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Graspig God's Word

your guide to understanding and applying the Bible

JOURNEY INTO GOD'S WORD

ZONDERVAN

Journey into God's Word

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*To those who labor to teach
God's people how to understand
and apply God's Word*

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Who Controls the Meaning, the Reader or the Author?

When Danny's kids were small, one of their favorite videos was the old movie *The Wizard of Oz*. This movie is based on the book by L. Frank Baum. To Danny's young children this delightful tale was about a young girl named Dorothy and her cute dog, Toto, who overcame the odds and defeated the powerful and scary "bad guys" (the wicked witches) with some help from Dorothy's nice new friends. To the young children the story had this simple meaning.

If we observe the story closely, however, and if we start to poke around into the historical background of the time Baum wrote the book, a different meaning surfaces. One of the hottest political debates going on in America when Baum wrote this story was over the issue of whether America should continue to use the gold standard as the basis for the U.S. dollar or whether it should switch to silver. This historical context suggests that the main line of the book ("Follow the yellow brick road!") may be a reference to the central political issue of the day. Remember that although the yellow brick road led to the great wizard of Oz, once Dorothy arrived there, she discovered he was a fraud. Dorothy's real hope lay in her shoes. In Baum's book the shoes are *silver*. Hollywood changed them to ruby so they would show up better in color for the movie. So, perhaps the book falls into the classification of political satire.

According to this line of interpretation, the characters in the story then probably represent different segments of American society. The Scarecrow represents the farmers (supposedly, no brains). Who would the Tin Woodsman represent? The factory workers (no heart). And the cowardly lion perhaps represents the political leadership of the country.

We also meet the wicked witch of the east (the East Coast establishment?) and the wicked witch of the west (the West Coast establishment?). And who is the heroine? Middle America—Dorothy from Kansas.¹³

So, who is right? Are Danny's kids *wrong* to interpret the story as a simple tale of good triumphing over evil? Did not the author intend it to be read as political satire? Are we wrong if we understand it otherwise? What *is* the meaning of the story? And *who* determines that meaning?

This question about meaning has prompted a lively and sometimes heated debate, not only in secular literary circles, but also among students and scholars of the Bible. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the traditional approach to interpreting any literature, biblical or secular, was to assume that the author determines the meaning and the reader's job is to find that meaning. Within the world of secular literary criticism, however, this approach came under attack throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, and many literary critics today argue that it is the *reader*, and not the *author*, who determines what a text *means*.

This view has drifted over from secular literary criticism into the field of biblical interpretation. Many biblical scholars began probing the question, *What is meaning?* Some concluded that the term *meaning* only applies as a reader interacts with a text—that it takes both reader and text to produce *meaning*. The author, they argue, is no longer involved.

Of course, there remain those who maintain that the original author still controls the meaning. As an author writes, they argue, he or she intends to convey a certain meaning in the text. This intended meaning of the author's is the true meaning of the text.

The position that stresses the author in the determination of meaning is called *authorial intention*. The opposing view, which focuses on the reader as the main character in the determination of meaning, is called *reader response*. Both positions have strong arguments. Which approach should we take?

Communication—the Central Issue

Certainly the reader has the freedom to interpret a text any way he or she chooses. No one will force you to read *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* as

political satire. So the author has control of the meaning only so far as the reader allows him to. But suppose, for example, that you receive a mushy love poem written to you by your girlfriend or boyfriend. As you read each word and line of the poem, you will be searching for the meaning that your girlfriend or boyfriend intended. You will want to know what he or she is trying to say *to you*. In this situation you will be following the *authorial intention* approach because you are viewing the text as *communication* between the author and yourself. You know the author and you want to know what the author is saying to you. You will be asking the interpretive question, *What does the author mean?*

Let's assume, however, that one day as you walk through the woods, you find a piece of paper on the ground with a love poem written on it. The author is not even identified. The poem, however, is beautiful, and you enjoy it as you read. In this situation you may not care what the author intended or what the author meant. You do not even know who the author is. You have the freedom in this situation to read and interpret according to *reader response*. Your interpretive question will change to *What does this mean to me?* In the woods with an anonymous poem you are free to ignore the author and his or her meaning.

In many situations, however, it is extremely important that we search for the author's meaning because of serious negative consequences that will come if we misunderstand or intentionally ignore the meaning the author intended. For example, one of the most common literary texts in America is the big word STOP painted on the red octagonal signs at many street intersections across the country. If you choose to, you can follow a *reader response* approach and interpret the text to mean: *slow down just a bit, look for cars, and then speed on through the intersection*. Or perhaps it means Spin Tires On Pavement! The police, however, believe strongly in *authorial intent* for the determination of meaning, so they will respond to your interpretation with a traffic ticket and fine.

