

Dr. Seakle Greijdanus on Scripture Interpretation

Introduction

In May and June of 2006, I made a series of posts on my blog in which I shared the insights of Prof. Dr. Seakle Greijdanus on the science of Scripture interpretation (hermeneutics). I was introduced to this material by my New Testament and Old Testament professors in seminary (Prof. J. Geertsema and Dr. C. VanDam, respectively).

I have drawn extensively on my notes from them, especially from Prof. Geertsema. I could not share this material with you if it weren't for them. Here and there I've tried to clarify a bit more, insofar as this has been inaccurate or just plain wrong -- *mea culpa*.

May these notes help God's people to know his Word and so know him and the only Saviour, Jesus Christ (John 17:3).

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Interpreting the Bible



I agree: the man in the picture above looks crabby. He looks like he's ready to throw a piece of chalk at some student. But don't be fooled: this crabby-looking man has the goods. Or I should say "had" the goods. This is Prof. Seakle Greijdanus. He was born in the Dutch province of Friesland in 1871. After studying at the Free University of Amsterdam, he was called to the ministry in 1904. He became a professor of New Testament studies at the seminary in Kampen in 1917. In 1944, he played a leading role in the liberation (*vrijmaking*) of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. He died in 1948.

Greijdanus wrote a lot of helpful material, but unfortunately not a lot of it has been translated and what has been translated consists of articles in books or in-house translations of excerpts of his writings. Over the next while, I'd like to share some of what Greijdanus wrote about the science of interpreting the Bible (a.k.a. hermeneutics). I'll be drawing on translations and summaries of Greijdanus from two of my seminary professors, Dr. C. VanDam and Prof. J. Geertsema. This was material that I was taught in seminary and I believe it's worth sharing with a broader audience.

This material comes from Greijdanus' 1946 book "Scripture Principles for Scripture Interpretation" (*Schriftbeginselen ter Schriftverklaring*). In chapter 2, Greijdanus lays out his basic methodological principle: the rules for interpreting Scripture must be derived from Scripture. If this sounds circular, that's because it is -- and with good reason. Man is the creature and he is entirely dependent for everything upon the Creator. If someone were to attempt to approach the Bible

from a purely scientific standpoint, this would give credence to the lie of Genesis 3:5, "You will be like God." We call this pretended autonomy -- man thinks that he is a law unto himself. In reality, there are no "brute facts" in the world -- there are only interpreted facts. And there is no real position of neutrality either. Either we interpret the fact of Scripture (and its interpretation!) from God's point of view (revealed in Scripture itself) or we interpret Scripture from the stand point of man's pretended autonomy. Only the former method will lead to the most consistent and God-honouring appropriation of the truth.

In my estimation, this is an enormously valuable contribution of Greijdanus. It is an extension of the principle (to be discussed in more detail later on) that the Bible is a unity and therefore Scripture must interpret Scripture. Scripture must also give the rules for its own interpretation. And so when we run into what seem to be contradictions or difficult passages, we take our starting point in that we are the problem, not the Bible. The Bible is not affected by the fall into sin, the Bible does not have creaturely weakness -- we have both.

Here follow the 18 principles of Greijdanus:

1. The interpretation of Holy Scripture must be objective.

In other words, the interpreter has to submit to the text. Yes, there is a subjective element, but we'll discuss that in a moment.

a) The interpretation must render what is revealed according to God's intention in an undistorted and complete way. Cf. Jeremiah 23:25-26,32; Ezekiel 33:7-9, 13:22-23 -- all passages which speak of how false prophets misinterpreted or misconstrued God's intention.

b) The interpreter is not to bring into his interpretation his own ideas, thoughts and desires. He cannot leave out part of a passage under consideration because he doesn't like it. He cannot and must not twist or distort Scripture passages. Cf. John 6:60-66.

c) Positively, the interpreter must explain Scripture according to God's intention, very carefully and precisely, in its own context.

d) An objective interpretation must be done with a believing heart (1 Cor.2:12). Such a believing heart will not add or take away from the text. In this way, the objective and subjective come together. When considering the subjective element further, it is true that one interpreter will see more and be more sensitive to certain aspects of the message than another. This is reflected in the fact that commentaries will and do differ -- sometimes these differences are apparent or a matter of emphasis; sometimes they are real and significant. These differences highlight the difficulty (but not the impossibility) of objectivity and compel the interpreter to take great

care.

