

**A SHORT VERSION
OF
REFORMED GUIDELINES
FOR
INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE**

**With a statement on
THE BIBLE
From
THE CONFESSION OF 1967**

REFORMED RULES FOR INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

TWO BIG PROBLEMS:

How do we avoid reading "into" instead of "out of" the Bible?
(How do we avoid judging scripture by our own culturally and historically conditioned insights and interests?)

How do we deal with the historically conditioned character of scripture itself? (How can we tell the difference between the will of God for the lives of all people in all times and places {us} and what applied "back then" but not now?)

Reformed rules for the proper interpretation of scripture help us with these kinds of problems. They are not magic. They do not tell us everything we need to know to do a good job of interpreting or automatically provide the "right" answers, but they don't lead us astray and they help a lot.

1. Scripture interprets scripture
When we encounter difficult or controversial passages we are to:
 - a. Compare them with other passages that throw more or different light on the problem, and;
 - b. Try to understand them in the light of the whole message of scripture, including parts that may not specifically deal with the question at hand.
2. The Christological Principle
Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the central revelation of God in Jesus Christ. This means that everything else in scripture should fit with what Jesus said and did. As far back as 1532 the Confession of the synod of Bern said "... when something is brought before us ... which brings us closer to Christ, and in accordance with God's word is more conducive to mutual friendship and Christian love than the interpretation now presented, we will gladly accept it and will not limit the course of the Holy Spirit, which does not go backwards towards the flesh but always forward toward the image of Jesus Christ our Lord."
3. The Law of Love
Scripture is to be interpreted according to the law of love. This means that no interpretation that shows hostility or indifference toward any person or group can be a correct interpretation of the Word of God since His will for our lives is

summarized in the command to love God who are different from us we must get to know them, listening to and learning from them, willing only their good whether or not we agree with what they believe, say and do.

4. The Rule of Faith

Since the reformation, we have understood that the Holy Spirit enables us to hear and understand better when we seek and trust God's guidance. Whether old or new, the church's interpretation is always subject to criticism and correction in light of further study of scripture itself. However, since the spirit is promised to the whole Christian community, we are more likely to interpret rightly when we begin by listening to the consensus of the church's understanding. In the Reformed tradition, our Confessions from different times and places help us to do that.

5. Respect for literacy and Historical Context

Scripture is to be interpreted in light of the various literacy forms and social-historical contexts in which it was written. Since John Calvin, Reformed tradition has used the scientific and historical tools available. As the Confession of 1967 (C67) puts it: "The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literacy fashions of the times and places in which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were them current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literacy and historical understanding."

Ours is a living faith in a living God through our living Lord Jesus Christ to whom C67 refers as "the Word of God Incarnate". As Pastor John Robinson said to the Pilgrims as he sent them off to the new world in 1620, "We limit not the truth of God to our poor reach of mind, by notions of our day and sect, crude partial and confined. No, let a new and better hope within our hearts be stirred: for God hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word." Again, in the words of c67, "As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations; ... he will continue to speak through the scriptures in a changing world in every form of human culture."

Adapted from ALWAYS BEING REFORMED, Dr. Shirley Guthrie, Columbia Theological Seminary.

From The Confession of 1967

2. The Bible

9.27 The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate, to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written. The Scriptures are not a witness among others, but the witness without parallel. The church has received the books of the Old and New Testaments as prophetic and apostolic testimony in which it hears the word of God and by which its faith and obedience are nourished and regulated.

9.28 The New Testament is the recorded testimony of apostles to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, and the sending of the Holy Spirit to the church. The Old Testament bears witness to God's faithfulness in God's* covenant with Israel and points the way to the fulfillment of God's purpose in Christ. The Old Testament is indispensable to understanding the New, and is not itself fully understood without the New.

9.29 The Bible is to be interpreted in the light of its witness to God's work of reconciliation in Christ. The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless human words, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literacy and historical understanding. As God's word has been spoken in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that God will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture.

9.30 God's word is spoken to the church today where the Scriptures are faithfully preached and attentively read in dependence on the illumination of the Holy Spirit and with readiness to receive their truth and direction.