

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE FOR ALL ITS WORTH

A SURVEY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION BASED ON THE BOOK BY GORDON D. FEE & DOUGLAS STUARTⁱ

CLASS GOALS

- Understand why biblical interpretation is necessary
- Explore different types of Bible translations
- Identify key literary genres of the Bible
- Describe key elements of the historical context of each of the major biblical literary genres
- Learn how to approach the literary context of each of the major biblical literary genres
- Encounter both good and bad examples of biblical interpretation in each major literary genre
- Be empowered and inspired to read the Bible for all its worth

CLASS OUTLINE

June 4 – The Need to Interpret, Bible Translations, Old Testament Narrative

June 11 – The Law, Psalms

June 18 – Wisdom, Prophecy, Gospels, Parables

June 25 – Epistles, Revelation, Evaluation and Use of Commentaries

REVIEW

- Scripture will be interpreted by whoever reads it, so we should endeavor to interpret _____.
- The best interpretation is _____.
- The Bible is the _____, given in _____.
- The Bible cannot mean _____. It has a _____.
- There are two main categories of context we can consider:
 - _____ Context
 - _____ Context
- There are two main aspects of interpretation:
 - _____
 - _____

A. EXEGESIS OF EPISTLES

“...they appear easy to interpret. After all, who needs special help to understand that ‘all have sinned’ (Rom 3:23), that ‘the wages of sin is death’ (Rom. 6:23), and that ‘by grace you have been saved, through faith’ (Eph. 2:8), or the imperatives ‘live by the Spirit’ (Gal. 5:16) and ‘live a life of love’ (Eph 5:2)?

1. The *occasional* nature of epistles. (48-49)
2. Historical Context
 - a. Learn about the audience from a commentary or introduction or Bible dictionary
 - b. Read through the whole letter in one sitting, twice if possible, noting:
 - i. Historical context clues
 - ii. The author’s apparent attitude
 - iii. Any audience descriptors
 - iv. Where you think the natural, logical divisions might be
3. Literary Context
 - a. Learn to think paragraphs
 - b. Create a tentative outline of the whole book
4. What to do with especially difficult texts
 - a. Let our uncertainty make us hesitant about being dogmatic
 - b. Make a few guesses about the main point of the whole passage
 - c. Divide what can be said for certain about a text from what is possible but not certain
 - d. Consult a good commentary

B. HERMENEUTICS OF EPISTLES

1. The problem with Scriptural commands

“None of us, for example, has ever felt called by the Holy Spirit to take a pilgrimage to Troas in order to carry Paul’s cloak from Carpus’s house to his Roman prison (2 Tim. 4:13), even though the passage is clearly a command to do that.”

2. Our common hermeneutics

“Even if you are among those who may have asked, ‘Herman who?’ when confronted with the word *hermeneutics*, you are in fact involved in hermeneutics all the time. What is it that all of us do as we read the Epistles? Very simply, we bring our enlightened common sense to the text and apply what we can to our own situation. What does not seem to apply is simply left in the first century ... Let it be emphasized here that most of the matters in the Epistles fit very nicely into this common-sense hermeneutics. For most texts it is not a matter of whether one *should* or not; it is more a matter of ‘stirring one another up by way of reminder’ (2 Peter 1:15). ... Our problems—and differences—are generated by those texts that lie somewhere in between these two, where some of us think we should obey exactly what is stated and others of us are not so sure. Our hermeneutical difficulties here are several, but they are all related to one thing—our lack of consistency. This is the great flaw in our common hermeneutics. Without necessarily intending to, we bring our theological heritage, our ecclesiastical traditions, our cultural

norms, or our existential concerns to the Epistles as we read them. And this results in all kinds of selectivity or “getting around” certain texts.

- 1 Timothy 5:23 “Stop drinking water only, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses.”

Why do we not apply this to ourselves?

- 1 Timothy 3:14-16 “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...”

To whom is this specifically addressed?

Let’s try something easier:

- 1 Corinthians 11:14 “Does not nature itself teach you that for a man to wear long hair is degrading to him...”

