

Interpreting Scripture Today: A Mennonite Brethren Model and Method

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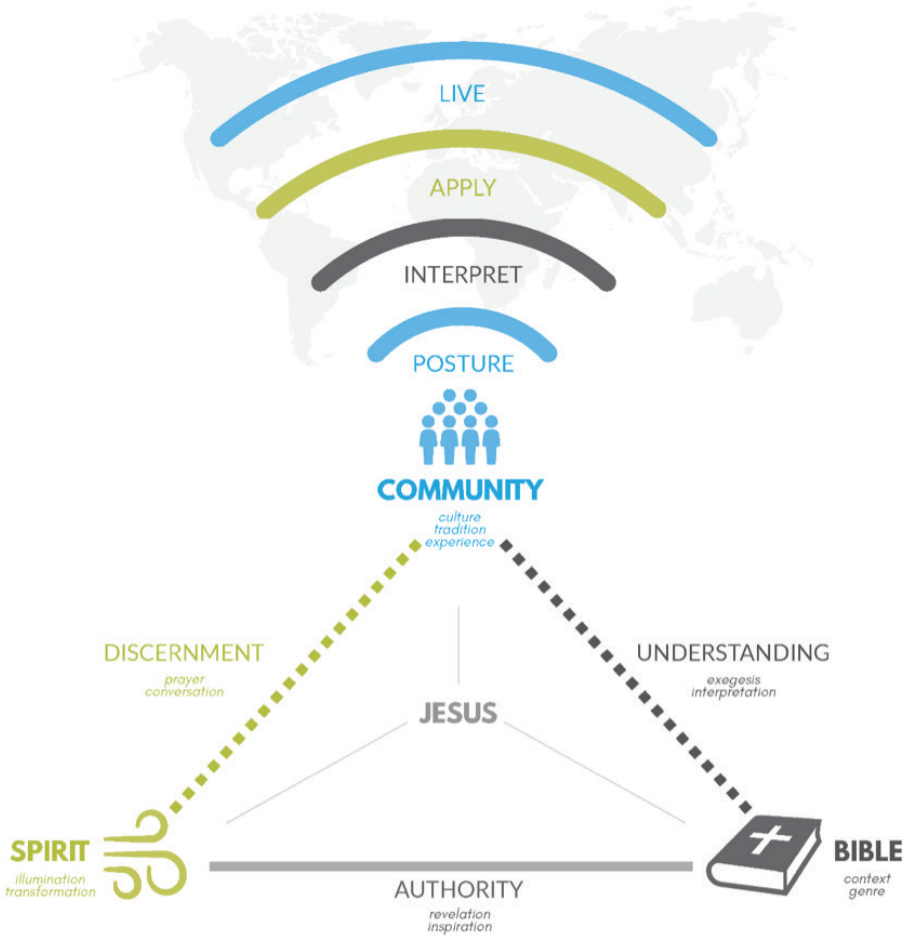
How do we interpret the Bible well today? This was the key question at the 2019 Equip Study Conference of the Mennonite Brethren churches in Canada held in October in Waterloo, Ontario. How does our confessional belief in “the Bible as the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for faith and practice”¹ play out in life and ministry?

The interpretive process is not complete until we have done something about what we have read and heard.

The Interpretive Model and Method (affirmed by the National Faith and Life Team and presented at the Study Conference) upholds the Mennonite Brethren commitment to live under the authority of Jesus Christ as made known to us in the Scriptures and to follow him as his disciples in all of life. The Confession of Faith highlights three intertwined elements at work when we as Mennonite Brethren read the Scriptures—the Bible, the Spirit, and the Community. “We believe that the entire Bible was inspired by God through the Holy Spirit . . .

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FOLLOWING JESUS



who guides the community of faith in the interpretation of Scripture.”² These three elements taken together form the foundation for interpreting, applying, and living out Scripture today.

THE INTERPRETIVE MODEL

A simple visual representation of the connections between these three elements illustrates what is involved in interpreting Scripture. Flowing out of this model is a method of engaging in biblical interpretation consistent with Mennonite Brethren teaching and practice.

BIBLE, SPIRIT, AND COMMUNITY

The Bible, as the written Word of God, bears witness to and reveals Jesus Christ, the Living Word, who brings continuity and clarity to both the Old and New Testaments.³ The Living Word is identified as the source of light and life in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . In him was **life**, and the life was the **light** of all people” (John 1:1, 4).⁴ These two images are also a helpful description of the nature of the written Word. As **light**, the Bible reveals and witnesses to God’s actions and words in history with the people of Israel, and ultimately reveals and witnesses to the revelation of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Spirit. The Psalmist describes Scripture’s revealing nature as “a lamp for my feet and a light on my path” and as a light that “gives understanding” (119:105, 130). Paul describes all of Scripture as “God-breathed” (2 Tim 3:16), which alludes to God’s Spirit as the breath of **life** (Gen 2:7; Job 33:4). Jesus said to his disciples, “It is the Spirit that gives life . . . the words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and life” (John 6:63). The Scriptures are the words through which God speaks and offers life to those who put their faith in Jesus. (The authority of the Bible in the life of the follower in Christ is discussed below).

