GUIDELINES AND GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

| **GUIDELINE[[1]](#footnote-1)** | **GUIDING QUESTIONS** |
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| 1. **Read/study in a state of reverence and prayer**  * “The work of interpretation leads to God's authoritative and convincing word for us only through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. All interpretation should be undertaken in reverence and prayer for that illumination.” (p. 15) * “After we have done the best we can with all the means at our disposal, we depend upon God's Spirit to enable us rightly to hear and believe and obey.” (p. 15) | (Before reading)   * 1. Have I prayed? Is my attention focused?   (As I read the passage or immediately after an initial reading of the passage)   * 1. What words, phrases, or ideas draw my attention? Why am I drawn to those right now?   2. What words, phrases, or ideas make me raise my eyebrows?   3. What questions come/came to me during my reading?   (As I study or as I reflect upon my study, after following the remaining guidelines)   * 1. What is my “take-away” from this study? What does this mean for me, now, individually and/or for my family, church, or world?   2. What will I do differently as a result of this study? |
| 1. **Attend to the literary and historical context**  * “The kind of literary material being interpreted should be respected in determining what is said. Epic poetry is not historical chronicle; symbolic stories are not science; and admonition to a particular person or community is not general law.” (p. 13) * “The language of biblical texts is to be understood in the light of what can be learned about the history of their composition…Every text was written by someone, sometime, somewhere, or some reason, using the genres of types of communication available in the cultural setting.” (p. 12) * “The biblical text in Hebrew and Greek is to be used in theological work. Translations are to be tested by these original languages.” (p. 6) | (Using commentary/notes in your Bible or other resources)   1. What type of book/writing is this (law, song, historical account, letter, etc.)? What are the features of this kind of text? 2. What do I know about this book’s author, purpose, audience? 3. When was it written and what was going on then? 4. Are there words that are translated differently in another Bible translation? How does that change the meaning of the passage? 5. Are there certain words that may have different meanings in their original language or in that time period than how I interpret those words now? 6. How does knowing the literary and historical context affect my understanding of this passage, especially the parts that grabbed my attention in my first reading? 7. What questions does this literary and/or historical context raise about parts of this passage? |
| 1. **Apply Scripture to the interpretation of Scripture**  * “Literary units (passages, paragraphs, …etc.) are to be understood in terms of the relation they bear to the larger whole of the book in which they stand.” * “A special dimension of this guideline has to do with the interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the New Testament, as well as the interpretation of the New Testament in light of the Old Testament. Thus the New Testament's emphasis on the gospel is not to be understood apart from the Old Testament's emphasis on the grace of the law; and the Old Testament's emphasis on the law is not to be understood apart from the New Testament's emphasis on the grace of the gospel.” (p. 17) | 1. What’s going on (in the Bible) before this passage and after this passage? 2. Does anything from this passage show up in another place in the Bible? How/why is it related? 3. What questions do I have about this passage and how it connects to other passages? |
| 1. **Interpret all Scripture in light of the centrality of Jesus and the Rule of Love (to love God and neighbor)**    * “No understanding of what Scripture teaches us to believe and do can be correct that ignores or contradicts the central and primary revelation of God and God's will through Jesus Christ made known through the witness of Scripture.” (p. 16)    * “When we encounter apparent tensions and conflicts in what Scripture teaches us to believe and do, the final appeal must be to the authority of Christ (DF VI.3).” (p. 17)    * “The fundamental expression of God's will is the two-fold commandment to love God and neighbor, and all interpretations are to be judged by the question whether they offer and support the love given and commanded by God. When interpretations do not meet this criterion, it must be asked whether the text has been used correctly in the light of the whole Scripture and its subject.” (p. 18) | 1. Does the message of this passage fit with what I know about Jesus and his priorities? How do I know? 2. How does it expand or enrich my previous understanding? 3. Does this message conflict with the commandment to love God and neighbor? Does it reinforce it? 4. After contemplating how the passage relates to Jesus and the Greatest Commandment, what questions do I have? |
| 1. **Test with the community of faith (but recognize the fallibility of all interpretation).**  * “[S]ince the guidance of the Holy Spirit is promised to individual Christians for the sake of building up and equipping the community of Christians for its mission in the world, the church's consensus is likely to be more accurate than the opinions of individual persons.” (p. 19) * “[N]o doctrinal or ethical interpretation of Scripture, whether long established or new, is to be accepted as a final word, but is always subject to possible revision and correction as a result of further study of Scripture.” (p. 20) | (Upon sharing possible interpretations with others)   * 1. How does my interpretation compare to those in commentaries, sermons, and other writings on the topic?   2. Does my interpretation make sense to others in my community of faith?   3. How does my community of faith respond to the questions I have brought to them based on my study? What can we figure out together? |

1. Bulleted quotes in the GUIDELINE column come from: *Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture* (A Position Statement Adopted by the 123rd General Assembly [1983] of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. <https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/_resolutions/scripture-use.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)