

# Whose Interpretation Is It Anyway? Building Consensus on What the Bible Is Saying<sup>1</sup>

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My title is a word play on the name of a popular TV game shown in the USA (on ABC) and in the UK (on Channel 4) during the nineties and the early noughties (2000s) called *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* (sometimes abbreviated to *Whose Line?*). Repeats still feature on cable channels. In the show a panel of four performers improvise to create characters, scenes and songs on the spot. Topics are based either on suggestions from the audience or on pre-determined prompts from the host. The games are designed to test the performer's improvisational skill. The host randomly awards points and arbitrarily chooses a winner at the end of the show.

One is reminded of this TV show when considering the way the Bible is sometimes interpreted. So many differing and competing understandings of biblical texts are in circulation that one wonders whether interpreting the Bible has become a theological game that tests the ingenuity of the interpreter! The root reason for this hermeneutical *potpourri* in the churches is that culture seems to have become the ultimate arbiter of the Bible. Culture monitors the Bible rather than the Bible critiquing culture. Scripture is thus deprived of its supreme authority as the Word of God. But culture cannot be ignored. Christians are called to contextualise the Bible's message in today's cultures and in so doing to demonstrate its ongoing relevance to our generation. As we attempt to do this we discover that there are elements in our culture that the Bible affirms and others that it condemns. The Bible's message is both pro-cultural and counter-cultural.

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A complicating factor is that within the wider culture of any society churches have their own sub-cultures. A casual analysis of church sub-cultures in the West suggests that a spectrum exists ranging from traditional to *avant garde*. At the traditional end, respect for precedence prevails in biblical interpretation. At the opposite extremity, 'felt needs' consumerism plays a key role in the process of engaging with the Scriptures.

Moving out of church sub-cultures to the wider culture of the West, we find that both academia and the secular media tend to hold the Bible hostage to the competing claims of modernity and postmodernity. The influence of modernity is evident in the high visibility given to doubt in historical-critical approaches to the Bible. On the other hand, pressures from postmodernity are evident in the growing popularity of approaching the Bible with suspicion.

This broad-brush analysis of Christian sub-cultures and the dominant culture identifies four arbiters of Scripture: traditional precedence, contemporary consumerism, rationalistic doubt and radical suspicion. All of these influence the way the Bible is being understood and applied today. An over-privileging of tradition may be evident in churches that, for example, impose severe restrictions on the role women may play in church life. The priority of meeting emotional felt needs justifies doing church in the style of contemporary popular culture. The modernist tendency to doubt the factualness of the biblical narrative raises questions in the popular mind regarding the reliability of the Gospel. In a somewhat similar way, postmodern suspicion is construing the biblical polemic against sexual immorality as oppressive and manipulative.

The technical title given to the science of biblical interpretation is 'hermeneutics.' 'Hermeneutics' differs from 'exegesis.' Exegeting a text enables us to determine what it meant in its original context. Hermeneutics enables us to determine the significance of that meaning for today. But as we have seen, there is currently little consensus on what this significance entails. This article is an attempt to formulate some steps that hopefully might encourage us all to find our way through the current hermeneutical mist and to renew our determination to arrive at a common mind on how to discover the message of the Bible for contemporary Christian belief and practice.

The four arbiters of Scripture noted above – which we might call 'popular hermeneutics' – are all inadequate because they all detract from the Word of God as the focus of faith. If we allow traditional precedence or contemporary consumerism or rationalistic doubt or radical suspicion – or a mix of some or all of these – to arbitrate our engaging with the Bible, we will find it difficult and often impossible to exercise the hermeneutic of trust that is so beautifully articulated in the hymn of the psalmist: 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path' (Ps 119.105).<sup>2</sup> The Bible underlines faith as

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<sup>2</sup> Cf A. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*, Grand Rapids, 1992. Page 143. 'On the basis of belief in God *trust* [in pre-modern interpretation] assumes the kind of methodological role which *doubt* assumes for modernism as exemplified in Cartesian rationalism,

vital in any and every Christian activity. ‘No one can please God without faith’ says the writer to the Hebrews (11.6, GNB). Paul tells us that the message he preached and expounded in his Letter to the Romans both demands and generates faith. He asks: ‘For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness”’ (Rom. 4.3, ESV). And later in the epistle he tells us that the faith that puts us right with God ‘comes from hearing the message, and the message comes through preaching Christ’ (Rom 10.17, GNB).