The Spirit of Christ is the “Spirit of revelation and wisdom” (Eph 1:17) who inspired (God-breathed) human authors as they wrote (2 Pet 1:21), which means the Bible is unlike any other book. The authority of the Scriptures is directly tied to the Spirit as the source of God’s revelation as well as his active involvement at every stage: from the Bible’s formation to its reception by readers and its ongoing impact in people’s lives. It is the Spirit who illuminates the interpretation and application of Scripture, guiding the community as it listens to and discerns God’s Word as “living and active” (Heb 4:12) in its midst. It is through the Scriptures that the Spirit transforms the people of God into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18).

The community of faith, the church, approaches the Bible from within its own culture, experience, and situation to hear God speak into its life as

it seeks to follow Jesus. The contemporary community identifies with the story of God's people found in the Scriptures—Israel in the Old Testament, and the disciples of Jesus and the early church in the New. The words that God spoke through the writers of Scripture to these original hearers are also the words that the church needs to hear today as God continues to address his people through his Spirit. The community is the interpretive context where understanding the meaning of Scripture and discerning its application to life take place.

How do these three elements work together? How does the Spirit of Christ, who is present within the community, illuminate the interpretation of the Scriptures, guide the discernment process, and transform people's hearts and actions through the Word? Three connections describe the dynamic relationship between the elements of the model: Authority, Understanding, and Discernment.

AUTHORITY, UNDERSTANDING, DISCERNMENT

The authority of the Bible must be set within the context of God's ultimate authority.⁵ The Bible's *inherent* authority reflects its Spirit-inspired revelation of the true living Triune God. The Bible is infallible because God is true and trustworthy. At the same time, the Bible's authority is also *functional* in that it "is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16). The written Word is continually used by the Spirit of God to speak and accomplish his purpose of transforming God's people into the image of the Living Word. The authority of Scripture is *affirmed* by the community, not just in doctrinal statements, but through its "willingness to live according to the teachings of the Word of God."⁶

The community comes to the Scriptures with the interpretive goal of listening and *understanding* its meaning (Matt 13:23). Exegesis describes the task of explaining the meaning of the biblical text in its original context: in other words, what the author intended to communicate to the original audience.⁷ This task calls for a close reading of the biblical text that enables contemporary readers to bridge the distance of language and culture that are encountered when reading texts addressed to people in another location and time. Good interpretive practices aim at being able to hear clearly what God was saying to the original hearers. Understanding what the Bible says, however, does not emerge from careful exegesis alone; it also involves the illumination of the Scriptures by God's Spirit and through the experience of faithful obedience in life.

Understanding what the Bible says still requires *discerning* how the meaning of the biblical texts relates to our contemporary situation and life. How do we bridge the chasm between the world of the Bible and our own context to hear the biblical message addressed to us?⁸ Discernment

takes place within the community where the Spirit of wisdom is present, where leaders facilitate a process of prayer and conversation so all can participate, and where various interpretive options are carefully weighed (1 Cor 14:29, 31). Discernment involves a conceptual application of the biblical message that leads to living out of this message as a community. The work of the Spirit in discernment is always consistent with what God is saying by his Spirit through the meaning of the Scriptures.

Of course, Bible, Spirit, and community cannot be as sharply separated as the diagram of the Interpretive Model may suggest. An intentional engagement with all three elements is necessary because attention to only one or two elements will create an imbalance in the interpretive process that will diminish the dynamic relationship between them. For example, a focus on community and Bible may emphasize authority and understanding, which might lead to the development of biblical knowledge that is not adequately applied or lived out within the community. On the other hand, a focus on the Spirit and community may emphasize listening to the Spirit in ways that disconnect discernment of what the Spirit is saying from the Scriptures.

THE INTERPRETIVE METHOD

Method refers to a way of doing something, and so the Interpretive Method describes what is involved when one engages in the practice of interpretation. The Interpretive Method seeks to highlight four steps along a pathway (Posture, Interpret, Apply, Live) that enable understanding and discernment of the meaning of the Scriptures. The image of a “Wi-Fi signal” seeks to portray movement in a direction without defining rigid distinct stages in the process. The Interpretive Method could also be visualized as an ongoing “hermeneutical circle” that begins with the community approaching the Bible, seeking understanding, followed by discerning how to live out Scripture’s message in the community.

POSTURE — HOW DO WE APPROACH THE BIBLE?

