

Interpretation

The word ‘interpretation’ has developed a bad reputation in the church. Oftentimes when you hear the word, it is used negatively or pejoratively. You might hear people say, “Do not interpret the passage to me, just read it.” Or sometimes you will hear, in the midst of a statement about Scripture that people do not like, “That is just your interpretation.” That first statement implies that the Bible does not require interpretation. The second assumes that all interpretations are equally valid.

As for the first, I think we need to recognize that everyone is engaged in many acts of interpretation every day. You interpret speech, attitude, body language, clothing style, hand gestures, and facial expressions among many other things. The word ‘interpretation’ only refers to the act of discerning the meaning of sensory stimuli. Human beings make tens of thousands of interpretations every day. Everything that comes into our field of vision, touch, smell, taste, or hearing is interpreted. Now while all things must be interpreted, reading is especially interpretive in nature and that includes reading the Bible. If we read the Bible, we will interpret. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart say in their book, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*, “We invariably bring to the text all that we are with all our experiences, culture, and prior understandings of words and ideas. Sometimes what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray, or else causes us to read all kinds of foreign ideas into the text.” They go on to say that we can interpret well or we can interpret poorly, but we will and must interpret. Therefore we must use principles that will ensure that we will interpret God’s Word faithfully.

What about the charge that all interpretations are equal? Is it possible that one person’s interpretation of a text is superior to another’s? It is somewhat natural that we would have different interpretations of things. In order to understand, make sense of, and determine the meaning of things, we apply our accumulated experience and knowledge to every new experience. We understand the new thing by comparing it to, and analyzing it in terms of, the old things, those things we already know. The human mind, after all, is not a clean slate that the Bible writes its message upon. When we read, we engage the material through the matrix of our prior knowledge, our familiarity with the text, our expectations about the text, and our traditions—whether those be confessional, ethnic, or political. So as no two people have had exactly the same lists of experiences, it is only natural that no two people see all of reality in exactly the same way. But are all interpretations equally valid? In things pertaining to the content and message of the Bible, many people say ‘yes.’ Because human beings interpret realities according to different sets of experiences, some have suggested that all interpretations are equally valid, or equally true.

The assumption of that argument is that people are bound to their contexts and they interpret reality through them. That is an inescapable reality. The problem, however, is that the relativity of personal contexts and perspectives is used as the sole norm for interpretation and knowledge. It is very common today to allege that relativism is a necessary aspect of our established relativity and that interpreters are subject to their experiences. This would mean that all truth claims are subjective. This is the thinking of postmodernism. In postmodernism, one’s interpretation of a reality is true for that person, and the only thing that can falsify that interpretation is if it fails to have a utilitarian or existential value for the one holding it. Another way we can get at this is to say that postmodern views of truth do not believe that there is a truth out there, external to the knower. Rather, truth is internal; it is even called an activity of the knower. We make truth; we make our truth. But something very close to postmodernism has been a reality for many years in evangelical circles. Postmodernism should not shock us; postmodernism should not appear to us as being completely new. In evangelical circles we commonly hear the following introduction to an interpretation of Scripture: “What this text means to me is...” It is the very thing that the Roman Catholic Church warned against in the early 16th century when Protestants broke away from

the mother church. If there is no teaching majesterium, then every man will become his own interpreter. There will become as many churches as there are people reading Scripture and meaning and truth will become utterly individualized, utterly superfluous.

My question is this: Would we allow such relativism in other realms of human knowledge? Would we allow the same kind of relativism in other areas of thought that we evangelicals seem to prize in our reading of Scripture? If I sell you my old motorcycle for \$250, can I take that \$250 check down to the bank and demand \$2500 because I choose to interpret \$250 for \$2500? That is what your check means to me. But wait a minute; the bank teller has her own interpretation of the check. She reads the check as an instruction to empty out your account and give all of the money to me. There seems to be a problem with making individual experience the arbiter of reality. Each one of us has our own interpretation. If we wish to affirm that such an approach to the Bible is okay, if we want to say that all interpretation is equally true, then we must also be willing to accept the other side of the equation: all interpretations of the text are equally false. If the Bible says everything, it is not saying anything. It is merely an occasion for our assigning the meaning. Accepting multiple interpretations of the text as valid is to read the Bible in such a way that it is making no truth claims at all. It is to say the Bible has nothing to do with reality and again its only purpose is to offer us food for thought.