What Paul in effect is saying is that faith must have the Word of God as its basis. Indeed, faith is correlative to the Word.<sup>3</sup> It is believing what God says to *us* just like Abraham believed what God said to *him*. A living faith correlates with what God says to us in Scripture and becomes operational through a hermeneutic of trust and obedience. John Calvin regarded the Scriptures as the ‘sceptre of Christ’ – i.e. the instrument through which He mediates His Lordship over us and the means through which we discern His will for our lives.<sup>4</sup> But 2 Peter 3.16 makes clear that there is a danger of distorting (‘explain falsely,’ GNB) to our own destruction some parts of Scripture which are hard to understand.<sup>5</sup> This warning highlights the importance of Paul’s advice to Timothy working in a context where some Christian teachers had ‘departed from the truth’ so that they ‘destroy the faith of some’ (1 Timothy 2.17-18). The apostle urges his mentee to devote himself ‘to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching’ (1 Timothy 4.13). In his second letter Paul reminds his co-worker that he will win God’s full approval in this vital task by becoming ‘one who correctly handles (‘rightly explaining,’ NRSV) the word of truth’ (2 Tim. 2.15). I suggest that we need to be aware of the very real danger that the popular hermeneutics already noted – viz. giving precedence to religious tradition, or to consumerism, or to doubt, or to suspicion – can lead us to distort God’s Word. For this reason it is important that we find alternative approaches to Scripture that will facilitate the appropriate handling of the Word of Truth.

### Presuppositions

Before seeking such alternatives, I wish to explore some presuppositions to be taken into account in formulating principles of Bible interpretation. The following five basic presuppositions flow from the unique nature of the Holy Scriptures.

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and which *suspicion* assumes for post-modernism in socio-critical hermeneutics and in deconstructionism.’

<sup>3</sup> N. Needham, ‘Westminster and Worship: Psalms, Hymns? and Musical Instruments?’ in *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, vol. 2. J.L. Duncan, ed., Fearn, 2004. Page 241.

<sup>4</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 4.2.1.

<sup>5</sup> Cf Jesus’ assertion in Mark 7.13 that the Pharisees and scribes ‘nullify’ (TNIV; ‘cancel out,’ GNB) the Word of God through their tradition.

The first is that *the Bible serves a unique purpose*. In 2 Timothy 3.15, Paul spells out for his young co-worker God's intention in giving us the Scriptures. The purpose of the Holy Scriptures, he writes, is to impart 'the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.' All Scripture is useful, the apostle goes on to say, 'for teaching the truth, rebuking error, correcting faults and giving instructions for right living.' Thus Holy Scripture is able to qualify and equip God's servants to do every kind of good deed (2 Tim. 3.15-17, GNB). We learn from this job description of the Bible that its purpose is specific and limited. The Bible is not an encyclopaedia containing and imparting all kinds of knowledge. Rather, it is a handbook of salvation. Its function is to effect life-transformation and change eternal destinies.

The second presupposition is that *the Bible is culturally embedded*. For this reason we do well to have some appreciation of its own life-setting if we are to interpret the Bible authentically. Today many find this difficult due to the temporal and cultural distance between the Bible and us. A recent survey of Bible reading in nine countries revealed that more than half the respondents had difficulty understanding the Bible.<sup>6</sup> This is not surprising given that the contents of the Bible are set in a variety of ancient cultures – Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Canaanite, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman – all of which to a greater or lesser extent seem alien to our western 21<sup>st</sup> century culture. So, to interpret the Bible meaningfully we need to find ways of bridging the culture gap. Some hermeneutical scholars employ the metaphor of the horizon as an aid to building linkage between the Bible and us. Antony Thiselton entitles one of his books *The Two Horizons* and another *New Horizons*.<sup>7</sup> The cultural world of the Bible and the cultural world of today's interpreter constitute two separate horizons. The task of the interpreter is to find the points where the two horizons intersect.<sup>8</sup>

A third presupposition is that *the Bible displays multiple literary genres*. Although the *genus* of the Bible is historical narrative, its sixty-six books exhibit a range of different types of literary *genre*. In the Old Testament there is prophecy, psalmody, wisdom literature (like the Book of Proverbs), and the apocalyptic in parts of both Ezekiel and Daniel. In the New Testament, in

<sup>6</sup> C. Wooden, *Not an Easy Read: Survey Indicates Bible Hard to Read*, *Vatican Letter*, May 2, 2008, Catholic News Service. In the USA 56% acknowledged that they struggle to understand; in Germany it was as high as 70%. Although 7 in 10 respondents had Bibles in their homes, relatively few, apart from those in the United States, had read them in the previous twelve months.

