

How Does, or Should, Our Theology Impact Our Interpretation

By Dave DeWitt

Introduction

Although the question has been around for two thousand years, it has received a renewed interest in the 21st century. The issue is critical, since it determines how we understand the Bible.

Definitions, as I am using them here:

Theology is a study of the nature of God and subjects related to the nature of God.

Interpretation is understanding the meaning of a written text.

There are basically four views about the relationship between theology and interpretation:

1. The theology of the church community should govern our interpretation.
2. Our theology and our interpretation should be a two-way street, each improving the other.
3. Our interpretation should be governed by the New Testament, with a focus on Jesus.
4. Our interpretation should always be the author's intended meaning, a one-way not a two-way street.

I will present each position, but I will be defending position #4.

1. The Theology of the Church Community Should Govern Our Interpretation

Although this idea has been around since the early church councils generated creeds, canons, and catechisms, it has taken a new form of late, which is becoming increasingly popular in this 21st century. It is called TIS, Theological Interpretation of Scripture. TIS uses the theology of the church community to bring meaning to the text of Scripture. John Poirer says this about TIS:

All view the "true" meaning of Scripture as derivative of its active role within the Church today. In other words, these approaches locate meaning in some (supposed) aspect of Scripture that transcends its (human) authors." [John C. Poirer, "'Theological Interpretation' and Its Contradistinctions," *Tyndale Bulletin* 61, no. 1 (2010): 106]

Historically, this was originally done through the theological developments of the church councils and especially through the creeds, canons, and catechisms developed from the first seven church councils. Except for the influence of some prominent bishops and teachers (like Athanasius, Augustine, and Aquinas), most Christians through the Middle Ages received their understanding of the Bible from the creeds, canons, and catechisms read by priests and bishops and repeated by the congregation. The Bible was not available to most Christians before the invention of the printing press in 1436. So it is easy to see why the early church would understand that theology governed interpretation.

But today's idea of TIS goes beyond the creeds because the creeds did not change. TIS claims the "true" meaning of Scripture is a derivative of its active role within the church today. So, unlike the creeds, the TIS meaning changes with the church community and can change from one church community to another. The idea is that the church community knows more than the individual, so the individual believer should take the meaning determined by the community to the Bible, to determine its meaning.

The problem is, an appeal to the early church creeds is not helpful in the discussion of interpretation because the creeds were not designed as a tool for interpreting the Bible. Nor were they actually something most early Christians used to interpret the Bible. Unless you were a bishop or a monk, most early Christians, before the invention of the printing press, did not have a Bible to interpret.

Also, the TIS view puts meaning in the hands of an imperfect community. It is one thing for a church, mission organization, or denomination to develop a creed or doctrinal statement about what they believe. It is quite another to use that to interpret the Bible. This would mean the Bible can only say what has already been determined by that community.

Another problem with the TIS approach is that the Theological Interpretation changes as the views of the Christian community change. For example, if the community changes its theology from saying an LGBTQ+ lifestyle was unacceptable, to saying it is acceptable, then that new understanding is used in interpreting Scripture. If one objects to the change, claiming the Bible has not changed, the TIS mentality simply says the meaning “transcends its (human) authors.” That might sound good if the assumption is that the transcending author is the Holy Spirit. But with TIS, the determination of meaning has moved from the author to the community. In that case, the Bible is nothing more than a Jackson Pollock “picture” of paint splattered on a canvas, having no meaning, and allowing meaning to be whatever the observer brings to it. In this case, it is the changing community, not the unchanging Word of God, that governs meaning.

2. Our Theology and Our Interpretation Should Be a Two-Way Street, Each Improving the Other

The idea is this.

“Whether we mean to or not, and whether we like it or not, all of us read the text as interpreted by our theological presuppositions... The very possibility of understanding anything depends on our prior framework of interpretation.” [From a paper is published by *The Green Tree and Hermeneutic Roots for Biblical Faith and Practice*]

This position agrees that we need to have a literal [Literal Grammatical Historical (LGH)] understanding of the text of Scripture, but that LGH understanding will, whether we like it or not, only come through our already existing theological framework. [Carter, *Contemplating God with the Great Tradition*, 86]

This position says, since having a theology is unavoidable, the best process is a two-way street between our theology and our interpretation. As Christians, we come to the Bible with a theology. Our theology stands until we encounter a biblical observation that challenges it. As we consider our new discoveries from the Bible, we then change (tweak and improve) our theology. Then we bring an improved theology back to the Bible to further impact our literal (LGH) understanding.

