

An Introduction To Bible Interpretation: Our Purpose, Our Crisis, Our Response

Preston Graham Jr.

Our Purpose: Why A Seminar on Biblical Interpretation?

1) A Response to Christ's admonitions applicable to Bible Interpretation and Teaching

Christ warns against assuming the position of a teacher without due caution,

James 3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Christ tells us to watch carefully lest false teachers bring harm to the church,

2Pet. 2:1-2 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves. Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned.

2John 1:10 Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching;

Christ commands that those who do teach false doctrine be removed from teaching,

Titus 1:11 they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach.

Christ warns us that the last days will be characterized not only by "false teaching" but also a natural affinity for it so as to take all possible precautions against it,

2Tim. 4:3 For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires,

1Tim. 4:1 now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,

Christ warns us that many will want to be teachers who may not be qualified,

1Tim. 1:7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

Christ explicitly commands that those who do teach be teachers of "sound doctrine"

Titus 2:1 But as for you, teach what is consistent with sound doctrine.

Christ commands that teachers are to be measured by the "standards" of sound doctrine,

2Tim. 1:13 Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus,

Christ intends for the ministry of "teaching" to be passed on through the succession of apostolic faith

2Tim. 2:2 and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.

Summary:

A low view of the functions of the ministry will naturally carry with it a low conception of the training necessary for it... A high view of the functions of the ministry on evangelical lines inevitably produces a high conception of the training which is needed to prepare men for the exercise of these high functions... for here we have, of course, an infinitely higher conception-- as merely an enthusiastic Christian eager to do work for Christ... we might as well seek recruits for the ministry among the capable young fellows about town, zeal their highest spiritual attainment.

B. B. Warfield

2) The responsibility of every Christian to examine the teachings of our day in the light of the Scripture:

*That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea; and when they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue. These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing. **Acts 17:10-12***

LC #160

What is required of those that hear the Word preached?

It is required of those that hear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.

3. For the Love of God's Word Unto Salvation (Psalms 119, John 1)

Psa. 119:15 *I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.*

16 *I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word...*

27 *Make me understand the way of your precepts,
and I will meditate on your wondrous works.*

97 *Oh, how I love your law!
It is my meditation all day long.*

98 *Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.*

99 *I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.*

100 *I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts....*

103 *How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

104 *Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.*

105 *Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.*

Why did the Psalmist Love the Word?

My soul languishes for your salvation; I hope in your word. Psa. 119:81

- c.f. John 1:7-9, 3:19ff

4. For the Love of Christ and His Glory: The Goal of Biblical Interpretation:

“Sir, Bring us to Jesus!”

(Engraved into the Old Wooden Pulpit in a Presbyterian Church, Pitts. PA)

Michael Horton's, *Knowing What You're Looking For In The Bible*

- *What are some ways that “study Bibles” and “Bible Studies” could mislead us?*
- *Why is it important to read the Bible as a “single Story?”*
- *What are the major elements of the “single Story”*
 - *Narrative of saving events*
 - *Christ-centered telos (purposeful focus, or “ends”) of redemptive history.*
 - *Unity of Bible in a “promise-fulfillment” pattern*
- *In short, according to Jesus even, what does the Scripture Ultimate testify to?*
 - *John 5:40,*
 - *Luke 24:27ff,*
 - *Heb 1:1-4*

Summary: All of scripture ultimately wants to point us to Christ... it is a redemptive oriented revelation, not....?

- a. We see it in the strategy of Peter—Act 2

- b. We see it in the strategy of Paul—Acts 13, 17 etc.
- c. We see it in the teachings of the NT—Heb. 1
- d. We see it in the approach taken by Jesus himself in Luke 24
- e. We see it in the book of Revelations, as the end or ultimate “purpose” of revelation is shown forth using OT images to direct us to the exalted Christ of the present and future...

To be sure, all of Scripture is written with a view toward leading us to Christ’s Salvation and Lordship, whether it be the OT narratives and “types” Christ and salvation in Genesis, the “new creation/salvation of Exodus and the Moses of God fulfilled in Christ the law of Leviticus as fulfilled by Christ, the Psalms of desire and fulfillment in Christ, the wisdom of God such as to lead us to Christ our wisdom unto salvation (1 Cor), the love songs of the Song of Songs that directs us to the marriage of the lamb, etc. etc. -- wherein Christ became for us the wisdom of God unto salvation as noted in 1Cor. , whether it be in the wisdom of love between a husband and wife, as in the imagery of the Song of Solomon, or Hosea and other marriage songs—which all point us to the great marriage of the lamb to his bride, whether it be in a tightly crafted argument say for instance Romans and the so called “Roman Road.” etc. etc.

The Issue of Christ’s Lordship applied to Biblical Interpretation:

From a Biblical point of view, the purpose of interpretation must be to receive and respond properly to the word of God... His word is truly inescapable. God's communication to us always displays his Lordship. That is, it displays his authority, his control, and his presence... Within a Christian framework, the law, the world, and the self go together. God has authority over all, God controls all, God is present in all.

Vern Poythress

Our Crisis: Modernity and “Signs of the Times”

“Signs of the Times”

2Tim. 3:1 *You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. 2 For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant,...* **14** *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, 15 and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

2Cor. 10:2 *I ask that when I am present I need not show boldness by daring to oppose those who think we are acting according to human standards. 3 Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; 4 for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments 5 and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.*

In different terms, there is a shift from a concern with "what the Bible states" to "what God is telling me...The coming generation, then, is less demanding in its expectations of the Bible. Beyond this, however, there is a marked tendency toward "hermeneutical subjectivism" (the neo-orthodox impulse)...

James Hunter

Popular Trends In the Crisis In Bible Interpretation:

1. Individualism: "It's all a matter of a person's own, *private* Interpretation"

The revivalist of the Second Great Awakening... argued (as the secularists had a century earlier) that his revelation was not properly mediated by either tradition or theology; it came directly to each individual through

personal experience. As a result, the individual became the arbiter of what the Bible did and did not say. The new evangelical coalition attached little importance to the aid of the past or even the present community of interpreters in matters of biblical interpretation. External authorities were jettisoned and divine authority was internalized-- a strategy not altogether different from that of the Enlightenment.

