

Discerning the Word: Comparing Scripture With Scripture

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Tim. 2:15)

We have seen that discernment is the skill of understanding God's Word and God's world so as to love what God loves. We saw last week that developing discernment is primarily a matter of being rightly related to God: relying on Him for knowledge, obeying what you know, pursuing His wisdom in study. We come today then to a very practical matter: how to judge or discern the meaning of the Word.

At school, one of our classes was Basic Techniques or Woodwork, where we were supposed to learn the basic techniques of using hammers, saws, drills, clamps, spanners and so on. Most of my woodwork teachers were aggressive men with bad tempers, but looking back, I think I understand why. To be responsible for a class of about 30 restless boys, and let them into a place filled with electric saws, vices, razor-sharp blades, and plenty of objects that can produce blunt-force trauma is pretty nerve-wracking. And you could tell the boys who had never used tools: the way they held the tools, the awkward posture, the inefficient method, the wide berth which everyone gave them, and the butchered result. Having a tool in your hand is one thing, using it skillfully is another. A powerful tool in inexperienced hands is a dangerous thing.

This verse we've just read says the Word of God is that way. It is a powerful tool – it is the word of truth. But how you use that tool makes all the difference. In Paul's words, failure to use this tool properly is a cause of shame. Conversely, an approved workman needs never be ashamed because of what he does. What does he do? He rightly divides the word of truth. Rightly divides is a word that has the ortho- prefix we use on our bulletin every week. It is the word *orthotomeo*, which literally means to cut it straight. To make a clean cut, or to clear a straight path in the forest. No mess, no deviations, no inefficiencies. Like the man who knows how to use a tool well. He measures twice, cuts once. This is the skill of discernment in the Word. It's a skill, and it is more than just being biblical.

Many Christians come to salvation in churches where the teaching is very man-centred, very rooted in self-esteem teachings, motivational teaching, and just a very casual use of the Bible. They hear the Gospel and are saved, but soon become aware that most of what they hear is unbiblical. Maybe through some kind providences, they are eventually led to a church that preaches the Bible alone, and Scripture is its final authority. They have had the discernment to go from Bible-plus or Bible-minus to Bible alone.

But very often, these young Christians are in for another surprise. They arrive in a church which uses the Bible alone. They start reading biblical authors. They listen online to more biblical teachers and soon they begin finding out that among Christians who are biblical in their approach, there are still some fairly significant differences. They thought the major issue was to stop being extra-biblical or non-biblical, and become biblical. But now they find it is not that simple.

They listen to one Bible teacher defending a position on baptism, or the gifts of tongues or prophecy, on election and man's freedom, whether the church should be governed by elders or the congregation itself or a presiding bishop, whether there will be an earthly millennium. He quotes several Scriptures and explains them in ways that seem to support his position. He appears biblical. Then they come across another Bible teacher who also uses Scripture alone, and references many texts and seems to come out at the opposite position. They both seem to be biblical. They are both using Scripture. Who is right?

Some Christians get very discouraged by this and feel it is too confusing. So, they back away from every disputed issue, and decide it is too complex to figure out.

Others just make the decision based upon personal loyalty. They like this teacher for personal reasons, and so they choose their side, their camp, their loyalty, and from that position, they never really entertain any serious challenge to their theology. They have pitched their tent in that camp, and are not really interested in opening or re-opening positions that threaten their views.

But both of those responses are, in the end, a lack of discernment. It is not discerning to either avoid doing difficult theology, nor will it do to shape your theology through personal loyalty. If we are truly interested in developing the skill of understanding God's Word and God's world so as to love what God loves, it is not enough to merely say, I am a person of one book. We need to learn how to use that one book.

So what I wish to do this morning is a little unusual for a sermon. It is going to be a little more teaching than it is preaching, because I want to give you guidance as to how to use the Bible, and how to do theology. What I'm going to give you is something you would study in a Bible college or seminary called Theological Method, which is where we teach future preachers how to do theology. We don't just want to give them pre-digested theology; we want them to see the method of combining, and comparing Scripture so as to arrive at correct theology.

When you find that one Bible teacher teaches that say, faith comes before regeneration, and another teaches regeneration comes before faith, it is not that they are using different Bibles. It is not that the Bible contradicts itself. It is not that one of them is necessarily being unbiblical. But what is happening is that those two men are using different theological methods to weigh up and judge between different Scriptures. They may come to different conclusions about the meaning of certain texts, but often, even when they agree on what those texts mean, they disagree about how to harmonise all the biblical data so as to arrive at what the Bible actually teaches.

So let me begin with some negatives, some practices to avoid if you want to discern the meaning of Scripture.

