

Hermeneutics: from 'then and there' to 'here and now'

Interpretation is essential

"Precisely because God chose to speak in the context of real human history, we may take courage that these same words will speak again and again in our own 'real' history, as they have throughout the history of the church. The fact that the Bible has a human side is our encouragement; it is also our challenge, and is the reason that we need to interpret." – Gordon D. Fee

In their excellent book¹, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart point out that there is a 'gap' between ourselves and the original hearers of God's Word. Our culture and world-view are significantly different in many ways to theirs. When we read the Bible we need to take account of this gap before we decide how to apply what we are reading in our own lives.



It is fairly obvious that some instructions in the Bible apply equally in all times and places ('Love one another...'), whilst others are to be left completely in the past ('Bring me the cloak I left in Troas...') More troublesome are those passages where it is uncertain to what extent they apply for us today. That is also where controversy can arise! Some believe that to take changes in culture into account is a slippery slope to error. However, even they apply common sense to obvious cultural differences (e.g. 10-stringed lyres can stand for all kinds of musical instruments). We cannot avoid interpreting when we read the Bible.

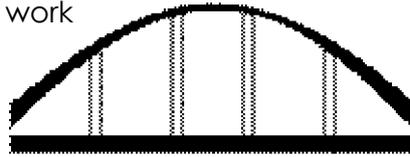
Whose thought-patterns?

As we saw in the last session, the books of the Bible were written in several ancient cultures, in languages that are unfamiliar to most of us, and by people whose thought patterns and assumptions were often very different to ours. Our tendency in reading the Bible is to bring our own 21st century, Western thought patterns, as well as our personal experiences and preferences, to bear on what we are reading, which can lead us to a faulty understanding.



¹ *How to read the Bible for all its worth*, Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, Zondervan, 1993 (UK: Scripture Union, 1994)

Simply saying, 'Just read and obey,' does not work every time. We need to bridge the gap from the 'then and there' of Bible times and places to the 'here and now' of where we are today. This means we need to understand the thought-patterns of the human author and the original recipients of the passage in question, at least to some degree, before we can be confident we understand what God is saying to us. If we don't, we may simply jump to a wrong conclusion because of our own preconceptions.



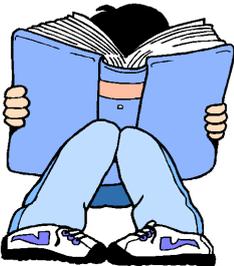
Thankfully, there are many 'expert' sources that can help us – multiple translations that we can compare, Bible dictionaries, commentaries etc. However, even without these, if we follow a few straightforward principles, ask the Holy Spirit for help, and apply a healthy dose of good common sense, we can really improve our understanding and ability to properly apply the Bible today.

The 'right' way to read the Bible

The real key when looking at a passage or verse of the Bible is that *it means what it meant*. In other words, God's Word for us today is exactly what his Word was to the original hearers. The important question therefore is, 'What did the author intend to communicate in this passage?' Then, as appropriate, we can apply a sensible 'translation' for our own culture, often looking for the *principle* behind what is being said. So, there are two stages to Bible interpretation:

- Find out what it meant to the original hearers ('exegesis')
- Hear the same meaning in our own context ('hermeneutics')

To do this effectively, we must always consider the *context* of the passage we are reading, i.e. we should read passages around the one we are interested in – preferably the whole book that they are part of. Meanings can change depending on the context leading up to the passage, what was going on at the time, what did the original hearers need to have said to them? Furthermore, we must always keep in mind



the message and story of the entire Bible, looking for any related passages that shed light on the one we are studying. This means reading the Bible frequently will help us get better at interpreting it as time goes by – there is no substitute for that!

When looking for a possible meaning, we must remember that a verse or passage can never mean something that the original hearers would not be able to understand. It cannot mean what it never meant! Also, if we find our interpretation is different to everyone else's we should be suspicious! 'Unique' interpretations are usually wrong.



Notes

Discussion time...

Have a think about the following and see if you can use the above principles to address them:

1. Deut 22:8 tells the people of God to build a parapet around the roof of our houses. Should Christians hire builders and roofers to have this done? If not, what is the application today?
2. 1 Cor 13:8-10 is often used to 'prove' that spiritual gifts do not operate in modern times but died out once the New Testament scriptures had been finalised. How do good hermeneutics show this to be untrue?

Part 2: How To Handle Different Bible 'Genres'

There are several distinct styles of writing (or genres) in the Bible – narrative, poetry, prophecy, law, letters, proverbs etc. Each of these needs approaching in a different way, as although they are all part of God's Word to us, they do not all function towards us as the Word of God in the same way. Here are some principles that will help us get the most from some of these genres:

Narrative (Story)

Much Old Testament history, the gospels and Acts are in the form of narrative – describing what happened, what God's people did at certain times in history.