Where interpretations of the text are contradictory, only one can be right. The fact is, they may all be false, but only one can be correct. If you think about it, the argument that says all interpretations of the Bible are equally valid ultimately comes from skepticism of the Bible's ability to make truth claims and about its ability to speak to reality. The Christian who accepts the Bible as the Word of God has the normative rule for faith and life. To confess the Bible as the Word of God is to confess that God reveals His will and His ways in the pages of Scripture. To suggest that we cannot know its contents, to say that our relativity makes us perceptual know-nothings, is to say that God is an incompetent or ineffective communicator. The problem of Scripture is not one of content, but interpretation, and it is not God's problem; it is our problem. The Word is not relative; we are.

I want to move to the issue of presupposition. Until very recently in the last century, interpreters of the Bible usually assumed that they were objective. People simply ignored the problem of presuppositions, at least their own presuppositions. Let me give you just one example. This example comes from the Reformed tradition. Francis Turretin, a 17th century Reformed theologian, was a major thinker in the history of the tradition. His work *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* is still in print and it was a standard textbook at places like Princeton Seminary into the late 19th century. Turretin gives us a good example of the principle of presumed objectivity and an over-extended use of the principle of clarity. Turretin assumed that the Bible was a completely perspicuous and rational book. Remember, 'perspicuous' means clear. According to him, a proper employment of reason should elicit the proper meaning of the text. Yet Turretin also learned from experience that Christians do not all share the same interpretation of every text. How can you come to this phenomenon? How is it possible that Christians can come to improper exegetical conclusions if the Bible is completely clear and rational? How is it that we do not agree? First of all, he said that we might assume that people lack sufficient knowledge about the text, either at a linguistic or historical level, so what we need to do is give them more information, more knowledge, and then they will be able to see what the text clearly means. The second possibility, however, is that people, even those who possess sufficient knowledge, will remain intransigent against the clear meaning of the text. Their bias or biases will not allow them to see the truth. Throughout this discussion, Turretin assumed that he possessed the correct understanding of the text. He assumed that he was not biased. It is often this way: it is the other person who either lacks sufficient knowledge or a proper attitude. Turretin did not even consider the fact that he might be biased. And this attitude has been the standard fare in Christian circles, both liberal and conservative. Liberals assume that we

conservatives are confused, and that they are objective. We conservatives assume our own objectivity and we assume that liberals have sold out to modern culture.

The solution, of course, is that we must recognize that we all have biases. We all have pre-understandings, commitments about the nature of things, about the nature of Scripture, and the nature of human response. All of these shape our understandings of the text. Our confessional backgrounds and education, our personal frame of reference, our life experiences, all of these inform how we read the text. We need to be aware of that and we need to be willing to test those biases in terms of Scripture itself. This means that as we read we should be asking ourselves whether we are exegeting or eisegeting. Exegesis is 'to read out,' to read what is there. Eisegesis is 'to read into,' to simply take our biases, presumptions, or presuppositions and read those into the text.

But let me emphasize here: it is not a matter of getting rid of all presuppositions. The fact is, it is impossible to divest ourselves of all assumptions. We all wear glasses of one kind or another in the interpretative process. We cannot do otherwise. The question is whether the glasses we wear have been changed by Scripture itself, whether they are true to the Bible, whether they have been polished by constant interaction with Scripture, and whether they can stand the test of Scripture. Presuppositions are not necessarily bad things; they are good things. It is simply a fallacy to think that the reader can operate without assumptions, theories, paradigms, presumptions, or even prejudices. If you remember our discussion about the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, that led to the conclusion that we should operate with a certain assumption, the assumption that the Bible is the faithfully inspired and inerrant Word of God. The task of an obedient reading of Scripture is to bring our assumptions under the critical gaze of Scripture itself. It is not to get rid of all assumptions but to have our assumptions opened up, to have them brought under the gaze of Scripture and its world picture. In that process of reading, the reader must be willing to have his or her preconceptions tempered, challenged, and where necessary, even crushed, exploded.