2. The interpretation, therefore, must interpret Scripture as given in its totality and according to its various parts.

a. This rule is developed from the first one. Sinful man is inclined to disagree with the Word of God. 1 Corinthians 2:14 teaches that regeneration is necessary to properly interpret the Scripture. The unspiritual man does not grasp the things of the Spirit. The dangers of giving one's own interpretation can be seen in Scripture with the Pharisees and their understanding works of the law as a means to obtain righteousness with God. Another example is seen with the Sadducees and their rejection of the resurrection. We must not spiritualize or rationalize Scripture so as to make it say what fits with our own system.

b. Therefore, one is not allowed to adapt the interpretation of the Bible to the spirit of the age or to contemporary ideas, even if refusing to do this means suffering and conflict. We have to be reminded of what Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 10:5, namely that there has to be a destruction of arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God and a taking every thought captive to obey Christ. "Therefore, Holy Scripture must be unfolded in its interpretation according to its own contents and meaning and claim, as it is itself, and as it gives itself, without any accommodation to any other direction, meaning or spirit."

c. What holds for Scripture as a whole, also holds for its constituent parts. These parts must be interpreted as they give themselves, according to their own character, that is: as history, as prophecy, as a psalm, as parable, as apocalypse and so on. A portion of history must not be explained as a psalm or a parable, but history as history, a psalm as psalm, and so on. Further, all parts should be interpreted in their narrower and wider contexts of the passage itself: the chapter(s), the book (and group of books, as in the Prophets or the Gospels), the Old or New Testament, and then the whole Bible. When speaking about context, we think of concentric circles moving out from the text to eventually encompass the whole Bible. In this respect, careful attention must be given to how the different parts of Scripture present themselves. *Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpret est* (the Sacred Scripture is its own interpreter). It has the principles for its interpretation in itself. And it is *autopistos*, that is to say: it has self attesting authority; it has the basis for its trustworthiness in itself.

3. Scripture is portrayed or demonstrated as the revelation and exact Word of God through human service.

a. There are many places in the Bible that speak of it as being God's

Word: Isaiah 1:2, Amos 3:7-8, John 10:35, 2 Timothy 3:16, and Hebrews 1:1. Therefore, it has divine authority and this has to be recognized in its interpretation.

b. Consequently, the interpreter has to acknowledge this claim. God cannot lie (Deut. 32:4 and Numbers 23:19). What God says in Holy Scripture is true and we are to receive it as such. And when we explain it, we have to make it known that this is the truth of God clothed with divine authority.

c. This impacts how the interpreter approaches the Bible. With every passage he interprets, the heart of the interpreter must be dominated by faith and filled with reverence and awe. He should have in his heart the prayer of Psalm 119:18, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law." And of 1 Samuel 3:9, "Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening." If this is what we do, our interpretation will bear this stamp. And then there will be the joy of Psalm 147:19, "He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel" and Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."

In summary, God is pleased to use human instruments to point us to the character of his Word. Recognizing this, interpreters must nurture a spirit or attitude of devotion to the Word.

4. A distinction has to be made in Holy Scripture between God's Word in a formal sense and God's Word in a material sense.

a. Not everything given us in the Bible is God's Word in the material sense, that is, with respect to the truth of its contents. For instance, Genesis 3:1,4,5 gives us the words of the serpent. 1 Kings 3:18 contains a deceiving word from the old prophet at Bethel. John 9:16a gives the wrong reasoning of some of the Pharisees. Therefore, we have to distinguish between God's Word in a formal and in a material sense. When God tells us words of Satan, of the ungodly, and so on, these words are the Word of God in a formal sense.

b. We speak here of *auctoritas historiae* (historically authoritative); these words also come to use with divine authority and we have to accept them as God's truth in the sense that they are historically reliable records of what was said. Nevertheless, they are not the norm for our faith and actions. These words are often sinful and in conflict with the truth. With such sinful words, God reveals to us even more forcefully the terrible essence of sin, the justice of his wrath, and the greatness of his grace.

c. However, most of the contents of Holy Scripture is the Word of God in the material sense, that is: revelation of God with respect to what we are

to believe and how we have to live and act before God. Here we speak of the *auctoritas normae* (normatively authoritative). Here God speaks directly (God said...) or through an angel or prophet, etc. Examples include: Genesis 2:16-17, 3:15, 22:12ff, Luke 1:11ff., Romans 1:1, etc.

d. Everything in Scripture contains divine instruction. All of Scripture is God's written revelation, speaking with divine authority. But the interpreter always has to ask whether what is being interpreted is the Word of God in the material or in the formal sense of the term. Sometimes the difference is easy to notice; at other times, as with the book of Job, it is more difficult to discern. Cf. Deuteronomy 13:1-3 where God warns his people to distinguish between true and false prophets. Also cf. 1 Kings 13:16ff and Matthew 4:6 (Satan comes with a word from Scripture, but takes it out of context). Greijdanus also gives the example of the false prophet Hananiah in Jeremiah 28. Words spoken must be in agreement with the whole of Scripture and its intention.

5. Everything revealed in Holy Scripture must be seen and understood in connection with Christ.

a. The center of the contents of the Bible is the self-revelation of God in Christ. Everything in the Bible is connected to this in some way. John 5:39 is a key text in this regard. The Lord Jesus says there that the Scriptures testify about him. Revelation 19:10 says that the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. Therefore every passage of Scripture must always be seen in connection with Christ, because its stated aim is to show the glory and necessity of Christ's person and work. Greijdanus could also have mentioned John 5:46 and Acts 10:43.

