

Principles of Biblical Interpretation – Teacher Notes

As a Protestant I cherish the NT teaching on the priesthood of believers—that each Christian has the right to his/her own interpretation, but also that each Christian has the responsibility to get it right. —Daniel Wallace

Introduction

When it comes to making claims about what the Bible means, sometimes we hear comments from Christians or non-Christians like the following: “Well, that’s just your interpretation.” “The Bible can be made to say anything you want.” “You can’t really understand the Bible. It is full of contradictions.” “No one can understand the true meaning of anything anyone says.” Or, someone sitting in a Bible study might say, “This is what the Bible means to me.” All of these types of comments are about principles of biblical interpretation also called in theological jargon **hermeneutics**.

Some issues that Christians face regarding the topic of biblical interpretation include: How does divine inspiration and human authorship affect biblical interpretation? What does a text mean? What are some general principles of interpretation? How do we interpret the Old Testament? How do we interpret the New Testament? These are all critical questions for us to consider as we seek to become better interpreters of God’s word, the Bible.

Terms of Bible Interpretation

Hermeneutics

The process of interpreting the Bible: this is what we are learning. It includes all the rules, principles, theory, and methods of interpreting the Bible. It covers the process from trying to understand the original meaning of the verses (what it says) to what it means to us today.

Exegesis

This is **the process of interpretation where you are trying to find the original meaning of the verse**. It is finding out what the message was that was heard by the original recipient of the Bible. Example: Paul told Timothy to "stop drinking only water, and use a little wine...(1 Tim.5:23 NIV). Exegesis would attempt to find out what it really meant to Timothy (not to us

today). The original message was given to Timothy under a specific circumstance. The background may involve issues that are evident to both Paul and Timothy but are not mentioned in the Bible.

Exposition

Application of the Bible passages to modern times. This is the process that most of us will do with the verses of the Bible. It is trying to find the application or relevance of the Bible message for us today. It is the process that follows exegesis, trying to get at what the Bible means for us today.

So here is the relationship of the terms with each other: **To understand the Bible properly we practice hermeneutics by first applying exegesis because we want to find out the original meaning of the Bible. Secondly, we do an exposition of the text because we want to apply the message to our lives today.**

Hermeneutics = Exegesis + Exposition

What Does a Text Mean?

The Bible is both a human book and a divine book. There are certain implications of this for biblical interpretation. The first is that **the human authors had a specific historical audience, context and purpose.** These authors used their own language, writing methods, style of writing and literary form of writing. The divine authorship of the Bible gives it its unity and the ultimate source of all interpretation is from God. In the book of Genesis Joseph was asked about the meaning of some divinely given dreams and he replied, “Don’t interpretations belong to God? (Gen 40:8).

So, what does a text mean? The answer to this question is that **a text means what the author intended it to mean.** For a simple example, if you wrote a letter with some statements in it that are a little ambiguous, then what does the letter mean? Does it mean what you intended it to mean or how the readers interpret it? Of course it means what you intended it to mean. The true meaning of a text resides in the authorial intent of the text. This leads us to the first primary and fundamental principle of interpreting the Bible.

General Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle 1: Interpretation must be based on the author's intention of meaning and not the reader.

This means we must get into *the author's context, historically, grammatically, culturally and the literary forms and conventions the author was working in*. To be able to do this some good Bible study tools are needed since we are 2000 years or more removed from the biblical authors and their context is very different than ours. The first tool that any one should get is a **good Study Bible with notes** that explain historical and cultural background information. Make sure to look at a couple of different translations to get a variety of perspectives. When someone in a Bible study states what the verse means, we need to redirect and clarify that the meaning is what the author intended. After that the question then is how that historical meaning applies to us today. The second principle of biblical interpretation should also be considered foundational.

Principle 2: Interpretations must be done in the context of the passage.

What does the following mean? "It was a ball." Well, the answer depends on the context. Consider the following sentences: The baseball umpire saw the pitch drift to the outside and said, "it was a ball." We went to the dance last night, in fact it was so formal "it was a ball." As I was walking along the golf course I spotted something small and white in the tall grass, "it was a ball." I had so much fun at the game night, "it was a ball." In each case the word ball means something different. Therefore, context determines meaning! The nearest context must be given the most weight in interpretation. ***First, there is the near context of the sentence, then the paragraph, then the section and then the book and even author. The interpreter should look at all these circles of context to be able to correctly assess the meaning.***

Far too often people try to interpret a verse in isolation without looking at the context itself. For example, consider the verse Revelation 3:20 which is sometimes used as an illustration for evangelism. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me" (Rev 3:20; NASB).¹

If this is all you looked at, it would be easy to understand the verse in terms of someone asking Jesus into his or her life for the first time. But the context in the preceding verse (v. 19) is talking about discipline of those whom Jesus loves, which would most naturally refer to believers. Also, in looking at the larger paragraph the passage is to a church (Rev 3:14, 22).

The verse is really addressed to believers who need to repent from their sin and return to fellowship with God.

Principle 3: Interpret the Bible literally (or normally) allowing for normal use of figurative language.

Take the plain meaning of the text at face value. When the literal does not make sense you probably have a figure of speech. For example, Isaiah 55:12 states the trees of the field will “clap their hands”. Since trees do not have hands or clap this must be a figure of speech. Look for words such as “like” or “as” which can also communicate a figure of speech. Figures of speech and illustrations give the Bible a powerful and colorful means of expression. They are an important part of the normal expression of language.

