

The Functional Authority of Scripture in the Church

One conviction that the Church has held in common throughout her history and development is the central role that Scripture performs in the life of each Christian and in the community of God. The statement of faith for most Christian churches contains, with subtle variations in wording, the bold declaration that the Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit and authoritative for the Church in matters of life and doctrine. Through this primer, we will attempt to discuss the broad brush strokes of what that statement means and how it can be applied in such a way that we are built into “the unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:13).¹

AUTHORITY

The Bible does not explicitly claim to be an officially authoritative book, but instead simply demands to be obeyed as the Word of God. We must be careful about what we mean when we speak of the authority of Scripture for its authority is actually representative. Scripture clearly declares that all authority belongs to God. He is subject to none, including any book written by men. He alone carries all authority, and as such, is Himself the final authority in all matters pertaining to life and doctrine.

"The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all." Psalm 103:19

"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.'" Matthew 28:18

"...he raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." Ephesians 1:20b-23

At the same time, God’s authority is not without a voice in the earth, but is constantly communicated to us. God does this by proclamation and the demonstration of His Spirit. In other words, the Kingdom of God comes to humanity primarily through God’s actions and His words. Though not limited to the pages of Scripture, this word/act revelation is recorded definitively in the Bible. God continues to speak and act authoritatively, but such actions are only discernible to us through the litmus test of Scripture.

Words, therefore, are central to the expression of His government. Rejection of His words is tantamount to rejection

¹All Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV

of Him and rebellion against His authority. It is in this sense that Scripture functions as authoritative in the life of the Church.

*"If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak." **John 12:47-49***

*"And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked." **1 John 2:3-6***

Furthermore, these words do not just inform, but also create the reality of which they speak. God's words in Scripture are not as much official rulings on controversial matters as powerful declarations that accomplish His will. God is not just revealing truth to us through Scripture; He is powerfully bringing His Kingdom into this earth.

*"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." **Isaiah 55:10-11***

Likewise, the Bible is not just filled with words that God has spoken in the past. The Bible is the central content of what God is still saying. Until His words fulfill their purpose, they are still being sent. Our reading of the Bible should be done in a proper fear of the Lord and faith in His power to accomplish all that He declares.

Thus, the authority of Scripture is given to it by God; or rather, God is the final authority who operates by and through the Scriptures. In regard to the Bible, one could repeat the words of Paul when speaking about political authorities:

*"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God." **Romans 13:1***

We should not leave the subject of the authority of Scripture without briefly mentioning the roles of reason, tradition and experience. These three issues, at various times and in some branches of the Church, have been and still are offered as authorities alongside Scripture. They have not necessarily been declared as rival authorities to the Bible, but instead, as authoritative additions to and interpretations of the Scripture. While each of these factors are helpful, if not essential, to our understanding of the Bible, we must avoid speaking of them as authoritative in a similar sense to Scripture itself.

Reason is best regarded as a guide in understanding the Scripture as authoritative. While the Enlightenment envisioned reason as a rival authority, the Christian maintains that no such rivalry exists. Reason is not an autonomous authority equal to the Bible, but the means by which we are saved from making the Bible say whatever we want. It keeps us from fanciful and private interpretations. It aids our reading of the Bible by harmonizing the Scripture, noting context and cultural considerations, taking into account the discoveries of other sciences, etc. N.T. Wright offers us a helpful analogy:

"Reason' is more like laws of harmony and counterpoint: it does not write tunes itself, but it forms the language within which tunes make powerful sense...It is the necessary adjunct, the vital tool, for making sure we are truly listening to scripture and tradition rather than to the echoes of our own voices. It is also an essential way of

making sure we are listening to one another...”²

Tradition is properly appreciated as the understanding of the Bible that the leaders of the Church have held throughout her long history. Similar to reason, it is not an authority equal to Scripture, nor does it control its interpretation. It is the means by which we enable the leaders of the Church in times past to have a seat at the table with us as we discuss the Bible’s meaning. It avails us to their substantial gifts and insights. We would be wise to give it a proper hearing and appropriate weight in our attempts to interpret and submit to the authority of Scripture. However, a traditional interpretation of the Bible is not necessarily the authoritative meaning of a passage.

