

Discovery Class

Session 4 of 9: General Principles and Observation, Part 2

Clayton Valley Church

Session Goals

These are the questions this session will chase down and answer. Keep them in mind as we work through the material.

- *What safeguards keep careful Bible study from going wrong?*
- *How do you ask good questions of a passage before you try to answer them?*

A. The Clarity of Scripture

Scripture is clear enough for ordinary readers to understand it, though understanding it still takes real work. Martin Luther argued this against the Roman Catholic view that only the church holds the key to Scripture's meaning.

Key principle: clarity works two ways. External clarity means the words themselves, studied with sound method, yield their sense. Internal clarity means the Holy Spirit illuminates our reading and study.

Neither kind of clarity guarantees every passage is easy. Some things will still puzzle us, often for lack of information about language, culture, history, or geography.

B. The Accommodation of Revelation

Definition: God adapts the form of His revelation to what human minds can receive, without ever compromising the truth itself (Ramm, p. 99).

God does this in four ways:

- Human languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.
- Human and social custom: the parables of Jesus.
- The person of His Son: God in human flesh, the highest form of accommodation.
- Anthropomorphic language: ascribing human characteristics to God so we can grasp Him.

C. Progressive Revelation

Definition: God unfolded His revelation gradually, by His own initiative, moving people from the theological infancy of the Old Testament to the maturity of the New (Ramm, p. 102).

Hebrews 8:5

"They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, 'See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain.'"

Hebrews 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."

This does not mean Scripture evolves morally or culturally, or that the Old Testament carries less authority than the New. Colossians 1:26-27 and 2:16-17 show the pattern instead: what was once hidden or shadowed comes into full light in Christ.

D. Scripture Interprets Scripture, and the Analogy of Faith

Definition: the whole of Scripture is the context for understanding any one part of it. Use the clear passages to illuminate the obscure ones (Ramm, p. 105).

Build doctrine from passages that treat a subject extensively (Romans 1-3 on sin, John 5 on the deity of Christ), not from isolated, ambiguous verses.

The analogy of faith adds that Scripture is one coherent system (Ramm, p. 107). No reading of a specific passage will contradict the total teaching of Scripture on that point.

E. The Importance of Context

Context runs in four widening circles around any passage:

- The material immediately before and after the passage.
- The book in which the passage occurs.
- The Testament in which the passage is located, Old or New.
- The whole of Scripture.

F. Some Mistakes to Avoid

From *How to Interpret the Bible for Yourself*, Richard Mayhue, Moody Press.

1. Prooftexting: forming a conclusion first, then hunting for verses that seem to support it. Example: citing Jeremiah 29:11 alone to guarantee an easy outcome for a personal plan, without asking what the verse promised specific exiles in Babylon.

2. Isolationism: pulling a verse out of its context. Example: quoting "ask and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7) as a blank check, apart from the surrounding teaching on what the Father gives to those who ask.

3. Nationalizing: treating your own nation as heir to a promise God gave Israel specifically. Example: reading Israel's blessings for obedience in Deuteronomy 28 as a direct guarantee for any modern nation that honors God.

4. Embellishing: reading current thinking into the Bible. Example: insisting the locusts of Revelation 9, with "breastplates like breastplates of iron" and wings sounding "like the noise of many chariots" (Revelation 9:9), must be modern military helicopters.

5. Culturalizing: limiting a text to one time or culture because of today's social pressures. Example: arguing Paul's command not to be "bound together with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14) applied only to specific first-century pagan practices, not to relationships today.

6. Redefining: giving historically accepted biblical words new meanings to fit a theology. Example: redefining "faith" to mean simple positive thinking.

7. Anglicizing: building conclusions on the English text alone, ignoring the original language. Example: Mormon visitors at the door often lean on Colossians 1:15, "the firstborn of all creation," to argue Jesus was a created being, when the Greek word behind it, *prototokos*, marks a position of rank and inheritance, not chronological birth.

8. Letterism: ignoring figures of speech, reading them woodenly literal. Example: insisting Jesus must have leaves and roots because He calls Himself "the true vine" in John 15:1.

9. Generalizing: treating one historical experience in Scripture as a universal expectation. Example: expecting every believer to receive a vision like Paul's on the road to Damascus.

10. Experientializing: letting personal experience validate Scripture, rather than the other way around. Example: concluding a teaching must be true because it matches a personal experience.