This process of bringing our worldview and our presumptions to Scripture for the purpose of testing, is sometimes called the 'hermeneutical circle.' The idea of the hermeneutical circle is simply this: one cannot read the Bible obediently unless one has the mind of Christ, but one cannot get the mind of Christ unless one reads the Bible. So the very function of Scripture is to give us the mind of Christ. We do not come to the Bible only after we have the perfect view of things. If we wanted to hold such a view, we would actually deny Scripture's function as a pair of spectacles. We know Christ only as He addresses us in Scripture. We come to know the mind of Christ, how to think redemptively about things, only through Scripture as well. The hermeneutical circle says we begin with Scripture where we are. When we first come to the Bible we come with all the baggage of our culture and our own sinfulness. I do not know about you, but I live in a secularist, humanistic, progressively scientific, egalitarian, individualistic, capitalistic, and materialistic world. Furthermore, I am convinced that the world revolves around me, and whatever I think is right *is* right, and whatever I do is good. We all start there, and we all come to Scripture with that attitude, and this means that Scripture will offend us, right from the very beginning. And we will feel the sting of that very offense as it breaks down our presuppositions, breaks down our allegiances, and starts redirecting them. But our coming to see the world as God would have us see it through Scripture, like the rest of our sanctification, is a life-long process. It happens a little bit at a time, each time I come back. That is why it is called the hermeneutical circle. There is breaking down and a redirecting, and with each bit of new insight there is a bit more clarity. I get my materialism critiqued; I get my sexism critiqued; I get my racism critiqued along with all my other -isms. I would suggest that, should we ever get completely comfortable with the Word of God, we stop listening because we all have some things that are going to need breaking down and redirecting in the rest of our lives. But again, in this breaking down of our presuppositions, we are not left without presuppositions;

we are not left without a framework. Therefore one way to address and begin to correct our faulty presuppositions about reality is to intentionally choose a good set of presuppositions.

Our concern is presuppositions about the nature of reading and the character of Scripture, which brings us to intentional presuppositions. We intentionally choose some presuppositions. For instance, there are two presuppositions about reading itself. First, reading is an act of interpretation. And second, reading is a dynamic activity in which the reader is actively engaged. Those may sound fairly pedestrian, but we live in a culture and a day that does not read, and in many ways, is losing the ability to read. We are now in a video world, and video is a passive medium. All it asks is that you show up. It does not ask that you engage; it does not ask that you talk back; all it asks is that you sit there. What we find in TV is a minimum of analysis, and exposition, and whatever is on television must be capable of being introduced and completely explicated by the time the next commercial rolls around. Unlike that medium, unlike video or television, reading is work. That can be a forbidden word in our culture today. Reading is work; it takes commitment, time, study, brain power, and quite frankly, some people are better at it than others. Reading is not egalitarian. Knowing how to read and reading well is more than simply knowing the vocabulary and something about the grammar and syntax. Unlike television, reading asks the reader to ask interpretive questions of the text. If one does not ask the questions, all the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and syntax in the world will not produce the results which reading is intended to produce.

When I taught at the college level, every semester I would have the same discussion with a student. A student would come into my office and say, “I read the whole text and I do not have an idea what it is saying. It made no sense to me.” Then I had the unpleasant duty of informing the student that, even though he graduated from high school and got perfect grades, he did not know how to read because he read texts with which he spent as little effort as possible, in the same way he read video—passively, coolly, just sitting there. Reading is active. It is about asking questions. What kind of text is this? That is a genre question. What is the author trying to say? That is an intention question. Where is the author going with this line of argument? That is a structure question. What kind of response does the author expect from me? That is a response question. So reading, interpreting what is being communicated, is at a very fundamental level an issue of asking questions.