Rick Lints, *Fabric of Theology*

Compare:

1Tim. 3:15 if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

Eph.4:11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

2. Populism (Democratization): "The *common* sense of the majority is right"

In America the principal mediator of God's voice has not been state, church, council, confession, ethnic group, university college or seminary; it has been quite simply, the people... the impulse to rework Christianity into forms that were unmistakably popular... and democratic in at least three respects: it was audience centered, intellectually open to all, and organizationally pluralistic and innovative.

Nathan Hatch, "Evangelicalism as a Democratic Movement"

A curious effect of this emphasis on the subjective leading of the Spirit was the growth in power of the "popular popes" of evangelicalism. Though highly individualistic in their approach to salvation and populist in their biblical interpretation, populist Bible teachers and preachers served to draw people together into a mass movement largely through the strength of their personal popularity. As Mark Noll puts it, "Evangelical interpretation assigned first place to popular approval.

Rick Lints, *Fabric* p. 35

Compare:

Matt. 7:13 "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. 14 For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Matt. 22:14 For many are called, but few are chosen.

3. Anti-Intellectualism: "All I need is my Bible"

By thus admitting the sovereignty of the audience, evangelicals, knowingly or not, undercut the structure that could support critical theological thinking of the level of a Jonathan Edwards or a John Wesley. Not only did theology proper recede in importance before the task of proclaiming the gospel; the new ground rules for theology, opening it to all, meant that the measure of theology would be its acceptability in the marketplace of ideas. This meant that uncomfortable complexity would be flattened out, that issues would be resolved by a simple choice of alternatives, and that in many cases the fine distinctions from which truth alone can emerge were lost in the din of ideological battle.

Nathan Hatch

Expecting that great freedom of thought would generate great ideas, he found instead that Americans easily became "slaves of slogans. Expecting to find priests, he found politicians."

N. Hatch about Tocqueville

Compare:

Rom. 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.

2Cor. 10:5 Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;

The Underlying Roots of a Crisis in Biblical Interpretation:

Underlying Roots: Enlightenment Agenda Exposed

1. Historical-Criticism (HC): Pertains to the historicity of the events recorded in the Bible and a resulting conclusion about the credibility of certain portions of text in the Bible. Post enlightenment skepticism regarding the actuality of the miraculous events in the Bible has called into question the veracity of the Biblical record itself. The primary method of HC: As stated by Maier, "as long as one makes analogous classification a precondition for acceptance, much in the word of the Bible remains without foundation." (Maier. p.16)
2. New Hermeneutic (NH): Whether the "NH" of Hans-Georg Gadamer, or the common "HC" practices of everyday Christians that "that are unencumbered by a concern for the author's original intention." (Hirsch.

p.246) Gadamer's impetus rests primarily in a skepticism concerning the possibility of objective historical knowledge. In reference to Gadamer, E.D. Hirsch notes in his book, *Validity in Interpretation*, "If an interpreter cannot overcome the distorting perspective of his own historicity, no matter how hard he tries, then it follows that "one understands differently when one understands at all." (Hirsch. p.252.)

In view of the historicity of our being, the rehabilitation of (a text's) original conditions is a futile undertaking. What is rehabilitated from an alien past is not the original. In its continued alienation it has a merely secondary existence." (Hans-Georg Gadamer quoted by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, [New Haven: Yale University Press; 1967 p. 247] from his personal translation of Georg Hans Gadamer, *Truth and Method* p. 159)

The primary method of the NH: Like the HC method, an analogy is made between the present and the past yet for the very different purpose of expanding a historical text rather than to reducing it. In other words, by a "fusion of horizons", the present perspective of the interpreter is allowed to act upon a historical text in such a way as to expand and even change an author's intended meaning. As Gadamer states, "The real meaning of a text as it addresses itself to an interpreter... is always codetermined by the historical situation of the interpreter. (Quoted by Hirsch. p.253 from *Truth and Method*.)

A Growing Skepticism Concerning the Reliability of Scripture

To be fair, much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries.

Richard Dawkins, The God Delusion

A Growing Skepticism Concerning the Perspicuity of Scripture:

The confusion and proliferation of answers that evangelicals are giving, all from the same Bible are disconcerting to students. So the quickest and safest way out of this uncertainty and confusion is to resort to religious experience. Again, this is nothing new. The history of liberalism documents it, and evangelicals are reliving it in their own experience. Scott Hafeman

In different terms, there is a shift from a concern with "what the Bible states" to "what God is telling me..." The coming generation, then, is less demanding in its expectations of the Bible. Beyond this, however, there is a marked tendency toward "hermeneutical subjectivism" (the neo-orthodox impulse)... James Hunter

A Growing Skepticism Regarding the Sufficiency of Scripture

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Our Response:

A. Response to Historical Criticism (HC) and New Hermeneutic (NH):

1. Summary: *When it comes to our approach to Bible hermeneutics, it is sometimes easy to forget the obvious. But if scripture IS a communication from God to us, it is not to obscure His will for us and our salvation but to clarify it; it is not to diminish God's sovereignty over us but to expand it; it is not to blunt God's glory but to amplify it. Any theory or practice in the interpretation of scripture that denies the obvious refutes it's own usefulness in this endeavor. Vern Poythress*

2. Biblical Presupposition of God's Sovereignty Applied:

(Based upon Mark Noll's "Traditional Christianity and the Possibility of Historical Knowledge", *Christian Scholar's Review*, Volume XIX Number 4, 1990, p.388-406)

Against the Enlightenment conception of God as being contained to outside our universe in activity-- if He even exists at all-- Mark Noll notes how the Christian faith affirms that "God is not just the creator and passive sustainer of the world, but also that His energy is the source of the world's energy and His will the foundation of its existence." (Noll,p.398) As further noted by Noll:

Christians like Malebranche, Berkeley and Edwards postulated a deity who filled the universe he had created, who activated the minds he had made in his own image, who brooded over the world with constant love as well as distant power. This is the sort of Christianity that can rescue Historical knowledge. (Noll, p.399)

Derived from the fundamental belief in a Sovereign God who is active in the universe, Noll argues that there are four basic Christian beliefs which together rescue a working confidence in historical knowledge. (Noll. p.299-405) Together, they remove the epistemological bias of present experience in the task of understanding historical texts. They could be described as the four pillars resting upon the Sovereignty of God that support a Biblical cosmology or an open system universe. As these are applied to Biblical Interpretation, the following four observations can be made:

1. An open system universe affirms that "the divine creation and sustaining of the world is the foundation for epistemological confidence of whatever sort." (Ibid. p.399) There is a correspondence between our minds and God's mind such that it is possible to gain true knowledge as God intended it in the revelation of Scripture.

