

Xenos Christian Fellowship
Christian Ministry Unit 2
Using Your Bible
Week 4 – Interpreting the Bible

Can the Bible be understood?

"We should rely on the clergy/experts to tell us what the Bible means."

"People have always disagreed about the meaning of the Bible. That's why there are so many different denominations."

"The Bible has been used to justify everything you can think of. You can make it mean anything you want it to mean."

"That's just your interpretation." "It's impossible to determine the original author's meaning, rather, as we read it, we create our own meaning for the text."

In a home Bible study when someone says "What this passage means to me is . . ." And then someone else says, "That's great. But I got a different meaning (and his meaning is contradictory)." And everyone concludes by saying "*Praise God for all the great insight we're getting!*"

Perspicuity

Definition of biblical perspicuity:

John 20:31 . . .but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.

2 Tim. 3:14,15 You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned *them*, 15 and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

"The Bible is basically clear and lucid. It is simple enough for any literate person to understand its basic message. This is not to say that all parts of the Bible are equally clear or that there are no difficult passages or sections to be found in it. Laymen unskilled in the ancient languages and the fine points of exegesis may have difficulty with parts of scripture, but the essential content is clear enough to be understood easily." – R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977), p 15.

Responses to attacks on Biblical perspicuity

1. "The Bible is so complicated. Who could understand it?"

Response:

"When it comes to the central core of the Christian faith . . . the biblical evidence is overwhelming. The deity of Christ, the triune nature of God, the creation of the world by God, the sinfulness of all humanity, salvation by grace through faith, the resurrection of the dead—these and many other such matters are clearly taught in scripture." - James Sire, *Scripture Twisting* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), pp. 12,13.

2. "If it's so easy to interpret, why are there so many denominations?"

Response:

“If that’s the case, then why do ‘Christian’ groups disagree on essential doctrines?”

Response:

Examples of alternate authoritative sources:

Religious Tradition: *Rabbinic "oral law" (Mk. 7:5-13)*

e.g. “Sacred tradition” in the Catholic Church. "*Sacred tradition and sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the Word of God committed to the Church ... the task of authentically interpreting the Word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ ... It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, are in accord with God's most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.*"¹

New "Scriptures": *Book of Mormon; Apocrypha (on purgatory)*

"Keys" to Biblical interpretation: *Christian Science's Key To Science & Health; Rev. Moon's Divine Principle.*

Skewed translations of the Bible: Jehovah's Witness's Watchtower Version (Jn. 1:1); Mormon Bible

Alien presuppositions: Naturalism in Thomas Jefferson's Revised Deist Bible; Liberal Theology; Pantheistic Avatars (manifestations of the divine light); Postmodern Thought

3. "We're too far removed in time and culture from the original authors. Therefore, we could never understand what they intended."

Response:

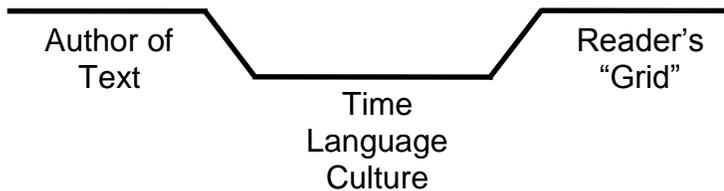
¹ Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," no. 10.

e.g. Consider this statement: "Go to the Kroger store and buy 10 lbs. of potatoes."

Now consider this statement: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." (Jn. 3:36)

So we affirm that the Bible is _____.

Interpreting the original message and applying to our lives



Two additional factors accentuate this distance:

The reader's "grid":

The nature of Scripture:

John Stott points out: "Although his self revelation is addressed to every man of every age and every country, each part of it was addressed in the first instance to a particular people of a particular age in a particular country. Therefore the permanent and universal message of Scripture can be understood only in the light of the circumstances in which it was originally given." – Stott, p. 192, 193.

Grammatico-Historical Hermeneutics

“Hermeneutics” is the _____.

Grammatico-Historical hermeneutics is a method of interpretation that takes into account common rules of _____ *and* _____ and the author’s _____ context.

The difference between interpretation and application

Interpretation _____.

Application _____.

While there may be _____ valid APPLICATIONS of a text, there is only _____ valid INTERPRETATION.

(Matthew 22:39) “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

1. Interpret GRAMMATICALLY

Take the normal meaning of the words, phrases and sentences unless it is impossible to do so. The interpretation must correspond to the words and grammar in the text in a reasonable way.

An interpreter may mistakenly assign his own meaning to the text without objective control. Historically, the primary example of this mistake is **allegorical hermeneutics**.

(Deuteronomy 14:6) “You may eat any animal that has a split hoof divided in two and that chews the cud.”

Allegorical interpretation: “Cleave unto those that fear the Lord... with those who know that meditation is a work of gladness and who chew the cud of the word of the Lord. But why that which divides the hoof? Because the righteous man both walks in this world and at the same time looks for the holy world to come.” – Epistle of Barnabus 14:35-45²

Qualifications:

a. Allow for figures of speech.

Psalm 91:4 “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.”

Both Nicodemus in John 3 and the Samaritan woman in John 4 took Jesus’ message to them in excessively literalistic ways.³

b. Allow for symbolism.

