

He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

Lesson 4

Approaches to Meaning

Forum



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Lesson Four: Approaches to Meaning

Faculty Forum

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Question 1:

How can identifying the proper genre help us interpret Scripture more responsibly?

There are several initial questions we should ask if we're going to interpret a book of the Bible responsibly. One of those questions deals with what type of literature, or genre, we have in front of us. So, how can identifying the proper genre help us interpret Scripture more responsibly?

Dr. Dan Doriani

Proper genre identification is vital for biblical interpretation. You have to know what you're reading. If you're in the book of Proverbs and you take it as absolute promises or as absolute law, you're going to make mistakes. Proverbs is a description of the way life ordinarily works, the path of wisdom. And we can see, for example, in contrasting proverbs, that we're supposed to hold things in a sort of creative tension. So, one place it says, back to back, "Correct a fool lest he be wise in his own eyes" ... "Don't correct a fool lest you," to paraphrase, "be dragged down to his level." Well, which one should you do? I mean, you have to figure it out. On the other hand, if you're in a place like Exodus 20 and you're having, "You shall..." and "You shall not..." you need to understand these are absolute, universally relevant, applicable laws of God. They're not counsel, they're not advice. They are the sure will of God.

Dr. Ben Witherington III

The question about genre — which means a literary type or kind of biblical books — really is a crucial question. The Gospels are like ancient biographies. They're not like modern biographies. The book of Acts is a historical monograph. It's not like biography. The letters of Paul are... wait for it... letters of Paul, and they have their own conventions. And the book of Revelation is a piece of apocalyptic prophecy, not just any kind of prophecy but *apocalyptic* prophecy, which is to say, visionary

prophecy. If you don't get the genre signals right, then you don't understand the sort of universe of discourse out of which this book is operating.

Dr. Greg Perry

It's important to identify the particular genre of biblical books because the author is sending signals about how he wants to be understood. We know right away when we see the words, "Once upon a time," for example, what to expect, that we can expect maybe a unicorn, or flying horses, because the genre signal has been sent that we are in a fantasy or a fable or a fairy tale. But if we have this sense of "St. Louis," and we have a particular date, and we have a particular location like St. Louis, then we know that it's... about events that actually happened, and we don't expect any flying horses... So the gospel writers, the writers of the New Testament, the writer of Revelation for example, are sending signals, these genre signals, about how they want to be understood. So we need to catch those signals so that we can read and understand properly.

Question 2:

How does the process of interpreting Scripture resemble a spiral that closes in on God's authoritative meaning?

Evangelical interpreters seek, first and foremost, to understand God's authoritative meaning in Scripture. At its base, this is what biblical hermeneutics is all about. Recently, this hermeneutical process has been described using the picture of a spiral. How does the process of interpreting Scripture resemble a spiral that closes in on God's authoritative meaning?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Sometimes those involved in hermeneutics talk about the interpretive spiral by which we understand that the reader of a text goes to the biblical text. That text, in a sense, starts shaping and reforming a person's thinking. And as a result of responding to God's Word, you then enter back into reading the text again with renewed understanding and renewed focus. And in that respect, it is like a spiral that comes down to hone on a central meaning. And part of the hermeneutical task of reading the Bible is recognizing the whole baggage of theology that we bring to the text — some of which is good theology, some of which is just part of whatever we've inherited — that shapes the way we read the text, but the text then has to challenge that in some way so that our theology, as time goes on, becomes more and more biblical. And as this sort of two-way process goes on, one hopes that as the reader prayerfully responds and obeys God's Word, then the theology which they bring to the text in the first place is more shaped by the Bible. In that respect, the analogy is of a spiral that moves around, becoming closer to the understanding of the text itself.

Dr. Gary Cockerill

Sometimes we talk about interpreting the Bible being a spiral. Grant Osborne... is one who's made that term popular, a spiral as we approach God's intended meaning for Scripture. And the spiral takes into account my own spiritual condition, my own background, what I bring to Scripture. It says that... I will understand Scripture better if I submit myself to Scripture. If I submit my background, my own thinking... my own perspective and let Scripture reshape me. Then, when Scripture has reshaped me... I will come around the spiral because I will be better able to understand Scripture. I'll be more in sync with Scripture. I submit again. God uses Scripture to reshape me and to re-form me. That makes me again better able to understand Scripture because I'm more closely in sync with God's Word. And then I submit again, and God uses Scripture to reshape me, which brings me again into a closer relationship with God's Word. So it's a matter of submitting and God reshaping. That puts me closer to God's Word. So I submit again, and he uses it to reshape me, to conform me to Scripture ... So in that way, my understanding of Scripture is progressive. As I surrender to it, God reshapes me, and as he reshapes me, I'm able to better surrender to it. As I surrender to it again, he reshapes me. So, my understanding of Scripture then grows. I approach more closely, understand more deeply its meaning as it reshapes me and brings me into sync with it. This really describes a lot of the process of spiritual growth. You know, I study Scripture. God uses it in my life. That makes me better able to understand it. So I study again, continue to study it, he uses it again to change me, to make me better able to understand it. That's... what I understand by a hermeneutical spiral.