The issue of communication, therefore, lies at the heart of one's decision about how to interpret a text. If you, the reader, see the text as a communication between the author and yourself, you should search for the meaning that the *author intended*. If, however, you as the reader do not care to communicate with the author, then you are free to follow

reader response and interpret the text without asking what the author meant. In some cases, however, there may be negative consequences for such a reading.

Can you see how this discussion applies to reading and interpreting the Bible? This is an important issue—one that lies at the foundation of our approach to interpreting Scripture. If you read the Bible merely as great literature, merely for its aesthetic value, or merely for its suggestive moral guidance, not as communication from God, then you can interpret the text in any way you choose. Your main interpretive question will be: *What does this text mean to me?* If, however, you believe that the Bible is God's revelatory Word to you and that the Scriptures function as communication from God to you, you should interpret the Bible by looking for the meaning that God, the author, intended. Your interpretive question should be: *What is the meaning God intended in this text?*

We believe strongly that the Bible is a revelation from God to us. God's purpose is to *communicate* with us about himself and his will for us. We can choose to ignore his message and interpret biblical texts according to our feelings and desires, but if we do, we will suffer the consequences of disobedience. We will also miss out on knowing God in the way he desires. So it is essential that we follow the *authorial intent* approach to interpreting the Bible. In biblical interpretation, the reader does not control the meaning; the author controls the meaning. This conclusion leads us to one of the most basic principles of our interpretive approach: *We do not create the meaning. Rather, we seek to discover the meaning that has been placed there by the author.*

Definitions

At this juncture it is also important that we define the terms *meaning* and *application*. We will use the term *meaning* to refer to that which the author wishes to convey with his signs.¹⁴ Signs are simply the different conventions of written language—grammar, syntax, word meanings, and so on. Thus, in biblical interpretation meaning is not determined by the reader. Meaning is what the author intended to communicate when he wrote the text.

What the reader does with the meaning is *application*. Once we identify the meaning in the text that God is trying to communicate to us, then we must respond to that meaning. We use the term *application* to refer to the response of the reader to the meaning of the text. Thus, it would be incorrect for us to ask in a Bible study, "What does this passage *mean* to you?" The correct question sequence is, "What does this passage *mean*? How should you *apply* this meaning to your life?"

Applying the Meaning

We cannot apply the Bible without knowing what it means, but we can know the Bible without applying it. We can investigate context, analyze words, and even memorize chapters, but unless we act on what we know, we do not truly understand that Word. Knowledge by itself is not enough; it should lead to action.

We began the Interpretive Journey by discovering the meaning of the text in the town of the biblical audience. Then we measured the width of the river of differences and crossed the principlizing bridge. Now it is time to ask, "How can we apply the meaning of the text in our town?"

Keep in mind that there is a vast difference between knowing how to apply a biblical text and actually applying that text in your life. Once you know how a text could be applied, it is up to you to submit to the Spirit of God and live out the application. For example, in Ephesians 4:26 we are told not to let the sun go down while we are still angry. We find in this verse the *theological principle* of putting a fairly short time limit on dealing with anger. As a volatile emotion, if anger goes unchecked for long, it can do major damage. One *application* of this principle would be to make sure that when you get angry with your spouse or someone at work, you deal with the problem as soon as possible (e.g., before the end of the day).

We will now show you how to determine valid applications for theological principles you have discovered in a biblical text. Since applications may vary from reader to reader, we need a reliable method of making sure that the applications are within the boundaries established by the author's meaning. Our approach to applying biblical meaning follows

the steps of the Interpretive Journey you are already familiar with (see chapter 1). We can expand Step 4 as we detail the application process into several substeps:

- a. Observe how the principles in the text address the original situation.
- b. Discover a parallel situation in a contemporary context.
- c. Make your application specific.

We will illustrate the application of process using Philippians 4:13, a popular text that is often misapplied: "I can do everything through him [Christ] who gives me strength." In each section, we will cite the step, discuss the process, and then apply it to our example.

Step 1: Grasp the text in their town by summarizing the original situation (historical-cultural context) and the meaning of the text for the biblical audience.

Regarding Philippians 4:13, we should note that Paul is writing this letter while in prison awaiting trial (1:7, 13–14, 17). His faithfulness to Christ in the ministry of the gospel has landed him in prison. In this friendship letter, he exhorts the Philippians to stand firm in the face of external opposition and warns them against internal fighting. He reports about his own situation and thanks them for their ministry to him. In Philippians 4:10–13, Paul acknowledges their monetary gift sent through their mutual friend, Epaphroditus. He also wants to make it clear that while he is most grateful for their gift, his ministry is ultimately dependent on Christ.

Step 2: Measure the width of the river to cross. What are the differences between the biblical situation and our situation?