Moving on specifically to presuppositions about reading Scripture, the first is that the Bible is the authoritative and reliable Word of God. We work from the faith. Being a good interpreter, a sound interpreter, means that we have a positive commitment to the text, rather than a negative, dismissive, or critical commitment. Since we have spent quite a bit of time with the issue of inspiration and inerrancy, I am not going to take it any further at this time, but we will develop the rest of these at much greater length.

The second presupposition is that the Bible has a particular content. God is saying something in Scripture, not nothing. After all, the Bible is a revelation, a revealing of what would otherwise be unknown. Agnosticism will not do. A legitimate response to the biblical text is never ignorance. The Bible is about something. It has a content, but the question is how we find that something, how we find that content. The answer is we must ask the right questions. Reading the Bible, like reading anything, is an active reality. The meaning of Scripture will not come up and smack us, nor does it just watch over us in the quiet moments in which we are utterly passive and open to the Spirit of God. We must seek to discover the truth that is there. I will say again that good interpretation is about asking the right questions, but of course the ultimate question we all want to get to is: What is God saying to me in this text? What does the text mean for us? What is God’s Word for us today in this text? Those are legitimate questions. Unfortunately, we usually cannot go straight to those questions. That was the mistake in the bank example I used earlier. You had your immediate interpretation; I had mine, and the teller had hers.

Each person asked, “What does the check mean to me?” There were no controls on the interpretive process. As difficult as it might be to our modern evangelical ears, the question, “What does it mean to me?” is an inappropriate question. Scripture simply does not work that way. The individual does not control or decide the reality, the relevance, the meaning of the text.

Thus the question is not, “What does it mean to me?” The first question is, “What does it mean?” How then might we find a control? How can we introduce a control? We do that by asking questions, by asking historical questions. What did the author mean to say? This is the necessary starting point for interpretation. This question seeks to get at what is sometimes called authorial intent, or authorial intention. What did the author mean to say? We all speak with intention. Thus we might introduce the primary maxim in exegesis this way: a text cannot mean something contrary to what the author intended it to mean. Stated more positively, the text means what the author meant to say. This maxim provides the objective control for biblical interpretation. The truth is, we might be ineffective communicators. I have had students come back to my office after receiving a test back, “I did not mean to say that.” That kind of assumption, however, would be an improper attitude to take toward the Word of God, arguing that He did not mean to say that.

Imagine you are going on a trip for a couple of weeks and you have an aquarium so you leave a note for your roommate or your spouse, and the note says, “Please feed the fish.” When you return you find your aquarium is still there, the water is in the tank, and the aerator is still bubbling, but the fish are nowhere to be found. So you ask your roommate what happened to your fish. “Did you feed the fish?” you ask. If your roommate says, “Yes, I fed the fish...to the dog,” you have a right to be very angry. You would ask how on earth anyone could get “Feed the fish to the dog,” from “Feed the fish.” You did not intend anything like that and there is no way you could imagine that your roommate would get that from what you said. There is no reason to think that they would, should, or could have taken your words to mean such a thing. That introduces the second question we ask of the text: How would the first audience (your roommate, for example) have understood the text? Here we hope we are asking the same question about authorial intent, but now from the receiver’s side, rather than the speaker’s side. How would those people who shared the same thought world, the same language base, the same cultural, historical, traditional particularities as the author, have understood that word?

The third presupposition for reading Scripture is that the Bible is a unified revelation. The Bible is God’s Word and thus it constitutes a unified revelation, a unified revelation of God’s character, His will, and His saving intention. The Bible is not a disjointed collection of words but a single canon, the rule of faith and practice. I said earlier that if we do not make that confession, then what we have is not the Word of God at all but a kind of “best of” collection. Although the Bible was written in three languages, over a period of some 1500 years, by many different human authors, and in many different genres, the Bible is fundamentally one Word, for its chief Author is God. Thus, along with the question of authorial intent—What did Moses or Joshua intend to say?—we might add this question: What is God saying? What does He intend to say? Hermeneutically, this question is answered by employing what the theological tradition since Augustine has called the ‘analogy of Scripture,’ or ‘the analogy of faith.’

