

General Principles of Bible Interpretation

1. Always work from the assumption that the Bible is completely inspired (God-breathed); inerrant (without error); infallible (can't fail); and authoritative (having authority over our lives). The first verse of the Bible says "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." The assumed position of the Bible is that God exists, He is the Creator of all (time, space, matter) – thus having all authority and the rest of the Bible should be easy to deal with once these assumptions are accepted. No author ever tried to defend their existence, the mere fact that they are writing is evidence of that. God approaches His Word the same way, but also gives evidence that is clear to all His creation (Romans 1:19, 20) from what He made and what He put in each one's conscience.
2. Always remember that the Bible will interpret itself; the best interpreter of scripture is scripture itself. Because of this principle, the Bible must be approached literally, historically and grammatically.
 - a. **Literally** = it is plain in its meaning, i.e. the people receiving the original communication would understand the message (nothing hidden or mysterious). The literal method is normal communication that involves the use of symbols, figurative, analogies etc. to express a particular point. All biblical writers utilized this method of communication, even the poetic sections still were addressing literal issues and were not allegorical (see note on the problem with the allegorical method below).
 - b. **Historically** = it was originally given in a historical context and this is critical to understanding the message within that context. The background and situation are essential to the proper context, otherwise the message is unrelated and can be easily misunderstood. Without the historical context, the text is isolated and can be used to say anything and typically, this ends up being anything but what the original writer intended.
 - c. **Grammatically** = sentence structure, word definitions, repeated words or phrases and at times how things are phrased, all need to be examined when trying to discover the writer's message. The written word is made up of grammatical rules and principles based on the original language it was written in (Hebrew and some Aramaic for the OT, Greek for the NT). Like any language, grammar needs to be addressed for understanding, it's the basis of the writing and communication.
 - d. **The problem with the allegorical method of interpretation.** There is no biblical or historical basis for interpreting the Bible or prophecy in an allegorical manner, which results in spiritualizing the message.
 - i. No biblical basis: The OT prophets, Jesus and the apostles always interpreted and understood the Bible to be literal. This applies to doctrine and prophecy. For example, Daniel understood the prophecy of Jeremiah regarding the 70 years of captivity for the Jews in Babylon to be coming to a close (Daniel 9) because the literal 70 years was about up. Daniel was then given a prophecy that was very specific regarding when the Messiah would come and be crucified. This was prophesied and fulfilled literally. There is a 7 year period (Daniel's 70th week) still waiting for fulfillment which Jesus tied to Daniel (Matt. 24:15). This period is well prophesied in both OT and NT and has not yet been fulfilled, for Jesus categorized it as the worst time the earth would see in human history (Matt 24:21). There is no reason to allegorize or spiritualize it since the first portion of the prophecy was given and received literally.
 - a) In Luke 4:16-30, Jesus quoted Isaiah 61:1-2a and literally applied it to Himself saying, "this day this scripture is fulfilled in your ears". The people certainly understood what He was saying because they tried to stone Him for making the application to Himself as Messiah.

- b) Peter on the day of Pentecost answered the people in Acts 2 regarding the 120 speaking in tongues by literally applying it to the prophecy of the prophet Joel. Peter said “this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16, Joel 2:28-32).
- c) Matthew quoted the OT at least 11 times saying “that the scripture might be fulfilled” in response to the literal activity of Jesus to demonstrate that He literally fulfilled the scriptures that only the Messiah was to fulfill.
 1. Understanding the Bible and prophecy literally was the key to knowing who the Messiah was. There was a group that spiritualized certain aspects the Messiah’s coming and that was the Pharisees and some of the other Jewish leadership. They spiritualized His suffering (Isaiah 53 as an example) and applied it to Israel as a nation or ignored this aspect of His coming because they were looking for Messiah to come and reign. They were more interested in the aspects of prophecy that answered their desires more than just taking the scriptures for what they were saying. Thus, we see the problem of arbitrarily allegorizing scripture and prophecy. In the Pharisees case, they missed the Messiah because they spiritualized their own scriptures. It was a disastrous result then and it would be no less if it is applied to Jesus’ second coming. It is for this reason we understand the Bible as teaching both pre-tribulational rapture and pre-millennial return of Christ to setup His kingdom for 1000 years. He will take His Church out from the world prior to Daniels 70th week, or what is called the tribulation period. He will then return with His Church at the end of the 7 year tribulation period to establish His millennial reign on earth from Jerusalem as described in Revelation 20.
 2. What is interesting in this regard is those who allegorize prophecy typically don’t agree among themselves, for the allegorical method makes the interpreter the basis of the interpretation and not the comparison of scripture. For as we have seen, the prophets don’t give or understand prophecy in that manner. The various allegorical interpreters apply prophecy based on various historical, political or theological bias that is private to themselves. But Peter tells us that “no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation” (2 Pet 1:20), hopefully they are not spiritualizing that scripture verse. Plus, allegorical interpreters of prophecy agree that if you take the Bible and prophecy literally, it will result in a pre-millennial position.
- ii. No historical basis: The history of allegorical interpretation of the whole Bible can be traced back to Origen of Alexandria around the 3rd century. No conservative Bible believing scholar would ever agree with Origen’s interpretation of the Bible for he was always looking for a meaning that was behind the text instead of just accepting the text itself. This led Origen to multiple heresies as is the result of allegorizing scripture in the first place. Around the 4th century, the great Augustine applied this method to prophecy resulting in an allegorical interpretation of the millennial reign of Christ and prophecy in general. The Roman Catholic church adopted this view of end times and maintains it to the present day, thus they are Amillennial (do not believe in a literal reign of Messiah for 1000 years) in relation to the their view on Revelation 20 and the 1000 year