One of the first, and most common errors of handling the Bible is called *proof-texting*. Proof-texting is listing out verses, or citing references that seem to back up your assertion. For example, someone wants to say that we should speak in tongues today, so he makes the assertion, and then cites 1 Corinthians 14:39 39 Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues. (1 Cor. 14:39) and then adds 5 I wish you all spoke with tongues (1 Cor. 14:5). The problem here is that it is not helpful to have an idea ("we should all speak in tongues"), and then find verses that seem to support that idea, or seem to be associated with that idea, and then list them out. It looks biblical, but it isn't always. What we really want to know is whether all those verses listed actually say what you claim they say in their context.

A second bad theological method is called *hijacking the text*. This is when someone takes a verse and uses it to support ideas it wasn't meant to address. I once had a discussion with a Bible teacher who told me the reason he believed in a private prayer language was because Romans 8:26 says the Spirit intercedes for us in groanings that cannot be uttered. But if you read Romans 8:26, you'll find Paul is explaining why believers are not condemned: the Father is for us, the Son intercedes for us, and the Spirit intercedes for us. It has to do with our position in Christ, our eternal security, and with the prayer life of the Godhead. It has nothing to do with my prayer life, or praying in tongues.

A third bad theological method is to *insert our own ideas into the text*. I've heard people teaching that the church has completely replaced Israel and taken its place based upon the verse "For they *are*

not all Israel who *are* of Israel, (Rom. 9:6)” But what Paul was teaching there was that there were saved Israelites among the ethnic Israelites. That text cannot be used to say Paul meant that now the elect from every nation have become Israel. That’s arguing from silence. We can only assert what the text asserts. We cannot insert our own ideas.

In fact, if the way you do theology is that you say, “Well, this verse could mean this, and combined with this verse which could mean this, and this verse which could possibly mean this” you can arrive at just about any conclusion. We must affirm what Scripture clearly affirms and deny what it denies, not argue from silence, and build theology on probabilities and possibilities.

Now there are many other errors we could talk about, but those are some of the more common, and they are the most obvious and easiest to detect. The point is, not everyone using the Bible is using it properly.

So how should we use the Bible? During the Reformation, Protestants were accused by Catholics of a subjective kind of interpretation, where every man is right in his own eyes. The Roman church claimed that the only way to rightly interpret Scripture was to use tradition and the magisterium as one’s guide. The Reformers responded with something they called “the analogy of faith”. What they meant by that is simple: Scripture interprets Scripture. The Bible is its own interpreter.

The problem, as we’ve just seen, is that when you compare Scripture with Scripture, the Bible sometimes seems to point in different directions. And since Scripture does not contradict itself, it is the task of discernment, the task of good theological method to harmonise the evidence, to compare Scripture with Scripture in ways that best harmonise the whole message.

Does the Bible reveal a method to compare Scripture with Scripture? Not in point form, not explicitly, but implicitly, it does. As we see how Scripture quotes itself, how the New Testament uses the Old, how Jesus interpreted Scripture, we arrive at three major principles. When you listen to a Bible teacher make his case, when you listen to me or anyone in this pulpit teach, or when you are trying to harmonise Scripture with Scripture, these three principles are the ones you want to use.

I. The Test of Intention

Simply put, this means Bible texts that intend to deal with the problem you are studying, carry more weight than texts that simply mention it incidentally. Some Bible texts are actually answering the question you are looking at, while others just happen to say something about it. When you compare Scripture with Scripture, you give more weight to the intentional passage, than to the incidental passage.

For example, let’s say we are trying to understand what the Bible teaches about baptism. At the beginning of 1 Corinthians, Paul tells the church that he didn’t remember baptising any of them except three people. He then says 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. (1 Cor. 1:17)

Now while this does supply us with some information about baptism (for example, if baptism was necessary for salvation, Paul would never have said that), Paul isn’t writing about baptism. He’s actually writing about divisions in the Corinthian church and that he didn’t baptise them in the name of Paul. But baptism is incidental to what he is dealing with, his focus is elsewhere. On the other hand, when the apostle Peter compares baptism to Noah’s Ark, with submersion under the water meaning death, and emergence from the water meaning life, Peter’s focus is, for that rather brief moment, on baptism. If we want to know what baptism is about, Peter’s intentional passage is going

to carry more weight than Paul's incidental passage.

Or, for example, when Paul lays out his life's ethos in Philippians 3, he mentions the resurrection twice. 10 that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11 if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. (Phil. 3:10-11) While this has important truth for us on Christ's resurrection and our resurrection, it is not Paul's focus. His focus is on a new life by faith in contrast to the old life under the law. If we want a passage that focuses on the resurrection, we turn to 1 Corinthians 15.

1 Corinthians 12-14 is the intentional passage about spiritual gifts. 1 Corinthians 7 is the intentional passage about divorce. 1 Timothy 3 is the intentional passage about church offices. 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 is the intentional passage about giving. Romans 9-11 is the intentional passage about the church's relationship to ethnic Israel.