The problem is, almost no one changes their theology based on their interpretation. Almost everyone takes their theology to the Bible, but they do not consider the possibility that their theology needs to be changed (tweaked or improved).

It is true that this has happened a few times historically, as with the Reformation of Martin Luther, the Covenant theology of John Calvin, and the development of dispensationalism with J.N. Darby. But individuals changing their theology are rare. We can sympathize with this idea because it is certainly true that humans are spiritual beings, and we take our theology with us, unavoidably. This view is also far superior to the TIS view because it recognizes the need to keep learning from the Bible rather than acquiescing to the views of a Christian community. Continued learning is essential. I recently heard of a local church that added a sentence to their doctrinal statement that said, “And this doctrinal statement will never change.” Although it is unclear who originated it, many conservative pastors have repeated the saying, “If it is new, it is not true, and if it is true, it is not new.” If that is the case, then how do we understand Peter’s command to *...grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (2 Peter 3:18; see also Luke 2:40)? So we should agree that our interpretation of the Bible should impact our theology. In other words, our theology should bow to our interpretation, but that does not mean our theology should impact our interpretation.

Just because something, like our theology, is inevitable or unavoidable, does not make it acceptable. My sin nature is unavoidable, but that does not make it acceptable. My sin nature will also impact my theology, making my theology imperfect. That means taking my theology to the Bible makes my interpretation of a perfect text in submission to my imperfect theology.

The two-way street approach does nothing to keep Christians from bringing their extreme views to their interpretation. For example, those who eliminate the sovereignty of God, those who eliminate free will, those who believe there are new modern-day apostles, those who believe we are not saved unless we speak in tongues, those who believe homosexuality is acceptable, those who believe in a prosperity gospel, a social gospel, or a cultural gospel, are not likely to change their theology after they bring it to their interpretation.

But this is also true of main-line denominations. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Charismatics, Reformed churches, Baptist churches, and independent Bible churches, all find the theology, they already believe, in the Bible. I can remember when I was young being amazed that the sermons of Baptist preachers proved Baptist views and the sermons of Reformed preachers proved Reformed views. In the small town I grew up in (Spring Lake, Michigan), there was a Baptist and Reformed church nearly across the street from each other. The Baptists condemned the Reformed for smoking in the church parking lot after church, and the Reformed condemned the Baptists for going out after church to eat at a restaurant (or playing baseball) on Sunday. Independent Bible churches find their local church pastors in the Bible. The Brethren movement finds no local church pastors in the Bible. All the above support their view from the Bible.

This view also presents us with no way to combat the divergent view of the cults. To say we should change our theology based on our interpretation **does not offer a way to actually do that**. Since our theology impacts our interpretation, ultimately the meaning of a text of Scripture will be shoehorned into our theology. So the two-way street rarely happens. Ultimately, the two-way approach usually means our theology governs our interpretation.

3. Our Interpretation Should Be Governed **by** the New Testament, with a Focus on Jesus

The Christian Study Library states the position this way:

The redemptive-historical method acknowledges and highlights that the whole of Scripture testifies of Christ. The Old Testament points to Him. The New Testament witnesses of Him. The Old Testament anticipates His coming; the New Testament confirms and anticipates His return. Jesus Christ is the center, the focal point of history, but He is also working through history. **An interpretation that does not point to Him and His redemptive work is lacking in precision and is at best incomplete.** [christianstudylibrary.org. **Emphasis mine.**]

This view rightly points out that the Holy Spirit is also the author of the Bible (1 Corinthians 2:10), and the revelation of Jesus in the Bible is the focus of the work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:14). For example, Jesus said,

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me (John 5:39).

When Jesus appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Luke reported,

Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27).

Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, refers to Jesus. Even if the human author did not know that he

was writing about Jesus, he often was.

The foundation of this view is that the Bible was written for the salvation of man. Jesus came *to seek and to save that which was lost* (Luke 19:10). This is the view (as in most Reformed and Covenant theology) that understands the Bible as “Redemptive History,” beginning after the Fall in the Garden of Eden and continuing until the Second Coming of Christ (the covenant of grace).

