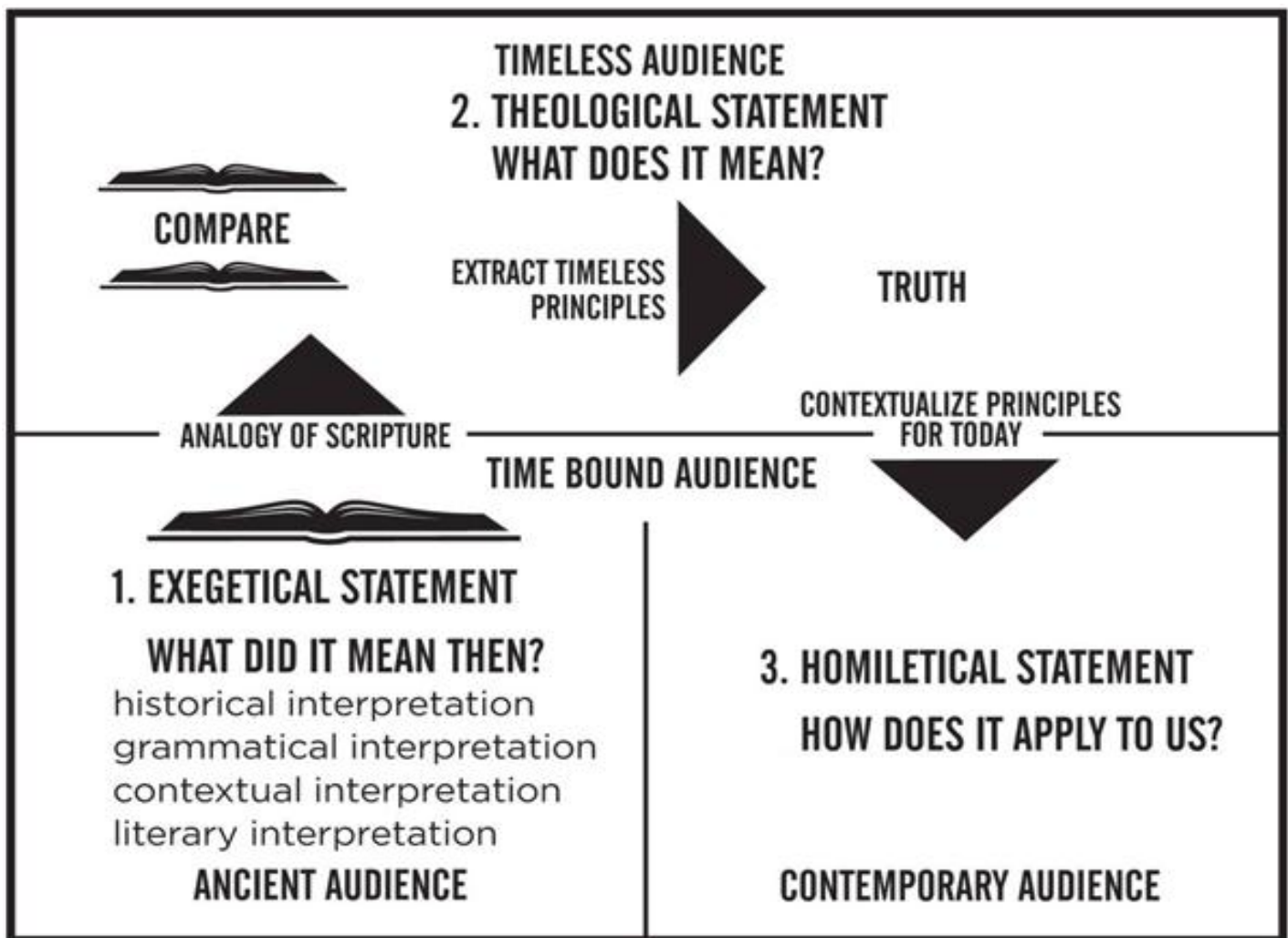


Bible Interpretation in a Nutshell

By C. Michael Patton (From www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog)

The following is a practical guide to biblical interpretation following a three step process that I have used for years. The Bible is two-thousand years old and often seems very archaic. This makes it hard to know how it applies to us. It can be very frustrating as all Christians are encouraged to read their Bible daily but often are at a loss as to how to understand it and apply the message to their own lives. This process has served me well and I believe it is representative of the best way to interpret the ancient word of God and apply it to today. I hope that it will alleviate some of the “Bible interpretation anxiety” that is out there, allowing the Bible to become real and relevant to your life.



