

# Responsible Biblical Interpretation

Rev. Paul Nulton Sept. 17, 2000

## The Bible's Purpose

The Bible is the record of the acts of God containing what we need to know for faith and practice. No other book carries the authority of the Bible. Other writings can advise but cannot equal or reformulate the Bible. There is no other source for our final authority for faith and action. (Westminster Confession)

## Inspiration

There is a statement in the Bible that all scripture is inspired. Here's why we believe it.

There is a unity of thought from a diversity of authors. Different cultures over 1200 years but consistent in what they say about God. It must be the same God directing their thoughts.

Communication across cultures: much of the language uses the imagery of a rural, prescientific age, and still it communicates to spiritual needs in our technological age. The basics are universal.

The Bible is not written to be a systematic explanation of God. It is not a textbook of religion. It is organized more like family records. A family scrapbook contains stories about people, poems, obituary clippings, newspaper articles about events, letters from friends and relatives, photos, souvenirs of trips. It is not ordered by subject. It is not expected to be a complete family record.

This very organization tells us something important about God. God is not a thing that can be figured out, and thus controlled. God is personal and loving Spirit, and lives in relationship like a family. Thus, the family record style organization of the Bible.

## God in Relationship

God reveals himself in historical events. The true arena of the encounter between God and people is not in nature but in human events.

God reveals himself through persons: characters of the Bible

God reveals himself most clearly through one person: Jesus Christ.

God reveals himself through the life of a community

God reveals himself through a book, the Bible

The pre-history stories of Genesis 1-12 are not written to tell us how the world was created but why. Not to teach us facts about dates and places and process but to teach us about encounter between God and people.

The Bible is not written to prove the existence of God. The writers already knew God. They wrote about the events where God makes himself known.

1. Creation stories communicate the majesty and mystery and power of God.
2. All that is, is dependent upon God.
3. Creation is good
4. There is meaning and purpose to the creation.

Since God lives in relationship, the Bible uses stories. Stories communicate relational truth better than explanations can. Jesus' stories, for example, contain truth that logic cannot hold. Stories can convey truth to the spirit, deeper than just the mind. Our actions come from decisions of the spirit. So any truth that would influence the way we act, therefore, needs to get into the spirit. The creation story, for example, is far more moving than just a scientific account of the beginning of the world would be. Therefore, it is far more true. It is spiritual truth, not just mental truth.

The Bible's stories are not only about the characters in them. The Bible's stories are about us. We put our selves into an event or story or poem.

Who are the Samaritans now?

Who is the lost sheep now?

Who are the Hebrews in the desert now?

Who is the anti-Christ now?

## **Taking the Bible Seriously**

### **1. Whole Bible**

When we apply the Bible to our life, we use the whole Bible, not just part. We check how the Word of God in the history, the prophets, the poetry, the gospel, the New Testament letters and the Revelation to John applies to our situation. Each adds to the meaning of the others. Where one seems to contradict the other, we check further into the meaning in its original situation to determine what it is actually saying to us.

Ie: role of women in leadership, which foods to eat, role of the messiah.

The practice of using a verse to prove a position is called proof texting. This is fair if the verse is an example of what the whole Bible says about a subject but unfair if the rest of the Bible has a further meaning.

Here's an example. Jesus speaks about his mother, brother and sisters being those who do the will of God. Cult leaders use those words to "prove" that their followers should reject their families. The bulk of the Bible references to families remind us to support them.

2 Tim 3:16 is a helpful verse. "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work."

This was written at a time there was no New Testament. It was written about the Old Testament. But we have decided to believe it applies to the New Testament as well, not just because these words are in the Bible, but because the experience of millions of Christians over 2000 years has proved it true.

We are all selective literalists, we just disagree about which verses to take literally and which to take figuratively. We choose some to be authoritative and interpret the rest based on those. Our choice is conditioned by our experiences, learning, brain types and more. Our choice is strongly influenced by our support group. Because we need love, we're most likely to believe like those who love us. If we want to get past this limitation, we must learn with those whose perception is different. And we must do our best to take the whole Bible, not just parts.

## **2. Limitations of Words**

Words cannot hold God.

1. Deciding that words can tell us everything about God, limits God to our understanding.
2. Every attempt to put God into words involves a distortion.

It is like an artist who tries to show a three dimensional picture on a two-dimensional canvass. A picture has railroad tracks which disappear at the horizon. In the real world, the tracks are parallel all the way. But on the canvass, they are not. The painter succeeds in telling us the truth (tracks are parallel) by painting something else (tracks are not parallel). Also, sometimes taking the words of the Bible literally diverts us from the truth.

