

Interpreting the Bible

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The Bible is the Word of God

I believe the Bible is the Word of God. In my life and in countless other people's lives over the centuries, the Bible has consistently been used by the Holy Spirit to bring about a deeper and more meaningful understanding of God and relationship with Him through Jesus Christ. God speaks through the Bible!

The Bible has proved to be relevant in every historical period and in every culture. Digging deep into the Bible is an essential part of living an effective Christian life. It is always inspirational and encouraging for our spiritual development. There is always more you can learn from the Bible: its riches are never-ending! But it has to be interpreted in a valid way if we are to experience the full measure of these riches!

- The Bible was written by lots of different authors (inspired by the Holy Spirit).
- It was written in many different styles (history, poetry, prophecy, letters, genealogy, laws, songs, proverbs, oracles, stories, parables, apocalypse).
- It was written at specific times in many different cultures.
- It was written for specific purposes.

This means we must interpret different parts of the Bible in different ways so we can hear God's Word to us and so it can be a *'lamp to our feet and a light to our path'*. Psalm 119:105.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16.

Exegesis and hermeneutics

When interpreting the Bible there are two major aspects to consider:

- What was its meaning when it was written? (exegesis)
- What is its meaning for us today? (hermeneutics)

So, if we are to interpret the Bible accurately we must be involved in both exegesis and hermeneutics.

This means we will be asking questions like:

Exegesis What did it mean when it was originally written?
 What was the message the original author was intending to convey?
 What was the message the readers/recipients would take from it?
 What was the Word of God to the original readers/recipients in their situation?

Hermeneutics What does it mean to us today?
 What is relevant for us in our situation?
 What is the Word of God for us today?

Questions about the trustworthiness, infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible must be asked at the exegetical level (relating to the original text in its original context and with its original purpose) not at the hermeneutical level (as it relates to us today). Otherwise the questions/answers are affected by our many and varied cultural differences and interpretations.

Factors affecting our interpretation of the Bible.

- God gave His Word in ordinary human language (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic – not English!), through real people, in real settings, for specific purposes, at different times, with different styles, in different ways, speaking into particular situations.
- Originally information in most of the books in the Bible was created and passed down orally. It was written down many years later and then, later still, compiled into books and recognised as the canon of scripture. (No tape recorders, paper, or photocopiers back then!). Scribes had to copy and translate the written manuscripts by hand and this was done with varying degrees of accuracy.
- Most of our interpretation of the Bible is based on reading and analysis of written English translations. The meaning in these is hard to maintain when the original Hebrew /Greek/Aramaic words are translated into various other languages eg. Latin, and then translated into English.
- Our interpretation of the Bible is always affected by tradition.
- The Gospel writers recorded traditions from the Old Testament eg. Jesus' use of the term 'Kingdom of God', the genealogies, and the meaning of the events of the Passover. When they wrote down their Gospels they used their memory of the events (if they were present) and whatever records were available. Matthew, Mark and John were present for some of Jesus' ministry but Luke based his account on other people's descriptions. John's Gospel was written 60 years after the events he described and reflects the thinking and traditions that had developed over that time. The words he used are more likely to be the meaning or understanding that had developed rather than verbatim 'tape recordings' of what had been said. That's why John's Gospel is different to the others. It emphasizes the important aspects of Jesus' ministry that had come to be central for an understanding of what it means to be a Christian.
- Traditional understandings and interpretations were given authority very early in the Church's life once the Canon of Scripture was recognised eg. through the Creeds. The doctrine of the trinity, for example, was recognised pretty much from the beginning of the Church. Doctrines like this that have stood the test of time have proven and established authority.
- Gradually Church traditions (as compared to Biblical interpretations) became more authoritative especially in the Roman Catholic Church. eg. the infallibility of the Pope, purgatory, priestly authority etc.
- Later traditions (eg. Reformed, Evangelical, Anglican, Pentecostal) and denominations within these traditions tended to start because God revealed a new truth or because a group rebelled against the prevailing doctrines eg. Presbyterian (elders), Baptist (baptism).
- We all have our own personal traditions based on our spiritual life/journeys/backgrounds/Church involvement/experiences etc. Also we all live in a cultural environment that strongly influences our approach to life. The way we 'do church', for example, is a strongly held tradition, but would be quite different if we were part of another church, especially if it was in a different country or culture.

