

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#4—Interpreting the Bible—Part III¹

Paul Karleen

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Interpretation and the Nature of the Bible

As with past studies, I'd like to start with a reminder of the importance of theology and of being able to handle the Bible well. The following recent commentary on the nature of the Bible and the general inability to use it fruitfully goes hand in hand with the lack of theological understanding and interest among evangelicals today.

Biblical illiteracy is one of the biggest problems facing the Church in America today. A recent survey indicates that the average American owns three copies of the Bible, but doesn't read any of them. According to Woodrow Kroll, president of Back to the Bible, the organization that conducted the survey, "The problem is not that people can not read the Bible, it's they don't read the Bible...Bible literacy is not a problem in the church. Bible literacy is THE problem in the church. It impacts everything else we do."

There are more than 450 different versions and translations of the Bible in the English language, and yet most Americans can't identify the first book of the Bible or name even one of the four New Testament gospels. When Boston University did a survey of high school students last week they found that fifty percent of the students incorrectly thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were married.

The vast majority of Americans say they believe in God. In fact, some polls indicate that two-thirds of Americans believe that the Bible holds the answers to all or most of life's basic questions. However it seems that while Americans acknowledge that the Bible is important, most don't take the time to find out what it says.

It seems that more and more Christians today are unable to articulate an intellectual basis for why they believe what they believe is true. Even those who attend church regularly do not take the time to study the Bible on their own. Biblical illiteracy is perhaps the primary reason why many Christians do not share their faith and why most are ill-equipped to defend it. It is no wonder that 50 to 80 percent of Christian youth abandon their faith within the first years of college.

Where did our Bible come from? How do we know that it really is the Word of God? What is truth? Why do you believe what you believe? When someone asks you to explain your faith, will you be able to give them an answer? What will you tell them?

. . . [T]he Bible, although composed of 66 books, penned by 40 different authors, over thousands of years, is an integrated message system. Furthermore, the origin of this message system is from outside our time domain. The degree of integration of design among the 66 books is astonishing. Every number, every place name, even the hidden structures behind the text itself, bear evidence of precise, skillful engineering.

. . . If you want to be able to discern the truth and grow in your spiritual walk with God, you have to be willing to get your hands dirty. In Acts 17:11 we are encouraged to receive the word with all readiness of mind, and search the scriptures daily to find out whether these things are so.²

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² Koinonia House eNews, March 13, 2007.

I believe that the only valid theology is theology that is drawn from the Bible. And sound theology is based in turn on sound interpretation of the Bible. Appreciating the nature of the Bible is the starting point for sound interpretation. So here is an important sequence:

The right valuation of the character of Bible → Sound interpretation → Sound theology

Understanding the nature of the Bible is the starting point for sound interpretation. This doesn't guarantee sound theology, because we can make errors along the way, but the first two steps are necessary to arrive at the third. Because so many evangelicals today display such a great lack of understanding of what the Bible is and what it says, they will have difficulty even getting to the second step in the sequence.

In the previous study we presented a working premise: The best system for interpreting the Bible is one that gets the most information from Scripture—that is, one that does not leave gaps and yet does not make one part contradict or dominate another. We can see from another angle the importance of this basic assumption if we investigate the character of the Bible as a whole. To put this another way, how we approach the Bible is determined by what we believe about it. In addition, if theology is an organization of what we believe the Bible says, then the Bible itself has to be the starting point for its own interpretation, because there is nothing that has authority over the Bible.

A divine revelation

To begin with, the Bible is a revelation from God, as asserted in such places as Jude 3, which speaks of “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints,” where ‘faith’ refers to the body of revealed truth to which human faith responds (see also 1 Jn. 5:9-12). Such a view of communication by God is echoed in the many occurrences in the Old Testament of the phrase “thus saith the Lord.” The prophets understood that the words they passed on to others were not from themselves (1 Pet. 1:10-12), but were, instead, the product of the creative breath of God (2 Tim. 3:16). Because of this we have to assume that it must be understandable, for God would not foist on us the frustration of having a book we couldn't comprehend. Nor would God mislead us. We can count on the fact that there are no tricks in the Bible.

Not only is the Bible a revelation from God, but that disclosure has also come in stages. Because of this “progressive revelation” we must be alert, as Luther and Calvin were, to ways in which the New Testament unfolds the Old Testament and ways in which the New Testament is contained in the Old Testament. Connected with this is the need to recognize distinctions in what God is doing at different times in biblical history. The meaning of Pentecost in Acts 2 and how it ties with God's preceding and following work, for instance, and the “mystery” of Eph. 3:3, cannot be adequately related to other portions of the Bible without an understanding of the progressive unfolding of God's plan for humanity.

