

How Brethren Understand God's Word

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Background

In 1989, affirming the recommendation of Moderator Kenneth Sullivan, General Conference authorized the formation of a Committee on Doctrine, Research, and Publication. This committee was charged with the responsibility of helping the denomination to “articulate clearly its faith and practice and pass on its heritage to succeeding generations.”

The committee first turned its attention to the Brethren approach to Scripture, for this issue is the foundation for all others. Thus began a two-year process, the goal of which became the publication of a statement describing how Brethren understand and use Scripture. The committee sought to make this statement as representative of current Brethren thought as possible by eliciting input from pastors at the 1992 and 1993 Pastors' Conferences and from the wider church through *Leadership Letter* and discussion at the 1993 General Conference. That conference accepted this document as a report of the committee and authorized its publication and dissemination.

The committee’s purpose was to create a concise, readable summary of the Brethren approach to Scripture usable by both pastors and lay people. They wanted to produce a document that would enable Brethren to develop a self-conscious, intentional approach to understanding the Bible. Scriptural references are provided for documentation and more in-depth study. A list of resources for further study appears at the end.

The committee affirms the view of *A Centennial Statement* (1984) that each generation of Brethren must come to terms with the importance of Scripture for its faith and life. This document represents an attempt to express the Brethren understanding of Scripture for this generation.

The Importance of the Word

Brethren have always been a people of the Word. Because we affirm Scripture as the rule for our faith and life, we recognize the need to interpret it correctly. Biblical interpretation is especially important for the Brethren, because we have no tradition or official arm of the church to dictate how we must understand the Bible. Since we have never allowed such things to fix the meaning of Scripture, we must try to apply Scripture itself to our lives in each generation.

2 Tim. 2:15

Biblical interpretation is especially important for the Brethren today. Different views of the nature and interpretation of Scripture are behind the different positions people take on the important issues of our day. We need to understand our biblical heritage in order to discuss these current issues. Such a process of understanding would reacquaint the present generation with the principles that have guided the Brethren in the past. It would also encourage discussion and dialogue among the Brethren as we seek greater consensus on biblical interpretation and application. We must become aware of our own view of Scripture before we can speak effectively to other believers and the wider culture.

God, the Revealer

The understanding of Scripture begins with the knowledge that God has chosen to communicate with us. Without this revelation, we could not know God at all. God has spoken to us through creation, through human nature, through words, through events in history, and finally through becoming flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

Heb. 1:1-2
Ps. 147:19-20; Luke 10:22
Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:20; Gen. 1:27;
Rom. 2:14-15; Ex. 3:4-15;
Jer. 1:4-10; Amos 3:7; John 17:6-23;
Ex. 20:1; Ps. 98:1-2; Is. 60:15-16;
Ezek. 6:1-10; John 1:14; Heb. 1:1-3
Ex. 24:4; Is. 30:8; Jer. 30:1-2;
Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30; 21:25

Much of God's revelation in word, in deed, and in Jesus Christ is recorded in Scripture. This is why we can go to Scripture to understand God's character and will. In fact, it is only in Scripture that we can learn about God's redemptive plan in Christ.

2 Tim. 3:15

But Scripture contains more than knowledge about God. In Scripture, God speaks to us in love, in order to initiate a relationship with us through redemption in Christ and to bring us into relationship with one another. As we respond to God's loving self-disclosure, we become part of the people of God, a body of believers whose head is Jesus Christ.

John 3:16; Rom. 5:6-11; 2 Cor. 5:18-20
Eph. 1:13-14; Jer. 31:31-33;
1 Pet. 2:9-10; Eph. 4:15-16

Jesus Christ, the Living Word

Brethren affirm that Jesus Christ is the Living Word of God, the one who reveals God fully and finally. In His life, teaching, death, resurrection, and living presence, Jesus has shown us all we need to know about who God is and who we are.

