

# SOUTH RIDGE COMMUNITY CHURCH

## *Statement of Position Related to Interpretation of Scripture*

### **A. Abstract**

The goal of this document is to broadly articulate the position of South Ridge Community Church regarding its approach to interpreting the Bible. This includes a summary of the Bible's plot, themes, and origin as well as a brief description of what we believe the Bible is, why it must be interpreted, and general guidelines and challenges for good interpretation and application of its principles to the present day cultural environment.

We hold to the following beliefs and practical implications concerning the Bible:

1. The Bible is God-breathed. God orchestrated its development and distribution so that we could encounter His presence and understand His truth. God guided the Bible's writers to communicate, without error, His character and plan.
2. Every reader is an interpreter. Unless we identify principles that guide us in approaching the Bible with a high level of awareness and intentionality, we will interpret carelessly.
3. Because the Bible is God's Word, it is eternally relevant. Because God chose to speak His Word through human words in history, each document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was originally written.
4. The first stage of interpretation is exegesis. This is the careful, systematic study of scripture to discover the original, intended meaning.
  - a. Exegesis provides an objective point of control. It keeps in check our desire to make the text mean whatever we want it to mean.
  - b. Exegesis considers both the literary and historical context as well as the content of a passage.
  - c. The meaning of the smaller units (words, sentences) of a particular section or book of the Bible is best seen when we keep in mind the bigger picture – the author's overall point.
  - d. As we consider context, we must consider content such as lexical meanings, grammar, and other textual choices. It will also be helpful for us to note structural relationships such as cause and effect, comparison, contrast, repetition, and climax.
5. The second stage of interpretation is hermeneutics. It is the process by which we faithfully apply the author's original meaning to our own lives and communities.
  - a. Hermeneutics will not provide "cut and dry" answers for all of our questions. The goal of hermeneutics is to provide guidelines that aid us in wrestling with and living out the truth of scripture
  - b. While it is our responsibility to pursue good hermeneutical practices, it is the Holy Spirit's job to change hearts and minds. We must interpret with reliance on Him.
6. While it is difficult to give "rules" for hermeneutics, here are some general hermeneutical guidelines:
  - a. Interpret with confidence that the Bible is unique and trustworthy
  - b. Interpret with genre in mind
  - c. Interpret the parts in light of the whole
  - d. Interpret in light of God's unfolding plan
  - e. Interpret scripture in harmony with other scripture
  - f. Interpret the unclear in light of the clear

## B. The Bible's Plot

In the beginning, God created all that exists [“the heavens and the earth”]. The *ruah* (“Spirit” or “rushing wind”) of God descended on the primeval ocean, speaking order into wild and waste and granting life in desolation. This is underscored by structuring God’s creating in a pattern of seven, the Hebrew number of completeness. God’s authority, goodness, creativity, and gracious heart overflow in this passage. The climax of His forming and filling activity is His handcrafting of human beings “in His image”, mirroring His attributes and stewarding His authority on behalf of creation. The woman and man are in perfect unity with God, self, each other, and creation. He places them in the Garden of Eden (“delight”) where they have all they need and more. They are given one guideline: eat from any tree in the Garden, but the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Through the trickery of a snake [Satan – Rev. 12], they rebel against God bringing His just decree of death: separation from God, self, each other, and creation. This rebellion is like a disease that spreads to the whole human race, keeping them in exile. In spite of God’s redemptive intervention, the human race spirals downward to the depths of pride. In His perfect timing, God initiates the great turning point of history by choosing Abraham and bringing from him a blessed nation through whom all the nations would be blessed. Ultimately, this blessing would occur through Christ, the defeater of the death decreed in the Garden.

Based on His promise to Abraham and his family, God rescues the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and, with a rushing wind [a “*ruah*”], splits the Red Sea and sets apart a people for Himself. To fulfill their destiny as “a kingdom of priests”, “a light to the Gentiles”, He gives them the Law, instruction on how to walk in His ways. At Sinai, He makes a covenant with them, a relational agreement detailing how to be unified with Him and each other. After the death of Moses and the first generation in the wilderness, God leads the second generation to inherit the land of Canaan under Joshua. After Joshua’s generation, Israel turned from her calling and fell into hundreds of years of idol worship, with only occasional windows of repentance. During this time, Kingship is established and prophets spoke of imminent judgment and future restoration. God made a covenant with King David that an eternal ruler would come from his throne. After years of idolatrous kings, civil war, and word-weary prophets, God disciplines unfaithful Judah, and sends His people into exile. After seventy years, there is a measure of restoration, but this falls short of the prophets’ glorious descriptions.

