

## Lesson Plan on Biblical Interpretation – Part 2

### Title: Biblical Interpretation – Part 2

#### Resources:

- Required: St. Francis Prayer, Unity Promise, Scripture – Word of God or Word of Man, A Short Plan for Studying the Bible, Some Thoughts on Cultivating Biblical Comprehension, Whiteboard, bibles
- Optional/Supplemental: Scripture – Word of God or Word of Man, Deeper Issues Trouble United Methodists

#### Outline:

- Open with welcome and introduce this session as the third in a series of constructive conversations designed to prepare our congregation for the denominational decision regarding any changes that may or may not take place at the February 2019 General Conference relative to human sexuality/homosexuality. Future sessions will deal with views of human sexuality and the plans being considered by our denomination to address the issue of homosexual inclusion in our church.
- Today's session continues to focus on the issue of biblical interpretation. As we observed last week, devoted Christians read the same bible and come to different conclusions on a whole host of matters. Why is this so? Because we interpret the bible in different ways.
- Now last week's lesson may have been a bit disconcerting for some. In that lesson we talked about different things taught from the bible that we may no longer believe. The goal of that lesson was not to undermine our trust in the bible as a record of God saving work, but to remind us that none of us ever performs a simple straightforward reading of the bible text. All of us read the bible and then make interpretive decisions about what the bible means, and our interpretation may be wrong or prove to be outdated over time. For example, some of the things written in the bible, even some things written in the New Testament, don't quite comport with what we may currently believe. Things like slavery, female subordination, and patriarchal patterns for marriage as defined by the New Testament are different from what we may currently practice. So, all of us make interpretive decisions whenever we read the bible, and our interpretation of the bible may be wrong or prove to be outdated over time; that was the point of last week's lesson. This week we will explore how we should make those interpretative decisions with a goal of better understanding how the bible applies to us today.
- But before we begin this lesson on biblical interpretation, let's start our session by praying the Saint Francis Prayer & reviewing the Unity Promise & Guidelines.
- In last week's lesson we saw that the bible is foundational to our faith and that interpreting the bible is an essential but difficult task due to a variety of factors.

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This week we'll further explore some of the factors that make biblical interpretation difficult as well as some of the tools we can use to interpret the bible well.

- So, how do we explain the fact that devout Christians sometimes interpret the bible differently, and we don't necessarily always believe everything that has ever been taught from the bible?
  - Well first, we may simply need to remember that interpreting the bible is a difficult task – it's not as simple as it seems! Despite our best efforts, we may come to wrong conclusions because of the cultural, chronological, and linguistic differences that exist between our time and culture, and the time, culture, and language of the bible.
    - It can be very hard for us to understand what the bible meant in its initial context due to the vast chronological and cultural differences that exist between us and the original writers and readers. When you travel today to a different country or culture, do you sometimes have difficulty understanding the people there, and do they sometimes have difficulty understanding you? Of course! The same is true, but even more so, when we "travel" to the ancient biblical world and attempt to understand it.
    - In addition, even if we think we know what the bible meant in its original context, it may sometimes be difficult for us to apply its teaching meaningfully to our current chronological and cultural context since times have changed, culture has changed, and human knowledge has progressed.
    - Because of these and other factors, devout people sometimes come to different conclusions about what the bible originally meant and now means in our modern world.
  - Second, devout Christians sometimes interpret the bible differently from one another, and we don't necessarily believe everything that has ever been taught from the bible, because new knowledge and information becomes available over time. Can you think of any examples of how advances in knowledge have altered our understanding of the bible?
    - Many Christians once believed (and some still believe) in 6 literal 24-hour days of creation as described in Genesis chapter 1. Today, many Christians (probably most) believe God was the Creative Agent bringing all things into being over long epochs of time that are poetically described as "days" in the book of Genesis.
    - At one time, most Christians believed that human beings existed in their present form since the beginning of time. With advances in anthropology, geology, archeology, and evolutionary sciences, 71%

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of white mainline protestants now believe humans have evolved over time into their present form. (Pew Resource Center Report *Religion and Science* by Cary Funk and Becka Alper, released October 22, 2015, p. 19)

- Many Christians once held to a geocentric (earth-centered) view of the universe and resisted the scientific discovery of a heliocentric (sun-centered) universe.
  - The bible knows little or nothing of the biological, microbial, genetic, or psychological causes of sickness, disease, or health as commonly identified today; and biblical medicine was very primitive compared to modern medicine. As previously noted in last week's session, few of us would treat a boil by applying a fig to it today! "Bring a lump of figs. Let them take it and apply it to the boil, so that he may recover." (2 Ki 20:7)
  - Perhaps we should remember that the bible is a book about salvation, i.e. how God is salvaging creation and restoring it to its true/divine intent; it's not a book about science or technology and shouldn't be read that way even though it may contain scientific, medical, or other such insights as viewed through an ancient lens.
- Third, we may need to acknowledge that the bible is both a divine and a human book, i.e. it contains both divine truth and human views.
- The bible is certainly a divine book in that God revealed God's self to various people. There would be no bible without God's prior self-revelation.
  - The bible is also a human book in that those people had to interpret God's revelation and then record what they saw, what they heard, and what they thought about it. And they had to make that record in their own time, place, culture, and language, and subject to their own human limitations, even though they were aided by God's Spirit as they did so.
  - Sorting out divine truth from timebound human views can sometimes be a challenge.
  - In his book, *Being Christian in the Twenty-First Century*, Sam Gould offers some comments on the divine/human nature of the bible.
    - Distribute the reading and allow participants a few minutes to read through the handout.
    - Say, "You may or may not agree with the author, but can you see how the bible might be both a divine and a human book

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reflecting God's revelation and human understanding, and how sorting the two might be a difficult task leading people to different conclusions?"

