

1-1-2000

## Critical Methodologies and the Bible as the Word of God

Markus H. McDowell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

McDowell, Markus H. (2000) "Critical Methodologies and the Bible as the Word of God," *Leaven*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol8/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu](mailto:bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu).

# Critical Methodologies and the Bible as the Word of God

BY MARKUS H. MCDOWELL

During the course of a church class, the teacher made a reference to “the author’s intention” concerning a book of the Bible. Immediately, a man raised his hand and pointed out that the Holy Spirit told the writer what to say, and that what the author meant had no bearing on the meaning of the text. Statements such as these are often emotional responses to perceived threats on traditional interpretative methods and hermeneutics. Yet underlying the statements are important questions that all Christians should consider. How do we determine the meaning of any particular biblical passage? How do we discern the truth contained therein?

Some would suggest that one does not “interpret” the Bible but simply listens to what it says. Surely this is naive, when we see numerous meanings proposed for a variety of passages. How can we be sure our own understanding is correct? Since the vast majority of Christians would agree that scripture contains the word of God, how can we know we are listening correctly to what the Bible says?

The simple answer is that we look for controls—some method or principles that will allow us to check our reading and understanding of a given passage. Interpreters have employed a variety of means to accomplish this end, including the reader’s own tradition, feelings, thoughts, or logic, and the various critical methodologies, such as literary or historical. Yet many of these begin *outside* the text. Is there a methodology that flows from the text itself? Such a method would harmonize with the Protestant call for *sola scriptura*, that is, “scripture alone.” Yet

even *sola scriptura* has its problems, for the diversity of both the Old and New Testaments presents apparent contradictions in the texts (e.g., the different genealogies of Jesus, the time of the cleansing of the temple, women speaking in the assembly, Paul’s focus on faith versus James’ focus on works). Responses to this diversity have resulted in judgments that scripture is simply inconsistent and contradictory or that scripture is in need of being massaged and glossed into harmony. The first option creates a problem in viewing scripture as the authoritative word of God; the second creates the problem of an interpreter’s manipulating the authoritative word of God.

In previous centuries the historical-critical method of trying to place each passage in its historical and cultural setting has been seen as a sound methodology for biblical interpretation. Yet that method itself has created problems in a number of ways. First, the increasing atomization of the text has obscured the larger meaning. Second, the increasing specialization of scholars has effectively removed biblical interpretation from the lay person. Third, as a result of the previous two trends, the texts have become ancient artifacts that seem to have no real meaning or relevance for modern life. These problems, along with the deficiencies of the methods and an increasing distrust by churches for modern scholarly methods, have resulted in what James Smart has called the “strange silence of the Bible in the Church.”

Is there an answer to this dilemma? Can a Christian who believes that the Bible is the authoritative word of God find a method of interpretation that allows a check

on interpretation and understanding? I will argue that it is possible, with a caveat: we must remember that we are dealing with the word of God. Interpretation will always be a task of some uncertainty, for we are finite beings attempting to comprehend the Infinite. This great task requires humility and a willingness to admit that we can often deal only in probabilities and not certainties. This is not to say that God's word of salvation is obscure. The message of salvation can be stated somewhat simply. Other issues, however, can become quite complicated: the themes and purposes of various New Testament writings, historicity, church structure, theology, doctrine, practices, and the Christian life. This complexity is not a limitation of God but a limitation of humans. An example is the resurrection of Jesus: no one can *prove* historically that the resurrection of Jesus happened. Yet through an examination of the witnesses of scripture, the witness of the historical church, and our personal experience of God, we can come to the reasonable conclusion that Jesus was indeed raised from the dead.

What method or methods are viable for ascertaining probabilities of correct interpretation? For a believing Christian to ascertain such a methodology, three important steps are in order. First, an examination of the manner and character of God's revelation; second, an examination of the diversity of the Bible; and third, a construction of a methodology that flows from the text itself and grows out of the previous two steps.

### The Nature of Revelation

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, it is apparent that God revealed himself *in history*. In fact, the Bible is almost entirely a record of God's acts in history. Thus we can characterize God's revelation as taking place through particular historical figures, located in a particular time, space, and setting. We see this characteristic in Noah and his corrupt world; in Abraham and a world that had forgotten God; in Moses and a world where God's oppressed people were crying for salvation; in the conquest of the land of Canaan; in the desire for a nation and a king; in the sending of the prophets to a wayward people; in the punishment of that wayward people by Assyria and Babylon; and in God sending the Messiah and the founding of the church. All these acts of God took place through specific individuals, at specific times, in specific settings. Although all these revelations contain timeless information about God, humans, and creation, they were mediated first through a specific setting and occasion.