As time goes on, it becomes clear that God has something much more significant planned. God is incarnated as one of us in the person of Jesus, the promised King from the line of David, the fulfillment of the Law, and the one who will defeat the death that was doled out in the Garden. He announced that God’s rule had come near, and initiated a three-year ministry of reconciliation. He called people out of exile and into relationship with God. His ministry climaxed with His death and resurrection, the way in which sin, death, and Satan would be defeated, the curse reversed, and all created things put under the authority of God. Having been purified by His death, His followers received the gift of God’s permanent, indwelling Spirit after Jesus returned to heaven. The Holy Spirit is the guiding, empowering, renewing presence that would enable them to continue Jesus’ mission of reconciliation, which was His final commission to them. Ultimately, Jesus will return to consummate and establish His eternal kingdom. Creation will be restored, and the curse will be forever lifted. God’s people will be reconciled with Him, self, each other, and creation. In turn, those who have rejected God will be separated from these things. All things will be subjected to His gracious authority so that He might be “all in all” (I Cor. 15). The end, in short, is a new beginning. Once again, God has brought order to ~~wild disorder and waste~~ and granted life from desolation.

## C. The Bible's Themes

### Jesus

The Bible is the unfolding story of the fulfillment of God's promises through Jesus Christ. From the promise of Genesis 3:15 to Jacob's prediction that Judah's line would have "the obedience of the nations"; from Abraham struggling to sacrifice His Son to the typology\* of Joseph, Moses, and Joshua; from symbolism of the sacrificial system to pictures of Israel's restoration that lift the veil on what God, through Christ, will do to reconcile the world to Himself (Colossians 1:20); from Moses' prediction of a prophet-mediator (Deuteronomy 18) to God's promise that David's throne would be "established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16); from poetic pictures of Christ's coronation (Psalm 2 & 110) to the anguish of His suffering in Psalm 22; from Proverbs' personification of wisdom to Daniel's "son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven" (Daniel 7:13); from Isaiah's suffering servant (52:13-53:12) to great and dreadful "Day of the Lord", Jesus Christ is the central theme of the Bible. Matthew records Jesus as having said of the Old Testament, "These scriptures speak of me". Luke records (24:27): "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained what was said in all the scriptures concerning Himself". In the book of Acts, the apostles consistently share the good news of Christ from the Old Testament, and the writers of the epistles frequently draw on Old Testament concepts to elaborate the message of Christ.

\* (Typology refers to the study of Biblical types. Wick Broomall says "type is a shadow cast on the pages of Old Testament history by a truth whose full embodiment ...is found in the New Testament revelation."

### Kingdom, Redemption, and Covenant

Subcategories of the theme of Jesus Christ are kingdom, redemption, and covenant. From page 1 of Genesis, God is portrayed as the sovereign ruler who creates a kingdom for Himself. Once separated from His creation by sin, He begins a process of redemption, bringing His exiled creation back to Himself. Through the millennia, God's primary means of officiating and communicating redemption has been through covenants. God agreed to make Abraham a great nation and bless "all nations" through his descendants. He promised through Moses that He would bless those who kept the Mosaic covenant, and He promised Israel, through Ezekiel and Jeremiah, that He would make a new covenant, writing the law on their hearts and replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (Jeremiah 31; Ezekiel 34 & 37). Jesus said that a cup of wine would represent "The new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20). The writer of Hebrews calls the reader to see this promise as fulfilled, through His Spirit, in the lives of God's emissaries: The Church (Hebrews 8:8).

## D. The Bible's Origin: God-Breathed

The Bible is a collection of short stories, poems, proverbs, histories, prophecies, narratives, and letters, organized in sixty-six books written by more than forty people over a span of at least 1,000 years. God orchestrated the development and distribution of these writings so we could encounter His presence and understand His truth. This idea is commonly called *inspiration*. The Bible is inspired in that God guided the Bible's writers (utilizing their personalities and skills) to communicate, without error, His character, His activities among mankind, and His divine plan.

In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul writes, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The word *God-breathed* is from the Greek word *theopneustos*, which can also be translated *inspired*. In casual speech, we might say a book is *inspired* and mean it is *well-written*. In contrast, the Bible presents itself as God exhaling His life-giving truth, through human writers, into people's lives.

In 2 Peter 1:20 & 21, Peter teaches, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” The term *carried along* is a translation of *pheromenoi* which is also used in Acts 27:15 & 17 to refer to a sailing ship being carried along by the wind. Just as wind fills the sails of a boat to direct it, God guided the Bible’s writers to write with supernatural wisdom, insight, and integrity. This expression of inspiration demonstrates that while God used the inspiration process to communicate His truth to mankind without error, the process was far from mere mechanical translation or rote dictation. Inspiration claims that scripture is a living, breathing speech act of God in which He communicated His truth in a dynamic way for the purpose of bringing people back into relationship with Him so they could become the kind of people He created them to be (1 Peter 1:22-2:3).