2. An open system universe can affirm the doctrine of the fall such that "the resultant depravity of human nature suggests that the human moral condition obscures vision, presumably for historical as well as moral reasoning." (Noll. p.401) Therefore, there is no guarantee for a perfect knowledge of the original intent of Scripture due to the fall and the repercussion of sin upon human thought. However, given #1 above, just because the Bible reader cannot have an infallible knowledge of the Biblical intention, it does not follow that he cannot know anything about it either? Yet this second observation points to the wisdom in a "corporate" reading of scripture rather than an individualistic reading-- thus the wisdom of a confessional "tradition." Furthermore, it points to the wisdom of the ongoing history of interpretation-- while we believe that new is not necessarily better in the interpretive endeavor, we also believe in the possibility of progress in interpretation. Thus, a "history of interpretation" that piggy backs on previous wisdom while seeking to expand upon it.

3. An open system universe can affirm that writing history or interpreting an ancient text "from the point of view of a particular culture becomes not only inescapable, but also divinely ordained and good. A modified "Relativism", in other words, has a divine sanction." (Noll. p.401) It is true that to get at an ancient text, one must look through the lens of his/her cultural and historical particularities. However, the skepticism that is

usually associated with

this subjective reality is rendered unfounded given an open system universe and the belief in a benevolent, sovereign God who is active in history. What's to say, then, that the historical distance is necessarily harmful to objective understanding? In the case of eye vision, for instance, the optician might construct a series of lenses which together promote sound and proper vision in the patient. The lens actually corrects, not distorts the vision. What is to say that the lens of historical and cultural dimensions, constructed by a sovereign God working in history, might not serve to correct an understanding of the past rather than inhibit it. Whose to say that the historical and cultural distance might not provide the needed perspective to understand the significance of an author's intended meaning rather than preventing one from understanding the author? In other words, the skepticism itself is what ought to be questioned if one holds to an open system universe. Skepticism, that is, that functions as an *a priori* presupposition to interpreting historical texts. Therefore, we should study the bible as within its cultural/historical context yet without diminishing the divine sanction of the authority of scripture.

4. An open system universe and a Biblical understanding of the cosmos means that the "recognition that it is God who brings about belief is the source not of despair, but of hope." (Noll. p.405) The stress in the Bible is that even the ability to believe rests upon God's activity of revelation. (1 Cor.6-16) God must alter our frame of reference before we are eager to come to God and know His mind. (Jn.6:37) Yet this is a source of hope in that my own epistemological frailties can be overcome through the divine intervention of a Sovereign and benevolent God who is there. While there is a certain degree of knowledge accessible in the natural laws and order of creation, there is the anticipation of revelation by God's special grace that begins to overcome the limitations imposed by our fallen state. We therefore must assume "revelation" as this has happened in the text of scripture by the Holy Spirit, but we must pray for illumination" as this is necessary so as to change our affections so as to really "hear" the word speak to us.

B. Response to Crisis in Sufficiency of Scripture:

those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased...(1.1b), ... unto which nothing at any times is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men..." (1.6)

- *Heb. 1:1-3—God "spoke"... not "speaks"*
- *Eph. 2: 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.*
- *Rev.22:18 ...if anyone adds to them...*
- The Word-Deed-Word Principle of Inscripturation.. where "Redemption and revelation coincide...." (Geerhardus Vos)

C. Three Theological Confusions Clarified

1) The Role of The Holy Spirit in Bible Interpretation

A Not-So-Modern Confusion: John Calvin On False Use of Holy Spirit:

We are assailed by two sects, which seem to differ most widely from each other. For what similitude is there in appearance between the Pope and the Anabaptist? That when they both boast extravagantly of the Spirit, the tendency certainly is to sink and bury the Word of God, that they may make room for their own falsehoods.

Why, then, does Chrysostom admonish us to reject all who, under the pretense of the Spirit, lead us away from the simple doctrine of the gospel-- the Spirit having been promised not to reveal a new doctrine, but to impress the truth of the gospel on our minds... '

For seeing how dangerous it would be to boast of the Spirit without the Word, He declared that the Church is indeed governed by the Holy Spirit, but in order that that government might not be vague and unstable, he annexed it to the Word. For this reason Christ exclaims that those who are of God hear the word of God-- that his sheep are those which recognize his voice as that of their Shepherd and any other voice as that of a stranger (John10:27) For this reason the Spirit, by the mouth of Paul, declares (Eph.2:20) that the Church is built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets. Also, that the Church is made holy to the Lord, by the washing of water in the word.

(On Reform, p.92 & 93), *Selections ...* Ed. Dillenberger)

No less a confusion today: "Dripping Like A Leaky Faucet", Scott Oliphint, *Reformation* Sept. 2012 *(c,f, Suggested Readings)

Clarification: Distinction between Revelation (authority in meaning) and Illumination (understanding of significance)

Westminster Confession of Faith, Section 6

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.

What the Spirit Does and Does not do in Interpretation:

A. Does: "Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word"

Rom. 8:6-8 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able {to do so}; 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

1 Cor. 2:12-14--Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, 13 which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual {thoughts} with spiritual {words.} 14 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.

a. The subjective role of producing reconciliation. Rom. 8.15.

