



Biblical Interpretation 101

SESSION 3

| *How can we interpret the Bible more faithfully?*

The Power of Experience

Interpretation is an inescapable fact of life. Every bit of information, every feeling, every sight, is filtered through our life experience. If we are North American and middle class, we will necessarily interpret our experiences from that vantage point. We may metaphorically use the simple act of describing a glass of water as half empty or half full as a measure of a person's degree of optimism or pessimism. But this simple interpretative act also assumes a cultural setting where there are glass utensils, where there is enough water readily available to imagine a full glass, and where there is actually some possibility to determine one's future. A person in another place and time who regularly dipped scarce water by hand to mouth without any real chance of improving things would not understand the image or its metaphorical use at all.

The basic reason that people interpret the Bible differently is obvious when you think about it. We are all different. Across the centuries Christians have lived in many different places and in different cultures. Individual experience, historical circumstance, and cultural assumptions all influence the way an individual or group interprets the Bible—and everything else for that matter. Interpretations differ because we are all different, but there are ways that we can recognize and correct unhelpful bias that will improve our chances of becoming more faithful and accurate interpreters.

Though particular groups—the men's Bible class, the young adult's group, to name but two—may share a basic cultural background, nonetheless the individuals



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within the group have experienced many different things in their own particular histories that color the way they see things, the way they interpret things. Each reader of the Bible brings a unique life experience to the book and thus understands the book in a particular way.

Of course, people of a broadly similar background do tend to agree about the meaning of a passage. Interpretations from people with the same economic, educational, cultural, and social backgrounds will be broadly similar. But even within basically homogenous groups, a woman who has been raped will certainly have a different emotional reaction to the passage in 2 Samuel 13 that describes the abusive aggression of Amnon against his half-sister Tamar than others in her group. A man who has been swindled out of the family inheritance by a devious sibling will most likely react differently than others to the Genesis 27 story of Jacob's deception of Isaac at Esau's expense. The person who has been in the shoes of the older brother in Luke's parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) may not be as appreciative of the father's reception of his brother as others.

Personal experience is always with us and can be of enormous help in interpreting the Bible. That is one of the reasons that for most people the Bible becomes

more meaningful the longer it is studied. The richer the life experience of the interpreter, the greater the likelihood the Bible will speak ever more profoundly to that reader. The only way to read the Bible is in conversation with one's own experience of life.

But having acknowledged that, we must also understand that personal experience can sometimes bias one in interpreting the message of the Bible. A person who has had a life-changing experience of God similar to that reported of Paul (Acts 9) may find it difficult to believe that everyone need not have such. Someone who has been injured or abused by the application of an overzealous misunderstanding of the adage "spare the rod, spoil the child" may not find Proverbs 13 very illuminating. What's more, a person who has never been homeless, hungry, or oppressed may find it difficult to appropriate Jesus' message as enumerated in Luke 4/Isaiah 61.

The Power of Discussion

All of us belong to a variety of groups. Sometimes we may feel all alone, but only in rare instances is that actually the case. Usually there is a circle of friends, church school participants, people who belong to an interest group you attend, or perhaps members of your family. Identifying a group—large or small—with whom you can study and seek to understand the Bible is very important. You may be the most informed or the least informed, but as you try to articulate your interpretation of a passage, you will be aided by new information from the group that may better shape your interpretation or necessitate a correction of your understanding. Personal experience can both sensitize and desensitize one to the meaning of the Bible. The best way to bring balance in interpretation is to submit one's understanding to the scrutiny of a group.

In the Protestant church there is no one who is the designated interpreter of the Bible never to be challenged. Each member of the church has the opportunity and obligation to study individually and to form personal opinions about the meaning of Scripture. At the same time, however, the interpretation of the Bible is finally the responsibility of the gathered community under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit. No one—not the preacher or your church school teacher or the most informed Bible student in the congregation—can pronounce authoritatively the meaning of a passage. Rather, each of us needs to study on our own and then

be willing to discuss our understanding eagerly until a common understanding is reached. Then, tomorrow, we have to be ready to start all over again because new information is always coming to light.