Matt. 11:27; John 1:1-14, 18;
Col. 1:15; 2:9
Heb. 1:1-3; John 14:5-11; 17:6
Phil. 2:6-11

Brethren have believed that Christianity is first and foremost a relationship of loving discipleship to Christ. This relationship with Christ is the first

Matt. 16:24-25; John 14:21-24;
John 15:1-10; Phil. 3:7-11

priority in understanding Scripture: it is both the beginning and the end of the process. We must know Christ before we can fully understand Scripture. We then go to Scripture in order to know Him better and to proclaim Him to others so that they might come to know Him too.

Brethren have emphasized that Christ is not just our redeemer but also our teacher and example. The goal of our lives as Christians is to become like Him. The Brethren approach to Scripture thus puts Jesus Christ at the center. It begins with Christ and ends with Christlikeness.

Scripture, the Outer Word

Scripture is the Word of God in written form. The early Brethren called it the Outer Word, the external written witness which, together with the Holy Spirit, the Inner Word, testifies to the Living Word, Jesus Christ. Because Scripture presents God's revelation to us, it is our only reliable source of knowledge about the mind and will of God. The Bible records God's revelation, witnesses to its truth, and explains it to us. Brethren historically have affirmed that the Bible's authority comes from its witness to Christ as the Living Word. The New Testament, because it witnesses most directly to Christ, is the final rule for our faith and life.

The nature of Scripture, like the nature of Christ, is both human and divine. The Bible itself says that Scripture is inspired or breathed out by God. This means that God guided the human writers to such an extent that what they wrote could be considered God's Word written. The Bible expresses God's eternal truth in the words of particular human beings in history. It shows particular events in history that are relevant to people in all times and places. It is a collection of books written over 1600 years by many different people who had their own concerns, purposes, and styles. Yet it is unified by God's unchanging plan through history to reach out to human beings, make peace with them, and call them into a new obedient community the people of God. The Bible's eternal message must be thought through and restated in each generation to speak to the people of that generation.

The Bible tells us both what to believe and how to live. Besides giving us knowledge about God, it also introduces us to the person of Jesus Christ. Through Scripture, the Holy Spirit enables us to come into relationship with Christ and grow into His likeness. Because of its unique character, the Bible has a unique claim on us. Brethren have always held the Bible to be completely true and completely reliable. Jesus Himself said that the Scripture, which to Him meant the Old Testament, cannot be broken.

The Holy Spirit, the Inner Word

The Holy Spirit has a crucial role in interpreting Scripture. The early Brethren called the Holy Spirit the Inner Word who testifies to the Living Word, Jesus Christ, and who helps us to understand the Outer Word,

John 5:37-40; Luke 24:25-32, 45

John 15:7-11 Matt. 28:18-20

Matt. 23:10; John 13:13-17; Eph. 5:1-2; Phil. 2:5; 1 Pet. 2:21; 1 John 2:6

Rom. 8:29; Phil. 3:20-21 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 John 3:1-2

Mark 7:9-13

John 5:39; 1 John 1:1-3; John 15:26

Ps. 147:19-20; Isa. 8:19-20; Acts 17:11

Heb. 8:6-13

2 Pet. 3:15-16

2 Tim. 3:14-17

Rom. 3:2; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:20-21

Ps. 119:89; 1 Pet. 1:23-25; Luke 1:1-4

Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11; 1 Cor 15:3-8, 12-28

1 Pet. 1:10-12

2 Cor. 5:18-20; Ex. 6:6-7; Jer. 31:31-33; 1 Pet. 2:9-10

1 Tim. 4:16; James 2:18-19

Acts 18:28; John 5:39; 2 Tim. 3:15

John 14:26; 15:26; 2 Cor. 3:17-18

Ps. 19:7; 119:89, 160; Matt. 5:17-18; Luke 21:33; John 17:17; Rev. 21:5, 22:6; John 10:35

John 15:26

1 Cor. 12:3; John 16:13; Eph. 1:17

Scripture. Just as the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is necessary in order to understand and obey the Scriptures. This means that only believers can understand the spiritual significance of the Bible. It also means that all believers have the privilege of reading and understanding Scripture for themselves.