Can you think of other examples of hyperbole like this in the Bible?

Matthew 23:24

Mark 9:23b

There are many problems with reading the Bible literally or, as some people call it, a “plain sense” reading of scripture:

1) The person reading. What knowledge and understanding of scripture and its background does the reader have?

2) Our own worldview. Readers assume their own frame of reference (cultural, social or emotional context) and read into the text.

3) We miss the subtleties of the text, like irony, word play and metaphorical writing, for example, which can often contradict a “plain sense” reading.

(Dennis Bratcher)

Principle 4: Use the Bible to help interpret itself.

Interpret difficult passages with clear ones. This is sometimes called **the law of non-contradiction**. There are clear passages that teach the doctrine of eternal security, that once a

person is truly saved he or she cannot lose salvation (John 5; Rom 8). Some passages in the Bible are very hard to interpret like Hebrews 6:2-4. So I would let the overall and clear theology of the Bible influence me that a very hard passage like Hebrews 6 is not teaching that someone can lose his/her salvation. Also, **use the New Testament to help interpret the Old Testament.** This recognizes the progressive nature of revelation; that is, the Bible is giving more revelation on topics over time. But one must start by interpreting the Old Testament text in its context before a New Testament consideration is made.

Principle 5: Interpretation must be distinguished from application.

While there is one interpretation that is historical, there are many applications that can be carried over to our modern context. Build an application bridge from the interpretation to the timeless principle and then to the application now. For example, *in John 12 Mary anoints Jesus with very expensive oil. The historical context records a historical event. The interpretation relates only to what Mary did to Jesus. What about us today? An application might be that we are willing to give sacrificially for the Lord's work and give Jesus acts of worship as Mary did. Or when Jesus states the principle in Matt 7 to love one's enemies it is a general command that I might apply specifically by loving a worker who undermines me or a neighbour who offends me.*

Principle 6: Be sensitive to distinctions between Israel and the church and Old Covenant and New Covenant eras/requirements.

Promises made to Israel in the Old Testament cannot automatically be transferred to the church in which we are a part. For example, the land promises were given to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 12:7) but that does not include me, a Gentile Christian. Christians are not under the requirements of the Mosaic law (Rom 6:14). For example, in Lev 19:19 there is a command "you must not wear a garment made of two different kinds of fabric." This was a binding command under the Mosaic law but not under the terms of the New Covenant. It is true that certain Old Testament commands repeated in the New Testament are still binding, but this is made clear by their repetition in the New Testament. The church was formed in Acts 2 with the descent of the Holy Spirit and most direct statements to and about the church occur after that.

Principle 7: Be sensitive to the type of literature you are in.

The Bible contains many different types of literature: law, narrative, wisdom, poetry, gospel, parable, epistle, and apocalyptic. Each of these types of literature has specific features that must be considered when interpreting a text. Some of these will be examined in the next section. For now we need to understand that ***where we are in the Bible makes a big difference on how we interpret and apply it.***

Principle 8: Understand the complexities of translation.

Some words have more than one meaning, while some we don't know the meaning at all. Understanding the true meaning of the words used in a passage is very important in proper interpretation or exegesis. The first thing we do to know what a word means is to read in its context. This, however, is sometimes not enough, for a context can sometimes take on different meanings for a particular word. This has caused varying interpretations among Christians. Remember, the real meaning of a word is the one intended by the author.

Eg. The word "abomination".

The Hebrew word means something like "ritually impure". Other abominations include: a person eating lobster, a man getting a haircut, a person eating a cheeseburger, to name a few.

A better way of understanding a word's meaning is to understand what it meant at the time it was written. Words change meaning as time goes by, and we cannot always put the same meaning we have today on the same word that was used centuries ago. By reading other older writings of the same period that uses the same word will give us ideas on the meaning of the word.

Some word we just don't have definitions because we don't use them, such as the words shekels, ephahs, talents, etc.

Principle 9: Identifying Themes.

Most biblical scholars will agree that there are central texts which describe major themes of Scripture as a whole. Then there are peripheral texts – passages that are culturally particular, for eg. – that are less relevant to every time and place. Some passages describe broad principles (such as hospitality/love your neighbour) and there are biblical texts that make exceptions to these broad principles.

For eg., Gen 34,

Dinah's brothers seek revenge and kill all the males of Schechem. Most Christians would argue this cannot serve as an example for us today, since other Scripture clearly rejects the use of this kind of violence (Gen. 49:5-7)

The main question is: how do we identify these main themes and which passages fit under these themes? This is where Christians often disagree.

This also applies to other passages like the sixth commandment "You shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13). The Heidelberg Confession explains:

"I am not to belittle, insult, hate, or kill my neighbour – not by my thoughts, my words, my look or gesture, and certainly not by actual deeds – and I am not to be party to this in others; rather, I am to put away all desire for revenge. I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself, either. Prevention of murder is also why government is armed with the sword."

Christians over the centuries have understood the significance of this commandment (in light of many other stories in Scripture) to be the great value God places on human life. Jesus emphasizes this in Matt: 5:21-24.

Therefore, we cannot simply draw the meaning of the Bible from one passage alone, but how it fits in to the larger themes of Scripture.