

Properties of Sacred Scripture: Part III

The last two weeks the bulletin articles have presented some principles or properties of Sacred Scripture that help to understand Scripture. It might be helpful to have these “principles” or simple realities about Scripture all assembled in one place. The ones presented were:

- **In Scripture, God condescends to man to speak to man in terms that he can understand.**
- **Scripture does use some figurative language, and while all Scripture has some literal meaning, the literal meaning of a passage may be the figurative literal.**
 - God must speak “loud enough” for us to hear, because of the effects of original sin so He sometimes uses very emphatic figurative language.
- **The purpose of God revealing Himself to us (the purpose of Scripture) is *our salvation*.**
 - Scripture contains historical (actual, real) events and people but its purpose is not to be a history book.
 - Scripture contains things about the natural world but its purpose is not to be an instruction on the physical sciences or natural history.
- **All of Sacred Scripture is the inspired word of God.**
- **All of Scripture is absolutely inerrant, in regard to the message that is intended.**
- **Scripture must be taken in its entirety; isolating one passage is invariably a mistake.**
- **Truth cannot contradict truth.**

Practice makes perfect, as the old saying goes, and so to fix these basic but very useful and important realities in your mind, the best way is to use them. Try to take some time, then, to use these principles or properties to “explain” or respond to some of the points and passages brought up in the previous articles:

- The 6 *days* of creation (Gen 1). This, according to modern “science,” did not occur in 6 days but over 1000’s (or whatever the claim is) years. This proves the bible is wrong.
- “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off...” (Mark 9:43). Does that mean if my hand was involved in a sin, I need to have it amputated? If not, what does it mean and why would Jesus speak in this way? Why would He say something He doesn’t really mean? (be careful with this last question – it’s worded in a way that is meant to be misleading!)
- “God made the sun stand still” (Joshua 10:13). Doesn’t this prove the bible is wrong since it is (according to current “scientific” belief) the earth that moves while the sun is stationary?
- One way to account for the passage from Joshua is simply that not all of Sacred Scripture is inspired, only that which pertains to our salvation: True or False.
- Unless you hate your mother and father... (Lk 14:26). This seems pretty explicit – if you don’t hate your mom & dad, you can’t get to Heaven. It says so right there.
- Dinosaurs are not mentioned in the bible. This shows that Scripture is wrong and/or that God is not all-knowing.
- The wrath of God (e.g., Ez 7:8), or God relented of the punishment He had planned (e.g., Ex 32:14; Jonah 3:10). Don’t all of these passages imply change in God? But God is immutable – never changing. Isn’t this a contradiction that proves the bible is wrong, inconsistent, and incoherent?

This is mostly all review from the previous two weeks’ articles. There is another subject that needs to be addressed, though, to round out a basic discussion on “interpretation” of Scripture (actually there’s a lot more that could be said – understanding parables, historical settings, language use and so on would be some examples – but this article is talking mainly about just basic, fundamental things; it’s by no means a complete course on Scripture). This last thing is perhaps most easily introduced with an illustration. I heard another priest say (rightly) once that you could choose 10 verses from the bible – probably any 10 verses – and argue that

something like same-sex relations (or just choose your favorite moral or dogmatic topic) is ok, and someone else could choose 10 verses – maybe even the same 10 – and argue the exact opposite.

So where does that leave us? The lack of an authoritative interpreter renders the Word of God useless. If there is no authoritative interpreter – a referee, if you will – who can say, with *absolute certitude*, this and not that, if Scripture (or more generally Revelation) is simply left up to individual interpretation, to whatever I think, or perhaps more precisely whatever suits my fancy, if I can make it say whatever I want it to say, then God wasted His time revealing Himself to us. Now our Lord knew, of course, that this would be the case. In fact, He Himself demonstrated the need for an authoritative interpreter. He said to the Apostles: who do *people* say that I am? *People* – in other words, He’s taking an opinion poll, a popular vote. And they replied: some say John the Baptist, others Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets. So when a survey is used to determine what is true, what are the results? Not only contradictory answers but they are all wrong. And then our Lord said to the Apostles: and who do you say that I am? Peter alone answered, the head spoke for them all: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Our Lord then replied with the words that established the teaching authority of the Church: you are Peter and upon this rock I will build My Church... The teaching authority of the Church means that whatever the Church teaches *definitively*, is true with absolute certainty, it cannot be otherwise. This is a gift to us, so that we can know for sure the way home – how to be, what to do, what not to do in order to conform ourselves to God. Scripture – Sacred Tradition – The Teaching authority of the Church, these form as some put it, something like a 3-legged stool; if you take out one of the legs, the stool cannot stand.

Now what does this mean in terms of interpretation of Scripture? It does *not* mean that the Church has given a definitive and exhaustive interpretation for every (or even most) passage(s) of Sacred Scripture. What it does mean is that where the Church does provide a definite interpretation, that teaching is for certain true. Take as one example the 6 days of creation. The Church has never, and probably will not ever, make any definite statement as to whether or not “day” here is meant literally – 24 hours – or if the 6 days are definitely figurative. On the other hand, take our Lord’s words at the Last Supper: do this in memory of Me. Most Protestants say this does not mean literally the Eucharist or the Mass; as Catholics, of course, we know that this is what He meant because the Church has declared so definitively. St Augustine, one of the greatest teachers of the faith in the entire history of the Church and one of the greatest thinkers in the history of man, said that he would not know that the Eucharist is the person of Jesus except for one thing – because the Church declared it so, definitively. There are many moral questions today – is contraception ok to use in marriage? The Church, using its God-given authority and fulfilling its God-given duty looks into what He has revealed about Himself, how man is meant to be, the nature of love, and what He has revealed specifically about marriage and sexuality and says: no, this is contrary to the will of God – a definitive interpretation of what He has revealed.

This, then, is how the teaching authority of the Church is often lived out. Part of the point is that the Church does not, by any means, have some huge commentary with a verse-by-verse definitive interpretation of all Scripture; there’s nothing even close to that. What this means, then, is that we often need good Catholic commentaries to help further understand Scripture. It’s always best to at least incorporate the most trustworthy sources, which would be things (or people) like: papal writings (especially more authoritative ones), Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and writings of other saints. Sometimes Scripture scholars can also be helpful. One of the best contemporary Scripture scholars that I know of, who also has some free materials on the internet, is Dr Brant Pitre. The Catechism also uses Scripture and has an index of Scriptural passages so a person can go there and see how a given passage is used.

Let’s conclude this little series on attaining a better and better understanding of Scripture with a reminder of how Aquinas said wisdom is built: seek diligently, listen *willingly*, meditate attentively, and respond prudently. These are sound practices for reading Sacred Scripture.

God bless you, Fr Kuhn.