Posture calls for a growing self-awareness that we read the Bible out of who we are—both individually and collectively. As followers of Christ, we cannot read the Bible well unless we position ourselves before the Scriptures as disciples of Jesus. Acknowledging how our approach to the Bible has been influenced by our culture, history, traditions, experiences, and current situation enables us to reflect on how our assumptions, questions and expectations shape our reading of the Bible. We approach the Bible as disciples of Jesus who bring our whole lives to our reading of Scripture. Worship and prayer together nurture a listening stance that fosters a posture of dependence upon God’s Spirit.

Key questions to ask ourselves as we approach the Bible:

- How do we adopt a posture of receptivity to God speaking through Scripture?
- How do our own situations and experiences provide a lens for reading the Bible?
- How do our cultures, traditions, and theological beliefs shape our perspectives and expectations regarding what the Bible says?

INTERPRET — WHAT IS THE BIBLE’S MEANING?

To *interpret* is to ask the question of meaning: what did the biblical authors intend to communicate to their original readers? Recognizing the genres in which authors wrote (narrative, poetry, wisdom, gospel, etc.) will shape our expectations of their purpose for writing. A “close reading” of the text calls for a careful exploration of the historical, cultural, and literary contexts that help us understand what is being communicated.⁹ We also need to read individual passages within the larger context of the entire Bible, allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. The Scriptures are a unified witness to Jesus Christ. The Spirit illuminates Scripture by providing awareness and insight in the process of reading and interpreting the Bible. Key questions to ask ourselves as we interpret the Bible’s meaning:

- How does the genre of a biblical book guide our reading?
- How do we engage in a close reading (i.e., grammatical and historical exegesis) of a biblical text?
- What light might the larger canonical story cast on the meaning of a particular text?

APPLY — HOW DOES THE BIBLE RELATE TO US?

Application moves from an understanding of the meaning of a text to the question of the significance of that meaning for contemporary readers. As the church, we identify with the people of God in the Scriptures and hear the message that the Spirit inspired in the original authors as a continuing word for us. The application of biblical meaning must be discerned since it is now being contextualized into a different cultural and situational setting. This is also the opportunity to assess how our own context—expressed through our assumptions, values, and practices—has shaped how we have heard the meaning of Scripture. The Spirit’s role is not to change the meaning of the text, but to create a bridge by actively bringing the written Word to bear on our lives. The person, teaching and life of Jesus comprise both the “interpretive key” and the standard by which we discern the application of Scripture. Discernment takes place within the context of the gathered community as they “weigh” together, through conversation and prayer, their response to

God's Word. Key questions to ask ourselves as we apply the Bible:

- How does Jesus, the Living Word, clarify the contemporary significance of a biblical text?
- How does the Spirit guide the community in its discernment and application of the Bible's meaning?
- How do we bridge the historical and cultural distance between ourselves and the world of the Bible, and consider the contributions from social and natural sciences?

LIVE—HOW DO WE THEN LIVE?

Interpreting the Bible is not just about hearing God speak; it also involves the Spirit of God calling, challenging, encouraging, and guiding us along the discipleship journey as he transforms us into the image of Christ. The movement in the whole process of interpreting and applying the Bible is toward a response in our actions, our practices, and how we live as a community. The interpretive process is not complete until we have done something about what we have read and heard. In a very real sense, we have not fully understood the meaning of the Bible until we follow in obedience. Jesus expected his disciples not only to hear his words but to put them into practice (Matt 7:24-27; cf. Jas 1:22-25). As we respond, the same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures, now illuminates their meaning, guides in the discernment of its application, and transforms who we are (our values, attitudes and motivation) as well as what we say and do through our actions and behavior. Key questions to ask ourselves as we live out the Scriptures:

- How is the Spirit transforming our character, perspectives, and values into the image of Christ?
- How do we faithfully follow Jesus as his disciples and obey his commands?
- How do we put what God is saying through Scripture into practice in all of life?

CONCLUSION

The individual elements of the Interpretive Model and Method are not unique to Mennonite Brethren; but collectively we propose that they represent shared Mennonite Brethren convictions and experiences regarding how to interpret the Scriptures. The ongoing practice of the Interpretive Model and Method invites Mennonite Brethren into a rich experience of interpreting and applying the Scriptures together, which offers hope of the Spirit's transforming work through the written Word as we faithfully seek to follow Jesus. ✱

NOTES

1. "Article 2: Revelation of God," *Confession of Faith: Commentary and Pastoral Application* (Winnipeg, MB: Kindred Productions, 2000), 23.
2. "Article 2," 23.
3. "Article 2," 23.
4. Bold added for emphasis.
5. N.T. Wright, "How Can the Bible be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991): 7-32.
6. David Ewert, review of *The Battle for the Bible* by Harold Lindsell, *Direction* 6 (April 1977): 40.
7. The Greek term *exegeomai* is used in John 1:18 of Jesus "exegeting" or explaining (making known) the Father.
8. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 5.
9. Several helpful resources include J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-on Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012); Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017); and Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017).