

How to understand the Bible without bending it to our purposes

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[0 : 00] Okay, let me pray and we'll start that way. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for just this chance to pause and think about how we understand the Bible and how we know that what we're understanding is what you're saying.

And we want to pray for your help in that we want to acknowledge that we spend all of our time and live all of our days in your presence, but that as we gather as your people together, as we seek to open the Bible together, that you are present with us and that you are concerned for us that we understand rightly.

So please bless our time together. Help me, help all of us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So these Sunday evenings are sort of like partway between a sort of sermon, a lecture, a seminar, right? So if you were hoping for a sermon, you'll be disappointed.

If you were hoping for a lecture, you'll also be disappointed. If you were hoping for a seminar, you were likewise to be disappointed. So if you were just hoping for pictures on the handout, you would also be disappointed. But just to kind of get us thinking and get us in the zone of what I'm going to talk about, I want you to ask with the person next to you, have you ever heard the statement, well, you can make the Bible say whatever you want it to say.

Who said it? Not necessarily, oh, it was, you know, Graham or something, but like, who said it? As in, it was someone who wasn't a Christian, it was someone who was a Christian, it was someone who was on the TV or whatever.

[1 : 26] And why did they say it? And how did you reply? Okay? Don't spend like super long on this, but have a go at that just for a couple of minutes. Okay. Does anyone want to tell us?

You can make the Bible say whatever you want it to say. Anyone? No one's ever heard that before, so. Yeah? Maybe, what are we doing here? Yes, go on, Ray.

You've said it. Okay, when did you say it? If you take just a sentence from the Bible, you can actually probably say anything. Okay, yes. So, it is theoretically possible to make the Bible say whatever you want it to say, but only by acting in an irresponsible way with it.

Right, yeah. Okay. Anybody else? Jeff? Right.

Yes. And what are they, you know, why are they saying it? What is it they're trying to achieve by saying it, do you think? Right, just trying to ignore what it says.

[2 : 38] What do you tend to say in response? Yeah. Okay, yeah, read it.

Yeah, that is a good response, yeah. Yeah. Anybody else? There is a sense in which we can impose our interpretation.

Right. Yes, there is a sense, and I suppose that's what Ray was picking up on as well. There is a sense that we can impose an interpretation, a wrong interpretation on the Bible, and force it to say something.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I think it's particularly set around some controversial aspects in church life, isn't it? So particularly stuff on sex and sexuality, gender, those kind of things, or roles of men and women in church life.

Well, you can make any argument for anything. Sometimes people mislead by over-contextualizing. Right. So, like, for example, when they say, if you're arguing against occult practices, they'll say, oh, yes, but this was in the context of idolatry.

[3 : 49] Yes. So they bring up, and the same thing they do with, uh, practices to, uh, homosexuality. Yes. Oh, yeah, that's because it was involved in some ritual. Yeah.

So that's taking over-contextualizing. Yes. So one of the means that people use to make the Bible say whatever they wanted to say is by over-contextualizing it, by kind of tying it to its, uh, to a particular understanding of the context that it was given in.

Okay. Well, that was just to really get your juices flowing and to make you start to think about some of the things that we're going to discuss this evening. But really what we're trying to do is carry on this series of thinking about how there are many old answers to some of our new questions and seeing particularly how, um, the Baptist Confession of Faith, so 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith addresses lots of the things that we are coming up against today.

So there are three confessions, yeah, we were looking at, it's the Westminster Confession, the Savoy Declaration, and the Baptist Confession of Faith, which are all very similar, but, uh, vary on church governance.

And we are looking particularly at what it says about the Bible. And what I'm trying to do is show you that, and reassure you, if I can, that there's nothing new under the sun, that most of what we face, much of what we ask, much of what worries us and concerns us has been faced in the past one way or another.

[5 : 07] Now, to get to the 1689 answer to the question, you have to kind of just, like, lift the helicopter up a bit and zoom out, uh, and start just thinking a bit differently, okay? Let me try and explain the context in which the 1689 Baptist Confession comes, all the confessions come.

