

# How to Read the Bible? – Catholic Approaches to Biblical Interpretation

## The Challenge of “Fundamentalism”

- Five “Fundamentals” of (Protestant) Christian Doctrine (from the “Fundamentalist Congress” of the 1890’s)
  1. **Inerrancy of the Bible** (interpreted *literalistically*)
  2. Virgin birth & deity of Jesus
  3. Substitutionary atonement (Jesus’ death)
  4. Bodily resurrection of Jesus
  5. Imminent return of Jesus
- Popular Appeal of Fundamentalism
  - Offers *simplistic* answers to complex questions; people crave *certainty*, don’t like complexity or ambiguity

## Five Principles of Catholic Biblical Interpretation

1. **Incarnational Principle of God’s Self-Revelation** (vs. bibliolatry, over-emphasis on Bible as text)
  - Multiple Stages of **Revelation**: essentially God’s *Self-Revelation* in and to the world
    - Also multiple stages of **Tradition**: the “transmission” or “handing down” of revelation
  - The **Word of God** is not just a book, but primarily **JESUS**, the Pinnacle of God’s Self-Revelation
    - “God sent his only begotten *Son*...” (John 3:16), *not* “...his only begotten book!”
  - **Incarnation**: “The Word became Flesh...” (John 1:14) → Jesus is *both* Son of God *and* Son of Mary
    - Word of God (God *speaks*, things happen); Word made Flesh (God speaks in limited *human* languages)
2. **“Both/And” Approach to Catholic/Christian Theology** (vs. one-sided over-emphases of any type)
  - The Bible is *both* the Word of God (divine inspiration) *and* written by human authors (language limitations)
  - The Bible contains *both* Old *and* New Testaments; we *both* study it academically *and* read it prayerfully
  - Catholics interpret the Bible *both* literally *and* spiritually (christologically, morally, anagogically)
  - *Caution*: We read the Bible *literally* (as “literature”), but not *literalistically* (as if it were mere “facts”)
3. **Ecclesial Guidance for Proper Understanding** (vs. individualistic misinterpretations)
  - Jesus, Spirit, Disciples, Church: all came *before* the Bible was completed and compiled!
    - The Church (guided by the Holy Spirit) created the Bible, *not* vice-versa!
  - The community helps us understand the text (Homilies, Commentaries, Bible Study, Scripture Sharing)
    - One’s personal/individual interpretation should not conflict with long-standing Church Tradition
    - Our Popes and Bishops are the guarantors of this Tradition (assisted by theologians and biblical scholars)
4. **Literary Genres are Diverse/Complex** (vs. modernist/historicist assumptions)
  - “GENRE” = category/type of literature (*art, music, etc.*) characterized by a particular form, style, or content. Some publications contain multiple genres:
    - Ex: **newspapers** have news, editorials, comics, sports results, financial reports, ads, obits, etc.
  - Similarly, the **Bible** is not just one “book,” but a whole “library,” containing many *different* literary genres:

Hebrew Bible Genres:	New Testament Genres:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Myths &amp; Legends</b> (Gen, parts of Exod, Num, Deut)</li><li>• <b>Legal Codes</b> (Lev, parts of Exod, Numb, Deut)</li><li>• <b>Genealogies</b> (parts of Genesis, much of Numbers)</li><li>• <b>Annals</b> (Josh, Judges, 1 &amp; 2 Samuel, 1 &amp; 2 Kings, etc.)</li><li>• <b>Prophetic Books</b> (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.)</li><li>• <b>Psalms/Odes/Songs</b> (Psalms); <b>Prayers/Laments</b> (Lam)</li><li>• <b>Proverbs</b> (Proverbs); <b>Wisdom Literature</b> (Job, Wisdom, etc.)</li><li>• <b>Apocalypse</b> (Daniel)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>Gospels</b> (Mark, Matthew, Luke, John)</li><li>• <b>Acts</b> (Acts of the Apostles)</li><li>• <b>Letters</b> (esp. Paul’s); <b>Epistles</b> (1 &amp; 2 Peter)</li><li>• <b>Sermon</b> (Hebrews); <b>Wisdom Collection</b> (James)</li><li>• <b>Church Orders</b> (1 Timothy, Titus)</li><li>• <b>Testaments</b> (2 Timothy &amp; 2 Peter)</li><li>• <b>Apocalypse</b> (Revelation to John)</li><li>• many more sub-genres, esp. in the Gospels</li></ul>

5. **Historical-Critical Exegesis is Essential** (vs. fundamentalist/literalist fallacies)
  - Foundation of **Ex-egesis** = “leading out” (drawing the intended meaning *out* of the text)
    - Contrast to *eis-egesis* = “leading into” (reading your own opinions *into* the text)
    - Catholics accept *many different methods* of exegesis: historical, literary, sociological, canonical, etc.
  - Multiple levels of **Content & Essential Role of Context**:
    - Literal/Historical Content (*original* meaning) *and* Spiritual/Theological Content (*enduring* meaning)
    - Literary/Canonical Context (surrounding *texts*) *and* Cultural/Historical Context (surrounding *world*)
  - Consideration of **Historical Development**:
    - From *oral* preaching/tradition to *written* texts/scriptures; growth in understanding/application over time

