

## Interpreting the Bible Part 1

### How to Understand the Bible as God's Word

"How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth..."  
"Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light to my path..."  
"My heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end..."  
"May my cry come before you, Lord. Give me understanding according to your word..."  
- Prayers from Psalm 119

The word of the Lord in Scripture is more than just an abstract idea.  
We feed upon, ingest, and delight in it as we delight in honey, by tasting & chewing.

We delight in God's Word together in congregations as we...

- Sing it • Pray it • Set our hearts upon obeying God's Word • When we are in need •

When we cry out to the Lord, not just for our problems to be fixed, but to be given a new understanding according to your Word, as the psalmist says.

But there are a lot of misunderstandings and even conflicts that come up in how we understand the Word of God, how we approach Scripture, and different approaches to Scripture.

#### **Interpreting the Bible | [What does it mean to interpret the Bible as Christian Scripture?](#)**

Although it may seem like an obvious question, there are a lot of different ways to approach this.

Example #1: *the smorgasbord (or buffet)*

- I want a little bit of carrots here, a little bit of potato there.
- I want a little bit of self-esteem boost here. I want a little bit of encouragement about forgiveness here.
- Picking and choosing, but nothing central holding it together.

Example #2: *the Bible as secret knowledge*

- Looking into scripture to decode what is going to happen in the future, perhaps about future political events and when the end times might be coming with the second coming of Christ.
- Or other times, Christians approach the Bible for a diet plan. Since the Bible is *the answer book*, maybe it has that secret diet plan that will help me lose those, you know, 10, 20, 30 pounds that I'd like to lose.

Example #3: *the encouraging word*

- Christian radio stations/TV/podcasts, and even sermons that use scripture as a means of encouragement.
- Too often this way of interpreting the Bible, that it was written simply for encouragement, is good, but this misses out on the wider scope of the Bible telling us what we need to wrestle with, just as Jacob wrestled with the angel.

Example #4: *the Bible as Christian Scripture*

- A lot of scholars approach the Bible interested in ancient history or interested in ancient culture. And as valuable as that is, that's different from approaching the Bible as the Word of God.

**The Rule of Faith** | [So what does it mean to approach the Bible as the Word of God?](#)

Looking at early Christians, from the second century on, we have something called the rule of faith, which is a rule by which we interpret Scripture, looking to see what Scripture is doing in our lives together as a baptized community.

The basic idea of the rule of faith:

- We interpret Scripture on a pilgrimage of growing in conformity to Christ.
- We interpret Scripture as disciples of Christ, growing in love of God and love of neighbor.
- We interpret Scripture filled with the Spirit, looking forward to the day when we will see God face to face.

As a rule, then, if an interpretation of Scripture does not lead toward the love of God and love of neighbor, it's simply not a Christian interpretation of Scripture.

You may be doing some interesting interpretation of the Bible, but it's not interpreting this as Christian Scripture. Or if you have an interpretation of Scripture that is not leading you deeper into your life in Christ and conformity to Christ, again, that's not a Christian interpretation.

All interpretations of Scripture which are distinctively Christian will lead us deeper into the life and the way of Jesus Christ because that is our identity, people who have been united to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

**The reformed approach to scripture** | [What is a Reformed approach towards Scripture?](#)

A Reformed approach includes what I have already said about reading Scripture in light of Jesus Christ on this pilgrimage of coming to know God. But it also has some other

characteristic features.

\*The Belgic Confession |

<https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/belgic-confession>

*\*The Belgic Confession, written in 1561, owes its origin to the need for a clear and comprehensive statement of Reformed faith during the time of the Spanish Inquisition in the Lowlands. Guido de Brès, its primary author, was pleading for understanding and toleration from King Philip II of Spain who was determined to root out all Protestant factions in his jurisdiction. Hence, this confession takes pains to point out the continuity of Reformed belief with that of the ancient Christian creeds, as well as to differentiate it from Catholic belief (on the one hand), and from Anabaptist teachings (on the other).*

The Belgic Confession starts by saying that we know God by two books

- the book of creation
- the book of Scripture

This Confession affirms that in the book of creation, we have a beautiful book that we are to read as creatures of God. This book testifies to God's eternal power and divinity. But the result does not lead us to a saving knowledge of God. Instead, all these things are enough to convict us and to leave us without excuse. This is a reference to Paul in Romans 1:20.