So in the medieval church, the pre-Reformation church, there is a lot of concern for having an authoritative interpretation of the Bible. The thinking goes something like this, you know, scripture obviously needs to be interpreted.

You know, you open a Bible, and it's obvious that it is an ancient text, is written by people who are different from us, different from the readers, uh, in medieval times as well.

And they are in different situations to us. And so you cannot just draw a straight line from those words in the Bible into your life. You're not Timothy, you're not Titus, you're let alone not Abraham or Isaac or Moses.

So scripture needs explaining. It needs interpreting. It needs work done with the scriptures to hear the message in our own lives. And that interpretation was, it was so thought, cannot be provided by anything other than some sort of authoritative body outside of the scriptures.

[6 : 20] The church, the magisterium, as it was called, which is the bishops along with the Pope. So they thought that they were the right people to provide a correct interpretation of the Bible and exclude all other misunderstandings.

So basically what you, what you did is you said, this is what this, this is what this means. And if you disagree with this, out, right, get out of the church. And then you end up with one church that teaches one thing and holds on to the explanation for itself.

Now, this is an important and serious task that the church takes on itself, isn't it? It's not like just the arrangement of the cups on the coffee counter. This is serious and important because if you, if you allowed somebody other than the magisterium, the bishops and the Pope to take on that role, then it would be chaos.

Bavinck, he, yeah, anyway, I'm not going to explain who Bavinck is. We talked about him last week, but he explains it like this. He says the, the absence of such a judge, as in someone to explain what the Bible means, every interpretation becomes completely subjective.

Everyone judges its own pleasure and considers his own individual opinion infallible. Every heretic has his own favorite letter. Now, the Roman Catholic Church so committed to this need to interpret the Bible, it decided that it didn't actually matter whether people understood the words of the Bible in the pew.

[7 : 47] So they would continue in Latin. And so they would exclude people from interpreting the Bible because they would exclude them from even understanding the words that were being said. And in fact, it wasn't really until the 1960s that the mass was permitted to be read in English and not in Latin.

Now, in contrast to that, the confession reads, as does the Westminster Confession, some things, chapter one, paragraph seven, some things in scripture are clearer than others.

And some people understand the teachings more clearly than others. However, the things that must be known, believed and obeyed for salvation are so clearly set forth and explained in one part of scripture or another, that both the educated and uneducated may achieve a sufficient understanding of them by properly using ordinary measures.

Now, I said last week, and Vanessa picked up on this, that this doesn't terrify me because these are the sorts of things that I read quite a lot. But for the rest of you, this is my, ah, right, this is not how we speak normally, is it?

But I want you, with the person next to you, to think how that might disagree with what I've just explained to be the position of the Roman Catholic Church at the time. What are they claiming for the Bible?

[9 : 10] What are they claiming for the Bible in the confession? Just have a conversation with the person next to you about that. Great. What do we think?

Anybody want to share their thoughts? Anyone can understand?

Yep. Yep. Yes. Yes. It's sufficient for understanding salvation.

So, any, not anyone can understand all of it. Right? But, it is sufficient and sufficiently clear in teaching the way of salvation.

Yeah. Anything else? Thank you, Paul.

[10 : 14] Yeah, yeah, the Spirit has to remove prejudice.

Right, yeah, yeah. Right, yeah. When they were commissioned, yeah. Yeah, so we'll come on and think about the work of the Spirit and understanding it, understanding the Scriptures, but they use a phrase, ordinary means.

What do they, oh, ordinary measures. What does ordinary measures mean at the end of that sentence, do you think? Yeah, reading it, yeah.

So it's not like, you know, the Bible code thing. It's like read every fourth word and some secret message pops out, yeah. It sounds fanciful, doesn't it? But people do treat the Bible like that, don't they?

But actually, the Bible is written as literature that you can understand. Now, you might have heard the term, the perspicuity of Scripture or the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture.