Notice the three sections of the chart. There are three audiences that everyone needs to recognize in the process of interpreting the Bible. In the bottom left, you have the “ancient audience.” This represents the original audience and the original author. The top portion represents the “timeless audience” which transcends the time and the culture of the original situation. It is that which applies to all people of all places of all times, without regard to cultural and historical issues. Finally, we have the “contemporary audience” in the bottom right. This

represents the audience of today. Here we will find application of the Bible with regard to our time, culture, and circumstances.

In Biblical interpretation, it is of extreme importance that one goes in the order of the chart. The goal is to find out what the Bible *meant*, what it *means*, and how it *applies* to us. So many people start with the third step and fail miserably in understanding God's word. Others start with step number two, attempting to force their own theology on the text. It is important that all steps are covered to ensure interpretive fidelity.

Step one: Exegetical Statement

What did it mean then?

The first step is the most important. Here the goal is to ascertain the original intent of the writing. It is very important that one enters into the world of the author and the audience. Sometimes this will be easy, sometimes it will be very difficult, requiring quite a bit of study.

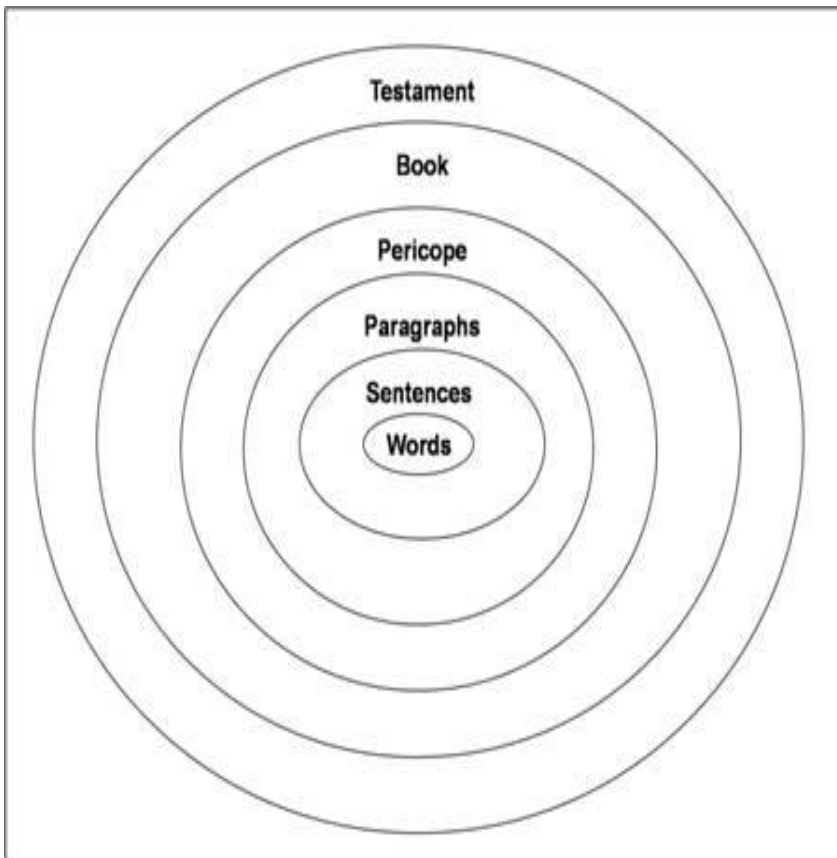
Here are the different issues that you must consider:

Historical issues: There will be historical circumstances that will aid in your understanding of the text. Here, you will ask questions of "occasion." Who is the original author? Who is the original audience? What purpose did the writing have? When Moses wrote the Pentateuch, what was his occasion or purpose? Was it to give an exhaustive history of the world to everyone or to prepare the Israelite religious community to exist in a theocratic society under Yahweh? When Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians, what was his purpose? Knowing that in 2 Corinthians he was writing to defend his apostleship as other false apostles were opposing him is essential to understanding every verse. As well, what was Paul's disposition toward the Galatians when he wrote to them? Was it to commend, condemn, or correct? The occasion will determine so much of our understanding.

