

Scripture speaks for itself

2 Peter 1:19-21

Last week I began this series on how I read the Bible by saying I made certain assumptions. I believe these presuppositions reflect God's own bias, that God has a heart for the poor, the oppressed, the prisoner and the blind. I am aware that such a presupposition, as indeed do all presuppositions, needs to be constantly challenged. So I subject myself to the scrutiny of Scripture. I do this by applying a set of principles to all my reading and study of Scripture. It is these I want to share with you over the next few weeks. These principles have no particular order, each is of equal standing with the others. At times they don't sit well with one another, but I have found that out of this tension fresh ideas can arise that lead me into a deeper knowledge of God and his word and a deeper relationship with Jesus.

Let me briefly list these guiding principles. Over the weeks ahead I will expand them, show how they work and hopefully give useful examples.

- First, I believe Scripture speaks for itself. Generally speaking the Bible is plain enough to be understood and obeyed.
- Second, all Scripture is Christ centred. That is, all the Bible must be read through the lens of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. But more than that, I believe that a living, personal relationship with Jesus is necessary if we are to understand Scripture aright.
- Third, Scripture is an unfolding story, a history, both of God's dealings with us and our response to him.
- Fourth, Scripture can only be understood under the active, present guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Fifth, Scripture belongs to the people of God and the proper place to interpret and apply it is in the local congregation.
- Finally, the goal of Scripture is not to inform us about spiritual things (although it does do that), it is to change us. It is good to understand the Bible, but it is far more important to obey it.

My first principle is that Scripture speaks for itself. As our forebears were keen on saying, the Bible is both clear and sufficient. Of course, this is not entirely

true. If it were there would not be quite so many interpretations as there are. This is why I have six principles and not just the one. However, to allow Scripture to speak for itself we can follow certain guidelines. Firstly, every proposed interpretation of any passage must be compared with what the other parts of the Bible teach. In other words, the message which the Scriptures as a whole proclaims will not be contradicted by any particular passage. Therefore, if two or three different interpretations of a part of the Bible are equally possible, any interpretation that contradicts any other part must be carefully re-examined.

Secondly, context is critical. Every word, clause, sentence and paragraph of Scripture comes to us in contexts – from the immediate passage to the part of a book, to the whole book, to the historical context of the book, its setting and purpose, and ultimately to the entire Bible. Tunnel vision is perilous. A passage cannot mean one thing when taken at one level and something else at another. Such a practice, called ‘proof-texting’, is always to be rejected.

A logical extension of this is that we should not build an interpretation of Scripture upon a single verse or a small selection of texts. We should not erect an entire teaching or system of doctrine upon a verse in isolation from its context.

Thirdly, when reading Scripture we should allow the clear and unambiguous to interpret the less clear. This is easier to say than do, as we may think we have a clear grasp of a passage only because of a dubious prior understanding. It is often because of this that the traditions of man can be mistaken as the teaching of Scripture, a problem today no less than in Jesus’ time.

I believe this taking of Scripture at face value has important implications for all God’s people. It means that when each of us comes to Scripture we should do so with open minds and hearts, not already convinced by some doctrinal position or traditional interpretation that allows, encourages or deceives us into evading rather than understanding and applying what God is saying.

Just two brief examples may help with understanding this principle. The first is an old sore taken from the Old Testament law and a favourite quote of those who want to prove the injustice, even barbarity of God’s law. “If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” This law of equal retribution is repeated three times (Exodus 21:23–25; Leviticus 24:19f; Deuteronomy 19:21). When it is quoted, even by Christians, it is nearly always taken out of both its Biblical and historical context. Its immediate context is part of a legal procedure. It is not tacit approval for personal revenge. Its wider Biblical context is that it is said by God who also says, “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:18 and see Romans 12:19) Placed side by side these two apparently self-contradictory passages should alert us to look deeper.

In fact, when we turn to the wider historical context we find that far from being the draconian law it is often accused of being, Israel's law of appropriate retribution is a model of enlightenment compared with the legal codes of other nations of that time and place. Archaeology has now given us many examples of these codes and they are universally unjust, treating rich and poor completely differently. The penalty for a poor man stealing from the rich was often death, whereas a rich man could kill a poor man with impunity. God's people are not to be like that, all are equal before God. What's more, this law restricts punishment. Injuring another, even intentionally, could not be punished by death. The principle here is not about revenge, but about fairness.

My second example is one of Jesus' well know commands. "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26) How are we to read this in the light of, say, the Fifth Commandment: "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you." (Exodus 20:12) Again, context is vital. This passage in Luke (14:25-35) is all about counting the cost of following Jesus. It is not intended to be easy. Neither are we intended to read it in isolation from all the other things Jesus said. We may be tempted to quickly pass by such passages, pausing only to say, "Ah yes! He means, 'hate in comparison'." But such stark words are intended to pull us up short, to make us think. Similar questions may be asked about other hard sayings of Jesus, for example, if your eye causes you to sin, why do you not pluck it out (Mark 9:47), or must we sell everything we have and give it to the poor in order to inherit eternal life (Luke 18:18-22)?

Allowing Scripture to speak for itself will always be a challenge.

Amen.

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