Question 3:**Why is it important to consider a biblical author's purposes and goals for writing?**

Some interpreters believe that if they ignore the author and the original audience of Scripture and deal directly with the text alone, they'll arrive at a more rational and objective understanding of the text. But evangelical interpreters see the value in studying biblical authors and understanding their reasons for writing, especially when a purpose is explicitly stated. Why is it important to consider a biblical author's purposes and goals for writing?

Dr. Dan Doriani

It's important to consider the reasons why an author wrote to aid our interpretation. When you get a book that has a very specific focus and then a purpose statement made by that author, that enables you to read everything in the light of that purpose. Classically, John 20 says, in verse 31, John says that he wrote these things "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ and that by believing you have life in his name." And so, you know from that statement that's his purpose. And the whole book should be read with this in mind, that we should believe in Jesus, know that he's the Christ, have life. And of course, we understand from John that that life begins now. But, you

know, the statement pretty much says this is an evangelistic gospel. Not that it's only evangelism, but it has a driving evangelistic purpose. In other words, a purpose statement that says, "This is what I'm aiming for," is enormously beneficial. To stay with the Gospels, there's not a purpose statement as clear in Matthew, but it does say at the end as Jesus was leaving his disciples, "You must go make disciples of all the nations." And if you realize that somebody's last words are often their heaviest words — what's of greatest importance — you go back to the Gospel of Matthew, and you can see that this is not so much an evangelistic, but more a disciple-making gospel, lots and lots of teaching, practical answers to the basic questions of how you follow King Jesus ... It's also important to recognize that some books don't necessarily have a clear-cut purpose. You have books like, for example, 1 Peter and James that appear to be letters written for the whole church. This is the scope, the shape of the Christian life lived out in the presence of Christ our Lord, the Holy Lamb of God. In books like that — and maybe you mention Genesis in the same — they're of universal interest. They touch all of the Christian faith, all belief. And we have to accept that these are overtures, to the whole Christian experience, and that we shouldn't look for one particular purpose. The purpose is to present who God is and who we are in his presence.

Dr. Peter Chow, translation

I think our hope when interpreting the Bible is to be able to grasp the original intention of the author, what he hoped to get across in the manner that he wrote, what sort of assumptions he was making about his original audience as he was writing. For example, Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. The salvation from God that the Israelites experienced — the Passover lamb, the sparing of the firstborn, the crossing of the Red Sea, the eating of manna, etc. — with all of this as a background, God gave the Law to the Israelites through Moses. The Israelites had a responsibility to obey the Law, and Moses was calling them to be grateful because they had experienced God and his salvation. It's for reasons like this that we need to understand the implied relationship between the original reader and the writer ... By better understanding this tacit agreement between the author and original reader, we can more accurately, and more deeply, understand the Bible.

Dr. David W. Chapman

One of the important things to take into account as you're interpreting Scripture is to learn as much as you can about the author because the author is going to convey things in ways that are consistent with other purposes and other books that the author has written and have their own distinct emphases. So, if you think of the book of Acts, for instance, it's very useful and important to know that the same author is the author of the Gospel of Luke. And then you can see that Luke and Acts forms a continuous storyline, where the emphases that are in Luke, in the gospel, continues into the book of Acts. And you can see this important transition between Jesus and his mission and the apostles and their mission. Another example would be that, with the apostle Paul, you see this diversity of letters written to different purposes and peoples, and yet, you see a unity to the corpus. Sometimes if there's something difficult to understand in one writing of Paul, to read another of his epistles might add clarity to

it. But you also see a broader sense of his aims and purposes if you read the collection as a whole.

Question 4:

What were the fundamental ideas underlying Descartes' rationalism?

When we begin to interpret Scripture, one of the first questions we have to ask is, "How do we approach meaning?" Throughout history, philosophers and theologians have formulated a variety of ways to answer this question. One of the major proponents of a rational and objective approach was the French philosopher René Descartes. What were the fundamental ideas underlying Descartes' rationalism?