b. What happened through God's providence and as part of his special revelation belongs to the whole of God's self-revelation in Christ. Therefore, we must receive the narratives (stories) of Scripture not as independent self-existing things, but always in their relation to and significance for the totality of God's self-revelation in Christ. So, for instance, the story of Melchizedek in Genesis 14 -- we see that in the light of Hebrews 7. The story of Jonah we read in the light of Matthew 12:39-40. We consider Elijah and the widow of Zarephat in 1 Kings 17 in connection with Luke 4:24-27, and so on. These connections set the pattern for us to follow in our interpretation. Therefore, we must see the facts of these stories in the Old Testament, but also the self-revelation of God in Christ in them. Further examples given by Greijdanus: the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 19 with Luke 17:26-28; the manna in Exodus 16:4,14 with John 6:32ff.; the water from the rock in Exodus 17:5-6 and 1 Corinthians 10:4.

c. This includes not only the historical events, but also information or

statements that were included with them. Greijdanus gives the example of Genesis 15:6 (Abraham being declared righteous) -- this has to be seen in connection with Romans 4:23-24, Galatians 3:8. [He also mentions John 19:28 here, but I have to say that I find it difficult to see a direct connection, WB]. This calls for carefulness in interpretation. We have to watch for a false, human-invented spiritualizing that goes against the intent and meaning of Scripture. It's difficult to give a general rule for this. We simply have to be sober and check what we think about the text with the rest of Scripture. We can only allegorize or spiritualize when Scripture itself indicates it.

d. In connection with this, there is also the principle that we must see the words in Scripture addressed to specific persons as spoken also to those who come after them, including ourselves, cf. Matthew 22:31, Matthew 15:7, and 1 Corinthians 9:10. The application is not something that we add, but it flows from God's Word itself and is also addressed to us.

e. Moreover, since we live in the dispensation of the New Testament, the era of fulfillment, we must read the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament. By doing this, we receive clearer insight, cf. Matthew 11:11, and 1 Peter 1:11-12. We see God's revelation in a clearer and deeper sense than the Old Testament believers who were addressed first. Since God gave his revelation through the service of man, we can formally, though often not materially, distinguish between the meaning and intention of God (the primary author) and that of the secondary human authors, cf. 1 Peter 1:11. But in Scripture the most important thing for us is the meaning intended by God, whether the secondary authors understood it or not. Moreover, through the New Testament fulfillment a much clearer light has been given to us.

6. Attention must be given to the manner in which the Holy Scripture interprets itself and how the human instruments of revelation do this.

a. The best interpreter of a book is its author. This holds true also for the Bible. God is the primary author and thus is its best and most perfect interpreter. So, the best interpretation of the Bible is the Bible itself.

b. Of course, this is only true if the whole Bible is God's Word. Since the Bible presents itself as such, we believe that to be the case. However, as mentioned previously, this does not mean that human authors (the secondary authors) always fully understood what they spoke or wrote. It is quite possible that they did not see the full extent of what they said. But it was God who spoke through them (Hebrews 1:1). They did not have to understand always what was meant (Daniel 12:8-9, Matthew 11:11, 1 Peter 1:11). It also does not mean that a New Testament explanation of an Old

Testament text is the only possible explanation or interpretation. Peter says that the prophecy of Deut.18:15,18-19 was fulfilled in Christ (Acts 3:22-23). But this does not exclude fulfillment through other prophets whom the LORD gave to his people between the time of Moses and Christ. Yet this promise has been entirely fulfilled in Christ and in the other prophets in their connection with him, because they were all servants and types of Christ, through whom he spoke to the people. Greijdanus also gives the example of Matthew 2:17-18. This passage speaks of the murder of Bethlehem's children as a fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy (Jeremiah 31:15). However, this does not deny that this prophecy was also fulfilled already in a certain measure in the captivity of Judah in Babylon. But the murder of Bethlehem's children was the ultimate culmination of Jeremiah's prophecy.

c. This principle means that we have to pay close attention to the manner in which the Saviour and his apostles and the other secondary authors received and interpreted the Old Testament revelation of God. We have to interpret Scripture in God's way.

It means further that we have to pay close attention to how God, in the events described in Scripture, has fulfilled the prophecies he gave beforehand in both promises and threats. For example, the sending of Christ and his work of redemption as God's gift, is the fulfillment of his Old Testament prediction. The purpose is that we receive insight into later revelation through earlier revelation and in this way see the greatness and fullness of God's revelation. In this way, we receive principles and guidance as to how to interpret Scripture.

d. An additional question is whether we can investigate the way in which the secondary authors in Scripture reached their interpretations of earlier written revelation. If we can, for instance, through taking into account the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) or the way of thinking or interpreting the OT in those days, then the NT explanation of the OT revelation is not thereby deprived of its divine correctness or authority. In fact, these things must be seen as a means in God's hand to lead the secondary human authors in their thinking and writing for revealing his truth.