reign of Christ, they allegorize this period of time. Prior to this the ante-Nicene fathers (those who lived prior to the Nicene council in 325AD) were Chiliasts (chili = 1000 in Greek), they believed in the literal coming of Messiah to setup His kingdom on earth to reign for 1000 years.

- a) The Reformers in the 1500's didn't address eschatology in their move away from the authority of the Pope and maintained the traditional position of the Roman Catholic churches Amillennialism. But, there is a severe problem with this position. The consequential result of an Amillennial position and allegorical reign of Messiah is that none of the promises or prophecies to Israel for their land, King or kingdom can be literally fulfilled and God is left making promises that He never keeps. Truly, the millennial kingdom is the time of Israel's fulfillment of these critical promises introduced in the OT. Dr. Norman Geisler gives the following 7 reasons for the millennial reign:
 1. Restore Paradise Lost
 2. Fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant
 3. Fulfill the Davidic Covenant
 4. Fulfill Daniels Predictions
 5. Provide a Climax for History
 6. To Destroy Death
 7. To Defeat the Devil
 - b) But, if these are spiritualized and Israel is not to have these fulfilled in them as a nation, the only group left is the church. This obviously has been the foundation of the churches anti-Semitism throughout the centuries. Its resurgence in seminaries today seen in the current replacement theology (spiritualizing the prophecies for Israel and making them apply to the church, thus replacing Israel with the church). This method is dishonoring to the Word of God and the God of the Word and should be entirely rejected.
- iii. Beyond this, there are 4 basic problems with using allegory as the means of interpreting the bible. Dwight Pentecost in his classic book "Things to Come" provides the first 3 and Dr. Andy Woods in his presentation on "The Protestant Reformation" gives us the 4th, here they are:
- a) First, the text of the bible is not being interpreted. In other words, it's really a matter of the interpreter making the bible say whatever they want it to say, since the text itself is not allowed to speak for itself.
 - b) Second, the authority is transferred from the text to the interpreter. The interpreter's doctrinal positions and bias is allowed to drive the interpretation wherever the interpreter wants to go. They have the authority in this case, not the text itself.
 - c) Third, there is no way to test the conclusions of the interpreter. Since the basis of the interpretation is in the mind of the interpreter and not the text itself, there is no test that can be applied to measure the accuracy of the interpretation.
 - d) Finally, there is no way of controlling the interpreter's imagination. Since no one can control the thinking of another, the interpreter can use speculation, spiritualization, allegorization and misinformation (whether

intentional or not) as the basis of what they impose on the text of the bible.