A creation of God

A second feature of the Bible that is important for shaping our methods of interpretation is its own teaching that it is detailed and exact by virtue of its being breathed out by God. This quality of being associated with the very nature of God, as expressed primarily in 2 Tim. 3:16 (see also 2 Peter 1:20-21), must mean, among other things, that Scripture will not contradict itself. It is not the product of human activity, but of God's creative power, for in Ps. 33:6 the breath of God is what brings the world into existence, and that breath is sufficient to accomplish this all by itself.

This principle of non-contradiction is far-reaching in its implications. In the final analysis it means that, first, our task of interpretation is guaranteed success, and, second, the Bible will shed light on itself without

leading us astray. The breathed-out character of the Bible also sobers us to realize that not only must we not miss the meaning through neglect or distortion, but we dare not ignore its application to life.

Another, and very practical, result of this characteristic of Scripture is the need for accurate translations. Each rendering of the Old Testament and New Testament in any language should ideally always go back to the original languages as part of the process of exercising the utmost care in transferring the message into a new language.

Further, we must accept the Bible for what it says, at face value. This is the basis of so-called literal interpretation. Because God gave us the very words He desired, then the words must mean what they say. The error of allegorical interpretation is apparent when we understand this principle. We will develop the implications for this in a later study on literal interpretation (I believe that a better name for it is normal interpretation).

The breathed-out quality of the Bible also encourages our interpretation by context, since all the parts of the message are important. None are accidental and none are misplaced.

Our sole authority

A third characteristic of the Bible that it teaches us about itself is that it has authority over us and is the sole standard for faith and practice. This is found in such passages as 2 Tim. 3:16 and Mk. 12:24. Consequently, we are not allowed to change it but instead must ourselves be changed by it. We must always be ready to accept it at face value, never softening a message that might strike too close to home.

We are also taught that the Bible is powerful: “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple” (Ps. 19:7-9). Theologians call this quality animation. The Bible is sufficient in every way for changing the condition of fallen humanity. Our responsibility is to allow it to speak for itself.

Situation in genuine experiences

In a slightly different vein we note that the Bible is rooted in culture, history and language. It was written by real people for real people about real-life situations. The experiences of Paul in prison, of Esther in Persia, and of Ezekiel in Babylon attest clearly enough to this. Consequently we need to know the purpose of each book and its setting. As an example, when we consider the purpose of Philippians we learn that Phil. 4:19 does not give a blank check to anyone who seeks to serve the Lord, but instead promises the one who gives money sacrificially that God will make up his lack. One of the basic purposes for the writing of the book was to notify the Philippians that their gift had been received, a gift that exceeded what their circumstances might have led them to give. Historical, contextual, grammatical and literary features should never be neglected in the examination of this book that is grounded in the human situation. It is a genuine book in terms of literary qualities, in a sense like any other fine book that we possess, and it asks, among other things, that we treat it as we would any other work that we respect.

So we see that we can best interpret the Bible by allowing for its own nature as found in its own statements about itself. It tells us a great deal about how to approach it. It is divine revelation, is a creation of God, is our sole authority and is situated in real life. It is God’s book, and we can trust it as we accept what it says at face value. And because of all of this, we must allow it to interpret itself for us. It has the power, precision and authority to do so.

Let us return to our premise for a moment: The best system for interpreting the Bible is one that gets the most information from Scripture—that is, one that does not leave gaps and yet does not make one part

contradict or dominate another. This premise is valid because of the nature of the Bible itself: it is all valuable and one part of it does not contradict another.

If we return to the article I cited at the beginning of this study, we can see that the answers to the problems and questions in the fourth and fifth paragraphs are theological points that have their start in what we believe about the character of the Bible itself. May we work to overcome biblical illiteracy and learn to appreciate and handle the Bible in a way that leads to sound theology. Too much is at stake not to do this.

Study questions

1. What are some of the reasons for Bible illiteracy today? What are the implications of this for doing systematic theology?
2. What is progressive revelation? Give some examples. Why is it important for doing systematic theology?
3. What are some of the practical results for interpretation and theology of the principle of non-contradiction within Scripture?
4. What are some of the implications for systematic theology of the Bible's being an authority over us?