Grammatical issues: It is important to understand that the Bible was written in a different language. The New Testament was written in Greek. Not only that, but it was a particular kind of Greek called "Koine." Most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew (small portions in Aramaic). Naturally, other languages will have characteristics that communicate well in the original tongue but can get lost in translation. Greek, for example, works off inflections (word endings) which determine their part of speech. Word placement can add emphasis. These types of things are often hard to translate. I am not saying that everyone needs to be a Greek and a Hebrew scholar to understand the Bible, only that there are grammatical issues that can nuance our understanding of the passage. A good commentary will normally bring these to recognition.

Contextual issues: Every book was written for a purpose. The smallest component of a writing is a letter. We don't take each letter in isolation, but understand that with a group of letters, it makes a word. But we don't take the word in isolation, understanding that a group of words makes a sentence. And we don't take sentences in isolation, understanding that a group of sentences makes a paragraph. But we don't stop there. Each paragraph either represents or is a part of a larger whole that we call a "pericope." The pericope is the basic argument or story that is being told. The story of David and Goliath is a pericope of many paragraphs. As well, Christ's parables make up individual pericopes. Finally, the pericopes are smaller parts of the entire book. The purpose of the book will shape the context in which each pericope should be interpreted.

Here is how it looks:



Literary issues: We must remember that there is no such thing as a type of literature called “Bible” or “Scripture.” The Bible is made up of many books from many different types of literature called “genres.” Just like in your everyday life, you encounter many genres and know almost instinctively that they follow different rules of understanding. You have fiction novels, newspaper editorials, commercials, television dramas, academic textbooks, and tickers at the bottom of the news stations. All of these need to be understood and interpreted according to the rules of the genre. In the Bible, we have narratives, histories, parables, apocalyptic prophecies, personal letters, public letters, songs, proverbs, and many others. Each of these are to be interpreted according to the rules of the genre. Just because they are in the Bible does not mean that the rules change. For example, a proverb is a common type of literature that is found in the Bible, but also in many other cultures. A proverb is a statement of general truth or wisdom that does not necessarily apply in every situation. A proverb is not a promise. If it is in the Bible, it is still not a promise. As well, theological histories are just that—
theological. Being in the Bible does not turn it into a technically precise and exhaustive history that is supposed to answer every question that we have. We must determine the type of literature we are dealing with if we are to understand it.

Book	Genre	Purpose
Genesis	Narrative/History	Theological history of Israel
Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	Narrative and Law/Legal	Theological history of Israel
Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther	Narrative/History	Theological history of Israel
Psalms	Poetry/Songs	Emotional praises and cries to God
Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs	Wisdom	Wise living
Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi	Prophecy and Apocalyptic	Call Israel to repentance
Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts	Narrative	Theological history of Christ
Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude	Epistle/Letters, personal and public	Didactic and pastoral letters written to explain theological teaching for the Church
Revelation	Apocalyptic	Message of hope for the church

Step two: Theological Statement

What does it mean for all people of all places of all times?

Here is where you are moving from what *was* being said to what *is always* being said; from *was* being taught to what *is always* being taught; from what the (original) author *was* saying to his audience to what the Author (God) *is always* saying to all people. The audience here is timeless and universal. You are extracting the timeless principles for all people, of all places, of all times.

Principle: A general truth that that applies universally. A doctrine. A fundamental law. The underlying reality. The essence of the action. The reason for the norm.