Most of you believe it is ok for a man to wear long hair. On what grounds?

- 1 Corinthians 11:15 “...but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.”

Most of you believe it is ok for a woman to wear short hair. On what grounds?

“How is it in that in many evangelical churches women are forbidden to speak in church on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, yet in many of the same churches everything else in chapter 14 is argued *against* as not belonging to the twentieth century? How is it that verses 34-35 belong to all times and all churches, while verses 1-5, or 26-33, and 39-40, which give regulations for prophesying and speaking in tongues, belong only to the first-century church?

3. The basic rule (64)

“A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his readers.”

4. The second rule (65)

“Whenever we share comparable particulars (i.e. similar specific life situations) with the first-century setting, God’s word to us is the same as his word to them.”

“The great caution here is that we do our exegesis well, so that we have confidence that our situations and particulars are genuinely comparable to theirs. This is why the careful reconstruction of their problem is so important.”

5. The problem of extended application

Principle: “...when there are comparable situations and comparable particulars, God’s word to us in such texts must always be limited to its original intent. Furthermore, it should be noted that the extended application is usually seen to be legitimate because it is true, that is, it is clearly spelled out in other passages where that is the intent of the passage.”

Example: “A more difficult case is presented by a text such as 2 Corinthians 6:14, ‘Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.’ Traditionally, this text has been interpreted as forbidding marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian. However, the metaphor of a *yoke* is rarely used in antiquity to refer to marriage, and there is nothing whatever in the context that remotely allows marriage to be in view here... Our problem is that we cannot be certain as to *what* that original text is forbidding. Most likely it has something to do with idolatry, perhaps as further prohibition of attendance at the idol feasts... Can we not, therefore legitimately ‘extend’ the principle of this text, since we cannot be sure of its original meaning? Probably so, but again, only because it is indeed a biblical principle that can be sustained apart from this single text.”

6. The problem of particulars that are not comparable

Some particulars, such as meat sacrificed to idols, are completely unknown to Western cultures. Other particulars, such as people getting drunk at a meal in conjunction with Communion, are highly improbable in our culture.

Principle: “First, we must do our exegesis with particular care so that we hear what God’s Word to them really was. In most cases a clear *principle* has been articulated, which usually will transcend the historical particularity to which it was being applied ... Second, and here is the important point, the ‘principle’ does not now become timeless to be applied at random or whim to any and every kind of situation. We would argue that it must be applied to *genuinely comparable situations*.”

Example: “...Paul forbids participation in the temple meals on the basis of the stumbling-block principle. But note that this does *not* refer to something that merely offends another believer. The stumbling-block principle refers to something one believer feels he can do in good conscience, and which, by his action or persuasion, he induces another believer to do, who cannot do so in good conscience. After all, the brother or sister is ‘destroyed’ by *emulating* another’s action; he or she is not merely offended by it.”

Problem: “...how does one distinguish matters of indifference from matters that count...?”

Principles: “What the epistles specifically indicate as matters of indifference may still be regarded as such: food, drink, observance of days, etc. ... Matters of indifference are not inherently moral, but are cultural—even if it stems from *religious* culture.”

Give an example of an explicit or implicit rule from religious culture that is a matter of indifference to the Bible.

Can anyone think of an implicit rule from our religious culture that is a matter of indifference to the Bible?

7. The problem of cultural relativity

“This is the area where most present-day difficulties—and differences—lie. It is the place where the problem of God’s *eternal Word* having been given in *historical particularity* comes most sharply into focus... Nearly all Christians, at least to a limited degree, do translate Bible texts into new settings. Without articulating it in precisely this way, this is why twentieth-century evangelicals leave ‘a little wine for thy stomach’s sake’ in the first century, do not insist on head-coverings of long hair for women today, and do not practice the ‘holy kiss.’ Many of the same evangelicals, however, wince when a woman’s teaching in the church (when men are present) is also defended on these grounds, and they become downright indignant when homosexuality is defended on these same grounds.”