G. The Six Observation Questions

Once a passage's grammar is diagrammed, several questions are profitable to ask:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- Why?
- How?

Key principle: do not try to answer these questions yet. Just ask them.

Worked example: 3 John v. 1

3 John 1, ESV

"The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth."

- Who is "the elder"? What does that title tell us about how the writer identifies himself?
- Who is "the beloved Gaius"? What does "beloved" tell us about the relationship?
- What is it to "love in truth"?

Practice: 3 John vv. 2-4

3 John 2-4, ESV

"Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul. For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

Write your own questions below. Notice the words, the phrases, and how they connect.

Handout: Two More General Principles

Take-home reference. Not covered live in class today.

The Unity of the Meaning of Scripture. Any given passage of Scripture has only one meaning. This is affirmed by Paul's command for Timothy to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15) and by God's judgment on those who distort it (2 Corinthians 11:4, 14-15; 2 Peter 3:16).

The Principle of Ignorance. Some things about Scripture we simply do not know, and speculating past what the text gives us is not the same as interpreting it. Example: will there be coffee in heaven?

Handout: Specific Things to Observe

Take-home reference for sharpening your observation of any passage.

Look for structure. Notice cause and effect, if-then statements, and connecting words like "and" (things alike) and "but" (things contrasted).

Look for literary form. Is the passage discourse, prose narrative, or poetry? Figures of speech (simile, metaphor, parable, hyperbole, allegory, ellipsis) each work differently and should not be read woodenly literal.

Look for atmosphere. What tone does the passage carry: joy, warning, urgency, grief?

Homework

Answer all three questions before next class. There is no grade. Write out your answers, then compare them honestly with the response guide.

Question 1: Observation Questions on 3 John 1-4

3 John 1-4, ESV

"The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul. For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

Write twelve observation questions on this passage, using who, what, where, when, why, and how. Do not answer the questions.

Response guide: a good observation question stays fixed on what the text itself says, its words, phrases, and their connections. A strong response includes questions like these: Who is "the elder," and who is "the beloved Gaius"? What does the word "elder" tell us about how the writer identifies himself? The word "truth" appears in verse 1 and again in verses 3 and 4, is it doing the same job in all three places? Verse 2 links two wishes to "as it goes well with your soul" using the word "as," what kind of comparison is that making? Verse 3 says the brothers "testified to your truth," what does "testified" imply about how this information reached the writer? "Walking in the truth" appears in both verse 3 and verse 4, is it describing the same thing both times? Verse 3 says "I rejoiced greatly" and verse 4 says "I have no greater joy,"

what is the relationship between these two phrases? Who are "my children" in verse 4, literal or figurative? Why does verse 1 specify "in truth" rather than simply "whom I love"? What two things does the elder pray for in verse 2, and how are they connected by "as"? Does "beloved" describe Gaius the same way in verse 1 and verse 2? What does "hear" in verse 4 suggest about how the writer learned this, compared to firsthand experience? What do the surrounding words tell us about what "walking" refers to each time it appears?

Question 2: Read with Discernment

"A believer reads Genesis 12:1-3, God's promise to bless Abraham and make his descendants a great nation, and concludes that America, as a Christian-founded country, has inherited that same promise of national blessing today." Read this claim with discernment. What question should a careful reader ask before accepting it, and which principle of careful interpretation points toward a better reading?

Response guide: *a discerning reader asks who this promise is actually addressed to in its own setting. Genesis 12 is a covenant promise to Abraham and his physical and spiritual descendants, addressed in its own context to Israel. The principle that guides a better reading is avoiding Nationalizing (p. 90): seeing one's own country as the recipient of a national promise God made to Israel specifically. Discernment does not mean the promise has nothing to say to a reader today. It means locating what it actually says before drawing an application from it.*

Question 3: Finding Structure in 3 John

You have now read 3 John in full several times. Using the "Look for structure" skill from the handout, find one place in verses 5 through 14 where a connecting word, "for," "therefore," "but," or "and," links two parts of a sentence. Write out the connection, then say what kind of relationship it shows: cause and effect, an if-then statement, two things alike, or two things contrasted.

Response guide: there is more than one good answer here. A few strong examples: verse 8 says, "For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these." "Therefore" shows cause and effect: because they took nothing from outsiders, support from believers is owed. Verse 11 says, "do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good." "But" contrasts two opposite paths directly against each other. Verse 12 says Demetrius "has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself." "And" links two sources of testimony as alike, both pointing the same direction.