[11:32] This is what this is based on, the idea that the Bible is clear. This is like the kind of cornerstone in some ways of the Reformation, the idea that the Bible is intelligible and clear on the way of salvation.

But the point isn't that all of the Bible is equally clear as the rest of the Bible. They're not saying that everything in the Bible is obvious or easy to understand. Not even that it doesn't take work to understand, or even that some people might be better at understanding the Bible than others, right?

He says some people understand the teachings more clearly than others. Rather, the claim is that the Bible is clear about salvation in such a way that anyone reading the Bible or hearing the Bible in their own language, whether they are highly educated or otherwise, will be able to understand what is required for salvation.

And not with special skills, but with the ordinary means of reading and learning. Again, Bavinck explains what we mean by the clarity of Scripture. It means only that the truth, the knowledge of which is necessary to everyone for salvation, though not spelt out with equal clarity on every page of Scripture, is nevertheless presented throughout all of Scripture in such a simple and intelligible form that a person concerned about the salvation of his or her soul can easily, by personal reading and study, learn to know that truth from Scripture, without the assistance and guidance of the church and the priest.

Now, it's worth thinking, are they right? Okay, so were they right to think this? Where did it come from? Where did the Reformers get this idea from? Why did it get put into the Confession?

[13:24] That doesn't... Yeah, why would they believe such a thing? Well, the reason for believing such a thing is because they were convinced this is what the Bible teaches about itself. So they say, the Bible claims for itself to be a light to all people.

The Bible doesn't claim to be a light to priests who then shine the light for others, but rather the Scriptures are anticipated as being a direct witness to God's people themselves.

So let's go through some of these examples. And I've printed them out on your handout, so you don't have to turn to these passages in the Bible. So if you take Moses speaking to the people of Israel before they go into the Promised Land with Joshua, he tells them that God has not put his words far away from them, but near to them so that they might know the way to go.

So he says, Now, what I am commanding you today is not difficult for you or beyond your reach. It's not up in heaven so that you'll have to ask who will ascend into heaven and get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it.

Nor is it beyond the sea so that you have to ask who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it. No, the word is very near you. It's in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

[14:35] Now, clearly, Moses wasn't anticipating that each individual Israelite would have a written copy of the Torah, but he is understanding that the word is for them as the people, isn't it?

Psalm 119, we read that the Scriptures are to show people where to go. Verse 105, Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.

Verse 130, The unfolding of your words gives light and it gives understanding to the simple. It's the same in the book of Proverbs. For this command is a lamp, this teaching is a light, and correction and instruction are the way to life.

Then when you read the Old Testament prophets, they are addressing the people, aren't they? When their words are written, they are written for the people. You may remember that Nehemiah and Ezra, when they have rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem and the temple, they are reading the Scriptures to the people so that they might hear God's word.

Jesus, when he comes, he doesn't just gather the religious leaders. He comes and speaks to the crowds. He expects his teaching to be intelligible and understood by common people of every day.

[15:47] The New Testament letters are written to the churches themselves and not just the leaders of the church. Interestingly, there's an argument used later on for congregational church governance, is that the Bible is addressed to the people in the church, not just the leaders of the church.

Then in the New Testament, people are commended for listening and carefully checking against the Scriptures what is being said. Acts 17 verse 11 says that the Bereans, now the Berean Jews, were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica.

Why? Well, they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. Bereans are commended for being those people who are kind of engaging with the Scriptures and listening to what they're saying.

John says in his gospel that he's writing so that his readers might understand how to be saved. He says, but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

It's significant, isn't it, that the reformers and the writers of the confessions took all of that and concluded that Scripture must be clear. God is the ultimate author and has spoken and written in such a way that the way of salvation is plain and clear.

[17:05] And that nowhere is it taught or anticipated in the Bible that the Bible should not be read by all people and especially by all Christians. Now, it's worth thinking before we apply this and how this fits with what we saw last week.

So if you remember last week, we said, didn't we, that Christians believe the Bible to be the word of God ultimately by faith, right? So we believe that God's word is God's word by faith.

