

GETTING THE BEST FROM YOUR BIBLE

A Course in Principles for Biblical Interpretation

This course is for any Christian who wants to understand the Bible better, but especially for Leaders in Home Groups, Children's and Youth Work, for all who preach and teach. We have the great privilege of leading others on in the Christian Faith by teaching them from the Word of God, the Bible. But this carries with it an enormous responsibility. Paul's advice to Timothy applies to us too,

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15)

This course will help us to understand the Bible better for ourselves, and so equip us to share its message more effectively with others. We will focus on the New Testament, although the principles of interpretation we will consider apply equally well to our understanding of the Old Testament.

Themes in Evening Services

1. The place to start: a good translation -
Do you love me? (John 21:15-17)
2. Different kinds of language –
This is My Body (Mark 14:22-25)
3. The Immediate Context –
A comfortable promise? (1 Corinthians 10:13)
4. The Wider Context –
All you need is love? (1 Corinthians 12-14)
5. Understanding Stories –
Lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11)
6. Understanding Stories – The Old Testament!
7. Understanding Parables –
The Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8)
8. Understanding the Letters – May women speak
in church? (1 Corinthians 14:33-35)

Outline of these Notes

1. Where's the Problem?
2. A Text without a Context is a Pretext
3. The Gospels - an Easy Start?
4. Theory into Practice I - Some Case Studies for Interpretation
5. Understanding the Letters
6. Theory Into Practice II - Some More Case Studies for Interpretation
7. Issues in the Gospels - Miracles and Parables
8. Practice Makes Perfect!

Reading

One very good book on Biblical Interpretation at this level and very well worth buying is by G.D.Fee and D.Stuart and is called ***How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth***.

Other books are recommended at different stages and a list of all of these is supplied separately on a convenient pocket-sized leaflet (easy to carry to the bookshop!) The categories covered are (A) The Place to Start - a Good Translation; (B) Finding Out the Background - Some Useful Resources; (C) Checking Up - Commentaries (D) Piecing the Jigsaw - Some Useful Doctrinal Guides.

The leaflet also includes an Appendix with hints on understanding particular passages.

Session 1. Where's the Problem?

Introducing the principles and importance of sound biblical interpretation.

“You don't need a Bible College education to understand the Bible”, people say. Of course they are absolutely right. But if understanding the Bible is so easy, how come there have been so many folk down the centuries (and as many as ever still today) who have misunderstood God's Word? How is it we still have so many differences in understanding between equally sincere Christians? The Bible was written by at least fifty writers over a period of 1500 years. The different books were not originally written for us, but for the people at the time. Yet often we read the texts through our own eyes - our Twenty-first Century, Western European, (prosperous? secure? middle class?) Baptist eyes. We often assume that the Bible was written directly and exclusively for us. So our understanding of God's Word for today can be distorted by ignorance of the original background and by our own presuppositions.

We want to understand and apply the Bible as God's word for today, here and now. So our task is to bridge the gap between two worlds - that world in which the author originally wrote, many centuries ago and thousands of miles away, and our present day world. We believe that God's Word will not change across time. So His Word for us today will usually be the same as His Word to the first readers, unless we have good reason to think otherwise. Our central principle for consistent and reliable interpretation is this:

THE TEXT CANNOT MEAN NOW WHAT IT COULDN'T HAVE MEANT THEN!

DO NOT FORGET - we can only understand the Bible with the help and illumination of the same Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible. As someone put it, “We can only understand the Bible on our knees.” But we must use our minds as well! There is a place for serious Bible study and this course is intended to help us in such study, in Christian living and in our teaching.

Escaping the Trap of Our Traditions

We need to work hard if we are to escape the biggest barrier to understanding the Bible - the trap of our own traditions. The Pharisees rejected Jesus because they had could no longer hear the Word of God for their own man-made rules and regulations. The Reformation helped the church to escape from some traditions of the church of Rome, but produced its own Protestant traditions instead.

We also have our own traditions, our own background which comes from our prior knowledge and experiences, from our churches and from the culture around us. We have our own “world view”, and this can be a great barrier to us understanding God's Word, because the original writers of the Bible lived in a very different world. Their traditions were obviously very different from ours. Yet so often we come to the Bible and expect it to answer our 20th Century questions in terms of our 21st Century thinking. And the problem is not only that we fail to understand the Bible's answers. Often we are asking the wrong questions in the first place!

So as we read the Bible we must allow it to challenge our background and traditions with a truly Biblical world view and agenda. The Bible's answers to our questions will present us in turn with new questions. Our task is not simply translate the Bible from its culture into our own. By a cyclic process of questions and answers (sometimes called **the Hermeneutical Circle**) God's Word must be allowed to confront us until we no longer view the world through the eyes of our traditions, but rather through God's eyes.

In this way we will not merely reach an intellectual understanding of the Bible message. Far more important, we will feel the Bible message and be transformed by the Bible message! Then the challenge is to put all that God has said to us through His Word into practice in our own lives, in His church and in His world.

The Two Stages in Understanding the Bible

To achieve a reliable understanding of the Bible, we must first uncover what WAS God's Word for the original readers. This process we call **EXEGESIS**. Only then can we go on to see how that Word speaks to us today - the process of **INTERPRETATION**. The combined process of **EXEGESIS** followed by **INTERPRETATION** is usually given the rather grand title of **HERMENEUTICS** (although Fee and Stuart use Hermeneutics to mean what we will call Interpretation - see F&S p.25). We will need basic principles to guide us through these two stages because it is essential to avoid the common great mistake in understanding the Bible. Many people jump ahead to the process of **INTERPRETATION** before they have correctly identified the meaning of the passage in its original setting by sound **EXEGESIS**. So our two stages will always be:

STAGE 1. EXEGESIS - finding the original meaning, THEN

STAGE 2. INTERPRETATION - finding the meaning for today.