Dr. Bruce Baugus

Descartes was very concerned about the lack of certainty in philosophy, in knowledge. And he was on a quest to try to find a method, a philosophical method that could offer the kind of certainty for philosophical ideas that math enjoyed, that you could find in mathematics, for example — in his quest, he turned to doubt and a kind of radical doubt — so that you could get down to those things which were certain and sure, and then you could begin to rebuild your foundation on that. I think the unintended consequences for Descartes, of his method, was that it created a very self-centered, egocentric sort of approach where now *you* became the center and were deemed to be confident, and your reason sufficient for assessing what was certain and what was true. And measuring everything else so that those things which were certain to you and that your reason could be confident in would become the foundation. Everything else would be built upon that foundation ... This meant that reason had a kind of priority and authority that turned out to undermine tradition or other sources of authority. It meant that the individual was at the center. And therefore, there was a loss of need and dependence upon the community and those around you. Once again, it was an attack and assault that undermined tradition and the contributions of others around you. And it led to a kind of form of rationalism where truth, on the good side, was seen as objective — that is, independent of what you happen to know or think about it — but on the negative side was identical with that which was eternally valid, these ideas that could be extracted straight out of history and straight out of their cultural context and so forth. And that's what truth was, and that's what we were aimed at, and that's all we're interested in. As you see this work itself out historically, you see a great emphasis on trying to recapture the "essence" of Christianity. And usually that became code, in the sort of Cartesian tradition of rationalism, for trying to identify eternally valid, often moral teachings in Scripture and isolating those from the historical husk and the positive husk. All the particular things that were thought not to be necessary could be discarded. And this, of course, is a major agenda of higher critical exegesis going forward.

Dr. Steve Blakemore

René Descartes is considered the father of modern philosophy. He's the one who introduces what most people consider now the epistemological problem that has plagued modern thought. And that problem is this: how can I be sure that anything I think I know is really true? How can I be confident that my beliefs are grounded in reality? And he's famous for going through this process of doubt — What could I doubt? I could doubt this, I could doubt this, I could doubt this — He doubts all the way down to the final conclusion of his doubt where he says, "The one thing I could not doubt, so long as I was doubting, was that I was doubting. If I'm doubting, I can't doubt that I doubt. Therefore, if I'm doubting, I'm thinking. If I'm thinking, I must exist." Now what does that lead to? That leads to a central focus on the human rational self as the source of all authority. The other thing Descartes was wanting to do, though, was to try to get a starting point upon which all reasonable men could agree. Everybody is going to agree that you can start with yourself and the certainty of your own existence and your own selfhood. So, those are the two fundamental premises of Descartes' rationalism. First is a move toward the centrality of the self as the source of epistemological certitude. And secondly, a kind of foundationalism upon which all rational persons could begin to agree.

Question 5:**What were the fundamental ideas underlying Kant's subjectivism?**

When considering ways to approach meaning in the Bible, some modern interpreters reject objectivism and its flaws in favor of a subjective approach to meaning. This approach can be traced back to at least the eighteenth century and the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. What were the fundamental ideas underlying Kant's subjectivism?

Dr. Peter Chow, translation

Whether it is Descartes or Kant, they all start from a humanist point of view, man-centered epistemology ... Kant divided the world into the phenomenal and the noumenal, placing man's moral consciousness, God, and matter into the noumenal world, which, in Kant's philosophy, means they are unknowable. If that is true, then we can never know anything about God. So, in effect, Kant is denying the possibility of any kind of theology. He believed that the phenomenal world can be studied by science, but since this study is restricted to the phenomenal level, it's impossible to know the true nature of anything. The scientist and philosopher Alexander Pope believed that all true scientific theorems must be falsifiable. And that sooner or later all such theorems would be disproved since what science studies is just the appearance, and not the true nature of things. In this way, a humanist basis of knowledge results in the destruction of true knowledge.