## Official Church Documents explaining Catholic Bible Interpretation

- Pope Pius XII: *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (Encyclical, 1943)
- **Second Vatican Council: *Dei Verbum***: “Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation” (1965)
- Pontifical Biblical Commission: “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993)
- ***Catechism of the Catholic Church***: Part One, Section One, Chapter Two - §§51-141 (1994, 1997)
- Pope Benedict XVI: *Verbum Domini*: “The Word of the Lord” (Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, 2010)

## *The Essential Key to Theology (and Life): BOTH/AND*

by Felix Just, S.J., Ph.D.

### **The proper Catholic-Christian answer to any theological question always involves “both/and” rather than “either/or.”**

At first glance, this claim might seem ridiculous. Isn't God absolute? Isn't there only *one* truth, as opposed to error? Indeed, this proposal does *not* imply that a statement and its *direct negation* are both true, or that one can say anything one wants. It would be wrong, for example, to claim both “God is Love” and “God is not Love,” or to say “Jesus is divine” and “Jesus is not divine,” or to say “God is a fish and God is a frog!”

However, just as every coin has *both heads and tails* sides, just as every battery has *both positive and negative* terminals, and just as the earth has *both a North Pole and a South Pole*, so also the Catholic-Christian answer to any theological question always has (at least) two “sides” or “poles.” These opposite poles may often *seem* far apart and difficult to hold together. It is rarely easy to understand and balance both sides of an issue, just as we can't easily see both sides of a coin at the same time (without a mirror, at least!). Yet the “opposite” sides are seldom real “contradictions,” even if there may be some strong differences and tensions between them.

For example, Christians believe that Jesus is *both God and human*. To a non-Christian, this might seem ridiculous. Even for a Christian, it is hard to understand or explain. How can anyone be *both divine and mortal*? Or how can God be *both transcendent and immanent*? Or how can the Bible be *both the Word of God and human literature*? Can *both creation and evolution* be true somehow? Can *both science and religion* be reconciled? The proper answer to all these questions is YES, *both* the one side *and* its opposite not only can, but *must* be held together in tension, even if they seem to be contradictory, in order to understand the whole truth, the whole of the complex reality.

Rather than overemphasizing one pole and neglecting the other, the challenge in Christian theology is always to hold the two poles together, to maintain a proper balance between both seemingly opposite sides of the truth. Another way of phrasing the Catholic position would be to say, “**Not Only..., But Also...**” Here is a list of only some theological issues and the Catholic-Christian answers, which include both poles:

God is	<i>both</i>	Transcendent (beyond)	<i>and</i>	Immanent (within)
God is	<i>both</i>	One Divine Nature	<i>and</i>	Three Divine Persons (Trinity)
God is	<i>both</i>	Almighty Creator	<i>and</i>	Loving Father
Jesus is	<i>both</i>	Fully Human	<i>and</i>	Fully Divine
Jesus is	<i>both</i>	Son of Mary	<i>and</i>	Son of God
Jesus is	<i>both</i>	Messiah of the Jews	<i>and</i>	Savior of All Nations
Mary is	<i>both</i>	Mother of God	<i>and</i>	Mother of (the human) Jesus
Christian life is based on	<i>both</i>	Scripture	<i>and</i>	Tradition
The Bible is	<i>both</i>	Word of God	<i>and</i>	Authored by Humans
The Bible contains	<i>both</i>	Old Testament	<i>and</i>	New Testament
The Bible must be	<i>both</i>	Read Literally	<i>and</i>	Interpreted Spiritually
The Bible should be	<i>both</i>	Meditated Prayerfully	<i>and</i>	Studied Academically
The Church is	<i>both</i>	a Divine Mystery	<i>and</i>	a Human Institution
The Eucharist is	<i>both</i>	the Sacrifice of Christ	<i>and</i>	a Communal Meal of Thanksgiving
Humans can encounter God in	<i>both</i>	Prayer (meditation)	<i>and</i>	Action (work, service)
To be saved we must	<i>both</i>	Believe (have faith)	<i>and</i>	Put Faith into Practice (good works)
As human beings we are	<i>both</i>	Individual persons	<i>and</i>	Members of families & communities
As human beings we are	<i>both</i>	Free to make choices	<i>and</i>	Responsible for choosing the good

The list could go on and on, but I hope you get the point. Just as every coin has two sides, so the best response to any theological question is not satisfied with simplistic either/or choices, with answers that consider only one side. An authentic Catholic-Christian theology always attempts to understand both sides of a reality in all its complexity, and tries to avoid overemphasizing one side while neglecting the other, which leads not only to distortions of the truth but also to unfortunate consequences in practice.