

The Interpretive Journey

People from all over the world love reading the Bible because it is a fascinating book that is filled with exciting stories and challenging exhortations. The Bible deals with life's biggest issues—God, eternal life, death, love, sin, and morality. The Bible brings encouragement and guides us, but it also corrects us and brings us closer to God.

Some parts of the Bible are easy to understand, and others are not. Most people want to be able to dig into God's Word so as to see and know more of the biblical text. One of the best ways to analogize it is to liken reading the Bible to going on a journey. As we read the Bible, we are able to come to a determination of what the passage means in a biblical context, but often when we try to make application into our own lives, we run into problems.

Things such as customs, language, situations, and time _____ us from the original audience. These differences can form a barrier, if you will, separating us from the text and our ability to grasp it and make application for ourselves.

What ends up happening is that Christians are often uncertain about how to interpret the Bible. How should we in the 21st century understand Lev. 19:19, that prohibits wearing a garment made of two types of material? In Judges 6, Gideon puts out a fleece to confirm what God had told him; does this mean we should do the same to seek God's leading?

Any attempt to interpret and apply the Bible involves trying to cross the proverbial river that separates us from the original audience and context. Many Christians, most often unconsciously, attempt to apply an _____ or *feels-right approach* to interpretation. Meaning that if the text looks like it could be applied directly, then they attempt to apply it directly. If not, then they take the _____ approach which often borders on allegorizing the text (which shows little or no sensitivity to the biblical context).

These approaches will not land us safely on the other side of the river. Those using the intuitive method are blindingly wading out into the river, hoping that the water is not more than knee deep. Those who spiritualize try to jump the river in one leap. All the while both methods often lead to being washed ashore, if you will.

The primary focus of this study will be to address how to cross the river and follow a legitimate approach to the Bible that is not based on intuition and feeling, but rather derives its meaning from the text.

This approach must also be one that can be used on any passage, helping us to not simply skip over difficult passages, but to guide us through them to determine the meaning of that text for us today.

Basics of the Journey

The goal of this study is to help us grasp the meaning of the text God has intended. We do not create meaning out of a text; rather, we seek to find the meaning that is already there. We understand that we cannot apply the meaning for the ancient culture audience directly to us today because of the river that separates us (culture, time, situation, covenant, etc.).

This journey that we will follow works on the premise that the Bible is a record of God's communication of himself and his will to us. We revere the Bible and treat it as holy because it is the Word of God and because God reveals Himself to us through His Word.

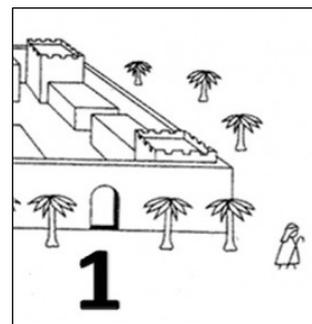
While the _____ of a particular passage may only apply to a particular situation of the biblical audience, the theological principles revealed in that text are applicable to all of God's _____ at all _____.

Because this theological principle has meaning and application to both audiences, it functions as a bridge spanning the river of differences. It is on this bridge that we can safely cross over the river. Constructing this *principlizing bridge* will be one of the critical steps to our Interpretive Journey.

Step 1: Grasping the Text in _____ Town

Question: What did the text mean to the biblical audience?

First, you must read the text carefully and observe it. Try to see as much as possible in the text. Look, look, and look again. Scrutinize the grammar and analyze all significant words. Also, study the historical and literary contexts. How does your passage relate to those that precede it and those that follow it?



After completing this study, synthesize the meaning of the passage for the biblical audience into one or two sentences. Write out what that passage meant for the biblical audience. Use past-tense verbs and refer to the biblical audience.

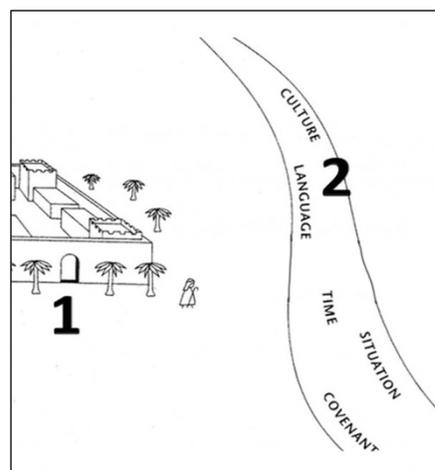
Be _____: Do not generalize or try to develop theological principles yet.

Step 2: Measuring the _____ of the _____ to Cross

Question: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

The Christian today is separated from the biblical audience by differences in culture, language, situation, time, and often covenant. *These differences form a river that hinders us from moving straight from meaning in their context to ours.*

The width of the river varies however from passage to passage. Sometimes it is extremely wide and needs a substantial bridge for crossing. Other times it is extremely narrow and it is as easy as just hopping over a small creek.



In this step we will take a long hard look to determine just how wide the river is for the passage we are studying. You want to be on the lookout for _____ between our situation today and the situation of the biblical audience. If you are studying the Old Testament passage, also be sure to identify those significant differences that came as a result of the life and work of Christ.

