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Glenwood's Memory Verse: Luke 24:27 *"And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself."*

READING 101: The Art of **Interpreting** (and why it matters for Bible readers.)

Take a look at this piece of art that you can find next door in the TMA Galleries, Thomas Cole's [*The Architect's Dream*](#). What does it mean? Does it *mean* one thing? What are you looking at to help you understand what it *means*?

What about this text: Mark Bittman's *Food Matters* cookbook. It is much clearer and the author is striving for clarity so that *you* can do exactly what he is doing!

Which might you say has more 'meaning' or more to say? Which of these is the Bible more like? It has words so its form is more like the cookbook. It has been full of meaning for every generation since its texts were compiled so it is more like the painting. Some parts are more like a piece of art and others are an exhaustive list of instructions. I frequently find that discussions about the the Bible fall apart when one person is reading it like a cookbook, very clear and full of instructions, and the other person is reading it like a piece of art, searching for many possible meanings though sometimes just making things up. *The Bible is full of meaning that must be accessed through prayerful reading and loving conversation.*

INTERPRETATION INSIDE THE BIBLE

How often have you had a conversation that was just a bad conversation? Not because of bad content, just because the whole discussion was talking *past* each other, never actually connecting, being rude to one another, or simply not listening. The St. Francis Prayer addresses this challenge: Divine Master, grant that I may not seek so much to be understood as to understand. In a conversation if your goal is to seek understanding, common ground, shared values, sharing your version of reality with your partners, you will have a much better outcome.

This activity of seeking understanding, listening and looking carefully, making sense out of what someone else is saying as they speak *or* in what they write is called ‘interpretation.’

To Interpret, most simply means ‘to understand.’ In order for me to understand a person who speaks only Arabic and to be understood, I will need an interpreter. I find the same to be true for art; I didn’t really know what to look for in a piece of art until Jerry Bruckseker convinced me to go on a docent tour at the TMA where a trained interpreter of art showed us how to pay attention. When I look at Thomas Cole’s painting I can make an interpretation of what this painting is saying right now. A docent will often offer what it *said* when it was originally received. If what we’re doing with the Bible is ‘trying to understand it’ then the thing we are doing is ‘interpreting.’ The Bible is not one hundred percent clear to anyone and must be interpreted.

Luke 24:27 is *the* key place where we as disciples hear the call to interpret. Are you familiar with the Road to Emmaus story? Two disciples, one named Cleopas and the other unnamed, are walking along. They meet a stranger. The reader knows the stranger is the Risen Jesus, these disciples do not. Rather than reveal himself, Jesus asks why they are sad, they speak about the disappointment of Jesus’ execution, and even *then* rather than reveal himself face to face, Jesus does something strange. He interprets the Scriptures to them. Luke writes, **“And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.”** He *interprets to them* all the Scriptures! This is the most important line of this whole forum, *so* important that... it will be Glenwood’s memory verse for 2019.¹ Commit this verse to memory and you will be learning the most important thing I can teach about the Bible. Jesus interprets the Bible for them and for us.

Everyone interprets. No one gets to shortcut ‘interpreting’ if *Jesus* does not shortcut interpreting. No one receives complete understanding of the Scriptures or of what God can say through the Scriptures. For those of you who might argue that a time machine would help us figure out what the Scriptures *really* mean, even authors have to interpret their own work! In 1 Corinthians, Paul demonstrates that even an *author* of Scripture cannot be 100 percent clear in his own letters! ‘First’ Corinthians is not actually the first letter to the Corinthians.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons— *not at all meaning* the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world. 1 Cor 5:9-10

Before we get distracted by a tiny piece of Paul’s sexual ethics, look what we have. There was a previous letter! And, most significantly, the Corinthians did not understand what Paul was saying so Paul needs to interpret his *own* words, and re-submit them to his readers. Paul, the author, becomes simply another reader of his own text. He tries to control the ‘meaning’ of his

¹ Compare Nehemiah 8, *giving the sense*. Same thing.

words and he fails because the Corinthians, throughout the entire letter exchange, do not (always) understand what he means.² Now this may be a little alarming, that Scripture does not have some fixed meaning that can be discovered like oil or gold. However, I hope you will start to feel how exciting this is: even when an author of Scripture is alive and present, what it takes to understand something like a piece of writing, to discover what it means and for whom it means something, is a conversation.

CONVERSATION

If all scripture must be interpreted, then ‘what it means’ will need to be put together in a conversation, just like on that Road to Emmaus. It follows that in order to discover what the Bible means and become interpreters, we actually need to have good conversations! *A good conversation does not happen naturally. It happens when conversation partners commit to ‘playing fair’ and by the same rules, as one would in a game of pick-up basketball or cards.*³ Take the example of Rock Paper Scissors. I suspect the last time you played this game, even if it was decades ago, you had to speak with your game partner about a critical agreement. Do we throw our item on the third word (Rock Paper Scissors, my hand goes flat to paper) *or* do we throw our item on ‘shoot!’ (Rock Paper Scissors, shoot! And my hand becomes a scissors.) The game can be played without this quick check-in, but if one person throws out their item before the other has decided the game is a wash. How often do we take the time to check-in about ‘rules’ in a conversation? I’ve even heard the word conversation used to do away with rules, “Relax, it’s just a conversation!” But that’s not what it takes to have a good conversation, just like we cannot play pickup basketball without checking in about number of players, fouls, make-it-take-it, etc. The best games happen when the rules are clear and enforced so that the game itself can be as exciting as possible without being wrecked by bad behavior.