As we approach the task of interpretation below, we must be careful to realize that inspiration recognizes the fact that the text was given as real communication, to real people, in real places, experiencing real circumstances. While we affirm that scripture is God’s truth for God’s people of all times and places, we affirm, at the same time, that it was shaped by the times and places in which it was written and that it was specifically directed to the people in its cultural context. By functioning as both a historical record of revelation as well as a contemporary avenue for revelation, Scripture draws the reader or listener into proper alignment with an unchanging and culturally transcendent God.

Over the bulk of the last three centuries, the role of the Bible interpreter has often been compared to that of a scientist who gathers and systematizes data as particles of information. While this is partially helpful, we must also recognize that the task of interpretation must be approached with humility, Spirit-led examination, and an awareness that we inevitably bring to the process our own personalities, experiences, traditions, and cultural perspectives. We must realize that we are finite human beings, situated in particular times and places and therefore limited in knowledge and power. In contrast, God is infinite, subordinate to nothing, and unlimited in knowledge and power.

All of this argues for a position of both confidence and humility. God gave scripture to us so that we could know and understand Him. At the same time we are limited by our sin and perspective. Daily recognition of our idolatrous hearts and limited sight will drive us to greater reliance on God and a healthy caution in being overly dogmatic in our interpretation of certain passages of Scripture (Job 42:4, James 4:14).

## **E. The Need for Interpretation**

If God is speaking in and through the Bible, we should listen and respond to its teaching. In order to do this, we must understand what it means. This is the task of Biblical interpretation. This task, however, may not be as simple and plain as it might first appear. Because the Bible was written in ancient times, its interpretation presents some unique challenges. This is because time, geography, and culture all separate us (listener/reader) from the writer. When we lack awareness of the Bible’s social context, we interpret passages by unconsciously “filling in the cracks” with cultural assumptions and associations. Consequently, we need to sharpen our awareness of the issues related to biblical interpretation so that we can take proper account of linguistic and cultural nuances.

In the book *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, Gordon Fee rightly suggests that the goal of good Bible interpretation is to determine the plain meaning of the text. He goes on to ask, “But if the plain meaning is what interpretation is about, then why interpret? Why not just read? Does not the plain meaning come simply from reading?” (Fee, 18, 2002)

Fee says “No” for two reasons. First,

*We invariably bring to the text all that we are, with all our experiences, culture, and prior understandings of words and ideas... Sometimes what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray, or else causes us to read all kinds of foreign ideas into the text. (Fee, 18-20, 2002).*

In other words, a failure to recognize that “every reader is at the same time an interpreter” leads to careless interpretation. We must, instead, identify principles that guide us in approaching a given text with a high level of awareness and intentionality.

Secondly, as with Christ,

*The Bible is at the same time both human and divine ... it is the Word of God given in human words in history ... Because the Bible is God’s Word, it has eternal relevance; it speaks to all humankind, in every age and in every culture. Because it is God’s Word, we must listen – and obey. But because God chose to speak His Word through human words in history, every book in the Bible also has a historical peculiarity; each document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was originally written... Interpretation of the Bible is demanded by the tension that exists between its eternal relevance and its historical peculiarity (Fee, 20-23, 2002).*

We read the Bible through our lens. Frequently in our culture we read the Bible through the lens of personal application or through God’s instructions to believers in the church rather than through the lens of God’s redemptive kingdom functioning in our world.

*“In a church-centric world, the Bible is viewed as God’s self-revealing gift to His people, chronicling for them His work on their behalf and how they are to conduct their lives together as His people. In this context, Bible study typically functions as a devotional aid and an instructive lesson applied to church people who find what they need for godly living. . . . For the missional church, the Bible serves as a narrative to help the people of God understand His mission in the world and their role in it. It serves as an authoritative guide for living as God’s people while being on mission with Him to woo the world. It conveys God’s hopes for humanity, His dreams of how people should treat one another and what life in the kingdom looks like. By forcing us to see the disparities between the kingdoms of His earth and the kingdom of God, it becomes far more disruptive than informational. The Bible presents a call to action, not just a lesson to be studied.” (McNeal, 26-27, 2009)*

## **F. The Task of Interpretation**

### **The Role of the Holy Spirit**

It is important to remember that we must rely on the Holy Spirit’s illumination to gain insights into the meaning and application of Scripture. It is the Holy Spirit’s work to throw light upon the Word of God so that the believer can determine intended meaning and act upon it. The Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of Truth, guiding us so that “we may understand what God has freely given us” (1 Cor 2:12). Full comprehension of the Word of God is impossible without prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God, for He who inspired the Word is also its supreme interpreter. This illumination is necessary because man’s mind has been darkened through sin, preventing us from properly understanding God’s Word. Human beings cannot understand God’s Word apart from God’s divine enablement. This aspect of the Holy Spirit’s ministry operates within the sphere of man’s rational capacity, which God Himself gave man.