John 14:26; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21
1 Cor. 2:2-14; Eph. 1:17
Deut. 29:29; Deut. 30:11-14; 1 John 2:20, 27

Brethren have believed that the Holy Spirit is as active in the church today as in the days of the apostles. We have been confident that the Spirit would illumine the Scriptures for us and guide us into truth. Both then and now, the Spirit testifies to Christ. Because of our confidence in the Holy Spirit's work, we are open to new light on the Scriptures, relying on the Spirit to give us new insight into God's eternal truth and help us apply that truth to our lives.

John 14:26; 16:13
1 John 2:27
John 15:26; 16:14

Brethren have affirmed balance and agreement between the Inner Word and the Outer Word. The Scriptures do not come alive to us without the Holy Spirit to interpret them to us and convict us of their truth. Likewise, it is difficult and unwise for us to interpret the Holy Spirit's witness in our hearts without the confirming testimony of the Scriptures. Promptings of the Holy Spirit will not contradict the Outer Word. The Holy Spirit and the inspired Scriptures will always agree.

1 Cor. 2:6-16

Ps. 119:18; Rom. 8:5-7; 2 Cor. 3:1-6
Is. 8:19-20
1 John 4:1-3

Being Conformed to the Word

The attitudes with which people approach Scripture strongly influence what they find there. As Brethren, we approach Scripture believing that we are not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. That is, rather than being conformed to the world, we are to be conformed to the Living Word, Jesus Christ, through obedience to the Outer Word, Scripture.

John 5:39-40 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 11:6
Rom. 12:1-2

2 Cor. 3:13-18; John 14:21-24; John 15:7-11

We attempt to read Scripture with both mind and heart. In order to understand the Bible, we study it diligently, using our renewed minds under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We seek to find the plain sense of Scripture, the meaning that the original writers, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, intended to convey. The early Brethren emphasized the simplicity and clarity of Scripture; they pointed out that our greatest problem is not understanding Scripture but obeying it.

Ps. 119:97
Deut. 6:6-9; 2 Tim. 2:15

2 Pet. 1:20-21
Ps. 119:105, 130
Ps. 119:100; John 7:17

In order to understand the Bible, we also read it devotionally, asking the Inner Word, the Holy Spirit, to apply it to our hearts and transform our lives. Brethren have always taken a very practical approach to Scripture, reading it to find God's will and obey it. Bible reading, like all other aspects of the Christian life, should lead to discipleship.

Ps. 1-2; Ps. 119:9-16;
1 Cor. 2:12-13;
1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16-17
Luke 8:21; John 17:6

Brethren have usually approached Scripture with an attitude of humility and love. Rather than exerting mastery over the Word, we have tried to live under the Word. While regarding doctrine as very important, we have refused to develop doctrines that go beyond what Scripture affirms. In our interpretations, we have found that the truth is often a balance between

Josh. 22:5; Ps. 119:9-11; Heb. 4:12-13; 1 John 5:3;

1 Cor. 4:6; Eccl. 7:18

extremes. Both in our study and in our devotions, we go to Scripture to be closer to the Lord we love and serve.

Being Obedient to the Word

Because the Christian life is a relationship of loving discipleship to Christ, we as Brethren read Scripture with the intention of obeying our Lord in all things. A commitment to obedience may be the most important attitude with which we approach Scripture. Brethren have held that Scripture can be fully understood only by someone who is willing to obey it. The basis for this obedience is our love for the Lord who has loved us. It is not enough just to read the Bible or hear the Word preached. We must study the Bible and obey it so the Holy Spirit can use it to change our lives and bless us.

Besides obeying the commands of Scripture, the early Brethren sought to follow the example of Christ and the apostles. They practiced a radical obedience, putting into practice what they found in the Bible, regardless of the consequences. They believed that scriptural demands must not be rationalized away. They looked especially to the Sermon on the Mount for the ethics of the Christian life. Complete obedience to the teaching and example of Christ and the apostles is the basis for the Brethren practice of the ordinances, including some practices (such as feetwashing and anointing) which other groups regard as nonessential.