1. These are serious problems once we are removed from the literal (normal) method of bible interpretation. The literal method:
 - i. Allows the text to be interpreted,
 - ii. Allows the text to maintain the authority,
 - iii. Allows for the interpreters conclusions to be tested against the text and comparative texts,
 - iv. Removes the need to control the imagination of the interpreter, since the text is where the focus is directed and not the thinking of the interpreter.
3. A total reliance upon the Holy Spirit is always necessary to achieve a sound interpretation of the Biblical text. The Holy Spirit is the Author of the scripture (2 Peter 1:21) and He is the One that makes the truth of God known to those who read it (John 16:13).
4. Experience must always be interpreted in light of what scripture says, and never scripture in light of personal experience. Our experience should be within the boundaries of what scripture allows, thus we should not allow our experience to dictate to the scriptures what is true. The scriptures should be taken plainly and should be dictating our experience.
5. Biblical examples are authoritative only when supported by a command. Narrative portions of the Bible are not necessarily authoritative regarding instruction. If an apostle in Acts is speaking to a group, the speech must be put in context to have it applied properly. The narrative has the speech in it, but it doesn't always apply directly, at times it may only apply in principle. For example, Peter spoke directly to Jews who crucified Jesus and addressed them as such. In that instance we learn the truth from the sermon and should respond in faith to the message as they did, but the public requirement for baptism (Acts 2:38) would not be a necessary component of repentance for all people. They publically rejected the Messiah and Peter was calling for public repentance in identifying them through baptism with the risen Christ. Peter later when preaching to Gentiles in Acts 10:43 required belief for salvation and the baptism came after they were saved (10:48), and it was commanded to be done by Peter.
6. Church history is important but, not decisive in the interpretation of scripture. The church does not determine what the Bible teaches; the Bible must determine what the church should teach! We can learn from the past how church leaders viewed and interpreted scripture, but that is mostly helpful for confirmation on particular areas and not for absolute truth. As discussed above in the issue of Amillennialism, church history is a good barometer for how things progressed and is helpful in discovering the principles used for biblical interpretation in the past. But we are all subject to the authority of the Bible and what it is saying, not what others say it says, for anyone can wrongly apply the scriptures based on faulty analysis.
7. The primary purpose of the Bible is to change our lives, and not merely increase our knowledge – it is not for information alone, but for transformation. Any application of scripture must be in keeping with the correct meaning, as determined by sound interpretative principles. Learning the truth is the first step in applying the truth. Jumping from observation to application without interpreting the things observed can lead to faulty application. An entire analysis should be sought today with the multiple of helps available to all who desire to learn the Bible.
8. Do not seek to justify the interpretation you favor, but to arrive at the interpretation that best fits the text and context. Everyone has biases; none of us are free from them. But when we approach scripture, we should be conscious of the fact that we are seeking to be objective. There are things the Bible says that I wish it did not say, and there are things that would be much more pleasing to my sin nature if they were said differently. Knowing that ahead of time can save me a lot of grief

and misunderstanding of God's Word. No matter what I want the Bible to say, I have to deal with what it says and not seek to change it to satisfy my particular biases.

9. Always stay within the context of the passage being studied in order to prevent an isolated interpretation. All verses fall in the context of the paragraph and book they are in. Thus, it is helpful to read before the verses you are trying to understand and to read those after it. Narratives and epistles have a plan by the writers and the Holy Spirit that guided them in the process of laying out a message that is both logical and understandable. People that approach the Bible like a fortune cookie will inevitably fail in understanding the message that is given. The verses are not just short snippets of ancient wisdom collected to gain ethereal wisdom. These verses are the grammatical foundation of a larger message that must be understood in its entirety for there to be proper understanding and the resultant application.
10. Do not set one part of scripture against another part, but do interpret each part on its own terms and in its own context before seeking to understand how they relate to one another. Many Bibles give cross references to verses that seem to apply to each other. But before cross referencing areas in the Bible, make sure that each passage is understood within their own context first. Nothing but the text is inspired by God, so everything else is an addition for study helps. Cross references in Bibles are typically given based on the interpreters understanding of the text. For example, a Bible that is based on a theology different than I adhere to would have cross references to verses I may not believe should be tied together. Each section of scripture that is crossed referenced should be understood in its own context first and then compared to see if the comparison actually fits properly. The 3 rules of real estate are location, location, location. The 3 rules of bible interpretation are context, context, context.
11. The normal and obvious meaning of a passage (in context) is usually the correct one. As Dr. Norman Geisler says, "When the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense, lest it result in nonsense". Great and necessary advice!
12. Read the surrounding chapters or verses to make sure that the context is understood. When that is done, do it again and again. The primary problem with all cults, isms and extremist church groups is their *misunderstanding* of the Bible. This is usually the result of a lack of "**proper**" study, which results in "**improper**" conclusions. These false interpretations set the foundation for further errors in belief. Ignoring the overall context is a major problem in any false teaching. These errors will continue to increase as we move closer to the 2nd coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Many cults make Jesus some kind of lesser or secondary god in relation to God the Father. The immediate problem with this is that ANY god other than the one true and living God (Isaiah 45:5) is by definition a false god since there is only one God. The point is, before people get hung up on individual verses and what they may appear to say, if the assumed interpretation overrides the clear foundational truth found in other places in the Bible, it has to be incorrect.

Summary:

It is of vital importance that we don't approach the Bible with preconceived ideas, ideals or theologies. This will cause us to be biased to the true meaning of scripture before we actually read it. It is of the utmost importance that we don't try and make the Bible say what we prefer it to say, but to allow it to say what it is clearly saying. In this way we can understand Gods message to us, instead of forcing the Bible to say something God never intended it to. Value the time that you can spend in the study of God's Word and use the above principles to guide you, thereby maximizing your time and understanding of scripture. It is far better to completely understand a few verses by the end of your study time than to read multiple chapters and never know what they really mean.