<sup>7</sup> A.C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein*, Exeter, 1980; *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Bible Reading*, Grand Rapids, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> Larry Caldwell speaks of *three* horizons, in that the Christian interpreter is called upon to interpret Scripture not only for his own church world, but also for outsiders who live and move and have their being in a non-Christian or even an anti-Christian world. Referenced in W.C. Kaiser and M. Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*, Grand Rapids, 1994. Page 179.

addition to the four Gospels and Acts, there are twenty-one epistles plus the Book of Revelation. In the Gospels there are many parables and in at least one epistle allegories are found. All of these different literary *genres* have their own rules of interpretation which must be respected in our engagement with biblical texts.

A fourth presupposition is that *the Bible grew* over its thousand-year plus literary history. Its message became fuller and clearer as the centuries passed. God's special revelation in Scripture records a long series of events and case studies – of peoples and of personalities – culminating in the coming of Christ and the establishment of the apostolic church. The revelatory meaning of these events is built into the narratives that witness to them as well as being expressed in prophetic and apostolic commentary. Thus God's plan of redemption was unveiled progressively in deed and word, event and theme, over the centuries of biblical history. James Packer reminds us that this progress 'was not (as has sometimes been thought) from fuzzy and sometimes false (OT) to totally true and clear (NT), but from partial to full and complete.'<sup>9</sup> A key to following the storyline of the Bible as the story progresses is to explore how biblical events relate to biblical themes.<sup>10</sup>

The fifth and final presupposition is that *the Bible is a metanarrative* or 'big story.' The big story of Scripture ranges from creation in Genesis 1 and 2 to the consummation of all things in the Book of Revelation. Between these two canonical book-ends, there is the crisis of the Fall and God's astoundingly gracious redemptive response manifested in the call of Abraham, the exodus from Egypt, the conquest, the kingdom, the exile and the return, leading up to the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of a multi-ethnic church spreading into the wider world. These critical events in the Bible's big story form the backcloth against which we are to interpret every incident and every statement in the Bible. If we lose this grand perspective, we will find ourselves examining trees with a microscope and losing the prospect of gaining a panoramic view of the forest as a whole.

Affirming these five basic presuppositions is key to interpreting Scripture. They help us to engage the Bible in ways that are appropriate to its own unique nature as Holy Scripture. As we wrestle with the message of the Bible, it is critical to keep in the forefront of our thinking and praying the Bible's unique purpose, its distinct cultural environment, its range of literary forms, its internal narrative-thematic development, and its central storyline consisting of Creation – Fall – Redemption – Consummation. Having identi-

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<sup>9</sup> J. I. Packer, 'Reading the Bible Theologically' in *ESV Study Bible*, Wheaton, 2008. Page 1568.

<sup>10</sup> One model for doing this is the crossword puzzle in which every square fulfils two functions, one in relation to the clues across and the other to the clues down. One can think of the great events of the Bible as the clues down and the themes as clues across. See G. Grogan, *The Faith Once Entrusted to the Saints? Engaging with issues and trends in evangelical theology*, Nottingham, 2010. Page 244.

fied appropriate presuppositions that will shape our approach to the Bible, the next step is to formulate some key principles of interpretation that will guide our engagement with specific passages.

### Principles

Some Christians might be tempted to think that formulating any principles of biblical interpretation is unnecessary. After all, theologians speak of the *perspicuity* (i.e. clarity) of Scripture. However, by asserting that Scripture is perspicuous, theologians are not declaring that every passage in the Bible is clear. Rather, they are claiming that the Bible's overall message is clear, comprising 'those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation.'<sup>11</sup> They acknowledge that every text of Scripture is not clear. Indeed, it is precisely because there are texts that are ambiguous and, indeed, some that are mysterious, that theologians have developed an extensive science of hermeneutics.

