

INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

One of my Bible professors was converted while he was a machinist. In order to answer questions from skeptical co-workers, he would go home at night and start reading the Bible from the beginning until he found the answers. He had an incredible grasp of the context of Scripture, could quote entire pages, and often asked, "don't you people read your Bibles?" He was a pointed example of 2Timothy 2:15, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." That's what you must do on your journey of understanding the Bible.

1- Follow the basic PRINCIPLES - God is the Author of Scripture, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, who breathed out God's words through the words of human authors. God superintended them to write what He wanted to say. *Believers rely on the Holy Spirit to understand the Bible, but we do not presume upon the Holy Spirit.* That is to say, understanding the Bible utilizes the same principles of interpretation as any other book. These principles are referred to as "*hermeneutics*," the science of interpretation.

The term comes from the Greek "*hermes*" which refers to an emissary of the gods. The mythological Hermes was the messenger to the human race. Scholars tell us that all forms of human communication follow the same principles of hermeneutics, and the steps of observation, interpretation, application, as we seek to understand what an author means for an audience to grasp.

RC Sproul notes, "*the Bible is uniquely inspired and infallible, and in a class by itself. But for matters of interpretation, the Bible does not take on some special magic that changes the basic literary patterns of interpretation.*" The same rules apply to all literature. We begin reading the Bible like any other book.

2- Here's a pertinent EXAMPLE - Do you understand the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution? It reads, "*A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.*" Clear as a bell for believers in the Second Amendment, "*but for those who lack the will to see, nothing is so mysterious as the obvious.*" Historically, the American revolution was accomplished by arms, weapons and warfare against the standing army of England. The Founders of the United States of America self-consciously made it clear that the right of self-defense, to keep and to bear arms, would never be infringed - in order to defend ourselves against the new American government, with the same level of firepower as the national armed forces.

Likewise, the writings of the Founders of our Constitution make it clear they opposed abortion. We could develop either of these illustrations much more fully, but the point is, the principles of hermeneutics that apply to any communication, such as our Constitution, also apply to the Bible. We must be careful to read the intent of the authors *out from* the document, rather than reading our ideas today *into* the document. Likewise, when you are studying the Bible, the question is not "*what does this mean to me?*" but rather, what did the original author intend this to mean for his original audience, and how does that apply to me? The last thing in the world you care about is what the Bible "*means to you*" when your task is to find out what God says it means to Him, and therefore how it applies to all people in every time and place.

3- Use the basic TOOLS - Understanding literature, especially things written in some other original language, like the Bible which was written originally in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, requires tools. You use the principles of the science of interpretation as you utilize the literary tools available. This includes dictionaries, lexicons, language resources, concordances, study Bibles, atlases, commentaries, and etc. These tools help you read the trailmarkers as you journey through reading and understanding the Bible.

RC Sproul observes, "*the pooling of knowledge is edifying to the church, but the pooling of ignorance is destructive, and manifests itself as the blind leading the blind. The church needs educated teaching.*" That's why we must learn what the original author meant for the original audience, before we can try to apply it to our life today. We practice "*exegesis*," reading the original author's intent "*out of*" the text. Because "*eisegesis*," which is reading my ideas and presuppositions and the world's current point of view "*into*" the text, will certainly twist the author's meaning, and get you good and lost.

4- Avoid false OBSTACLES - You are daily influenced by forces intending to lead you astray. Just because something is in print or video doesn't mean you can believe it. Major media outlets long ago abandoned principles that used to be taught in journalism schools. Now they're all about promoting a narrative, spinning fake "news" to fit some political group's preferred propaganda. Find out what they left out, not just swallow what they're trying to feed. Practice hermeneutics, the science of interpretation, to discern the truth and filter out the misleading, misinformation, and disinformation.

Same with understanding the Bible. There are lots of ways to go wrong on the trail. Lots of mis-steps you can make. If you want to understand the Bible, you must first read it and read it and read it! □