Scripture itself contains revelation from God and mirrors this locative characteristic. When we examine the texts

in their original language, it is readily apparent that each book was written in a particular author's style (compare Luke-Acts with Mark or Revelation), at a particular time (compare the portrayal of non-Christian Jews in earlier documents of the New Testament with the later documents), for a particular occasion (the Gospel of Luke stresses the innocent nature of Christianity to the Roman Empire; 1 Thessalonians focuses on resurrection; Revelation exhorts its readers, who are facing persecution by the Roman government).

Thus each book of scripture can be seen as containing revelation from God, brought forth in a specific time, place, and occasion, just as the other revelations of God. Just as Jesus was born as a common Mediterranean Jew of the first century C.E. (and not as a Chinese immigrant in twentieth-century America or a sixth-century Irish nobleman), the books of the New Testament appeared in a specific time, place, and occasion. Scripture was written in ancient Hebrew or Aramaic or Koine Greek (not English or Russian or Thai). It came to certain people in a certain time; to ignore that fact is not to take the revelation of God seriously.

The canon itself came about through a series of complex events involving tradition, scripture, and interpretive struggles between orthodoxy and heresy. Just as the church came to view the New Testament as authoritative, the New Testament views the Old Testament as the authoritative word of God (John 10:35; 2 Tim 3:16).

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that accepting scripture as the true word of God requires acceptance of the *manner* of that revelation, as well as the words themselves.

### The Diversity of the New Testament

It is also important to note that the concept of biblical inerrancy is not the same as that of biblical authority. God has always revealed himself through imperfect humans in imperfect language. Even Jesus, as a sinless human, chose the lowly human state and its inadequacies to effect his ministry and sacrifice (Phil 2:5-11). Inerrancy not only ignores obvious mistakes of the authors (compare Acts 7:16 with Josh 24:32 and Gen 23:16; 49:29-32; 50:13), but it is also untrue to human experience. God's word is mediated through the imperfections of humanity in language and society (1 Cor 2:1-5; 2 Cor 12:9; 13:4; Phil 2:5-11).

This understanding of the nature of God's revelation in scripture answers many of the apparent contradictions seen in the diversity of the New Testament. Each instance of uniqueness points to the fact of occasion and historic-

If we view scripture as canon, then we stand outside it and cannot rightly claim the same freedom of interpretation as its writers and redactors.



ity; otherwise, the differences are simply contradictions. Smoothing and harmonizing texts is an unsound method, for it manipulates the text itself rather than letting the text speak from its unique position. This cultural uniqueness can be seen in a number of texts regarding attitudes toward slavery, the worship of idols, idol meat, and so forth.

It should also be pointed out that the diversity of the New Testament reflects the diversity of God. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God's character and actions are depicted in a startling variety of images and manners. Since God is diverse, we should not be surprised that his revelation through scripture would also be diverse.

### A Biblical Hermeneutic of Faith

As mentioned previously, there are a number of modern interpretive methodologies: existential, feminist, reader-response, church tradition, and so on. While these methods may have some value, all of them begin *outside* the text. This makes the reader the interpretive center and makes the truth of the texts relative. Controls are needed that allow the text to speak and the interpreter to check his or her own understanding of the text *by the text*. Such controls are found in what can be called the *historical-contextual* method. This method begins with the text, taking seriously the nature of the revelation of God and the original meaning. It attempts to allow the text to speak from its original setting and purpose, while recognizing that it is the word of God and has a larger role and place in the church. This method might suggest that a text can only *mean* what it *meant*. Yet one can argue from scripture itself that a text *can* mean something later that it did not mean originally. The redactors of the Old Testament prophetic

material gave new meanings to old texts, as did the writers of the New Testament (the Gospel writers in particular). However, if a text can mean *anything*, then we have once again moved outside the text, allowing the reader to have primary interpretative control.

One possible answer to this dilemma is to remember that these texts are *part of an accepted canon*. If we view scripture as canon, then we stand outside it and cannot rightly claim the same freedom of interpretation as its writers and redactors. We can grant that God is capable of bringing new meanings and purposes to a text while at the same time denying that a text can mean *anything*. Again, the answer to this problem is historical-contextual controls. We should first strive to understand the text in its original context, then broaden our study with literary methods such as narrative and rhetorical analysis. Once we have exhausted all applicable methods, we can begin to understand what a text *meant* and what it *might mean* today (which could be different from what it meant), as well as what it *could not mean* today. Then, having these controls, we can turn to the modern methods mentioned above for further help in determining what the text says to us today.