Sometimes it is very easy to find the principle as there is no cultural baggage to extract or interpret. Other times it can be very difficult. As well, there are not always principles to universalize. More often than not, the text will only be communicating what was done without any mandate to follow the example. An easy illustration of this is when Paul told Timothy to bring him his cloak (coat) he left in Troas ([2 Tim 4:13](#)). This is not to be universalized in some way where Christians are supposed to be bringing people coats, clothes, or anything else to warm themselves with. It is simply what Paul needed in his time and we must allow it to be limited to such. Therefore, you much distinguish between what is *prescribed* and what is merely *described*.

On the other hand, we also have material that is already in its principlized form. For example, when the author of Hebrews says that Jesus Christ has said that “he will never leave you or forsake you” ([Heb. 13:5](#)), in the context, this is already a principle. In other words, there is no reason to think that he is only saying this to the recipients of the book in the sixties, but there is every reason to believe that this refers to all Christians of all times. We must simply ask if the passage applies universally or locally.

One way to determine this is to follow the “analogy of Scripture” as you can see on the original chart. Here you are to ask if the Bible, in other places, confirms, repeals, or denies the principle or action. For example, much of the Law in the Old Testament does not find any application to us today, either theologically or in practice. Why? Because Christ fulfilled the law in many ways. The New Testament explicitly tells us that we are not under the law. Therefore, when it comes to animal sacrifices, we no longer need to practice this in any way. Christ’s sacrifice fulfilled this law.

At other times, principles will not be overshadowed by a fulfillment and even, often be confirmed in multiple places elsewhere. This lets us know that that the principle is universal and not limited to a particular moment in redemptive history. For example, the command not to commit adultery is never repealed and is confirmed in many other places. This is the analogy of Scripture.

Once a solid interpretation has been made, one must look for reinforcement for the principle in other places. These places should never be thought of as more authoritative than Scripture itself, but as an interpretive aid in responsibly coming to a conclusion. Here are the four places to look:

1. Reason: Is the interpretation reasonable? Does it make sense? I am not talking here in a subjective sense, but in a very formal sense. If your interpretation directly conflicts with other known information then the filter of reason will drive you back to Scripture to reassess your conclusion. Truth cannot contradict itself. The filter of reason will provide a valuable avenue of assessment concerning your interpretation.

2. Tradition: What do others say about it? Here, you will be dipping into the well of the interpretive community asking for help. If we believe that the Holy Spirit is in all Christians, we hope to find aid from the advice of the Spirit led community. Not only are you to look to contemporary scholars and theologians, but also to the history of the Church. What has the church said about this passage/issue throughout time. If you come to a different conclusion than the historic body of Christ, it is a good sign that you have taken a wrong interpretive turn somewhere. Though this is not always the case.

3. Experience: Don’t be surprised here. Albeit fallible, our experience is a very important interpretive guide. If your interpretation militates against your experience, this *could* be a sign that your interpretation is wrong. For example, when we interpret Christ in the upper room discourse concerning prayer “in his name,” we could get the idea that we can ask for *anything* in his name and expect to receive it. “Please give me a new 2010 Camaro, in Jesus’ name.” “Please heal my mother, in Jesus’ name.” “Please remove this depression, in Jesus’ name.” Been there done that. We all have. When the magic formula does not work in our experience, we return to the Scripture to search for other interpretive options. As well, we should. God expects and requires the analogy of experience in our interpretation of Scripture. The Bible is impossible to understand without an assumption of experience. While experience can lead us wrong and we don’t believe that it can contradict rightly interpreted Scripture, it can help us to figure out how to rightly interpret Scripture.

4. *Emotion*: Like with experience, we must be very careful here. Our emotions can be extremely important and also extremely misleading. First, they are important by analogy. When we read about God's love, in order for us to understand this love, we are expected to have had some degree of the emotion ourselves. For us to know what "the peace that passes understanding" is, we have to have experienced some sort of peace in our lives. If we have not, our understanding is going to be two-dimensional. Second, our emotions can direct us to the right understanding. We are told that the Holy Spirit convicts us of the truth. This internal conviction must be a valid source of information. If we feel that an interpretation of a passage is wrong because it does not seem to be emotionally satisfying, this *could* be an indication that it is indeed wrong. Yet, we must be careful here as our emotions are guided by many other sinful elements that can mislead us to the wrong interpretation as well. Nevertheless, it is a part of the theological process to recognize the part our emotions play in our understanding of the Scripture, both good and bad. If we deny them and act as if they have no part to play, we are only fooling ourselves.

