

# Interpreting the Bible Biblically

People use the Bible to support many contradictory ideas. For instance, it is used to support ideologies that are totally irreconcilable in philosophy, such the Amish, on one hand, and the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Unitarians, on the other. Calvinists and Armenians use the same Bible, as do premillennialists and amillennialists. Even amongst evangelical, conservative Christians, we find various opposing interpretations of key concepts like the Atonement. Obviously not everyone can be right.

So how can we know what the Bible means? How can we know that we are Scriptural in our applications of Bible principles? One key, of course, is to be submitted to God's direction, so that the Holy Spirit can guide us into all truth. However, the Holy Spirit most times uses the Bible as a basis for understanding God's will and direction. So it is important for us to understand some basic concepts about Biblical interpretation.

In this article we want to look at some basic assumptions about the Bible and some methods built on these assumptions that will help us to come up with a Biblical interpretation of Truth.

## Basic Assumptions

### 1. The Bible is God's Word

The Bible differs from all other books. Other books may discuss God's message, but the Bible *is* God's message. If we do not believe this we will not give the Bible the respect that is needed to properly understand it.

We believe that the Bible was inspired by God. In other words He controlled what was written to the degree that the Bible in its original writing said exactly what God wanted to say, and everything that God wanted to say. It was not only perfect, but also complete. We will not find further revelation of principle in any form, outside of the Bible.

Furthermore, we not only believe that the Bible was inerrant in its original form, but we also believe that God has preserved His message for us. Due to the fact that men have copied its pages and translated its words for almost 2,000 years, we may not always know the exact words that God originally used. But God has preserved His message for us, and we can be assured that the Bible we have today accurately represents His will for us.

*Believing that the Bible is God's Word is the first basic assumption we need to make in order to properly understand its message.*

### 2. The Bible is God's Revelation

The basic purpose of the Bible is to reveal God to men. What is God like? What does He expect of us? Can we please God? If so, how? The Bible reveals all of this and more to us.

God wants us to know Him. He wants us to be able to please Him. He wants us someday to share heaven with Him. He made it possible for us to be His children. That is why He gave us His Word.

*Believing that the Bible reveals God and His will to us is the second basic assumption we need to make in order to properly understand its message.*

### **3. God's Revelation is Progressive**

A misunderstanding of the concept of progressive revelation has led many people to believe false doctrines. God never changes His mind. But God throughout history has changed his methods of dealing with men as He further revealed Himself to them.

For instance, we know that Abraham was a man of God, and a friend of God. But Abraham married his sister—an action later listed as a transgression in the Law of Moses. However, God had not revealed this part of His will to men at this point, and He did not hold Abraham responsible for this. (See Acts 17:30.)

God continued to reveal Himself to men throughout the Old Testament. Prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel made it clear that pleasing God was more than just a blind observance of ceremonies, and introduced values that would become the foundation of the New Testament.

The culmination of God's revelation was the New Testament. We now have a picture of God and His will for us that supercedes any revelation that God gave before that. This is important to remember, because sometimes people try to use examples from earlier revelation to discredit later revelation.

Suppose a Jewish man living after the Law would have wanted to marry his sister or half sister. The Law of Moses said that this was wrong. Would God have excused him because he pointed to Abraham's example? Of course not—the later revelation of the Law superceded the example of Abraham. Yet today, how often do people go back to the Old Testament for examples and illustrations to justify themselves for going against New Testament revelation? They use the example of David to justify going to war. They use the example of Rachel to justify wearing jewelry. They use the Law to justify divorce and remarriage.

For Jews living after the Law to use the example of Abraham to justify breaking the Law did not work. They were no longer ignorant as Abraham had been. For the same reason, we cannot go to the Old Testament for justification for war, jewelry, and divorce and remarriage. Later revelation supercedes earlier revelation, or lack of it. That is one reason we base all of our doctrinal teaching on the New Testament.