- Narrative isn't intended for *teaching* truth (but can illustrate it)
- It does not always represent what *should* have happened
- God is always the 'hero', not people (we must work out what God is doing in the story)

Law

The primary way we should understand the Law, contained in the early Old Testament books (mainly Exodus to Deuteronomy, traditionally including Genesis) is that it formed a *covenant* between God and his ancient people, Israel. It was the way that they were to relate to God. In some ways it reflected (and improved on) the laws of other nations, but pointed Israel to better and higher realities, ultimately pointing towards Christ whilst showing their inability to keep it. It is *not* binding on Christians!



The New Covenant is about our union with God that produces God-like behaviour from the divine nature within us, rather than an externally imposed code. However, the New Testament does use some aspects and commands of the Law to describe what love, godliness and new life in the Kingdom looks like. In a sense, therefore, some commands are 'renewed' in the New Covenant, however no longer as obligations but rather illustrations and promises of what life in the Spirit can be.

Poetry

Much of the Old Testament, especially the prophetic and wisdom books, and parts of Revelation in the New Testament, are written in poetic form. English poetry often uses rhyme (parallel sounds) or rhythm (parallel timing), but Hebrew poetry uses parallel *ideas*, often in pairs, sometimes in larger groupings. One statement echoes and confirms another, or expands on another. Sometimes the two statements are a comparison between one thing and another. We can use this to help us, because one statement might be clearer than another and we can then interpret the other correctly.

Prophecy

People often make the mistake of believing the prophetic books of the Old Testament are about the future, when in fact most of what was 'future' to them is now 'past' to us. These books mostly contain warnings to Old Testament Israel that they were not keeping God's covenant, and that dire consequences would result – couched in the vivid language of the covenant 'blessings' and 'curses' of the Law. There are also promises of future restoration that hint at New Covenant realities. To understand these books, we need to be aware of the point in Israel's history at which each was written. We need Bible dictionaries or commentaries to help us. It also helps to recognise that they are often broken into discrete 'oracles' about specific subjects that have been collected together.

Parable



Except in rare cases, where Jesus spells it out, a parable makes just one main point – many of the details are just for the drama, not for detailed analysis! The parables are intended to surprise and hence to obtain a *response* from people. As with a good joke, too much explanation and analysis can spoil the response! To understand and interpret the parables for ourselves, we need to identify who the intended audience(s) were and how they were meant to respond.

Letters

Many New Testament 'books' are actually letters. Real letters, written to real people at a specific time for a particular purpose. Most of them were *not* written to spell out theology, but rather to correct something or strengthen people in a particular way. We need to bear this in mind.

- Work out *why* the letter was written (the main point or points) – think about the people originally reading it... What did they need to hear?
- What it meant for them is what it means for us (with sensible 'translation' to our culture where necessary) – do we need to hear exactly the same thing in our culture, or do we need to hear an equivalent *principle*, translated to our culture?



Apocalypse (Revelation)

Revelation is the hardest book of the New Testament to understand, and most easily misinterpreted, especially if we don't do exegesis first! Wild theories abound, but by applying sensible principles we should be able to derive some benefit from it, even if we don't resolve every detail.

- The 'apocalypse' genre draws on OT prophetic writing at a time of persecution or oppression to predict God's coming justice and salvation for his people. It is meant to encourage, not scare us!

- The vivid fantastical imagery is not to be taken literally, but is part of the accepted genre / style of 'apocalyptic' writing.
- Primary meaning cannot be something the original readers (or John as the human author) would not have understood from their own circumstances, history and knowledge of the (OT) Scriptures, although a secondary meaning is sometimes possible.



- In general, look at the various images and passages as wholes, as with parables.
 - Much of the book relates not to the future but to things already accomplished or already existing realities. Some parts purely concern the future, whilst others have a blend of both.
- It is not a detailed chronological prediction of the future – its great images reassure the Church that God is in control and for them!

Final thoughts

Where the Bible gives instructions to Christians, for example in the New Testament letters, which of these are 'culturally relative' (needing translation to our culture) and which are directly applicable? To help us decide this, we should consider the following questions in each case:

- Do the same or directly equivalent circumstances apply today? If so, then we can probably apply the passage directly.
- Is the Bible unequivocal in its teaching, or are there apparently different teachings in different places? If the latter, then the different circumstances being addressed were probably relevant.
- Did the same options for living exist then as those that exist today? If there was only really one way to live in the 1st Century, then there is more likelihood that our (different) culture could affect the situation. But if the choices available then were similar to today's then the passage is more likely to apply the same way today.
- If something is consistently included in lists of morally right or wrong behaviours, then it is likely to be the same for us today.

Finally, rather than only thinking 'exegetically' for the 'difficult' passages, our Bible reading will be greatly enriched – and our interpretation more accurate – if we learn to do it every *time* we read the Bible.

*"This is the greatest book on earth,
Unparalleled it stands;
Its author God, its truth Divine,
Inspired in every word and line,
Tho' writ by human hands."*

– Unknown, quoted by J.S. Baxter