



How do we interpret the Bible?

Paul told Timothy to *"be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15)."* Of course, Paul was speaking to Timothy, the young pastor of Ephesus, so therefore that verse does not apply to all of us. Not so. It certainly primarily applies to pastors and teachers in the Church but in a Reformed Church all believers are prophets, priests and kings – this is what the Reformation was all about. All believers are to be students of Scripture for we are to let the word of Christ dwell in us richly so that, in all wisdom, we may teach and admonish one another (Colossians 3:16). But how are we to handle the Word of Truth correctly, or rightly divide it so we come to a correct understanding of it? The basic principle to remember is that the Bible has essentially one author and that is the Holy Spirit. Thus we may say, the Holy Spirit interprets the Holy Spirit. Says the Westminster in its last paragraph of Chapter 1:

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture.

A poet once said, when asked the meaning of a couple of lines of a poem he had penned some time previously, *"When I wrote that, both God and I knew what I meant; now only God does!"* I've experienced the same when I've looked at my sermon notes in the pulpit some Sundays. But when it comes to the Bible, its author is God, so there is no question of a faulty memory entering the equation. This principle is clearly enunciated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned, but we have received the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.

Under this basic given then, what subsidiary principles can we outline to help us interpret God's Word rightly?

1. The Bible interprets itself

That is, in a way, only repeating what I have already said, but there are implications that must be drawn from it for this principle is violated time and again by many so-called Bible scholars today. We normally think of this principle as violated mainly by the Roman Catholic Church and the sects. That is quite true. For instance, the Second Vatican Council says,

... hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal feelings of devotion and reverence (for both together) make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God ... the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone (p.755).

Our argument with Rome here is two-fold;

- i. Concerning what is inspired by God, what is the Word of God; if we accept that only the Bible is inspired and not these oral traditions, then we cannot accept this teaching. For Paul

says in 1 Corinthians 2, *"the things that come from the Spirit of God are spiritually discerned."* In that these oral traditions of Rome do not come from the Spirit of God, then the things that come from the Spirit of God, the Bible, are being discerned, interpreted, not spiritually, but by human teachings (these oral traditions).

- ii. The second problem here is our old argument about whether all Christians have direct access to God or whether we must still go through the priest. Hebrews tells us quite clearly that we may speak directly to God. On the other hand, God also speaks to the individual believer through the Word. Besides all the many commands of Scripture that come to all the various groups of people in the Church, even children, for example, Jesus says, *"He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out ... and His sheep follow Him because they know His voice (John 10)."*

The so-called Jehovah's Witnesses do the same as Rome. They say:

Not only do we find that people cannot see the divine plan in studying the Bible by itself, but we see, also, that if anyone lays the (JW) Scripture Studies aside, even after he has used them, after he has become familiar with them, after he has read them for ten years – if he lays them aside and ignores them and goes to the Bible alone, though he has understood his Bible for ten years, our experience shows that within two years he goes into darkness. On the other hand, if he merely read the Scripture Studies with their references, and not read a page of the Bible, as such, he would be in the light at the end of the two years, because he would have the light of the Scriptures.

(Watchtower, July 1, 1957, *quoted in G.I. Williamson's The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*)

All round, that is a particularly arrogant statement. In the Lord Jesus Christ, the veil in the Holy of Holies has been torn in two and the way into the presence of God is open for every believer. We must never let a tyrannical Church take that privilege and blessing away from us.

Unfortunately, we are not free of it for a new tyranny has arisen within Protestantism. At the moment it looks like a new freedom – to some. But the end result will be as closed a Bible as is offered in Rome and the sects. I refer to the place historical research, or what is passed off as historical research, is beginning to play in the interpretation of the Bible. One could think of the way the Gereformeerde Kerken in Holland in their report, *God With Us*, at least as reported by those who can and have read it, disposed of some of the disparaging remarks of Psalm 60 and 108 that God made about Moab and Edom. One could think about how the same Church and many others argue to justify homosexuality. They say that those prohibitions in the OT refer only to homosexual prostitution in pagan temples or to casual liaisons. And we know this, not from the Bible itself, but from what we have learned from other historical records about pagan culture and religion of the time. That is what is being prohibited, not long-term, stable, loving relationships – so the scholars using historical research tell us. But is that what the Bible seems to say?