1. Spirit destroys that enmity between rebellious creatures and God, which is the fundamental problem with interpretation.
2. While we are no longer fundamentally at enmity with God, the sanctifying work of the Spirit is not yet complete.

b. The Spirit's role in enabling us to *receive* the truths of God

1. Rom. 8:5-8-- 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law-- indeed it cannot, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

2. 1 Cor. 2:9-15 9 But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" -- 10 these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. 13 And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. 14 Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. 15 Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.

c. Conclusions:

"The Holy Spirit plays a subjective, not objective, role in biblical interpretation. In reconciling our sinful hearts to God, he promotes within us a similar desire to love and serve God as we have to love and serve our natural parents. Further, he particularly gives us the desire to embrace and receive the things of God. In doing this, he makes us willing to work hard to understand scripture, and willing to embrace the conclusions of our study of scripture. Our view is distinct from the view of Rome, which argued that the difficulty of understanding scripture aright was due to scripture's obscurity and perplexity; Protestants responded by saying the difficulty was due to our obscurity and perplexity. On the other side of the Reformers, battling from another direction, were the anabaptists, who joined Rome in claiming scripture to be intellectually unclear and in need of further revelation and information. Thus, the Holy Spirit is most necessary in removing that sin and love of sin which is that which effectively prevents us from embracing and receiving the things of God." T. David Gordon

John Owen, vol. 4, pp. 118-235, "Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God", p. 156:

"The things revealed in the Scripture are expressed in propositions whose words and terms are intelligible unto the common reason of mankind. Every rational man, especially if he be skilled in those *common sciences and arts* which all writings refer unto, may, without any especial aid of the Holy Ghost, know the meaning of the *propositions* that are laid down in, or drawn from the Scripture; yea, they can do so who believe not one word of it to be true, and they do so, as well as the best of them, who have no *other help* in the understanding of the Scripture but their own reason, let them profess to believe what they will. And whatever men understand of the meaning of the words, *expressions*, and *propositions* in the Scripture, if they believe not the *things* which they declare, they do not in any sense *know the mind and will of God* in them; for to know a thing as the mind of God, and not to assent unto its truth, implieth a contradiction."

B. Does Not: "unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit,

"The Holy Spirit does not give us insight into the correct interpretation of a given biblical passage.

(Caveat: in saying the Spirit does not do this, we are not saying He is *incapable* of doing this, nor are we denying that, in some extraordinary circumstance, He *might* do so, or even *has* done so. What we are denying is the propriety of *expecting* Him to do so. We are denying that belief that it is a regular part of His role in the present church-order to reveal to individuals the meaning of a biblical passage."

T. David Gordon

Evaluation of those misunderstandings of scripture which suggest that the Spirit does give supernatural insight into the interpretation of texts of scripture.

1. John 14:25-26--

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you"

1. To whom is this addressed? The disciples in the Upper Room. The twice-repeated "you" of v. 26 has the same referent as the "you" at the end of 25 and the end of 26.
2. What is promised to the disciples? The Holy Spirit.

3. What will the Holy Spirit do? He will teach-remind (note the parallel between teaching and reminding here). His "teaching," even among the disciples, is not new information, but a remembrance of the many things which Jesus had already said.

4. What will be the content of the Spirit's teaching-reminding among the disciples? What is the referent of the *pavnta*? This is answered by the relative clause, "that I have said to you". This clause is almost certainly further defined by the first clause of 25, "I have said these things to you while I am still with you".

5. Conclusions from John 14.25,26. This text records a special promise of the Holy Spirit to the disciples guaranteeing that they will be helped to remember what Jesus taught them while he was with them. A number of other texts affirm that this is precisely what happened.

2. John 15:26-27 --*When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. 27 You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.*

1. To whom is this promise addressed? To the disciples again (same discourse context, and also, 27 defines the 2d person plural as those who have been with me from the beginning).

2. What is promised? A special capacity to testify about the Christ. Note the difference between the denying, weeping Peter, and the emboldened Peter subsequent to the resurrection appearances and outpouring of the Spirit.

Conclusions of our analysis: What may we, as Bible interpreters, rightly expect from God the Holy Spirit? That He will increasingly take away our innate rebellion and hostility to the ways of God, which is the primary obstacle to our "receiving" God's truths. In this way, He will "illumine" us, not by adding *content* to the objective revelation in scripture, but by subduing that rebellion which subjectively prohibits the truth from being received and embraced.

2) Confusion About The Role of The Church in Interpretation (c.f. slides

What the Church does and does not do in Interpretation:

1) Does not add to the revelation in scripture: "unto which nothing at any time is to be added, ...nor traditions of men."

Protestant revolution was not about inspiration or tradition, but over a matter of authority. Whether the church in its teaching office had the right to impose meanings on the Biblical text which was not itself subject to correction by that text. Protestants held that Scripture was no longer free-- church teaching was silencing Biblical teaching.

Note the distinction between Westminster and Trent (1545-63) on ecclesiastical traditions:

"The sacred and holy, ecumenical, and general Synod of Trent--...following the examples of the orthodox Fathers, receives and venerates with an equal reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament--seeing that one God is the author of both--as also the said traditions, as well those appertaining to faith as to morals, as having been dictated, either by Christ's own word of mouth, or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession....But if anyone... knowingly condemn the traditions aforesaid; let him be anathema. Let all, therefore, understand, in what order, and in what manner, the said Synod, after having laid the foundation of the Confession of faith, will proceed, and what testimonies and authorities it will mainly use in confirming dogmas, and in restoring morals in the Church."

The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, "Decree Concerning the canonical scriptures"

"I most steadfastly admit and embrace apostolic and ecclesiastic traditions, and all other observances and constitutions of the same Church. I also admit the holy Scriptures, according to that sense which our holy mother Church has held and does hold, to which it belongs to judge of the true sense and interpretation of

the Scriptures; neither will I ever take and interpret them otherwise than according to the unanimous consent of the Fathers.”

Profession of the Tridentine Faith, III.