Experience, due in large measure to the rise of existentialism, has gained a large following as an authority in determining what is true. Experience is often appealed to as a means of proving veracity. The problem here lies in the order. Experience should be and is a fruit of truth, but it is not its root. In other words, Biblical truth will prove itself in the experience of a Christian. However, an authentic experience does not thereby prove that it represents truth. My child may truly experience fear in the dark, but that does not mean that there is, in reality, anything to fear. To use a Biblical example, Saul truly received a message from God through Samuel when visiting a witch, but this authentic experience ‘from God’ does not prove that visiting witches is a proper means of seeking God’s will. Probably, we will find no more sobering warning of the danger of trusting in experience than in the words of Jesus Himself:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” - Matthew 7:21-23

INSPIRATION

“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

1 Thessalonians 2:13

The Bible is authoritative only because it is inspired by God. It is the fact that Scripture is Godbreathed that gives it a decisive ruling voice in the Church.

“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” - 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Within the words of Scripture, we are encountering the very Word of God. As His Word, the words of Scripture authoritatively communicate His will.

While there has been much debate about the exact nature of inspiration, most churches have understood the inspiration of Scripture to extend to every part and as originally given. Likewise, the majority of churches believe the manuscripts behind our current translations to be reliable copies of the original documents.

In addition, the inspiration of Scripture is generally considered to bear the marks of culture without its message thereby being corrupted. It seems self-evident that Scripture was not dictated in such a way that the human author was merely a keyboard on which God typed His message. Rather, what is written is both the free composition of the author and the very words of God. Benjamin Warfield’s classic explanation still holds true:

²N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today*, Harper One Publishing, 2005, p. 121

“Representations are sometimes made as if, when God wished to produce sacred books which would incorporate His will - a series of letters like those of Paul, for example - he was reduced to the necessity of going down to the earth and painfully scrutinizing the men he found there, seeking anxiously for the one, who, on the whole, promised best for His purpose; and then violently forcing the material he wished expressed through him, against his natural bent, and with as little loss from his recalcitrant characteristics as possible. If God wished to give His people a series of letters like Paul’s, he prepared a Paul to write them, and the Paul he brought to the task was a Paul who spontaneously would write just such letters...What if the colours of the stained glass window have been designed by the architect for the express purpose of giving to the light that floods the cathedral precisely the tone and quality it receives from them.”³

Any attempt to allow the Bible to function as an authority in the Church must take this method of inspiration into account in its interpretation.

INTERPRETING BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

With this common foundational understanding, one would assume that the Church would be able to achieve a great degree of unity in its understanding of the Faith and in its functioning together as a body. For many years, this seemed to be the case. However, that is not the situation we find ourselves in today.

One of the peculiar characteristics of the Church in the last 100 years or so has been the rate of her division into differing groups. While these types of statistics are hard to track with precision, we can say with some confidence that there were less than 100 Christian denominations operating in the world at the turn of the 20th century, and many of those denominations were national churches stemming from the same theological family. In all, there were approximately 10 major branches of the Church.⁴ At present, there are over 40,000 denominations in operation, with most of those having no ties to a broader theological family. While the Church took around 1900 years to divide into 100 groups, it has divided into at least 39,000 parts in just over the last 100 years! The radical disintegration of the unity of the Church is unquestionably one of the biggest blights on the message of Christ during our time.

What is staggering about this fact is that the vast majority of these denominations claim the Bible not only to be inspired by God, but to be their authority in faith and practice. This reality may explain why the Church held to some degree of unity for the first 1900 years, but is inexplicable in light of the rapid division within the Church in recent years. Compounding the perplexity is the fact that most, though certainly not all, of these groups came into existence through a claim that they were honoring Scripture as their authority (usually in reference to a particular interpretation or practice) over against another group who were, ironically, making the same claim.

How is such a discouraging situation possible in spite of widespread agreement about the authority of Scripture? Who is to blame? The unsuspecting scapegoat is what is commonly known as exegesis. While most churches claim the Bible as authoritative, they are quick to add, in practice if not in an official statement, that it is only authoritative as properly interpreted. It is only by rightly applying the principles of exegesis that we come to the correct interpretation of Scripture; and it is such correct interpretation that effectively functions as authoritative in the Church. What is far from coincidental, if we are being honest, is that the ‘correct’ interpretation is shockingly consistent with our own church’s interpretation of Scripture. Is it possible that blame lies more with our tendency to manipulate the exegetical process in the direction of our preferred interpretation than we have cared to admit?