Dr. Bruce Baugus

Kant admitted that Hume was a significant influence on him — "Awoke him from his dogmatic slumber," a famous line that Kant stated about Hume. To understand what's going on, I think, in Kant, then, we need to spend a little bit of time thinking about what's going on in Hume. Hume had taken the sort of rational theology that had become all the rage in the United Kingdom and subjected it to a pretty strong critique showing, exposing, that if you're going to be a strong empiricist that you were not going to be able to know nearly as much as you thought you could. His critique was so radical that he pointed out that even things as basic as causality could not be known on purely empiricist principles or lines. Kant comes across this argument. He sees that Hume is onto something here. That there's been in this sort of rational theology that had grown up both with Cartesian background on the Continent, and with more of a British empiricism, which Locke has a contribution to although is not identical with. And that Hume was onto something. That if we were to restrict ourselves to just those principles, we really couldn't know very much at all. And that troubled Kant. Kant was more optimistic than Hume. He wasn't willing to live with that kind of restriction, and yet he embraced Hume's principles to a large extent. So he's working on, how can we know? How can we claim to have knowledge of things like cause and effect? And as he sits down, and he thinks about this. He strikes upon a very creative idea, and that is that the human mind is not just a blank slate. It's not just something that is impressed upon with ideas objective and external to ourselves, as the empiricists had construed it. But rather, it makes an active contribution to knowledge, so that, in our mind, we have something vaguely similar to Aristotle's categories. And we bring those to the experience of reality around us, and we make that contribution with our mind. So that knowledge is actually downstream of that contribution of our mind so that it's how we read reality as it presents itself to us through the categories of the mind as we actively contribute to the knowing process. What that means is that, in an ironic sense, we're cut off from the world as it is in itself. We can never know the world as it is independent from or apart from our thinking about it. We can only know it as it appears — to our sensory experience and to the categories of our mind — and as we process that. So we can only know the appearances, and we can only know those appearances as we have construed them in our mind and as we've thought about them ... This emphasis on the contribution of the mind and the implication of how we're cut off from reality as it is in itself gives rise to a kind of creeping and ever increasingly radical subjectivism in the history of Western thought.

Question 6:

How can overemphasizing our own responses to the Bible undermine the objective meaning of a text?

At the heart of subjectivism is the individual reader's response to the text. But while it's helpful to see how we personally respond to a text, overemphasizing this aspect of study can cause us to miss other helpful interpretive approaches. How can

overemphasizing our own responses to the Bible undermine the objective meaning of a text?

Dr. Simon Vibert

Sometimes we emphasize a reader's own response to the biblical passage at the expense of the objective meaning of the text. Now clearly, the way in which somebody responds to the text is important. And there is a whole school of hermeneutics that speaks about reader response to the text, which quite rightly emphasizes the fact that the perspective from which we read the passage has an influence upon us. And what we are able to see in the text depends on from where we read it. To use a trivial illustration, I bought a secondhand car for the family, and I was intrigued to discover that the following week everybody on the road had bought the same model. Well, of course they hadn't. It was just that I was now looking at the traffic on the road from a completely different perspective. And that's a positive insight from reader response, but the danger is that it forgets that actually God has stamped his authority on the pages of Scripture. And it is a message that is timeless, that is not actually shaped by the responder. Rather, the text of the Bible itself should dictate the way in which the reader responds.

Dr. Vern S. Poythress

Some people focus almost completely on their own response to Scripture. I've seen Bible study groups where the question is, "Well what does it mean to *you*? And what does it mean to *you*?" The trouble with that kind of thing is that everybody is encouraged just to have his own ideas without disciplining their own minds to focus on what is Scripture really saying rather than, "What do I imagine or like it to mean?" So there's danger there. I believe there is danger in the opposite extreme, too, that we never take to heart what Scripture says. We never apply it. So it's a "both-and" process.

Question 7:

What are the strengths and weaknesses of following a rigorous methodology in our interpretation of Scripture?

Sometimes people are under the impression that if they just learn the best hermeneutical principles, they can unlock the meaning of a biblical text. And if they follow this mode of interpretation consistently, they will always have new and wonderful insights into the Bible's meaning. But this is not always the case. What are the strengths and weaknesses of following a rigorous methodology in our interpretation of Scripture?

Dr. Vern S. Poythress

What are the strengths and weaknesses of following a rigorous methodology in studying and interpreting Scripture? Well, the strengths are that your method, if it's a good method, can lead you to notice many things about Scripture that you might

overlook, that you might slide over. The weakness is that a method can make you notice only what the method tells you to notice, so you're leaving out something else.

Dr. Howard Eyrich

Following a rigorous methodology in our approach to studying and understanding Scripture has both strengths and weaknesses, as so many things in life are that way. I think one of the weaknesses of rigorous study is that we can fall into the trap of putting God in a box and making him look a certain way because it fits with what we think we have developed as a systematic system. I think that's something we have to be careful for, because we can't put God in a box. He is much bigger than any box we could ever create. I think the second weakness is, is that we tend to lock ourselves into a certain format of interpretation. And in the process it's easy to become a follower of a man, for example, Calvin on this side, or a man, Arminius on this side. And in doing so, we end up many times making those men say what they weren't saying and making Scripture say what it doesn't say because it seems to make a consistent system. So, those are the weaknesses, I think. But the strength is, is that it keeps us from going into emotional extremes. It keeps us from developing our own ideas and making our own ideas that which we superimpose on Scripture. So it has strengths and it has weaknesses. But in the long run, a consistent methodology, it certainly has a lot more in its favor than an inconsistent methodology does.

