The Bible is not an easy book. Even aside from all the classes you’ve had to take to finish your academic programs, and all the sermons that have been preached over the years, the Bible continues to be something we need to wrestle with, before we can win a blessing. Certainly, reading the Bible has been a source of inspiration and guidance for Christians, comforting, teaching, and supporting our devotion to God as we read it alone or in groups or in worship. However, biblical interpretation has also raised many issues for the churches over the years, and has been the source of arguments and contentious questions among Christians. For all the folks that have been encouraged and nurtured by reading the Bible, there are others who have found the Bible to be a source of personal pain, social exclusion, political oppression and loss. For all the people who have found inspiration for struggles against injustice and violence in its pages, there are still others who have made their peace with the Bible only after a hard interpretive struggle.

I’m not going to take up any of these particular issues or arguments. Rather, I want to focus on an issue that gets lost in the midst of our arguments about interpretation, and that is the issue of the ethics of interpretation. How do we conduct ourselves and our discussions when we are discussing the complex reality of the Bible? Are there some ethical principles that might be appropriate for the time and place in which we find ourselves now as biblical interpreters? Is it a case of anything goes, or the case that the person with the loudest voice or firmest opinion wins? Or, are there some moral guidelines for how we treat the Bible, ourselves, and each other when we discuss the meaning of a bible passage today?

We could start a list of principles for interpretation with one we learned in Sunday School, ‘the Bible tells me so.’ It’s worth celebrating the genuine devotion and confidence of that statement—my own faith was nurtured by the personal witness of a Presbyterian family and larger church family that lived that confidence and taught it to me. As I have read and taught the Bible for many years, I have tried to use that devotional approach to the reading of the Bible, to
remember that we should be prayerful and open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit when reading Scripture for study and reflection.

However, I’ve found that sometimes my devotional approach leads me into a quandary when it comes to saying what a particular Bible passage might mean. It seems that other Christians who are reading the same passage come up with a different meaning for what “the Bible tells them so.” For example, I have always interpreted the book of Ruth as a lovely story of loyalty, especially when Ruth says to her mother-in-law Naomi, “Where you go, I will go…your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” The story celebrates compassion and kindness between Ruth and Naomi as they help each other survive as widows in a patriarchal culture. It seems to be the most gentle and loving of all stories in the Bible. Yet, I have met young Asian women and read interpretations from Asian women scholars who do not find Ruth’s loyalty inspiring. As one scholar phrases it, “in some Asian cultures, …some church leaders are reported to have used the example of Ruth to insist that young Christian women maintain a traditional cultural practice of serving their mothers-in-law.” This turns the story from a lovely message into a restrictive message that is experienced as oppressive. I had no clue someone could see that story so differently.

Or take the creation story in Genesis 1 where God creates an orderly and blessed cosmos and makes human beings in God’s own image. I’ve often taught this passage with a focus on the careful narrative structure and its important theological concepts about God, creation and humanity. But then I read an interpretation from a Mayan woman pastor in the Presbyterian Church of Guatemala. She says, “Many … put us down because we’re indigenous. They say we’re not equal to the [upper classes] but that’s not what God says. When God created us we were made all the same and one God made us all. So we shouldn’t discriminate against anyone… God gave us the earth, the land, all the plants and fruit to use and care for, unfortunately the others haven’t seen it like that. They’ve wanted to get ahead and they’ve taken away our land… and put us down. They look at us strangely and they say we’re not worth anything because we’re indigenous. But that’s not true.” In her eyes, Genesis 1 becomes a testimony to human rights for Indigenous peoples, a very different reading from my North American theological one.
I could give hundreds of other examples. But the point is that the words of the Bible can apparently mean so many different things to so many different Christian readers around the world. As a biblical people we are shaped by the words of Scripture, which means we find God’s Word in these words, we let them give meaning to us and let them shape our allegiances, decisions, and ethics. How can we do that when there are so many voices of interpretation?

Let’s start with the Bible itself. Does it help us to hear a variety of voices? Does it give us any guidance for a way forward? I think, in fact it does. In the Bible itself, we see the fruits of God’s Spirit at work, through the writing, development and canonization of the books of the Bible. We see the Spirit at work in the words of generations of God’s people who set in writing God’s ongoing revelation in their lives and in truths that found expression in story, song, poetry, proverb, oracle, letter and gospel.

