



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

August 6, 2017

# How We Read the Bible

*A Christian Worldview: Fifth of Seven in a Series*

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# **How We Read the Bible**

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: August 10, 2017

*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path  
(Psalm 119:105).*

A slogan of the Protestant Reformation that began 500 years ago was *sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia*—which is to say, scripture alone is our guide to Christian faith, and we're saved by grace alone through faith alone, not by any of our own works. This means, among other things, that we need to know how to read the Bible, and as it turns out, that's not quite as simple as it sounds.

The Reformation was about some reforms that Martin Luther, John Calvin, and others thought needed to happen in the Catholic church, and they used the Bible as their test for the church's teachings. Now if Christians were to depend directly on the Bible, they had to know how to read, so Protestantism incidentally sparked a great surge of literacy that eventually spread all around the world.

The leaders of the Catholic Church warned that if everyone started reading the Bible for themselves, they would come up with all sorts of interpretations, some of which would be wrong, and the unity of the church would break down even further. To some extent, they were right about that. Today there are hundreds of Protestant denominations, and independent churches that claim no denomination at all, while there's still only one Roman Catholic Church. That's why people can shop around to find a Protestant church where they like what's being said, while they'll find more or less the same teaching in any Catholic church.

All this diversity raises some important questions. Is there really a central message to the Bible that ought to be

clear to most people, or is the Bible more like a Rorschach test where everyone can see whatever they want to see? If there is a central message, how do we know what it is, since people seem to disagree about so many things? And do we read the whole Bible in the same way, or should we approach different parts in different ways?

As I was writing this morning's sermon, this is the point where I thought it might need to be two hours long. But fear not, as the Bible itself often says. Instead, I'll just offer a short sketch of principles and invite you to come to one of our Bible studies that will start up again in September.

So here's a sketch of some principles about how we read the Bible.

First, there really is a central set of messages in the Bible. The Bible makes some big claims about God and the world and our human condition, e.g.: God made the world and everything belongs to God; we all fall short of God's will for our lives; God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself; God is love; God expects us to live by the Golden Rule; and one day God will make all things new, including you and me and all of creation. No doubt there are other ways to summarize the message, but I think this is a pretty good start. It means that if we take the Bible seriously, it insists on some things we ought to believe and some ways we ought to live, and everything is not, in the end, just a matter of personal opinion.

That said, a second principle is that we don't read all of the Bible in exactly the same way, for the simple reason that the Bible is a whole library, a collection of books, with different styles meant to convey the truth in different ways.

Some of the Bible is poetry, glorifying God with lofty language that draws us into the praise itself: “Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” Some of it is lovely metaphor full of comfort: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.” On the other hand, some of the Bible’s metaphors are not so comforting, but are calls to action instead: “Take up your cross and follow me,” Jesus says.

Parts of the Bible are meant to be taken literally: “Do to others what you would have others do to you.” And some parts are not meant to be taken literally at all, as in Genesis 1, where the sun is not created until the fourth day, though a day, by definition, is the apparent rising and setting of the sun.

When the New Testament says Jesus died and rose again from the grave, that’s meant in some quite literal, though mysterious, sense, because Jesus’ resurrection is the ground of hope for our own resurrection, and we want to live not metaphorically but in reality. Sometimes the truth of the Bible comes to us literally; other times it comes in parables and tales: “A sower went out to sow....” But either way, what comes to us through scripture is God’s word for our lives.

This doesn’t mean that everything that looks to us like history is necessarily a factual account of the way things happened. Much of what appears to be history, especially in the Old Testament, was probably written much later than the events described, where the focus was on God’s purpose and providence, rather than on literal history in the modern sense.

By the same token, not everything in the Bible that looks like a law is binding on believers in every time and place. A few statements about the role of women in church, for example, may reflect unquestioned assumptions from 2000 years ago rather than the eternal will of God. The American Declaration of Independence said it was self-evident that “all men are created equal,” even while some men were still being held as slaves, and it’s taken us centuries to let the deeper truth of the principle overcome contradictions in practice. In a similar way, many of us recognize that the deepest principles of God’s will for our lives—to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves; that in Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free—have taken a long time to amend some practices and assumptions handed down from the ancient world.

All of this brings us to a third principle, which is that we need to ask for the Holy Spirit’s help when we read the Bible. The Spirit of God moves in and through our own spirits to guide our understanding and translate the words on the page into the living word within our hearts. A long Christian tradition says that the Spirit reveals four kinds of meaning in biblical texts: a literal sense to convey some information we need to know; a moral sense to shape the way we live; an allegorical sense where we see our own lives reflected in the biblical story and we say, “Yes, that’s the way it is!”; and a unitive sense where reading scripture brings our soul to rest in the peace and love of God.

Another principle we need to remember is that our faith is ultimately in God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—not in the Bible per se. The Bible is our uniquely authoritative witness to God in Christ, but our devotion is to a living

person, not an ancient book. So we read every text of the Bible in light of what we know about God in Jesus Christ.

We're more likely to do that if we follow a fifth principle, which is that we read the Bible together. Like the Ethiopian in the story in Acts, we understand so much more when others are there to help us. We learn from scholars and interpreters from other times and places, and we learn from one another's experiences, too, since the living word of God comes through other people's lives in ways that inspire and strengthen our own.

And this brings us to a final principle, where we'll stop for the time being, though in a sense it's really just the beginning. That is, we read the Bible with the expectation that we'll meet God there. We meet Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the living Word today, arising out of the ancient written word. We find life in this book, living water for our thirsty spirits, the bread of life for our hungry souls. And we find joy there, as we look beyond ourselves, all the way to the loving, redeeming heart of God.

So we learn to read the Bible in ways that are as rich and diverse and subtle as life itself. There's nothing else quite like it, which is why people through the ages have always said, along with the psalmist, "Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path."



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