

Interpreting the Bible

Introduction: The Crisis of Meaning

What are the greatest challenges you face in trying to understand the Bible? What have you found helpful in overcoming these challenges?

Why a class on Bible Interpretation?

1. For your love of God and His Word

- “My soul longs for your salvation; I hope in your word” Ps. 119:81
- “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” Ps. 119:97
- “How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth” Ps. 119:103
- “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” John 5:39

2. To examine the teachings of our day

- “The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. [11] Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. [12] Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.” Acts 17:10–12
- WLC 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 those who would teach (and for the sake of those being taught)

- 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 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.
- *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

The Crisis in Bible Interpretation

1. Individualism

What happens in an inductive Bible study when the leader asks the group, "What do you think this passage means?"

What are the implications of coming up with multiple interpretations 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." Scott Hafeman, GCTS

"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." James Hunter

How do these quotes compare to your experience? What does Hunter mean by "less demanding"?

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: Majority is Right

"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

"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

How have you witnessed this trend? What are examples? What are the dangers?

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. All I Need Is My Bible: Anti-Intellectual

The problem of meaning is compounded by an increased skepticism toward the authority, and suspicious of are suspicious of an interpretation that comes from tradition.

The revivalist of the Second Great Awakening... argued (as the secularists had a century earlier) that God's 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.

Rick Lints

What is good about this skepticism of authorities? What are the dangers?

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 exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;

Understanding How God Communicates

The crisis has become exaggerated because we fail to understand how God communicates to us. We have the Bible, but struggle to understand God's role in the process. To put it succinctly, what exactly is inspired?

What Exactly is Inspired?

1. **Liberal Protestant View:** The Biblical author is inspired (not his words). 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.

*What kind of questions will you ask when studying the Bible if you took this view?

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.

What distinguishes the false prophets is precisely that they 'prophecy out of their own heart' (Ezek. 13:2-17)

*What kind of questions will you ask when studying the Bible if you took this view?

3. **Classic Evangelical View:** The words themselves are inspired.

2 Timothy 3:15-17 ESV

[15] and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. [16] All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

What it says of Scripture is, not that it is 'breathed into by God' or is the product of the Divine 'inbreathing' into its human authors, but that it is breathed out by God...the Scriptures are a Divine product...No term could have been chosen, however, which would have more emphatically asserted the Divine production of Scripture that that which is here employed."

B.B. Warfield

*What kind of questions will you ask when studying the Bible if you took this view?

Summary: Both the Liberal and Neo-Orthodox views are subjective. 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*. It is vital to distinguish *meaning* and *significance* so that we preserve the text's place of governing us, rather than we governing it.

A good maxim is one interpretation many legitimate applications. What sorts of questions or concerns does that maxim raise for you?

Note: We may never plumb the full depths and implications of that one meaning, but that is not the same as saying that the text has multiple meanings. The tools you use and the questions you ask of the Bible will be dramatically different if you understand that meaning is found in the text.

*According to this view, can there be wrong interpretations? What is our responsibility when we encounter conflicting interpretations of the same passage? How do we respond in love and Christian unity when differences arise?

One Author/One Story: One Meaning

A. One Author/One Story

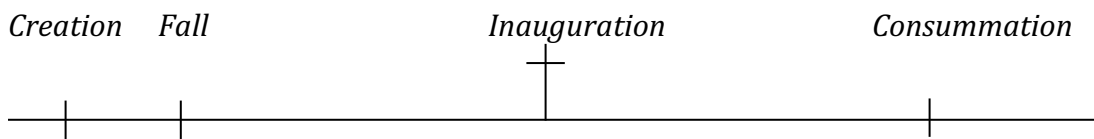
1. Ultimately the author of all Scripture is God.

2. The **one story** from Genesis to Revelation involves God’s plan of salvation. Redemptive-history is the method of tracing this unfolding plan from seed to full bloom.
3. **Yet diversity**: individual books have their own human author and particular context. A Literary Approach emphasizes that we must hear the intended voice of the original author.

B. The One Story is the Story of Jesus

1. According to Peter in Acts 2:14f and Paul in Acts 13, Hebrews 1)

And he said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! [26] Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” [27] And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. Luke 24:25–27
2. Implications: All scripture must point to Jesus. Jesus is at the center of God’s story, so all parts connect to him. He was always the plan of salvation.



3. The story of the plan of redemption unfolds in more and more detail throughout the Bible. It is doesn’t become a different story, but the subject gets clearer and clearer.

“It is sometimes contended that the assumption of progress in revelation excludes its absolute perfection at all stages. This would actually be so if the progress were non-organic. The organic progress is from seed-form to the attainment of full growth; yet we do not say that in the qualitative sense the seed is less perfect than the tree.”
Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*

IV. Two Aids to Interpretation

We still have the problem of multiple interpretations. How can we discern the true interpretation of a passage?

1. The Role of the Holy Spirit in Interpretation:

*Doesn’t the Holy Spirit show us the right interpretation?

What the Spirit Does and Does Not Do in Interpretation: Illumination vs. Revelation

A. **Illumination**: “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” WCF 1.6

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.*

1. The Spirit destroys that enmity between rebellious creatures and God, which is the fundamental problem with interpretation, yet not completely.

2. The Spirit enables us to *receive* the truths of God

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. Rom. 8:5-8

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. 1 Cor. 2:9-15

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

B. Revelation: "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. WCF 1

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

What may we 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. The Role of the Church in Biblical Interpretation:

Since the Reformation was about the right of individuals to read and interpret the Bible, do we need the church or "authorized interpretations"?

