Principles of biblical interpretation

Christians who accept the Bible as the Word of God will interpret Scripture in harmony with the following fundamental principles:

The canonical principle
The canonical principle refers to the fact that the information needed to understand the Bible is found in the canon of Scripture itself; i.e., Scripture is its own interpreter.

It rejects the widespread practice of interpreting the Bible in the light of ancient and even modern cultures. Though there certainly are cultural aspects in Scripture, they must not become the norm for its interpretation, as is the case with many modern interpreters.

Although given to people who lived in an ancient Near Eastern context, the Bible transcends its cultural backgrounds to serve as God’s Word for all cultural, racial, and situational contexts in all ages.

The biblical writers affirm the supremacy of Scripture over tradition (Matt. 15:3-6), human philosophy (Col. 2:8), human reason (Prov. 14:12), and so-called “knowledge” (1 Tim. 6:20). Seventh-day Adventists, therefore, reject the use of any method of interpretation that does not accept Scripture on its own terms.

The unity of Scripture principle
Since all Scripture is inspired by the same Spirit and all of it is the Word of God, there is a fundamental unity and harmony among its parts (Matt. 5:17; Rom. 3:10-18). This means that Scripture is consistent. Although the different writers, at times, emphasize different aspects of the same topic or event, they do not contradict one another. For example: each of the Gospel writers under inspiration records different facets of Christ’s life, yet each is needed to obtain a full and balanced picture of the life and work of Christ (John 20:30, 31).

The literal interpretation principle
A basic principle in biblical interpretation is to understand words and sentences in their literal sense, unless figures of speech or idiomatic expressions are used. This is in harmony with Ellen White’s counsel that “the language of the Bible should be explained according to its obvious meaning, unless a symbol or figure is employed” (The Great Controversy, p. 599).

The literal interpretation of Scripture should not be confused with a “literalistic” understanding of biblical texts. For example, some Christians believe that “chariots . . . with flaming torches” in Nahum 2:3 is a literal reference to motorcars. Other Christians understand Revelation 16:12 to mean that the Euphrates River will literally dry up, so that the kings of the East (Chinese and Japanese) and their armies can march across. Such interpretations fail to recognize that the authors of Scripture used symbols, similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech.

The spiritual discernment principle
The fourth general principle of biblical hermeneutics is set forth by Paul: “The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14, NKJV). Because “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Tim. 3:16, NKJV) and the Bible writers spoke “as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21, NKJV), the interpreter of Scripture must be led by the same Spirit.

The Christological principle
The Bible reveals Christ as the focus of all divine action, whether it be through historical events, prophecy, or worship: “To Him all the prophets witness” (Acts 10:43, NKJV) and “all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen” (2 Cor. 1:20, NKJV).

Christ Himself affirmed that the Old Testament Scriptures testified of Him (John 5:39). He was the confirmation and the consummation of “the promises made to the fathers” (Rom. 15:8, NKJV). The New Testament writers recognized this and applied the Old Testament promises and types to...
Jesus. Thus they modeled a Christocentric approach that every interpreter of Scripture needs to imitate.

“The Old Testament sheds light upon the New, and the New upon the Old. Each is a revelation of the glory of God in Christ. Christ as manifested to the patriarchs, as symbolized in the sacrificial service, as portrayed in the law, and as revealed by the prophets is the riches of the Old Testament.

Christ in His life, His death, and His resurrection; Christ as He is manifested by the Holy Spirit, is the treasure of the New. Both Old and New present truths that will continually reveal new depths of meaning to the earnest seeker” (Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students, pp. 462, 463).

—Gerhard Pfandl