Dr. Bruce Baugus

Some of the strengths of being rigorous in your methodology when it comes to the interpretation of Scripture, of course, is that it can be a very useful and helpful check on ourselves. It's so easy to allow other factors, biases and things like this, to enter in. And it can help to correct for blindnesses in us if we are consistent in our application of these methods and so on. On the other hand, we need to be careful about the reduction of the interpretation of Scripture to a kind of abstracted, objective methodology, a kind of meat grinder approach where you pour in the words of Scripture at one end and crank it, and out comes readymade meaning on the other end. God has given us his Word. And the point that I want to emphasize there is, he's given *us* his Word. That we're supposed to bring our humanity to the text and allow the text to speak to us as human beings and the idea that, through a rigorous methodology, we can check our humanity and sort of bracket it and keep it separate from the text. That's never what God has intended in his Word, and that is likely to lead to a skewed understanding and interpretation. And we've seen some of the results of that in higher criticism, for example. Instead, we are to bring our humanity to the text and submit it to the text and be vulnerable before the text and allow the text to have its way with us because it is God's own word.

Dr. Brian J. Vickers

I think it's important when we study the Scripture that we do have a rigorous and sort of well-thought-out method for doing so according to and depending on what we're reading, the parts of Scripture we're reading, the kind of thing we're reading in Scripture. And the great strength about having a rigorous methodology when we're studying Scripture is we're applying, sort of, careful investigation to the study of

Scripture rather than just, say, opening it up and waiting for something to pop out at us, or whatever sort of strikes me that day as being important. And to me, the greatest strength about following a methodology for studying the Scriptures is that it makes it less likely that I'm just going to make the Bible say what I want it to say, which we all have a tendency to do that anyway ... Now one of the dangers, and one of the things that we have to be aware of, is that it's easy to have a methodology and develop a methodology. And then, therefore, feel like all I have to do is have a text of the Bible, take my methodology — my method, my steps, my questions, what have you — and sit it down over the text, and that it is just by its very nature going to give me the right interpretation apart from anything else. So we have to be careful and keep even the best methodologies that we use — even the most rigorous study that we apply to the Bible — we have to keep that in check and remember that just because we have a sound interpretive method, that doesn't mean we're necessarily going to have a sound interpretation. Because we can come to rely on those methods, say, more than anything else, and just assume, oh I have the right method, therefore, I have the right interpretation. And so, we just have to be careful. I mean, we need to apply rigorous methods of interpretation but do so in such a way that remembers, hey, you know, we're fallen. Even as the redeemed, we still struggle with sin. We still have our own issues that we bring to the table, all kinds of things that can cloud interpretation. And so, we just want to be careful we don't rely on our methodologies ultimately.

Question 8:

What is the relationship between Bible study methods and intuition?

Bible study methods have always had an important part in the life of believers. Sound Bible study methods can help guide readers to ask the right questions and, in turn, come to the right answers. But, we may sometimes overemphasize Bible study methods at the expense of useful intuition. So what is the relationship between Bible study methods and intuition?

Dr. Carey Vinzant

Do we sometimes overemphasize Bible study method at the expense of useful intuition? Yes. Very simply, yes. And I think this is one of the fundamental arguments that's going on in the time of the Reformation. The relationship between the Reformation and Renaissance humanism is very important in this regard because humanism, most importantly, is a rejection of the method-driven approach to learning represented by scholasticism. The humanists took a different approach in that. Where the scholastics tended to say, "We're going to teach you how to learn, and then you apply this method to whatever situation or source you may encounter, and you will come out having learned rightly," the humanists looked at this, and they said, "Well, that sounds great, but your method is producing some conclusions that we simply find repugnant; they're unacceptable." And so, humanism grounded its confidence — where learning is concerned — in "sources," reading the good stuff. And this is one place where I think that has an important lesson to teach us in biblical interpretation.

When we approach the text from such a method-driven perspective that it will not allow the text to say what, in fact, it does say, we need to hear the humanist complaint. It's always important that we hold the text of Scripture as primary, and that the clear voice of God speaking through the Bible gets to trump our methodological assumptions.