A. What the Church Does and Does Not Do in Interpretation:

1) It Does not add to the revelation in scripture.

2) It 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"

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.

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

*Doesn't the priesthood of all believers mean that all Christians are "ministers" so as to be able to understand and even teach the scripture without theological training?

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 function in the church or world.

Interpretation and Tradition: Confessional Theology

1) *The Need*

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.

Rick Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*

2) *The Answer: Aid in Interpretation from Christians throughout history*

Creeds: A "creed" is any summary and/or clarification used as a consensus statement concerning communal beliefs. (The word "Creed" is derived from the Latin word "belief.") Therefore, a Christian creed is a summation of the general teachings of the Old and New Testament Scriptures categorized into themes and topics of relevance to the Christian faith and practice 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.*

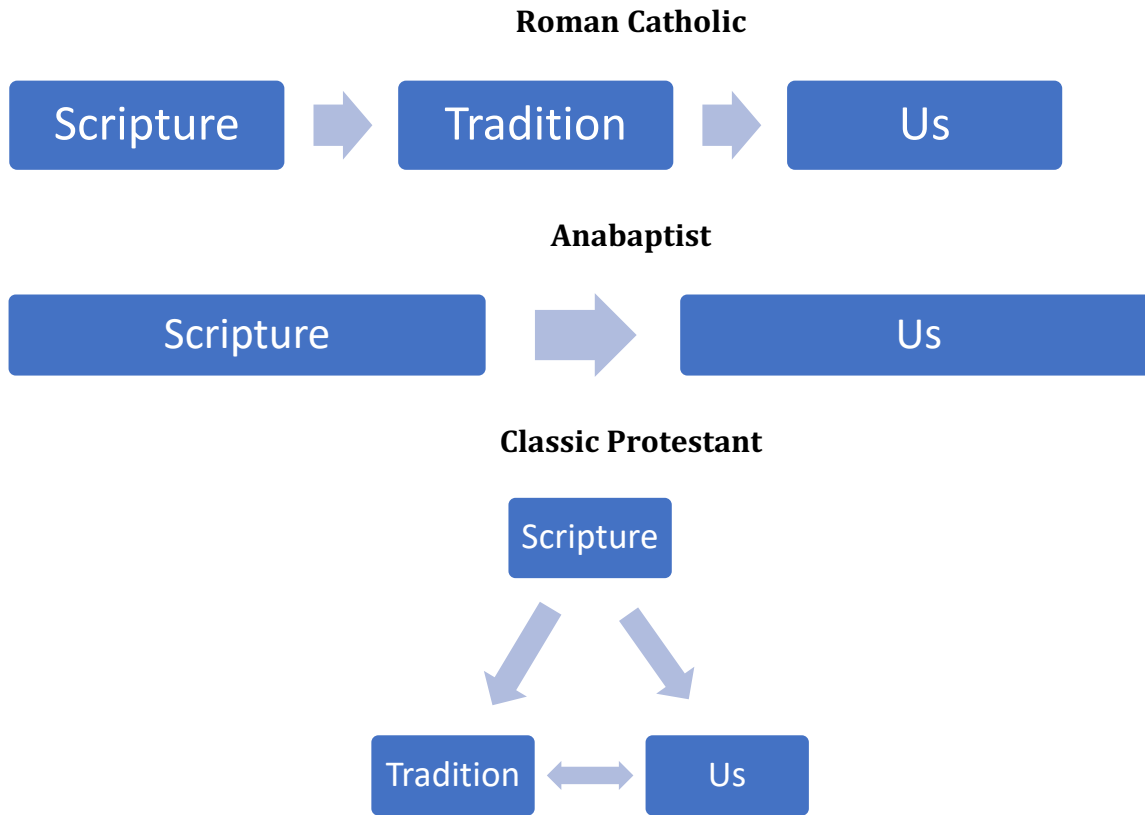
2 Thess.2:15, *So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by our letter.*

There are Generally 3 Options In How To Interpret the Bible:

- 1) **Read it Individually:** Susceptible to MY own cultural and sinful bias.
 - 1 Tim. 4:16 *Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.*
- 2) **Read it within my particular and local community:** Susceptible to OUR cultural and sinful biases.
 - 1Tim. 3:15 *if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.*
- 3) **Read it Confessionally WITH the community of faith of every age and place:** Recognizing this is fallible but with the added advantage of a consensus that transcends the bias of a particular time and/or culture.
 - **2Th. 3:6** *Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the **tradition** that you received from us.*
 - **1Cor. 11:2** *Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the **traditions** even as I delivered them to you.*

- **Gal. 1:14** And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the **traditions** of my fathers. **2Th. 2:15** So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the **traditions** that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

Three Options for Use of Tradition in Interpretation Illustrated:



Benefits of Reading Scripture within a Tradition:

- To Help Guard Against The Possibility of Misinformed Zeal

they have a zeal for God but not according to knowledge. **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.

- As A Basis for Christian Unity

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.

- For Evaluating True From False Teaching

2John 1:10 Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; **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, **1 Tim. 6:3**, Whoever teaches otherwise and does not agree with the healthy words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that is in accordance with godliness... **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.

- Essential To Healthy And Grounded Christian Spirituality

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 healthy teaching that you have followed.

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.

That Being Said... Confessions and Creeds ought never to supplant the diligent exegesis and study of God's word as the only rule of faith and practice—even though not tasked with the vocation of exegesis per se, even the lay person who spends the majority of their lives in common grace vocations are required to hold their pastors/churches accountable to showing them the teachings FROM THE SCRIPTURE!

Acts 2:42 And they devoted themselves to the **apostles' teaching** and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 17:10-12 That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Berea; 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.