Here one of the most highly regarded professors at the University of Chicago shares his ‘rules.’ “Conversation is a game with some hard rules: say only what you mean; say it as accurately as you can; listen and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinions if challenged by the conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure necessary conflict, and to change your mind if the evidence suggests it.”⁴ None of these seem controversial. We might each observe, however, how infrequently people are willing to change their opinions about something important, regardless of evidence. We often do not stop to ask what would *count* as evidence that would actually change my mind. Tracy addresses this step also, “When

² Mitchell, Margaret, *Paul, the Corinthians, and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010.

³ This whole discussion of interpretation as conversation comes from the introduction to David Tracy’s book on interpretation.

Tracy, David, *Plurality and Ambiguity*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986.

⁴ Tracy, 19.

challenged on an interpretation, do I have any evidence that my conversation partner could accept? Can we find those commonplaces that constitute the right places for discussing our differences? ... Or shall I simply retreat into announcements arising from my own intuitive sense?"⁵ If we do not have any evidence that we would accept as valid and opinion-changing, then the only person we can talk to is our self.

People who write about the Bible and do so well, *do* explain the rules they are using for the conversation! If you pay attention in their first chapter, they will often tell you how they are reading and what they find most important in their interpretations, the evidence they will use most. The book that Bishop Daniel recommended as companion to the year of Scripture lays out some rules in the very first chapter of their book, drawn from the Nicene Creed.

1. The Bible is Scripture, tight relationship between church and the Bible.
2. The Bible is One. They clarify to say that it has many perspectives but one overarching message.
3. The Bible is Holy. (By Holy they mean, set apart for extraordinary service and they argue that what makes the Bible Holy is the Spirit's decision to select these particular texts to build up the church.)
4. The Bible is catholic, that is 'universal.' It does not have a denomination that it favors.
5. The Bible is Apostolic. "Its testimony lines up with the first witnesses of the Risen Jesus."

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First, they say they will treat the Bible as Scripture, rule number one. In the church this may seem obvious, but this is a ground rule for our reading and cannot always be taken for granted. Next they say the Bible is One, rule number two. They clarify to say that it has many perspectives but one overarching message. Third rule, the Bible is Holy. By Holy they mean, set apart for extraordinary service and they argue that what makes the Bible Holy is the Spirit's decision to select these particular texts to build up the church. Their fourth rule is that the Bible is catholic, that is universal. Last, the Bible is Apostolic, rule number five. "Its testimony lines up with the first witnesses of the Risen Jesus." I share these as excellent rules for your interpreting. They help guide you towards interpreting the Bible as the whole church's holy book along with the rest of the church.

For the purposes of this discussion about interpretation, note the ways that these authors are laying out rules for the 'game' or interpretation they will offer. Some of these rules would need to change depending on the company with whom I am discussing. My atheist friends do not use the rule of the Bible as Scripture or Holy. My Jewish friend does not use the rule of one overarching story culminating in Jesus. So long as we are clear about what will count

⁵ Tracy, 25.

⁶ Wall and Nienhuis, eds., *A Compact Guide to the Whole Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker 2015. See especially chapter one, "Reading the Bible as Scripture."

as ‘rules’ and what will need to be argued using other evidence, we can still have a great conversation! Sadly, few discussions of the Bible are handled with such care.

Now we can return to our original question: is the Bible more like a cookbook, ready to divulge information for us to imitate immediately or more like a painting for us to ponder and enjoy? In some places, the Bible is certainly like a cookbook with instructions to be followed. But it’s a cookbook for people who were living in ancient Israel or wandering the Sinai peninsula. Consider all the proper procedures for sacrifice that we have read about in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. The places where the text seems to want to be specific and control an outcome like a recipe end up being the hardest for us to read because we are not eating what they are cooking so to speak. The Bible is also not a beautiful piece of visual art where each viewer can walk away with something different going on inside them that does not affect anyone but themselves. The Bible is a huge, beautiful, puzzling collection of collections of writings from many different times. It is a gift through which we can experience the presence of God through the activity we have called interpreting.

Do be afraid if you do not know everything about Biblical history or language or know the whole story! As Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 2:13, God does not work through our minds and the number of facts we retain. “And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom, but by the Spirit, interpreting Spiritual things to those who are Spiritual.” Jesus did not teach facts on the Road to Emmaus, he taught a way of reading so that these disciples could find *him*, the executed victim offering forgiveness and announcing the love of a God who *actually* loves us no matter what.⁷ My Hebrew Bible professor would say: listen I can tell you what it probably meant in the time that it was written, but I cannot tell you its significance for the church. You and the church need to figure that out. Just like prayer is not necessarily speaking all the time but is actually more like listening, reading Scripture is not only an investigation of the ancient world and ancient beliefs Bible trivia as much as a listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit revealing something about a God who loves us, interpreting something in an ancient text which is as important today as it was way back when.

⁷ For this reading of the Road to Emmaus Parable see *Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice*, Book 1, Essay 2: “Emmaus and Eucharist.” Glenview: DOERS, 2013.