These traditions are part of what we believe, and who we are. They give us a background understanding of the Christian faith upon which our lives are built. Knowingly or unknowingly we all defend these traditions strongly (whether or not they are based on good interpretation of the Bible!). Sometimes our defense of our traditional understandings can be so strong that we are not open to God speaking to us from His Word, or by His Spirit.

As a result it is never possible to do 'pure' exegesis (as we will always be interpreting from our traditional perspectives). In addition we are always selective when interpreting the Bible hermeneutically. We can't help it!! (We can do this innocently or to justify a pre-determined position). And that's why there are so many interpretations of the Bible, with Christians believing different things!

This shouldn't stop us reading and studying the Bible, though. Development of our understanding of God, His Word and His ways is a life-long journey. Keep learning! Keep growing! Keep on spending quality time in God's Word.

Nothing else will give you a *'lamp to your feet and a light to your path'*. Psalm 119:105.

Interpreting the Epistles

Most of our doctrine comes from the epistles so it is vital that we interpret them correctly.

Read the epistles! The Holy Spirit can take any verse and make it 'come alive' for you. He can speak to you from the most unlikely verses and bring relevant truth into your life. Always be open to the Holy Spirit as you are reading the epistles (and any other part of the Bible for that matter!).



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2 Timothy 3:16

Here are some principles that may help you interpret the epistles as you seek to understand God, receive His Word, and live out your life as a Christian.

- **Recognise that the epistles were all written in the 1st century from the context and culture of the author to the context and culture of the recipients.**

(When we read an epistle it's a bit like listening to someone making a telephone call 2000 years ago when we are only hearing one side of the conversation).

- **Try to understand the original setting, the author's background, the recipient's situation, and the cultural context.**
- **Then try to understand the author's purpose for writing and the particular issues, concerns or problems he was addressing.**
- **Recognise that there are different types of epistles and read them accordingly:**
 - letters which were written for specific people, churches or situations eg. most of Paul's letters; Philemon; 2, 3 John..
 - epistles intended for public reading with wide application. eg. Romans; 1 Peter.
 - books/homilies/tracts eg. Hebrews; James written to share specific messages.

This background information can easily be obtained from commentaries, study Bibles and Bible dictionaries.

- **Ask questions related to the whole epistle and its sub-sections:**

What was the message the author intended?

What was the message the recipients received?

What was the word of God to them in their situation? and then....

What is the Word of God for us in our situation?

(Most of the time we go straight to this step!).

- **Recognise that every part of the epistle is culturally conditioned and may have a quite different meaning and application for us today.**
 - Some parts belong in the past and are not relevant to us.
We tend to overlook or ignore these.
 - Some parts are relevant for our situation but belong in the past and are culturally different from our situation.
We tend to use them as examples, legalize them, make them into 'principles', or ignore them depending on how they affect us. This is where Christians can make significant errors of interpretation, especially when we create 'laws' or codes of conduct that are quite different from what the author intended in the original context.
 - Some parts have ongoing human application and are relevant for anyone, anywhere, anytime.
We tend to use them as examples, legalize them, make them into 'principles', create codes of conduct or ignore them depending on how they affect us.

- **Try to understand the cultural background and context and set everything within that context.**

Ask questions like:

What was the author's cultural situation?

What was the receiver's cultural situation?

What was the context: historically, culturally, for the author, for the recipients?