STAGE 1. EXEGESIS - finding the Original Meaning

The key to understanding God's Word to the first readers is to discover what the original writer expected them to understand as he wrote. Exegesis is all about discovering the “**AUTHOR'S INTENDED MEANING**” so we can read and understand the passage as did the first readers. Good exegesis demands two things - a good translation, and seeing the text in its context. This session will discuss translation, and the next will focus on setting the text in its context. Only after we have discovered the **AUTHOR'S INTENDED MEANING** by these steps can we go on to consider principles of interpretation.

The Place to Start - a Good Translation

We can easily forget that the Old Testament was written in Hebrew (except for two small sections - do you know which?) and that the New Testament consists almost entirely of Greek, although Jesus spoke mostly if not exclusively in Aramaic. Obviously a correct understanding of the Bible demands a good translation of the original text. Note A on the list of Recommended Reading offers suggestions about suitable translations for study purposes. Reaching the perfect translation is not always easy.

To discuss or think about

Consider a few basic words. What do these words mean in the Bible?

- FAITH – try Heb 11:1; Rom 3:26; Eph 2:8-9; James 2:17-19.
- WORLD – try John 1:10; 3:16; Col 2:20.
- FLESH – try Rom 1:3; 2 Cor 5:16; Col 1:22; Gal 5:16-17.
- LOVE – find your own references!

We know that each of these words can take a variety of meanings in the Bible. Sometimes some of these meanings do not correspond to any of the ways in which we use that word in English (the CONNOTATIONS of the word are different). At other times the problem is that we only have one English word to translate more than one Greek or Hebrew word (e.g. "love") so we lose some of the IMPLICATIONS of the original in the translation.

Taking the wrong one out of the range of possible meanings for a word can confuse us. For example, in the New Testament "the blood of Christ" usually refers metaphorically to His sacrificial death rather than literally to the red body fluid. Hymnwriters please note! We will want to know the possible meanings of the words, and the ideas they might carry with them (their CONNOTATIONS) in the original language to the first readers. These are not always obvious.

YOU - Singular or Plural?

Probably the biggest single misunderstanding of the Bible arises when I read every part of it as if it was written personally, directly and singly for me as an individual. This mistake comes from the Individualism which has spread through the Western World since the Enlightenment and the Industrial revolution. We have become increasingly isolated from each other. The corporate life of local communities, tribes and families has been replaced by the anonymity of towns and cities. Increased mobility, competitiveness and the emphasis on individual achievement have their effects in the privatisation of religion. Too often as Christians we fall victim to what has been called the "Small Corner Syndrome". Each one of us is only interested in letting our personal light shine, "You in your small corner and I in mine."

So whenever we come across the word "YOU" in the Bible we tend to read it in the singular, "you as an individual". Very often this translation is wrong! If we read the original languages, "you" is much more often in the plural. The books of the Bible were written by people who attached very great importance to family and community, as Middle Eastern cultures still do today. Most of the Bible is directed at communities or at the whole church, not at individuals (think hard to find the exceptions!)

Time and again we read that God is concerned with the whole church or the local church as the BODY of Christ, as well as (if not even more than) the concerns of solitary saints. Salvation is not merely individual, it is CORPORATE. God is concerned for the reconciliation not only of individuals but also of communities, structures and ultimately the cosmos. Our Baptist convictions regarding independence and the autonomy of each congregation sometimes confuse us here. To check your (singular, or plural?) grasp of this vital issue, think about the following passages and questions.

- Luke 22:31-34 (good footnotes help here)
- 1 Corinthians 6:18-20 compared with 2 Corinthians 6:14-16
- Ephesians 5:25-33
- Revelation 3:20 (note the CONTEXT - writing to a church)
- What does Paul mean when he talks of being "IN CHRIST"? See e.g. Eph 1-2, Col 1.
- How many of the great promises we cling to were actually originally given to the NATION of Israel, or to the disciples AS A GROUP, rather than to any one individual?

AN EXAMPLE: "Christ is the head of the church" (Eph 5:23 c.f. Col 2:19).

What do you think Paul meant when he described Christ as the "head" of the church?

To us the "head" is the location of the brain, the seat of consciousness and intelligence. This implies to us control over the body. But when the Hebrews and Greeks thought about the head they didn't think about the brain at all. Although the word "head" had the same DENOTATION (it still referred to the part at the top of the body) the word had very different CONNOTATIONS to them. For the first readers of the New Testament the centre of decision and will and of inmost thoughts was the heart (and the centre of the emotions was the bowels or the kidneys!). They

thought of the “head” rather as the SOURCE of life and energy. Figuratively the head also refers to rank and authority, still probably based on the idea of origins, since the Patriarch in the tribe was the head man because he was the great-grandfather of every member of the tribe! So in calling Christ the HEAD, Paul was saying that Christ is the source of life for the church, but he was NOT making any reference at all to the intelligence controlling the church.

Different Kinds of Language – Symbolism and Metaphor

The Bible is one book made up of 66 books. Within those books are many different kinds of writing: history; legal regulations and covenants; poetry; “wisdom literature”; letters and “apocalyptic” language (referring to the end times). All were written in either Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic, so long ago that modern literary categories like “history” or “poetry” do not accurately apply to literature then.