I will make a somewhat autobiographical confession here. In earning an academic Master’s degree and a Doctorate in Theology before going to seminary, and having completed those first two degrees in decidedly liberal institutions, I was a bit in the dark when I first went to an evangelical seminary and my professors started talking about the analogy of Scripture or the analogy of faith. I remember having to ask what exactly the professor meant, and I also remember feeling a bit sheepish about having to ask for a definition of a term which he used like it was second nature. I had graduate degrees from really fancy schools; I should know this stuff. But then when the professor told me what he meant, I was no longer

surprised. I was not surprised that I had not run into the term in a liberal theological context because in that liberal context, the analogy of Scripture is dismissed.

When the Reformers broke with Rome, and Rome warned them what they were going to get—every man his own interpreter, every man his own church—they understood right from the very beginning that not only was it important to put the Bible in every person’s hand, but it was also very important to develop principles of interpretation, controls on interpretation. And the first principle for the Reformers, the one they returned to over and over again was the analogy of Scripture. This they saw as the first principle, the greatest principle, of interpretation. The analogy of Scripture means this: one must respect the whole of Scripture when handling any part of it. The exegesis of one passage must be checked by the teaching of the rest of Scripture, especially analogous passages. This principle is sometimes referred to under the statement “Scripture interprets Scripture,” for sometimes you will hear people say the Bible is its own best interpreter. They do not mean the Bible interprets itself in the sense that you just open it and it makes sense. But rather one part interprets the other parts, and you must compare parts with parts, and you must respect the whole. This means that those parts of Scripture which are apparently ambiguous or obscure are to be interpreted in light of the clear parts, interpreted in light of those texts where the meaning is known. Analogous passages must be allowed to amplify one another. Despite its great linguistic, historical, cultural, and genre diversity, the Bible has a unity, and it is this unity, this analogy of Scripture, that really stands behind a lot of what we call doctrine. Providence, baptism, and many other issues in Scripture are the result of comparing Scripture to Scripture.

Different texts may speak to the same issue and thus shed light upon one another. A single text may be one-sided and you need to put it in the context of other texts. I am going to give you one example here. On the issue of faith and works you must compare Paul and James because quite frankly the two of them thought of faith and works in different ways. For Paul, works are things done to win acceptance, and thus he thought of works quite negatively. For James, works are evidence of real faith, so James thinks of works very positively. For Paul, faith is a living relationship with God, but as James uses the word ‘faith’ in his epistle, it is really nothing more than intellectual acceptance of a proposition. You must compare the two of them and see them in context, see what they are arguing for and against. Unfortunately, this idea of the analogy of faith has been abused. It does get abused when we use it to ignore the historical progression of the text, or when we use it to ignore the diversity of the text, but it is based on the valid assumption of the unity of Scripture.

R.C. Sproul says, “This principle [the analogy of Scripture] rests on the prior confidence of the Bible as the inspired Word of God. It is therefore consistent and coherent, since it is assumed that God would never contradict Himself. It is thought slanderous to the Holy Spirit to choose an alternate interpretation that would necessarily bring the Bible in conflict with itself.” Sproul goes on from there to note that, quite apart from the issue of inspiration, the principle of the analogy of Scripture is a sound approach to interpreting anyone’s work, for interpreting literature generally. The simple canons of human decency dictate that you give a writer the benefit of the doubt regarding consistency until they prove themselves inconsistent. In other words, if I have the option of interpreting a person’s comments in one of two ways, one rendering what they have said consistent and the other one rendering it inconsistent, I should give the person the benefit of the doubt. This comes up a lot with neophyte students. They will read a book they are assigned to review, and they will say the writer is inconsistent in a place. But I will say, “Wait a minute. The inconsistency may be on your part. You should not assume inconsistencies too quickly. Go back and read them again. It may be merely apparent.”

Remember my experience as a graduate student never having heard of the analogy of Scripture. The reason I had never heard of the principle of the analogy of Scripture is that most of my professors were

committed to the disunity of the Bible. R.C. Sproul explains, “It’s commonplace to find modern interpreters who not only interpret Scripture against Scripture but go out of their way to do so.”