At the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther asserted that 'the Holy Scripture is its own interpreter,' and today evangelical theologians worldwide continue to affirm this as the fundamental principle governing all appropriate interpretation of the Bible. Richard Foster expresses this axiom simply as reading the Bible in conversation with itself.<sup>12</sup> Mid-twentieth-century Old Testament scholar John Bright noted that most biblical texts express some aspect of theology that causes these texts to reflect the fabric of the Bible as a whole. This is so because each biblical author built on the backdrop of Scripture that already existed and was known to him.<sup>13</sup> This is why we find common themes running through the biblical books. This unity of biblical thought, underlying the considerable diversity found in the Bible, flows from the apostolic statement that 'all Scripture is inspired by God' (2 Timothy 3.16, GNB). Alvin Plantinga claims that if God is the principal author of Scripture, the Bible is constituted as 'divine discourse' and is to be approached 'more like a unified communication rather than a miscellany of books.'<sup>14</sup> James Packer asserts that 'Scripture is no ragbag of religious bits and pieces, unrelated to each other; rather, it is a tapestry in which all the complexities of the weave display a single pattern of justice and mercy, promise and fulfillment.'<sup>15</sup> These writers do not mean that the Bible is unnuanced, lacking tension within its plot development, or that it is without ambiguities in its historical details. They do mean that there is an overall coherence in the Bible's message that overarches its diversity, a coherence un-

<sup>11</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1647: 1.7.

<sup>12</sup> R. Foster with K. A. Helmers, *Life with God: A life-transforming new approach to Bible reading*, Consumer Sampler Pack, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> J. Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament*, Nashville, 1967. Pages 143, 170.

<sup>14</sup> A. Plantinga, 'Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship,' in C. Bartholomew, C. S. Evans, M. Healy, and M. Rae, *Behind the Test: History and Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 4 in the Scripture and Hermeneutics Series, Grand Rapids, 2003. Page 25.

<sup>15</sup> J. I. Packer, op. cit. Page 2567.

dergirding the fundamental hermeneutic of the Reformation that ‘Scripture interprets Scripture.’ And it is precisely when grappling with those biblical passages where the meaning is unclear and the significance appears to be ambiguous that this principle is most useful.

‘Scripture is its own interpreter’ is the fundamental hermeneutical axiom. This axiom is perhaps most appropriately applied by breaking it down into a series of subsidiary principles or rules of engagement that will help us to grasp the clear overall message of the Bible and at the same time to grapple with biblical precepts and practices where certain ambiguities make it difficult to decide whether such precepts and practices are timeless or transient. Hopefully the subsidiary principles or rules of engagement about to be articulated will enable us both to escape from the mayhem in which everyone interprets Scripture according to personal taste and also will give us hope that a more common mind can be achieved concerning what the Bible is saying to 21<sup>st</sup> century people.

What are these subsidiary principles or rules of engagement that can help us distinguish the authority level of specific biblical texts? I suggest that there are four key rules of engagement flowing from the fundamental principle that Scripture is self-interpreting. I will argue that following these rules of engagement will help us to capture the essence of the Bible’s message and in particular to distinguish those texts that have a normative status transcending context and time from other texts whose authority is restricted to the religious and cultural situation of the original audience.

### **1. The clear interprets the obscure**

Although the overall message of Scripture is clear and the meaning of the text is apparent in the great majority of passages in Scripture, some texts are obscure and difficult to understand. In his correspondence with the Christians in Corinth, Paul refers to their custom of baptising the dead (1 Cor. 15.29). Why the Corinthians did this is unclear. Nor is it obvious why Paul appears to be indifferent to the practice. For these reasons most Christians interpret this reference in the light of the wider baptismal practice of the early church as portrayed in Acts and in teaching on Christian baptism found in Romans 6 and Colossians 2. The Mormon practice of performing baptisms vicariously on behalf of dead relatives is an example of giving an obscure text an interpretation which is difficult to defend in the light of the wider evidence of the New Testament.

Another obscure text which has been misinterpreted for similar reasons is Revelation 14.4: ‘It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes.’ This verse has been utilised to support clerical celibacy in the church and to assert that the celibate state grants one a higher status in the sight of God than does marriage. But while God may indeed call some Christians to serve him by re-

maining single, no clear passage of Scripture hints that thereby they are given a higher status before God.

Similarly, attempts to construe Jesus' obscure reference to those who are eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of God as a basis for justifying homosexual practice are surely grasping at hermeneutical straws (Matt. 19.12). In the creation accounts, God creates Adam and Eve, not – as some wag has said – Adam and Steve. And the construction put on Jesus' words by some proponents of 'queer theology' is surely negated by the strong polemic against same sex intercourse in Romans 1 and elsewhere. All of these biblical references – to baptisms for the dead, to the 144,000 in the Book of Revelation, to eunuchs for the kingdom of God – do, indeed, present a challenge. But it is a challenge to be faced in the light of other clearer passages. From the clear interpreting the obscure, we move to the New interpreting the Old.

