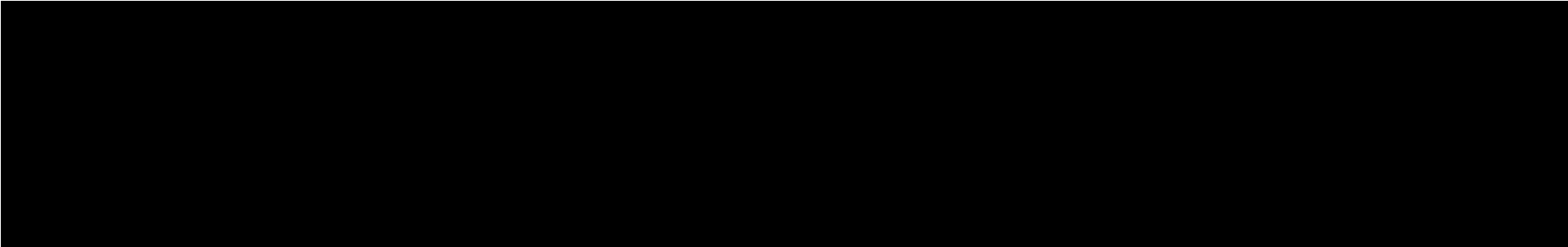


Getting the Big Picture: Session 2

How Should We Understand the Bible?

“That’s just your interpretation”

- **2 Peter 1:20-21** *“...knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of **any private interpretation**, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”*
- During long periods of church history, people were told they were not qualified to read and understand the Bible for themselves because only the Church could interpret it.

- 
- But these verses are not saying that we can't understand the Bible for ourselves but rather that we mustn't twist them to make them mean whatever we want them to mean.
 - It points to the origin and source of the Scriptures as God communicating through His chosen servants.
 - So, we need to discover God's meaning and intent in recording His Word.

Who makes the rules?

- “The general rules for interpreting oral or written speech are not learned, invented, or discovered by men; rather, they are part and parcel of our nature as individuals made in the image of God. This art has been in use since God gave the gift of communication and speech itself.”

- Walter Kaiser, quoted in *Rightly Divided*, pg. 49

What about presuppositions?

- We rarely think about our presuppositions (assumptions) because we presuppose them.
- But everyone has presuppositions.
- Some people think that our presuppositions make it impossible to interpret the Bible impartially.
- But our presuppositions must be challenged and validated.

Challenging our presuppositions

- For good or evil, those who first teach us the Bible and model biblical interpretation for us, strongly influence our thinking.
- And even though it is emotionally or psychologically difficult for us to challenge what they taught us, the search for truth and faithfulness to God and His Word must take precedence over loyalty to our teachers.

Eight basic presuppositions

1. God exists.
2. I exist.
3. Absolute truth exists and is knowable.
4. Both God and man are rational beings.
5. Truth is non-contradictory.
6. God has spoken.
7. God's communication is understandable.
8. God communicated through human means in human language.

The need for God's help

- The Bible is intended to reveal God's truth.
- God does not have difficulty communicating.
- However, some truths are more easily understood than others.
- To understand God's Word, we need God's help and our hard work.
- So, ask God for help as you read and study His Word.

The provision of God's help

- **1 Corinthians 2:11-13** (NET Bible)
 - For who among men knows the things of a man except the man's spirit within him? So too, **no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God**. Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things that are freely given to us by God. And we speak about these things, not with words taught us by human wisdom, but **with those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people**.

The nature of the Bible

- It is a revelation from God
 - “*God, who at various times and in various ways **spoke** in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days **spoken** to us by His Son,*” Heb 1:1-2
- It is the very words of God
 - “*All Scripture is God-breathed,*” 2 Tim 3:16 (NIV)
- It has dual authorship
 - “***Holy men of God** spoke as they were moved [carried along] by **the Holy Spirit,***” 2 Pet 1:21

Who determines the meaning?

- Some have argued that we, the readers, determine the meaning of a text.
- However, the normal approach to any communication is that the author or speaker determines what he/she intends to say.

Who determines the meaning?

- “The meaning of a text is what the author consciously intended to say by his text. Thus the meaning of Romans is what Paul intended to communicate to his readers when he wrote his letter.”
 - Robert Stein, *Rightly Divided*, pg. 33

Who determines the meaning?