Dr. David R. Bauer

The relationship between Bible study method and intuition is an important one. It is true that intuition plays a role in our construing of sense, our obtaining sense from the biblical text. Quite often connections or insights come to us intuitively. The relationship between intuition and Bible study method, I think, is twofold. One is a good, solid, appropriate method in Bible study *tests* intuitions. So, often we get a sense, or an intuitive sense of the meaning of a passage or connection between passages or the like. And those intuitions may or may not be valid. And so, it's helpful to have — as a matter of fact, it's critical, I think — to have a method in place that can test those and can determine whether those initial intuitions turn out to be right or not, turn out to be valid or not. A second relationship between intuitions and Bible study method has to do with the fact that developing good method practices actually aids in helpful intuition. It trains us intuitively. I actually teach courses that rely heavily upon method in Bible study, so I do a lot of teaching on Bible study method. And I alert students that as they learn method they will often at first be distracted by method. But as they become comfortable with methodical practices — with Bible study method and the practice of various steps in proper Bible study method — these will become second nature. They'll become internalized; they don't have to think about them anymore. And as they become internalized and second nature, then they really kick in and are helpful in the study of the Bible, so that students often become surprised at what they're able to discern, what they're able to gather from passages. And they're not quite sure how they got there, but they were able to do so because the principles and processes in Bible study method have actually shaped in very profound ways the way they think and the way they read. And that turns out in the end to be extremely helpful for them.

Dr. Stephen J. Bramer

I think we always want to be careful about trying to dismiss proper methods. We *want* to have those there. And, as you understand, hermeneutics is partly a scientific job. We understand the words and the principles. But if the Spirit of God is also present helping us to apply this to our lives, we must allow the Spirit to work within us. And so it becomes that balance of a science and art. We never want to go with intuition *against* proper methods, but *within* the methods, we want to give the Spirit of God a chance to work within our minds, our hearts, our emotions, our wills. Because we're not just a head; we're a whole person.

Question 9:
**How can our gifts and abilities help or hinder the way we apply
the Scriptures?**

Looking at different interpretative approaches can be helpful as we seek to learn methods that do not come naturally to us. And yet, we all have natural gifts that can affect the way we look at a text before we ever learn a different approach. How can our gifts and abilities help or hinder the way we apply the Scriptures?

Dr. M. William Ury

I believe our gifts and abilities can both help and hinder the way we interpret the Scripture. Our gifts and abilities help in the regard that we're the body of Christ and we have to have — and the Lord's given to us, provided for us — various ways of viewing reality. Revealed truth is reflected upon by the body of Christ in ways that no one person could ever ascertain. So we come to Scripture with our different personality types, our different gifts, our different backgrounds, and we see different things. It's really a beautiful thing. My wife views the Bible, in many ways, more intimately than I view it. I study it. I take it apart. I look at the text. I look at the Greek. She sees the love of Jesus for the human heart. And I need that in terms of my interpretation. I have gifts. She has gifts. And so we need to be aware of that. I think it's a very important part of interpreting the Scripture, that not *just* scholars can interpret the Scripture. We need people in the church, people who have worshiped and prayed for all their life; they also help us to see the deep meaning of Scripture. Many, many non-schooled people that I've met are very much more aware of what's happening in the Word than I will ever be with all of my language or Bible study background. So I need them, and I think they need me as well. There's a body of Christ mutuality here. So we help each other. I think hindering can also be a factor, and that is, of course, we have minds and abilities, and we think, "Well, I'm able to take apart a passage, I'm able to use my Bible study methodology, I can cut it apart." And that, although it can be good, it can actually be a destruction of the intention of the revealer himself. We turn it into a science. We turn it into another thing that you do just perfunctorily to get, to mine a gem that I think I need rather than receiving with awe and with wonder and with gratefulness the one who has spoken to me through his Word and is revealing to me through his Spirit what is true. So as in every gift, there is a positive potential, but also there can be an abuse if I'm not careful. And there again, we need the Holy Spirit to guide us, to help us, to say, "Don't deny the gifts, the abilities. Those are gifts to you. But do not overuse them. Don't use them without my presence and without the correction of the body." We need to make sure that's always the case in interpreting the Bible.

Dr. Dan Doriani

Our gifts and abilities help or hinder our interpretation of Scripture in a variety of ways. First of all, if you have linguistic gifts, you can learn the Greek and the Hebrew and study the Bible in the original languages. And it's a great blessing in many ways. The capacity to enter imaginatively into other worlds is something enormously

helpful if we want to read the Bible well, to refrain from judging other cultures but accept them as they come. Now, you may have picked up an ability to enter imaginatively into other people's experiences because your mother or father was very good at that, and it was of value in your family. And you would look people in the eye and listen to them. Well, that same skill that enables you to listen well to somebody today who might be quite different from you — and, therefore, relate to people of a different social class or a different background, training, experience, profession — can actually help you read the Bible well. You can say, "These people were very different. They were shepherds. I'm not a shepherd. They were farmers. I'm not a farmer. But I've worked with animals. I've spent some time trying to grow things, and therefore that imagination can help. Probably the greatest hindrance is if we're not willing to grow — if you are not willing to do the work, read the books, go into the backgrounds, read the Bible in different translations or in the original languages if you have that ability. Everybody can learn something. And if you become lazy and don't labor to know the world, the culture of the Bible, the background of the Bible, or your own people, you're not going to be a very good interpreter. So stay imaginative, label your skills, hone them as best you can, and you'll slowly become a better interpreter and expositor, teacher of the Bible.