## Exegesis

Good interpretation has at least two stages. “First, one has to hear the Word they heard; you must try to understand what was said to them back *then and there*.” This is called exegesis. “Second, we must learn to hear the same Word in the *here and now*.” This is called hermeneutics. (see pg. 7)

Exegesis is the careful, systematic study of scripture to discover the original, intended meaning. Too often, exegesis tends to be employed “when there is an obvious problem between the biblical texts and modern culture.” Instead, it should be the first step in reading every text. This is because “the original meaning of the text – as much as it is within our power to discern it” provides an “objective point of control.” It keeps in check our desire to make the text mean whatever we want it to mean. Good exegesis involves careful reading that asks questions about *context* and questions about *content*. Questions about context will involve considering both historical and literary context (Fee, 26-30, 2002).

### 1. Historical Context

The historical context is concerned with the culture of the author and his readers as well the author’s purpose for writing.

*It is helpful, for example, to know the personal background of Amos, Hosea, or Isaiah, or that Haggai prophesied after the exile, or to know the Messianic expectations of Israel when John the Baptist and Jesus appeared on the scene, or to understand the differences between the cities of Corinth and Philippi and how those differences affected the churches in each (Fee, 26, 2006).*

Our investigation should start with the Bible itself. Beyond this, a good resource for background information is a quality study Bible with book introductions and notes. For further study, Bible commentaries, atlases, dictionaries, and handbooks provide more detailed background. It is also crucial to have “an idea of what was going on in Israel or the church that called forth such a document” (Fee, 26, 2002).

The answer to these questions can often be found within the Bible itself. For example, the sayings in the book of Proverbs were compiled “for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young” (Proverbs 1:4). Luke wrote his “carefully investigated” and “orderly account” of Jesus’ life “so that you may know and be certain of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:3-4). John writes, “But these [miraculous signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God and by believing, you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). Paul wrote Galatians to confront those who were “trying to pervert the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:7). Comparing internal evidence to study notes and commentary may be helpful as well.

### 2. Literary Context

To consider the literary context is to recognize, first, that the meaning that an author intends to convey by using a particular word is best seen by how he used that word in a sentence. The author’s intended meaning of a sentence is best seen by looking at the preceding and succeeding sentences. In other words, the meaning of the smaller units (words, sentences) of a particular section or book of the Bible is best seen when we keep in mind the bigger picture - the author’s flow of thought.

*The most important contextual question you will ever ask – and it must be asked over and over of every sentence and every paragraph is “What’s the point? ... What’s the author saying, and why does he or she say it right here? Having made that point, what is he or she saying next and why?” (Fee, 28, 2002)*

In his book *Exegetical Fallacies*, D.A. Carson offers a lengthy and detailed discussion on the dangers of determining the meaning of a word in isolation rather than by considering its context. One example he cites is the English word *nice* which comes from the Latin *nescius*. Carson says, “I know of no one today who in saying such and such a person is *nice* believes that he or she has in some measure labeled that person as ignorant because the *root meaning* ... of *nice* is *ignorant*” (Carson, 28, 1996).

Similarly, Ben Witherington gives the example of the word *perfect* in the New Testament.

*Jesus said, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” in Matthew 5:48. In 1 Corinthians 13:10, Paul says that “when the perfect comes, the partial disappears.” Are they talking about the same thing just because they use the same term? Well, no. The context of Matthew 5 indicates that Jesus is referring to that sort of whole-hearted loving of others that characterizes God. Be perfect means be loving like the Father is loving. Paul, on the other hand, is talking about when the eschaton (the final perfect condition) comes, and we see Jesus face to face and understand all things perfectly and clearly. Words only have meaning in contexts, and plucking words out of contexts and linking them to other uses of the same word is often a recipe for disaster and misinterpretation (Witherington, 2007).*

### **3. Content**

This is not to say that we should give no consideration to content (such as lexical meanings and grammar). We must consider both context and content, looking to see how the smaller pieces inform the whole and vice versa. There will be times, for example, when we need to know something about the meaning of a *denarius* (a day’s wages), or *the Sabbath* (the Jewish day of rest), or *high places* (mountain shrines to idols) (Fee, 28, 2002). It will also be helpful for us to note structural relationships such as cause and effect, comparison, contrast, repetition, and climax.