And what do we read in the Bible? We hear there a multitude of voices. There is not just one perspective presented in the Bible, not just one voice or just one presentation of God’s revelation. Rather, as Art van Seters used to say, the Bible is a whole library of books. It’s a whole library of interpretations about what God is doing in creation, in Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit. Just think of the four gospels—rather than just one gospel, the early church canonized four, each with a distinctive theological perspective about Jesus as the incarnation of God. Think about the differences between the book of Proverbs which insists that good actions are rewarded with blessing and the book of Job, which undermines that insistence with Job’s probing questions why a good man has been made to suffer. Or, look at Paul’s assertion that “we are justified by faith...through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have obtained access to this grace” 4 Then hear another voice, the letter of James which advocates that “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” 5

Or, consider the viewpoint of Ezra and Nehemiah who said that God’s will meant that foreigners must be excluded from God’s people in the post-exilic community. 6 In Third Isaiah we hear a different perspective in a prophecy that welcomes foreigners as members of God’s covenant community in the temple that is “a house of prayer for all peoples.” 7 Or my particular favourite contradiction: in a beautiful vision of God’s peaceable kingdom, Isaiah and Micah assert that
peoples “shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.”

In a dramatic reversal of that vision, the prophecy of Joel calls people to “beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears.”

Apparently, the Spirit that worked through the lives and writing of the biblical authors over the course of 1200 years found expression in a variety of testimonies and points of view. But are we not already familiar with that? Paul writes in 1 Corinthians: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord....”

Apparently, there are also varieties of perspectives and voices in the Bible, but it is the same God who activates all of them.

I propose that the Spirit that was at work in the writing of the Bible is the same Spirit that can meet us in the act of interpretation in our lives and contexts. We acknowledge the active engagement of God’s Spirit in the whole variety of words recorded and preserved, and so why would we not expect God’s Spirit to be active in the words read and interpreted by those who prayerfully and consciously seek to shape themselves as biblical people?

With that understanding of the Bible, we can develop a sense of ethics about how we treat others as we read Scripture. Let’s say we take seriously faith commitments based in biblical theology as the basis for establishing our ethical commitments.

First, let’s say we take seriously that God is the ground of all existence and all time, that God is present in each moment. Further, let’s take seriously the biblical story of God’s people, that God was involved with our ancestors in the faith and in the same way meets us even in our present embodied reality. God is a God who is with people. The expression of this in the New Testament is the basic understanding of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. If this is part of our basic confession, that God is passionately involved and present at each moment, then ethical implications follow. This means that we should take the past seriously to address our time and that we are called to have attitude of attending to God’s presence in all our present moments. From where we are situated in time and context, we become participants in God’s ways in the
world, when engage our own context passionately and hold deep respect for all of humanity, grounded in the incarnational identity which we have in Christ.

Further, let’s take seriously that God is one who saves, who redeems and acts for justice and righteousness for humanity. Let’s take seriously that redemption is made real through Christ for all who are estranged from God’s intentions of wholeness for human life. If as Jesus proclaims, ‘the Kingdom is at hand,’” and if Christ’s life, death and resurrection call us to live and embody life as seen in redemptive acts of God, then ethical implications follow. This means we are called to shape our lives, decisions, commitments, values, and institutions to embody what God intends. God sends us to proclaim this good news that God in Christ answers humanity’s deepest needs with mercy, compassion, and healing. We are called to be participants in God’s new creation by living into this redemption, acting in righteousness for well-being, wholeness, inclusion, mercy, justice, and compassion.

Finally, let’s take seriously that God is Lord of all – the one who creates and defines the whole created order. Basic to both the OT and the NT is that God is Lord of lords. The earliest Christian confession was, “Jesus is Lord.” This leads us to be biblical people who find our true selves in relation to, and acknowledgement of, this creator God. If God is Lord, then nothing of our creation or claims or allegiance is “Lord”. All other powers, truths, and allegiances are relativized – including any we would claim for ourselves or our group or church or identity. If the sovereignty of God is a central faith stance, then ethical implications follow. Our basic attitude toward others is one of humility, an understanding of our limits, and a wariness of any arrogant claims to truth or knowledge, including our own. This attitude suggests that while we seek truth and recognize the truth of Christ in the Gospel, that while we need to be clear about our faith, we also forego the claim of any ultimate truth in our own formulations.