I trust none of the readers of this magazine have any sympathy for the practice of homosexuality, but is it possible that some of us might be verging on the brink of such methods of reading the Bible? Take the matter of women in ecclesiastical office. Paul says, *"Spiritual things are to be spiritually discerned."* That is, what the Spirit has said in Scripture is to be interpreted by what the Spirit has said in Scripture, and not by what human beings have written in the history books. History is fascinating, but it is notoriously fallible! What is more, it is even more notoriously subject to what its writer wanted to prove in the first place, or, for that matter, its reader. And even I can pick a lot of holes in a good deal of the historical research that is brought to bear upon the question of women in ecclesiastical office.

But why do I bring this matter up? I do so because it will not stop at this question. We have seen too many times that Churches that open ecclesiastical offices to women, either at the same time or very soon after, also begin to sanction the practice of homosexuality. Thus so in the GKN; it is now openly talked about in the CRCNA. There is a reason for that and the reason is because of the way

the Bible is now being read. It is no longer being interpreted in terms of itself but rather outside material, and some of it very shoddy work, is being used to overrule what the text, at least on the face of it, says, and has appeared to the whole Church for 2000 years and more to say.

There is also a very strange assumption behind this and that is that the NT writers, and maybe even Jesus Himself, were simply reflecting the mores of their age in all these matters. Why ever Jesus and any of the Apostles, who actually died for standing right against the great philosophical and religious ideas of their day, should buckle under on these two questions, is beyond me.

Perhaps some will not appreciate my making the connection I just have. But on the other hand, many of us cannot believe what has happened to their mother Church in Holland in less than 50 years – or the Church all round the world, for that matter. But since it has, why should we be so sure we can go some of the way along what is, in principle, the same path but not go as far in the end? *"Let him that thinks he stands, take heed, lest he fall,"* Paul would remind us. So, if not for ourselves, then for love of our children and grandchildren, let us think very, very hard about whether we are discerning spiritual things with spiritual or whether we are subjecting the Word of God to the word of man. As Noel Weeks said in a *Call* article some time ago, *"It is the Bible that is infallible, not the writings of the fallible historian."*

2. The Bible, in any given text, has only one meaning

Right from the time of Origen, around 200AD, many in the Church have believed there were three levels of meaning in any given text – the literal, the moral and the allegorical. The literal sense was for the ordinary believers, the mere hoi polloi, and meant just what you read in the words on the page. The moral sense would give a meaning for how Christians are to act over against one another and with unbelievers. But it is the allegorical sense that gives the really spiritual meaning and is, therefore, the most important. So, for example, Rebecca drawing water from the well for Abraham's servants and camels is telling us we must come to the wells of Scripture in order to meet Christ – true, no doubt, but that Genesis 24 is saying that I have my doubts. And there is still a bit of that going on today.

By the time of the Middle Ages, there was even a fourth level of understanding that could be got out of any passage but the Reformers said:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

(Westminster 1.9)

Notice that the Confession speaks of the "true and full sense" (singular). Rowland Ward, in his modernised text of the Confession, has here that that one meaning is to *"be found in the proper grammatical sense in its context."* I don't know if he gets that from another text of the Confession than that which we have adopted, but he is quite right in what he says. In other words, just take the words in their ordinary meaning, taking into account whatever else is said in the passage and what kind of literature it is. As John Stott says,

"Because the Bible is the Word of God, we should read it like no other book; but, because it is the word of man, we should read it like every other book."