## **2. The New interprets the Old**

The level of divine revelation rose over the centuries of biblical history culminating in the Christ event. Revelation becomes fuller as the narrative proceeds, so it makes good sense to interpret earlier Scriptures through the lens of those that came later. Because the New Testament witnesses to the climax of divine revelation in Christ, it is the 'economy of fulfilment' in contrast to the 'economy of preparation' obtained in the Old Testament. For this reason the later testament provides the key to interpreting the nature of the continuing relevance of the Scriptures contained in the earlier testament.

From the time of Jesus and the apostles the church has always regarded the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. Although Christ fulfilled the typology of the temple ritual, and the command to go to all nations has rendered redundant the civic arrangements of ancient Israel, other elements of Old Testament teaching and practice, such as the Sabbath principle, which have not been abrogated, explicitly or implicitly, by the New Testament, continue to be authoritative in the Christian church.<sup>16</sup>

Unless we interpret the Old Testament from the Christian perspective of the New, we may find ourselves being naively misled into some bizarre activities. In March 2011, BBC TV screened a programme focusing on two religious families belonging to a church in the USA that was described as 'evangelical.' It was portrayed as a church that takes the Bible very seriously. One of the scenes contained shots of a church member tearing down his home and reducing it to matchwood with a mechanical excavator. The church member then transported the debris to be burned in what he described as 'an unclean place' outside the city. What was the reason for this act of domestic demolition? The homeowner told viewers it was the persistence of

<sup>16</sup> In the New Testament the Sabbath mutates into the Lord's Day, but it is not thereby abrogated. I argue elsewhere that the Sabbath is a creation ordinance and that, as such, it remains in force until the consummation of all things (cf Heb. 4.9). F.A.J. Macdonald 'The Lord's Day' in D. Macleod, ed., *Hold Fast Your Confession: Studies in Church Principles*, Edinburgh, 1978.



mildew on the walls of the house. He had read in Leviticus 14.45 that if a defiling mould persistently tarnishes the structure of a house then the whole edifice ‘must be torn down – its stones, timbers and all the plaster – and taken out of the town to an unclean place’ (NIV).

The Christian concerned performed this act of demolition believing he was obeying the Bible. But surely his action is a sad consequence of a failure to interpret the Old Testament by the New. Jesus has fulfilled the ceremonial laws and customs of the Old Covenant. The ritual laws of Leviticus in which the command to demolish a persistently mouldy house is found include instructions about clean and unclean foods which Jesus in effect abrogated when he declared all foods to be clean (Mark 7.19). Old Testament ceremonies, like the sacrifices of the Jerusalem temple, were pointers to the reality of full salvation which the coming Messiah would accomplish. Now that Jesus has come and the new reality is here, these ‘types’ have become obsolete. Similarly the civic laws of ancient Israel do not necessarily apply to us today because the New Testament no longer identifies the people of God as a national political entity but as an international network of local churches. On the other hand, we ought not too readily to dismiss Israel’s civic laws as irrelevant today. The rationale of some of these laws is universal, and in such cases they find transposition into cultures which aspire to enshrine Judaeo-Christian values. For example, in the wind-swept Scottish Hebrides the command in Deuteronomy 22.8 to build a parapet round the roof of your house is transculturated by ensuring that the tiles and slates on roofs are securely fastened so as not to be blown off with serious consequences for passers-by. From the New Testament interpreting the Old, we move on to a third subsidiary principle.

### **3. The universal interprets the local**

The New Testament church was called to live out its message within the culture in which it was situated. Some elements of that culture the church accepted, such as greeting fellow Christians with a kiss (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Pet. 5:14). There were others that it conceded, such as exhorting slaves to submit to their masters (Col. 3.22; Eph. 6.5-8). Are such practices mandatory for Christians living in other cultures and at later times? The church has struggled to answer this question. But it has come closest to a satisfactory response when it interprets specific local references in the light of texts that embody universal principles. In 19<sup>th</sup> century America there was an animated debate among Christians on slavery in the southern states of America. Those Christians, such as Robert Dabney, who supported an enlightened form of slavery, argued from the specific biblical instructions that slaves should submit to their masters. But the abolitionists considered such instructions to be concessionary and took their stand on the principle enunciated in Galatians 3:28: ‘There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of

you are one in Christ Jesus' (cf Col. 3.11). In the light of this principle they took the exhortations that slaves obey masters to be local, incidental and temporary.