Being a Community under the Word

The community of believers is the theme the Brethren have found in Scripture, the context in which we have read Scripture, and the context in which we have put it into practice. The central theme Brethren have found in Scripture is God's eternal purpose through history to form a people for His own glory. God began that purpose in the people of Israel and continues it today in the church, the community that is Christ's body. As His body, we are to grow to maturity in Christ and to be united in mind and spirit. Obedience to the Word is thus corporate as well as individual.

As part of our commitment to one another, Brethren read Scripture together to help one another understand and obey it. The early Brethren would test their interpretations by discussing them with one another and by attempting to live out their decisions together. They were confident that the Holy Spirit would bring them to consensus in matters of faith and practice. They called this finding the mind of Christ. To assist this process, they practiced mutual submission, encouraging one another and accepting correction. When they could not agree, they would bear with one another and wait for consensus to develop. Thus, in their use of Scripture, they tried to find a balance between the opinions of the individual and the unity of the body.

Matt. 7:21-25;

Heb. 5:9

Rom. 1:5; 16:26; Ps. 119:100

John 7:16-17; 14:21;

John 14:15; 15:10

Ps. 1:1-3; Luke 11:28; James 1:22-25; James 2:17-19

1 Cor. 11:1; Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; 1 John 2:6

Luke 8:21; Acts 4:19-20; 1 Pet. 4:16-17

John 13:17; James 5:14-16

Ex. 6:7; Is. 43:6-7, 21; Jer. 31:31-33; Eph.1:3-14; Rev. 21:3

Ex. 19:5-6; Deut. 7:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Eph. 1:22-23

Eph. 4:3-6, 13, 15-16;

Phil. 2:2

Col. 3:16

1 Cor. 2:16

Eph. 4:2; 5:21; Col. 3:12-15

Our Ideas about the Word: Historically

All readers of Scripture come to the Bible with certain ideas about how to interpret it and certain questions they want to ask of it. The questions they come with partly determine the answers they find. The ideas they bring can make understanding easier or more difficult. Brethren ideas about Scripture have been especially influenced by Anabaptism and Pietism, the two movements that were foundational for the early Brethren.

Heb. 11:6; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 3:14-16; John 5:39-40

Both Anabaptism and Pietism had a high regard for Scripture, seeing it as God's Outer Word that testifies to the revelation in Jesus Christ. But they also held that the Inner Word, the Holy Spirit, is absolutely necessary in order to hear God's voice in Scripture. For both movements, obedience to the Outer Word demonstrates faith in God and love for Christ.

John 5:39

1 Cor. 2:11-14; Eph. 1:17

Rom. 1:5; James 2:17-18; John 14:21-24

The early Brethren took very seriously their commitment to Scripture. They understood that Scripture was the primary witness to their living Lord, Jesus Christ. They accepted what they read at face value and sought to obey it fully, as individuals and as a community. Though upholding the New Testament as their final authority, they believed that all Scripture was divinely inspired. They knew and used both testaments.

Acts 18:28; 1 Cor. 15:3-4; 1 Pet. 1:10-12

Ps. 119:4-6

Jer. 7:23; Heb. 8:6-13; 2 Tim. 3:14-17

Over the years, the Brethren have remained fairly consistent in their approach to Scripture. Several changes in emphasis have occurred, however. During the nineteenth century, the traditional order or customs of the Brethren gained an authority almost equal to Scripture. The "Progressives" (the present day Brethren Church) reacted against this stress on the "old order." In their reaction, however, the Progressives tended to take a more individualistic approach to interpreting Scripture, giving less weight to the need to work for consensus within the community. Likewise, The Brethren Church, with its emphasis on educated pastors, moved toward a more reasoned approach to the faith. At times, we have tended to shift the primary source of authority from the Living Word, Jesus Christ, to the Outer Word, Scripture. Recently, as in the *Centennial Statement* of 1983, we have reaffirmed the primacy of Jesus Christ.

Col. 1:18

Our Ideas about the Word: Today

Brethren share many ideas about Scripture with other Protestant traditions. For example, we believe that a proper understanding of Scripture must take into account the history and culture behind it, as well as the words and grammar in which it is written. Readers of the Bible must interpret every passage in its immediate context and in the context of the whole of Scripture. Similarly, we should interpret particular statements in light of universal scriptural principles. Like any other book, the Bible should be understood literally unless the language seems to be used in a figurative way. Symbolic passages should be interpreted in the light of teaching passages. These principles are useful in understanding any ancient book.

