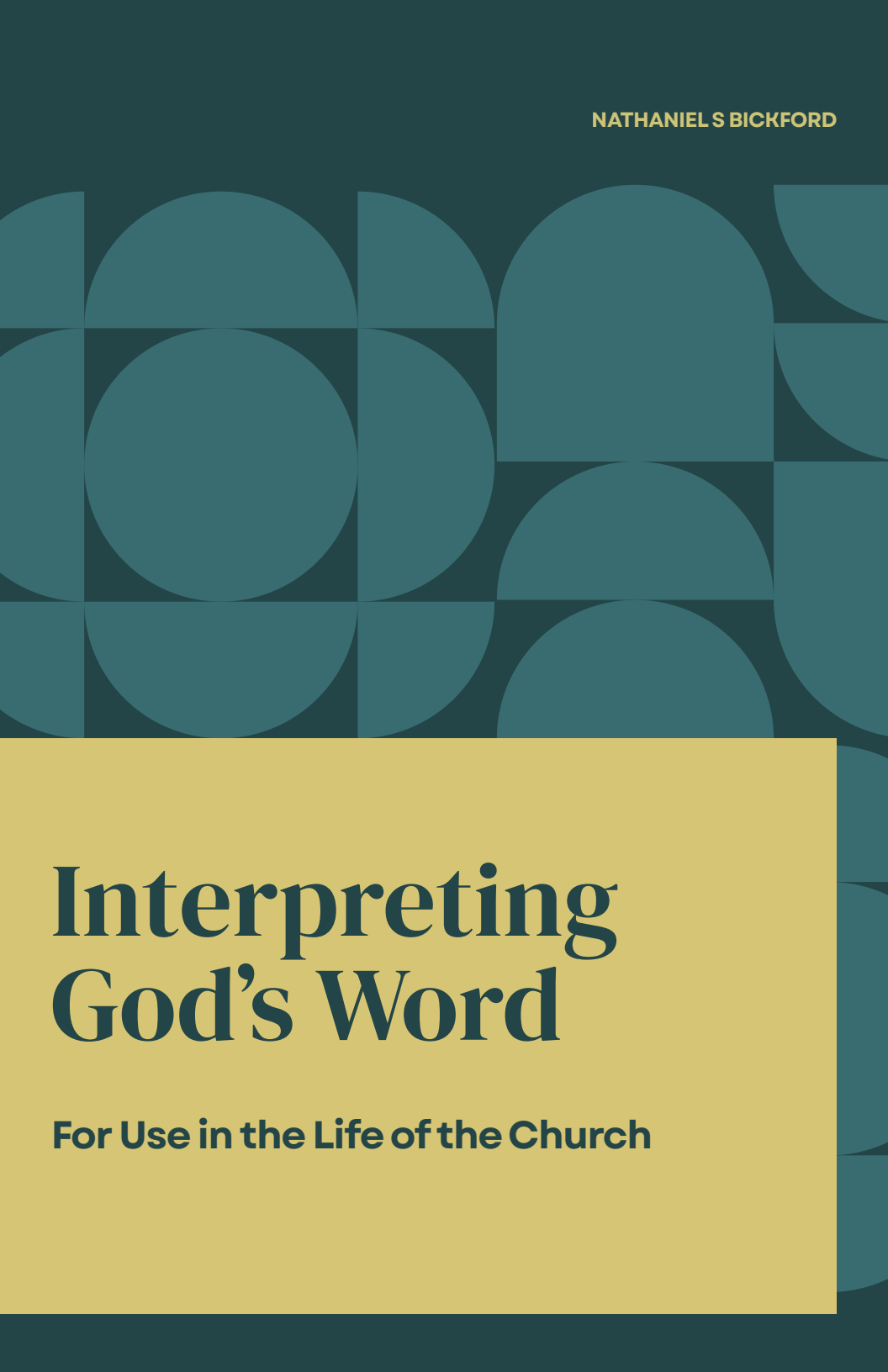




NATHANIEL S BICKFORD

Interpreting God's Word

For Use in the Life of the Church

Dear servants of Christ,

Reading, studying, and communicating God's Word is one of the most important things we do as Christians. The goal of this booklet is to give us basic methods and guidelines for interpreting God's Word as He would have us to do, that we may remain faithful to the calling he has given us and rightly divide the word of truth.