To understand any passage of the Bible we need to look at the words in their LITERARY CONTEXT, which means, amongst other things, discovering WHAT KIND OF LANGUAGE they are written in. The technical term for this is the *GENRE* of the literature. We also need to remember that religious language in many of the *GENRES* often used metaphor or symbolism to describe the divine and the supernatural. It has to do so, because human language is too limited to describe adequately the transcendent God!

Some obvious examples of the issues will help:

1 Corinthians 4:8 *Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings—and that without us! Have they really? Read the rest of the verse!*

Luke 14:26 *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” Does it really mean “hate”?*

The writer of Ecclesiastes believes that more or less everything is “useless”, “meaningless”. Is he right? Are his statements meant to be understood literally, or are they ironic?

Revelation 14:1-3 *Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads ... the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. Will there really only be 144,000 Christians in heaven?*

Do parables like the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:24-27) or the Two Lost Sons (Luke 15:11-22) refer to historical events which actually happened? Consequently – does the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) give us any information about the existence and nature of Hell?

For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. (Exodus 20:11) What kind of language is this? What is the *genre* of Genesis 1-3?

Mark 14:22-25 ***“This is my body.”*** Is this literal, or symbolic language? Literal leads us to transubstantiation and the Catholic Mass, or perhaps Luther's consubstantiation - the real presence of Christ “in and under” the bread. We prefer a symbolic interpretation - but why? Consider also John 6:47-59 especially ^{6:53} *Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”*

An important issue thinking about the authority and inspiration of the Bible is INERRANCY.

Inerrancy means that when all facts are known, the Scriptures in their original autographs and properly interpreted will be shown to be wholly true in everything they affirm, whether that has to do with doctrine or morality, or with the social, physical, or life sciences. (P.D.Feinberg.)

No Christian will question that God speaks truth and truth only (that is, what he says is infallible and inerrant). But if all Scripture comes from God in such a sense that what it says, he says, then Scripture as such must be infallible and inerrant, because it is God's utterance. (J.I.Packer, following Calvin)

The root problem with the doctrine of inerrancy is that it treats every verse of the Bible in the same way, as if it is all literal historical or scientific writing (in the 20th century senses of those words). Inerrancy completely fails to recognize that different parts of the Bible are written in different genres, and that those genres work as literature in different ways! Metaphors should not be taken literally!

2. A text without a context is a pretext

To see the importance of understanding a text in its proper context.

Here is an essential warning which some preachers ignore! After we have obtained a sound translation, the next step in determining the original meaning of a Biblical text, i.e. what its author intended to say and how his readers would have understood him, lies in putting the text into its CONTEXT.

But the CONTEXT of a verse of Scripture is not only the verses before and after it. Too often even these are ignored! The true context is the whole background of the author and his readers, their culture and historical setting, and the place of that book in that setting - the occasion and purpose of the book. We will need to establish what kind (genre) of literature we are dealing with - gospel history or poetry, Old Testament Law or New Testament Letter - to discover whether the words and ideas should be understood literally or symbolically or both. All of these might be significant for our understanding of the text, as well as the immediate context of the verse - how it fits into the flow of narrative or argument. We can build up a picture to help us see the true context of any text.

Finding Out the Background - Some Useful Resources

To establish the context of any Bible passage properly we will need a wide knowledge of the background. Note B in the Recommended Reading offers suggestions for useful REFERENCE books to help our study of the background to the Bible. Serious Bible students might wish to purchase, or add one or two to their Christmas list.

ONLY when we have understood an accurate translation of the text in its context and found the "author's intended meaning" by EXEGESIS should we move on to the second stage in understanding the Bible, INTERPRETATION.

PUTTING A TEXT IN ITS CONTEXT:-

The TEXT

How big is a text? It is a mistake to try to understand too SMALL a part of scripture on its own. Sentences in the original are often larger than one verse. Paragraphs of letters, or whole parables, are examples of the sort of "chunks" to consider as whole units.

The IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

Narrative/Argument - how the text fits into the flow of what the author is saying.

Author's use of words AND ideas - which MAY be different from that of other Bible writers.

The LOCAL CONTEXT

Time and Place - Occasion - Who was the author? Who was he writing for?

Purpose in writing - WHY did he write? What situations, needs, problems was he addressing?

Genre - what KIND OF LANGUAGE is this? Is it history or poetry or law or letter? Should it be taken literally or symbolically or both? We considered this on page 5 **Different Kinds of Language – Symbolism and Metaphor**

The GLOBAL CONTEXT

History/ Geography/ Politics / Economics / Lifestyle

Culture - traditions, customs and common ideas of the times can be important.

Religion - beliefs and practices which the author assumes his readers know about.

The Religious context - Themes and Texts

“Explain the Scriptures by the Scriptures,” said Clement of Alexandria.

Major elements of the religious context of a passage are parallel and related passages, behind which lie the great themes of the Bible. A sound grasp of these is vital to our understanding of specific passages. The themes give us an overview of the whole jigsaw so that we can see where each piece fits in. But our themes must in turn be based on sound understanding of the individual texts, of course.

Be warned! Some passages are “problem passages” simply because they do not fit into our neat systematic theologies. We **MUST NEVER** twist a passage to mean what it could never have meant to its original author, even if it seems hard to reconcile it with our themes. (If you don't see the problem, try Ecclesiastes.) You don't do a jigsaw by cutting pieces into a different shape so they can fit in the hole you happen to want to fill!

A number of themes are central to the message of the Bible. Each of them merits careful study. The Illustrated Bible Dictionary (see Recommended Reading note B) or any other theological word book offers a valuable introduction. Recommended Reading Note D “Piecing the Jigsaw - Doctrinal Guides” suggests other useful general books, and titles on specific subjects.