John 15:5 is a great example of both cause and effect and comparison. Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in Him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”. As a branch is nourished by the vine to which it’s connected, Jesus’ disciples are spiritually nourished by their connectedness to Him. This connectedness is a cause, and the effect is that they will “bear much fruit.”

A great example of repetition is Genesis 1. Phillip Yancey writes, “And God said .... And God said .... And God said – the phrase beats in cadence all the way through the chapter.” Through this, we get a sense of the order and harmony of God’s creative work that is not overtly stated in the passage. The significance of climax, repetition, and contrast can be seen in Romans 8. After a rather technical discussion on sin and the Holy Spirit, Paul ramps up to the heart and soul of his theology:

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38 & 39).*

Paul’s repetition of the *neither...nor* give the passage an increasing intensity, triumphantly emphasizing the totality of God’s love.

## **Hermeneutics**

While exegesis seeks to understand what the writer was trying to say to them *back then and there*, we must learn to hear the same Word in the *here and now*. This is called hermeneutics. It is the process by which we apply the author’s original meaning to our own lives and communities. The goal of hermeneutics is to

provide guidelines that aid us in wrestling with and faithfully living out the truth of scripture. For example, in what way are we to heed the lengthy, detailed legal codes in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy? What does it mean in our culture to “Greet one another with a holy kiss?” (Romans 16:16) What does it look like today for “women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, but with good deeds, appropriate for women who profess to worship God?” (1 Timothy 1:9 & 10) These are not easy questions. No approach will provide “cut and dry” answers for all of our questions.

What is God’s role in all of this? While it is our responsibility to pursue good practice in this area, it is not ultimately our job to change hearts and minds. In John 17, Jesus promised that when the Holy Spirit came [“The Counselor”] to live in the hearts of believers (Acts 2), He would continually “teach you all things and remind you of everything I said to you” (14:26). He would also “convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment” (16:7). Paul teaches, as well, that it is through God’s Spirit that we “are being transformed into His likeness with ever increasing glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18). As we wrestle with how to apply God’s eternal truth to particular situations, we must remember: “... We cannot make it mean anything that pleases us then give the Holy Spirit ‘credit’ for it. The Holy Spirit cannot be brought into the process to contradict Himself...the Spirit’s help for us will come in our discovering the original intent and in His guiding us as we try faithfully to apply that meaning to our own situations” (Fee, 30, 2002). While it is difficult to give rules for hermeneutics, here are some general hermeneutical guidelines:

## **G. General Hermeneutical Guidelines**

### **1. Interpret with Confidence that the Bible is Unique and Trustworthy**

Though the inspiration of scripture is a position that we believe by faith, there is a significant amount of verifiable evidence to support the claim that the Bible is both unique and trustworthy. For example, in spite of the fact that many of the authors did not know each other, did not live during the same time period, nor share a common culture, their writings fit together to tell a single story - the story of God working in history, through Jesus Christ, to draw people to Himself. Further, much of the Bible has been affirmed by archeology. For example, discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls reveal the precision with which ancient scribes copied and preserved the Old Testament scriptures; the discovery of artifacts related to the Hittite civilization has confirmed the existence of these people mentioned in the Old Testament but whose existence was previously doubted before these discoveries.

Similarly, we possess a wealth of matching New Testament accounts, written and corroborated by eyewitnesses and written within less than one generation of their occurrence. The existing manuscripts of the gospel accounts, in today’s museums, date back farther, are higher quality, and exist in much greater number than the earliest manuscripts of any other document. There are approximately 24,000 ancient hand-written copies of the New Testament in existence. While scribal errors occasionally result in minor variations [analogous to “a few typos”], these copies are essentially matching in content and worldview. The sheer volume of copies eclipses even the most respected ancient documents, such as Plato’s writings [30 copies] and Homer’s *Illiad* [650 copies]. It should also be noted, that the “average ancient Greek author’s writings have no copies until at least five hundred years later. In many cases, if not most, it is closer to 1,000 years. Not so with the New Testament. The earliest fragments come from the second century—within 100 years of the originals...Today there are as many as a dozen or so Greek New Testament manuscripts from the second century...From the fourth century, within 250 years of the originals, we have a complete New Testament.” (Daniel B. Wallace). In short, not only are there many more manuscripts of the Bible than any other ancient writings, they are also much closer to the original source than other writings.

## **2. Interpret with Genre in Mind**

Genre matters. Before we can interpret a particular type of literature we need to understand what kind of literature it is. Here are some of the Bible's more commonly used genres and some general guidelines for interpretation:

### **a. Narrative**

Much of both the Old and the New Testament is narrative. In scripture, narrative more often describes what "is" rather than "what ought to be." For example, consider Genesis 4:8: "Cain said to his brother, 'Let's go out to the field.' And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him." Consider, as well, Genesis 16:3-4: "So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived."

