

The PC(USA): *Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture* (G.A., 1983)

In matters that are so obscure and far beyond our vision, we find in Holy Scripture passages which can be interpreted in very different ways without prejudice to the faith we have received. In such cases, we should not rush in headlong and so firmly take our stand on one side that, if further progress in the search for truth justly undermines this position, we too fall with it.

St. Augustine of Hippo

Ordination Vow: Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's Word to you

Confession of 1967

"The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel."

a) Authority

Calvin's Institutes 1.7.4,5: ***Thus, the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it. The prophets and apostles do not boast either of their keenness or of anything that obtains credit for the words they speak; nor do they dwell upon rational proofs...we ought to seek our[conjecture]in a higher place than human reasons judgments, or conjectures, that is, in the secret testimony of the Spirit. ... they who strive to build up firm faith in Scripture through disputation are doing things backwards...unbelieving men both wish and demand rational proof that Moses and the prophets spoke divinely. But I reply: the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness to himself in his Word so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. ...Scripture indeed is self authenticated hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning.***

- b) UNIQUE: The Precedence of Holy Scripture: "In matters of faith, life, and salvation, Scripture takes precedence over all other authorities." (*Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture, General Assembly, 1983*)
- c) The Purpose of Holy Scripture (*Presbyterian Understanding and Use of Holy Scripture, General Assembly, 1983*)

“Scripture provides the knowledge of what is necessary for the glory of God and for human faith, life, and salvation. The subject of the Bible as Holy Scripture is God and God's way with humanity and the world...The purpose of Scripture has to do with questions about the ultimate origin, meaning, and goal of human life in relation to God, all of which lie behind or beyond the scope of secular scientific and historical disciplines. ...Conversely, this guideline means that Scripture is not authoritative for any and everything, in any and every question. It is not an encyclopedia of information about every area of human knowledge and understanding. So, for instance, it is not appropriate to go to the biblical sources for scientific understanding of such things as biology, astronomy, the structure of the universe, or historical knowledge in general.”

Historical Background

Rules for Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition

- a. Scripture is to be interpreted with confidence in and openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- b. The scripture principle: Scripture is to be interpreted in light of scripture, comparing scripture with scripture, with openness to hear the whole Word of God, not just selected parts of it.
- c. The Christological principle: Scripture is to be interpreted in light of God's central self-revelation in Jesus Christ.
- d. The rule of love: scripture is to be interpreted in light of the one commandment of God that summarizes all other commandments, love for God and for all our neighbors.
- e. The rule of faith: Scripture is to be interpreted with respect for the church's past and present interpretation of scripture.
- f. Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the literary forms and historical context in which it was written.
- g. Scripture is to be interpreted seeking the word and work of the living God in our time and place.
- h. Scripture is to be interpreted with awareness of our limitations and fallibility and with openness to change our mind and be corrected. “Reformed” means always being reformed afresh by the Word of God.

Where these rules are discussed in the Presbyterian Book of Confessions:

- ♦ Scots Confession, Chapters XVIII and XIX
- ♦ Second Helvetic Confession, Chapters I and II
- ♦ Westminster Confession, Chapter I
- ♦ Shorter Catechism, Questions 89 and 90
- ♦ Declaration of Barmen, 8.10-12
- ♦ Confession of 1967, 9.27-30

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