TO THINK ABOUT – make a list of TEN of the KEY THEMES of the New Testament.

- | | | |
|----|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 10 | | |

Once we have achieved a reliable EXEGESIS of the author’s original meaning from the best translation set in its proper context, then we can move on to

STAGE 2. INTERPRETATION - finding the meaning for today

It is easy to lay down general principles for exegesis, although it can be much harder and time-consuming to apply them. But exegesis is not an optional extra for understanding the Bible. It is the essential first stage. Only then comes interpretation, moving from a sound grasp of the author's original meaning to the meaning of that passage for us today.

Interpretation is best approached by examples and case studies, so we will follow this practice. But to prepare for this, a little research would be very valuable. Before looking at the gospels together, please consider these questions:

- (i) **In what ways was Jesus's world different from ours? In what ways similar?**
- (ii) **What would you say was the central thrust of Jesus's ministry and message?**
- (iii) **Choose one of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew/Mark/Luke). Try to find out some of the important factors which make up that Gospel's global and local contexts.**

3. The Gospels - an Easy Start?

To identify the context and central theme of Jesus's ministry.

Finding the Context

Jesus Christ was not born late in the Twentieth Century in South-East England. **Can you suggest TEN differences between life for Jesus in First Century Palestine and life for us today?**

In one session we could not hope to fill in all the significant features of the history, geography, culture and religion which make up the GLOBAL CONTEXT of the gospels. We can only mention some of those aspects of the background without which it is very easy to misunderstand the gospels. It is absolutely essential that we always keep in mind two things:

1. Jesus was a Jew, with all that implied in terms of customs and practices, history and hopes.
2. Jesus proclaimed the approach of the Kingdom of God which must be understood in terms of the JEWISH expectations of the bringing in of God's end-time rule as King, through His agent the Messiah.

Jesus was a Jew and when we forget this we can easily miss the point of so much of His ministry. So a grasp of OLD TESTAMENT history and theology is not an optional extra for Christians. It is very valuable for our understanding of the New Testament. Bibles with references which make clear when a N.T. saying is quoted from or based on the O.T. are VERY useful.

Jewish history and customs are referred to, or often just assumed, throughout the gospels. **Can you suggest some examples?**

You might think of the different parties of Jews, with very differing beliefs and practices. Matt 22:23-32 and Acts 23:6-8 hinge on the different beliefs of Pharisees and Sadducees.

Who's Who?

The following groups and individuals were very significant in New Testament times. How much do you know about each of them?

The Pharisees

The Sadducees

The Zealots

The Sanhedrin

King Herod (hint - there were at least TWO)

“Rabbi”

The Places

GEOGRAPHY can be significant too. You may find a MAP of Israel in New Testament Times very useful for following Jesus as He moved around during His ministry. Remember that Jesus came from Nazareth, which was as obscure, provincial and "Northern" to Jews in Jerusalem as somewhere like Sale in Cheshire is to Kent folk! Thus, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). Galilean Jews followed Jesus - Jerusalem Jews crucified Him!

Sin and Judgement

The Bible is the story of God's answer to man's problem - sin. Ever since the first man and woman disobeyed the one command God had given them, men and women have rebelled against God, "through ignorance, through weakness and through our own deliberate fault". The human race is alienated from its Creator, and even the planet is corrupted and polluted by sin. As such we face judgement, the anger of a righteous God.

So the background to the whole of the Bible is this desperately important question of how the world can escape the judgement of God and be reconciled to Him. The Bible is the record of the redeeming acts of the God who is at once love and holiness, through his chosen people in the Old Testament and through the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of His Son in the New. And the Bible presents each one of us with God's challenge, in view of all He has already done and still continues to do - repent, change direction, be transformed by the renewing of your mind, by His grace alone live a new life!

The Messiah - The King Who is to Come

The Jewish religion looks back and it looks forward. Jews look back to their escape from slavery in Egypt and to the formation of the nation of Israel when God gave to Moses the Ten Commandments. They look back to their greatest years, when David was King and he ruled over the whole of the Land God had promised them.

Jews also look forward to even greater times to come. They hope that one day, in "the Day of the Lord" (or "the Year of the Lord") God will give them another King, even greater than David. This "Messiah" (which means "chosen one" in Hebrew and is translated into Greek as "Christ") will deliver them from their enemies and bring in the Reign of God on earth, putting right the wrongs of "this present age" and bringing in all the blessings of "the age to come". And He did!

BIBLE READINGS: Isaiah 9:2-7; 11:1-9; 61:1-7.

The Kingdom of God! BIBLE READINGS: Mark 1 and 2:1-17.

"The Kingdom of God" was the heart of Jesus' message as the Synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) record it. But what does the phrase "THE KINGDOM OF GOD" actually mean?

What is the Kingdom of God?

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:16-21)

When Jesus read those words from Isaiah 61 in the Synagogue at Nazareth, He also said, "TODAY this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Then He began to preach to everyone,

"The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News."
(Mark 1:15)

We think of a kingdom as the place or the people over which which a king rules. But the word Jesus used in Aramaic describes much more the things a king DOES. The Kingdom of God (or the Kingdom of heaven) refers to God's ACTIONS as King over His world - GOD'S KINGLY RULE.

Bringing God's Rule as King in Words

preaching and teaching about God and salvation.
forgiving sins which only God could do!

Bringing "God's Rule as King" in Actions

Healing the sick and driving out demons.
Showing God's love to everybody, even tax collectors like Matthew.