In reality, our division over Scripture has far less to do with our view of it as authoritative than with our work in understanding and applying it through our chosen hermeneutical lens. Therefore, any hope for substantial gain in the

³ B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1948, p. 155

⁴ Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Anabaptist, Moravian, Wesleyan, Baptist and Pentecostal

unity of the Church would seem to lie more in the nitty gritty area of building agreement as to how to interpret the Bible than in philosophical discussions about the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

CHALLENGES TO UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Any attempt to receive the Bible as authoritative and to build agreement in interpreting Scripture is made complicated by many factors, seven of which we outline below:

First, the Bible is not the ‘final authority’ in the sense that we can appeal to it in answer to all of our questions. There are many issues that are not even brought up in the pages of Scripture. It seems that the Bible gives us the questions as well as the answers. In other words, it highlights for us the questions we should be asking; those that are most important for faith and salvation. Then, it proceeds to answer those questions. In this way, it provides us with specific truths necessary for salvation and guiding principles that direct us through all the parts of our lives.

Second, Scripture does not deliver its message in the didactic manner to which we are accustomed in our normal experience of learning. It is not in the style of a classroom lecture. It lacks the simple question and answer form of a catechism. It is very different from the precise and detailed instruction of a law book. It does not gather its subject material together in any organized way like a systematic theology. It is, in certain moments, relatively plain instruction; but mostly, it is historical narrative, poetry, prophecy, apocalyptic literature, parable and story. Further, as noted earlier, God’s revelation in Scripture comes to us both as actions and as words. Our approach to understanding the Bible must take into account the way that it has been delivered to us.

Third, we read the words of Scripture from a distance. We are thousands of years away from its original writing. We are not able to ask the authors what they meant, or even rely on the assumption that we would instinctually understand them because we share a similar background. The Bible was written in languages that are foreign to us and are no longer commonly used. It was composed in the context of a culture that is equally unfamiliar to us, and no longer completely accessible. It contains geographical references different than our own, and was written from a worldview that we do not share with the authors. In all these ways and more, the Bible is truly a foreign book. Our understanding of how this distance affects Scripture will determine our approach in interpreting the Bible and how we receive it as authoritative:

“In addition to the question of the sense and degree of ‘conditioning’ of culture on the Bible is the question of the sense and degree by which the Scriptures ‘reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos’ of antiquity. Does reflect mean that the Bible teaches as true, outmoded and incorrect views of life, history and cosmos?...Or does ‘reflect’ mean that we can read between the lines of Scripture noting such things as phenomenal language and see a cultural setting in which a culture-transcending message is given?...The ultimate issue here is this: to what extent is the Bible’s relevance and authority limited by changing human structures and perspectives in the Biblical text.”⁵

Fourth, the above mentioned distance has given rise to the exegetical playground of historical reconstruction. It has become vogue to attempt to reconstruct the cultural and historical situation of the time of the writing of a passage of Scripture. While such attempts can be helpful and are to some degree necessary (see below), the inherent difficulties and uncertainties must be acknowledged. Historical works from the times of the writing of Scripture lack the precision needed for such reconstructions to be completely reliable. They are often sketchy, at times contradictory, and always open to interpretation. What is most disconcerting is how these historical reconstructions are often used.

⁵ R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture*, Intervarsity Press, 1977, p. 103

In most cases, they are employed either to limit the application of a passage that one is not inclined to practice, or to overcome what would otherwise be the more obvious understanding of the passage. If one struggles with the meaning of a text, the easy answer lies in constructing a historical and cultural context that allows one to interpret the verse(s) in whatever way one chooses. Such interpretations are bolstered by the existence of ‘experts’ who agree with these endless varieties of possible historical reconstructions. The result is that the modern interpreter, based on his or her reconstruction of the time, concludes that he/she knows what the Biblical author ‘meant’ to say, usually by importing some additional understanding into the text to change and, at times, even contradict what the normal use of the words would actually mean. What ends up being decisive in interpretation is uncertain historical conjecture, rather than the actual words we have been given. The authority of the Bible is severely hampered by this process.