In other words, it's a work of the Spirit opening our eyes and quickening our hearts to believe in Jesus that leads us to believe that it's his word to us. And here the claim is that faith is explained clearly by the Scriptures in a way that everyone can understand and no one commits.

And so with that faith, we're not separated from the word, but it's given to us in a way that we can understand, be guided by it as we walk through life.

So perhaps, maybe I can put it this way. Last week, I was trying to reassure you that your job is not to defend the Bible. The Bible is able to defend itself because ultimately the Bible gives faith as we read it and understand it.

[18:11] That then assures us that it's true. This time, I'm saying that the Bible not only defends itself, it also explains itself, right? And so anyone can read it and understand it.

So they go on in the confession. And I didn't put this on your handout, but 1.9 says this. The infallible rule for interpreting Scripture is the Scriptures itself.

Therefore, when there is a question about the true and full meaning of any part of Scripture, and each passage has only one meaning, not many, it must be understood in the light of other passages that speak more clearly.

So the Bible is able to explain itself, and anyone can read it.

Now, how do you think that helps with the statement that we made at the start? Turn to the person next to you and have a think about that. How does any of that help you with the, you can make the Bible say whatever you want it to say?

[19:25] And then I've got some suggested answers that I'm going to go through, but give that. Okay. Let me give you some suggested ways that I think this helps us with the, you can make the Bible say whatever you want it to say.

I've got four suggested answers, and maybe these will cut across what you've said, and then we can take some questions. Okay, number one. Well, while it might be true that the Bible needs to be interpreted, still the experience of Christians is that the main teaching is very clear and easy to understand and hasn't really been contradicted.

I think the one that Jeff raised, where it's non-Christian friends who are saying, oh, well, I don't really believe the Bible because you can say it, make it say whatever you want it to say. You can say to them that the most remarkable thing is that most of history, people have believed the same things about the way of salvation from the Bible, right?

What I believe about how you're saying is exactly what the early church believed about how you're saying. You know, in our church, we read confessions that were written thousands of years ago because we still believe the same things.

If you're looking at the surprise from interpreting the scriptures, it is the agreement, not the disagreement, which is surprising. That is incredible when you think about that down through history.

[20 : 46] And so I think people jump onto that bandwagon, and Jeff's answer was actually quite a good one, wasn't it? Just read it, right? Just read it because it is clear. But actually, it is the agreement in interpretation which has been extraordinary down through history.

Secondly, I think it's worth saying that it is possible to twist the Bible to mean things it wasn't meant to mean. But because the Bible is in everyone's hands, we keep one another safe, right?

So the way that you keep one another, you keep people safe from twisting the Bible is that you give it to everybody and we work on it together, right? Novel interpretations are usually wrong, right?

So if you've come up with, you know, an interesting decision over what John 3.16 means that you can't find anybody that agrees with you on, I mean, I hate to break it to you, but you're probably misunderstanding it, right?

Because actually, Christians have been understanding the Scriptures and applying them to themselves for generations and generations. And in that sense, the Roman Catholic Church had got it wrong, hadn't they, in medieval times?

[21 : 56] It was that they thought that we surrendered to them rather than they were a gift to us, right? So theologians belong to us, we don't belong to them, right? This is Paul, isn't it, in the beginning of Corinthians where he says, you know, people are saying, oh, I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to whoever.

Actually, no, no, it's the other way around, isn't it? They belong to us to help us. They are ministers, they are not majesties, yeah? We don't bow to them, they serve us to help us understand.

And so the way that we don't just all spit off and say different things is that we help one another circle in on the meaning by serving one another, rather than just surrendering to one particular understanding.

It's interesting that the Roman Catholic Church still has a problem with this doctrine of clarity or perspicuity, and says that that's why the Protestant Church is so divided, right?

And you can link this idea of perspicuity to individualism or radical individualism, that basically you give anybody a Bible and say, there you go, you can interpret it yourself, and they go off and wander off.

[23 : 07] But actually, it shouldn't lead to that if we work together on it in communities of faith. Thirdly, when we disagree over a passage of the Bible, we are not saying that the Bible is saying two different things.