Until the last few weeks of His life, Jesus was very careful about how He described Himself, usually preferring the name "the Son of Man". To have claimed to be the Messiah directly would have produced misunderstanding by the Jews, who mostly expected the Messiah to be a great military leader like David who would drive out the occupying Roman army. The Romans would readily have executed any Messiah as a revolutionary threat, too soon for God's plan. Instead Jesus's ministry focused on THE KINGDOM OF GOD He had come to bring.

4. Theory into Practice I

To gain experience through some Case Studies for Exegesis and Interpretation

There are three kinds of problem passages:

- (i) passages where it is hard to understand what the author was saying to his first readers,
- (ii) passages where it is hard to work out whether or not the passage applies to us today, and if so how,
- (iii) passages which make life difficult because they don't fit very easily into our overall understanding of the Bible, or into what we want the Bible to say!

Half the battle in interpreting the Bible is successfully recognising which kind of problem we are facing. Here are a selection of Bible verses and passages on which we will "cut our teeth" in Biblical interpretation.

Straightforward Texts

John 9:3; John 21:15-17; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 6:20-26

Interesting Texts

Matthew 12:30-32; Acts 5:1-11; John 15:7,16; 16:23-24

You may like to read some of these passages and think about what they mean for us today. You might like to do a little research on one or two passages. Problems can arise at all the different stages of understanding the texts. The following CHECKLIST will help:-

EXEGESIS: Is our TRANSLATION correct? Have we understood the CONTEXTS correctly? IMMEDIATE, LOCAL and GLOBAL ?

INTERPRETATION : How DOES this apply to us today? Directly? As a principle which needs applying? DESCRIPTIVE or PRESCRIPTIVE: example or command?

The BOOK LIST leaflet also includes an APPENDIX which contains some hints on understanding these passages.

5. Understanding the Letters

To explore the exegesis and interpretation of the letters.

Our TWO STAGES of understanding the Bible are

- (i) **EXEGESIS** - finding out what the text meant to its original readers, THEN
- (ii) **INTERPRETATION** - seeing how the text applies to us today.

We will consider our understanding of the New Testament Letters using the example of 1 Corinthians, chapters 11 to 16. For more details and explanation, see *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, chapters 3 and 4.

Before we come to INTERPRETATION we must be sure to get our EXEGESIS right, and this will involve some consideration of the CONTEXT. It is always helpful to check our own exegesis with the experts. Commentaries do not do the interpretation for us - indeed they often give us a choice of possibilities for the original meaning. Some suggestions of useful Commentaries are given in the Recommended Reading Note C.

Questions on the context of 1 Corinthians

Was this written to the Corinthians? If so, what does that tell us? Did Paul write it? Why? When? (Hint - 1 Cor 7:1, 15:12). Was it Paul's FIRST letter to them? (Hint - 1 Cor 5:9).

The LOCAL CONTEXT of 1 Corinthians

- Time and Place
- Purpose
- Genre

(1 Corinthians is usually regarded as a REAL LETTER i.e. sent from one person to a specific group, rather than an EPISTLE, a body of teaching composed for wide circulation, like Hebrews, 2 Peter, etc.)

The GLOBAL CONTEXT of 1 Corinthians

- History
- Geography
- Politics / Economics / Lifestyle
- Culture
- Religion

Once we are sure we understand the global and local contexts of a whole Letter, we can begin to apply that Letter to OUR world. We must never forget our central principle:

THE TEXT CANNOT MEAN NOW WHAT IT COULDN'T HAVE MEANT THEN!

Some texts only directly applied to the world of the first readers - they are "culturally relative". We must ask important questions which have different answers for different sections of 1 Corinthians. So we need to look at the IMMEDIATE CONTEXT of the different sections.

IMMEDIATE CONTEXT - The Structure of 1 Corinthians

Paul is answering questions raised by the Corinthians themselves. Each new section is introduced by the phrase translated ``Now about" or ``Concerning". The subjects Paul covers are

about marriage (7:1-24) and virgins (7:25-40),

about food offered to idols (8:1-11:1),

about the covering of women's heads in church (11:2-16),

about the problem of abuse at the Lord's Table (11:17-34),

about spiritual gifts (12-14, and these three chapters are the context of chapter 13!),

about the physical resurrection (15:1-58),

about the collection for the saints (16:1ff).

Try to identify the questions which the Corinthians have asked. Sum up the answers Paul gives.

For EACH of these issues we now need to think – DOES THIS STILL APPLY TODAY?

You can find the full text of this course at www.pbthomas.com link to "Handy Extra Learning Packs."

6. Theory into Practice II

To gain more experience through Case Studies for Exegesis and Interpretation

Don't forget the guidelines given earlier in Unit 4 on page 10.

Straightforward

1 Corinthians 10:13; James 5:13-20;

Interesting

1 Timothy 2:9-15; Colossians 2:16-3:4

You may like to read some of them and think about what they mean for us today. You might like to do a little research on one or two passages.

The BOOK LIST leaflet also includes an APPENDIX which contains some hints on understanding these passages.

7a. Issues in the Gospels - Parables

The Kingdom of God is here!

Jesus came as the Jewish Messiah, God's 'Anointed One', the King Who is to Come, to bring God's chosen people deliverance from their enemies and to bring in the Reign of God on earth, putting right the wrongs of 'this present age' and bringing in all the blessings of 'the age to come'. We saw earlier that this was the heart of Jesus's message,

"The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News." (Mark 1:15)

We think of a 'kingdom' as the place or the people over which which a king rules. But the word Jesus used in Aramaic describes much more the things a king DOES. 'The Kingdom of God (or of heaven)' refers to God's ACTIONS as King over His world - GOD'S KINGLY RULE.