Fifth, the emergence of higher criticism has resulted in an explosion of differing interpretations and readings of the Bible, and in an increasingly radical disintegration of unity among scholars. The pressure on the scholastic community is often to come up with a new and novel interpretation that will lead to one being published, rather than on serving the church with faithful interpretations of the text. Such a chaotic environment has created at least three difficulties in interpreting the Scriptures:

1. With an endless variety of scholars one can marshal to defend any particular view, the [lit.] unorthodox scholar is not providing food for the leaders of the church, or even accountability in faithful interpretation, but rather ammunition for one’s private view.
2. The sheer ludicrousness of some scholastic interpretations has led many leaders to reject the idea of theological training as helpful in leading a church, the result being a plethora of churches in which the main teacher(s) has little training or skill in the hermeneutical process.
3. There has emerged a loss of belief in the ability to come to agreement on matters of interpretation. As I recently heard one church leader remark, “Even the scholars can not agree and they are smart; how can we expect to come to a common interpretation?”

Sixth, we have been shaped by many presuppositions that we bring to the reading of the Bible, which influence our thinking and often control what we allow the Bible to say. Such presuppositions are the product of our worldview. Like glasses, we are not usually conscious of our epistemological views, but they are always influencing our perspective. We will consider a few of them, defining them at their popular application rather than their philosophical roots.

Individualism - The belief that the basic unit is the free, autonomous individual. Truth is the possession of the individual: “For something to be true, it must be proven true to me.” Individualism is strongly supported by the concept of innate ideas: the belief that we know all reality within ourselves and that, therefore, all truth will be self-evident or innately recognizable to us individually. We are unsuspecting of ourselves, but maintain suspicion toward any person or group that tells us what we must believe. The freedom of the individual is to be preserved, and submission to an interpretation coming from an authority is rejected. We choose the content of our faith according to our personal conscience and conviction. For the Protestant, this view is strengthened by the inaugural moment of our movement, when Martin Luther boldly declared:

“Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason--I do not accept the authority of popes and of councils, for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe for us, nor open to us. God help me. Amen”⁶

However, it is unlikely that Martin Luther had the modern individualist interpretation of his statement in mind. Indeed, later in his life he is attributed with the quip, “I am afraid we have replaced one pope with thousands.”

⁶ Rolan H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther, Abingdon Press, 1978, p. 144

Pragmatism - The belief that if something succeeds, then it must be good. The definition of success may vary, but it usually includes some sort of numerical evaluation. Truth, therefore, is at the mercy of success, which looks alarmingly similar to popularity. If a declaration or approach to life (and, we could add, church) attracts people, then it must be good. Truth is mainly the declaration of technique that will accomplish the desired results.

Egalitarianism - The belief that because all people are created equal, such equality must be defined as equal rights, equal roles and equal opportunity for participation. Injustice and prejudice is seen as the drawing of any lines in opportunities and participation.

Deconstructionism - The belief that there is no objective truth or meaning. A text has no meaning other than the one the reader gives to it. Therefore, we can not know what a text truly means, but only our interpretation of what it means to us. Ironically, authoritative interpretations are thrown out *a priori*. All that is left to us is private interpretation, i.e. “That is *your* interpretation...”

Existentialism - The belief that truth and humanity can only be known through authentic experience. It is at its heart a protest against systems, academic philosophy and the rule of reason. Truth is more caught than taught. We come to know the reality of life through becoming authentic and examining our experience. Life is to be lived, not studied. Whatever causes me to feel connected to God or feels authentic to who I am is how I live the Christian life.

The Platonic Good - Plato taught that there exists “the Good”. This Good represents principles of the ideal. All, including the gods, are subject to these principles. Therefore, principle is effectually god. For example, God no longer defines what love is; rather, love (according to our understanding of its ideal) determines who God must be.

