

## POSITION PAPER: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION CLEAR CREEK CHURCH OF CHRIST

### INTRODUCTION

The Biblical Interpretation position paper is born out of our love for the Bible and the God it reveals. The health of the Church, our families, city and world are directly affected by how well we understand and apply God's Word to our lives. This paper is intended to outline how we interpret Scripture and to give fellow students basic tools for studying the Bible for themselves.

It is divided into four parts:

- I. The Bible
- II. Biblical Interpretation
- III. Ten Interpretive Filters
- IV. How We Understand Biblical Silence

### I. THE BIBLE

The Bible is a library of 66 books written over a 1,500-year span on three different continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe) by more than 40 God-inspired authors who wrote in Hebrew (in the Old Testament), Aramaic (parts of Ezra and Daniel), and Greek (in the New Testament). It tells the unified story of God creating, loving, saving and restoring humanity through Jesus Christ.

We believe the Bible is...

**Inspired.** Inspired does not mean that God dictated each word recorded in Scripture. Rather, He communicated in a miraculous, unspecified way His intent through the biblical authors. In other words, the Bible is a human and divine book. This accounts for the different styles of writing while remaining God's Word. (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:21)

**Authoritative.** The Bible holds the same authority (control or power) over our lives as if God were speaking to us in an audible voice. Therefore, we submit to Scripture as the final arbiter on all issues. (Deuteronomy 4:1-2; Psalm 119:11, 89, 105; Isaiah 40:8; Matthew 22:29; John 5:39; 16:13-15; 17:17; Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Psalm 119:2; 2 Peter 1:19-21)

**Complete.** The 66 books of the Bible contain all we need for "life and godliness." (2 Peter 1:3) While non-canonical<sup>1</sup> books may be useful for understanding the historical context of certain biblical passages, they are neither inspired by God nor necessary for us to follow.

**About Jesus.** The Old Testament promises that God will rescue humanity through Jesus Christ and the New Testament reassures us that God is still rescuing humanity through Jesus. He is the hope of the world and the hero of Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> The word "canon," in biblical terms, refers to the 66 books of the Bible that are accepted as inspired by God.

## II. BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Studying the Bible consists of three parts: observation, interpretation and application. Observation asks, “What do I see happening in the text?” Interpretation asks, “What did the text mean to the original author and audience?” And application asks, “What does the text mean to me?”

Another word for interpretation is exegesis, which means “to lead out of.”<sup>2</sup> Our goal is to dig out what God meant within the text rather than insert our opinions into the text. Interpretation follows filters to bridge the gap between what we observe and how we apply God’s intended meaning.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, there are two challenges to correctly interpreting the Bible.

**First, the Bible is an ancient text.** From covenants to head coverings, the Bible is often hard to understand. This is because reading the Bible is like visiting a foreign country with its own culture, customs and language. It would be unwise and frustrating for us to carry our cultural views into the foreign soil of Scripture. Rather, we must interpret the Bible based on its cultures, customs and languages. As we do, we will understand God’s heart more clearly.<sup>4</sup>

**Second, everyone reads the Bible through their preexisting interpretive lens.** Our life experiences, personalities, upbringing, preferences and fears tint how we view everything including the Scriptures. It may not be possible to remove our preexisting interpretive lenses, but a careful interpretive plan will help us see biases and work past them.

For these reasons, we approach biblical interpretation with:

1. **Humility.** James 4:6 says, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Humility invites God’s grace when our reasoning is flawed and invites His Spirit’s work in understanding the Bible.
2. **Honesty.** First, we are honest with ourselves about our interpretive lenses. Second, we are honest with one another by challenging faulty views with deeper study.
3. **Honor.** Our goal is to honor God over winning an argument or causing dispute.

## III. TEN INTERPRETIVE FILTERS

At Clear Creek, we study the Bible by looking at texts through 10 filters. These filters are embedded in the Bible itself because, as we will discuss below, the Bible interprets itself.

**Filter #1: Prayer.** More than a filter, we rely on God’s Holy Spirit to reveal truth. Jesus promised that “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things...” (John 14:26 NIV) Begin every Bible study by inviting the Holy Spirit to direct our study and supernaturally reveal insights we cannot gain on our own.

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<sup>2</sup> Exegesis comes from the Greek words *ex* “out” and *hegeisthai* “to lead or guide”.

<sup>3</sup> The interpretive rules and tools a student follows is called his/her hermeneutic.

<sup>4</sup> For example, early Bible translators were unaware that the New Testament was written in koine Greek, which was the common man’s language. Some words had slightly different meanings in koine Greek than in classical Greek. This better understanding has led to more accurate Bible translations.