When we interpret New Testament letters, normally the river is not very wide or deep. There are exceptions, of course (e.g., dealing with the passage about meat offered to idols in 1 Corinthians), but usually this is the case. Regarding the Philippians passage, there are a few differences. Paul is an apostle and we are not apostles. Paul is in prison and most of us have not been imprisoned for our faith (or for any other reason, we hope). Neither are we members of the Philippian church that have supported Paul's ministry financially.

But there are also similarities. We are New Testament Christians under the same covenant. We are also members of Christ's body, the church.

Moreover, many of us experience difficult situations as we seek to live out our faith. For the most part, the river of differences for Philippians 4:13 is not wide.

Step 3: Cross the principlizing bridge. List the theological principles communicated by the passage.

As for Philippians 4:13, you could say, "Believers can learn to be content in a variety of circumstances through Christ, who gives them strength." Or you might prefer, "Christ will give believers strength to be content in a variety of trying circumstances that come as a result of following him faithfully."

Step 4: Grasp the text in our town. How should individual Christians today apply the theological principles in their lives? This step consists of several substeps.

a. Observe how the principles in the text address the original situation.

Look carefully at how the biblical principle addresses the historical-cultural situation. What you see in this intersection between the text and the situation is the heart and soul of the application process. There will be certain *key elements* present in the intersection of text and situation that will prove significant for the rest of the application process.

As the principle in Philippians 4:13 intersects with the historical-cultural situation, several key elements emerge:

Element 1: A Christian (Paul)

Element 2: A Christian who is experiencing a variety of trying circumstances as a result of following Christ faithfully (Paul is in prison because of his service in the cause of Christ)

Element 3: Christ's promise to give the Christian strength to endure whatever the circumstances

With key elements in hand we are ready to connect to our world and make application to our lives.

b. Discover a parallel situation in a contemporary context.

In applying the Bible we have to be students not only of the biblical world but also of our own world. Search for a situation in your life (or your world) that parallels the biblical situation. When we speak of a *parallel*

situation, we mean a situation that contains *all* of the key elements you identified in the previous step.

Below we provide two scenarios. The first is only an apparent parallel situation since it does not contain all the key elements; the second is a genuine parallel that does contain all the key elements.

Example 1. Philippians 4:13 has become a popular theme verse for Christian athletes in American society. The verse was even prominently displayed on the robe of a recent championship boxer. The phrase "I can do everything" no doubt motivated the boxer to defeat his opponent or at least to do his best.

Assuming that Paul and the boxer are both Christians (element 1 above) and that they both look to Christ for strength (element 3), we are still missing at least one key element of the intersection between the original situation and the text (element 2). Paul and the boxer have radically different understandings of the expression, "I can do everything." A close look at the literary context of Philippians 4:13 reveals that the word "everything" refers to a variety of trying circumstances. At this point in his life, Paul is experiencing a trial of need rather than a trial of plenty. When Paul says he can "do everything," he is referring to being content or enduring rather than conquering. There is a big difference between the "trials" of athletic competition and the trial of being imprisoned for your faith.

We misapply the Bible when we grab a situation that is not a genuine parallel. There may be a superficial connection, but one or more of the key elements are missing. Ultimately when we misapply the Bible, we hurt people by pointing them toward false realities. People put their hope in something they think is true when it is not, and they suffer for it. In our example from Philippians, the principle of contentment in Christ whatever the circumstances is replaced by a proof text calling on God to help us win the game or the contest. How does this misapplication affect the faith of a losing boxer? Couldn't the boxer actually apply this verse more appropriately after a serious defeat? What do you suppose God should do if this boxer fought another Christian boxer who also claimed the promise of Philippians 4:13?

Example 2. You are a single mother whose non-Christian husband recently deserted you because of your commitment to Christ. Your two

small children suddenly find themselves without a father. The sense of personal failure weighs heavy. The social pressure of what people will say lingers. You face overwhelming financial burdens and worry about how you will survive on your part-time job. As life seems to crumble around you, God has given you an unshakable peace that Jesus Christ is with you, that he understands, and that he will see you through.

In this last scenario all the key elements are present: (1) a Christian (2) who is experiencing tough circumstances because of his or her commitment to Christ (3) but who looks to Christ for strength to endure. As you identify contemporary situations that are parallel, you can have confidence that you are applying the meaning of the biblical text rather than an invented meaning. The next step is to be even more specific with your application.

c. Make your applications specific.

Once you have identified a parallel situation—a genuine parallel—you should give some thought to specific ways the biblical principle(s) might apply. What should the single mother think or do as she turns to Christ for strength? (We say *think* or *do* because applications may touch on ways of thinking as well as ways of acting or behaving.) If we never make our applications specific, people may not know how to live out the message of the Bible in the down and dirty of real life. Don't be afraid to make specific suggestions. People don't just need to know *what* to do; they also need to know *how* to do it.