Pluralism - The belief that all views are equally valid and true. Unity is impossible in terms of agreement on truth or doctrine. Instead, one should look for a unity of heart. This type of unity is accomplished through tolerance and appreciation of differences. We should not tell another how to believe, but should protect his or her right to believe differently. What dominates exegesis is how the Bible could be interpreted, rather than how it should be interpreted:

“But a text which is treated as endlessly flexible and capable of multiple contradictory readings either becomes a mere tool of dogma and ideology, or a reflex of unrestrained egotistic pluralism.”⁷

Seventh, the division within the Church has become systemic. Groups, whether they be churches or any other type of social group, are self-preservationist by nature. They are concerned with their continued existence. Unfortunately, this has pervaded the way Christians view one another, often resulting in an “us vs. them” mentality. Even where fruitful discussions on issues of interpretation might otherwise result in greater unity, skepticism and fear of the consequences from one’s denominational group can stall such progress. Holding to certain interpretations is necessary for the preservation of a group’s identity and for the perpetuation, if not justification, of its existence. In such cases, attempts at building unity in the Church are often offset by loyalty to one’s denomination or stream.

Much more could be said, but these seven challenges should suffice in convincing us of the difficulty of the path that lies ahead of any group of people attempting to grow in their common submission to the authority of Scripture.

⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *New Testament Theology: The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 4

However, the effort is still worth it. Therefore, we will look at the main elements in the exegetical process in an attempt to find a common approach to the Scripture.

DEVELOPING SOUND EXEGESIS

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.” - 2 Timothy 2:15

Hermeneutics is the term often used to describe the art and science of interpreting a text. Within this field, the critical process of determining meaning is commonly called *exegesis*. The etymology of the term *exegesis* comes from the root “to draw out.” It is the attempt to draw out of a text its meaning and intention. The opposite of *exegesis* is *eisegesis*, which refers to reading into a text our own thoughts, biases and presuppositions. *Exegesis* is a process involving three main steps: translation, interpretation and application.

Translation

Before we can attempt to interpret a passage, we must be sure we are dealing with an accurate translation of the text. While some may be able to work directly with the original languages, most of the people we care for and work with will not. Accordingly, the bulk of our work in making clear common interpretations will be done within the English language. We will fail before we start if we are not beginning with words and meanings equivalent to those in the original language.

Translation does not occur before interpretation, but as an essential part of the process itself. Translation can not be done without consideration of meaning, e.g., whether *sarx*, in Romans 8, means ‘flesh’ or ‘sinful nature’. This process is not as simple as looking up a word in a dictionary and importing a meaning into the verse. Functionally, words do not have concrete meanings, but rather uses, i.e., how a word is used is what determines its meaning (e.g., what is the meaning of the word “cool”?). One does better to consider the ‘semantic field’ of a word by considering its usage within an author’s writing, within the rest of Scripture, and within the society of the time. Equally, we must consider the grammatical function of each word and phrase in the passage, identifying and acknowledging tense, voice, modifiers, etc. Once we have an accurate translation, we can continue the work of interpretation in earnest.

Interpretation

Since the functional authority of the Bible in the church is determined by its interpretation, it is paramount that we learn how to become good interpreters of Scripture. If we are committed to good *exegesis*, we must be mindful of the following essential elements:

- **Humility**

While this may seem rather obvious, it is often sorely lacking in practice. The root of the Hebrew word for pride is related to the idea of being engulfed in smoke. It is an inability to see clearly. Oftentimes, when we approach the Bible, our pride prevents us from seeing our own biases and presuppositions clearly. We are blinded to the motives under the surface that may corrupt our good intentions with regard to interpretation. We may think we know what a passage means before we examine it. We may come to the Bible being unprepared to accept certain interpretations. If this is the case, our conscious or sub-conscious goal can be to find a way to interpret the Bible as we want it to read, rather than truly drawing out its actual meaning.

The Bible is a message that addresses us from the outside. It should seem foreign, even troubling, to us at times. God’s thoughts are very different from our own.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” **Isaiah 55:8-9**

If we always ‘agree’ with our interpretations of the Bible, then pride and/or self-interest is most likely blinding us in some way. We may not be hearing God’s thoughts so much as our own thoughts in ‘God’s voice’. We must continually humble ourselves every time we come to the Bible, acknowledging that our need is to break out of the thinking of this world and be transformed:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” **Romans 12:2**

- **Faith**

Our approach to interpreting Scripture must be one of faith. Faith is, not only agreement, but also trust that what God has said is right and good. It means believing Scripture is the Word of God and trusting that God’s Word is powerful, authoritative, and correct. Biblical faith is rooted in this idea of trust as submission. This is the type of faith that Jesus commends. When a centurion came to ask Jesus to heal his servant, he said:

“Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, ‘Go,’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come,’ and he comes, and to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” **Matthew 8:8-9**

Jesus’ response is revealing as to the true nature of faith:

“When Jesus heard this, he marveled and said to those who followed him, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith” **Matthew 8:10**

Faith is seen in our belief in the Word of God as authoritative.