(*The Essentials*, Edwards & Stott, p.93)

So, if it is plainly a teaching passage, like the NT Letters or the commandments, we are to read them quite straightforwardly. If it is figurative language, read it just as we do figurative language everyday even when we drop just a phrase into ordinary everyday speech. We all know that a heavy drinker is not someone who weighs 23 stone and drinks a lot of water. So leave off the dead literalism. Especially the easterns loved to speak in pictures. Even we utilitarian westerners are not so mundane.

Once again, this question comes down to the honesty of God. Has He spoken to us as the sheep of His pasture who should be able to follow Him simply and plainly and put full trust in Him? Or has He spoken to us in riddles and conundrums that only the very clever can solve and the rest of us should follow them blindly as all good Roman Catholics and sectarians? Was Jesus being up front when he said we are to come to Him with the simplicity of children? Or was that just another of His encoded obfuscations?

3. Difficult passages are to be interpreted in the light of the plain

It should be perfectly obvious to all that the plain teaching passages of Scripture should rule us, not what we think a story from Israel's history or some character in the Bible or some description of early Church life might possibly mean. So, to take an example that Mormons abuse, we won't take that verse that speaks, just as a passing comment, about people being baptised for the dead and construct a whole doctrine out of it, much less alter our understanding of plain teaching elsewhere in Scripture. Unfortunately, this one also is greatly violated among so-called reformed and evangelical writers these days.

4. Scripture itself is the final judge

There is something else very beautiful that the Reformation gave to the Church and that is the idea of the progress of the history of salvation. The Bible is a record of God saving His people. Everything comes out of that mother promise in which God said to Satan,

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head and you will strike his heel."

So, as we read the Bible, we remember its flow of history and how God never changes, but is constantly working out what He has already said and is bringing the old promises to fulfilment. Thus Jesus never actually brought a new way of salvation. Abraham and David were saved in exactly the same way we are – by grace through faith (Romans 4). We can even say that all the laws of sacrifice have never been superseded by something new. They have just been fulfilled in Jesus' sacrifice. Indeed, none of the ceremonial laws, the food laws, and so forth, have really been done away – not the meaning of them. What all those laws – about clean and unclean food, and not using two types of cloth in one garment, or planting two types of grain in one paddock, and so on - what all those laws mean is still with us. God still says, *"Come out from the world and be separate."* It is just that the Church with the Holy Spirit come in power in the heart of every believer, has now come of age and no longer has all these childish restraints anymore. We're out of the playpen now.

Mind you, there is another side to this. Some ask: is not God continuing the history of salvation? And as He does so, does not the Church today see that the principles of freedom or emancipation should go further than the early Church was able to take them. Even as, for example, it took centuries to abolish slavery? So therefore, should we not go on progressing beyond what the Bible has explicitly said? Again, this is often said in the women-in-office debate and that about sexual morality and marriage. (Indeed, why should marriage not be abolished among Christians? It is going to be in heaven.)

In 1 Corinthians 4:6, Paul concludes his teaching about how the Corinthians should view different teachers in the Church by quoting an old saying; *"Do not go beyond what is written."* If Scripture is the full and final revelation of God to man and if it is sufficient for our faith and life, we should accept that, on whatever subject, God has said all He has to say and, although the world might change somewhat, this is the last age of the earth's history before Christ comes again. Therefore the NT gives us a full revelation of God for this final age. If we say the Bible doesn't go far enough here or there, then we should also be looking forward to some other great work of God, some new age and some new unfolding of God's dealings with man. But all the NT ever teaches us to look forward to is the glorious appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring this age to an end. For this age until He comes again, we have enough in Christ Himself and His Word, the Scriptures.

Conclusion

Scripture itself is the final judge; we may not go beyond what is written and with the Spirit's decision in Scripture, we are to be content. Luther summed up the difference between the Reformation and the Renaissance nicely when he said once to the great scholar Erasmus:

The difference between you and me, Erasmus, is that you sit above the Scripture and judge it, while I sit under Scripture and let it judge me.

As usual, Luther hit the nail squarely on the head. May the Lord ever find us standing right there with Him.

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