

Biblical Interpretation In The Life Of The Church

A Summary Statement

Part 1: Principles of Biblical Interpretation

C. Interpreting the Bible

The *ultimate goal* in interpretation is to allow the Bible to speak its own message with a view to worship and obedience. In many cases what a passage says is clear. Then, the task of interpretation is concerned with discerning at what points the message touches life. However, in some cases the meaning of the passage must first be determined by careful study.

Letting the Bible speak for itself under the *guidance of the Spirit* is not at all that easy. Tendencies to impose our ideas and biases need to be set aside. For example, middle-class North Americans find it easy to disregard the perspective of any other racial, cultural, or economic view of the Scriptures. Although we will always read and study the Bible from our own point of view, knowing interpretations of others will aid responsible interpretation. While it is important, therefore, to both seek the guidance of the Spirit and consider insights of others, personal Bible study will make use of the following sound methods:

1. Observe carefully what the text says.

This approach to the Bible study is known as the *inductive method* of Bible study. Essentially this means paying careful attention to both the literary structure and context of a passage. This approach involves looking at words, sentences, paragraphs, and larger blocks of material, and asking questions such as who? what? where? when? and why? It means noticing recurring themes, causes and effects and relationships within the passage, as well as similarities and differences from other passages of the Bible. This approach to the Bible allows the conclusions to grow out of the text.

2. Be sensitive to different literary forms.

Because the Bible is made up of a variety of *literary forms*, responsible interpretation must respect the differences between narrative, parable, poetry, and discourse. Careful study will recognize the Bible's use of symbolism and imagery, striving to get the basic message without making it say more or less than it was intended to say. As various literary forms and images are understood, the puzzling features of the Bible often begin to make sense (as in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation). Thus, the Bible is seen as a living document bound up with the people of God and, as such, it is the message of God to and through His people.

3. Study the historical and cultural contexts of the passage.

It is necessary for us to take seriously the historical context of any given passage and the Bible as a whole. God revealed Himself in history to a particular people over a period of many centuries. The written Word reflects the process of God's revelation of himself. Hence, faithful interpretation requires careful consideration of the historical context of any given passage. Much misinterpretation has resulted from disregard for the historical context of the passage being interpreted. Study of the Bible is always a study of a people. It is necessary therefore to enter the world of the Hebrew people and the people of the early church. This includes understanding their ways of thinking, their cultural patterns, and their distinctiveness amid the surrounding cultures and nations.

When we do that we can expect to experience a degree of cultural shock, just as we experience when we cross cultural barriers today. The ability to cross such barriers is one of the callings of the Christian, both to understand the Bible and to communicate it to other cultures of the present day. In order to understand the cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts of a given Scripture, the various *tools of biblical criticism* may be helpful. (See the discussion on biblical criticism in Part II, Section B and on social sciences, Part II, C)

4. Make wise use of various translations

In addition to taking seriously the cultural context of the Bible we must understand *the language itself*. Today we read the Bible in our native language. The Bible, however, was written mostly in Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament). In recent years many translations and paraphrases of the Bible have become available. These attempt to use contemporary English and some take account of better knowledge of ancient languages and manuscripts. A comparison of alternate

renderings of a passage may lead to a clearer understanding of the biblical text. A knowledge of the biblical languages is necessary to evaluate the different translations of a verse. In general, versions made by committees (such as *KJV, ASV, RSV, NEB, NIV, NASB, JB, TEV – Good News Bible*) are more accurate and reliable than are translations and paraphrases made by individuals (such as *Weymouth, Phillips, The Living Bible*). Most paraphrases are so free that they are unreliable for serious Bible study. The use of a variety of translations by the congregation probably means that worship aids are needed (such as the Scripture texts printed in *The Mennonite Hymnal*). It would seem good to choose a committee-produced version for memory work and curriculum materials.

5. Consider how the text has been interpreted by others.

The endeavors of the early church, the medieval church, the Reformers, and contemporary Christians to understand the Bible will be instructive to us. Bible commentaries and Bible dictionaries can be valuable resources. A study of how the New Testament interpreted the Old Testament will also be helpful. As Mennonites, the impact of the biblical message upon the Anabaptists will be crucial to our own understandings. (See Section D below.) By considering how other Christians throughout history have interpreted the Bible, we may be able to understand it more clearly.

6. Consider the message of the Bible as a whole.

One of the major errors in biblical interpretations is failure to relate a given passage of Scripture to the overall message of Scripture. It is therefore necessary to take seriously the message of the Bible as a whole and compare Scripture with Scripture. This requires acquaintance with the unfolding drama of the Bible, its major themes, and how the various themes are related and integrated into a whole. The meaning of any part cannot be arrived at apart from the message of the whole. The theological views discussed in Section D below are crucial points in understanding how the entire Bible fits together.

7. Meditate upon the Word in the spirit of prayer.

As we learn what the passage says and means, we should meditate upon its message. We should ask ourselves: In what way does this Scripture speak to my life and our lives? How does it instruct me and my fellow believers? How does it teach, correct, reprove, and train in righteousness? (2 Tim. 3:15-17). Some specific topics of the Bible may not apply directly to us today, although they may be pertinent to Christians in other cultures; examples are circumcision, eating meat offered to idols, and the Christian's relation to the ceremonial practices in the Old Testament. However, the manner in which God's people of the New Testament worked through these issues will be instructive to us today.

8. Listen for the guidance of the Spirit, individually and congregationally.

The Spirit gives life to the written Word. The spirit uses the Word to convict us of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn. 16:7-11). The Spirit likewise leads us into the truth, guiding our perception of the written words (Jn. 16:13). As new insights and convictions come through personal study, we should share and test them with other Christian brothers and sisters who are listening to the Spirit. The experiences of the Spirit, the interpretation of the Word, and the understanding of the church should agree.

9. Respond obediently to the Bible's message.

Interpretation of the Bible must include our own response to its message. The response may be praise or repentance, thanksgiving or confession, examination of inner attitudes or restitution to one wronged. The Scripture speaks to us only if we are open to its message. Sin in our lives, such as malice toward other people, hinders us from wanting to know and hear the scripture's message (1 Jn. 2:4-6; Jn. 8:31 IT.; cf. Mt. 5:22,23). Lack of love and commitment to one another will also hinder believers in their effort to arrive at unity in their understanding of the Bible. Through faithful response to the Word, we discover the power of the biblical message to upbuild the interpreting community – “to break and to heal, to wound and to cure.”