



Understanding God's Story

**Copyright © Porterbrook Network 2013.
This file is protected by copyright and is
for the personal use of the purchaser of
this course only. Distribution or resale of
it is strictly prohibited.**

Unit 2. Approaching God's Word

The process of understanding and applying the Bible is known as 'hermeneutics'.

There are three core elements in the hermeneutic process: authors, texts and readers.

Postmodernism locates the meaning of any text with the reader. The text 'means whatever it means to me'. But in the case of the Bible this robs God's word of its authority. The Bible means what God intended it to mean, not whatever I want it to mean.

So evangelical hermeneutics locates the meaning of the text with the author. The meaning of a passage is the meaning intended by the authors – both the human author and the divine author (even if Old Testament writers did not always fully appreciate how what they wrote would be fulfilled).

This meaning, however, is conveyed by the text of the Bible. We can't go and ask Paul what he meant when he wrote Ephesians. So our job is *to identify the meaning intended by the authors by playing close attention to the text.*

The heart of the reader

But this does not mean we can ignore the role of readers. As readers we come with our own assumptions and prejudices. We need to be careful not to let these distort our reading of the Bible.

"The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good." (Psalm 14:1) The characteristic of a fool is not ignorance or stupidity, but corruption and sin.

Exercise

Read Romans 1:18-25

- What does Paul say about the truth about God and its availability?
- What prevents people from understanding the truth about God?
- Why has our thinking become more futile and our hearts become darkened?
- What exchanges took place when humanity rejected God's rule?
- How do you see this in your culture?
- How do you see this in your own life?

People do not know God because we do not want to obey God. It is not because we *cannot* know God (God has made himself plain), but because we *will* not know God (we choose to worship created things rather than the Creator).

The main thing that prevents us understanding God's word is *our sin*. We instinctively tend towards understanding the Bible in the way that justifies our actions and attitudes. Jesus said, "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority." (John 7:17) Those who understand the teaching of Jesus are those who begin with a desire to do God's will.

So two principles are foundational:

1. Read the Bible with a humble heart

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction." (Proverbs 1:7) The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. The Bible defines a fool as one who will not obey God and the wise person as one who fears God, who is willing to submit to God. "Thus says the Lord: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word'" (Isaiah 66:1-2). The Creator esteems those who tremble at his word. "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.'" (Isaiah 57:15) The Most High dwells with the humble. The one who lives in a high place dwells with the lowly! We need to be humble and contrite before God's word. We need to tremble at his word (see Psalm 29). Look at James 1:19-25. We read the Bible not simply for information. We read it so that it shapes our lives. We are not simply *informed* by God's word. We are *transformed* by God's word.

2. Read the Bible as part of a discipling community

We are often blind to sin and blind to the way we use the Bible to justify our actions and attitudes. We need other people to highlight our sin and misunderstandings. So we need to read the Bible as part of a community who will graciously challenge our thinking and behaviour.

Exercise

Read Ephesians 4: 13-16

- What does maturity look like?
- How does growing in maturity take place?

So far in Ephesians Paul has described how Christ has united us — he has made us one. He has explained how we need one another. But for what? In verse 13, 14, 15 and 16 (NLT) we have the idea of maturity and growth. Maturity means growing more like Christ. And we grow *together* into maturity.

- "That we will be *mature* in the Lord..." (Verse 13)
- "No longer be *immature* like children..." (Verse 14)

- “*Growing* in every way more and more like Christ” (verse 15)
- “As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts *grow*, so that the whole body is healthy and *growing* and full of love.” (Verse 16)

How do we grow more like Christ? This happens as we speak the truth to one another in love.

- “...until we all come to such unity in *our faith and knowledge of God’s Son* that we will be mature.” (Verse 13)
- “We won’t be tossed and blown about *by every wind of new teaching*. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us *with lies so clever they sound like the truth*.” (Verse 14)
- “Instead, we will *speak the truth* in love.” (Verse 15)

What makes us mature is faith and knowledge of God’s Son. We become mature as we are able to spot lies — even lies that sound like the truth. Your friends or colleagues will say things to you that sound plausible, but you will be able to say, “No, that’s not the truth about God’s Son. I’m not going to think that way or behave that way.” But this is a communal activity. We are to speak truth to one another in love. We are to be communities in which we encourage, challenge, console, rebuke, counsel, exhort and comfort one another with the truth.

Asking questions of the text

The Bible is a contemporary book that speaks to us. It does not belong simply in the past. God speaks (present tense) to his people through his word by his Spirit. Writing to the church in Ephesus in the first century, the Risen Christ says: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Revelation 2:7) Though his words are addressed to one particular church at one particular time, we are to hear what the Spirit says (present tense) to all the churches.

The Bible, then, was written *for us*. But it was not written *to us*. It always has an original audience in mind. And so we need to work out what the original authors meant by what they wrote and why they were writing it to their original audience. This is technically known as ‘authorial intent’.

Exercise

Read Luke 1: 1-4

- Why did Luke write his Gospel?
- How might knowing this affect your understanding and application of the Gospel?

Read 1 John 5:13

- Why did John write his first letter?
- How might knowing this affect your understanding and application of the letter?

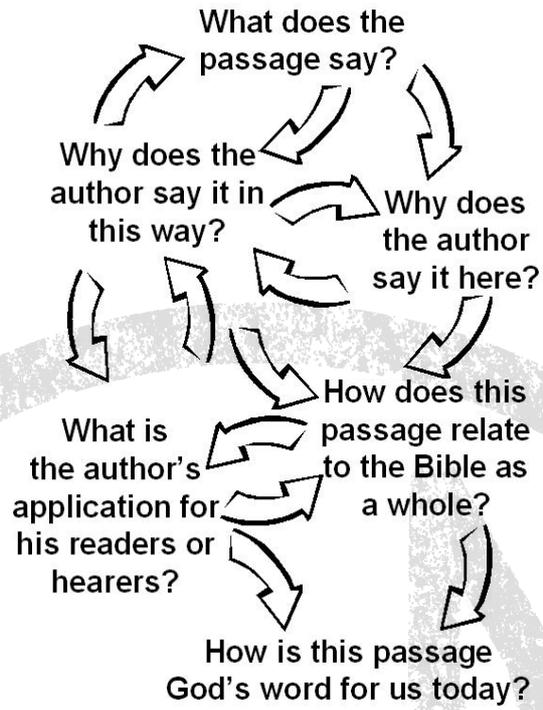
Sometimes authorial intent is explicit (as with Luke 1:1-4 and 1 John 5:13). Sometimes you have to work it out. Who is writing to whom? What are their situations? Do they mention specific problems? Is there an overall theme or message? When it comes to narrative, what does the author include and leave out? What editorial comments does he insert? If the Bible book was part of a telephone conversation, what is going on at the other end?

Sometimes you need an iterative process. You get a rough idea of the author's overall purpose and message. That helps you understand the details. Understanding the details clarifies the overall purpose and message. And so the process goes on.

The key questions to ask of the text are as follows:

- A. What? 1. What is the meaning?
 2. What is the structure?
- B. Why? 3. Why say it this way?
 4. Why say it here?
- C. How? 5. How should they have responded then?
 6. How should we respond now?
 5. Why should we respond?

There is a certain logical progression to these questions. But in reality, most of the time, ideas shoot off in all directions as we study a passage. We might think of an application as we first read it. We might explore why the author says it here, come to some provisional conclusions and then go back to the question of what is being said. The process is never a neat 'step one, then step two, then step three'.



Sample