7. We are not allowed to make faith in the truth of Scripture-interpretation dependent on outside sources.

a. Data from outside God's Word (such as archaeology, extra-Biblical writings, etc.) can never rule over Scripture or be made equivalent to it. These things must always be subordinate to Scripture. For these things are always the word or conclusions of human beings, liable to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. What Scripture says is true

whether or not it is confirmed or contradicted by outside sources.

b. The Holy Scripture is the revelation of the Word of God. Apart from God's regenerating work, human minds are sinful and do not understand the things of the Spirit, 1 Corinthians 2:14, 4:18. "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil." (John 3:19, cf. 7:17, 8:31-32, 18:37, 5:40). Placing other sources beside or above Scripture is in conflict with what Scripture says about itself as the self-revelation of God.

c. We can bring in many things to help us in understanding the meaning of Scripture words, but Scripture itself remains the decisive factor. Its truth must stand, simply because Scripture says it. God's Word is *autopistos*: it has the ground for its trustworthiness in itself.

d. In order to interpret Scripture correctly and fully, we have to know it both in its form and contents, cf. Matthew 22:29. Our knowledge will be only in part here on earth, therefore the human interpretation of Scripture will also be only in part. But this means that there is an even greater need to know Scripture as much as we can, and more and more.

8. Since Holy Scripture is an organism, the interpretation of one of its parts must reckon with the whole and with the other parts and with the developing progress of God's revelation.

a. An organism is a whole being and it has parts which make up the whole. In the same way, Scripture is a whole entity made up of parts which are connected and form a unity. Therefore, in order to interpret the place, form, and working of the distinct parts, one has to take the whole and the other parts into account. The different parts of Scripture did not come into being independently from one another or accidentally without any inner link. Rather, its parts belong (so to speak) together genetically and genealogically. They are spiritually related and together form a firm, well-ordered completed unity. The New Testament cannot be understood correctly without the Old Testament. It constantly refers to the Old Testament, quotes from it and argues its points from it. The Old Testament opens up in the New. This finds expression in the old Latin dictum, *Vetus Testamentum in Novo patet, Novum in Vetere latet* (The Old Testament opens up in the New, the New was hidden in the Old). With the parts of the New Testament, as well as of the Old, often the secondary authors appear to have known and used each others writings to enhance the influence of those writings.

b. Consequently, we have to recognize in Scripture what came before and what followed after. One part enlightens the other. One can notice development in Scripture, not only in the increase of content, but that

what is present in seed form (*in nuce*) in the older books is worked out and elaborated in later books and becomes clearer. In Genesis 3:15 the whole gospel is present in seed form (*in nuce*), but we see this only in the light of the New Testament. The same counts for the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3 that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. One final example: Isaiah 53, which we can only understand fully in the light of the sufferings of our Saviour.

c. When we pay attention to this growth, we see God's self-revelation become clearer and broader through time. There is a history of God's self-revelation in Christ. Therefore, in Genesis 3:15 (the mother promise), we have to recognize what God has revealed with respect to this promise in later times and with its ultimate fulfillment in the New Testament in Christ. The same has to be said for God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7 and, in fact, for everything.

d. Therefore, we must recognize the progressive, organic development of God's revelation with its different parts in their distinct moments as coming from one seed (germ). We also have to see its truths in relation with the whole of God's revelation and with the mutual connections of the diverse parts. The wider context sheds light on a specific text.

I should note again that I am heavily relying on my seminary notes from Prof. J. Geertsema for this. I have the Dutch original and am referring to it and occasionally changing or clarifying, but most of this comes from Prof. Geertsema. As he was teaching the above material, he pointed out that Greijdanus was influenced in some ways by the ideas of Abraham Kuyper and the philosophy of idealism/romanticism. This was especially with this idea of an "organism." However, Prof. Geertsema did acknowledge that the basic thought here is correct, viz. the unity of Scripture and its parts is critically important for us to recognize.

9. Therefore when we interpret Scripture we also have to recognize the distinct times and dispensations to which the parts that are to be explained belong.

a. Although God gave his self-revelation in Christ (regarding the redemption of sinful man and a lost world) fully and right away in seed form, it did become more richly developed with the passage of time. Specifically, in the time of fulfillment (the New dispensation), God placed his predictions entirely in the light, cf. Romans 3:25 and Galatians 3:23-4:6. This fulfillment brought along great changes. The entire ceremonial law, inasmuch as it was a shadow of Christ, has been abrogated. Animal sacrifices have been abolished, cf. Hebrews 10:12,14. So are the commands regarding circumcision and the feast days and feast years, Galatians 4:9-10, Colossians 2:16-17. The relation of church and state is

no longer the way it was in Israel. Also, the apostles were given the command to gather God's people from all nations, Matthew 28:19. In the new dispensation we live under different circumstances, relationships and regulations. Many rules in force before Christ no longer apply because they were shadows of Christ and his work, cf. John 4:21-24.

b. Before the Law (Moses) came, there was still a different dispensation, namely that from Abraham to Moses. This was preceded by the dispensation that includes the time before the Flood. Materially, the covenant of grace did not change throughout these different times and dispensations. For there is only one Mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). There is only one way of salvation for sinners (John 14:6). There is only one true faith (Ephesians 4:5) and only one name through which we are saved (Acts 4:12). This is true throughout all ages. But the forms in which God revealed this were different in these distinct dispensations and his demands were also different. Essentially, however, these commandments were the same (as a comparison of Deut. 10:12-13, Micah 6:8, Matt.22:37-40 and Romans 13:9-10 shows), but the forms in which they were given and were to be obeyed differed.