It says the one thing, right? One of us, or both of us, must be wrong. This is 1.9, which I didn't put on your handout for some crazy reason, right?

Each passage has only one meaning and not many, right? So, you're not saying that the Bible, people can make the Bible say whatever they want it to say, but that doesn't mean that they're all right, yeah?

It means that lots of people are wrong. And so, if you and I disagree over what a passage means, it's probable that I'm wrong, or you're wrong, or we're both wrong.

It's not that the Bible is saying lots of different things. And actually, the fact that we can come to different conclusions on a matter might be an indicator that that matter is not as important over the things that we might agree on.

[24 : 09] And so, the weight of the Scriptures is significant in that, too. Now, fourthly, while Bible interpretation isn't perfect, God has written in a way that is easy for any culture and any time to understand what he is saying.

And he hasn't abandoned the Christian in this task, but has given us his Spirit to help us. So, this is important, isn't it? This is what Mike was touching on, that the Spirit helps us to understand the Scriptures.

Because actually, often, the problem is not so much just understanding what a text says, but is taking on board and accepting it for ourselves.

One of the reasons that people have such a problem with the Romans 7 stuff that we were looking at this morning is because people find it very difficult to accept that God would want them to battle with sin. That's actually the big deal.

It's not really the interpretation of the passage. And so, that's the thing, isn't it? The Spirit is given to us to help us not only understand the words, but also that we might accept them and internalize them for ourselves.

[25 : 09] And it is in submission to God and his words that we then begin to understand it and apply it to our lives. Okay. Any questions or comments as we pull things to a close?

Yes. Do you think this should change how we read our Bible in terms of should we try and just read it without the loads of other things?

I know that you're not going to understand what your devotion and whatever. I know that you need to help. Yeah. Do you think it's like a challenge to us that we should let the Spirit teach us?

And, you know... That is a brilliant question, Daisy. Thank you. Yeah. Should we affect how we read? So, I think absolutely we should just read the Bible because it's the Bible.

I know some pastors have a problem with study Bibles because the notes are there sort of inside the text of the Bible and it's perhaps a little distracting. And I don't know.

[26 : 17] It depends how your heart and mind works, doesn't it? Whether you read the text in the same way. But there is a sense in which, you know, you're given the Bible and the interpretation. Actually, those are different.

Those are different things, aren't they? So, yeah. I mean, Nathan and I have talked a bit about this. In sermon preparation, how quickly do you turn to a commentary?

You know, how quickly do you go, right, I'm going to read this and try and understand it and get to grips with it myself. And how quickly do you turn to a commentary? I think that varies. I think we should be expecting to be able to understand the Bible.

It's not hidden. It is exposed for you. You should be able to read it and you should be able to understand it. You should be able to read that with your friends and in your small groups and in your families.

Yeah, yeah, definitely. I wonder, Daisy, as well, whether we live at a time, don't we, where there are so many resources that it is overwhelming.

[27 : 17] How do you deal with those? Because I don't want to see what it is real. Yeah.

To just talk about it. But then how do you talk about it? It's not helping to be big or big or big or big or big? Okay. Yes. And how do you decide what they are?

And how do you work out whether a topic is unimportant or important? And all those questions. Yes. So I think we need to submit, I think, in part to the fact that we're not the first people to read the Bible.

So you're not immediately going to know the answers to all those questions. Over time, you will get to know what the scripture emphasizes and doesn't emphasize. I think I hesitated to put that on there because, say, for example, the issue of sexuality, someone might say, oh, well, we just disagree on this.

And therefore, it's not very important. It's not about salvation. But actually, this is one of those things where novel interpretations of the Bible are probably wrong. Because it's only in the last however many years that people have interpreted the Bible to say, oh, no, actually, the Bible is totally fine with same-sex relationships or same-sex sexual relationships.

[28 : 37] And it's not, is it? So that's a novel reading, which is probably wrong, certainly wrong. And so we can't just put that in a category of, oh, we disagree about it.