The problem is, the Bible does not say everything is about our salvation, or that biblical history is “Redemptive History.” The Bible is not centered in man at all. The Bible was written for the glory of God, not the salvation of man. Human salvation is valuable because it brings glory to God.

- **Psalm 19:1**, *The heavens are telling of the **glory of God**; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.*
- **Romans 3:23**, *...for all have sinned and fall short of the **glory of God**.*
- **1 Corinthians 10:31**, *Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the **glory of God**.*
- **Philippians 2:11**, *...every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the **glory of God the Father**.*

When Jesus appeared to a couple of His disciples on the road to Emmaus after His resurrection, *He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures*. But neither He, nor the disciples who heard the explanation, passed along to us where those things were in Scripture or what they revealed. So apparently, we do not need to know. We can, therefore, know the Scriptures testify about Jesus but not what any particular Scripture says about Him, unless the passage itself says it is about Him or a New Testament author tells us that.

If our focus is on Jesus, what about the focus on God the Father? Ignoring the author’s intended meaning of God in the Old Testament, and reading Jesus into it, can ignore the character of God the Father taught in the Old Testament, for example, ignoring the fear of God, the justice of God, and the jealousy of God.

Consider Isaiah 7:14.

Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.

We know this is a reference to Jesus, but not because it sounds like Jesus, or that Isaiah thought it was about Jesus. That would be reading our theology back into the text. Isaiah probably thought it was about his own son (Isaiah 8:3). But we know Isaiah 7:14 refers to Jesus because Matthew 1:23 tells us it does. After giving the genealogy of Jesus, and before quoting this verse from Isaiah 7:14, Matthew says, *Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet* (Matthew 1:22-23). We know the Isaiah reference contains a reference to Jesus because Matthew said so.

Consider Psalm 22.

Psalm 22:16-18, *For dogs have surrounded me; A band of evildoers has encompassed me; They pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones. They look, they stare at me; they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.*

We can theologically conclude that Psalm 22 refers to Jesus’ suffering because Jesus identified with it by quoting from it on the cross (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34). We can therefore use Psalm 22 to understand more about the suffering of Jesus. But we should not use the suffering of Jesus to understand Psalm 22. The question is, “Does David, in Psalm 22, have in mind the suffering of Jesus?” The psalm itself sounds like David is talking about his own suffering. Unless we can understand from Psalm 22 that David is referring to the Messiah, we should not interpret it that way.

Consider Isaiah 53.

Isaiah 53:5, *But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.*

Unlike Psalm 22 and Isaiah 7:14, it seems from the text itself, that Isaiah 53 has in mind the suffering of a future Messiah, who Isaiah called, *the arm of the Lord* (verse 1). One who will be *pierced through for our transgressions* and *crushed for our iniquities*. In that case, our interpretation, not a theology brought to the text, determines that it is a reference to Jesus.

4. Our Interpretation Should Always Be the Author's Intended Meaning, a One-Way Not a Two-Way Street

I hold to this view of interpretation because we know, beyond any doubt, that this is how every communication from any author is understood. Whether we read a newspaper or a novel, a magazine, a text, an email, or a letter from a friend, everybody reads with the question, "What is the author's intended meaning?" Sometimes it is called Literal Grammatical Historical (LGH). Sometimes it is called plain, ordinary, normal, or regular. Sometimes it is called taking it at face-value. Whatever it is called, the point is, we look to authorial intent for the meaning of any text. If some progressive teacher tells the class they should take their own meaning to a text, the students should ask the teacher if they should do that with the teacher's assignments and exams.

The Bible is the only literature I know of where people try to conjure up some other way of understanding the text. Nobody attempts to study Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Dickens, Milton, Voltaire, Tolstoy, or any other author, allegorically. Nobody attempts to interpret anything else with a TIS view, a two-way street view, or by reading later writings back into earlier ones. For example, to interpret Plato's discussion of democracy in the "Republic," it would not be legitimate to take what we know about democracy and use it to understand Plato. We could use what we learn from Plato in discussing democracy, but not use our understanding of democracy to interpret Plato. Everybody who intends to understand any written text always, without exception, asks the foundational question, "What is the author's intended meaning?" There is no logical reason to interpret the Bible any other way.

