

Reformed Guidelines for Biblical Interpretation

How are we to resolve some of our most basic questions about the Bible? Surely all of us have come across Bible passages we do not understand. Sometimes we disagree with others as to how to interpret various passages.

As Presbyterians, we are guided by our eleven confessions when we read the Bible. Our *Book of Order* says that the confessions declare “to its [the PC(USA)’s] members and to the world who and what it is, what it believes, and what it resolves to do.” Beginning with our oldest confession, the Apostles Creed, the confessions guide us in understanding such diverse beliefs as the trinity, the incarnation, the atonement, salvation by grace alone, the sacraments and predestination. They also guide us in how to interpret the meaning of confusing or unclear passages of Scripture.

The eleven confessions are: The Nicene Creed, the Apostles’ Creed, The Scots Confession, The Heidelberg Catechism, The Second Helvetic Confession, The Westminster Confession of Faith, The Shorter and Larger Catechisms, The Theological Declaration of Barmen, The Confession of 1967, and A Brief Statement of Faith. They offer us at least five guidelines for interpreting Scripture, and these guidelines are summarized below.

Reformed Guidelines for Interpreting Scripture

1. **First and foremost, we interpret Scripture with other Scripture**

The Westminster Confession of Faith 6.004 (see also Second Helvetic Confession 5.001)

If there is a question about the meaning of a passage, the most important step in clarifying the meaning is to find other passages of scripture that speak to the same topic, and to allow the meaning of the unclear passage to be illumined by other and perhaps clearer passages.

2. **We interpret Scripture with humility about the importance of our own opinion**

II Helvetic Confession Ch II 5.010

3. **We interpret Scripture with respect for the literary and historical context of the passage**

The Confession of 1967 9.29 (see also Second Helvetic Confession 5.010)

4. **We have freedom of conscience, and at the same time we respect the guidance of the appropriate council.** Depending upon circumstances, the appropriate council might be the session, the presbytery, synod or General Assembly.

The Westminster Confession of Faith 6.174

The Westminster Confession of Faith 6.109

5. **Our interpretation is guided by the love of Christ**

Scots Confession 3.19