Extraction of the Principles

Once your interpretation has been filtered through these things and affirmed, the cultural baggage must be completely extracted. Again, this involves a separation of the principles from the way in which these principles are applied in various contexts. The danger of skipping step two is tremendous. Skipping this step can make the Bible irrelevant as people fail to realize that there were often cultural issues that determine the application of the principle. These cultural issues are not timeless and will find little relevance in other places. For example, Paul tells the Romans to "greet each other with a holy kiss." While the principle of showing affection transcends culture, if you don't extract that principle and apply it properly in your context, you might find yourself in a heap of trouble as you attempt to kiss someone who will take it the wrong way. Interpretation: the act of greeting people with a kiss will not be an acceptable way of showing affection in some cultures. You can just shake my hand. You cannot skip step two.

Another example: Paul speaks of the necessity of women's head coverings to the Corinthians. What we must ask ourselves is whether or not women wearing head coverings is an eternal requirement of God or if there is some underlying principle that it represents. When I was at church last week, most of the women there were not wearing hats or any sort of covering at all. Does this mean that the women of this church do not believe or submit to the Scriptures? Doing a historical study of this issue reveals that head coverings, in this culture (as well as many today), probably represents both a women's submission to their husbands and their sexual modesty. In that culture, a woman's hair was a representative and revelation of her beauty. Failing to wear a head covering was sexually provocative *in this culture*. This has implications toward the marital bonds and fidelity. However, it is modesty and fidelity that is at issue, not simply the wearing of a hat. In this case, extracting the timeless principle means that the cultural baggage of expression—the hat—gets discarded so that the real issue can come into focus.

We must do our best to distinguish that which is time-bound from that which is timeless. Then, and only then, are we prepared for step three.

Step three: Homeletical Statement

How does it apply to me?

Finally, we are ready to apply the Scriptures to the 21st century. Having performed the first two steps, we now have all that is needed to contextualize the principles into our own situation. Having worked the passage down to its basic principles, we must reengage the principles, properly applying our own culture and context.

For example, continuing with the head covering illustration, we must take the basic timeless principle and apply it to ourselves. In this case, here in 21st century Norman, Oklahoma, head coverings or hats have no relevance toward modesty. The way to be sexually promiscuous today would involve many things including the length of skirts and the height of tops. The principle of modesty still applies, just in other ways.

Again, this only applies to the materials that have made it through the process in tact. Historical details, incidentals, and descriptive material will never find *this type* of immediate and practical application. Like with so much of the Scripture, the primary application will be to *believe* it. I believe that God delivered the Israelites from bondage. It is a historical event that expresses God's faithfulness to his promises. Broadly speaking, I can use this as an *illustrative* of God's faithfulness to his promises. But there is no reason for me to extract a timeless principle and say that God will deliver all people from all their pain in this life and then apply it to my immediate situation saying God will deliver me from these difficulties that I am going through. It is only the timeless principles that qualify for specific timely application.

God has promised a lot of things. God has not promised a lot of things. So many times I want to read into the Scriptures promises that he has never made. I remember my mother did this before my sister Angie died. She read one of the Psalms about God's deliverance and directly applied it to Angie's depression and her physical deliverance. It destroyed her when Angie died. She thought God had failed her.

It is so important for us to follow this process properly and faithfully. For if we properly interpret the Scriptures consistently, we will be less prone toward discouragement, disillusionment, and distancing ourselves from God. The Bible is so rich and full of application and information, but is not a magic book or a wax nose. It means what it means. Proper biblical interpretation through following the steps outlined above will serve us well.

That is biblical interpretation in a nutshell.