Christ-centered Interpretation of Scripture

The Foundations of Biblical Interpretation

**Two Presuppositions:**

1. The Bible as a whole, and in all of its parts, is the very Word of God written. It is therefore completely trustworthy, fully reliable and without error. (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 1 Peter 1:19-21).

2. The Bible principally teaches two things: what man is to believe concerning God (his character, ways, and purposes) and what duty God requires of man (it's instruction is for our practice). (cf. WSC Q. 3)

**Implications:**

1. Study the Scriptures prayerfully, with an eye toward changing your life (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Seek not to master but to be mastered.

2. Since Scripture is revelation about God and since Jesus Christ is the supreme revelation, then fundamentally all Scripture (both OT and NT) is about Him—his life, death and resurrection (Luke 24:27,45-47).

3. The fullest understanding and therefore the richest understanding of Scripture can only happen in community. We sometimes need the help of reliable explainers. We need our cultural and personal distortions removed by others. Read books, talk, experience Scripture.

4. Never set one passage against another so that they contradict. Interpret the obscure in light of the clear and plain.

**The Basic Principle of Biblical Interpretation**

Seek the plain, natural, intended meaning of the text. What did the original author (in this case God through the human author) intend for his original audience to understand, and therefore what is implied for Christians today?

Interpret the Scriptures literally and grammatically, based on whatever form it's in (history, discourse, parable, poetry, prophecy, etc.). Recognize that interpreting the Scriptures is like a science; you are looking for objective truth by following rules. Therefore, don't fall into the trap of coming up with two interpretations and saying “both of them are right,” even when they are opposed to one another. Second, don't seek to find a “hidden spiritual meaning” that is unwarranted and would be apparent to no one.

All Bible readers should learn the basic principles for interpreting it. First, we look for the natural, original meaning of the text, remembering that the plain and obvious meaning is sometimes not literal but figurative... We have to avoid reading our... thoughts back into the mind of the authors. The key questions are what they themselves intended to say and how they will have been understood by their contemporaries. For this we will need to know something about the historical and cultural background of the Bible. Secondly... we look for the general meaning. That is, we must interpret each text in the light both of its immediate context in the book concerned and of its wider context in the Bible as a whole... We will be right to seek harmony by allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture... and not “so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another.” (The Thirty-Nine Articles)

Reading the Bible as Jesus Did

If Jesus is divine, we should read the Bible as he did.

Jesus read the Bible as God's word so that “what Scripture says, God says.”

- He read the Bible as:
  a) supernatural revelation (Jn 5:37-39; Mt 19:4-5)
  b) inspired in every single part (Jn 10:34-35; Mt 5:17,19)
  c) authoritative and “unbreakable” (John 10:35; Mk 7:1-13)
  d) sufficient for salvation (Lk 16:15-31; Jn 5:39-40)

- He based even the smallest details of his life on the Scripture (John 19:28).

Jesus read the Bible as being all about himself (Lk 24:44-45; Jn 5:39-46).

- Every part of the Bible tells us something about Jesus and about how God redeems us through him.
  a) Jesus is the true Adam who passed the test in the garden.
  b) He is the true Moses who leads us out of slavery.
  c) He is the true Job — the innocent sufferer who intercedes for his friends.
  d) He is the true David, whose victory becomes his people's, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it.

In the end, there are only two ways to read the Bible. Is it basically about me or basically about Jesus?

- Is it basically a set of moral principles — about what I must do?
- Or is it basically the story of Jesus — about what he has done?
  a) Unless I see his ultimate generosity — giving everything up for me on the cross — I won't have the security or incentive to be generous with my money.
  b) Unless I see him forgiving me on the cross, I won't have what it takes to forgive others.

- As only principles of living, the Bible is a crushing burden.
- The Bible is not primarily a “book of virtues.” It is the story of how God is redeeming us through Jesus Christ.

The two disciples, when they review the career of Jesus, put the word “but” between his crucifixion and his redemption (v.20-21). They were saying, “He was crucified but we thought he would redeem.” In other words, they thought that his death had thwarted his redemptive work.

- At this point, Jesus rebukes them. “How slow of heart to believe… did not the Christ have to suffer…?” They didn’t see his death as part of his redemptive work.

- Why were they so blind? He says they did not believe “all the prophets have spoken!” (v.25)

- Again in v.27, Luke tells us that he told them what was said about the Messiah in “all the Scriptures.”
  
  a) Jesus saw the Old Testament as being necessary to put his work into context and to make its meaning clear.
  
  b) The Old Testament themes of law, sacrifice, priesthood, and the temple all throw the career of Christ into relief.

Jesus’ use of the Bible here is extremely telling.

- It demonstrates the Bible’s authority and reliability.
  
  a) This shows how seriously Jesus took the Bible. He based all he did and every part of his life and career on the Scripture.
  
  b) He faced every major crisis in his life by apprehending and quoting the Scripture: his temptation (Matt. 4); his betrayal (Matt.26:52-54); and his death on the cross (Matt. 27:46; cf. Psalm 22).
  
  c) This shows that his deepest reflexes were to believe and rely on the Bible.

- It shows that the Bible in its entirety is all about Jesus, even the Old Testament.

• It shows that the basic message of the Bible is that the Messiah has to suffer.
  a) This means that it is a fatal mistake to read the Bible as a set of moral philosophy. The Emmaus disciples had read the Bible as a book of morality — of how to save themselves, instead of as good news about a Messiah who would come and die and rise in order to save them.
  b) The point of his teaching is “suffer... and then... glory” (v.26).
  c) I Peter 1:11 summarizes the teaching of the Bible in the same way.