Perhaps the best way to make your applications specific is by creating *real-world scenarios*. These scenarios function as illustrations or examples of how a person might put the biblical principles into practice. They help us move beyond abstract principles to capture the color and emotion of the biblical principle. We are quick to admit that these real-world scenarios are not on the same level as inspired Scripture; they are merely illustrations. But we intend for them to be guided by the Holy Spirit and to be faithful to the biblical principles (i.e., consistent with the author's intended meaning). We also want the contemporary audience to know that God's Word is eternally relevant. Real-world scenarios should be both faithful to the meaning of the text and relevant to the contemporary audience. Let's give it a try.

Example. A real-world scenario making specific applications for the single mother as introduced above.

As a single mother you could do several things—get counsel from a mature Christian, write down your thoughts, and pray honestly. You may also want to study other biblical passages that speak about husband–wife relations, divorce, remarriage, and so forth. God will give you wisdom as you search his Word. There may be business people in your church who could assist you in making financial plans. Having a plan to provide for your kids will ease many of the day-to-day worries.

What about your husband? Throughout this entire ordeal you have been a faithful wife. You have prayed constantly that your husband would allow the Lord to calm his restless spirit, but he made a decision to leave. He knew that your ultimate loyalty was to the Lord and that you would follow Christ above all, even him. While his leaving has been tougher than you ever imagined, you have come to know God's grace and peace in ways that are beyond explanation. While you are frightened about the prospects of going it alone, you are not really alone. Of this one thing you are now sure: Your Lord will never abandon you—never! He always keeps his promises. You can do all things through Christ.

Real-world scenarios furnish a wonderful way of making specific applications that are both faithful to the original meaning of the text and relevant to contemporary life. This approach works especially well when interpreting biblical stories since you don't have to create entirely new scenarios. Instead, you just retell the biblical story for the contemporary audience (an approach sometimes referred to as *contemporization*). To contemporize a biblical story you retell the story so that the effect on the contemporary audience is equivalent to the effect on the original audience. We translate the meaning of the story into our own context and reproduce its effects on the contemporary audience.

One word of caution is in order concerning real-world scenarios. You need to study the biblical passage carefully, especially the historical-cultural and literary contexts, so that the real-world scenario you develop will accurately reflect the meaning of the biblical text. Otherwise you will be making a specific application for a biblical text that doesn't exist. It takes discipline, hard work, and creativity to come up with a scenario or

to retell a story in a way that is both relevant to the contemporary audience and faithful to the original meaning. Please, please do your homework so that your scenario will reflect that meaning.

Conclusion

Our approach to interpreting the Bible focuses on *authorial intent* rather than *reader response*. God has communicated with us through the Scriptures. He has worked through human authors to convey his meaning to us through the text. As readers we do not create the meaning; rather, we seek to find the meaning that has already been placed into the text by the author (both divine and human). This is why an understanding of careful reading, historical background, literary context, and translations is so important. These are the items we must grapple with if we are to determine the intended meaning of God, the author.

This also completes our approach to applying the meaning of the Bible. Because God's character and human nature do not change, his Word remains relevant! Our principlizing approach gives you a way to journey into God's Word that is relevant for every generation—not only for us, but also for our children, our grandchildren, our great grandchildren, and so on.

Some of you might be concerned that this method will restrict your freedom to apply the Scriptures. We remind you that as faithful readers our job is not to invent new meaning, but to apply the meaning that has been inscribed in the biblical text. Don't worry. You'll be able to find a number of parallel situations in your life or in your world that do contain all the key elements. And when you find a genuine parallel, you can be confident that you are applying the real meaning of the biblical text. Also, don't be afraid to make your applications specific by creating real-world scenarios or by contemporizing a biblical story. People need illustrations and examples of how the meaning might be lived out in real life. God wants his Word to sink deep into our hearts and minds and transform the way we live.

Before we move into the next chapters where you will learn how to interpret the various literary types found in the New Testament, we need

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to remember the main reason we come to the Bible in the first place. We study Scripture not just to learn more *about God*, but to *know and love God more*. He gave us his Word not just to fill our brains with biblical facts, but to change our lives. The plain intention of the divine Author is that we would understand God's Word and then apply it. Or, as Jesus said in John 14:21: "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me."

Discussion Questions

1. Why is the issue of who determines meaning (the author or the reader) such an important issue when it comes to studying the Bible?
2. Why is the issue of communication important to the discussion of authorial intent?
3. In the application process, why is it crucial to observe *all* the key elements that emerge from the intersection of the theological principle of the passage and the original situation?