- “To deny that the author determines the text’s meaning also raises an ethical question. Such an approach seems to rob the author of his or her creation... To take and place upon it our own meaning is a kind of plagiarism.”
 - Robert Stein, *Rightly Divided*, pg. 34

Historically, two primary methods

- Allegorical method
- Literal method

The allegorizing method

- “Allegorism developed from a proper motive: the desire to make Old Testament passages relevant to the New Testament believer. Allegorism has been rejected, however, because **it imports meaning on to the text which the author never intended to be there.**”
 - Henry Virkler in *Rightly Divided*, pg. 231

The literal method

- The essence of the literal method is:
- “When the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense.”
 - This has been called the “golden rule” of biblical interpretation.
- God says what He means, and means what He says.
 - In other words, don’t go looking for secret, hidden meanings. Take it at face value.

First Principles

1. Since the Bible was written by **human beings**, it must be treated as any other human communication in determining the meaning intended by the writer.
2. Since Scripture is **God-breathed** and true in all its parts, the **unity** of its teachings must be sought, and its **supernatural elements** recognised and understood.
3. Since Scripture is God-breathed, it is **absolute in its authority** for doctrine and life.
 - Robertson McQuilken, *Understanding and Applying the Bible*, pg. 9

Some further principles

- Let Scripture interpret Scripture.
- Interpret the obscure in light of the clear.
- Remember that God's revelation was progressive, with additional information given over time.
- Remember that while God never changes, His dealings with mankind did.
 - E.g. Old Testament vs. New Testament.

Understanding what it means

- Understanding the words
- Understanding the context
- Understanding the ancient culture
- Understanding the style of literature (genre)

Understanding words

- We determine the meaning of a word by how it is used in a particular context.
- We can get the range of meaning of a word by looking at how it is used in multiple contexts.
- We must also pay attention to grammar—tenses, verbs, prepositions, etc.

Understanding context

- Note the historical period of the passage and where it fits in the big picture.
- Note who is speaking and who they are speaking to.
- Identify paragraphs in the passage.
- Try to see the connection between various paragraphs.

Does the OT apply today?

- *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable," 2 Timothy 3:16*
- *"For whatever things were written before were **written for our learning**, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope," Romans 15:4*
- All Scripture is written **for us**, but not all Scripture is written **to us**.
 - e.g. Old Testament civil and ceremonial laws.

Understanding cultures

- Learn about the various nations and tribes in Scripture.
- Learn about the customs that are unique to these cultures.
- Learn about their religious beliefs.
- Be aware of the geography of each story.

Structure of the Old Testament

History

- 17 books

Poetry

- 5 books

Prophecy

- 17 books

Structure of the New Testament

History

- 5 books

Letters

- 21 books

Prophecy

- 1 book

Understanding literary styles

- Historical narratives
- Poetry
- Prophecy
- Gospels
- Parables
- Epistles/Letters
- Typology

Understanding narratives

- The first 17 books of the Old Testament are mostly historical narrative, and should be taken at face value.
- As history, the authors were recording what happened in real space and time.
- The challenge with these narratives is that the reader is expected to evaluate these narratives from other biblical teaching.

Understanding poetry

- Most of the “wisdom books” of the Old Testament (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon) are in poetic form.
- Poetry uses vivid imagery to describe truth.
- Hebrew poetry uses parallelism.
 - The first line makes a statement.
 - Then subsequent lines present either similar ideas, additional ideas, or contrasting ideas.

Understanding prophecy

- The basic principles of literal interpretation must still be followed.
- However, we must be aware that much of prophecy is poetic language so uses a lot of vivid imagery.
- Be aware that progressive revelation impacts on prophecy.
- Be aware that sometimes a single prophecy can be fulfilled in stages with large time gaps in between.

Understanding the gospels

- The primary role of the gospels is to identify who Jesus is, but they are not biographies in the modern sense.
- The gospels include various literary styles, but is predominantly narrative, a historical record of what happened, largely without drawing conclusions. That is done more fully in the epistles.

Understanding parables

- We must not confuse parables with historical narratives.
- Parables usually have 3 parts: the occasion, the story, and the lesson.
- Usually there is just one major point being made, so we should not try and explain every detail. Some is just the colour of the story.
- Parables were used by Jesus to both reveal and conceal truth.

Understanding the epistles

- These are addressed either to churches or individual Christians and most closely correspond to our situation.
- We must allow for translation of the cultural elements to us today, e.g. the holy kiss.
- But we must be careful not to use culture as an excuse for setting aside truth.

Understanding typology

- **Luke 24:27** *And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.*
 - “In the Bible, a type is a species of prophecy.”
 - John Phillips, *Bible Explorer’s Guide*
 - “Old Testament types illustrate specific Scriptural truths.”
 - John Phillips, *Bible Explorer’s Guide*

Interpretation vs. application

- Each passage has only one meaning or interpretation.
- However, it may have multiple applications to different people at different times.
- It is not enough to just understand the Bible. We must apply it to our lives.

Jesus said:

- *"Therefore **whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them**, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock. But **everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them**, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall."*
 - Matt 7:24-27