Everything shows that the Christ had to suffer in order to reach glory—that suffering and glory were not incompatible, but rather suffering leads to glory, death to resurrection.

• In other words, the Bible is not primarily a set of rules or a philosophy of life.
  a) If it is, then Mark Twain's nightmares about the Bible pressing down on him, crushing him, would be fair. It would be an intolerable burden.

• Rather, Jesus is telling us here that the Bible is primarily a report of what our peril is, of what God has planned to do about it, and about what he has done about it in history through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

• Thus the Bible is a “gospel.”
  a) In Jesus' day, a “gospel” was an announcement brought by a herald of some great event — not a philosophy or a self-improvement course.
  b) It is not that the Bible does not contain much moral philosophy, but it is based on the gospel of the sufferings and glory of the Messiah.
  c) For example, a herald would never come crying, “Crime does not pay! Be good!” but he might come crying, “Crime does not pay, because the true king has triumphed and is on his way!”

• So Jesus shows us a whole new way to approach the Bible and thus God.

• Becoming a Christian is not taking up a new interest or course of study and behavior. It is building one’s life on the report of an historical intervention.

The scope of his teaching is the entire Old Testament. Every single part is about him. This is clearly seen in v.44, where it says he was written about in “the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.”

• Now traditionally, the Old Testament is considered to have three parts—the Law (the 5 books of Moses), the Prophets, and the Wisdom literature (here referred to by its chief book, the Psalms).
• Thus Jesus sees himself as the fulfillment of it all. Literally everything in the Bible is about him. The Bible can only be understood if it seen to be about him.

a) Jesus fulfills the Prophets, who said the Messiah will be God (Isaiah 9:6), and will suffer and be killed (Isaiah 53).

b) He fulfills all the ceremonial law since he is the sacrifice, the priest and the temple to which all the ritual pointed.

c) He fulfills the moral law itself for he alone lived it personally, exemplifying righteousness, and doing it all as our substitute, satisfying it for us.

d) He even fulfills all the history of the Bible: he is the true prophet, the true priest, the true king to which all prophets, priests and kings point.

i. He is the seed of Abraham, David’s greater son, the true Jonah greater than Jonah, the true Solomon greater than Solomon.

ii. In fact, he is the true Israel, a remnant of one. When Hosea talks of the Exodus from Egypt he says, “Out of Egypt have I called my son” (Hos. 11:1) referring to the people of Israel. But Matthew quotes this to refer to Jesus (Matt.2:15) because Jesus is the true remnant — he alone kept the law with all his heart, soul, strength, and he alone inherits the blessings promised to Abraham.

iii. Only those united to him get the promises of Israel (Gal. 3:6-25; 4:21-31).

• In other words, everything in the Bible is about Jesus.

The implications of this are vast. The disciples cannot be witnesses to the gospel until they understand that the whole Bible is about him. Why?

We can either read the Bible as primarily about us (what we have to do for him) or primarily about him (what he had to do for us).

• We can understand salvation primarily as what we give God or primarily as what God gives us.

• If we understand that the Bible is basically about God’s work of salvation, then we will see it talking about that provision everywhere.

• That is “good news” and it gives us a message to proclaim.

Summary

As Luke 24 shows, the whole Bible testifies to Christ. Every passage in the Bible bears a discernable relationship to Christ and is primarily intended to point to Christ. The application of the meaning of any text must proceed from the application it has to Christ.
We must avoid seeking to apply individual and unrelated texts to ourselves in a haphazard way—making the Bible all about us. The following diagram illustrates this use of texts (T) which disregards their context and place in redemptive history. Notice that it places the hearer (H) in the center.

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\text{Applying Texts out of Context}
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This type of direct application is faulty for many reasons, but the main problem is that it avoids Christ who is at the center of all Scripture. It by-passes the gospel.

The diagram below shows how we can apply texts with and without the gospel. The invalid method of proceeding from text (T) to hearer (H) directly or intuitively (A) avoids the structure of Biblical revelation. The valid procedure is to trace the Biblical path (B) from text to Christ and to link this with the Biblical path (C) from Christ to hearer.

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\text{Applying Texts with and without the Gospel}
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The Redemptive Thrust of Scripture

The following questions will help bring salvation history into focus as we read and apply the Bible:

1) **Creation:** What does this passage reveal about God as Creator and Sustainer? What does it reveal about God’s original design in creation? How does it speak to us as being created in the image of God?

2) **The Fall:** What aspect of the fallen condition of mankind does this passage address? What sin is being dealt with? How does it affect God’s original design for creation? What consequences of sin are revealed in this passage?

3) **Redemption:** How is God’s remedy for sin and its consequences revealed in this passage? How does this text manifest the need for a Redeemer, the person and work of the Redeemer, or the consequences of redemption?

4) **New Creation:** How does this passage speak to God’s ongoing work through Christ of the renewal of all creation? Does it speak to the “cultural mandate”—the restoration of culture and society? (Gen. 1:28; Jer. 22:16) Does it speak to the “redemptive mandate”—the restoration of men and women? (Matt. 28:19-20) Does it point to God establishing “shalom” in a broken world—the establishing of harmony, justice, love, healing and the flourishing of all of God’s creation? (Isaiah 11:6-8; Prov. 4:31) How should we should serve Christ and advance his peace? (Isa. 2:2-3)