*Believing that the Bible's revelation is progressive is the third basic assumption we need to make in order to properly understand its message.*

### **4. Truth Will Never Contradict Truth**

This is one of the most important concepts in this list of assumptions, and in my mind one of the most obvious. Entire articles and parts of books have been written on this subject.<sup>1</sup> But in spite of this, many people overlook it and come to faulty interpretations of important Bible verses.

If truth is truth, then it is truth. There are no shades of truth, with some truths being more true than others. Maybe that seems like a tongue twister, but I know of no better way to say it. Truth is truth!

Why is this so important? It means that within the same period of revelation, there will be no contradiction. In other words, though some things in the New Testament may seem to contradict the example of the Old Testament, all New Testament truths will agree with each other. So if we find two verses in the New Testament that seem to contradict, we have a faulty understanding of one or the other (or both). Adhering faithfully to this assumption will save us from many faulty interpretations.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, the article "Does the Bible Contradict Itself?" in the 6/1/99 issue of the TCC.

*Believing that Biblical truth will never contradict Biblical truth is the fourth basic assumption we need to make in order to properly understand its message.*

## **5. The Bible Is Authoritative**

Today, some people read the Bible for inspiration, some read it for comfort, and some read it because of its promises. These are all worthy reasons, but too often people forget that we should also read the Bible because it has the authority to be our guide for life. When we overlook this final assumption we may easily misunderstand God's expectations for us. The Bible has authority and contains many commands directed to Christians.

This assumption is a very unpopular one. As soon as you raise the subject of obedience in some circles, people start talking about legalism and "works religions." They start spouting verses about Christian liberty, and deliverance from the Law. Nevertheless, the New Testament is clear that there are commands that God expects the Christian to obey. Jesus Himself said, "Ye are my friends, *if ye do whatsoever I command you*" (John 15:14 emphasis added). Later, in the epistles, the apostle John wrote, "And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3, 4).

If we do not obey the New Testament commandments we have no right to claim Christian assurance, or to claim to be a friend of Christ. This does not discredit the teaching of Grace. We are not saved by our obedience. But if we are saved we will obey. Grace does not cover deliberate disobedience of God's commands. (See also the judgment scene in 2 Corinthians 5:10, and Matthew 25:31-46, where Christians are judged by their works. This implies that our obedience and works are an accurate representation of our status with God.)

*Believing that the Bible is authoritative is the fifth basic assumption we need to make in order to properly understand its message.*

## **Keys To Proper Understanding**

### **1. We must read in context**

Various interesting misunderstandings have occurred because someone overheard part of a conversation, but not all of it. Similarly, it is easy to misunderstand a Bible verse if we pull it out of its context. We cannot really understand a statement unless we read the whole supposition of the author—the entire context in which the verse is given.

For instance, a friend of mine was once accused of believing in a "works religion". His accuser quoted Ephesians 2:8, 9 as a proof that works are unnecessary for the Christian. My friend opened up his Bible and read verse ten of the same passage, where it says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Actually to really understand Paul's teaching of Grace, and what it should mean to us, we should study Ephesians 2:1-10. Taking a verse out of context is a common mistake made even by educated Bible scholars. I have read some rather foolish statements in reference books, which were easily proved wrong simply by reading a few verses before or after the passage in question.

The book of Galatians is often abused this way by those theologians who are trying to prove that Christians can live in sin without repercussion. But anyone who reads the whole book carefully (and honestly) will soon see that Paul was speaking to people who were trying to find God's blessing through the Law of Moses. Paul was not saying that the Christian is at liberty from all law, but rather that we are at liberty from the Old Testament ordinances and ceremonies.

*When you study a verse, be sure to read the entire context of the verse.*

## **2. Compare Scriptures**

The Bible is not organized by theme or subject. Therefore we often find subjects touched many times over in the New Testament, in various places. In order to really understand what the Bible is teaching about such a subject we should study all the verses we can find that speak on the subject. A topical Bible or a chain reference Bible can be a handy tool, or a book of cross references, such as *The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*.