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.

~ II Timothy 2:15



Pray

For the Holy Spirit to shine his light in our hearts and minds.

I Corinthians 2:12-13

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

Prayer is the necessary first step to any reading or study of God's Word. For us to rightly understand what is taught, we must have the Holy Spirit at work within us. Our hearts and minds are darkened by our own sin and the influence of Satan and the world, but the Holy Spirit shines the lights of God in Christ Jesus, penetrating the darkness so that we might understand and believe what God says in his Word.

Principles

1. **Depend** on the Holy Spirit. True understanding comes from God alone. (Psalm 119:18)
2. **Seek** holiness and humility. Sin and pride blind us, but God's work and Word opens our eyes so that we will both know and obey. (James 1:21-25; John 7:17-18)
3. **Ask** for light, not new revelation. God has already spoken, and continues to speak in, his holy, and complete Word.
4. **Pray** to see Christ in all of Scripture.

Read

The passage and its context.

This may seem obvious, but it can be easily overlooked. The idea here is not to simply read through a passage quickly, but to read it thoroughly, perhaps even multiple times, in order to gain familiarity and to bypass our preconceived notions of what we have read.

Psalm 119:15-16

I will meditate on
your precepts
and fix my eyes on
your ways.
I will delight in your
statutes;
I will not forget your
word.

Principles

1. **Approach** the Bible with reverence: this is God's Word, not man's word. (II Timothy 3:16)
2. **Treat** the Bible as entirely true and trustworthy. (John 17:17; Numbers 23:19)
3. **Read** repeatedly. With familiarity comes greater understanding. (Psalm 1:2)
4. **Read** alone and in community, with the local church and the church throughout the ages, since the Spirit gives light to all of God's people.

Observe

What does the passage say?

Observation helps us to slow down and notice the passage itself rather than what we expect to find in it. It should be our desire to bring forth God's Word clearly, rather than to place our own thinking and desires upon the Bible.

Answer basic questions

- **Who** wrote the passage, **who** is it written to, **who** is mentioned?
- **What** topics are discussed, **what** words are used, **what** is repeated or unusual?
- **Where** and **when** did the people live?
- **Why** does the author write these things and **how** does he choose to express his thoughts?

Principles

1. **Understand** the basic themes of the passage.
2. **Notice** key words, phrases, and repetitions.
3. **Distinguish** between things that are clear and those that are unclear.
4. **Observe** how the text challenges the ideas you bring to it.

Interpret

What does the passage mean?

Interpretation is understanding the meaning of a text. It is easy for us to have an idea in mind and use Scripture to support our idea. The goal, however, is to conform our thinking to what Scripture teaches. Therefore, we want the Bible to speak for itself, to explain itself, and then to change our thinking. This requires us to focus on the Word of God first and foremost.

Key Steps

- **Answer** questions that remain from your observations.
- **Identify** the main idea, then the supporting ideas.
- **Connect** this passage with the rest of Scripture to see how it all fits together.
- **Use** other resources (like a Bible dictionary or commentary, if available) to deepen your understanding of the author's intent.

Principles

1. **Focus** on the plain reading of the text, considering the genre of the passage.
2. **Remember** that Christ is central in all of Scripture and view all of God's Word within the history of redemption.
3. **Use** Scripture to interpret Scripture. The clear passages shed light in the more difficult passages.
4. **Bridge** the timeless meaning of the Bible to your own context.

Genre

The specific type of literature used in a particular passage or book of the Bible.

- **Historical Narrative** communicates historical events. (ex. Luke)
- **Epistles** are letters that communicate teaching and application to an individual or group of people. (ex. Romans)
- **Law** is a series of rules or statutes explaining how people ought to live in relation to God and man. Laws in the Bible can be *moral* (universal for all people), *civil* (moral laws applied to a particular nation), and *ceremonial* (Old Testament application of laws pointing to Christ). (ex. Leviticus)
- **Poetry** is highly expressive and structured, making use of much imagery and figurative language. In the Old Testament, this is usually characterized by pairs of lines in parallel with each other. (ex. Psalms)
- **Wisdom Literature** is general instructions and principles that help us to live well in this world. (ex. Proverbs)
- **Prophecy** communicates direct messages from God to people usually accompanied by calls to action. Although it sometimes includes telling about future events, it is primarily giving a specific message to the hearers. (ex. Isaiah)
- **Parables** are short stories used to communicate a particular spiritual lesson or message. The focus is not on each individual detail, but on the main idea. (ex. Matthew 13:1-23)
- **Apocalyptic Literature**, like the book of Revelation, communicates spiritual truth, which is usually prophetic, through significant images and symbols. (ex. Revelation)

Relating the Testaments

The Bible is one united story.