As conservative Protestants, however, we believe that the Bible is more than just an ancient book; it is God speaking to us.

Acts 7:38; Rom. 3:2; 1 Pet. 4:11

Brethren also differ from other Protestant traditions. Readers from different traditions have different starting points when they read the Bible. Even if they believe the entire Bible to be inspired, they still have their favorite emphases. For example, Lutheran interpreters begin with the distinction between law and gospel. The Reformed tradition begins with the sovereignty of God. Dispensationalists begin with their understanding of the Kingdom and the events of the end times. Pentecostals begin with their experience of the Holy Spirit. Readers from a liberation theology perspective, whether African-American, Third World, or Feminist, begin with the idea that salvation means social, political, and economic liberation. Brethren, like the Anabaptists before them, begin with the person of Christ, especially as witnessed to in the Gospels.

We cannot come to the Bible without any ideas about it; we need a framework of things we already know in order to understand something new. Problems arise when we are unaware of our own ideas or make them so important that we will not let them be challenged or corrected by what we find in Scripture. Brethren have always been committed to testing biblical interpretations by the standard of Scripture itself. In our faithfulness to the Word, we should abandon any interpretations that do not meet that standard. The best safeguard against imposing our own ideas on Scripture is to be aware of our own approach to Scripture and the approaches of others, and then to let Scripture speak for itself.

2 Tim. 3:16
Heb. 4:12
Jer. 23:29
Acts 17:11

Applying the Word

In order to apply the Bible to matters of faith and practice, we must decide how to compare Scripture with Scripture. Our starting point and our emphases will influence how much weight we give to the Bible's different elements. Brethren affirm that Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture, the key to understanding it. The person and message of Christ determine which issues are central and which are peripheral.

Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39-40; 2 Cor. 1:20; Eph. 1:9-10

Brethren see both continuity and discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. God's nature and purpose are eternal. God's revelation of that nature and purpose was gradual, coming to a climax in Jesus Christ. The Brethren understand Old and New Testaments in terms of promise and fulfillment: the Old Testament looks forward to Christ, and the New Testament witnesses to His coming and interprets His work. The Old Testament gives a partial picture of God's character and will; the New Testament contains "the perfection of Christ." Because of the centrality and finality of Christ, the Brethren historically have claimed the New Testament as their only creed.

Ps. 33:11; 90:2; Heb. 13:8
Heb. 1:1-3; 1 Pet. 1:10-12;
Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27, 44-45;
Acts 2:30-33; 2 Cor. 1:20; Eph. 3:4-6; Heb. 10:1, 12-14; 1 John 1:1-3
Heb. 8:3-13; 7:28
2 Pet. 1:19

When the early Brethren studied an issue, they took a harmonizing, Christ-centered approach to Scripture. They used both Old and New Testaments

and considered all relevant passages, but they allowed the New Testament to have the last word. Within the New Testament, the Brethren valued the Gospels because their witness to Christ was so direct; they assumed that the rest of the New Testament was consistent with the Gospels' witness. When deciding about faith and practice, they tried to harmonize differing passages. The Brethren practice of threefold communion, for example, was developed by harmonizing John's account of the last supper with the accounts in the other three Gospels. The Brethren were guided in all their interpretations by the teaching and example of Christ and the apostles.

Matt. 23:10; John 13:13-17; 1
Cor. 11:1; Eph. 5:1-2; 1 John 2:6

In trying to apply Scripture, the Brethren have had many discussions about the relationship between scriptural principles and the forms in which they are expressed. As our practice of the ordinances shows, we have followed biblical forms in some instances in which other Christians have chosen to follow only the principles. But we have also acknowledged that eternal scriptural principles may need to be expressed in new ways in new cultural settings. We have not always come to the same conclusions. But we have tried to live out with one another the adage used by the Progressives: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

For Further Study

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