The story is told of a young scientist who made a brilliant discovery, and presented a paper on to a group of scientists. He was placed on a lofty pedestal of fame for a few hours until it was announced that several older scientists had tried to repeat his experiments and discovered that his results were the result of using dirty slides on his microscope. Budding Bible students have had similar embarrassments because they didn't do their homework properly before proclaiming a new doctrinal discovery to the housetops of the local congregation.

*To understand a Bible teaching, study all the verses in the New Testament related to that subject.*

## **3. Understand the Key Words of a Passage**

To understand the meaning of a verse, we must understand the meaning of the key words in the verse. For instance, what does the word sincere mean in the KJV? Actually, in 1611, when the KJV was translated, it had nothing to do with attitude. Rather, it meant pure. For instance Philippians 1:10—which states that we are to be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ—actually means that we are to be *pure* and without offence. There is a shade of difference in the interpretation. Sincerity is not sufficient in God's sight, and many people are sincerely wrong. This was not a mistranslation in 1611. The word has simply changed its meaning since then.

Sometimes it is helpful to compare the KJV reading with a newer translation, since this will alert you to such changes in language.<sup>2</sup> If you stumble across a seeming discrepancy don't write it off as a dishonest translation, but do a Greek word study to verify for yourself what it should be. There are various tools available for this. Many people use *Strong's Concordance*. I personally prefer a reference that gives more detail—such as the *Revised Thayer's Greek Lexicon* or *Vines Expository Dictionary*. The latter has been printed in various editions, some of which include Old Testament words. Occasionally a Greek Interlinear New Testament, such as Berry's Greek Interlinear New Testament can be helpful, though it won't tell you as much as a good dictionary will.

*To properly understand a Bible passage, you must understand its key words.*

## **4. Look For the Key Thought**

Almost every Conservative Mennonite knows that 1 Corinthians 11 speaks about the Christian woman's head covering. Our literal practice of this ordinance is one key difference between us and most other Protestant denominations. However, too often we overlook the fact that the Christian woman's head veiling is not the key thought of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. Rather, the key thought of this passage is the doctrine of headship. There are too many women who wear head coverings, but who are disobedient to this passage because they do not find their proper place in God's order of headship.

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<sup>2</sup> In preparation for a forth-coming book on this subject, (entitled *Thy Word is Truth*, Rod and Staff Publishers, Inc.) I prepared a list of around 36 words used in the KJV which have changed meaning like this since 1611. There are more—one book I have lists 800—but these are the important ones.

Once we see this, we also see that the head covering is an outward sign of an inward condition, just like baptism is. Baptism is an outward expression of an inner cleansing. The head covering is an outward expression of an inner submission to God's authority, vested in a woman's husband or father. All this, and more, we can understand once we study this passage to analyze its key thought.

Bible passages are not just hit and run approaches to a subject. They tend to be well thought out treatises with a theme. To understand the passage, you must find that theme.

*To understand a Bible passage, you must find its key thought.*

## **5. From within its original setting**

We believe that God verbally inspired the Bible, and every word was important. However, God used utilized the character and background of the writer in giving His message to us. We can pick out the individual characteristics in various writers. Paul, Peter, John, and Luke each have them, and sometimes they even vary depending the amanuensis employed.<sup>3</sup> Because of this, the writing of the Bible was influenced quite a bit by the setting in which it was written. It is helpful for us to understand this setting when we read the Bible.

When Jesus spoke about an issue to a Jewish audience, and did not explain His premise it is logical to interpret the passage as the Jews of that time would have interpreted it. For instance, take the oft debated subject of the meaning of leaven in the kingdom parables. It is possible that Jesus was simply making a parallel with the known action of leaven in permeating dough. But it is clear from reading the Talmud and Jewish teachings at the time of Christ that the Jews commonly considered leaven to be a type of sin. We should be very careful in brushing aside that knowledge and arbitrarily stating that Christ did *not* mean that.