*For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.” (Romans 1:20, NLT)*

On the one hand, Paul gives an exalted view of the creation, affirming how important both caring for and knowing the creation is. On the other, because we know about God and God's power through the creation, people are made without excuse for our sinfulness before God.

The Belgic Confession points to the second book, the book of Scripture, where God makes himself known to us more clearly through his holy and divine Word. It is as much as we need in this life **for God's glory and our salvation.**

So the idea here is that although **we can and should learn from science**, we can and should be attentive to learning **from all different sources in our human life**, as well as even in our knowledge of God, **but it is Scripture that will give us the clearest way and is the ultimate authority when it comes to our knowledge of God.**

In fact, the Belgic Confession goes on to say that we must not consider human writings, no matter how holy their authors, to be equal to these divine writings.

Therefore, we reject with our hearts everything that does not agree with this infallible rule (*Scripture*). So this means that even the church's polity (government/structures of order and leadership), and all other aspects of the church's life (apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, pastors) are underneath the authority of Scripture. No human construction (ministry/alliance/political party), **no human work has the authority that Scripture does.**

***Sola scriptura*** | [Scripture alone](#).

Now, some people might think that Scripture alone means that Scripture *alone* is what we should consult as Christians when we are in the Christian life. This idea would suggest that we shouldn't care what other Christians around the world think and we shouldn't care what Christians in earlier eras think. We just go to Scripture *alone*.

But that's never what *sola scriptura* has meant for the Reformed tradition. *Sola scriptura* doesn't mean that we read it alone as individuals. Instead, we should read Scripture as communities and listen to others who are reading Scripture, giving checks and balances to one another through the Spirit.

But **what *sola scriptura* does mean is that Scripture is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice.** This is so because the Christian way of reading and interpreting Scripture is believing that Jesus Christ speaks through Scripture by the Holy Spirit.

Because Christ is the head of the church, we believe that there can be no authority that is higher than Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ has chosen to speak through holy Scripture.

## Interpreting the Bible Part 2

### How Culture Impacts the Way You Interpret the Bible

*What does it mean to interpret the Bible in different contexts, in different cultural situations?*

Well, this may sound like an abstract question but we come across it all the time.

**Small group Bible study example:** Being in a small group Bible study where we're sitting around talking about a passage, and one person says, "Oh, this is really what this passage means." And then another person says, "Oh, but this is what it means to me." And then a third person says, "This is what it means to me."

*Well, how are we to think through these differences?*

*Are these differences always bad? When should we resolve them?*

**The general context for interpreting Scripture** as Christians and as Reformed Christians **is in community.** We do it with one another. And interpreting with one another can provide checks and balances, and can help us see areas that are currently our blind spots.

Example: *Dr. Billings compares Ethiopian and USA readings of biblical laws*

"One of the topics that comes up is biblical laws about diet, and dietary laws. You know, eat this. Don't eat that. How are we to make sense of these Old Testament dietary laws?"

In the United States, this question comes up and people think, well, maybe these are actually hidden laws about what foods are healthy and what foods are unhealthy. Or there's some other reason for this.

But in Ethiopia, each tribe in Ethiopia has different dietary laws and practices that make each tribe distinctive. So they don't eat certain foods and do eat certain foods. And that shows that they are part of this tribe and not another tribe. It has to do with belonging. It has to do with their identity as a people. Well, it was in that Ethiopian context I think that we can learn something about Scripture that we would miss otherwise, which is that in the Old Testament God gives laws, including dietary laws, not because they're some secret health codes, but because he wants his people to be distinct from the other nations.

We can learn from other cultures around the world and see our own cultural blind spots as we read Scripture together.

Reading Scripture together in different cultural contexts can lead to gifts where we learn from one another, like as we learned from Ethiopian Christians, but there are also times when we need to allow our own culture to be critiqued by the Spirit as we read Scripture,

since **we are reading Scripture as ones who are being transformed into the image of Christ.**

All cultures in the world have idolatries. We all have values that resist this transformation into the image of Christ. So we've got to hold these two together.

- On the one hand, the Spirit works in all different cultural contexts through the Word of God.
- On the other hand, the Word of God confronts all different cultural contexts through the Spirit as well.

Example: *Acts 2 and the famous event of Pentecost.*

Something going on here that we don't usually recognize.

There are people of different languages and cultures who hear the Word of God through this amazing, miraculous event.