c. This means that what God said in specific situations to Noah (build an ark) or to Abraham (offer your son) is not a command for us. We are not called to make a tabernacle with all the specific measurements. Thus, while in essence God's self-revelation was always the same, in its outward forms and rules there were distinctions in the different dispensations.

d. In 2 Samuel 7:12, the LORD promises David a son who will build the temple and for whom he will be a Father. This refers first to Solomon, but it includes the promise about David's great Son who will build the temple (which is the congregation) and for whom God will be Father in the full sense of the word. Therefore, with regard to the interpretation of this promise, we need to explain first the meaning for the time of David until the coming of Christ. This was about David's royal house and God's house of stone. Then we can proceed to the meaning for the New Testament time, looking at the fulfillment with Christ himself and his church as God's spiritual temple. Related to this, interpreting the Old Testament in the light of the New Testament means that the prayer of Psalm 14:7 ("Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!") must now be seen in the light of Christ, the fulfillment of Zion.

e. We can add that the things which can be inferred or deduced from what God has revealed in Scripture with clear words or deed must be considered God's Word too. God meant it this way, for when God gave his revelation, the consequences of what he said were clear to him.

10. In the interpretation of Holy Scripture, we must always take

careful note of the distinction between the special and the general.

God often reveals the general in a special, concrete form. As an example, consider the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder." Included with this command is a general prohibition against the breaking down of life (cf. the exposition of the Ten Commandments in the Heidelberg Catechism). We base this on the elaboration and application of these commandments as we find it done, for example, by Moses in Deuteronomy 6-26 and by Christ in Matthew 5-7. As another example, when God gave manna to Israel in the wilderness, at the same time he was teaching them (and us) the general truth that man shall not live by bread alone, but by God's promise -- and those promises include everything, also bread.

Therefore, with every word of God's revelation in Scripture we have to investigate its concrete and special meaning for that moment in history and also its general meaning for all times. When Israel was delivered out of Egypt, the church of all times was led out. This includes Christ himself so that Matthew 2:15 can quote Hosea 1:1 ("Out of Egypt I have called my son") as pertaining also to Christ. Christ's flight into and coming out of Egypt repeated what happened long before. In and with the Lord Jesus, all his people who were redeemed from sin and guilt were then led out of Egypt, because it is only through him that they exist as his saved people. It is only from him that they have all their salvation.

The Jewish leaders in the gospels think that being the physical offspring of Abraham is what makes them God's people; Christ teaches this to be wrong. They say one has to love his brother but can hate the enemy; also this is shown to be wrong. The stranger will be called and, in coming to the Lord, will belong to him as well. The external must be explained as the visible explanation for the inner and spiritual (Psalm 51:18-19); the spiritual is the main element. Careful attention must always be given to whom God says or does something, under which circumstances, and in what way. By doing this we can see what is the temporal and passing special element and what is the abiding general element. When Elijah is sent to a widow outside of Israel, this teaches for all times what Christ says in Luke 4: that those who belong to God's people but refuse to believe and walk in the way of the Lord -- they will forfeit God's salvation. When Abraham is said to believe and his faith was counted to him as righteousness, this is a promise for all who believe in Christ (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4, Galatians 3). Adam having been created first and Eve having fallen into temptation first is pointed out by Paul as having significance for the life of God's people in their homes, in society, and in the church (1 Timothy 2).

11. With each part and every text of Scripture careful attention

must always be given to the specific details.

a. Two texts can be exactly the same, but their use is different. As an example, consider Psalm 24:1a and 1 Corinthians 10:26, "The earth is the LORD's and everything in it." In Psalm 24, the teaching is that everything belongs to the LORD, but in 1 Corinthians this text is used as an argument to prove that meat bought at the market place can be eaten.

b. Since Scripture is God's Word, everything in it has meaning, including the little things. When the LORD was pleased to give us the same facts more than once, as in Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, or in the three/four gospels, the meaning is not exactly the same in each instance. It differs according to different context, order, form, and so on. Therefore, in each case, we have to ask what is it specifically that the LORD is revealing in that specific text in distinction from its parallels. As another example, consider Genesis 6:5 and 8:21. Both state the same truth, but the former points to the total depravity of man in a way which becomes the reason for the flood, whereas the latter indicates that this state has been there from man's earliest existence and that therefore there will not be a flood again. The flood water has not purified man's heart.

c. In order to find the specific meaning of a Scripture text, one must carefully and precisely determine which words and word combinations are used. And when a similar thought is expressed or a similar fact described, we must carefully compare the two to find out what is the same and what is different. We do this in order to learn what God is saying specifically in each place. Careful attention also has to be paid to the context and the question of purpose has to be raised. The interpreter has to ask why something is said or done at one place while it is said or done differently at another place. We can only understand the meaning of a text when we carefully investigate its specific details.