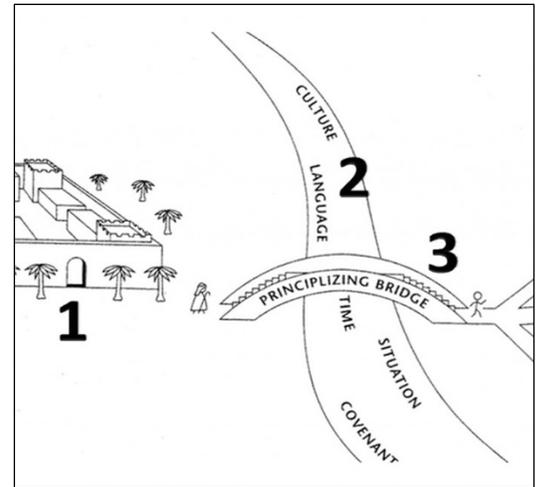
Also, be sure to identify any unique aspects of the situation of your passage. For example, in Joshua 1:1-9, the people of Israel are preparing to enter the Promised Land. Moses had just died and Joshua had been appointed to take his place. God encourages Joshua to be faithful in his conquest of the land. What are the differences? We are not entering or conquering the Promised Land. We are not new leaders to the nation of Israel. We are not under the old covenant.

Step 3: Crossing the _____ Bridge

Question: What is the theological principle in the text?

This might well be the most challenging of the three steps, because in it we will be looking for the theological principle or principles that are reflected in the meaning of the text that we identified in Step 1.

We are not looking to _____ meaning, but to _____ the meaning intended by the Author. Even as God gave specific expressions to a specific biblical audience, He also gave universal theological teachings for all of His people in these same texts.



We must recall the differences we noted in Step 2 and then identify any _____ between the biblical situation and our own.

Using Joshua 1:1-9 again, what are the similarities? We too are the people of God in a covenant relationship (new covenant); while we are not the leaders of the nation of Israel, some have leadership roles in the church; and while we are not invading the Promised Land, we are seeking to obey God's will and accomplish what He has commanded us to do.

Returning to the meaning we discovered in Step 1, we must now identify a broader theological principle in the text that relates to the similarities between us and the biblical audience. This theological principle will be the *principlizing bridge* by which we can cross over the river of barriers.

At the same time, we must reflect back and forth between the text and the teaching of the rest of Scripture, using Scripture to interpret itself. Meaning that the theological principle found in the passage would be congruent with the rest of the Scriptures.

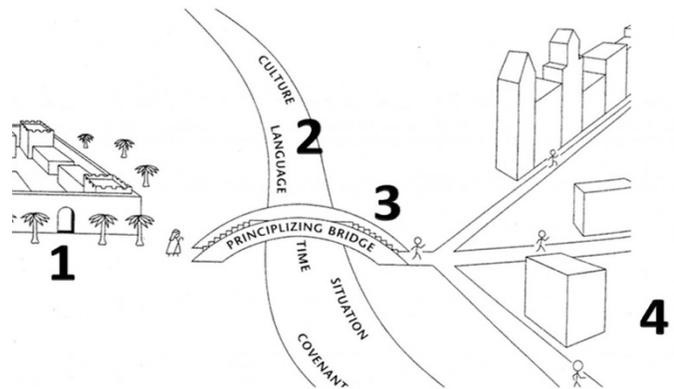
- The principle should be _____ in the text.
- The principle should be _____ and not tied to a specific situation.
- The principle should not be _____ bound.
- The principle should correspond to the teaching of the rest of _____.
- The principle should be _____ to both the biblical and the contemporary audience.

Write out the theological principle in one or two sentences using present-tense verbs.

Step 4: Grasping the Text in _____ Town

Question: How should individual Christians today apply the theological principle in their lives?

It is in this step that we apply the theological principle to the specific situation of individual Christians in the church today. We must now grapple with how we should respond to that principle in our town. That is, how does it apply in real-life situations today?



While for each passage there is usually only a few (and often only one) theological principle relevant for all Christians today, there will be numerous applicational possibilities. This is because Christians today find themselves in different specific situations, and we will grasp and apply the same theological principle in slightly different ways depending on our current situation and where we are in our relationship with God.

An Example—Joshua 1:1-9

“¹ Now after the death of Moses the servant of the Lord it came to pass, that the Lord spake unto Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' minister, saying, ² Moses my servant is dead; now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, thou, and all this people, unto the land which I do give to them, even to the children of Israel. ³ Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses. ⁴ From the wilderness and this Lebanon even unto the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, and unto the great sea toward the going down of the sun, shall be your coast. ⁵ There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life: as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee. ⁶ Be strong and of a good courage: for unto this people shalt thou divide for an inheritance the land, which I swore unto their fathers to give them. ⁷ Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper withersoever thou goest. ⁸ This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success. ⁹ Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.” *Joshua 1:1-9*

Step 1: What did the text mean to the biblical audience? _____

Step 2: What are the differences between the biblical audience and us? _____

Step 3: What is the theological principle in this text? _____

Step 4: How should individual Christians today apply the theological principle in their lives?

Assignments

- 1. Describe in your own words the four steps of the Interpretive Journey.**

- 2. What are the guidelines for developing theological principles?**

- 3. What are the differences that determine the width of the river to cross?**