A similar hermeneutic is employed today in the debate concerning New Testament injunctions that women should be silent in church (1 Tim. 2.11-12; 1 Cor. 14.34-35). Some scholars affirm the universal normativeness of these commands in all cultures in all times on the grounds of a perceived creation order.<sup>17</sup> Others argue that the subjugation of women to men is not a feature of creation, but rather a consequence of the Fall and has been cancelled out by Christ.<sup>18</sup> In this writer's view, attempts to determine the significance for today of such references to the church situation in Corinth and in Ephesus cannot ignore the fact that these are specific to local churches and are appropriately interpreted in light of the universal principle that in Christ discrimination between male and female has been abolished, just as it has between Jew and Greek, slave and freeman. On the other hand, churches are surely obliged to recognise that while God has created men and women equal, he has created them as complementary to one another. Therefore, while both men and women had valid ministries in the New Testament, the limited evidence suggests male and female ministries were correlative rather than identical, but with considerable overlap. This third subsidiary principle of the universal interpreting the local has some affinity with my final principle which is that the meaning and significance of Scripture may be determined by inference.

#### 4. Interpretation by inference

Jesus taught that the truth of Scripture is not always explicit. Sometimes it is implicit. Recall how he took the Sadducees to task for failing to believe in the resurrection.<sup>19</sup> He upbraided them for missing the implication of the words of the Lord to Moses at the bush (Exodus 3.1-12). They ought, Jesus told them, to have inferred the reality of the resurrection from the declaration that Yahweh introduced Himself to Moses as 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob' (v. 6), all of whom had died long before Moses' day. Similarly Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees' criticism of the disciples for plucking grains of wheat on the Sabbath is inferred from both the great principle declared by the Lord through Hosea: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' and also from the example of David and his companions in eating the holy bread of the Presence taken from the sanctuary in Nob (Matt. 12.1-8; Mark 2.23-28; Luke 6.1-5; cf Hosea 6.6; 1Sam. 21.1-7). Such biblical examples of inference prompted those who composed the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1647 to declare that 'the counsel of God ... is either expressly set

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, J. B. Hurley, *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective*, Grand Rapids, 1981. Pages 195-221.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, S. McKnight, *The Blue Parakeet*, Grand Rapids, 2008. Page 166.

<sup>19</sup> Mark 12.18-27 and parallels.

down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture.'

However, both history and present experience illustrate the difficulty of finding consensus when interpreting by inference in instances where the biblical data is relatively scanty. The so called 'worship wars' are an example. They are waged between biblical psalms and paraphrases against songs of purely human composition and also between traditional hymns and modern choruses. The decibel strength of instrumental accompaniment is also a contentious issue, as is whether praise should be complemented with any musical instruments at all. The question of worship may be so controversial precisely because we know relatively little about the practice of the New Testament church in this regard. In 1 Corinthians 14.26 we learn that when the whole church comes together each one has a 'hymn.' So singing, or possibly chanting, was a component of worship in Corinth. But what precisely was the hymn (literally 'psalm' in the Greek original)? Was it a psalm of David? Or a song composed by the worshipper? Or some other song? Readers of both the letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians are encouraged to sing 'psalms, hymns and spiritual songs' to one another. Again, the referent is unclear. Were these psalms, hymns and spiritual songs taken from the Book of Psalms where all three words appear in psalm inscriptions? Or, were they the compositions of early Christians?

Then, what about instrumental accompaniment? There is no evidence of this in the New Testament church. In fact, historians tell us that musical instruments may not have appeared in the church until the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The Eastern Orthodox Churches and some Reformed denominations still sing *a capella*. Of course, multiple musical instruments were employed in the Jerusalem temple, but apparently not in local synagogues which appear relatively late in Israel's history, but which by the 1<sup>st</sup> century had multiplied following the immigration of Jewish communities into cities of the Roman Empire. It is widely recognised that the earliest churches were modelled on the synagogue, in whose liturgy the public reading of Scripture and its exposition were the central elements. At the Reformation many Protestants rejected the use of musical instruments in church services inferring that their close association with the temple put them into the same category as the ceremonies and sacrifices that Christ had abrogated. Today the majority of Bible believing Christians consider this inference to be mistaken. They point to the lack of any explicit negation of instruments in the New Testament and infer from this that their use in worship continues to enjoy the divine authorisation given by the Old Testament.