Guidelines:

“One should first distinguish between the central core of the message of the Bible and what is dependent upon or peripheral to it. This is ... to safeguard the Gospel from being turned into law through culture or religious custom, on the one hand, and to keep the Gospel itself from changing to reflect every conceivable cultural expression on the other hand.”

“Similarly, one should be prepared to distinguish between what the New Testament itself sees as inherently moral and what is not... Paul’s sin lists, for example, never contain cultural items... Thus adultery, idolatry, drunkenness, homosexual activity, thievery, greed, etc., are *always* wrong. This does not mean that Christians have not from time to time been guilty of any of these. But they are not viable moral choices... On the other hand, footwashing, exchanging the holy kiss, eating marketplace idol food, women having a head covering when praying or prophesying, Paul’s personal preference for celibacy, or a woman’s teaching in the church are not *inherently* moral matters. They become so only by their use or abuse in given contexts.”

“One must make special note of items where the New Testament itself has a uniform and consistent witness and where it reflects differences.”

“It is important to be able to distinguish in the New Testament itself between principle and specific application.”

“One must keep alert to possible cultural differences between the first and twentieth centuries that are sometimes not immediately obvious. For example, to determine the role of women in the twentieth-century church, one should take into account that there were few educational opportunities for women in the first century, whereas such education is the expected norm in our society.”

“One must finally exercise Christian charity at this point. Christians need to recognize the difficulties, open the line of communication with one another, start by trying to define some principles, and finally have love and a willingness to ask forgiveness from those with whom they differ.”

Case studies: women in ministry and homosexuality

8. Two suggested solutions for the problem of task theology

“...be content at times with some limitations to our theological understanding.”

“Sometimes our theological problems with the Epistles derive from the fact that we are asking *our* questions of texts that by their occasional nature are only answering *their* questions.”

C. EVALUATION AND USE OF COMMENTARIES

“...one does not *begin* by consulting the ‘experts.’ But when it is necessary to do so, one should try to use the better sources. For example, in Mark 10:23 (Matthew 19:23; Luke 18:24), at the conclusion of the story of the rich young man, Jesus says, ‘How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ He then adds: ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom.’ It is often said that there was a gate in Jerusalem known as ‘Needle’s Eye’ which camels could go through only by kneeling, and with great difficulty. The point of this ‘interpretation’ is that a camel could in fact go through the ‘Needle’s Eye.’ The trouble with this ‘exegesis,’ however, is that it is simply not true. There never was such a gate in Jerusalem at any time in its history. The earliest known ‘evidence’ for that idea is found in the eleventh century (!), in a commentary by a Greek churchman named Theophylact, who had the same difficulty with the text that we do. After all, it is *impossible* for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, and that was precisely Jesus’ point. It is impossible for one who trusts in riches to enter the kingdom. It takes a miracle for a rich person to get saved, which is quite the point of what follows: ‘All things are possible with God.’” (21)

Criteria for the evaluation of commentaries:

1. “Is the commentary exegetical, homiletical, or a combination of both? ... what you really want in a commentary is exegesis.”
2. “Is it based on the Greek or Hebrew text or an English translation?” Commentaries based on original languages generally do a much better job at the task of exegesis.
3. “THE MOST IMPORTANT ... When a text has more than one possible meaning, does the author discuss *all* the possible meanings, evaluate them, and give reasons for his or her own choice?”
4. “Does the author discuss text-critical problems?”
5. “Does the author discuss the historical background of the idea of the text?”
6. “Does the author give bibliographic information so that you can do further study if you wish?”
7. “Does the introduction section in the commentary give you enough information about the historical context to enable you to understand the occasion of the book?”
8. ~~Do the author’s conclusions agree with your opinions?~~ Just kidding. In fact, be careful not to ask this question. Your concern is with whether you have good principles for rightly handling the Word of God. Interpreted well, let the Scriptures transform you.

For a copy of the bibliography of suggested commentaries, buy the book or borrow it.

ⁱ Fee, Gordon D., and Stuart, Douglas. “How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth,” 2nd Edition. Zondervan, 1993. June, 2023