Question 10:
How should we evaluate interpretations that are different from our own?

Even when evangelicals place a high importance on finding the original meaning of a text, responsible interpreters sometimes reach different conclusions about what a passage is saying. If the Bible's original meaning is sometimes complex and multifaceted, how should we evaluate interpretations that are different from our own?

Dr. Robert L. Plummer

One thing that's helpful when you're interpreting the Bible is to have a clear vocabulary, because sometimes people use terms in different ways. And Robert Stein, a retired New Testament professor, has written a little book called *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible*, and in that he suggests a clear vocabulary where he has meaning as the conscious intent of the human author. And then you have implications, which are things that the author might or might not have been conscious of but legitimately flow within that pattern of meaning. So, for example, in Ephesians 5:18, Paul says, "Don't get drunk with wine." Well, Paul wasn't thinking about whiskey, or vodka, or marijuana, or all these other... substances that could enter your body and cause you to lose control and do things you shouldn't do. But, by implication, certainly the apostle Paul would have understood that his original statement is including those unconscious — or conscious possibly in some cases — implications. So we want to understand, when you have various interpretations of Scripture, are they just different implications in different contexts, or are we really

saying the meaning is different? So if we're just dealing with different implications — and what are legitimate implications — that's one thing, but sometimes interpreters actually violently disagree. For example, Christians who disagree, should infants be baptized? Does the Bible teach that infants should be baptized? Or is that only for conscious believers who are able to assert their faith consciously and verbally? Or, the role of women? Are women to be pastors, or are women not allowed to be pastors? And so when you come to those kinds of disagreements, I think the first question is, is everyone at the table and discussing that agreed to the Scripture's final authority? Because if someone says, "Well... Paul said that but I don't agree with it," then we can't really have a conversation. But if everyone at the table says, "Whatever the Bible teaches, because it's God's Word, I submit to it," then we have to begin saying, well, let's look at the context. And let's look at what the author says elsewhere, and let's prayerfully ask God to help us to see the evidence clearly and to hear his Word and to submit to it. One thing that's illegitimate in a conversation like that, I think, is for someone to just appeal to the Spirit's guidance. They say, "Well, you know, the Holy Spirit told me this and so I know that's the interpretation." Well, that's not the way the authors of the New Testament write. They appeal to the Scripture, "Does not it say here...?" and they're proving their point by pointing to particular things in the Scriptures. And so even as we ask God's help to see things clearly, we realize that we have to reason with others with a finger on the text and showing them what it actually says.

Dr. Brian J. Vickers

It can be difficult to evaluate interpretations. And I mean specifically, interpretations among Christians, among people who profess that the Bible is God's Word, and for all intents and purposes they have the same sort of beliefs and practices, those kinds of things. It can be difficult because you can have two people, both claiming to be, and who give every evidence of being the people of God, who believe in Christ, who have different interpretations on a text. And so, can we know? I think the first step is when we confront other brothers and sisters who have different interpretations, I think our first approach should be, we should interpret that person "in love." In other words, we don't just come to them thinking, "I'm going to prove you wrong," or "I'm here to show that you're wrong." What I want to do is understand why you think that way. Because it could be that my view at a particular point is wrong ... I think one of the things we have to do, then, is we have to take the time to sit down with that person. And what we want to do with ourselves and with the person that we disagree with is try to determine how it is we came to that conclusion and whether that conclusion is based on reading that text in its context, and then, as it matches other biblical teaching. Or perhaps an interpretation, whether mine or someone else, perhaps that came from other places than the context of the Bible itself. And so, I think that's what we have to do. We have to come and try to evaluate as best we can, "Does this fit?" This interpretation, does it fit, not just this sentence, but does it fit the teaching of the Bible as a whole?