Revelation 1:9-20 – The symbols are identified as such (“like”) and explained.

Revelation 7:14 – John says that the robes of the saints are “made white in the blood of the lamb.” Obviously, literal blood would not make their robes white. Rather the symbol communicates the powerful truth that our righteousness (“white robes”) is due entirely to Christ’s death (“blood of the lamb”) in which we have put our trust (“washed their robes”).

2. Interpret HISTORICALLY

Take into account the historical background of the author and the recipients.

² Example adapted from John Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1999) pp. 189-190.

³ Example adapted from John Stott, *Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1999) p. 190.

- Situation:

- Style:

Literary genre impacts interpretation.

(Proverbs 22:6) Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it.

(Proverbs 15:1) A gentle answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger.

Contrast these to the didactic teaching of Rom. 8:1.

Which literary genres are used in the Bible?

- Culture:

Jewish attitudes towards Samaritans in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

The significance of monetary values (300 Denarii in John 12:3-5; 50,000 Drachma in Acts 19:19).

1 Corinthians 11:4-6 – Shorn hair was typical of Aphrodite priestess-prostitutes; shaven heads were typical of convicted adulteresses (v. 5).

Use Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, commentaries, or other sources to learn more about customs, money, geography, etc.

The IVP Bible Background Commentary

www.biblos.com

Logos Bible Study software at the Xenos Study Center

Interpreting Critically (Four rules for critical interpretation)

1. Interpret in light of the _____ of the passage (which author? book? passage?).

(Matthew 16:28) "Truly I say to you, there are some of those who are standing here who shall not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."

2. Interpret in light of _____.

(Heb. 1:1,2) "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world."

(Heb 8:13) "When He said, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear."

While God's *purpose* for man has never changed, his *strategy* in accomplishing that purpose has changed. He has dealt with man under different "covenants," or "dispensations." Therefore, it is important to ask, "Under which program was this written?"

Compare Exodus 20:8-10 with Colossians 2:16,17

(Ex. 20:8-10) "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you."

(Col. 2:16,17) "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day – (17) things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ."

Theocracy was commanded in the Old Testament, but submitting to secular government is affirmed in the New Testament (Rom. 13:1-7; Mt. 22:21).

3. Interpret scripture in _____ with other scripture.

Therefore, never interpret scripture in such a way that it clearly contradicts other scriptures. If a passage can be legitimately interpreted in more than one way, choose the interpretation that doesn't contradict other scriptures.

(Acts 2:38) Peter *said* to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

4. Interpret the unclear in light of the *clear*.

(1 Cor. 15:29) "Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?"

God's part and man's part in interpretation – 2 implications

1. Rely upon the _____.

(1 Corinthians 2:14-16) But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. (15) But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. (16) For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE SHOULD INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ. [Eph 1:17-18]

(Psalm 119:18) "Open my eyes that I may see the wonderful things in your law."

2. Diligently _____.

(2 Timothy 2:15*) Be *diligent* to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be *ashamed*, *handling accurately* the word of truth.

"Be diligent" implies _____.

"Ashamed" implies _____.

"Handling accurately" implies _____.

Some Christians may argue that only the illumination of the Spirit is needed. But consider the following **scenario**:

"Almost twenty years ago I rode in a car with a fellow believer who relayed to me what the Lord had 'told' him that morning in his quiet time. He had been reading the KJV of Matthew; and I perceived that not only had he misunderstood the archaic English, but also that the KJV at that place had unwittingly misrepresented the Greek text. I gently suggested there might be another way to understand the passage and summarized what I thought the passage was saying. The brother dismissed my view as impossible on the grounds that the Holy Spirit, who does not lie, had told him the truth on this matter. Being young and bold, I pressed on with my explanation of grammar, context, and translation, but was brushed off by a reference to 1 Cor. 2:10b-15 – spiritual things must be spiritually discerned – which left little doubt about my status. Genuinely intrigued, I asked this brother what he would say if I put forward my interpretation, not on the basis of grammar and text, but on the basis that the Lord himself had given me the interpretation I was advancing. He was silent a long time, and then concluded, 'I guess that would mean the Spirit says the Bible means different things to different people.'" D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 1984) p. 13.

We are commanded in the Bible in many places to use our minds and weigh out the truth of what we hear. Study the use of the following phrases:

- “Judge for yourselves” (1 Cor. 10:15 and 11:13)
- “Test the spirits” (1 John 4:1)
- Mature Christians have “trained themselves to discern good and evil” by “constant use” of the Word. (Hebrews 5:15)

Striking the right balance between God’s part and man’s part

(Daniel 10:12) "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you *set your mind to gain understanding* and to *humble yourself before your God*, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them."

(2 Timothy 2:7*) "*Reflect* on what I am saying, for *the Lord will give you insight* into all this."

Memory Verses

2 Timothy 2:7* – Promises God's illumination of scripture, and also says we must exercise our minds to understand it.

2 Timothy 2:15* – We must invest effort to interpret accurately, and we should be ashamed if we can't do this.

Assignment

Read Jude 3 times & describe the purpose & main idea of this brief letter. Write out your meditation on 2 Cor. 5:16-21 as explained in class.