The Bible's Internal Discussion

Just as no individual lives in complete isolation, no passage in the Bible stands alone either. The Gospel of Luke is accompanied by the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John. There is not one psalm; there are one hundred and fifty psalms. Those who fashioned our Scripture under the inspiration of God's Spirit created a book of different writings from a number of different people who lived in different places at different times. These individual and unique voices have been placed in ongoing conversation with one another, all to our benefit.

When a passage is unclear or downright obscure in one book, there may well be another passage that will cast light on the topic. For instance, the earliest Gospel to be written, scholars believe, was Mark. In the verses that describe the crucifixion of Jesus the author did not make clear the antecedent of the pronouns "he," "him," and "his" (Mark 15:21–32). They can be read as referring to Simon of Cyrene. In fact, some early Christians thought Mark meant that Simon had taken Jesus' place. But when the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written a decade or so later, their writers made it absolutely clear that it was Jesus of Nazareth who had been put to death by the Romans.

This conversation internal to the Bible also enables us to clarify some of the particular language. In Amos 7:14 the prophet Amos is called a "herdsman" (in Hebrew *noqed*), while the same term is used in 2 Kings 3:4 to describe King Mesha of Moab and translated there "sheep breeder." The king was probably not just an average shepherd. The text indicates that Mesha regularly provided great quantities of wool and a large number of lambs to the king of Israel. Since the same term is used of Amos, it probably means that Amos was no simple herdsman either. That insight, provided by a careful reading of the Bible's different parts, certainly should alter one's understanding of who Amos was and how he went about his work.

Illustrations are almost endless. Isaiah 40–55 responds to and interacts with the book of Lamentations. Language drawn from Psalms 22 and 69 is used in the Gospel of

Matthew to describe Jesus' crucifixion. The image of Jesus as the good shepherd in John 10 certainly suggests a careful reading of Ezekiel 34. The point is that Scripture illumines Scripture. To gain the best perspective for interpretation, the Bible as a whole must become partner in our discussions, and that requires disciplined study.

The Power of Theological Tradition

Differences in interpretation also occur because of differences in theological tradition. There is tension within the Bible between the priestly and the prophetic traditions, for instance, as there is between the ways the four Gospels present Jesus. But there are also differences among the ways various Christian groups approach the Bible, and these have a decided influence on interpretation.

Some Christians do not regard the Old Testament as being as authoritative as the New Testament. In fact, some consider the New Testament alone as the basis for their theology. Other Christians—particularly Presbyterians and other members of the Reformed family of churches—consider the Old Testament as equal in authority with the New Testament and therefore rely on both Testaments in fashioning their theological understanding. Some Christians believe that the Holy Spirit alone provides real authority and therefore approach the Bible as a resource but not as a defining revelation.

Where one stands with respect to any particular tradition will obviously affect one's interpretation. Within the Pentecostal tradition biblical interpretation tends to emphasize individual and group holiness. Living in the Spirit becomes the guide for understanding the Bible. Matters of history and society are of less interest. The stress is on the present celebration of the power of God to heal and to guide. Previous interpretations are important but not binding. And because in North America the Pentecostal churches have been of a more marginal character, interpretation has also tended to have an inward focus directed at building and protecting the fellowship. When one moves outside North America to Africa and to Central and South America, however, the Pentecostal churches are much larger and are now beginning to address societal issues as well as matters of individual concern.

Among those Christians who depend primarily on the New Testament for their guidance, there are several ways this theology affects biblical interpretation that



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can be noted. For one thing, the Old Testament, if considered at all, is relegated to one of two functions. For some the Old Testament is a record of failure. Israel did not meet the challenge of the Law as presented by God. That failure becomes instructive and elevates the significance of divine grace. The Law is no longer binding.

For others the Old Testament is important only insofar as it is believed to have predicted the coming of Jesus. The history of Israel is interesting, and some portions of the Old Testament may be useful as a source for moral instruction, but interpretation and theology are grounded in the New Testament. As a consequence, there is less attention paid to the ordering of society. After all, the New Testament says very little about how Christians are to live in the world. The few texts that deal with this matter at all recommend subservience to the worldly powers combined with a hope for a future heavenly blessing. It is thus better for Christians to withdraw from society and to concentrate their loyalty to the church, particularly the local fellowship, because that is where they live. Issues such as war and slavery and sexuality are often avoided because they are deemed divisive.