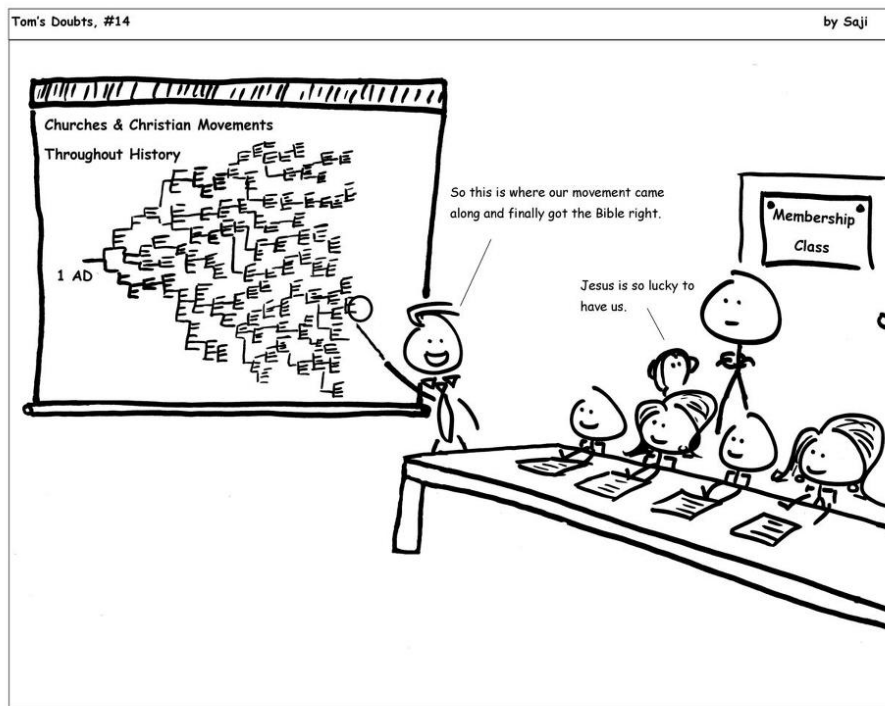
2) Does: To the degree that more qualified Biblical study and simply more of it over a greater period of time has the advantage of being a better instructor than the single untrained individual at one particular time, then the Church has the advantage of better translating the Bible, especially regarding those things "not alike plain in themselves nor alike clear unto all" (section7). The church then becomes a function of illumination vs. Revelation!

1 Timothy 3:15, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

The Use of Creeds) in Interpretation!!

Rick Lints, The Fabric of Theology

The inductive Bible study approach may encourage individuals to read the Bible as they never have before, but it will also encourage them to read the text according to their own subjective interests. The bible becomes captive to the whims of the individual freed from external constraints, and in such a situation the individual can imagine the text to say whatever he or she wants it to say. If our central concern in approaching the text is how it makes us feel or what it seems to be saying to us, then the church is doomed to having as many interpretations of the text as the interpreters. In banishing all mediators between the Bible and ourselves, we have let the Scriptures be ensnared in a web of subjectivism. Having rejected the aid of the community of interpreters throughout the history of Christendom, we have not succeeded in returning to the primitive gospel; we have simply managed to plunge ourselves back to the biases of our own individual situations.



Use of Creeds in Interpretation—A Communal Way of Interpret—

*Role of the Church
In Interpreting Scripture*

Roman Catholicism



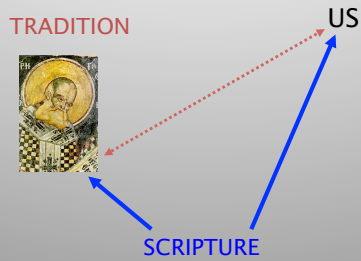
*Role of the Church
In Interpreting Scripture*

Anabaptist



*Role of the Church
In Interpreting Scripture*

Classical Protestant



The Ultimate Goal of Confessionalism: To Preserve the Apostolic Faith for the sake of believing it!

Our own confession teaches about itself that it is fallible (WCF 1:9, 31.3) and that "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 the Scripture" (WCF 1.10). And yet, without a corporate reading of scripture as within the organizational structure established by Christ through the apostles (Mt. 16, Eph. 2), we are left with private interpretations and a corporate identity crisis.

Mt. 28:20, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...

Acts 20:26-27, Therefore I declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God

2 Thess.2:15, So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

A Biblical History of Confessing

- An Intrinsic quality of faith-- *Let the Redeemed of the Lord say so... Ps.107:2*
- A Confessing history of Israel-- see Dt.6:4-9, 26:5-9
- Peter's Confession—see Mt.16:13-18
- Perhaps the earliest and briefest Christian confession—1 Cor.12:3, "Jesus is Lord."
- Early Apostolic "statements"—Rom.1:3-4, 1Cor.15:3-4, 1Tim.3:16
- A call to confess—Rom.10:9, 1 Cor.11:2, 12:3, Jude 3, 2Thess.2:15

The Use of Creeds to support Confessionalism

A "creed" is any summary and/or clarification of a certain belief or "a confess in writing." (The word "Creed" is derived from the Latin word "belief.") Therefore, a Christian creed is an interpretation of the general teachings of the Old and New Testament Scriptures categorized into general themes and topics of relevance to the Christian faith and subscribed to by the church.

2 Timothy 1:13, Follow the pattern of the sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus.

2 Thess.2:15, So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.

The Usefulness of Creeds: (Quotes by A.A. Hodge)

1. As a basis for Christian Unity

To act as the bond of ecclesiastical fellowship among those so nearly agreed as to be able to labor together in harmony.

Amos 3:3, "How can two walk together unless they be agreed?"

Phil. 1:27, "stand fast in one spirit with one mind"

1 Cor.1:10, "speak the same thing and be on one accord of one mind"

Philip. 2:2, Make my joy complete, be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Eph. 4:4, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.

Eph.4:13, "until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the son of God.

If not unity of "faith" then unity of what?

2. For Instruction

To be used as instruments in the great work of popular instruction.

1 Tim. 4:6, *If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed.*

1 Tim. 6:3, *Whoever teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that is in accordance with godliness...*

2 Tim.4:3, *For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires.*

3. For Ecclesiastical Discipline

Acts 20:28 *Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son.*

Heb. 13:17 *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing--for that would be harmful to you.*

4. As a basis for evaluating true from false teaching and teacher qualification.

To discriminate the truth from the glosses of false teachers, and accurately to define it in its integrity and due proportions.

Romans 10:2, *they have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge.*

2Pet. 2:1-2 *But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves. Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned.*

2John 1:10 *Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching;*

5. For Preserving the "Faith of our Fathers" such as to better protect against cultural "blind-spots."

To mark, preserve, and disseminate the attainments made in the knowledge of Christian truth by any branch of the church in any grand crisis of its development.

2Tim. 2:2 *and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.*

3. Confusion About the Priesthood of Believers in Interpretation

Sola Scriptura was a rallying cry for our Protestant forebears... neither Luther nor Calvin ever intended that this principle serve as the means by which individual interpreters might bypass the contributions of the larger interpretive community, either past or present. The Reformers maintained that interpretation of the biblical text is a responsibility not of the individual but of the community of believers gathered. It must be a corporate enterprise. Rick Lints, Fabric of Theology

WCF 1.6: *The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added...*

Confusion Stated: Doctrine of "priesthood of believers" has been misunderstood to mean that all people have equal ability to read, interpret and even teach scripture...

