

**SESSION 3: PRINCIPLES & PITFALLS IN FAITHFUL INTERPRETATION** with Pastor Mike Maslin, M.Div)

- I. Determining meaning: the author, the text, and the reader
  - II. The Holy Spirit's indispensable role in faithful interpretation
  - III. Principles and pitfalls in faithful interpretation
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I. Determining meaning: the author, the text, and the reader

A. What literary agent determines the meaning of a text?



**Author**



**Text**



**Reader**

1. When the reader determines the meaning...

- This approach is prone to subjectivism.
- **Subjectivism:** The idea that reality, and in this case the meaning of the text, is shaped by one's own perceived experience, beliefs, and feelings.

Postmodernism, which is heavily influenced by relativism, is the latest expression of subjectivism. Postmodern subjectivism projects the readers' own impressions onto the text. In this way, it consolidates truth into the individual (personal autonomy) rather than an external source (such as God).

- Example of a subjective reading of Scripture: Using Scripture to support one's own conclusions, for example, regarding homosexuality or universalism.

2. When the text determines the meaning...

- This approach is prone to theological liberalism.
- **Theological liberalism:** The approach where reason is stressed as the determiner of final authority and not authoritative doctrine.

- Examples of theological liberalism: “The account of Noah is in the genre of ‘myth’ and is therefore not historically true,” or “Textual criticism suggests that there were multiple authors of the book of Isaiah, some of whom likely wrote after the life of Christ, and therefore the apparent messianic-prophetic elements of Isaiah are not to be trusted as original.”

Note: In some ways, a text-based reading of Scripture is good and helpful – and utilizing the tools for in-depth observation of the text is good. However, theological liberals move beyond any helpful tools for examining the text and undermine the authorial intent.

3. When the author determines the meaning (“authorial” or “original” intent...)

- This approach best leads to a plain reading of the text in context.
- The plain reading of the text in context induces the reader to take the author, which is ultimately God, at His intended meaning, thus best cooperating with the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the reader. The plain reading informs interpretation, rather than any external device for deriving meaning.
- Examples of the plain reading of the text: Being sure to study one section at a time – observing, interpreting and applying based on the reading.

*“It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.” – John Calvin*

II. The indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in faithful interpretation

***“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:26).”***

***I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. <sup>18</sup> I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people (Ephesians 1:17-18).***

***You, God, keep my lamp burning;  
my God turns my darkness into light (Psalm 18:28).***

- A. Illumination – The belief that the Holy Spirit works to enable believers to understand and apply the truths of the Bible by spiritually enlightening their minds (Hebrews 4:12 and see above).
- Example of illumination: While prayerfully and thoughtfully reading a passage of Scripture, and God brings a strong impression of its truth to you, often in the form of a specific application.
- B. Cognition and conviction. The text can be read and, through skillful interpretive function available to any person of a certain basic intelligence, understood by anyone, but the conviction, which follows proper cognition, is a fruit given by the Holy Spirit.
- C. A Spirit-filled life (Galatians 5:22-23).

***Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18)***

***But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23)***

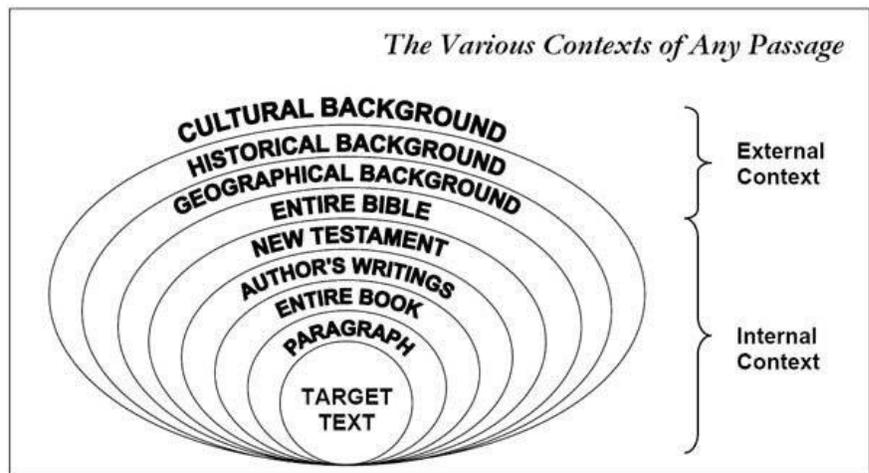
*“The key to reading the Bible well lies in the regions of the heart.” – George Guthrie, *Reading the Bible Better*, p. 15*

- The lack of Spirit-filled character creates an obstacle
- Example of the Spirit-filled life in interpretation: The cultivation

### III. Principles and pitfalls in faithful biblical interpretation.

#### A. Principles of faithful biblical interpretation

1. Read the text plainly.
2. Understand the text’s context.
  - a. Context frames our thinking.
  - b. Dedication to context helps us discover the author’s intent (original meaning).
  - c. Taking the Scriptures out of context is “Like taking a flower from its roots.” (Ulrich Zwingli)



3. Let Scripture interpret Scripture.
4. Understand the role of your personal bias.
5. Let the Spirit, and the fruit of the Spirit, animate your reading.

***<sup>11</sup> We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. <sup>12</sup> In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! <sup>13</sup> Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. <sup>14</sup> But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil (Hebrews 5:11-14).***

#### B. Pitfalls to faithful interpretation

1. Emotionalism
  - a. Sensory impressions
  - b. Mysticism (Inner spirituality)
2. Scientism
  - a. Running the text through the lens of Science
  - b. Demythologizing
3. Allegorizing the text
  - a. The text can never mean what it never meant.
  - b. "The Bible treated allegorically becomes putty in the hand of the reader" (Bernard Ramm) and is like "frivolous games" (Calvin).

4. Rigid Literalism (often doesn't consider external context)
  - a. Leads to out-of-place applications which were unintended by the author.