Christians who stand within the tradition that considers the Old and New Testaments as of equal importance—and surprisingly to many, this is a minority of Christians—often interpret the Bible differently from their sisters and brothers in other traditions. There is a much greater concern for matters of justice and peace. The continuity between what the prophets proclaimed and the ministry of Jesus is emphasized. Society, as well as each individual, needs transformation. The fact that God worked through a people, namely Israel, certainly flawed and sometimes disobedient, is taken to mean that God will work through the church in a similar way. A perfect company on earth is not the expectation. A certain level of conflict is assumed. People continue to

sin. Thus, the need for regular repentance is taken for granted. This tradition clearly shapes the interpretation of its advocates.

The Power of Culture

One further consideration about differences in interpretation should be noted. Culture—in this instance the North American culture—plays a powerful role in shaping the way the Bible is interpreted here. None of the traditions and none of the individuals noted above are immune to culture's influence. Often interpreters are unaware of the way culture affects their reading of the Bible, but it does nonetheless.

The controversies of North American society set the agenda for much biblical study and interpretation in the church. During the 1940s the issue of divorce among the clergy was very important. In the 1960s and 1970s civil rights for African Americans and then the war in Vietnam dominated the discussion. For the past twenty-five years human sexuality has been the preoccupation of many, and more recently issues of security and immigration have pushed their way into the conversation.

The problem with such an agenda of considerations is that the Bible does not directly deal with any of them except for divorce, and that in only an incomplete manner. Of course, people have found passages to support their opinions about all of these matters, but the very process of searching for proof texts distorts the interpretation that results. Further, there exists in the United States what some have called a civil religion that assumes a God-given destiny for the nation and requires an almost idolatrous acceptance of America's "right" to impose its values on all. Any disagreement becomes a sign of disloyalty nearly tantamount to a disavowal of God. Such a view certainly affects interpretation.

When the answers, the interpretations, of North American Christians to many contemporary issues are shared with Christians in other parts of the world, they are sometimes dismissed as reflecting the biases of a rich, highly individualistic society preoccupied by entertainment and personal pleasure. Many two-thirds-world Christians consider North American Christians so dominated by their culture as to be unable to hear or understand the Bible. Whether this is true can be argued, but the point it

raises is that the culture of every society exerts a powerful influence on any interpretation of the Bible.

The Value of Diversity

One might decide that faithful interpretation is an impossible task. There are so many variables, so many influences, and too many different opinions! Some no doubt conclude that the multiplicity of the results of biblical interpreters argues against the reliability of any of the interpretations and renders the whole exercise as futile. But such an opinion discloses a cultural bias, namely that there is but one truth and one true reading of the Bible.

Perhaps we would do better to recognize in the variety of interpretations a divine blessing. Diversity of experience and of understanding can enrich a community. Rather than be discouraged or confused by the existence of so many different interpretations, we might better celebrate the power of God's Spirit in bringing insight and empowerment to so wide a variety of individuals and communities. God's truth simply cannot be experienced in one way. Interpretation of the Bible is not a process of distilling a rarified commodity called truth. Rather it is the process of engaging the living God, who addresses each of us in all our differences and with all our prejudices toward living a life full of God's grace and truth. To live God's truth is the goal, and that can take numerous and diverse forms.

Summary and Conclusion

That there is no one-size-fits-all interpretation of the Bible should not be surprising. Personal experience, the interaction of believers with one another, and the ongoing discussion of one biblical text with another all affect interpretation. Add to these factors the influence of theological tradition and one's culture, and diversity of understanding is assured. While this can be disturbing, it can also be understood as a divine blessing attesting the ongoing work of God's Spirit within all our differences. The variety of interpretations displayed among God's people is the evidence of the power of God to address us right where we live.

About the Writer

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