As you can see, scriptural narrative is often shockingly frank about a character's shortcomings and failures; even the "good guys" fall into sins such as lying, polygamy, adultery, and murder. These portrayals underscore God as the faithful hero of the story acting in spite of, and beyond, people's failings. For this reason, with narrative, we must be cautious in generally interpreting a character's actions as "what we should do." Sometimes, characters illustrate "what we should not do." In reference to the generation that died in the wilderness because of disobedience, Paul writes, "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did" (I Corinthians 10:6).

### **b. Law**

Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy contain lengthy legal codes, the Law that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai. While Law is a straight-forward genre for the original audience, it is challenging for the modern reader to determine in what way and to what degree a particular law is either absolute or culturally specific. For example, what do complex purity rituals or rules for capital punishment have to do with us? What about the Ten Commandments?

Classifying law can aid in its interpretation. The six-hundred and thirteen laws given to Moses can be generally classified into the following categories:

- Ceremonial Law – temporary, pointed symbolically to Jesus Christ; emphasized spiritual shortcomings & need for payment of sin's debt; expressed means of demonstrating faith in God & substitution for payment of sin's debt.
- Civil Law – government guidelines for a particular historical context, provides pictures of God's eternal passion for love and justice; established uniqueness of Israel as God's own unique people set apart for His redemptive purposes in the world; further demonstrated people's inability to faithfully follow after God & obey Him. .
- Moral Law – Based on God's eternal character and expresses God's eternal guidelines for people to love God and each other (with cultural nuances, of course)

### **c. Poetry**

Job, Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon are biblical books of poetry. In addition, the Bible frequently weaves poetic interludes throughout its narratives. Poetry is a highly expressive, symbolic medium. Poetry communicates in broad strokes, inviting the reader into mood-pictures ranging from the pain of life to the glory of God. It typically reveals a thought process, rather than propositions or systematically reasoned arguments. For example, in Psalm 51:1, David pleads with God, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love."

A primary feature of biblical poetry is parallelism. Each line either restates the general idea of the preceding line or begins a new idea which is then restated in the subsequent line. For example, Psalm 3

begins with the same idea restated three different ways. David writes, “O Lord how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, ‘God will not deliver him.’” The next line establishes a new thought, (“But you are a shield around me, O Lord.”) which is restated in the next line (“You bestow glory on me and lift up my head”). In this way, Hebrew poetry contains an internal “check and balance” in that it often restates its main ideas in multiple ways throughout that section.

#### **d. Proverbs**

Proverbs are short, pithy statements of moral truth. They are often addressed to youth and frequently employ parallelism. Proverbs often use similes and metaphors and point the reader away from evil and toward what is right. They are not absolute promises. They are meant to generally illustrate “how life works” (Hendricks, 217, 1991). For example, Proverbs 22:6 says “Train a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not turn from it.” However, it is evident that some parents “train up a child in the way he should go” and when he grows up, he lives a lifestyle of poor choices.

#### **e. Prophecy**

The bulk of the second half of the Old Testament is prophecy. It is a “strident, authoritative presentation of God’s will and words; frequently intended as a corrective” which is “intended to motivate change through warnings” and “foretell God’s plans in response to human choices” (Hendricks, 218, 1991). It is at the same time highly symbolic, filled with metaphor. Jeremiah describes Israel’s idolatry by saying: “They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jeremiah 2:13b). Ezekiel uses this metaphor: “... you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute” (Ezekiel 16:15a).

Because of its symbolic nature, prophecy is easily misinterpreted. In light of the fact that the New Testament fulfills many prophecies in the Old Testament in ways that were unforeseen at their time of writing, we must approach prophecy humbly, reserving a wise measure of tentativeness, while retaining genuine enthusiasm to see how God will fulfill what He has promised. For example, in Isaiah 2 and Micah 4, the prophet writes, “In the last days, the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream into it” (Isaiah 2:2; Micah 4:1). Is the prophet speaking of a literal, rebuilt temple where all the nations worship together, or is he using the idea of the temple (the place where God’s presence dwells) to paint a symbolic picture of the nations returning to God and uniting to worship Him? We might intuitively choose the first option. Consider though John’s description of the New Jerusalem, “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Revelation 21:22).

#### **f. Biography**

The Bible contains biographies (a close-up view of someone’s life) of individuals like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Saul, David, Elijah, and Jesus. Rather than including all major events (as modern biographies do), these biographies are made up of carefully selected events. This is done to teach a specific lesson, often by contrasting one character to another (or group of others) or tracing a character’s development (Hendricks, 217, 1991). In reading biography, we must be cautious not to generally interpret a character’s actions as “what we should do” (see above comments on narrative). The exception to this rule is Jesus Himself who, as God incarnated, consistently models who God created us to be.