- **Submission**

When we read the Bible, we come with the intention of submitting to what it says. We are not acting upon the Scripture, testing and questioning it to see if we agree. God is acting on us through it, questioning, testing and building us into His image. The writer to the Hebrews makes our position clear:

“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.” **Hebrews 4:12-13**

The term translated “naked” in the above passage comes from a root meaning “to take by the throat”. It was used to refer to the sacrifice of an animal on the altar when the priest would pull the animal’s head back and expose its throat for the sacrificial knife. It was also used in reference to the fights of the gladiators, as the victor would lay the vanquished foe across his knee revealing the throat for the death blow. Such is our position before the Word of God. We come ready to be transformed in our thinking, so as to submit and obey.

- **The Holy Spirit**

If humility, faith and submission are going to be possible, then we need the presence and enabling of the Holy

Spirit. He is the author of the Book, so He alone knows what it means. As Thomas à Kempis taught, the Word is only rightly understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given. Certainly, we must work with all of our minds to understand the Bible; however, as we do, we must equally rely completely on Him for revelation. Paul clearly expresses our co-working with the Holy Spirit in this process:

“Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.” **2 Timothy 2:7**

We must not presume that the Holy Spirit will give us insight if we do not engage in the hard work of thinking. However, we must not assume our thinking will result in insight apart from His gracious gift of revelation. Indeed, we can not understand the Bible without the Spirit’s enabling:

“...these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. 'For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ.” **1 Corinthians 2:10-16**

- **Community**

The Bible must be privately read but its meaning is not the private possession of any interpreter. Any attempt to understand it must be done within the community of God. In particular, we must acknowledge that God has gifted certain people to help us in our understanding of Scripture. At the beginning of Ephesians 4, Paul makes clear that the maintaining of the unity of the Spirit is the clear responsibility of each individual Christian:

“I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” **Ephesians 4:1-3**

However, as he continues, Paul makes it equally clear that the unity of the Faith depends on our acknowledgment and reception of certain gifts:

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God”. **Ephesians 4:11-13**

God’s plan for His body to attain the unity of the Faith is through the giving and proper functioning of His gifts. This need for community is reinforced by Paul’s command to Timothy regarding teaching:

“...and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” **2 Timothy 2:2**

Paul did not want future teachers to come up with new ways of interpreting the truths he had declared. Rather, he wanted them to stay faithful to what he had actually said. Further, the meaning of his teaching was not the product of individual perspective (as one would say today, “What it means to me”). Instead, it was to

be that which had been entrusted to the Church, i.e., heard and understood by “many witnesses”. Teaching, therefore, is not the result of individual interpretation but faithfulness to the common understanding.

Therefore, all those looking to interpret Scripture should avail themselves of the works of systematic and biblical theologians, the understanding(s) of a passage held throughout Church history, and one’s current leaders and co-laborers in the Faith.

- **Context**

Martin Luther helped us greatly in his insistence that we interpret Scripture according to its *sensus literalis*. We should approach the Bible, as the Reformers referred to it, literally. The word literal comes to us from the Latin *littera* meaning letter. Therefore, a literal approach to interpretation is to interpret the Bible as literature and in a similar way to all human communication. The interpreter treats a passage according to the type of literature it is and according to the normal rules of grammar, syntax and context. Through this means, they taught that one may arrive at Scripture’s plain meaning.

