

Some Theological Principles for the Interpretation of the Holy Scriptures

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INTRODUCTION

This statement aims to summarise some of the most important theological principles used in the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. It does not deal with the various linguistic, grammatical, literary and historical principles and techniques used in their proper interpretation, but rather touches on those theological principles which need to be employed with the Scriptures, because they we confess the inspired word of God. I presuppose the common understanding and acceptance of the Scriptures as the word of God which is set out in the 'Theses on Principles Governing Church Fellowship' (A1), the 'Theses on Scripture and Inspiration' (A8), and the 'Theses of Agreement and Inerrancy' (B1). This is summarised as follows in the Document of Union of the Lutheran Church of Australia:

We . . . accept without reservation the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, as a whole and in all their parts, as the divinely inspired, written, and inerrant word of God, and as the only infallible source and norm for all matters of faith, doctrine, and life.

THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES FOR SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

1. The Function of the Gospel in the Interpretation of Scripture

a. Since our Lord Jesus fulfils the Old Testament as the word enfleshed for us, we are guided by his teaching and his interpretation of the Old Testament in our interpretation of Scripture

- (1) Following the example of Christ, our interpretation of Scripture is basically determined by the will of God revealed in the whole of Scripture.
- (2) The word of God, which is fully embodied in Jesus Christ, reveals his will to us as law and gospel.
- (3) While Christ preaches the law most fully and radically he and his apostles also proclaim the gospel as God's ultimate word to us.
- (4) We therefore teach both law and gospel and yet distinguished between them in our interpretation of Scripture and its contents.

b. Since the gospel, rather than the law, is God's ultimate word to us, we distinguish between law and gospel in our interpretation of Scripture.

- (1) While the law tells us what God requires of us, and accuses us of failure to do his will, the gospel tells what Christ has accomplished for us and announces that God the Father pardons and accepts us for Christ's sake and in him.
- (2) The law, which is always subordinate to the gospel, must never be confused with the gospel as the powerful, effective message of salvation. It must, however, be always understood as it functions in relation to the gospel and in contrast with it.
- (3) While the message of the gospel provides the basis and motivation for our obedience to God, it is, properly speaking, God's promise to us.
- (4) The whole of Scripture, which addresses us as both law and gospel, is interpreted in the light of the gospel. No application of a passage can therefore ignore the gospel or contradict it.

c. Since the law is an organic and inseparable part of God's word to us, we do not separate the work of the gospel from the work of the law in our interpretation of Scripture.

- (1) The gospel as the divine word of pardon cannot be divorced from the law as the word of accusation and condemnation for sin.
- (2) The law can function and be understood rightly only in relationship to the gospel as:
 - (a) God's ordinance for the operation and preservation of creation before the hearing of the gospel;
 - (b) God's word of accusation and judgment on human sin which points us to our need for Christ and forgiveness through faith in him;
 - (c) God's word of guidance and instruction in godly living for those who have heard the gospel and are children of God.
- (3) The proclamation of judgment and salvation, already found in the Old Testament, culminates in Christ's preaching. We do not therefore separate the Old Testament as law from the New Testament as gospel but discover law and gospel in both testaments.
- (4) While law and gospel can be distinguished formally as demand and promise, any passage may function existentially as either law or gospel depending on the spiritual state and conscience of the reader.

d. Although justification by grace through faith is the central doctrine of scripture, that doctrine does not automatically determine the sense of every passage.

- (1) The meaning of any passage is drawn from the passage itself and other related passages.
- (2) A particular teaching is not deduced from the doctrine of justification in isolation but is derived from clear statements in the Scriptures and is understood in the light of all other doctrines.

2. The Interpretation of Scripture by Scripture

- a. Since the whole of Scripture is the word of God, Scripture is used to interpret Scripture.
 - (1) A particular passage is understood in relation to all other pertinent passages and to Scripture as a whole.
 - (2) While some parts of Scripture relate more directly to Christ and the gospel, no part of Scripture may be played off against another on the ground that it is less inspired and less authentically the voice of the Holy Spirit.
 - (3) A difficult or obscure passage is interpreted in the light of clear passages, not vice versa.
 - (4) The immediate sense of a passage in its original social context and literary setting is related to its fuller sense (*sensus plenior*) in the light of its final canonical location and its reinterpretation by later biblical authors under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
 - (5) The fuller canonical interpretation of a text is not determined allegorically but rather grammatically, according to its literary genre.
 - (6) No teaching of the church is based on an isolated text, but on clear doctrinal passages and on all the evidence of Scripture taken together.
- b. The two Testaments are related historically and theologically to each other.
 - (1) Since the Old Testament foreshadows the New, the New Testament is not interpreted apart from its historical grounding in Israel and Israel's relationship with the Old Testament.
 - (2) Since the Old Testament is fulfilled in Christ, it is interpreted generally in the light of his life and teaching.
 - (a) The history of God's judgment and redemption of Israel culminates in the death and resurrection of Jesus.
 - (b) Not only are all God's promises to Israel fulfilled in Christ, but through Christ the Gentiles are also made heirs of those promises.
 - (c) Since the work of God with Israel foreshadows and prepares for Christ's coming, God's dealings with Israel are to be understood typologically in relation to Christ and the Church.

