

DOES THE BIBLE REALLY SAY THAT...

“Hermeneutics”

A General Interpretation of Scripture

(Part One & Two Part of Series)

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PART 1

From time to time I overhear conversations where people are discussing a Biblical passage, and someone is giving his or her interpretation of the meaning of it. In most cases (especially if it's a “difficult passage”), the interpretation is not even close to being accurate. It usually ends with the comment, “Well, I feel ...” or “God told me ...” regarding the accuracy of the interpretation.

Unfortunately, this method of interpretation is the one used by most people in the Christian world today, and sometimes even by clergy. Unknown to most Christians, a method exists that, in most cases, will keep one “on track” regarding the interpretation of scripture. This method is called hermeneutics. Although basic knowledge of Biblical languages is helpful for interpreting the Bible, one need not be a Hebrew or Greek scholar to capture the true meaning of a biblical passage, and some general principles can help us to interpret the Bible.

The first principle of interpretation is to “keep the passage in its context.” Any passage that is interpreted or quoted “out-of-context” is a “pretext” (assumption). There are several guidelines we can use to help us accurately judge the context.

First, we should think of all the possible meanings of the verse, then read it within the section where it is found in Scripture to determine the context. Sometimes this may require reading the entire chapter where it is found in the Bible.

The verse should then be studied more closely, noting any “main words” that are repeated. Write out the verse and its context in your own words, and try to determine what the verse means within this context.

Finally, meditate on the verse and ask the Holy Spirit to illumine your mind to the truth. Although there are some exceptions to this principle when interpreting some passages, the principle of contextual interpretation still stands as a rule.

The second general principle of interpretation is to interpret “according to the exact meaning of the words found in a passage.” Some words used in a language may have more than one meaning, and in some cases different words will have similar meaning. In addition, the meaning of some Biblical words often change. For example, many of the words used in the Bible are not words we currently use in our culture. Therefore, it is important that we understand the meaning of such words so we can develop a proper interpretation. Looking up the word in a dictionary, Bible dictionary, or concordance may be all we need to do. Then, we can go back and examine the word as it is used in the Biblical context.

The third principle is to “interpret according to the grammatical structure of a sentence.” To successfully communicate something to another person we must understand how a word is related to other words in a sentence. Thus, it becomes paramount that we know something about grammar; for example, the basic parts of speech — noun, verb, pronoun, adjective, adverb, etc., and how they relate to other words in a sentence.

Also, there are additional guidelines we can use when the meaning of a verse is not clear. Identify the “key word” in a sentence and determine what part of speech it is. Study the relation of this word to others that surround it and note the possible meanings it may give the verse. If there is more than one possible meaning, use other principles to help determine the correct meaning.

The fourth general principle is to “interpret according to the author’s purpose and plan.” Although God is the true author, let us assume He spoke to writers to “pen” the words of a book. In most books of the Bible, the purpose is often obscure and difficult to ascertain. In fact, the plan of a book is usually easier to figure out than the purpose. Sometimes the purpose of the book may be stated, and other times indicated by personal references. Sometimes the structure of the book may point to the purpose. Because this principle is difficult to apply, we may not use it as often as other principles.

The fifth principle is to “interpret by keeping in mind the historical, geographical and cultural background.” The same act or statement may mean different things in different times and cultures. If I said, “Get out of my face,” this would be difficult to understand unless one lived in America during the 21st century. We need to understand the meaning of Scripture as it relates to the people during the time it was written. The knowledge of Biblical culture and customs is both necessary and important in the interpretation of Scripture. Such knowledge can be acquired from Bible study, maps, and other resources and reference books. Once we understand the background of a passage, we are able to begin interpreting it.

With the sixth general principle we should interpret each passage “in the light of the Bible in its entirety.” In other words, we are to prove Scripture with Scripture. We can guard against a wrong interpretation of a passage by comparing it to the message that is expressed in the entire Bible. One way to acquire the proper understanding of the Bible is to study parallel passages in different Bible versions, and search for their meanings in different parts of the Bible that speak about the same issue. Another suggestion to help us

be more accurate in our interpretation is to acquire knowledge of the entire Bible by studying it carefully and regularly.

In conclusion, if we follow the principles outlined in this article in a systematic and prayerful way, they will ensure our interpretation of scripture will be more accurate.

PART II

Along with general principles of interpretation, there is also a group of special principles that will help us understand various kinds of Biblical thoughts expressed through various modes. The first of these special principles is called “figures of speech.”

Figures of Speech are found throughout the Bible. Inspired writers use figures of speech in an effort to communicate something to us in a way that is not literal, but meaningful. It is not an easy task to know beyond doubt when a “figure of speech” is being used. To be accurate in interpreting Scripture, one must have some knowledge of the customs, culture, and background of the time during which a specific book of the Bible was penned. Usually figures of speech are used in the Bible to add emphasis and vibrancy to the Word of God. And if we understand and recognize them, the Bible will come alive with new meaning.