Jesus brought 'God's Rule as King' in WORDS, preaching and teaching about God and salvation. and forgiving sins which only God could do!

He also brought 'God's Rule as King' in ACTIONS - healing the sick and driving out demons, and showing God's love to everybody, even tax collectors like Matthew.

WHAT ARE PARABLES and HOW DO THEY WORK?

A parable can be any comparison, including a simile or a riddle. But we tend to think about parables mostly in terms of the stories Jesus told. Jesus's parables are much more than easy "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning". Many of them needed explanations, and most ended with a punchline which demanded a response.

"He who has ears, let him hear," Jesus said. **Parables revealed truth to those who accepted Him as King, but hid truth from those who refused to believe in Jesus and His message.** The Parable of the Sower (Mk 4:1-20) is a parable about parables. It teaches that the response to the same 'seed' depends on the different kinds of 'soils'. So parables as 'seeds' act by demanding a verdict, to show up what kind of 'soil' the listeners are.

Different parables teach different things. Can you suggest examples of parables which teach:-

- About how God acts as King?
- About how men should (or do) respond to God as King?
- About Jesus Himself as the King?

Just a few parables are allegories, stories with a number of elements representing different people or events in the real world e.g. the Prodigal Son and the Elder Brother (Lk 15:11-32).

Can you suggest any others?

Most parables are not allegories but simple comparisons, with only ONE point of correspondence between the story and the real world. WE MUST BEWARE OF READING TOO MUCH MEANING INTO THE FINER POINTS OF A PARABLE, if they are only there to add colour and interest to the story. Not every detail is a symbol representing a profound truth!

Augustine saw the following points of correspondence in the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25ff.

the man	= Adam
Jerusalem	= Paradise, from which Adam fell
Jericho	= man's mortality
thieves	= the devil and his demons
priest and levite	= the ineffective ministries of the Old Testament,
Samaritan	= the Lord Jesus Christ
oil	= the comfort of hope
wine	= an exhortation to work joyfully(!)
donkey	= Christ's flesh
inn	= the Church
innkeeper	= the apostle Paul (of course!)
two coins	= the two commandments of love (or were they the sacraments?)

So then, what exactly did Christ mean when he told the lawyer, "*Go and do likewise*"

For what reasons could that kind of allegory NOT be a satisfactory interpretation?

P.G.Wodehouse defined a parable something like this:

"A parable is a rattling good yarn which drags you in and keeps you hooked but which keeps something up its sleeve which sneaks out and bops you one at the end!"

The secret of interpreting the parables correctly is to discover the RESPONSE the parable was expected to produce in its original hearers, e.g. shock, guilt, commitment.

TO UNDERSTAND ANY PARABLE WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE PUNCHLINE
--

Questions:

1. What was the punchline of the parable of the Good Samaritan? How might we retell that parable today?
2. Does the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19ff) prove that Hell as everlasting suffering really exists?
3. Does the Parable of the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1ff) encourage dishonesty?
4. What grounds are we given in the Parable of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8) to make us confident that God will answer our prayers?

7b. Issues in the Gospels - Miracles

The Kingdom of God is here!

We saw earlier how Jesus brought "God's Rule as King" in WORDS, preaching and teaching about God and salvation. and forgiving sins which only God could do!

He also brought "God's Rule as King" in ACTIONS - healing the sick and driving out demons, and showing God's love to everybody, even tax collectors like Matthew.

MIRACLES

Jesus's miracles were NOT intended to PROVE to anyone that He was God or that His message was true. Jesus refused to give proof to anyone (Mark 8:11-12). If miracles were intended to be that, they failed! In fact at that time there were other "miracle workers" in Palestine, and Jesus could seem to be just one among many.

Some miracles did act as "signs" that Jesus is King, NOT to produce faith in unbelievers but to strengthen believers' faith. As such miracles did serve a secondary function of authenticating Jesus's message to those who were already believers.

Can you suggest some examples of the part faith played in the miracles? (e.g. Mark 2:5; 5:34 and 36; John 14:12)

Rather than being "proof", most miracles were concrete examples of God acting as King in love and power in His world, repairing the damage done by sin. The primary function of the miracles was to demonstrate the Kingly Rule of God in actions. So miracles were evidence of the divine authority in Jesus's MINISTRY, rather than necessarily proofs of the divinity of Christ's PERSON.

"But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God then the Kingdom of God has come upon you."
(Matt 12:28)

Christ's miracles were accomplished by the power of the Holy Spirit as the inevitable out-workings of the Kingly Rule of God breaking in on the sin-spoilt world, bringing in the blessings of "the age to come". Healings removed suffering and restored life. Driving out demons released men and women from the hold of evil. However SOME miracles might still best be understood as prophetic symbolism illustrating an aspect of the Kingdom of God.

The chief problem in interpreting miracle stories arises as we try to apply them to ourselves. Should we expect God to work in such ways in our lives or not? This will affect considerably the conclusions we draw from such stories.

Some have argued that miracles must have ceased when the Early Church died out, since their only purpose was to authenticate the message of Jesus and of the Apostles. That view is surely mistaken, and does not fit with history. On the contrary, if miracles are concrete examples of the love and power in the Kingly Rule of God, then surely they are to be expected wherever and whenever the Kingdom is proclaimed in love and in power.

Questions

1. Should Christians expect to be able to walk on water? (Mk 6:45-52)
2. How do the "signs" in John's Gospel fit in with the understanding of miracles above?
3. How should we apply John 14:12-14 to our church life today?

