complete apocalyptic narrative.

The OT contains several different literary genre:

Genesis (?), Historical narrative (e.g., Joshua; over 40% of the OT is narrative), Poetry, Wisdom literature (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), Prophecy, Apocalyptic, etc.

Discussion Questions

- (1) In what ways has your interpretation of the Bible been affected by personal, subjective factors? Give concrete examples.

(2) Talk about the difference between “meaning” and “significance” in interpreting the Bible. Can you give some examples of this?

(3) What do most Christians mean when they say they interpret the Bible “literally”? What do you mean by it?

(4) Can you think of some *apparently* contradictory statements in Scripture that were later proven to be harmonious when the analogy of faith is employed? How would the analogy of faith help us reconcile these two texts: Acts 2:38 and Ephesians 2:8-10?

(5) What is literary “genre” and why does it play such an important role in the interpretation of Scripture? What is the difference in your approach to reading and interpreting the Psalms and reading and interpreting the Gospels?