But I think as you go on in reading the Bible, you should develop a humility about your understanding of it. So that you, you know, the Bible is really clear about what it is to be saved.

But you realize that you are given other Christians in order to help you understand it and to circle in on its meaning and that you should be good at listening to others and working it out. The final part of your question was what about understanding what's important and not important.

Yeah, I think that should be, that becomes clearer, doesn't it? As you read the passages and go, okay, we can't come to an agreement on this.

But we do agree that one of us is wrong. Baptism is a good example of that, right? So lots of my dear friends, lots of the people who are much brighter than me at university and at seminary, believe in baptizing infants.

[29 : 46] And I don't, I disagree with them. But I agree with them and they agree with me that we're not both right. One of us is wrong. And so, yeah, we trust the Lord in that and that actually one day it won't matter.

Yeah. Yes. Obviously, there's lots of translations. Yeah. I was just thinking about the translation, like the message. Yeah. A lot of people find that really helpful.

Yes. Especially when you say we're not all looking at the Bible. Yes. So what do you think about that? Yes. So, interestingly, I read you the Confession 1.7 and 1.9.

1.8 is about translating the Bible. So one of the things that the Reformers do is that they translate the Scriptures into everybody's everyday language, not, you know, so that people can understand it and connect with it.

And so an understanding that it's, you know, that's still God's word for us. So we don't have to read it in Hebrew and Greek. I think something like the message.

[30 : 56] So Bible translation is more complicated than I'm going to be able to explain in a few minutes. But the message is really an interpretation of the Bible rather than the Bible itself, isn't it?

Because it's gone so far from just translating the words. It's gone into translating the meaning. Right. Something like the NIV is more like a sort of dynamic equivalent where it's trying to stay as close to the words as possible, but also recognizing that doesn't always read very well.

And so it gives a sort of equivalent of it in English in a way that is as faithful as it can be. The ESV would have a slightly different philosophy where it doesn't really care too much whether you sound a bit odd when you read it out loud, because the word order is a bit funny because it's trying to stay more close by the Greek and the Hebrew than the other.

So they say, I don't think they always keep their promise, but they do say that they try and translate the Greek words the same way in passages. But that doesn't always scan. But that's that's the sort of pledge. So I think as a as a as a Christian, I'm not sometimes reading the message can be really helpful to me.

Devotion, it can be really helpful to me. But I probably need to read the message a bit like I read the bottom bits of a study Bible when I read. Actually, this is someone explaining it to me and they might have got the sense of it wrong.

[32:18] And so I want to I wouldn't want that to be my the only thing that I read. But just like a study Bible can be really helpful or a devotional commentary can be really helpful. The message can be really, really helpful.

And then that's why I think the people who are teaching you the scriptures need to at least be able to engage with the original languages in such a way that they can access material on it so that you know that you're being taught is from the original as far as possible.

Yeah. Does that help? Any other questions? The thing that you should all do after this evening is take one of those good news Gospels that we've got and you should just give it out.

Right. Because this is basically the conviction is that people can read the Bible and understand how to be saved. Right. And so that's why you've got Bibles to give away. You should take them and give them away.

Let me pray and we'll close that way. Right. Father, we thank you so much that you've not set the way of salvation in some obscure way that we can't understand or access, but that you've given it to us in your word so that we can read it and understand it.

[33:39] And even small children can hear it, understand it and put their faith and trust in you. We want to pray that you would make us Bible readers. We love to engage with you in your word and listen to what you say.

We thank you that we live at a time where we have the Bible in our own language, in our hands, on our phones, on the tablets, read to us in audio as well. Lord, we pray that we might make the best use of all of these things, that we might understand you.

We might think your thoughts after you. We might become more like the Lord Jesus. And help us, we pray, at a time where people love to twist your word to say whatever they want it to say. Help us, we pray, to be honest and to be clear that you are able to communicate what you want to say, if only we would listen.

Please, Lord, give us submissive hearts to you. Be at work in us by your spirit for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.