3. God is a mystery beyond us.
4. Differing conceptions of God by different writers over hundreds of years shows us that people are looking to God from different directions (the blind men and the elephant) and their cultural situation influences what they see.

One study Bible says that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. Most scholars agree that those books were written several hundred years after the time of Moses but that the authors did their best to write in the spirit of Moses. They believed it would have been what Moses intended to be recorded. Therefore they attributed the books to Moses. In their culture, that meant Moses wrote them. It is the same for the Psalms of David. It is the same, perhaps, for some of the New Testament letters. In our culture, we define “wrote” differently than they did. The Bible is still inspired by God.

## **3. Human Authors**

Some Christians believe the writers dictated God’s words or were robots with the Holy Spirit doing the writing. But Luke says he compiled his gospel himself in Luke 1:1-4. He gathered notes from eyewitnesses, apostles, relatives of Jesus and the book of Mark and wrote it in 85 AD. The eyewitnesses were at least in their 80’s by then. Dim memories may account for the differences in accounts of the resurrection. Luke 24:4 states that “two men stood by them in dazzling apparel”. Mark 16:5 states that there was a “Young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe”. Matthew 28:2 states “an angel of the Lord rolled back the stone and sat on it.”

The details are a bit different. The important thing is that Christ was risen. They agree on that.

Eyewitnesses to an event like a car accident tell the story a bit differently because of different positions, looking at different parts of the scene. One is sure the car came from the east, one is sure the car came from the west. Two accounts of the same event might be slightly different even immediately afterward, let alone 50 years later. Memories are good, but not infallible.

The writer of Chronicles used sources from the chronicles of Samuel, the chronicles of Nathan and the chronicles of Gad. 2 Chron. 9:29 lists sources. There are bound to be discrepancies even though the writers had a great respect for the acts of God and knew how important it was to record the events accurately. The writers each had their own perspective and biases on who were the heroes and who were the ungodly rascals.

After 930 BC, the nation split into two parts, Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Historians from each had different accounts of events and their meanings. One says God told David to take a census. Another says the devil told David to take the census. That doesn’t mean the Bible is not inspired by God.

Discrepancies, inconsistencies and contradictions exist like they would in a family scrapbook. The Bible was never meant to be literally true about every event. It is many records of relationships.

There are some contradictions between the creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. They were never meant to tell how God created but why. The answer to “how” is inconsistent. The answer to “why” is not. When we read it the way it was intended to be read, one story adds to the understanding of the other.

#### **4. Culture**

God shines through the prism of culture. Those cultures were different two to three millennia ago than they are now. God deals with people who are effected by their culture. It would not be loving for God to treat people in a patriarchal culture that allowed human sacrifice in the same way God treats people in a culture that includes women in leadership and outlaws human sacrifice.

Caruso might be the greatest opera singer the world has ever heard. But if you want to appreciate Caruso, you must recognize the scratches of the needle on the old records to sift out what is Caruso and what are the imperfections of the vinyl disk. Some of Paul’s instruction about women is scratches on the record.

John Wesley said Ps. 109 was unworthy to be prayed by a Christian.

When we see one passage of scripture, we measure it in light of other parts of the scripture, especially the words and work of Jesus Christ.

Paul’s command for women to keep still in church is a command for that culture, not this one. The Hebrews belief that they must kill their enemy at God’s command would not be from God in this culture.

#### **5. Diverse thinking**

People interpret the Bible differently because people’s brains work differently. Some people think more concretely, some people think more abstractly. Some can handle paradox, some can’t. For concrete thinkers, if a statement is not literally true, it is not true at all. There is no such thing as a truth between two seeming contradictions. Abstract thinkers have found that there is always the flip side of every coin. Every truism has its corollary, or opposite reaction. Concrete thinkers believe this kind of language is baloney, just an excuse not to believe the truth.

Our place as Christians is to respect, and learn from, both people.

### **Interpreting Scripture**

United Methodists have a tradition from John Wesley of understanding God from scripture, tradition, reason and experience. We use all four together, none alone. We start from scripture, and it is informed by the other three. When we want to understand a passage we say:

1. What does the rest of the Bible say about this?
2. How have the traditions of Christians handled this?
3. How does this fit with human experience?
4. What is reasonable?

Since Jesus is the most complete revelation of God, all scripture needs to be tested by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

### Healthy Bible Study:

1. first we aim to recover the original meaning in the situation
2. ask what the text means for us now
3. decide what God wants me to do about it

When we seek the mind of God on an issue, doctrine or practice, we don't look for a verse that explains it all. We look in the history, poetry, laws, prophetic preaching, life and death and resurrection of Jesus, Church events, doctrine and advice of Paul and John's vision to see the common threads that tell us what to believe and do about that issue, doctrine or practice. We take the whole Bible.