Jewish writers (and therefore Bible writers) were not as careful with details and chronology as we are. Our 21<sup>st</sup> century compunction for accuracy did not exist in New Testament times. A writer would say, Jesus said... and go on to summarize what He said even though he wrote as if it were a direct quotation. In some cases one Gospel writer summarizes one way, and another a different way. A good illustration of this is the sign that Pilate hung on Jesus' cross. To get the exact wording of this sign we need to amalgamate all four of the Gospel accounts, since each gives a different wording. This is not a contradiction—it is merely a case of God using the normal setting of the time to bring forth His message. Many passages that are used as proof of the Bible contradicting itself are merely complementary and should be studied together.

New Testament writers did not consider it dishonest to juggle the sequence of events in a story, if they were portraying a theme. In many cases the order wasn't important to them, so they simply listed the facts. A case in point would be the order of the temptations of Christ, which differ from Gospel to Gospel. We are wise not to try to make a point on the order of such specific details, since we may be reading something into the passage from our 21<sup>st</sup> century frame of reference that did not exist when the passage was written. This does not reflect on our belief in verbal inspiration, it simply shows that God worked with the boundaries and weaknesses of the human instruments He employed for His work.

*To understand a Bible passage it is helpful to understand the setting in which it was written.*

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<sup>3</sup> An amanuensis was a professional scribe that took dictation and helped in the final wording of a document. See 1 and 2 Peter for an illustration of this. The difference in style is especially noteworthy in the original Greek, so much so that some scholars have felt that the two books must have different authors. Probably Peter employed different amanuenses for the two books, or wrote the one book by himself.

## **6. Recognize Figurative Language**

This point ties closely into the previous one. The Jews in New Testament time and earlier were accustomed to figurative and apocalyptic literature. Jesus taught many lessons using parables and He also on occasion used hyperbole and other literary techniques, such as irony. Conservative Christians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century find this hard to cope with since it does not seem quite “honest” to them. But we will run into difficulties if we do not recognize this.

Take parables for instance. We spoke earlier of the importance of finding the main idea of a passage. This is especially important when trying to interpret parables. The Jews would not have wasted time in trying to fit the details of a parable into their interpretation of it, since they understood that such details were only included (in most cases) to carry the story along. To interpret a parable, you must find the main thought, and not be sidetracked into trying to fit the details into the interpretation. This is also true, in my opinion, of interpreting apocalyptic Bible prophecy. People struggle with this because they do not understand the Jewish mentality.

So it becomes important for us to discern when the Bible is speaking in figurative terms. To force a literal interpretation onto such a passage is doing injustice to God’s intentions. However, the converse is also true. Sometimes people attempt to make a passage figurative when it is obviously intended to be taken literally, as in the case of the ordinance of foot washing.

*To properly understand a Bible passage we must discern whether it is intended to be understood figuratively or literally.*

## **7. We Must Be Logical**

I ran into a situation recently where someone argued that since Peter did not tell Cornelius, the Roman centurion, to leave the army, it must be acceptable for Christians to join the army and go to war. This is an illustration of applying illogical reasoning to Bible interpretation. To argue from the basis of the lack of argument is not reasonable. The Mormons, for instance, could just as reasonably argue that, since the Romans regularly practiced polygamy, Peter’s lack of instruction to Cornelius about polygamy constitutes approval of polygamy.

Is it logical to believe that Jesus would have expected His listeners to cut off their hands, or pluck out their eyes, in His instructions in Matthew 18:7-9? Was it logical for Origen to literally follow the instructions in Matthew 19:12? While we want to be very careful not to explain away the teachings of Scripture, we do need to discern in what sense that the Scripture was intended to be understood. Otherwise we may end up making unreasonable or illogical applications to them.

God’s Word makes sense. Not to the unbeliever perhaps, but to the Christian it does. We do not always understand it all, but it is sensible. To use God’s Word to justify unreasonable or illogical doctrines or actions is not right, and we must be careful to avoid that.

*To properly understand God’s Word, we must be logical.*

## **8. Give God’s Word Its Rightful Position**

Having said all that we have, we need to make one more point. God’s Word is God’s Word. We need to be dedicated to believing it, and obeying it. We need to be willing to be viewed as radical, unreasonable, and irresponsible, if necessary, because of it. It is our road map to eternity. Prize it and study it.

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life” (John 5:24).