

BIBLE 101: HOW DO WE FAITHFULLY INTERPRET HOLY SCRIPTURE?

2 Timothy 3:14-17 John 1:1-8

Since 1991 the Gallup Organization has polled the American adult population nine times to determine what are Americans' personal views on the Bible. The question asked was this: Which best describes the Bible? A. Actual word of God, to be taken literally. B. Inspired word of God. C. Ancient fables, history, legends recorded by man. The results of their latest poll were released in May¹ and are consistent with the results of the last sixteen years. About one-third of the American adult population, 31%, believe the Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally word for word. The majority, 47%, believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God but that not everything in it should be taken literally. And then about one in five Americans, 19%, believe the Bible is an ancient book of "fables, legends, history, and moral precepts."

I was actually surprised by the polls' results. I would have thought the numbers would be higher for those who believe the Bible is to be taken literally considering that a literal belief structure has been the basis for a variety of current positions in America's societal and political life: opposition to evolution and its teaching in public schools, opposition to stem-cell research, opposition to same-sex relationships, continued opposition to women's ordination by many Christian denominations and even more opposition to ordination of people whose sexual orientation is gay or lesbian, to name a few.

If I had been asked the question by a Gallup pollster I would have answered the Bible is the inspired word of God. I would do so knowing that the word "inspired" is from the Latin root of the verb 'to inspire' and means "God-breathed". For me God is a living God and is still speaking, breathing life and meaning into the words of this ancient text we call the Bible, words that through the Holy Spirit becomes God's Word for us, for the church, for the world. However, to answer instead, the Bible is the actual word of God, to be taken literally word for word, would be comforting: no questions, no confusion, no shades of grey, no argument. With a literal approach "The Bible says what it means and means what it says". Period. But knowing what particular passages of the Bible mean is not that straightforward for me. It is a matter of interpretation. As Peter Gomes has written, "To read is to interpret. When one is reading the Bible, interpretation is... unavoidable."² So the Bible 101 question today is this: How do we faithfully interpret Holy Scripture?

You are probably familiar with the Buddhist fable from India about an elephant who once upon a time came into the village where six blind monks lived. They did not know what an elephant looked like but they could smell it and they could hear it. “What is this animal like?” they asked, as they each touched a different part of the elephant. The first monk touched the elephant’s body. “An elephant is like a wall,” he said. The second touched one of the elephant's tusks. “An elephant is like a spear,” he said. The third touched the elephant's trunk. “An elephant is like a snake,” he said. The fourth touched one of the legs. “An elephant is like a tree,” he said. The fifth touched one of the elephant's ears. “An elephant is like a fan,” he said. And the last monk touched the elephant's tail. “An elephant is like a rope,” he said. Then they began to argue about the elephant and each one of them insisted that he was right. Of course, they were all right but they needed every part, every perspective to truly know what the elephant was like. The same can be said of scripture. To faithfully interpret scripture requires looking at a passage using a variety of principles or guidelines in order to understand its true or full meaning. I’ve included in your bulletin “Seven Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation” from a Reformed understanding. There’s a lot to consider here but I think it can be condensed into three guidelines.

Combining 2, 4, 6, & 7, the first guideline is context. In real estate it is location, location, location. In Biblical interpretation it is context, context, context. “Every word in the Bible is part of a verse, and every verse is part of a paragraph, and every paragraph is part of a book, and every book is part of the whole of Scripture. No verse of Scripture can be divorced from the verses around it. Interpreting a verse apart from its context is like trying to analyze a Rembrandt painting by looking at only a single square inch of the painting, or like trying to analyze Handel’s ‘Messiah’ by listening to a few short notes.”² The context is absolutely critical to interpreting Holy Scripture. This includes the text’s relationship to the whole of scripture. It’s also about knowing the historical, cultural and social setting of the passage. Who is the author? Who is the author addressing? What is the cultural, social situation of the passage? It’s about learning what’s happening in the text and then discovering if it has anything to say to what’s happening in our world more than twenty centuries later. It’s also about the words themselves and their literary genre. What does a key word of the passage mean in Hebrew or Greek? It’s also about how the faith community understood the passage through the centuries and then bringing today’s world and all that we know from a variety of disciplines as well as our own experience to the text as we seek to interpret it and understand its meaning.

Phew... That's a lot to consider, so the task should not be undertaken without the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This guideline actually comes before context because it is a call to approach scripture with an open and prayerful attitude. Before one even begins to read scripture for study, for preaching, for seeking God and God's will for our lives, it should be approached in a spirit of prayer, calling upon the Holy Spirit to illumine the text and to illumine our hearts (see John 16:12-15; 1 Corinthians 2:9-11). How are we to faithfully interpret Holy Scripture? With prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God. Without the guidance of the Holy Spirit full comprehension of the Word of God is impossible.