Stated: What about the "Priesthood of Believers" doctrine taught in NT: In so far as every Christian is a "priest unto God", doesn't that mean that all Christians are "ministers" so as to be able to understand and even teach the scripture without theological training?

Clarification:

a. Priesthood of Believers pertains to our having free and total access to God by virtue of being "in Christ" who is our high priest. This objection seems to confuse the implications with what might be described as the "prophecyhood of believers." The "priesthood" doctrine pertains to our relation to God, not our functions in the church or world.

b. This distinction between our "function" and our "status" is common to reformation teaching as for instance John Owens:

"All faithful ministers of the gospel, inasmuch as they are engrafted into Christ and are true believers may as all other true Christians be called priests; but this inasmuch as they are members of Christ, not ministers of the gospel. It respecteth their persons, not their function, or not them as such." ("Digression on the Priesthood of all Christians" in "Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished", Vol. 13, *Works of John Owen*.)

1. Concerning the Ascension gifts: Eph. 4:7-16

Exegetical Observation:

Building up:

In vs. 22 a kind of "union in Christ" is synonymous with "being built up *together* spiritually into a *dwelling place* of God." One ought not to pass over this word "together", as it assumes an assembly or "ekklesia." Nor should we miss the significance of the phrase "dwelling place," as it is one and the same word used in the Greek Old Testament for "tabernacle" such as in Psalms 46 vs. 4!

Joined and knit together:

The word "joined" can be used synonymously with "assemble," arrange, structure or even "organize." In 1Cor.12:20 for instance, God is said to "structure) the body of Christ as to give some greater honor than others.. And perhaps most significantly, Titus 1:5 applies the verb to mean "set in order" or even "organize" as to establish a church by means of the training and appointment of elders.

Paul explicitly references a "structure" that is being "*joined together*" such as to grow into a holy temple in the Lord," even that which is "in Christ" being "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Eph. 2:20ff). And then it is observed how this same language of "being joined together" is used again in Ephesians 4:16, this time as related to the descent of Christ in the Holy Spirit as applied to the post apostolic offices!

Under the New Covenant, this conception of "tabernacle" is mediated through different corporate structures related to the activity of the Holy Spirit for the church. Paul teaches that "we are the temple of God" and immediately applies the promises and exhortations once given to the Old Covenant church to the New Covenant church (2 Cor. 6:16-18, see then Exek. 37:26, Is. 52:11, 2 Sam. 7:14.). Paul's teaching for us under the New Covenant was no different than the prophetic teaching under the Old Covenant, that salvation is described with the promise "I will dwell with them" (2 Cor. 6:16). This "dwelling" after the fall and before heaven always included some mediated structure whereby God, in a provisional way, was present to effect his saving activity. And according to Revelation 21, we are to see all this earlier history as climaxed in the return of Christ.

B. 1 Peter 2:4-10

Does the "you" in vs. 9 mean each *individual* or does it mean the *corporate*?

1. vs. 9, "a holy nation" (corporate)

2. vs. 10, "God's people" (in plural, not person in singular)

3. OT use of similar phrase always in context of corporate people, who functioned with "priests" so as to bring people to God-- Israel, in so far as it had the priestly ordinances, was as a nation a priestly nation...

Ex. 19:6 but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites."

Rev. 1:6 and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

C. One priest forever for all people-- thus the "priesthood (Christ) of all believers such that all believers are enabled to enter into the holy presence of God upon the priestly mediation of Christ-- not that everyone can bring themselves into God's presence, or that everyone then becomes a "prophet" or qualified teacher of revealed prophecy as recorded in scripture.

Heb. 7:23 ¶ Furthermore, the former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever.

Heb. 7:26 ¶ For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 Unlike the other high priests, he has no need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for those of the people; this he did once for all when he offered himself. 28 For the law appoints as high priests those who are subject to weakness, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.

Heb. 8:1 ¶ Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens,

Heb. 10:21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God,

C. Not everyone a "teacher" passages

James 3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

III. The Usability (Perspicuity) of Scripture Rediscovered: A Scripture Centered Methodology

WCF 1.7- *All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.*

1 Cor. 2:12, 14–15. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.... But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.

Eph. 1:18. ... the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints.

See 2 Cor. 4:6.

e.g. Wouldn't it be strange, that as an act of intimacy and self-revelation such as to drive God to communicate to us by incarnational words—that God would then make such words inaccessible. AS if we could blame it on God that we don't study his word as if it were not attainable to know what it says... Satan is cunning that way!

Common Confusions:

1) Confidence vs. Enlightenment biased "certainty":

E.g. Illumination vs.

- Empiricism
- Rationalism

2) Clarity vs. Easy

2Pet. 3:16 *as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.*

e.g. *And so while God has made the scriptures accessible, not in a way that would allow us to be independent of God acting in/with/through the Holy Spirit in communion in/with/through our inter-dependence upon one another...*

Thus, our method of interpretation will require humility and reliance upon God acting through the Holy Spirit as then also mediated in/with/through the temple-church of God! Thus....

A. The Core Principle of Soli Scriptura Applied: Scripture Interpret Scripture "

Standards: (Notice how the above confirms the teaching of Westminster)

WCF 1.7 All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

1.8 The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them. But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.

B. The Doctrine of Biblical Inspiration Applied to Interpretation

A. The Confusion:

1. About the relation of the divine working with the human in inspiration
2. About what exactly IS inspired.

B. Clarification: What is the doctrine of "Inspiration?"

Definition: The process in which the words of scripture are made by the Holy Spirit working through responsible human agents to be revelatory without usurping the personality and mind of the writers. Creative work of H.S. through human instruments....

1. Biblical Idea Stated:

2 Tim.3:16- "God-breathed", not scripture breathed into writers by God but rather breathed out "Breathed", always evidence of God's creation. (Ps.33:6, Gen.2:7) - "all", the whole of scripture is inspired.

2 Peter 1:19-21- not a private interpretation. It's more than simply being eyewitnesses of historical events, but the interpretation of those events given by God as well.