#### **g. Parables**

Parables are stories that communicate something of God’s rule in the world. They are symbolic in nature, similar to the Hebrew *Mashal*, and can best be understood in light of 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish culture. Jesus’ parables were characterized by a familiar form with a surprise element or twist. It is this surprise element that is meant to provoke readers/listeners to reexamine their worldview. One must be careful in reading

parables not to interpret them allegorically, where every aspect has a hidden meaning. The parable was a story about common situations that was used to convey a particular truth.

#### **h. Epistles**

Epistles are 1<sup>st</sup> century correspondences that address ecclesiastical problems and issues of spiritual formation. Even when they are addressed to a specific individual, they were publicly read and circulated. They seem deceptively straightforward, but must be read with attention to what is known of the specific details of the correspondence. It is particularly easy, in this genre, to read and apply the words of the text flatly, as if the “you” in the correspondence is more or less the modern reader. We must read, instead, with a heightened sense of awareness of the cultural context of original audience and the degree to which each passage has direct applicability to our culture.

For example, John says, “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God...If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him.” Does this mean that we should never invite anyone to dinner unless they are a believer? Not when we consider the cultural significance, in the ancient Near East, of sharing a meal with someone. It was an affirmation of spiritual unity. To eat with someone was to identify with their cause and in the context it alludes to a formal endorsement of that person’s teaching. Even Jesus ate with sinners and “fellowshipped” with them, but did not do so in a way that formally endorsed their position. It will look different in our culture to avoid identifying with causes that compromise or formally endorse positions that contradict the gospel. The more we hear the instruction of the epistles “with first century ears”, the better we can live it out in the here and now.

#### **i. Apocalyptic Literature**

Revelation and portions of Daniel are categorized as apocalyptic literature. This type of writing sees earthly events, especially the struggle of God’s people, as warfare between God and the forces of evil and depicts the coming victory of God over these forces by means of symbolic images. It is also characterized by the struggle of good and evil, particularly in terms of Satan as a counterfeit of God. Its predominant theme is God and His people’s victory over Satan, through Jesus.

Because of its highly symbolic nature, it must be approached with wisdom, humility, and high regard for the text’s original audience. We must remember that images that seem strange and abstract to us had a greater level of meaning for the original audience. Their culture provided reference points for symbols that are difficult for us to understand.

It is also important to note that it is fairly common for apocalyptic literature to interpret itself. For example, in Revelation 1, John is shown a vision of seven stars and seven golden lamp stands. Jesus appears in the vision and explains, “The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lamp stands are the seven churches”. In the same way, In Daniel 2, King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream of a great statue made of gold, silver, bronze, and clay which is smashed to pieces by a rock. Daniel explains what the dream was meant to represent. The statue represents subsequent earthly kingdoms. “The God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed...It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever” (Daniel 2:44). In Daniel 7, a similar interpretation is given for Daniel’s dream of “four beasts.” These stated interpretations do not answer all our questions, but they do bring an increased level of clarity to the Bible’s most difficult genre.

### **3. Interpret Each Part in Light of the Whole**

We’ve emphasized above that the meaning of words and sentences cannot be determined apart from the author’s flow of thought in that section or book of the Bible. The same is true on a larger scale. The meaning of whole sections or books should be seen in light of the Bible’s complete story. For example, the

legal codes of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy seem needlessly detailed and formal. If we were interpreting the law without the rest of the story, we might assume that to be right with God is to follow His laws to perfection. In the Bible's larger story, the law functions as a diagnosis of the real problem: a corrupt heart – for which the law alone can never be a cure. The cure comes through Abraham's family to the nations. As the story continues, it is revealed that this cure is a restored relationship with God, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Along these lines, without the teaching of the New Testament, what would it mean to us that God made a promise to Abraham that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"? (Genesis 12:3b) On the other side of Jesus' resurrection, though, we are able to see that in Genesis 12, "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you'" (Galatians 3:8).

#### **4. Interpret in Light of God's Unfolding Plan**

Scripture is the unfolding story of God's work, through Jesus Christ, to bring back under His rule that which has been separated from Him. Because the story is gradually unfolding, not every passage reflects an "ultimate ethic" of kingdom values. Rather, as William Webb suggests in his book *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, "These passages are written within a cultural framework within which God is moving toward an ultimate ethic" (Webb, 2001, 34). In scripture, God met people in their cultural context to "speak redemptively to their given communities" (Webb, 2001, 254). In other words, in relation to the sin of that culture, God is moving people, sometimes in baby steps, toward His definition of what His world should be. It is important for us to recognize God's redemptive movement within scripture or else we risk missing the point.

