

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

Table of Contents

The **bold print** below is the Table of Contents; the excerpts included from each section are direct quotations from the document, rather than paraphrases or summaries.

I. Introduction

That Holy Scripture is the “rule of faith and life” is a basic principle of the Reformation.

A. Variations on a Theme

The truth is that this affirmation is held and practiced among Presbyterians in a variety of ways.

B. Issues of Authority and Interpretation

To answer questions about [what kind of rule of faith and life Scripture is taken to be] in opposite ways is not to choose for or against the authority of Scripture; it is rather to choose one or another conception of the authority of Scripture... [Interpretation] concerns the determination of what a text of Scripture in the original actually says and the judgment of how what is said is properly used for governing faith and practice... In coming to grips with the differences among Presbyterians, it is important to note that while the problem is often voiced as one of authority, the more basic and pressing issue may be one of interpretation.

C. The Relationship of Authority and Interpretation

Interpretation may be regarded as the more critical issue because it is the functional expression of the Bible’s authority. The authority of the Bible is realized in its use, and apart from the interpretive use of it, its authority has no expression.

D. The Scope of This Study

The primary point of this study is to seek a common understanding of how Presbyterians might go about the task of using Scripture as the rule of faith and life... Such a common set of guidelines is not intended and should not be expected to result in unanimity in every respect... But a common agreement about principles can set the limits and lines for the practice of interpretation in the community.

E. Summary and Prospect

II. Guidelines for Interpretation

A. The Motives of These Guidelines

We call the books of the Bible “Holy Scripture” because of the continuous experience of the church that God by the Holy Spirit confronts us and communicates with us through them.

B. The Purpose of These Guidelines

These guidelines are proposed primarily for use on those occasions when Scripture is appealed to for guidance in making decisions about specific questions posed in the courts of the church.

C. The Development of These Guidelines

A primary interest in the development of these guidelines is to demonstrate their continuity with the Presbyterian and Reformed heritage of biblical interpretation.

III. Guidelines Concerning What the Text Says - exegesis

A. The Use of Original Languages

The biblical text in Hebrew and Greek is to be used in theological work. Translations are to be tested by these original languages.

B. The Employment of the Best Manuscripts

The best text as determined by textual criticism is to be used as the basis for study and translations.

C. The Priority of the Plain Sense of the Text

Various ways of reading and construing Scripture (allegory, second or deeper or spiritual meanings, free association) have been and may be useful in the many roles that Scripture has in the church. However, when establishing what the text says for the purpose of doctrinal and ethical deliberations, the objective is to identify the plain sense.

1. The Definition of Literary Units

Words, expressions and sentences should not be read in isolation from the context of which they are an integral part... Literary units are to be understood in terms of the relation they bear to the larger whole of the book in which they stand.

2. The Recognition of the Cultural Conditioning of Language

Language itself is a historical phenomenon... The validity of implications drawn from what a text says and the appropriateness of using it for theological purposes depends upon the recognition of its historical character.

3. The Understanding of Social and Historical Circumstances

While a particular text may name a subject with which we are also concerned in the present, the assumption should not be immediately made that the contemporary subject is the same as that addressed in the biblical text or that the circumstances and conditions of the biblical writer and modern interpreter are similar... The implications drawn from a text should not violate its purpose and character.

IV. Guidelines Concerning How the Text Is Rightly Used - theology

A. **The Purpose of Holy Scripture**

The purpose of Scripture has to do with questions about the ultimate origin, meaning, and goal of human life in relation to God... Scripture is not authoritative for any and everything, in any and every question.

B. **The Precedence of Holy Scripture**

In matters of faith, life, and salvation, Scripture takes precedence over all other authorities. However, the precedence of Scripture does not call for the disregard of other authorities.

1. **The Priority of Holy Scripture**

The witness of Scripture on matters within its purpose is authoritative over all other knowledge, opinions, and theories.... Since God is creator of all things, respect for the priority of Scripture does not exclude but requires respect for the subordinate, relative authority of such secular disciplines as the natural sciences, psychology, sociology, philosophy, economic and political research.

2. **The Use of Knowledge**

The way in which the biblical testimony should be used needs to be thought out in the light of contemporary claims, insights, and theories that bear on the question. Scripture as norm does not exhaust or limit what faith needs to know in seeking the most faithful course of obedience and confession.

3. **The Use of Experience**

The entire company of believers is both a resource and a participant in the process... The church in its institutional life must not discount the experience of its members, but hear their questions and receive their insights as opportunities to read Scripture again in the continuing search for positions and patterns of contemporary faithfulness.

C. **The Centrality of Jesus Christ**

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... Any teaching of the Bible on a matter of faith or life is to be used in a manner consistent with scriptural accounts of Jesus' own teaching and embodiment of the person and will of God.

D. **The Interpretation of Scripture by Scripture**

The observance of this principle involves searching of the whole of Scripture for all texts bearing on the question under consideration and using particular texts or groups of texts in the light of the whole... 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.

E. **The Rule of Love**

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... Any interpretation of Scripture is wrong that separates or sets in opposition love for God and love for fellow human being.

F. **The Rule of Faith**

Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the past and present Christian community's understanding of Scripture... The confessions understand full well that the church's traditional interpretation of Scripture is fallible and subject always to revision and correction. Nevertheless, they give it initial precedence over the interpretations of individuals, both because the understanding of the whole church over time is likely to be more adequate than the opinion of individual persons at one point in time and because Christ himself through the Holy Spirit has been at work in the church.

G. **The Fallibility of All Interpretation**

Every reading, confession, and theology that refers to Scripture is subject to testing by further and more faithful searching of the Scripture to see if it is genuinely in accord with the Bible's witness.

H. **The Relation of Word and Spirit**

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.

I. **The Use of All Relevant Guidelines**

No interpretation of Scripture based on a single one or several of the principles of interpretation we have mentioned is to be accepted without testing it also by all the others that may apply, or by still further principles of interpretation that may help us in the faithful, honest, and accurate use of Scripture.