This approach to interpretation is often referred to as the grammatico-historical method, focusing on the grammatical forms and historical contexts of written statements. To study the Bible contextually means we must consider the following elements:

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT - As has already been mentioned, each passage of Scripture was written into an historical and cultural setting. Such settings must be considered in the interpretation of a passage. In order to understand what Scripture means to us, we must begin with what it would have meant to them. We must consider the background of the author, the background of the recipient, the occasion and date of the writing, etc. However, a word of caution must be issued at this point. We must acknowledge that while every other context mentioned in this primer has been preserved for us by the providence of God within Scripture itself (the interpreter’s cultural context excepted), much of the historical and cultural context has not. One must therefore be wary of overturning what God has clearly given to us in the Bible with a questionable reconstruction that God did not inspire the original author to acknowledge or include. It is worrisome that, in our day, reconstructions that are clearly not inspired by God have become decisive in interpreting the inspired Word. We must always keep the weight of what a passage means on the side of the inspired text trusting that God, in His omniscience, would have included decisive cultural information that would overturn what He did inspire to be written.

THE INTERPRETER’S CULTURAL CONTEXT - This is a point often unmentioned in the interpretation of Scripture. Most exegetes lay much stress on how the culture of the day must be taken into account in understanding what a passage says. However, they often fail to take equally into account how their own culture affects their reading of the text. One must be aware of his/her own worldview, biases and agendas. Much interpretive work drips of the sad irony of dismissing interpretations, or even passages, based on the fact that they merely represent cultural bias, while one’s own interpretation is equally consistent with the current cultural bias. A major help in this process is to investigate the ways in which interpreters from other places and different times have understood the passage.

REDEMPTIVE CONTEXT - The Bible is a story of redemption that is progressive from beginning to end. It is filled with promise and fulfillment, type and antitype, teaching and further clarification of that teaching. Each passage must be interpreted in light of its place in the rest of the development of redemption,

and its application understood from the full perspective of progressive revelation in Scripture. While the meaning of burning one's house if mildew is found may be clear enough in its context, its place in redemptive history certainly gives it a different application in our day than when it was written.

CANONICAL CONTEXT - Each passage of Scripture has been placed within the canon of inspired books. By virtue of that, each passage is understood to agree with the rest of the books of the Bible, while also shedding light itself on what is written in the rest of Scripture. In other words, Scripture interprets Scripture, e.g., the explicit interprets the implicit, the didactic interprets the narrative and figurative, the New Testament interprets the Old Testament, etc. In books written by a common author, it is helpful to note how his own thoughts develop and explain each other. This process of harmonizing Scripture, also referred to as the analogy of the faith, must be taken into account in interpreting a passage.

CONTEXT OF THE BOOK - Another context that must be considered is the place of a passage within the book that it is found. Our interpretation should consider the general themes of the book and how those themes are subsequently outworked. What is the role of the passage within the function and theme of the book? What is the train of thought that immediately precedes and follows the passage? Is the same theme brought up in another part of the same book?

GENRE - In order to interpret a passage, we must first determine what genre of literature is being used. A poem would be interpreted differently than an historical narrative which, in turn, will be interpreted differently again from a parable. While this may seem a relatively simple task, the spectrum of diverse views of the book of Revelation (to give just one obvious example) proves that this is not always easy. Further challenging the interpreter, a single book of the Bible may utilize multiple genres of literature within its passages. To return again to the book of Revelation, it is, by its own declaration, an epistle, a prophecy and an apocalyptic book all at the same time.

IMMEDIATE CONTEXT - Eventually, the interpretation must be shown to rest on the actual passage itself. Having taken into account all of the above information, we attempt to determine the message of a passage. Our interpretation must evidently be seen to reflect the meaning, tenor and emphasis that is found within the text. What is the main point of the passage? What is its purpose? Is it a supporting text to a larger theme? We must pay special attention to the words within a passage. What type of genre do they indicate? Are there any literary devices or figures of speech? Of particular concern are the verbs and conjunctions within a passage and how they function grammatically. The ability to diagram sentences can be of significant help in determining the emphasis of a passage. In the end, our interpretation primarily rises and falls based on its consistency with the passage itself.