Whether you are tackling the matter of predestination, or what happens to the soul after death, or if the seventh day is still to be observed as Sabbath, you want to ask, is this passage answering the question I'm asking, or is it incidental to what I'm asking? If it is incidental, that doesn't always mean it's irrelevant, but it carries less weight than an intentional passage.

Now this implies something else which I'm sure you know. To understand what the intention of a passage is, you have to read it in context. The Bible is not a collection of sayings. The Bible is a collection of books. Books are read from beginning to end, and any part of a book only makes sense in light of the whole book. The Bible is not meant to be treated as a lucky-dip, or as a treasury of inspirational quotes and memes. The Bible is a library of 66 books between two covers. You are meant to read all of them, and meant to read passages and verses in light of the whole. So let me encourage you, aside from your Bible study, to have some kind of Bible reading plan, to get you right through these 66 books once a year or once every two years.

When you're reading the Bible as a book, you're asking, who's writing this? To whom? Why? What was happening? What is being discussed here? What problem is being solved? What situation is being addressed? This helps us to know what the focus of the passage is, and whether we're looking at a text that intentionally deals with what we're studying, or only incidentally touches upon it.

The second way we discern the Word and compare Scripture with Scripture is called

II. The Test of Prescription

This means, texts which prescribe carry more weight than texts which describe.

Prescription is something prescribed. When your doctor prescribes medicine, he is ordering you to take it. A prescription is a command. The Bible is filled with these. Sometimes they are commands, sometimes they are principles, sometimes they are pronouncements, sometimes simply wisdom. Now on the other hand, the Bible is also filled with descriptions, accounts of what people did, or said, or experienced. A large section of the Bible is narrative or history, giving us the account of people, describing what happened to them.

What this test says is, when you are comparing Scripture with Scripture, and trying to figure out the Bible's harmonious teaching, passages which prescribe or teach carry more weight than passages which describe or simply give an account.

Why? Because a description is simply telling you what happened to a person in a certain time and place. The fact that something happened in Israel, or in the book of Acts, or even in one of the

churches, doesn't mean it is required or normative for all people of all times. What did happen does not mean it ought to happen. It might be the case. Sometimes, we read of examples that are obviously commendable and worthy of imitation. But even these we have to stop short of turning them into commands.

But when Jesus, or an apostle is teaching and commanding what ought to happen, we now have a prescription, that depending on the context, may well be for all people of all times.

So for example, if we want to understand whether women are to be in spiritual leadership in the church, and preach publicly, we might read with interest that Israel had a female prophet Deborah. We might also read the descriptions of the daughters of Philip, who were prophetesses. But these are descriptions of particular events at particular times with unique contexts. If we want to know what is the norm for God's people of all time, we turn to the epistle of 1 Timothy. There Paul, and apostle is commanding Timothy, and by implication us, as to how to order the church. His command is clear: 12 And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence. (1 Tim. 2:12)

It carries far more weight than narratives, histories and descriptions, and informs our doctrine and practice.

Perhaps we are trying to understanding the baptism of the Holy Spirit. We read in the book of Acts of four occasions when the Holy Spirit came upon a group of people in a public, outwardly manifested way – the Jews at Pentecost in chapter 2, the Samaritans in chapter 8, the Gentiles in chapter 10, and the disciples of John in chapter 19. These are very interesting descriptions of what was happening in the first twenty years of the church's life. But if we want to know what is expected of God's people of all times, we are going to look for apostolic teaching, some kind of explanation in a New Testament letter. And so we find in 1 Corinthians 12:13, Paul tells us that every believer has been baptised by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ. We also find in Romans 6 and Colossians 2, Paul appears to speak of being immersed into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Now if being baptised by the Holy Spirit as an event after your salvation was a requirement for every believer, don't you think we would find at least one New Testament prescription making it a command? Do you think the apostles would omit to mention something as important as that, if it were an obligation for all of God's people of all times?

Whether we are asking if Christians should keep kosher, or if Christians should ever sue each other, or if the church must have a plurality of elders, or if and how the church should give to the poor, we come back to the principle of prescription. It is not enough that it is described in the Bible and that someone did this at some point. We want to know that it has been commanded for believers of our age.

Now this also implies that you become aware of what kind of biblical book you are reading. Again, the Bible is not a random collection of sayings. It is a library that contains very different kinds of books: history, laws, poetry, prophecy, wisdom, Gospels, letters, apocalypse. This means you have to pay attention to the actual words of Scripture, the grammar, the style, and the kind of literature you are reading.

Now I agree, some places are more difficult to discern. We sometimes find teaching passages within history, like the Sermon on the Mount. Or some apostolic teaching has a historical context, like Paul's commandments on head-covering or meat offered to idols to the Corinthians. But this is why God commands us to be diligent so that we may rightly divide, rightly interpret the Word of truth.