12. Holy Scripture and each of its parts must be interpreted in its own train of thought or spirit.

a. From the command in Leviticus 19:18 to love the neighbour, the Jews derived a command to hate one's enemy (Matthew 5:43); this was entirely against God's own practice and against the clear intent of his revelation. And consider how the truth that man's unrighteousness causes God's righteousness to shine forth brighter (Romans 3:5-6) is used as a pretext to go on sinning. This, too, is entirely against what God has revealed in his will -- he has an aversion against all sin, cf. Romans 6:1, Romans 5:20, Matthew 23:16ff.

b. Therefore, when we want to interpret Scripture, we have to make the nature or spirit of God's revelation our own, as well as its train of thought

and manner of reasoning, i.e., the logic of the Holy Spirit (the primary author), cf. Matthew 4:6,7. When John says "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16), we are not allowed to explain this in conflict with the revelation of his wrath (Nahum 1:2, Romans 1:18). Were we to do that, the suffering of Christ would be inexplicable since God would not be angry against sin.

c. Thus we always have to interpret Scripture according to the line of thinking which God has revealed and made known to us. Consequently, the primary question is not: what did the people to whom this Word of God hear in this word or understand? Rather: what is God intending to reveal here? [emphasis from Prof. Geertsema]. For example, in Genesis 1:26,28 when God speaks of himself with the word "us", we should not be primarily concerned with how Adam and the patriarchs understood this. Rather, it should be interpreted within the framework of God's existence as a triune being and what he has revealed in this respect. For Adam is not speaking here and neither are the patriarchs, but God himself is speaking. Thus, such a passage must be interpreted according to the sense of the Speaker, i.e. God, from eternity the triune God. Consequently, we are not to weaken the concepts in Scripture or interpret them in conflict with God's nature, e.g. God's wrath, so that the suffering of Christ is explained in a wrong way. Or when Scripture speaks about God repenting (Genesis 6:6, 1 Samuel 15:11) -- this must not be interpreted in a human way, as if God had an essential change of mind, in opposition to what Scripture reveals about him elsewhere (1 Samuel 15:29, James 1:17). What is said about God in a human way [anthropomorphism] must always be understood in a manner worthy of God. And so, when Philippians 2:7 says that Christ emptied himself, this should not be interpreted in conflict with that God reveals about his immutability. In 2 Peter 3:16, we are warned against twisting Scripture.

13. When interpreting Holy Scripture we have to take care that we do not deviate from, nor come in conflict with, the letter of the text by being either rationalistic or over-spiritual.

a. By far not everything in Scripture must be understood literally. The rumbling of God's intestines (bowels) in Jeremiah 31:20 must be understood figuratively as an indication of God's intense and strong affection. In Revelation 21:2 the coming down of the new Jerusalem is meant to be symbolic, just as the description and measurements in verse 16. It is clear that not everything is meant to be taken literally; in such cases we have to find the spiritual meaning of what is taught about God and the eternal matters. This has to be done taking into account our earthly existence and spiritual lack of comprehension. However, also in such cases we must not depart from the literal formulation of the passage. Rather, we take our starting point in it so that we can first determine the literal meaning and in that way find the spiritual or figurative meaning.

Also, when we have to interpret by "spiritualizing," this must not degenerate into intellectual games, but offer a true interpretation of Scripture, deduced from what the text says literally.

b. In this way, the letter remains, so to speak, the basis on which interpreters establish any such spiritual explanation. The "spiritualization" is not allowed to be the development of one's own ideas which are spun out in some vague connection with the text. One cannot hang one's own ideas on the text and then present it as God's Word while, in fact, the interpretation has nothing to do with the text. For example, when Luke 6:17 says that Christ spoke while standing on level ground, one is not allowed to infer from this that doctrines should not be used in preaching. We are also not allowed to interpret the letter of Scripture in a rationalistic way and so deprive it of its literal meaning. For example, when Matthew 14:25 says that Christ was walking "on the water," we must not explain this as "along the water" in order to avoid the literal meaning because we all know that man cannot walk "on" water, cf. verses 26 and 28. Saul interpreted God's command in 1 Samuel 15:3 in a way that seemed correct to him, but it was a deviation from what God had literally said and it was so wrong that he was rejected as king.

c. This rule implies that when it comes to prophecies too, we have to start from the literal meaning. We have to hold on to what is written literally as long as this fits a good interpretation. For example, when Psalm 48:12 says "Let Mount Zion rejoice," we must not begin by interpreting Zion in a spiritual way as referring to the congregation of the Lord. Instead, we must first understand this as referring to Jerusalem with its temple and palace and citizens. Only after this can we understand it in connection with the spiritual mountain where God dwells, that is: his congregation with his elect. In such cases we must begin with (but not restrict ourselves to) the literal meaning. From the literal meaning we have to come to the spiritual; from the literal temple of stone to the spiritual temple of the congregation.

14. When we interpret passages that are unclear in Scripture, we must take our starting point in what is revealed to us in a clearer way elsewhere in Scripture.

a. It can and does happen that one truth revealed in Scripture is much more difficult for us to understand than another. The doctrine of the trinity is less easy to understand than the doctrine of creation and the upholding of the world. The incarnation is more difficult than the miraculous birth of Isaac. But it is also the case that the Lord gave us more revelation about one truth than about another. And regarding the same matter, he revealed himself more clearly in one place than in another. For a right understanding of God's revelation, we must let

ourselves be guided by that which is more clearly revealed to understand better that which is less clearly made known. When Christ says in John 14:28, "My Father is more than I am," we must not understand this in a subordinate sense and so come in conflict with John 1:1. Rather, we have to see that in John 14:28 the Lord Jesus speaks about himself as being clothed with our human nature and as being the One sent by the Father.