One final caveat: many of the methods used to discover historical-contextual meaning are derived from the study of secular literature (historical, literary, redaction, rhetorical, etc.). Yet scripture is not secular literature. Therefore, these methods must be seen as *tools* that can help us determine meaning and not as ends in themselves. They must be employed with the understanding that the texts are sacred and authoritative scripture for the church. This "canonical approach," if we may borrow the term from Brevard Childs, overcomes many of the limitations of the traditional historical-critical method, which often loses sight of, ignores, or rejects the place of the text in the church.

The fact that these are tools used by imperfect humans implies a need for an ongoing interpretive effort. The effort is necessary because the interpretation *itself* is located in a specific time, place, and occasion. Thus again, the interpreter is cautioned to practice humility in the ongoing task of interpretation, recognizing that he or she is part of a long line of sacred interpretive history.

What principles could be applied to guide a believer in such an interpretive endeavor? David M. Scholer has helpfully suggested eight principles of interpretation that can guide the Christian interpreter in such a method. The principles, enumerated in an article by Scholer,<sup>1</sup> are also expounded upon in Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*.<sup>2</sup> These principles are

helpful for three reasons. First, they take seriously the nature of scripture as revelation located in time, space, and occasion. Second, they take seriously the nature of scripture as divine revelation. Finally, these principles depend upon *scripture itself* to supply the proper checks on interpretation, rather than some exterior model or paradigm.

1. One must distinguish between the core of the gospel message and what is peripheral or dependent. Not all passages are of equal importance; scripture itself suggests such a concept (Matt 23:23; 1 Cor 15:3).
2. One should note what scripture itself emphasizes. Churches have often been guilty of placing great emphasis on practice or doctrine that scripture itself does not stress (compare footwashing and headcoverings with baptism and idolatry).
3. One should distinguish between what is actually being *taught* to the readers and what is simply being narrated or presented as part of a story or speech (compare Luke 12:33 with 19:8–9 on the Christian use of possessions).
4. One should note where the Bible differs on certain teachings and where it is uniform. This also can show the interpreter what scripture itself considers important and unassailable (love as the basis of the Christian ethic; Jesus as the Son of God; sins such as practicing homosexuality, murder, or drunkenness), and what items might be culturally or historically conditioned (hairstyles, women's ministries in the church, eating food offered to idols).
5. One should distinguish between what scripture presents as specific principles of life and what it presents as simple applications in some particular situation. In 1 Cor 11:2–16 Paul establishes a principle based on creation, but he applies it in a way that appears to be relative (note the idea of "custom" in vv. 6, 13–14, 16).
6. One should recognize that passages that apparently contradict each other may also indicate cultural or historical conditioning. What may be needed in one setting or time may not be needed in another (compare Matt 10:5–6 with 28:16–20; 1 Tim 2:13–14/1 Cor 14:34 with 1 Cor 11:11–12/Gal 3:28).

7. One should note that there are passages where a writer appears to have only one viable option open to him in the cultural or historical setting, whether or not he agrees. The New Testament nowhere condemns slavery, and to have done so in the Roman world probably would have had severe consequences for the church. Yet the application of the Christian message and a reading between the lines of the book of Philemon seem to indicate that slavery is an evil.
8. One should compare one's own culture with the culture behind the original text. This takes seriously the fact that the interpreter, as well as the New Testament, is located culturally, historically, and occasionally.

Reading and understanding the word of God is an endeavor that should be approached with much humility, careful thought, and prayer. Any method used to interpret the word of God should take seriously the nature of God's revelation as mediated in a particular time, place, and occasion. The interpreter should remember that these methods are merely tools to be used to determine and check meaning. Further, he should recognize the nature of sacred literature in contrast to secular literature.

While all human methods are imperfect and subject to the weaknesses inherent in human endeavors, the historical-contextual method takes the text seriously as it was revealed by God and employs a hermeneutic that flows from the text itself. This method values scripture as the true word of God holistically: not in content alone, but also in function and manner of revelation.

**MARKUS H. MCDOWELL** teaches in the Religion Division at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, and is a Ph.D. candidate and instructor of Greek at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. He serves as one of the book review editors for *Leaven*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> David M. Scholer, "Issues in Biblical Interpretation," *Evangelical Quarterly* 60 (1988): 19–20.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 71–74.