8. Practice Makes Perfect!

Further experience through Case Studies for Interpretation

Remember, as we said earlier, that there are three kinds of problem passages:

- (i) some where it is hard to understand what the author was saying to his first readers,
- (ii) others where it is hard to work out whether or not the passage applies to us today, and if so how,
- (iii) others which make life difficult because they don't fit very easily into our overall understanding of the Bible, (or into what we want the Bible to say!)

Half the battle in interpreting the Bible is successfully recognising which kind of problem we are facing. Here are a selection of rather more difficult Bible verses and passages, and they include at least one example of each of these kinds of problem.

Tricky

Luke 11:5-8, Heb 6:4-6, 2 Thess 2:1-9, Matt 5:17-20, Rom 9:25-32

Only for the brave

Revelation 20, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Jude 5-11

You may like to read some of these passages and think about what they mean for us today. You might like to do a little research on one or two passages. Indeed, you may well get a bit stuck if you don't.

BE WARNED! Some passages are "problem passages" simply because they do not fit into our neat systematic theologies. We **MUST NEVER** twist a passage to mean what it could never have meant to its original author. You don't do a jigsaw by cutting pieces into a different shape so they can fit in the hole you happen to want to fill!

POST SCRIPT

I hope you have enjoyed this exploration of principles of Biblical Interpretation. I try to follow them in all my preaching and teaching. If you are looking at a particular passage, you might like to see how I have approached it by searching for it among the sermons at www.pbthomas.com/blog.

I am always happy to discuss the Bible face to face or by email peter@pbthomas.com.

Be doers of the word – not hearers only

Never forget that understanding the Bible correctly is not an end in itself, but only a stage on the way to hearing God speak to us through His Word, and allowing His word to shape our lives!

APPENDIX

Examples of Exegesis and Interpretation I - Some Hints to Unit 4

"Straightforward Texts"

Luke 6:20-26

We read it, but "spiritualise" it. Why do we find it do hard to believe that God is interested in the materially poor and disadvantaged, and angry with the rich and powerful?

John 9:3 IVP New Bible Commentary p. 949.

The meaning is clear. But must we conclude that God purposed the man's blindness so that his healing could bring God glory? Isn't that rather a cruel God?

Mark 14:22-25 IVP New Bible Dict. Vol 2 p. 913 (Lord's Supper).

"This is my body." Literal, or symbolic language? Literal leads us to transubstantiation and the Catholic Mass, or perhaps Luther's consubstantiation - the real presence of Christ "in and under" the bread. We prefer symbolic - but why?

John 21:15-17 IVP New Bible Commentary p. 966.

Translation is all-important. There are two different words translated "love". Jesus changes from demanding God's standard (agape) to what Peter offers (philia).

"Interesting Texts"

Acts 5:1-11

What it says is very clear. How on earth do we apply it? Should ALL events in Acts continue in the Church today? (See Fee and Stuart chapter 6.

Matthew 12:30-32

What sin is Jesus referring to? How can we be sure we have not committed it?

John 15:7,16; 16:23-24

Are these promises we may claim for ourselves today in every circumstance? If not, why not? Do faith and obedience guarantee answers to prayer? Do we just lack faith?

Examples of Exegesis and Interpretation II - Some Hints to Unit 6

"Straightforward Texts"

1 Corinthians 10:13

CONTEXT! See 10:1-13. This is no comfortable promise but a powerful challenge. The way of escape is there. Not "You MAY take it" but "You OUGHT TO take it" OR ELSE!

James 5:13-20

Does this suggest an example we MAY follow or a pattern we MUST follow? Are "elders" (v.14) a New Testament command for all churches? Is anointing with oil (v.14) essential? Does this only apply to the very few illnesses (v.15-16) which are directly due to specific sin?

"Interesting Texts"

1 Timothy 2:9-15

God's word for all time, taken literally, or general principles, or only appropriate for then? The problem of Cultural Relativity or excessive literalism or liberal woolliness? This is a key passage for the church of the 21st Century.

Colossians 2:16-3:4

New Moon Festivals and angel-worship are not usually problems for us. So what do the principles behind this passage have to say to Christians today?

Practice makes Perfect - Some Hints to Unit 8

"Tricky texts"

Luke 11:5-8

This passage could be used as an extended example. Different interpretations abound. This one comes from K. Bailey's Poet and Peasant pp. 119-133.

Why does the friend get up? Is it the man's BOLDNESS or his PERSISTENCE or his IMPORTUNITY (whatever that is!)? OR have we in the West always misunderstood the parable? Is it really all about the sense of honour an oriental friend would lose if he refused?

Grammatically the quality of boldness/persistence/importunity/shamelessness clearly belongs to the man INSIDE, not the one outside (i.e. to God, not to the person praying). In a Middle Eastern culture the need to "avoid shame" would be paramount. From living in that culture, Bailey suggests this interpretation.

Jesus is painting the picture of an unimaginable situation. Of course the man inside will get up to help -

(i) because of the importance of the duty of hospitality shared by the whole community to entertain a guest

(ii) because the man inside would be put to shame and lose his sense of honour if he refused - he would lose face.

So in the same way, of course God will answer prayer, not because of anything to do with us (boldness, persistence, need or anything else) but because of HIS honour and glory and for the sake of His Name.

Note the 2011 NIV translation picks this up as it offers the alternative translation, "yet to preserve his good name."

Hebrews 6:4-6 Different Commentaries give different answers!