Acts 2:5 says, "Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, the crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked, 'Aren't all these that are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each one of us hears them in our own native language?'"

Acts tells us that not only are they hearing in their own native language. They are hearing about the wonders of God in their own tongues.

This is something that the Spirit does. The Spirit comes upon people and speaks in all different languages at Pentecost.

But there's something subtle going on here. Different languages have different views of culture within them.

So if you know Spanish and English, you know that there are certain words that you can't exactly translate between the two. If you know various different languages, you know there's sometimes a better way to say something in one language than another.

But the Spirit actually comes on people and takes up this process of translating the gospel, translating the good news into all different languages, even though it will result in differences.

Example: *Jesus is Lord.*

As this is declared in the book of Acts (Acts 2:36), there are different cultural conceptions of

what this central confession would mean.

- For Jews, when they thought of the Lord, they thought of the Lord of the universe in the Old Testament, who created and chose them as the people.
- For the Gentiles that same word in Greek was used to speak about the Caesars, the worldly rulers who would often ask for homage, and would be ruling around them. And somehow, in his mysterious way, Jesus of Nazareth (!! ) was the true Lord now.

Within the Book of Acts in the early church, **different cultural conceptions are shown to complement each other**. The amazing thing about Pentecost these differences are being attributed to the Holy Spirit.

**Acts 2:6-11** | *When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because **each one heard their own language being spoken**. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—**we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!**"*

This reality gives us a certain boldness in translating the Bible into different languages, even though there will be different cultural understandings of the Bible.

Example: RCA missions involved in Audio Scripture Ministries; also the 'First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament'

- These ministries are translating the Bible into the heart language of different people around the world. These translations by the nature of their differences, end up with different cultural conceptions of those passages of Scripture.
- Because of the Spirit's work at Pentecost, we can have confidence that even when there are differences in interpretation, those can be Spirit-inspired differences, because God is speaking his Word to people of all cultures around the world.

*Are there limits to the differences of interpretation?*

Paul speaks about the Spirit's work in terms of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, and kindness. It's not possible, in Paul's view, for a culture to say, well, love is not fashionable. Kindness is not fashionable in our culture. So we're just going to reject that part. Like, you know, we want our own cultural view, which is hostility and retribution. And we'll do that instead of love, joy, and peace. **No.**

**The limit to differences of interpretation is set by the limit of what the Spirit is doing.**

The Spirit has a definite work >> The Spirit is conforming people to Jesus Christ.

There is a range to the Spirit's work, even as it has a specificity to it as well.

When we come to Scripture, on the one hand, we come with trust that the living Christ is speaking through Scripture, as we come together as communities, as we worship, that Christ is still speaking through his Word.

But we also should come with suspicion of our cultural tendencies to manipulate and control Scripture for our sinful purposes. The kingdom is among us in Christ. But until there is a consummation of Christ's kingdom with the second coming, his disciples will continue to struggle with sin. All of us, as biblical interpreters, will continue to struggle with sin. **None of us come from a culture that perfectly reflects the identity of Christ that Scripture sets forth for us.**

Note from Pastor Scott:

*When we interpret Scripture it is our interest groups that create culture within us. These are social locations and we do well to be able to identify them and surrender them as we seek to interpret scripture to the limit of what the Spirit is doing, and what the Spirit is doing is nothing less than conforming people to Jesus Christ, in their character, in their charity, in their neighborliness, in the way they love and lay down their lives for the world around them.*

To have the complete mind of Christ we need to come together and learn from God's Word, hearing it in a way in which we are not in control of the interpretation, and in a place of our spirit where we allow Christ's lordship to call into question some of our cherished cultural values so that we can grow in conformity with Jesus Christ as followers of him.

READ | 1 Corinthians 3:1-4; 16-23

Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger. And you still aren't ready, for you are still controlled by your sinful nature. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren't you living like people of the world? When one of you says, "I am a follower of Paul," and another says, "I follow Apollos," aren't you acting just like people of the world?

Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Stop deceiving yourselves. If you think you are wise by this world's standards, you need to become a fool to be truly wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. As the Scriptures say, "He traps the wise in the snare of their own cleverness."

And again,

"The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise; he knows they are worthless."

So don't boast about following a particular human leader. For everything belongs to you— whether Paul or Apollos or Peter, or the world, or life and death, or the present and the future. Everything belongs to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.