- (d) Every passage is not, however, taken as referring directly and unequivocally to him.
- (e) The historicity of the text and the limited perception of the writer and his audience are respected.
- (f) The full range of exegetical and theological options as given in the New Testament are used to relate the content of a text to Christ.

3. The Interpretation of Divine Commands

- a. Since Christ has come to fulfill the law (Matt 5:17; Rom 10:4; cf Matt 3:15), the commandments of God as given in the Old Testament are interpreted in the light of Christ's teaching and his fulfillment of them.
 - (1) All commandments are understood in the light of the twofold command to love God and the neighbour (Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37).
 - (2) Since Jesus is the perfect human being, who has fulfilled the whole moral law for us, we are righteous in him and are called to do good works through him.
 - (3) Since Jesus is our high priest, who has fulfilled the whole ceremonial law for us, we are holy in him and are called to do priestly service with him.
 - (4) Since Jesus is the Messiah, who has fulfilled the civil law by establishing God's kingdom on earth, we have royal status in him and are called to reign with him in our service to the world.
 - (5) Christ, who has fulfilled all God's law for us in his life, death and resurrection, fulfils that law through us by virtue of our union with him.
 - (6) What was fulfilled in him will not be completely evident to the world nor fully realised by us until the last day.
 - (7) We do not then interpret the divine commands in a utopian or perfectionistic way, but rather Christologically and eschatologically.
- b. Even though all the commandments in the Holy Scriptures are equally inspired, they are not all equally authoritative, as is shown by Paul's discussion on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7.
 - (1) The commandments of Paul carried more weight than the Christian teachers in Corinth, even though both claimed to be inspired by the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 7:40).
 - (2) Likewise the commands of the Lord carried more weight than those of his apostle, who could demand obedience only when he himself had a command from the Lord.
 - (3) Any command from the Lord is therefore most authoritative for the church and every Christian.

- (4) In determining the weight of a particular apostolic command we then establish by what authority the writer is speaking in that passage.
 - (a) It could be common sense, as with Paul's advice to Timothy to drink wine in I Tim 5:16.
 - (b) It could be natural law, as with Paul's argument about men's hair in I Cor 11:14.
 - (c) It could be common ecclesiastical custom, as with Paul's point about women's hairdos in I Cor 11:16.
 - (d) It could be theological reasoning based on the Old Testament and the gospel, as with Paul's argument against consorting with prostitutes in I Cor 6:12-20.
 - (e) It could be Christ's command, as with Paul's report on the Lord's supper in I Cor 11:23-25.
- c. The various commandments in the Holy Scriptures are not all equally applicable to the Christian congregation.
 - (1) The difficulty in interpreting the commands in Scripture is not usually caused by disagreement on their sense, but rather by uncertainty about their applicability in a given situation.
 - (2) While some commands apply only to a specific person in a given situation, others are generally applicable. Hence the command of Jesus in Matt 9:6 applies only to the lame man, but his command to love one another in John 13:34 applies to all Christians everywhere.
 - (3) As a general rule we need to ascertain the recipients, circumstances, purpose and extent of the command, before we can determine its present applicability.
- d. The commands of our Lord for the institution and arrangement of divine worship are absolutely authoritative and universally applicable within the church.
 - (1) These commands have to do with the means of grace, their ordered administration, and their proper use within the church.
 - (2) They not only institute divine worship, but empower it, so that it operates sacramentally and sacrificially according to God's will. Hence, cleansing from sin is not just effected by the water of baptism, but also by the word of Christ which instituted it (Eph 5:26).
 - (3) Where these foundational commands are not observed, worship degenerates into mere human activity and the practice of idolatry.
 - (4) Since they have to do with the performance of the gospel through word and sacrament, they have been called 'gospel imperatives'.
 - (5) Since these commands of our Lord create and uphold the church as a divine holy community, they are always authoritative and generally applicable to all churches in all cultural settings until the close of the age.