God has given us a complete, unified account of redemptive history. The Old Testament tells the beginning of this true story through real events, promises, types, and shadows that point to salvation from God, worked out in Christ within human history. The New Testament builds upon the foundations of the Old, making known the mysteries that were once hidden. Together, the Old and New Testaments give us the complete picture of what the Maker of Heaven and Earth has done to redeem his rebellious people.

Hebrews 1:1-2

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

See also Luke 24:27

Principles

1. **Pointing Forward:**
The Old Testament points ahead to the New Testament.
2. **Fulfillment:**
The New Testament fulfills, but does not cancel, the Old Testament.
3. **Law & Gospel:**
All of the Old Testament law points to the need for Christ and his righteous sacrifice. The moral law remains in effect for all people at all times.
4. **Christ the Center:**
Jesus, the Son of God, is the center point of all of Scripture, Old and New Testaments.

Apply

How does this passage change people?

If the former steps are completed, but this one is ignored, then all the rest was in vain. God's Word is intended to communicate the truth and by it to change those who read and hear it.

Consider, then, how all that you have learned impacts your life, and the lives of others. Does it change how you think about God or yourself? Does it call you to more fully glorify God or follow him? Is there an instruction, whether directly or by example, to repent of sin or change your behavior? Or perhaps the call that is given is to have greater faith in the Triune God in the midst of sorrows, sufferings, trials, and tribulations.

Principles

1. **Apply** to yourself first, and then to other people.
2. **Draw** applications from the interpretation of the text rather than from your own thinking.
3. **Focus** on timeless truths. What principles apply to all of God's people in any location, time, or culture?
4. **Make** application relevant to your current context and situation.
5. **Relate** application to the head (what we think), heart (what we believe), and hands (what we do).
6. **Emphasize** the work of Christ in redemption, even when morals are the focus.

Communicate

Share what God has taught you through conversation, teaching, and preaching.

Share

- What is said;
- Why it is true;
- How it changes our lives;
- All according to the gracious work of the Triune God.

All followers of Christ are called to communicate the Word of God to those who will listen. This is especially true for pastors and elders within each church, for we are told to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching (II Timothy 4:2).” How we communicate matters. As with the previous steps, the focus must always be on what God says (both the meaning and application of any particular passage), not on what we say.

Principles

1. **Exalt** Christ, not yourself.
2. **Be Faithful** to God’s Word, not your word, speaking the message that God has written for us from the text you have studied.
3. **Speak** the truth with love.
4. **Preach** clearly and persuasively, but particularly relying on the Holy Spirit to cause people to listen and receive the Word.
5. **Give** the hearers both doctrine and application. Help them to know what to believe and then what to do with that belief.

A Brief Example

Titus 3:4-7

Reminder to look back. We must live differently from the world, knowing that we were once just like the world.

[4] **But** when the goodness and loving kindness of **God our Savior**

The Gospel made known in Christ!

appeared, [5] **he** saved us, not because of works done by us in

We can't save ourselves.

righteousness, but according to **his own** mercy,

God the Father has had compassion on his rebellious people.

by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,

We are made clean and new through the work of God the Spirit.

A valuable blessing!

[6] **whom** **he** poured out on us richly through **Jesus Christ our**

Savior,

There is only one savior, see Isaiah 43:11.

This links the Father and Son together.

What changes in us? There is an important result!

[7] **so that** being justified by **his grace** we might become heirs

Undeserved good favor from God.

according to the hope of eternal life.

In Christ, by the Spirit, we receive an inheritance from the Father: eternal life.

Summary

Salvation for lost sinners is the expression of God's goodness and loving kindness, and it has come to the lost from God the Father, by God the Spirit, through God the Son. This rich blessing takes people, lost in their trespasses and sins, and gives them a firm, enduring hope, making them now able to live a new life unto God.

The Whitefield League