

how to read the Bible for all its worth

Siôn Glaze teaches us to read the Epistles

is sacred, and you are that temple.

Should these verses apply to the individual believer when, in its original context, it applied to the local church? The biggest danger of this is in bypassing exegesis altogether (and misinterpreting God's word). As a rule, when there are comparable situations, God's word to us should be limited to its original intent. Outside of this rule, extended application is normally found to be sound by discovering the application in other passages where that is their original intent.

problem 2 - **particulars that are not comparable**

Some texts detail events that have no direct modern day equivalent or are very unlikely to occur. Exegesis often reveals a clear principle that we can apply, but these principles must apply to genuinely comparable situations.

Certain issues may be important to some, but treated with indifference by others. For Paul, eating food served to idols was a matter of indifference, but it clearly wasn't to others.⁴ Here are some guidelines for deciding whether something is a matter of indifference:

1. What the Epistles saw as matters of indifference can

the Epistles: the hermeneutical questions

This series is summarised from Fee G, Stuart D. *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth* (3rd ed). Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003

We started looking at the Epistles in the last issue, focusing on God's message to its original first century recipients (*exegesis*). We now consider the *hermeneutical* questions: how his Word applies to us today.¹

Though people share much common ground when asking hermeneutical questions, differences of opinion always arise. These differences in interpreting God's word are due to inconsistencies, stereotypes, and church traditions - though we may not be aware of them. Two rules can help us to be more consistent:

1. 'A text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his or her readers.'²
2. 'Whenever we share comparable particulars with the first century hearers, God's

Word to us is the same as his Word to them.'³

So exegesis is key! But how do the Epistles apply beyond the original text? This generates a number of problems, which we will dissect to answer hermeneutical questions better.

problem 1 - **extended application**

Say there is a situation in the Epistles to which modern day particulars or contexts compare. Is it justified to extend the application to other contexts? Take 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 as an example:

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him; for God's temple

- probably still be seen as such
- Matters of indifference are cultural rather than inherently moral (even if they come from religious culture)
 - The sin-lists⁵ in the Epistles name principles rather than specific first century issues

problem 3 - cultural relativity

The Bible is a text of eternal importance written during a particular time in history. Do some issues, which appear to have modern day comparables, need to be translated into our times or simply left out? There is no divinely ordained culture, so we cannot simply live as in the first century. But how and where do we draw the line? Here are some guidelines:

- Decide on the core message of the Bible: the Cross is core but not the holy kiss⁶
- Distinguish what the New Testament sees as distinctly moral
- Be aware where the New Testament reflects differences⁷ in teaching and where it is consistent: differences may indicate *cultural* issues
- Distinguish between principles and specific applications
- Determine the cultural options that would have been open to the New Testament writers⁸ but with great care! If the

writers have only one cultural option open to them and they affirm it in the text then the likelihood of that issue being 'culturally relative' increases. Homosexuality was both affirmed and condemned in general society during the first century, yet the New Testament is consistently against it. This is unlikely to be a culturally relative issue

- Be aware of possible cultural differences between the first and 21st centuries. For example, consider the position women held then before reading the various passages speaking on the role of women⁹
- Recognise the difficulty of this process and be humble to each other when tackling these tough issues

problem 4 - task theology

Sound exegesis is crucial when learning theology from the Epistles, because the theology is task oriented rather than systematically presented. Even then, our theological understanding is limited by the fact that the Epistles are written for specific situations. So beyond what the text says, 'everything else is mere speculation'.¹⁰

The other problem is when we ask our questions of texts written for

specific situations, which only answer *their* questions. To deal with contemporary issues (such as abortion), 'we must attempt to bring a biblical worldview to the problem'.¹¹

conclusion

To answer the hermeneutical questions, we must look at God's Word to them before we examine his Word to us. After all, we do not treat every patient with acute abdominal pain for appendicitis reflexively. We use their history (the context) to inform our treatment. Interpreting God's Word is no different; we must come to the conclusion sensibly and consistently.

Siôn Glaze is a clinical student at Cardiff University

REFERENCES

- Ip H. How to read the Bible for all its worth - introduction: the need to interpret. *Nucleus* 2006; Autumn:36-39
- Fee GD *et al.* *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. 3rd ed. Zondervan. 2003:74
- Ibid*:75
- 1 Corinthians 8:10
- eg Romans 1:29-31
- Romans 16:16
- eg compare 1 Corinthians 11:5 with 1 Timothy 2:12
- Glaze S. How to read the Bible for all its worth - the Epistles: learning to think contextually. *Nucleus* 2008; Christmas:40-41
- eg 1 Timothy 2:9-15
- Fee GD *et al.* *Op cit*:86
- Ibid*:87