1 Timothy 2:5 says, "There is one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. This does not mean that Paul denies Christ's divine nature, for he teaches this very clearly in, e.g. 1 Timothy 3:16, Romans 8:32, 9:5, Philippians 2:6-11, and Colossians 1:15-17. The parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11ff. does not speak about a sacrifice to atone for sin as the basis for the return of the son to the father. However, we are not allowed to use this fact to deny the necessity of the atoning sacrifice of Christ for our sins, as taught elsewhere in Scripture (Matthew 20:28, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 19-21). In the same way, we must not interpret Romans 7:18 ("For to will is with me") as being in conflict with Romans 8:7-8 and Ephesians 2:1-3, as if the unregenerate man still has the will to do good works before God and thus would not need regeneration and renewal.

b. We must explain Old Testament prophecies in the light of their New Testament fulfillment. Through their fulfillment God shed more light on their meaning than in the Old Testament. We must not interpret such prophecies by themselves, apart from their New Testament fulfillment, because God gave that fulfillment in order that we should recognize it in our explanation of his Old Testament prophetic words. The more clear New Testament explanation sheds light on the more obscure Old Testament prophecy. In Acts 8:27-34, the Ethiopian eunuch was reading Isaiah 53 -- a passage which was obscure to him. Philip was able to explain this prophetic word to him in the light of the more clear New Testament revelation with its fulfillment in Christ (Acts 8:35-37). With Psalm 91:11-12 ("For he will command his angels concerning you...") there could be doubts about the situations in which this holds true. In reaction to Satan, the Lord Jesus points out from Deuteronomy 6:16 that it is clear what this passage does *not* mean. At the very least, we know that we can endanger our lives in a self-willed way and then, in so doing, the promise of Psalm 91 becomes no longer valid.

15. We must not interpret Scripture in conflict with the rule of faith.

a. When we interpret a text in Scripture, we must not do this in a way that comes into conflict with truths of the faith which God has clearly revealed in his Word. So, for instance, John 17:3 ("You, the only true God") must not be explained in an antitrinitarian way, in conflict with Matthew 28:19,

2 Corinthians 13:13, etc. Another example: Christ says that neither the man born blind nor his parents had sinned (John 9:3). This must not be explained as being in conflict with the teaching that all men are sinful (Romans 3:10-20). When we interpret Scripture and we come clearly into conflict with what God has made known in his Word, then it is evident that we have made a mistake in our interpretation. We did not understand the text correctly. Greijdanus gives one more example: in Matthew 10:41, the Lord does not teach that good works earn merit before God. There is no conflict with e.g. Luke 17:10 or 1 Corinthians 15:10.

b. We speak here about the analogy of faith (*analogia fidei*), conformity with faith. We can generally distinguish between three aspects:

1) **Analogy of Scripture** (*analogia Scripturae*), conformity with what Scripture clearly teaches even though it does not pertain to a specific point of doctrine.

2) **Analogy of Faith** (*analogia fidei*), the analogy of faith in the specific sense. This refers to conformity with a specific point of the true Biblical faith, such as human depravity and lost condition, Christ as Mediator, his atoning sacrifice, etc.

3. **Analogy of Dogma** (*analogia dogmatis*), conformity with dogma. This refers to the truth as formulated in the confessions and believed by the Church.

c. With respect to the last point (Analogy of Dogma), it must be noted that you cannot set up a rule stating that one is never allowed to come in conflict with the confessions as established by the Church. This is because they are not equal to Scripture, but are subordinate, since they are written by human beings. Only Scripture is the norm-setting norm (*norma normans*), while the confessions are the norm set by a higher norm (*norma normata*). Scripture is inspired, the confessions are not. Nevertheless, when our explanation is in conflict with the confessions, we have to be so humble as to look for the fault on our side first and not right away assume that the confessions are wrong.

d. The confessions of the church do not have binding authority in themselves. Only God's Word has this kind of authority. Nevertheless, they do have some regulating authority. This is in the sense that we better think twice before we publish our exegesis as the established truth of Scripture. One could be right but certainly also wrong, having made a fault in one's reasoning. However, even though the Lord promised his apostles, and in them his church, the guidance of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13), history teaches us that this must not be taken in such a way as if it were impossible for the church to fall into error. Sometimes the truth appeared gloriously just after a period of darkness, as in the days of the Reformation. Therefore, when interpreting God's Word, we must not deny

or restrict this promise of the guidance of the church by the Holy Spirit into the truth, but at the same time we must not neglect the fact that the church can and has erred.

16. When interpreting a parable we must first carefully observe the imagery and after this get a clear and correct picture of the signified matter. Then we must examine and exposit the correspondence between the two in a clear way.