- (6) They therefore belong to a different category from the ethical and practical directives of our Lord, which are interpreted according to the distinction between law and gospel.

4. The Role of Precedent in Interpretation.

- a. Wherever possible, doctrine and practice are established by the clear word of God.
- b. Biblical precedent, whether dominical or apostolic, cannot in itself establish doctrine, determine church order, and prescribe moral practice.
- c. Precedent may be used to clarify a passage and to confirm a particular interpretation of it.
- d. Where we have no clear word of God about a matter, we may argue from precedent and use it to determine the best possible options for teaching and practice.
 - (1) If such an argument seeks to establish a point of doctrine, it must agree with what is clearly revealed and be consistent with the gospel.
 - (2) If such an argument seeks to establish a matter of church order, it must serve the function of word and sacrament in creating, upholding and extending the church.
 - (3) If such an argument seeks to establish a moral teaching, it must be confirmed by clearly enunciated biblical principles which relate to the subject in some way.
- e. Where no clear prohibitions or commands are given, precedent can be used to establish whether something is permissible or desirable. Such a judgment, however, has the status of an *adiaphoron*.

5. The Importance of Liturgical Context in Interpretation

- a. The books of the Old and New Testament were canonised for reading and teaching in the divine liturgy of the church.
- b. The church thereby acknowledged that, since these writings contained the prophetic and apostolic word of God, they did not just address their original audience in its particular historical setting, but spoke to the church of all times and in all places.
- c. The proper setting for the canonical Scriptures is therefore the corporate worship of the church, for the same Triune God who founded divine worship and the liturgical community by his word, continues to address and to deal graciously with his people through that word.
- d. The Holy Scriptures are applied and interpreted properly when they are used by the people of God in the following ways:
 - (1) by the church when it determines from them how to arrange its worship and how to worship the Triune God;

- (2) by the congregation when it hears and heeds the word of God spoken to it in the readings from Holy Scripture;
 - (3) by the pastors when they proclaim that word effectually as law and gospel to the assembled congregation and when they either warn or comfort the saints personally in their pastoral care of them;
 - (4) by the people of God as they meditate on it and let it shape their faith and life;
 - (5) by the teachers of the church as they study it to determine the full counsel of God for his people and his whole creation.
- e. The Scriptures are therefore applied correctly when they are used to show how the same Lord Jesus who taught and healed the people of Israel continues to teach and heal his people through the means of grace in the worship of the church (Acts 1:1, 2).

6. The Influence of Culture in Interpretation

- a. In our interpretation of Scripture we can never arrive at a culturally unconditioned form of the gospel.
 - (1) Christ became a human being in a Jewish cultural and historical setting, so that he could use that culture to communicate himself to all people in their particular cultural settings.
 - (2) The interpretation and application of the Scriptures always involves their translation from one culture to another.
- b. In our interpretation of Scripture we need to discern the attitude of God to the culture of the people whom he addressed in that word.
 - (1) In God's eyes, all cultures are a mixture of good and evil, morally and spiritually.
 - (2) In his word God criticises and rejects what is contrary to his will.
 - (3) In it he also approves and accepts what is consistent with his will.
- c. In our interpretation of Scripture, we distinguish the message of the gospel from its expression in a particular culture.
 - (1) The inspired writers of the Scriptures used the culture of their hearers to present their message critically and relevantly to them.
 - (2) When they wished to indicate that their message did not just apply to that culture and time, they usually appealed to divine authority.
 - (3) While the culture of their hearers did often determine the topic, language and form of their proclamation and teaching, it did not determine their message which was regarded as trans-cultural and universal.
 - (4) Thus, when Paul gave directives to Christian masters and slaves on their treatment of each other, he did not necessarily thereby either reject or

sanction slavery as a social institution, but rather spelled out the relevance of the gospel to the people within it.

- d. As we interpret the Holy Scriptures, they seek to expose and correct our own cultural heritage.
 - (1) We bring our own cultural assumptions and prejudices to bear on the Holy Scriptures as we attempt to understand and interpret them. These prejudices indeed often make us question and even wrongly reject some aspects of biblical teaching as culturally conditioned and irrelevant to us.
 - (2) Our own culturally conditioned misconceptions and modes of behaviour need to be subjected to the scrutiny of God's word and corrected by it.