Difference of opinion on this issue ought not to encourage us to think that the form of church worship is a matter of indifference. The polemic against idolatry in both testaments indicates that God is deeply concerned about how we worship him. Discovering how we might most appropriately respond to this divine desire surely ought to be the objective of all our decisions con-

cerning worship. Some observers believe that today the evangelical world is losing a divine focus. According to Nick Needham, what so often prevails today is ‘a man-centered attitude or mind-set concerning worship.’ ‘The question,’ he says, ‘which most evangelicals tend to ask of worship-practices is, “Do I find this helpful? Is this meaningful to me? Does this make me feel closer to God?”’ The question, “Is this how God actually wants to be worshipped?” is rarely raised.’<sup>20</sup>

A further matter of concern is that talk about worship tends to be restricted to what and how we sing in praising the Lord. This lop-sided understanding of worship can so dominate church services as to dumb down the formal reading of Scripture for its own sake and also the preaching of the Word.<sup>21</sup> Howard Marshall makes the point that the church as portrayed in the Pastoral Epistles is primarily a listening congregation. ‘To think of a Christian meeting [only] in terms of worship,’ Marshall claims, ‘is to stifle the voice of God.’<sup>22</sup>

Differences on forms of worship exemplify the difficulty of finding a consensus in cases where the biblical evidence may be interpreted to point in more than one direction. A degree of mutual forbearance is surely appropriate where each side in the debate holds a high view of Scripture.

In summary, I have reaffirmed the great Lutheran principle that Scripture is self-interpreting and from this have identified four subsidiary principles to guide us in determining what the Bible is saying in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These subsidiary principles or rules of engagement are: we interpret obscure passages by those that are clear, the Old Testament by the New, the many local incidents recorded in the biblical text by the great universal spiritual principles affirmed in didactic passages, and, finally, the right – and, indeed, the need – to interpret by inference and thus make explicit what is implicit in the biblical text. This one fundamental principle and these four subsidiary principles are basic. But we also need to be aware that our pre-understandings and prejudices might bias the way we use them. For this reason it is wise to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to our conclusions by addressing some critical questions to our interpretations. So before concluding I will suggest three precautions we will do well to take into account when attempting to interpret what Scripture is saying today.

### Precautions

These precautions or safeguards can be summed up in three words: Intentionality, Consistency, and Reflexivity. Let me unpack what I mean by expanding these three terms into three questions:

- Does our interpretation honour the original purpose of the text?

<sup>20</sup> N. Needham, op. cit. Page 230.

<sup>21</sup> cf 1 Tim. 4.13; 2 Tim. 4.2; Titus 1.3.

<sup>22</sup> I. H. Marshall, ‘Worshipping Biblically’ in *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 20, no. 2, Autumn, 2002.

- Have we employed the four guidelines consistently?
- Have we reflected on the validity of the inferences made from the text?

Let us now look briefly and in turn at each question.

### **Intentionality**

Louis Berkhof identifies ‘the special scope of the author’ as an important internal help for interpretation. He explains the author’s scope as ‘the object he had in view in writing the particular portion of his work under consideration.’<sup>23</sup> When authorial intention is clear, such as in narrative texts, we ought to check whether we have ridden roughshod over it by, say, spiritualising a historical account into an allegory. When the scope of the author is not plainly expressed, the interpreter needs to read and perhaps re-read a whole section together with the preceding and following context in order to detect its purpose. Although a text may yield many layers of significance for succeeding generations of biblical interpreters, its meaning is what the original author meant it to mean and also what later biblical writers construed it to mean. Recognising the importance of authorial intention in relation to a text provides a very useful check on the validity of our interpretation of it. Moving on from intentionality we come to consistency.