Dr. David R. Bauer

The question of relating our interpretation to the interpretation of others — which may be different from our own — is extremely important. I do believe that there is some problem in making a blanket statement that says in essence, every passage of Scripture has one single meaning. That's really too simple a way of putting it. But rather, it seems to me that... all passages in the Bible are positioned somewhere on a continuum of — and I'm going to use, a technical term here — "determinate" on the one hand or on the one extreme, and "indeterminate" on the other. Passages that are relatively determinate are those whose range of possible meaning is relatively narrow. There's still a range there of possible construals within boundaries, but the boundaries are quite narrow. Indeterminate passages, those that stand on the other end of the continuum, have a much broader range of possible, plausible meaning. There are boundaries even there. No passage can mean just anything. A passage that can mean anything means nothing, so there are always boundaries there. But indeterminate passages tend to have wider range of possible meanings or construals. And it's actually because you have some range of possible construals that even indeterminate passages — say nothing of those that are more indeterminate — that it is possible for two or three interpreters to come up with somewhat different interpretations within limits of a passage and for those interpretations all to be equally right, especially if those interpretations are not self-contradictory. And as a matter of fact, that possibility is reinforced by the consideration that in the Bible we often have passages that are pretty clearly multivalent. That is to say, that certainly can mean more than one thing. In narratives especially, and it's and particularly in Old Testament narratives, you seem to have in many cases intentional multivalence, where the writer presents a passage which could be construed with equal confidence in two somewhat different ways — again not contradictory — with the suggestion perhaps that the reader should consider those two or three possibilities. And perhaps, recognize that the passage can be understood in any of those and even consider how they interact with one another. It's where one comes down within the range is dependent upon that person's background including the religious tradition out of which that person came. This is where, really, differences of personal background including, as I said, religious background, but also cultural background, plays a role. It's a healthy thing, actually, to become aware of other interpretations of the passage and to ask whether those other interpretations are, in the end, more plausible than your own. And if you judge them to be equally plausible, then to recognize that the passage may have that kind of dynamic robustness to it, and that simply becoming aware of those other possible interpretations can provide us with a kind of appreciation of the richness of passages that otherwise we might now have.

Question 11:
**Why is it important to do more than simply affirm
the authority of Scripture?**

Objective approaches can sometimes emphasize Bible study methods over God's authoritative meaning, and subjective approaches can sometimes emphasize our personal responses over God's authoritative meaning. Both of these methods become faulty if we fail to realize the Bible's authoritative place in our lives. Why is it important to do more than simply *affirm* the authority of Scripture?

Dr. Michael J. Kruger

You know, as a Christian it's one thing to *affirm* the authority of Scripture, it's another thing to actually *follow* the authority of Scripture. Christians proclaim that the Bible is the Word of God, but that claim really is hollow unless we actually live like the Bible is the Word of God. So, Christians have to be careful when we follow Scripture that we just don't follow the parts we like, that we follow the parts that make sense to us, or that we follow the parts that happen to be conducive to what we already believe. We have to follow the Bible in all its parts, in all parts of our life. In other words... the Bible's authority over the Christian is an absolute authority in every part of their life. To do otherwise is really to set ourselves up as God. To look at the Bible and say, "Well, I'm not going to follow that part but I'm going to follow this part," or, "I'm going to obey this little verse and not this little verse," is, in one sense, to set ourselves *over* Scripture and to determine what is true and what is not, what we follow and what we won't. And when we do that, we've become little gods ourselves. We set ourselves up as the god of the universe. And that is idolatry. So, to deny Scripture and not live by its authority in one sense is to try to supplant God and make ourselves that authority. So, it's very important that Scripture dominate the Christian's life in almost every area, or in every area, so that they really do give God his proper place as the ultimate authority.

Dr. P. J. Buys

To submit to the authority of Scripture actually means to submit to the real author, the Living God. And so people who do not submit to the authority of the Bible actually rejects and rebels against the real author. And he's the one that really conveys or provides understanding and meaning. And if you don't submit to him, you will never understand the real meaning of Scriptures.

Dr. John Oswalt

The Bible comes to us as a unique book. There really is no other book like it in the world in terms of its understanding of reality — Monotheism for instance, the idea that God is transcendent, he's not part of the world, he's other than the world, and a whole host of other ideas. Now we could explain that as accident — "Well, that just happened." But the Bible's explanation is, this transcendent God, this one transcendent God, broke into time and space and revealed these truths to people in the context of their life. If that's true, if he's the one creator God and he has revealed to us

why he made the world, what the purpose of our life is, then that book is the supreme book in the whole universe. And if we are to know why we're here, if we're to know what life is about, if we're to know what our destiny is, we've got to read that book. And it's not ours to alter as we wish to make it say what we want it to say. If it is from God, then we must submit to its authority.

In biblical interpretation, we can benefit from both objectivist and subjectivist approaches to meaning, but neither approach can fully capture the process of interpreting Scripture. Interpretation is a dialog in which we ask questions of the biblical text in submission to its authority. We must always be willing humbly to submit to the authority of Scripture. This submission then becomes key for a right interpretation of the text.

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