There is a relatively new approach to hermeneutics that has emerged in recent years that is a hermeneutic of trajectory. Traditional approaches to Biblical theology in the work of interpretation trace the trajectory or development of a theme throughout Scripture. Each theme is seen to progress as the canon of Scripture develops, building with further revelation throughout the Bible. The function and meaning of a passage is determined by its role in developing the theme it is proclaiming, as the interpreter takes into account what the Scripture has said before and after the passage under consideration. Traditionally, this task is accomplished within the canon of Scripture, understanding that the fulness of what God has chosen to reveal is in the Bible. Any attempts to develop the theme beyond the pages of Scripture must be proven to be consistent with what is actually written without adding to or taking away from the Bible.

In recent times, however, certain interpreters are suggesting that themes of Scripture should be developed in a way that effectually adds to the revelation contained in the Bible and, thereby, makes certain parts of the Bible redundant. This approach extends the trajectory of a theme beyond the close of the canon to what

the author supposedly would have written today or to a hidden meaning that the author meant to apply, e.g. when Paul told Timothy not to have women teach but to learn, he meant for them to teach; or when Paul stated there is neither male nor female, he was setting a trajectory of acceptance for homosexuality. Such an approach to Scripture is revisionist in nature inserting into the text a modern and foreign meaning. It is taking to oneself an authority similar to Jesus' by saying, in effect, "You have heard it said, but I say to you..."

Application

The goal of all interpretation is application and the job of exegesis is not done until we arrive clearly and firmly at how a passage is to be practiced in the life of the Church and of each individual Christian. Application takes what a passage said when it was written and transitions that to what it means for us today.

Much of the work of application is done in the process of contextually interpreting the passage as mentioned above. However, at times the application is not self-evident. Other considerations help determine the application of the passage. How are the verbs used within the text? Who is addressed in the text? Is the passage applicable only at a certain stage in the development of redemption, e.g., has the passage been fulfilled? Are there applications that are consistent with the passage and more relevant to our day? Do cultural considerations require a change in an application? Is the application being offered as a command or example?

We must consider one aspect of application that is responsible for much division within the Church: Is the life of the Church in the New Testament a pattern for the Church today or a unique and unrepeatable launching of the New Testament people of God? In other words, does the New Testament teach cessationism or does it provide an example to follow? The answer to this question usually operates on the level of presumption but highly influences our application of passages. It particularly determines the force of the narrative passages found in the Gospels and the book of Acts, but also has relevance to sections of the epistles. Our answer to this question determines our practice in a broad range of subjects ranging from the infilling and gifts of the Spirit, to our expression of church government and organization, to our practice of evangelism, and to many practices beyond.

Upon completing the process of interpretation, we should arrive, with a sense of faith and confidence, at the meaning of a passage and its application. At this point, submission to the authority of the Word of God becomes evident. If the Bible is our authority, then we are required to believe and practice the meaning of Scripture regardless of our personal agreement, preferences or even convictions. The question is never whether we like an interpretation or whether it seems right to us. On such occasions, the temptation is strong to find another interpretation. If we are honest, an able person can manipulate the context and even the passage itself to cause it to mean whatever he or she wants. It is never a question of how a passage can be interpreted. The issue at stake is whether an interpretation best reflects the normal meaning of a passage.

As has been mentioned above, we must be radically committed to avoiding eisegesis and practicing good exegesis. The unity of the Faith is built on this commitment and made manifest as we put it into practice together. For many modern Christians, a unified Church seems impossible. Many have given up on such a quest, opting for a unity of heart and divided faith and practice. In the face of such skepticism, we must have faith for God's purpose in unity to prevail. We should not settle for "agreeing to disagree". Such an approach falls pitifully short of Jesus' prayer that we would be one as He and the Father are one. Even on debatable issues, we are instructed to love one another and prefer one another, displaying both care and unity.

We need to lay our own hearts bare before God, allowing Him to search us and see if anything within us is resisting His work of unifying His Church. Paul's admonition needs to be heard again with hearts full of humility, submission and faith:

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” 1 Corinthians 1:10

Let us endeavor, by His mighty grace within each of us, to obey this command.

ABOUT ONE CHURCH MINISTRIES (OCM)

One Church Ministries administrates the care and equipping of local churches by Ephesians 4 ministries, currently led by the apostolic ministry of John C. Lalgee.

The goals of One Church Ministries

- To bring to maturity and effectively care for a God-determined number of local churches birthed through or adopted by OCM
- To influence the wider Church by way of resource and example.
- To raise up and release Ephesians 4 ministries.