### **Consistency**

In reviewing our interpretation of a text, we should ask: Have we employed our guidelines consistently. An example may help to illustrate the question. I have friends who believe with millions of Eastern Orthodox Christians that God does not wish the church to use musical instruments in its worship. They claim that the total silence of the New Testament indicates that the commands of Psalm 150 to praise the Lord with trumpet, lute, harp, tambourine, strings, pipe and cymbals is no longer valid because the church has replaced Jerusalem temple where these instruments were played. So far so good. But nearly all of my acquaintances who take this position also advocate the baptism of the infants of Christian parents despite the lack of explicit evidence for this practice in the New Testament. The basis of my friends’ position on baptism is that Old Testament commands continue to be valid unless it can be shown from the New Testament that they have been rescinded. They acknowledge that there is no incontrovertible evidence of infant baptism in the New Testament, but they justify the practice on the basis that in Colossians 2.11-12 Paul presents baptism as corresponding to circumcision. In other words, they claim that the Old Testament command to circumcise week-old male babies provides justification for the Christian baptism of infants now expanded on the basis of Galatians 3.28 to embrace fe-

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<sup>23</sup> L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, London, 1973. Page 103.

males as well as males. At this point my concern is not to pass judgment on either argument – that against music or that for infant baptism. My contention is that the hermeneutic underlying the interpretations against musical instruments contradicts the hermeneutic behind advocacy of infant baptism, for each interprets the silence of the New Testament in a diametrically different way. Advocates of *a capella* praise assume the silence of the New Testament invalidates the Old Testament use of instruments, while for supporters of infant baptism the silence of the New validates the Old Testament practice of granting the covenant sign to the children of believers. Surely affirming both positions reflects a hermeneutical inconsistency.

### Reflexivity

In the social sciences, the term reflexivity is used to describe engaging in critical self-scrutiny of one's findings in an attempt to minimise personal biases and cultural assumptions unduly influencing any research findings. The term reflexivity is not found in the Bible, but the idea is present. For example, Jesus took the two Emmaus road disciples to task for their lack of reflexivity regarding the way they had inferred from Scripture that the Messiah would come to triumph rather than to suffer. 'Oh, how foolish you are!' he said to them. The Greek word for 'foolish' (*anoētoi*) signifies an 'unwillingness to use one's mental faculties in order to understand.'<sup>24</sup> In other words, the two disciples had failed to scrutinise their hermeneutic. For us also it is always important to be reflexive when interpreting the Bible, especially when we are inferring from the text. Jesus' own example shows us how to infer appropriately. When Jesus inferred from David's eating the holy bread that it was permissible for the disciples to pluck grains of wheat on the Sabbath, Jesus was respecting the 'scope' of 1 Samuel. The activity of the disciples in the wheat fields paralleled David's action at Nob in at least three ways. First, the disciples – like David and his men – were hungry. Second, the freshness of the bread indicates that David ate it on the Sabbath.<sup>25</sup> Third, the Pharisees would have considered the eating of the holy bread by non-priests to be unlawful. Jesus' inference from biblical precedent to justify the disciples' conduct respected the original Old Testament context.

Asking these three questions regarding, first, authorial intentionality and then the consistency and reflexivity of our approach to Scripture will serve us well in helping to check whether we are rightly dividing the Word of Truth.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, let me return to my original question: 'Whose interpretation is it?' In the last analysis this is a question we can appropriately answer

<sup>24</sup> J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains*, Vol 1, 32.50, UBS, New York, 1988.

<sup>25</sup> The supply of the bread of the Presence was replenished every Sabbath (Lev. 24.8).

only in the presence of God. For interpreting the Bible is ultimately an act of worship. Scripture engagement is a vital element in following Christ. ‘Reading and studying and memorizing and meditating upon Scripture has always been the foundation of the Christian Disciplines. All of the Disciplines are built on Scripture. Our practice of the Spiritual Disciplines is kept on course by our immersion in Scripture.’<sup>26</sup>

Scripture engagement is encounter – encounter with God the Father, with God the Son and with God the Holy Spirit. Scripture engagement is also discovery learning that enables us to discover for ourselves the unique claim the text is making upon us. That claim is the assertion of Jesus to be Lord! Scripture engagement is not mastering the text but submitting to it!

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<sup>26</sup> R. Foster with K. A. Herlmers, op. cit. Cf one of the findings of the Willow Creek research involving 200 churches and 80,000 people in the USA: ‘The Bible is the most powerful catalyst for spiritual growth. The Bible’s power to advance spiritual growth is unrivalled by anything else we’ve discovered. Reflection on Scripture is by far the most influential spiritual practice.’ (G. L. Hawkins and C. Parkinson, *Follow Me: What’s Next for You?*, Barrington IL, 2008. Pages 105-6).