How do we compare Scripture with Scripture? We use the test of intention. What was the Holy Spirit intending to answer in the passage we are using? We use the test of prescription. What has God commanded of His people? Thirdly, we must apply.

III. The Test of Clarity

The test of clarity says, a passage which is clear and can mean only one thing carries more weight than an unclear passage that could mean several things. God's Word is a complex book, worthy of a lifetime's study. We Protestants believe in something called the clarity of Scripture, meaning that Scripture can be interpreted by an honest and thoughtful believer. But the doctrine of the clarity of Scripture does not teach that all Scripture is equally clear. Indeed, some passages are very clear, such as John 3:16, but others such as 1 Peter 3:19 which says Christ preached to the spirits in prison, is subject to multitudes of interpretations.

Now what this test says is simple: when you have a passage that is clear, you use it to help with passages that are unclear, not the other way around. Now some people argue that one passage seems very clear to one man and not very clear to another, so this test appears too subjective. But we can rephrase it this way: a passage that can mean only one thing must help us with passages that can mean multiple things. For example, let us say we are grappling with the doctrine of eternal security. The passage of Hebrews 6:4-6 which we are going to look at in a few weeks is often quoted by people who believe you can lose your salvation. For them, it appears clear. But the problem is, even they have to admit, that Hebrews 6 has been interpreted at least four or five ways by responsible interpreters. It is definitely not a passage that can mean only one thing. Yes, it does only have one meaning, but it is a passage that is, in God's providence, ambiguous enough to be interpreted several ways. On the other hand, when Paul in Ephesians 1:14 tells us that believers are sealed by the Holy Spirit to the day of redemption, this text has really one interpretation: believers are sealed by the Holy Spirit till the day of redemption. So, should we take Hebrews 6, which could possibly mean you can lose your salvation, and use it to interpret Ephesians 1, which says the Spirit seals you till you reach heaven, or should we use the unambiguous Ephesians 1 to interpret the more difficult Hebrews 6? We use the clear, univocal passage to help us with the harder, equivocal passages.

Let's say we are talking to a cultist. He takes us to Colossians 1:18, which says that Christ is the firstborn of creation, or to Scriptures that speak of God saying to the Son, "This day have I begotten thee" He says, "Clearly, Jesus is the first thing God created." But it is not clear. We read in Acts 13:33 that the apostle Paul applied that Scripture to Jesus' resurrection. And since no one thinks Jesus came into existence at the resurrection, begotten cannot mean beginning. At best, Colossians 1:18 is an ambiguous text to try to say that Jesus is a creation. On the other hand, John 1:1 uses unmistakable language when it says, "The Word was God". How many possible interpretations can "The Word was God" have? One. So do we use the less clear idea of begetting to understand John 1:1, or do we use the unmistakably clear words of John 1:1 to understand what Paul means by firstborn? Clear interprets unclear, univocal interprets equivocal.

Now, when you apply this principle, you also pretty quickly start to see what Scripture regards as most important, and what it regards as less important. The more important something is, the more God states it in unmistakable, unambiguous terms. There is no mistaking what the big priority of Scripture is: to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. There is no mistaking the Gospel and its doctrines: the Triune God, the fall of man, the Incarnation of Jesus, His substitutionary death and resurrection, salvation by grace through faith in Him, eternal life in Him, or eternal death apart from Him. There is no mistaking the Great Commission: to make disciples, immerse and include and instruct them in biblical New Testament churches. That's not to say there

aren't important doctrines that are difficult to discern. What it does mean is that God uses clear Scripture to make essential doctrine indisputable.

Christian who always begins with the obscure and the arcane and the doubtful and then tries to use it to understand the rest, will end up in error. Spend all your time on the doctrine of tithing mint, anise, and cummin, and you will fail to see the weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faith. Spend all your time figuring out who the Nephilim of Genesis were, and you'll fail to understand the worship of our God. Spend all your time arguing whether the number of the beast is 666 or 616, whether Paul, Barnabas or Luke wrote Hebrews, whether Melchizedek was actually Shem, you might have a lot of fun doing so, but you are straining out gnats, and will end up swallowing camels.

Read the whole Bible. Read right through it. Read entire books in one sitting. Study whole books at a time. Read all the texts in their context. That's when you will begin to be able to compare Scripture with Scripture to decide both doctrinal questions and practical questions. And when you put various Scriptures on the scale, Scriptures that intend to answer what you're asking have greater weight than incidental ones. Scriptures that prescribe or teach commands or concepts have greater weight than those that describe what believers did. And Scriptures that can really only have one, clear meaning carry greater weight, and help explain those that can mean multiple things and are harder to explain.

It was said of Apollos in Acts 18:24 that he was mighty in the Scriptures, meaning greatly competent. This is my prayer for each of us that hear this, that we would discern the Word and become such.