Can a Christian be "Saved and Lost" through apostasy? Or are we "Once Saved, Always Saved" (as R.T.Kendall's book says)? Warning passages are very difficult to interpret. Some would say that the language of warnings, where extreme consequences are suggested to deter the reader, need not imply that the average reader is in imminent danger of facing those extreme consequences. They might even reflect a purely hypothetical situation. (A parent may warn, "Don't go near the cliff or you'll fall over and be killed". That doesn't mean that the parent would just stand by and let the child die.)

On the other hand we all know professed Christians who are "backsliding". We must bear in mind the context of the rest of the Bible, but not distort the text to suit our own theologies. Try comparing this passage with 1 John 5:16-17, Romans 8:28-39, John 6:35-40, John 10:27-30, 1 John 1:8-9.

2 Thess 2:1-9

A good commentary will introduce you to the many different ideas about the meaning of "the man of lawlessness". This may be more reliable to help us understand what Paul was actually talking about than certain sensational paperbacks.

Matthew 5:17-20

This passage is central to our understanding of the Christian's relationship to the Jewish Law. Christ "did not come to abolish the Law", so are we obliged to live by all the Old Testament commandments? We don't, but why not? In what ways did Christ come "to fulfil the law"?

Romans 9:25-32

The destiny of God's chosen people Israel is controversial, and this passage is usually misunderstood. Has Israel been completely replaced by the church, or does God still have plans for those people and that land?

"Only for the brave!"

No hints here. You're on your own now!

A BOOK LIST

A very good book on Biblical Interpretation at this level and very well worth buying is:

***How to Read the Bible For All Its Worth* G.D.Fee and D.Stuart (4th Edition Zondervan 2014)**

The companion volume giving an excellent overview of each Bible book is:

***How to Read the Bible Book by Book* G.D.Fee and D.Stuart (4th Edition Zondervan 2014)**

A. THE PLACE TO START - A GOOD TRANSLATION

Translations and mistranslations come in three basic forms:

Literal - keeping as close as possible to the original language, word order and grammar (e.g. New American Standard Bible). This can produce very unusual English!

Paraphrase - representing the ideas from the original, rather than the exact words (e.g. Living Bible, New Living Translation, The Message). This can be very inaccurate.

Dynamic Equivalent - Trying to express what was originally written accurately, but "as it would have been written today" (e.g. New International Version, Good News Bible, Contemporary English Version).

The Dynamic Equivalent will usually give the "best" translation. The New International Version is a more Literal form and the Good News Bible a more Free version. It is always valuable to study from more than one translation, and NIV (or New Revised Standard Version) with GNB is a good combination. For a lively insight, J.B. Phillips' translation of the New Testament is excellent.

The Living Bible and The Message can be too free. Some feel that theological bias sometimes spoils the New English Bible. The AV translated less reliable versions of the original texts, into English words which sometimes no longer mean the same. The New King James is still based on less reliable texts! Beware!

A Bible with **CROSSREFERENCES and TEXTUAL NOTES** is very useful for study. Thompson Chain Reference is good but the Scofield Chain Reference system has a theological bias.

A **CONCORDANCE** is essential for any serious Bible student. It lists the references to words in the Bible. Some “Study Bibles” have simple and useful concordances. Concordances are now available based on modern translations (RSV and NIV), but the more comprehensive ones are still those based on the AV. The most useful concordances are not those based on the English text but those which list references according to the original Greek or Hebrew words as well as the translations. Young's or Cruden's are the best, but only buy what you know you would use.

Computer Bibles incorporating cross-references and search tools / concordances are now excellent. I use the Logos software from www.logos.com Only buy what you would actually use!

B. FINDING OUT THE BACKGROUND - RESOURCES

We cannot be sure to interpret the Bible properly if we do not know a little of the backgrounds of the original authors and their readers. Often just a little insight into the history or the geography, the economics or the politics in Bible times can make difficult passages clearer.

Reference works containing short articles on a range of topics can help enormously in our understanding. Highly recommended are:

The IVP Illustrated Bible Dictionary OR *The Lion Handbook to the Bible*.

There are more detailed resources from IVP e.g. their *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. These also include valuable articles on the books of the Bible, which deal with questions of authorship and dating and give outlines of the structure and the major themes of the different books. The Dictionary (surprise!) also gives meanings and usage of Bible words.

C. CHECKING UP - COMMENTARIES

The most helpful aid when you are grappling with a particular passage in the Bible is a commentary, which deals with the book verse by verse and section by section. It is a mistake to reach for a commentary until we have first given some thought to the passage ourselves. But then a commentary can be very useful in answering our questions and warning us of others we should have asked.

Commentaries are not sermons. Their task is to help us understand what the Biblical text means in its original context, not how it applies to us today, although some try to do a bit of both. A Commentary on the whole Bible is very useful for reference, e.g. *IVP New Bible Commentary*. The IVP Bible Background Commentaries on the OT and on the NT are also very helpful

I recommend various SERIES of commentaries: The Bible Speaks Today series and the Tyndale Commentaries (both IVP) and the older Daily Study Bible series by William Barclay. Tom Wright has written an excellent popular series on Bible Books “for everyone” as well as more academic works under the name of N.T.Wright.

D. PIECING THE JIGSAW - DOCTRINAL GUIDES

Explain the Scriptures by the Scriptures.” (Clement of Alexandria)

On the inspiration of the Bible and the historical evidence for its reliability, the following books are very useful.

F.F.Bruce *The New Testament Documents: are they reliable?*

J.N.D.Anderson *Christianity - the Witness of History*

Michael Green *The Authority of Scripture* (Falcon Booklet)