*The Israelites were instructed to provide safety and refuge to slaves fleeing harsh treatment from a foreign country (Deut. 23:15-16). Upon crossing Israel's borders, a fleeing slave was to be given shelter, was permitted to live in any of the Israelite's cities and was not to be handed over to his or her master (Webb, 33, 2002).*

*A static hermeneutic would apply this slaver-refuge text by permitting the ownership of slaves today, provided the church offers similar kinds of refuge for runaway slaves... Christians would dare not speak out against slavery. They would support the institution of slavery, but seek to give refuge to slaves in abusive relationships. Such an approach stays very close to the words of the text – at least the words of the text when understood without their crucial component of spirit-movement meaning. (Webb, 33-34, 2002)*

"The word of God is living and active." (Hebrews 4:12) The redemptive movement God intends must be discerned from the isolated words on the page.

On the other hand, there are also static "ethics" throughout the scripture. For example, God's pronouncement in Genesis 2:24, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" was reiterated by Jesus as God's norm for marriage. That norm has not changed over the years or over cultures, despite evidence in the Bible that people held other views of marriage. Thus part of the difficulty in interpreting is determining what ethics are static and which ones are unfolding.

#### **5. Interpret Scripture in Harmony with other Scripture**

Scripture should function as its own corrective. We must look for terms, concepts, and ideas in one part of scripture that are repeated in another. We must wrestle to synthesize passages on similar topics and allow the whole to inform the parts. Scripture often explores the same idea from multiple perspectives. Considering a wide scope of teaching on a topic tends to clarify our view of individual passages and give us a more holistic understanding of that topic. For example, in constructing a biblical view of gender roles, one would do well to compare and synthesize passages such as Genesis 1-3, Judges 4, Acts 18, Luke 8, Mark 14, Matthew 27, Romans 5, Romans 16:3, I Corinthians 16:9, Galatians 3, Ephesians 5, and 1 Timothy 2.

## 6. Interpret the Unclear in Light of the Clear

Similarly, it is unwise to build a biblical theology on any topic from one or two obscure verses. Instead, allow texts that thoroughly articulate a topic guide interpretation of less repeated and more obscure texts on that same topic.

For example, one may be tempted to base their theology of salvation around Jesus' teaching in Matthew 12:31-32 and Mark 3:28-29. In both of these passages, Jesus says that blasphemy against men will be forgiven, but "whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven" (Mk 3:29). At first glance, we might assume that this means that if you mess up your life bad enough, repentance will not be enough to make you right with God. It is not entirely clear, though, what "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" is. It is also not entirely clear, from this passage, whether Jesus intends to say that it will not be forgiven because God refuses to forgive or because someone's heart is too hardened to ask for forgiveness. What is clear is that the Pharisees' attitudes and words were blasphemous to God and Jesus was calling them to accountability.

As we look at scripture as a whole, there are numerous passages that teach and illustrate that God's grace is poured out unconditionally on those who turn their hearts to God, even those who are the worst of sinners (Psalm 32; Psalm 51; Psalm 86:5; Luke 23:43; Acts 13:38; I John 3:1-18; Romans 3:21-26; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:13-14; I John 1:8-2:2). Paul's testimony (Acts 9; 22; 26; Galatians 1:11-24) provides an illustration of the depth of God's grace. The church's most ardent persecutor has become its greatest advocate. He testifies in Galatians 1, "For you heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it...but...God...called me by His grace" (Galatians 1:13 & 15a). These passages on repentance and grace provide a clear and widespread framework within which to interpret passages with obscure statements such as Matthew 12:31-32 and Mark 3:28-29.

Note: A word of caution is also in order. It is exceedingly easy to select passages that seem to say what we want to hear and consider these the "clear" passages. On the other hand, passages that don't fit our pre-conceptions may be relegated to the category of "unclear" and explained away by the "clear" passages. We must continually submit to God this desire to muzzle the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts and minds

## H. Recommended Resources

Bartholomew, Craig & Goheen, Michael, *The Drama of Scripture*

Carson, D.A., *Exegetical Fallacies*

Eldredge, John, *Epic*

Fee, Gordon & Stuart, Douglas, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*

Hendricks, Howard, *Living by the Book*

McNeal, Reggie, *Missional Renaissance* p. 26-27.

Ryken, Leland, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*

Stott, John, *Basic Christian Leadership* (Chapter 3 provides concise summary)

Webb, William, *Slaves, Women, & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*

Witherington, Ben. *Hermeneutics: A Guide for Perplexed Bible Readers*

<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2007/08/hermeneutics-guide-for-perplexed-bible.html>