**Filter #2: Relationship.** Study the Bible to know and grow closer to God. The Bible is not primarily a rulebook to be followed, but a love story to be lived. God's commands are not fundamentally legal tests of loyalty, but God's guidelines for living well in relationship with Him and other people. As Dr. John Mark Hicks rightly explains,

“We do not obey commands to be saved, but (as the saved) to be transformed into Jesus' likeness. Jesus, himself, interpreted the Old Testament commands (i.e. Sabbath keeping) not as legal tests of loyalty to God, but as ways to become more like Him.”<sup>5</sup>

**Filter #3: Context** Interpret difficult passages with clear ones. This filter is sometimes called the law of non-contradiction. Because the Bible is God's word, and God is true, the Bible will not contradict itself. We look at the surrounding paragraph, chapter and book – expanding outward from the unclear passage until we find one that brings us clarity. If we cannot find clarity within the book, we expand our context search as follows:

- Other books by the same author
- Other books in the same genre as the unclear text (i.e. Gospels, Epistles, Poetic, etc.)
- Other books in the same time period or Testament (Old or New Testament)
- Finally, the Bible in its entirety

This filter is also referred to as the principle of “Scripture interpreting Scripture” because we are using clear Scriptures to help us interpret the unclear Scriptures. This filter only works because we believe all Scripture is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16 NIV).

**Filter #4: Genre.** Genre is a literary term having to do with the category of literature being studied. Proper interpretation takes the literary category of any given passage into consideration. Are we reading with poetry, history or prophecy? Understanding the genre does not devalue a text. Rather, it helps us to better understand what God's intent within the text.

Here are some books of the Bible and their respective genres:

- Psalms – Poetry
- Proverbs - Wise Sayings
- Isaiah - History and Prophecy
- The Gospels - Biography and History
- The Epistles - Teaching and Doctrine
- Revelation - Eschatology and Prophecy

**Filter #5: Chronology (Progressive Revelation).** God progressively revealed Himself to humanity little by little throughout biblical history. In the Old Testament, God revealed Himself primarily through people and prophets, but He revealed Himself through Jesus in the New Testament. The chronology filter asks where the passage fits within the Bible's timeline. Is it Old or New Testament? Does it precede or follow Jesus? As the old adage goes, “The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.”

One important note: We believe and celebrate that God continues to speak to us through His Holy Spirit in various ways. However, we believe that new revelation will never contradict preexisting revelation if it is from God.

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. John Mark Hicks, *Searching for the Pattern: My Journey in Interpreting the Bible* (2019), 135.

**Filter #6: Consistency.** Hebrews 13:8 says that God is the “*same yesterday, today, and forever.*” Although the way God interacted and communicated with humanity changed from the Old to the New Testament; His nature, will and character did not change. The consistency filter requires that our interpretation be consistent with who God is in Scripture.

**Filter #7: Word Definitions and Usage.** How did the original author and audience understand the meaning of the words in the text? Every culture uses words and phrases differently. For example, we might say that we “just flew in.” But we don’t mean that we personally flew like a bird. It is a cultural idiom. The Old Testament was written by, to, and for the Hebrew people. They understood the words and idioms. The majority of the New Testament was written in a milieu of Greco-Roman (and to a lesser extent Jewish) culture. We must not impose our modern usage into our interpretation. Rather, we always ask how the word was used in Scripture.

**Filter #8: Logic (Non-Contradiction).** Does the interpretation make logical sense? The Bible was given to us in the form of human language and therefore appeals to human reason – it invites investigation. It is to be interpreted with the laws of language and grammatical analysis.

**Filter #9: Precedence.** We avoid new interpretations that have no historical backing within the Lord’s Church. Over the past 2,000 years, Christians have dealt with virtually every issue. While Christians are not our final authority on a text, we are wary of interpretations that contradicts historic, Christian doctrine.

**Filter #10: God’s Word is the final word.** Scripture is sufficient unto itself. We do not interpret Scripture in light of personal experience or cultural norms. Rather, we ask Scripture to inform our personal experiences and cultural views.

## IV. HOW WE UNDERSTAND BIBLICAL SILENCE

Some Christians use an additional interpretive filter called “the regulative principle.” It holds that we may only do what the Bible explicitly commands or models. In this view, silence equals restriction. We, however, tend toward the “normative principle,” which states that we are free to do whatever the Bible does not forbid. We believe this position best mirrors how Jesus lived.

Jesus himself embraced the innovations of Hanukah (John 10:22-23) and the synagogue system (Luke 4:16) even though neither were commanded by God. He was silent about them. Hannukah was created between the Old and New Testaments and the Synagogue system was established during the Jewish exile in Babylon. Yet, Jesus felt free to participate in them.

Just because something isn’t in the Bible doesn’t make it unbiblical. By unbiblical, we mean contrary to the teachings of Scripture. There is another category—abiblical—and this carries a very different connotation. It simply means that there is no precedent in Scripture. Does that make it unbiblical? Not necessarily. There is no precedent for pulpits or hymnals or devotionals. But as long as the methodology doesn’t contradict orthodox theology, we are on good ground. We might even be on holy ground.