What About "Scripture Interprets Scripture?"

This is always a bad idea because it allows us to go beyond the author for the meaning. Other texts written by the same author might help determine the author's meaning, but the "Scripture Interprets Scripture" concept allows us to ignore the author altogether. Other Scripture, outside of the passage being studied, can add to our theological understanding, but it should never be used in interpreting the passage being studied.

For example, suppose I asked a knowledgeable Christian, "What is the correct interpretation of Genesis 1:1, *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*? Scripture interprets Scripture might bring in John 1:1-3 and Colossians 1:16 and say that Jesus was the agent doing the creating in Genesis 1:1. This is theologically correct. But did Moses know about Jesus? Did Moses know about the Trinity? I can find nothing in Genesis, or any of the Pentateuch, which tells me Moses knew anything about Jesus or the Trinity. If we use John 1 and Colossians 1 to interpret Genesis 1, we have ignored what Moses had to say in Genesis 1.

What Is the Role of the Progress of Revelation In Interpretation?

God did not reveal everything at once. Most of what we know about God was not revealed to Adam in the Garden of Eden. We can use what Adam knew, recorded in Genesis 1-3, to interpret a later passage, if it is likely the later author knew about Genesis 1-3. But we cannot use what we know about later passages to interpret Genesis 1-3. If the author of a text of Scripture did not know your theology, even if it is a good theology, then you should not use it to interpret a text. We can sometimes project meaning forward but never backward.

For example, consider Genesis 3. Who tempted Eve in Genesis 3? It is theologically correct to say Satan tempted Eve in Genesis 3. But that is not a legitimate interpretation of Genesis 3. Interpretation must follow the author's intended meaning, and there is no indication that Moses knew anything about Satan. Moses never mentions Satan anywhere in the five books of the Pentateuch. When **teaching** Genesis 3 we should clearly teach that the tempter was Satan because Revelation 12 says so. But when **interpreting** Genesis 3, we should never say it means Satan tempted Eve, because there is no way to understand Moses had Satan in mind.

Why Should I Interpret a Passage Using Less than I Know?

We should develop a theology from everything we know and teach from everything we know, but we should not bring everything we know to interpret a passage. Interpretation must be confined to the author because:

- (1) This is the only way to guard against imposing false doctrine on a passage.
- (2) If we impose a theological concept from another biblical author, we are denying the input of the author we are studying.
- (3) Each passage has something to add to our theology and that can easily be missed if we simply impose our existing theology on the passage.

As mentioned above, we all have the tendency to bring our theology to the text of Scripture. There is no miraculous tool to absolutely prevent us from doing that. But now we have an objective way to help ourselves to keep from warping the Scripture into saying what we already believe. We can force ourselves to doggedly, persistently, continually ask nothing more and nothing less than what the author intended to say.

The Author's Intended Meaning Must Govern Our Application

[The principles of application are beyond the scope of this paper. I shall here only mention application in its relationship to interpretation.] Once we determine what an author intended to say, we can then ask how we should apply that to our lives. But it is a common mistake to read a text of Scripture and jump from observation to application without interpretation. Here is an example.

Jeremiah 29:11, *“For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.”*

It is common to say this is God indicating He has plans for our future and a hope for us believers, today. But what is the author's intended meaning? Jeremiah had no knowledge of our church age, so he cannot possibly be referring to God's future for us. Jeremiah is talking about Israel as a nation. The previous verse says,

Jeremiah 29:10, *For thus says the LORD, “When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place.”*

In this passage, God is telling Jeremiah that the southern kingdom of Israel will be taken captive in Babylon where they will be held for 70 years. But after that, He will return them to the Land which He has given them because He has a future planned for the nation Israel.

Conclusion

Observation, interpretation, and application are essential in studying any text of Scripture. The interpretation part of that process should only ask the question, “What is the author's intended meaning?” Other significant questions, like the context, the kind of literature or the progress of revelation, can all be answered by asking the author's intended meaning. That meaning can only be determined by looking at the text itself, not the text of some other author, and not our theology brought to the text. The only all-inclusive question for interpretation is, **What is the author's intended meaning?**