- Interpreting the bible requires solid tools and some guiding principles.
  - Given the difficulties that exist in interpreting a very ancient text written in very different times, very different languages, and very different cultures, and given the related difficulties of applying that ancient text to our modern times and current culture, we need a variety of tools to help us interpret and apply the bible. Those tools are the tools of Biblical Hermeneutics.
    - *Hermeneutics* is derived from the Greek word (*hermeneuō*), which means to "translate or interpret".
    - Folk etymology places the origin of the word hermeneutics with Hermes, the mythological Greek deity who was the 'messenger of the gods'. Hermeneutics is the art or science of bringing God's message to humanity.
  - At my ordination as Elder on June 12, 1991, Bishop Leroy Hodapp presented me with a bible. That bible begins with a section of Study Helps, including a short section on How to Study a Bible Passage outlining 8 steps for study. Distribute *A Short Plan for Studying Bible Passages (Adapted)* and review the steps with the participants.
    - What is the bible passage you want to examine? Is it a complete thought? Sometimes a complete thought is a single verse, a paragraph, or a whole chapter.
    - Read the passage carefully, word-for-word. Jot down words or phrases that catch your eye as potential keys to what the passage is saying. Try reading the passage in a variety of translations. You can find many at [Biblegateway.com](http://Biblegateway.com).
    - Look up the key terms in a bible dictionary, theological wordbook, or lexicon like [Biblehub.com/lexicon](http://Biblehub.com/lexicon) and record your findings.
    - Clarify the literary context of the passage. What biblical material immediately precedes and follows the passage?
    - Clarify the canonical context. Where is this passage located in the bible as a whole? What connections does the passage have to other passages? How does this fit into the broad sweep of the entire biblical story?
    - Clarify the historical and geographical context. What was going on at the time the passage was written? What do we know about the author, the date and place of writing? Who were the original recipients? What issues or problems were they facing? Scholarly commentaries can be helpful in this effort.
    - State the original meaning of the passage. Based on your study what did the original author intend?

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- How does this ancient message apply (or not) to our current situation? How is our situation similar or different from the persons who first heard the passage? What do we share in common with the first audience or how do we differ? What equivalent issues do we face? What different issues do we struggle with? How do tradition, reason, and experience inform our interpretation and application?
- In addition to these 8 principles of biblical interpretation, I recently preached a sermon on cultivating our capacity for biblical comprehension.
  - Distribute *Some Thoughts on Cultivating Biblical Comprehension*.
  - Ask participants to read and mark those things they find significant then discuss their findings.
- Given the sometime complexity of interpreting the bible, is there some guiding principles or interpretive keys that can help us read, study, interpret, and apply it?
  - Perhaps one guiding principle of interpretation is found in the life and example of Christ.
    - In my *Thoughts on Cultivating Biblical Comprehension* I suggested that our interpretation and application of the bible should make us more like Jesus.
    - I said, “We should lay our conclusions at the feet of Jesus Christ. In other words, we should compare our conclusions with the life of Christ, the example of Christ, the teachings of Christ, and the spirit of Christ to see if our conclusions comport with the living Christ we’ve come to know and love. If we can’t imagine Jesus doing what we’ve concluded then maybe we should take a pause and start the process over again.”
  - Perhaps a second guiding principle of interpretation is found in the great commandments taught by our Christ.
    - Jesus said the greatest commandments are to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves.
    - As we read the bible, we should ask, “Does our interpretation and application of the bible foster greater love for God and neighbor?” If not, then perhaps we’ve missed the mark.
    - Jesus often opposed the religious leaders of his day when they used scripture and tradition to oppress rather than liberate and love people.
  - Perhaps a third guiding principle of interpretation is found in Matthew 23:23 where Jesus identifies the weightier/more important matters of the Law.
    - In an encounter with the Pharisees – the most religious people of his day – about tithing, Jesus said, “Woe to you, scribes

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and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law; justice and mercy and faith.”

- Does the way we read the bible lead us to just deeds, merciful acts, and growing faith toward God and faithfulness with our neighbors?
- Does applying these tools and guiding principles of biblical interpretation mean we'll all agree on what Jesus would do, what best fosters love for God and neighbor, or what best reflects justice, merciful, and faith-filled/faithful conduct?
  - No. But by using the same guiding principles, perhaps we'll agree more often than we would otherwise and we'll certainly have a better basis for meaningful and fruitful dialogue.
  - Also, when we do differ with others, we'll be able to respect those with whom we differ, while not necessarily agreeing with their views, because we'll recognize in them another faulty human being, just like us, doing their best to model Christ in loving God and neighbor and living for justice, mercy, and faith.
  - Finally, when/if we do err in our interpretation and/or application of the bible, we'll be doing so in love and can take some comfort in this: Love covers a multitude of sins. (1 Pe. 4:8)
- Closing Conversation
  - Read Ephesians 4:29-32.
  - Ask participants to review the Unity Promise and Guidelines and then discuss what they found most meaningful about today's discussion.
  - Distribute *Deeper Issues Trouble United Methodists* and ask participants to read and ponder it in the coming week. Stress that they don't have to agree with it but that it offers one view of biblical interpretation that some people embrace, and it shows how the way we read and interpret the bible can lead to differing conclusions about what it teaches and how it applies. Understanding how others read and interpret the bible can help us better understand them and what they believe.