So if these are our faith commitments and some ethical implications that follow from them, what does that say about how we as a biblical people interpret the Bible in a world of widely different ways to read? I think several significant ethical principles for interpretation follow from these commitments.
• These faith commitments suggest that we acknowledge and celebrate the fact that we read the Bible among communities of interpreters spread across the globe. In countless communities of faith, in small villages and urban areas, in countries all over the world, Christians read the Bible. Context matters and changes interpretation. The Bible has been translated into over 2,000 languages. All of those contexts and languages matter and impact the ways people understand and live out what they read. If we are to appreciate the breadth of God’s Spirit active in our world, then a principle of careful listening and awareness is crucial.

• These faith commitments suggest that efforts to secure our interpretation of a biblical passage as “the” interpretation are self-serving and arrogant, using only our own way of looking at the text and disdaining all others. We know from our faith commitments to the sovereignty of God that we have no exclusive control over or claim on truth itself. We have only our humble attempts to read the Bible as we understand it, in open engagement with the world and other Christians who also read the Bible as the Word of God. So, I suggest we need to adopt a principle of humility and be willing to forego the claim of any ultimate truth in our own formulations about Bible passages. Rather, we should seek dialogue with other readers that might reveal new truth about Scripture from new contexts and points of view.

• As we saw, the Bible itself sustains a deep and wide range of perspectives, voices and ideas, where some texts directly comment on other passages, and carry on a dialogue across books, and others seem to contradict each other. The Bible seems consistently to include minority points of view and the voices of the marginalized and vulnerable. Let’s take that as our model. Let’s be engaged with and open to our many neighbours in Christ and their ways of reading the Bible. Let’s practice a principle of generosity in interpretation, welcoming the Bible and the world through another’s eyes, seeking other voices, letting multiple interpretations interact without the need to reduce everything to just one formulation.

• These faith commitments suggest that we live with an attitude that allows us to be open to the other, to other understandings of what the Bible means, to dialogue, excited to discover new insights about Scripture. When we are aware of whose we are and who we are – we are called to have attitude of radical openness to the present, and God’s presence
in the other, even as that represents a complex and changing array of biblical interpretations. We are called to engage these other contexts, this complexity, this world, and new understandings. So, I suggest that we need to adopt a principle of honest engagement with the whole wide variety of contexts and readings in our present time, being open to learning from others.

I think, at the end, these principles of interpretation are no more and no less than an expression of Christian love. I have in mind here the love that Paul described in 1 Corinthians 13. With deep apologies for mangling Paul’s poetry, let me close with a re-interpretation of that famous passage:

If I interpret with the insights of scholars or of famous Reformers, but do not interpret in love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have interpretive powers, and understand all the mysteries of the text and all knowledge, and if I have all doctrinally correct analysis, so as to remove all questions, but do not interpret in love, I am nothing. Interpretation practiced in love is patient, it is kind, it is not boastful or arrogant about its own opinions on the text. Interpretation practiced in love does not insist on its own reading of the text; it is not irritable or resentful of different readings. It does not rejoice in putting other interpretations down but rejoices in hearing truth discovered through engagement with the text. Interpretation practiced in love listens to all interpretations with generosity, believes all interpreters can read with God’s Spirit, hopes all readers engage together in reading the Word of God, endures multiplicity and variety even with delight.

Love never ends. But as for interpretations, they will come to an end; as for analysis, it will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we interpret only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. For now we read as if interpreting riddles, but then we will read face to face. Now I know and interpret only in part; then I will know and interpret
fully, even as I have been fully known. And now the text, interpretation, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.

By God’s grace, may we so interpret, and so live. Amen.
1 Ruth 1:16
4 Romans 5:1-2.
5 James 2:17.
7 Isaiah 56:6-8.
8 Isaiah 2:4 and Micah 4:3.
9 Joel 3:10.
10 1 Corinthians 12:4-6.
11 Mark 1:14-15.