What was the concern that the author was addressing? eg. *Judaistic rituals; paganism; divisions in the Church; wrong thinking or doctrine; wrong behaviour; the Lordship of Christ; Gnostic philosophies; selfishness; legalism; defense of apostolic credentials; second coming of Christ; immaturity; steadfastness under persecution; leadership; church order; false teachers; assurance.*

What were the cultural issues being addressed?

Is the historical/cultural situation equivalent to ours?

What was the original purpose? *moral/non-moral; theological/non-theological; providing information; correction of a situation; establishing doctrine; encouragement; pastoral.....*

Is the message specifically for the receivers, or does it have universal application then, and/or now?

Is it a general principle applying at all times in all cultures, or does it only apply in the original situation?

Is it a custom?

Is it valid to extend its application from the original context into our context?

Would the author be surprised by what we are getting out of it?

Is it a universal requirement that must be obeyed then, and/or now?

Is it a story, example, analogy that invites interpretation and differences in interpretation?

Is it the only reference to it in the Bible? Is it backed up in other parts of the Bible in different ways?

Are we creating a deeper meaning than what the author intended. (*A sensus plenior*: i.e. a 'canon within the Canon').

Is our interpretation what the author intended?

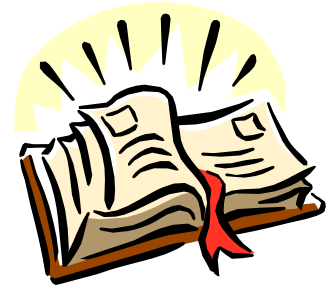
Is our interpretation what God intended?

What does the rest of the Bible say about it?

How is it balanced by other scriptures or parts of the Bible?

Are we imposing a construction of our own on it and then trying to make it fit?

What agendas are we bringing to it?



Help with all of these questions should all be covered in a detailed commentary on an epistle. Most commentaries concentrate on exegesis (i.e. answering many of the above questions) but some are more lightweight and concern themselves more with hermeneutics.

- **Recognise the personal nature of the epistle.**

It was written by someone as a letter to a person or group. It wasn't written to or for us!

- **Recognise the eschatological nature of the epistles, and of the New Testament Church.**

The early Christians were expecting Jesus to return at any time. This underlies all aspects of the life of the early Church and is part of the perspective from which the epistles were written and received. Because more than 2000 years have passed without Jesus returning we have lost the immediacy of this aspect and can easily overlook it when we read and interpret the epistles.

As we read the epistles the Holy Spirit makes them come alive: speaking to us via a *rhema*.(revelation).

As we study the epistles we make hermeneutic interpretations (hopefully based on solid exegesis so that the interpretations are valid and justified!). On this we base our thinking, doctrine and behaviour. We then say (confidently???) "This is what I believe God is saying". "This is God's Word for this situation".

Throughout history the epistles have had an enormous effect on human life. Sometimes there has been bad interpretation which has had significant negative consequences eg. for women, but mostly, the epistles have been the major way by which God has given His Word so Christians in any society, and at any time can live God's way. God's Word in the epistles has proven to be authentic, reliable, practical and relevant.

Exercises

1. We say the Bible is the Word of God. What does this mean to you?
2. How do you approach the different styles in the Bible? (History, poetry, prophecy, letters, genealogy, laws, songs, proverbs, oracles, stories, parables, apocalypse etc.).

How does this relate to 2 Timothy 3:16?