John 10:33-34- Jesus defends by the authority of Scripture being that of God Himself. Scripture and God lay so close together in the minds of the writers of Scripture that they spoke of scripture doing what only God can do. The "oracles of God." (Rom.9:17; Gal.3:8; Acts 4:25; Acts 8:3...

2. Summary of Biblical View of Inspiration:

Verbal: the very words of canonical text, not merely the writers or general concepts, are breathed out by the H.S.

Plenary: Inspiration extends to all parts of the Bible as opposed to views of partial inspiration.

Confluent: The divine and human interaction "flow together" such that the individual personalities and styles are not suppressed....

Inerrancy: The text of Scripture is true in all that it intends to affirm.

3. The Relation of the Divine to the Human aspects of Inspiration

1. The preparation of the men, physically, intellectually, spiritually and even personally. Not by dictation, human minds were engaged in the writing of scripture. Therefore, distinctive styles and forms of logic attributed to different authors. Scripture has no problem assigning the writing of scriptures to its human authorship.

2. The preparation of the history which is the subject-matter of Scripture.

3. Therefore, not an isolated event or action. A teleological character is inherent in the very cause of events toward the preparation of Scripture. Inspiration is founded upon the sovereign, providential and supernatural character of God making Himself immanent in history.

Implications: We give authority to the Bible as from the Mind of God, but take seriously that which is "human" such as language, literary, historical and social considerations, etc.

Summary: The Bible is the Word of God in the words of people. Inspiration has as its product the Old and New Testament Scriptures whereby God has brought about by providential control the writings of the canonical text.

4. What Exactly is Inspired:

1. Liberal Protestant View: The Biblical author is inspired. Locus moves from what has been written to what the author experienced. Identify the experience of the author and then a person can experience it him/herself.

2. Neo-Orthodox View: The reader is inspired. Confuses doctrine of inspiration with illumination. Bible is God's Word only in so far as God speaks through it to the individual reader. Denies the objectivity of Theological truth, rather truth is subjective. This view reveals its existential leanings.

3. Classic Evangelical View: The words are inspired. (see above)

Summary: Both the Liberal and Neo-Orthodox views are subjectivistic. They both confuse "meaning" with "significance." (One emphasizes significance as it was to the author and the other as it is to the reader.) The classic evangelical view understands that the words themselves were inspired such that meaning is objective and governed by the text itself. Significance, is merely the readers own personal responses to the objective meaning of the text.

Implications: *Original intent* as discerned in the text itself is the goal of interpretation. Each unit of scripture has only ONE *meaning*. *Significance* is distinguished from *meaning* so as to preserve the text's place of governing us, rather than we governing it. Each unit of scripture may have more than one *significance* although *significance* ought still to be a good and necessary inference from the *meaning*.

B. On the Nature of Scripture Applied!

WCF 1:9 *The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself...*

1) The Dual Nature of the Bible: "Albeit in the words of men, the Bible is the Word of God "

a. Albeit in the words of men:

The Bible consists of many "books": There are many authors within many socio-cultural-linguist and redemptive contexts that need to be taken seriously.

Applied: We take the TEXT Seriously

Asking Good Questions:

1. What is the Covenantal Context of this Passage? (see below)

What exactly is the promise of the covenant? What is the curse? What are the terms/stipulations? And if not the NT (our present context), how do the NT writers translate this covenantal context to their own.

2. What is the major themes and Purpose of the Book of this particular passage?

Political context?
Cultural context?
Author?
Purpose?
Recipients?
Controversies being addressed?
Major thematic emphasis?
How then does this particular passage fit into the overall “thesis” of the book?

3. Compare to other translations:

Ask: What are the significant differences between the different translations?
E.g. Word order, word use, sentence transition words... etc.

4. What is the genre of your text and what does this mean in terms of crucial questions to ask? Example: Poetry, Wisdom, Narrative, Epistle, Apocalyptic, etc.(see “Genre Specific Principles”)

5. What is the relationship of clauses/paragraphs, sections, etc (depending on genre, this may be as detailed as a sentence flow (rhetorical/poetic) or as general as comparison of one episodes to one another (historical narrative such as the gospels or Genesis...)

See “An Exegetical Checklist” by Scott Hafeman
See “Questions to ask ... to determine logical relationship between propositions”
See “Propositional Relationship Chart”

6. What is the Meaning of the Crucial Words in text?

How does the author use the word?
What is the range of meaning?
(note—do NOT do a root word study! Rather what is the Semantic range in that day?)

7. What is the confessional category that this text addresses and what does the church generally teach about it? (see confession)

b. the Bible is the Word of God:

The Issue of Redemptive-Historical vs. “Proof-texting” in Interpretation:

WCF1.1 “therefore it pleased God at sundry times and in divers manners to reveal himself and to declare...”

Key—A Covenantal Way of Reading the Scripture vs. proof-texting—

- There is many “texts” but one context—The redemptive history of God
- NT and OT—not a new religion, but a progressive revelation of redemption wherein the Old is developmentally mature in the New... e.g.
- We must learn to read the Bible backwards and forwards looking to locate each text into the trajectory or context of the whole of redemptive history and the working out of God’s covenant with Adam ultimately...

- *Example: We read Acts, not as an isolated event, but in the context of redemptive expectations and trajectories that have long proceeded it, even if awaiting its final consummation in glory.*

1. **A Biblical theology applied to Bible interpretation "deals with the process of God's self-revelation deposited in the Bible throughout redemptive history." G. Vos I.e.**

- a. It is God who is ultimately speaking such that we must work hard at JUST being the listeners lest we impose our own voice/narrative into the text.
- b. Truth is from God alone as relevant to God's redemptive historical purposes and is therefore not many voices but one ultimate voice with non-contradicting meaning assigned to a passage in relation to the whole.
- c. The Meaning is developing within a revelation process consistent with a history of redemption that culminates in climax.

2. **Main Features of a Redemptive Historical Understanding of the Bible**

a. The historic progressiveness of the revelation-process.

Revelation is the interpretation of redemption; it must, therefore, unfold itself in installments as redemption does. (Vos. p.6)

If there may be multiple significances in relation to multiple historical/covenantal/cultural contexts, there is never multiple meanings within a singular text since it is ultimate derived from the one mind of its single divine author—God!

b. The actual embodiment of revelation in history.