Symbols found in Scripture also require a special principle of interpretation. The Bible uses many symbols to reveal things both known and hidden. Some symbols can be natural things that exist or things that are miraculous. The Bible also uses certain numbers to symbolize something. We must be careful, however, not to add extra meaning to a word or passage of Scripture when we know beyond doubt it is a symbol. It is never proper to use symbols and numbers (numerology) to develop a doctrine. Apocalyptic books containing an abundance of symbols such as Daniel, Ezekiel, and the Revelation are extremely difficult to interpret. These books should be examined carefully before concluding thoughts and interpretations are made.

Types require a special principle of interpretation that is rather complicated. Most “types” are found in the Old Testament and are divinely purposed prophecies, symbols, or figures that are revealed as spiritual realities when found in the New Testament (called “the antitypes”). When a type includes one or more symbols, it is best that the interpretation be established and taken from within the type. Nonetheless, we must be careful how we use a type to interpret Scripture, and not read meaning into it that isn’t there. When referring to types, of supreme importance is, “never develop Biblical doctrine from a type” — a common mistake of both pulpit and television ministers. In most cases there is a parallel meaning between the Old and New Testaments when types are mentioned in Scripture.

Parables are often defined as “earthly stories with heavenly meanings.” A parable makes a comparison of something known in the natural world and gives it a spiritual meaning. In some theological circles, a parable may sometimes be viewed as an “extended simile,”

while not actually a simile. Parables are made up of three elements: the setting, the story, and the application. Sometimes, however, one or more of the elements may be missing. Parables normally have a single main point that represents the important central theme (or point/message).

Allegories are similar to parables and have been called “extended metaphors.” Most often the basic interpretation of an allegory is easier to find within the allegory than to find within the parable.

Idioms are expressions or words that are peculiar (i.e., “uniquely distinct”) to a certain language, people, or region. Every language and every culture has a different method of expressing ideas, words, or concepts. Hence, it’s important for the exegete (Bible interpreter) to know when a Biblical statement is an idiomatic saying, and therefore, not literal. In addition, the Biblical interpreter must know the customs and manners of the people who penned the Biblical passage. Sometimes the literal meaning is difficult to discover when a Biblical interpreter examines a passage in an effort to establish accuracy. Therefore, it’s important for the interpreter to know the key methods (“hermeneutics”) that lead to accurate interpretation of Scripture.

Poetry is used in the Bible to express a writer’s highest hopes and thoughts, as well as his or her feelings. As we look at the Bible, we see that the Old Testament contains a great deal of poetry. Thus, we must learn to recognize certain features to help us interpret poetical books properly. These features include parallelism, imagery, and hyperbolic (exaggeration) language. We can easily identify with the writers of the poetical books when we share with them our need to “pour our hearts out to God when we are in great travail.” Those books of the Bible commonly known as “Poetical” are: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon.

Prophecy requires a special principle of interpretation that gives us some of the greatest challenges in understanding the Word of God. Prophecies, especially those concerning Christ’s first and second coming, are crucial parts of the Bible we need to understand. In order to successfully interpret Bible prophecy, we must be able to understand the main characteristics. They are: prophetic perspectives, immediate and future fulfillments, figurative language, special grammar, conditional and unconditional predictions, and revealed and hidden truths. These features are important guidelines to help us in the interpretation of prophecy.

Doctrine is a word that refers to both a truth as a whole, and to a particular truth. In order to formulate correct doctrine, we must be able to interpret and understand its meaning in Scripture. By having a through knowledge of doctrine, we learn about God, how we can walk in righteousness, and live in obedience. As we mature in faith and knowledge of God, we learn His plan for mankind. Hence, it is important for us to study Biblical doctrines and know how to interpret them accurately.

Testament Connection is a term I have personally coined. It is seldom used by Biblical scholars and never used in textbooks that teach us “hermeneutics” (Biblical

interpretation). However, it's a significant term that describes how we are to connect thoughts expressed in the Old and New Testaments without confusion. Connecting thoughts of the Old Testament with the New Testament is difficult, to say the least, yet God has given us both Testaments in one Bible as a roadmap. Therefore, the study of "hermeneutics" will teach us how to "lay hold" of the deep truths expressed in the Old Testament, and how to connect it with the New Testament. When we study the Old Testament in light of the New, we find it is God's revelation of His plan of salvation for mankind. A good rule to follow when interpreting and linking the Old with the New is to study what is revealed in the New Testament and interpret backwards to the Old Testament. While there are many predictions in the Old Testament concerning future events, the best exegetes study the fulfillment of the prediction in the New Testament, and then reference the original prediction in the Old.

In conclusion, as you begin to study the Bible, remember that it is particularly important to set your mind to the purpose of studying God's Word. Be sure you understand and follow the "Rules of Interpretation" I've mentioned in this two part series on "hermeneutics." Remember, the primary reason we study God's Word should be to know Him in an intimate way and to glorify Him. And above all, once you've learned what God is saying, be obedient to His commands. As one prayerfully studies God's Word, he or she will have an encounter with the God of the universe and increase in knowledge, faith, and love for Him.

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