- a. We have to watch for the mistake of bringing all the elements of the image (the parable) to bear in the matter being signified. Therefore, we must not take our starting point in the image (the parable) and bring all the elements over to the signified matter. But the signified matter must, so to speak, be our starting point and the dominating factor, so that only those points of comparison of the parable are used which can help in putting more light on the signified matter.
- b. The point of comparison (*tertium comparationis*) is the main point. In order to discover this, we have to pay careful attention to what is said and the context in which the parable occurs. We must also consider and examine whether the features of the parable which we think must be used as points of comparison to show the signified matter, truly conform to the teaching of Scripture in that matter in other places.
- c. In the explanation of the parable of the weeds sown in between the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30), the Lord himself shows that in a parable more than one feature can be a point of comparison (Matthew 13:36-40). The Lord himself mentions the following: the sower of the good seed is the Lord himself; the field is the world; the good seed are the children of God; the weeds are the children of the Evil One; the enemy who sowed the weeds is the devil; the harvest is the end; and the mowers are the angels. Nevertheless, in using the features of the parable which are to be brought from the parable to the signified matter, we must always stay within the limits of Scripture (i.e. the teaching of Scripture elsewhere on the matter). If we go outside this, we risk the real danger of presenting our own imagination as being the Word of God -- something which is illegitimate and perverse.

17. In its different parts, Holy Scripture must be interpreted in accordance with the nature of those parts.

There are also some common/general (*algemeene*) laws of thinking that need to be followed when Scripture is interpreted. This pertains to the formal aspect. As for the material side, Scripture itself shows the principles for the right way and method to be followed and applied in its interpretation. This applies also to its parts. Not everything has to be

interpreted in the same way. For its books and its parts are not all of the same kind or genre. Historical books and parts are not the same as the prophetic parts. For example, the book of Revelation must not be interpreted as a historic book, as a story about the events that happened in the life of the people at that time. Rather, it needs its own particular approach that does justice to its genre. The same has to be said for parables and the apostolic letters -- they are distinct genres. For this reason, the principles for interpretation must be derived from those distinct parts respecting their own unique character, whether history, prophecy, poetry, parable or apocalypse. Having said that, it is possible that one who is gifted with regard to the interpretation of one genre of Scripture does not have those gifts with respect to other genres, and vice versa. There is variety in gifts, cf. 1 Corinthians 12:4, Romans 12:6-8, and 1 Peter 4:10.

As an aside, Prof. Geertsema made a comment about Proverbs 18:24, "There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother..." He warned us against interpreting this directly as a reference to Christ. Prof. Geertsema insisted that this has to be interpreted in accordance with the characteristics of the genre of wisdom literature. It is a general statement or observation about the reality of life. It does speak about Christ, but not directly. I've always thought that Prof. Geertsema had a good point here. So often people interpret the Proverbs as if they're commands. So for instance, if parents don't discipline their children with a rod, they're sinning. Others won't go that far, but they will say that if you don't corporally punish them for wrong-doing, that's a sin. That is not a proper way of reading the Bible. By that same reasoning, when you run across a fool, if you don't put stripes on his back, you're sinning (Prov. 10:13, 14:3, 19:25, etc.).

18. In general, we can conclude by saying that, because Holy Scripture is God's Word, it must itself be the governing rule for its interpretation.

When interpreting Holy Scripture, everything relevant must receive attention. This includes the things that found outside of it that might help in understanding what it says. But those things cannot be used in a decisive way to dominate the interpretation and the correctness of what it tells us. Rather it can only provide help for obtaining the right insight into its revelation. For Scripture alone is the unique Word of God, his specific revelation. It is therefore infallibly true in what it says, because God cannot lie nor can he make mistakes. It supersedes all human words and stands above them, not under them. Every human being can make mistakes in observation, link things together incorrectly, engage in

fallacious reasoning, and present things differently than what they are out of ignorance or otherwise. This is not possible with God. Therefore, when there seems to be a conflict between what God's Word reveals or says and what is asserted outside of it, and when this is not just an apparent contradiction but a real one, then the correctness and truth of God's Word must be maintained. It is an indisputable truth that the Holy Scriptures must be seen, judged, and interpreted in their own light.

Holy Scripture has the ground of trustworthiness in itself (*Sacra Scriptura autopistos est*).

Holy Scripture is its own interpreter (*Sacra Scriptura sui ipsius interpret est*).

Holy Scripture is the highest judge in controversies of doctrine and truth (*Sacra Scriptura supremus index controversarium est*).

Summary of General Principles

We must always consider:

By whom was something said or written?

To whom was it addressed?

When was it spoken or written?

In what way was it expressed?

What was the motivation for saying it or writing it?

What was the purpose or goal of what was said or done?

Under which circumstances did it happen or was it spoken?

What is the train of thought developed in the passage?

The Abridged Version

Here follows the greatly abridged version of Prof. Dr. Seakle Greijdanus's *Scripture Principles for Scripture Interpretation*. These come courtesy of my Old Testament notes from Dr. C. Van Dam -- I have left out his further explanations. Here they are:

1. Be accurate.
2. Be objective.
3. It is God's Word.
4. The Scriptures testify of Christ.
5. Scripture interprets itself.
6. Note the place and progress in the history of revelation.
7. Note the specific and the more general message of each passage.
8. Note the genre and the specific train of thought.
9. Stick to the text.