"the facts of history themselves acquire a revealing significance."(Vos. p.6)Read p.6-7

"The usual order is: first word, then the fact, then again the interpretive word."

Example: "The Old Testament brings the predictive preparatory word, the Gospels record the redemptive-revelatory fact, the Epistles supply the subsequent, final interpretation." (p.7)

c. The organic nature of the historic process is observable in revelation.

I.e. From seed form to full growth, qualitatively, the seed is not less perfect than the tree. We should therefore read the Bible as within an expectation that there is not multiple theologies presented within it, but rather one theology as becoming more and more clear as redemptive history progresses. We have license then to understand the "theological vision" of an earlier portion by it's relevant to a later portion.

Summary:

The genius of the Bible is its narrative. The Bible is less a systematic theology or a collection of wisdom sayings than the story of redemptive history beginning at creation and culminating with the consummation of the new heavens and new earth. As revelation is the interpretation of redemption, "it must therefore unfold itself in installments as redemption does." That is, the organic nature of the historic process of revelation proceeds from seed form to full growth. Within this analogy, if the seed is salvation that began in Genesis, Christ is the full-grown tree as expressed in Revelations. Within a redemptive "word-deed-word" pattern that existed within each of the various epochs of revelation, Vos explains how the whole of the Bible can be read as "the Old Testament brings the predictive preparatory word, the Gospels record the redemptive-revelatory fact, and the Epistles supply the subsequent, final interpretation."¹ And at the center of all this, is two redemptive historical trajectories that are initiated in Genesis and will culminate in Revelation: They are Covenant (The "scroll" in Rev) and Temple (viewed in Rev. 21:1 as temple above reuniting with temple below to make heaven!) even as the two, covenant/scroll and temple are shown to

¹ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1975). p.7.

be mutually inter-dependent, distinct if never separate, as will be represented in the two natures of Christ himself, "The word (covenant) became flesh and tabernacled (temple) among us (John 1:14).

The Covenantal Nature of Redemptive History

That the covenant orientation in spirituality is universally inherent to redemptive history is evidenced by its transcending trajectory both through the Old and New Testament narrative as culminating in Christ. This is perfectly illustrated by the particular use of the words "old" and "new" as assigned to "covenant" respectively throughout. So for instance, the prophet Jeremiah in the old covenant context anticipates the coming of a "new covenant" (Jer.31: 31. c.f Malachi 3:1) even as Paul in the new covenant context references the "veil" of the old covenant that was lifted by Christ in the new covenant (c.f. 2Cor 3:14).

Relative then to the old covenant context, the covenantal hermeneutic and orientation in spirituality is observed by the simple fact that the Hebrew word for "covenant" (berith) is used at least 289 times. So for instance, the Hebrew word covenant is explicitly used to summarize the whole of the Genesis history in Exodus 2:24 and the Old Covenant "Bible" itself was called the "book of the covenant" in Exodus 24:7. As related then to a covenant renewal event in worship, it is said how the, "book of the covenant" was first read and then explained in the hearing of the people wherein it was reported how they said, "all that the LORD has spoken we will do" wherein the Hebrew word "do" conjoins both the idea of "believing" and "acting on that belief."

Transitioning then to the New Covenant, we observe how the Old Covenant had every expectation that the "law-covenant" orientation would continue, even if in a revitalized way as related to the "law written on the heart." So for instance, the prophet Jeremiah says while under the Old Covenant:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.... I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, so that they may not turn from me.(Jer. 31-33, 32:40)

Matthew most especially applied the fulfillment motif relative to the Old Covenant expectations as Christ fulfilling the law-covenant. For instance, it narrates Christ's saying, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. "(Matthew 5:17-18) Here again, Christ is shown throughout his ministry to fulfill the law-covenant in relation to the "law" of love. Our point is how we often don't see the two together in praxis contra redemptive history (Dt. 6:5, 13:3 and Matt. 22:29-32).

The covenant orientation is likewise prominent in the epistles. Paul, for instance, will speak of the "veil" that remained "unlifted" in "the old covenant" until Christ was able to take it away (2Cor.3:14). Christ is later described as the "mediator of the new covenant" (Heb 9:15, 12:15) even by his own atoning "blood of the new covenant" that is then specifically related to the meaning and practice of the Eucharistic meal in the new covenant church (Luke 22:20, 1Cor.11:25). But like in the Old Covenant context and the gospel, beyond even the explicit references to "covenant" in the New Testament, we discern as well the use of "law" (nomos) as again synonymous with "covenant" throughout. Likewise, the "book of the law," as often used by the prophets in reference to the "book of the covenant" (Josh 24:26, Neh. 8:8, 18, etc) is perfectly aligned with Paul's use of the same in reference to the old covenant (Rom. 7:22, 25, 1Cor.9: 21).

Conclusion: The Subsequent Need for a "Covenant" Hermeneutic

Everyone agrees that all interpretation of scripture should be sensitive to the context in which a given passage of scripture appears. Our point is that every passage of scripture falls into some covenantal context as well as some historical or cultural or linguistic context. Thus, the "meaning" of any passage of scripture is conditioned by our overall understanding of the various covenants and their relations to one another. All of His laws are given in some covenantal context, and that context must be considered as part of the interpreter's duty. (T. David Gordon

3. Advantages of Covenantal Hermeneutic: The Preservation of Objectifying Grace!

1. Guards against moralizing certain passages through the use of false analogies between the biblical narrative and contemporary life even to the detriment of the fuller theological significance.
2. Guards against a theology of "proof-texting."
3. Can recognize both the significance of certain passages within its own redemptive context and in the present redemptive context whereby the biblical-theological understanding of scripture is made relevant to us.
4. Guards against emotionalism and subjectivistic interpretations whereby the normative (governing) value of Biblical revelation is retained to the interpreter in any practical sense. (We are still the listeners.)
5. Provides a proper hermeneutic from which to derived "biblical ethics."

Summary:

A redemptive historical orientation is not some kind of dispensable exegetical luxury. At stake is nothing less than the right way of interpreting Scripture. At issue here is simply the fundamental principle that the text is to be interpreted in the light of its context. In the case of Scripture, the redemptive-historical structure or framework established by Scripture itself is the contextual factor having the broadest bearing on a given text. (Gaffin, p.xxii)

C. Making the Bible Usable: A Basic Method Summarized