Then the most important guideline for interpreting Holy Scripture is the Christological principle which is also tied to the rule of love. The Christological principle is about recognizing that Jesus Christ, the one we call Savior, Redeemer, Master, Friend is at the center of Scripture. No understanding of what Scripture teaches us to believe and do can be correct that ignores or contradicts the central and primary revelation of God and God's will through Jesus Christ. And no understanding of what Scripture teaches can be set in opposition to God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

As I shared with you last Sunday the Bible is the story of God who out of love pursues a relationship with humanity and the central character in this love story is Jesus Christ. So it is through the lens of Jesus and his life and ministry that we seek to interpret scripture and thus understand God's will and purpose for our lives. To approach every scripture with Jesus in heart and mind is to remind ourselves that Jesus was not a legalist, he was a lover. So any interpretation of scripture is to be consistent with his life and teaching and what he called the greatest commandment, "to love God with all our hearts, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as our self."

So how are we to faithfully interpret Holy Scripture? We are to do so by prayerfully seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we consider every aspect of the scripture's context; and we are to ever fix our eyes and hearts on Jesus and the grace, truth and love he reveals through Holy Scripture.

Now interpreting scripture is not an easy undertaking. It can be demanding and humbling. It is also amazingly worthwhile because interpretation is not about gathering information it is about transformation. There is a story told of a woman on a mission field sitting under a tree reading the Bible. A friend passes by and asks, "What book are you reading?" She responds. "I am not

reading this book. This book is reading me.” The paramount purpose of Scripture is the transformation of the reader. The Bible is a way for us to encounter God who wants to be relationship with us and to transform our lives through the power of love perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ. So friends let us read the Bible knowing that to read is to interpret and to interpret is to understand at a deeper level that we are being transformed by the Word of God the lives among us, full of grace and truth. Alleluia! Amen!

Notes:

1. Gallup News Service, May 25, 2007. “One Third of Americans Believe the Bible is Literally True”, Frank Newport.
2. Peter Gomes, *The Good Book*, William Moore & Co., 1996, p.25.
3. Ron Rhodes, “Rightly Interpreting the Bible” (on the web)

SEVEN GUIDELINES FOR BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION IN THE REFORMED TRADITION

1. **The Centrality of Jesus Christ** (the Christological principle): No understanding of what Scripture teaches us to believe and do can be correct that ignores or contradicts the central and primary revelation of God and God’s will through Jesus Christ. Any teaching of the Bible on a matter of faith or life is to be used in a manner consistent with scriptural accounts of Jesus’ own teaching and embodiment of the person and will of God.
2. **The plain text of Scripture:** This guideline warns against reading into Scripture what we want it to say. We must take seriously the text as it is given to us and seek to understand it fully in its context. This means understanding what it says in the original language of either Hebrew or Greek; understanding the social, historical, and cultural circumstances of the writing – its author and audience; and understanding its literary genre.
3. **The guidance of the Holy Spirit:** This guideline is about relying on God’s Spirit to help us rightly hear, believe, and obey God’s word. It is about having a receptive attitude to the essential message God wants us to receive. Scripture is to be interpreted with awareness of our limitations and fallibility and with openness to change our mind and be corrected by God’s Spirit at work in our hearts and through the Biblical text. “Reformed” means always being reformed afresh by the Word of God.
4. **The rule of faith:** Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the past and present Christian’s community understanding of Scripture. Although the church’s traditional interpretation of Scripture is fallible and subject always to revision and correction, nevertheless, we are to be guided by the church’s credal statements.
5. **The rule of love:** The fundamental expression of God’s will is the two-fold commandment to love God and neighbor, and all interpretations are to be judged by the question whether they offer and support the love given and commanded by God. Any interpretation of Scripture is wrong that separates or sets in opposition love for God and love for fellow human beings.
6. **The use of knowledge and experience.** The interpretation of Scripture does not exclude but requires respect for knowledge acquired from other disciplines – the natural sciences, psychology, sociology, philosophy, economic and political research. The entire company of believers is both a resource and a participant in the process of interpretation. The experience of church members must not be discounted.
7. **The scripture principal.** Scripture is to be interpreted in light of all the Bible. It involves searching the whole Scripture for all texts bearing on the question under consideration. A special dimension of this guideline had to do with the interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, as well as the interpretation of the New Testament in light of the Old Testament.