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

3. The words of Jesus were spoken in Aramaic; remembered, passed down or explained from memory; written in Greek years later (60 years for John's gospel); and then translated into English in our current versions of the Bible. Does this mean we should take the English words literally?
4. What does 'build your life on the sand/rock' mean to you? What would it have meant to those who heard Jesus speaking about it? Matthew 7:24-28.
5. Read 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. Do an exegesis to clarify what Paul was saying; his purpose; the situation, and what the recipients would have got from it. Is this a message for the Church in Corinth that belongs in the past with no relevance for us? Is it relevant for us, but culturally different? Does it have ongoing human application and is relevant for anyone, anywhere, anytime? If so, how should we behave in response?
6. Create an exegetical background for each book in the New Testament, (and ultimately for each book in the Bible). Include aspects such as: author, recipients, date, historical/cultural context, theme, purpose, key verse, major messages, outline. Include this in your Bible with each book and read it before you read the book or do any hermeneutical application.
7. Do an exegetical study of John 1:1 to help you understand why John's Gospel was written, the cultural context and meaning of the 'Word', and why John's Gospel is so different to the other Gospels.
8. Do an exegetical study of a great theme where we have strongly held traditions.
eg. The Lord's Supper (based on Matthew 26:26-28, Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-20 1 Corinthians 8-11).
9. Identify the traditions that affect the way you go about interpreting Scripture. Include:
 - cultural understandings based on the culture you live in today.
 - the situations in which you were born, grew up, became a Christian, grew as a Christian, and are now in. eg. Churches you have been part of and their traditions, teaching you have received, books that have been influential in your life, experiences you have had, positions you hold, doctrines you believe,



Example of exegesis

Exegesis of 1 Corinthians 8 – 11.

In I Corinthians Paul deals with a number of significant issues that had arisen in the Corinthian Church. One of these was relating to 'food offered to idols' and this is addressed in Chapters 8-11. (This issue is also addressed in many other areas in the New Testament).

Cultic meals were the norm as part of worship in the pagan temples. They took place in three stages: preparation-sacrifice-feast. The offering was burned before the gods, placed on the table, then eaten. After Paul left Corinth the Corinthians returned to eating these meals (which had been part of their normal life till they became Christians) and began justifying why this was OK.

In Chapters 8-10 Paul addresses both their attitude and their argument, based on his position as their apostle.

8: 1-13 The Christian life is based on love, not false knowledge, 'freedoms' or laws. Their so-called 'freedom' to partake in the cultic meals is actually harming other weaker brothers.

9: 1-13 Paul defends his apostleship and right to speak to them on this matter. He explains that he also has freedom, but uses this to win others for Christ.

10: 1 - 11: 1 Paul explains there is a danger in partaking in the cultic meals (based on Old Testament examples) because the idols are powerful. He prohibits them from attending the cultic meals as this is really worshipping demons. They had argued that eating idol food was OK and couldn't affect the Christian life, as there was only one God. He explains the true nature of idolatry and contrasts this with the one body they are part of: the Body of Christ. He warns them that taking the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper will not protect them against disobedience relating to worship of idols.

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too. You cannot have a part of the Lord's table and the table of demons. v21.

He then explains that they can buy and eat the food from the marketplace, but should abstain if someone points out that it has temple cultic origins.

Paul then addresses abuses that had arisen in the Corinthian Church:

11: 2-16 The place of women (and men) in worship.

In their new 'spirituality' they were disregarding traditional distinctions between the sexes.

11: 17-34 The Lord's Supper

By their selfishness they were hurting the One who had brought them into fellowship, and hurting each other. They were losing the meaning of the food and thus of the fellowship meal as well (compared to us who have kept the food but totally lost the meaning of the meal). Paul brings them back to the institution of the Lord's Supper, refocusing them on Jesus: *This do in remembrance of Me*. They eat in fellowship (*koinonia* – fellowship, communion, participation, sharing) now, focusing on Christ's death which had brought them life, and do so as an eschatological people awaiting His return. To continue this abuse (and not *discern the Body*) puts them under the same condemnation as those who crucified Christ in the first place.

They had also allowed social distinctions to affect the unity of the Body of Christ. The host of a Passover meal and others of his class would eat in the triclinium (small dining room) while others of lower status ate in the atrium (courtyard). (Hence v 18-22, 29, 30). By carrying these social distinctions over into the Church they were effectively destroying it, and especially hurting the poor.

So they should be focusing on each others' needs, not their own selfish needs or social distinctions: recognising they are one body in Christ.

Somehow, our questions about confirmation, sacraments, ways of and eligibility for partaking in communion etc. seem rather irrelevant!

