

Some Rules for Bible Study

I remember sitting in a Wednesday evening Bible study listening to those around me sharing their thoughts on the subject of Bible interpretation. The general consensus of those present, including the teacher, who was also the preacher, could be summed up like this: *"The Bible doesn't need any interpretation and simply says what it means and means what it says."*

To substantiate their position, 2 Peter 1:20 was erroneously cited; which says, *"Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation."*

According to these Christians, this passage proved conclusively that the Bible was not written to be interpreted by man, but simply to be obeyed. I can assure you it was a terribly frustrating evening!

Yes, of course, the Bible says what it means and means what it says. But, and here's my point -- just what this is cannot be known without making some kind of interpretation.

Yes, the Bible is to be obeyed, but without some kind of interpretation, we can't know which commands, approved examples, and necessary conclusions are to guide us in doing God's Will.

2 Peter 1:20 is not prohibiting us from interpreting Scripture. If so, it would conflict with 2 Timothy 2:15, which says, *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."*

What, then, is 2 Peter 1:20 saying? Simply this: No prophecy of Scripture ever originated with men *"for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit"* (v. 21). In other words, *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God"* (2 Timothy 3:16).

This is, of course, my interpretation of the passage. But, more importantly, this is the correct interpretation! How do I know? Because I interpreted this passage within its historical, grammatical, and logical context, about which I'll have more to say in just a moment.

But first, let me emphasize just how important the interpretation of Scripture really is: Without the right interpretation, we cannot make the proper application of God's Word to our life; without the proper application of God's Word to our life, we are not going to be able to obey His Will; and without obedience to His Will, we are lost!

Before any real progress can be made in learning scripture, we must understand the importance of Bible interpretation. More importantly, we need to learn the skills that will allow them us correctly interpret the Bible.

If you were studying this subject in a college somewhere, it would no doubt be in a course entitled "*Bible Hermeneutics*," but here we'll just call it "*Some Rules For Bible Study*."

We will examine FIVE SIMPLE PRINCIPLES that permit us to rightly divide (i.e., interpret) the Word of God.

1. THE LITERAL PRINCIPLE.

This principle says that we understand Scripture in its normal sense, including figures of speech like parables, hyperbole, simile, metaphor, and symbolism.

The Bible is the word of God, but it is to be read naturally just like we read any other literature. The ancients used the term *usus loquendi*, meaning that the words of Scripture are to be interpreted the same way words are used in ordinary daily use. What this means is that the careful interpreter first looks for the literal meaning of the Bible passage, not some mystical, deeper, hidden, secret, or spiritualized interpretation.

Of course, apocalyptic or symbolic language is used in the Bible. You can find this kind of language in Zechariah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, Revelation, and a few other places. But, when this language is used, it is clearly identifiable as being symbolic. Nevertheless -- and this is very important -- the symbolic language is always used to convey some literal truth.

Parables are another form of figurative language sometimes used in Scripture. Parables are stories that illustrate some spiritual truth but whose details may not be actually historical. The details -- people, events, times and places -- may be hypothetical or metaphorical, but the spiritual truths illustrated by parables are always literal and real.

2. THE HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE.

A helpful step in understanding what a passage means is to have some grasp of the cultural, geographical, and political setting in which the passage was written. If one understands these things, the passage will often interpret itself.

For example, in Acts 8:5 it is recorded, "*Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them.*" On a map, the city of Samaria is north of Jerusalem. How is it then that Philip went "*down*" to the city of Samaria? Is this, as some like to point out, a geographical mistake? When one knows that the city of Jerusalem is at a higher elevation than Samaria and the other areas around it, one immediately understands how Philip went "*down*" to Samaria. This is why the expression "*up to Jerusalem*" is used some twenty-five times in the Bible.

When we study any book of the Bible, an understanding of the history involved is

helpful. If it's an epistle to one of the churches, then we need to know a few things.

For example: What were some of the characteristics of the city in which the recipients of the letter lived? What were the political and cultural conditions of the time? Who were the rulers? What were the tensions, problems, and crises of the community? What was the culture really like? What were the customs of the people?

To answer these cultural and historical questions, we can use Bible dictionaries, Bible handbooks, Bible commentaries, history books, and books about Bible customs. These will enable us to reconstruct the setting of a Biblical passage, and from this historical context will usually flow a clearer meaning of the passage.

3. THE GRAMMATICAL PRINCIPLE.

Quite often the "rules of syntax" of a passage is the key to its meaning. For example, sometimes the meaning of a sentence can hinge on something as simple as a preposition. It matters a great deal whether a passage says "because of," "unto," "in," "by," "through," or "with."

In some cases the original Greek or Hebrew can be translated by two or more different English words. Sometimes the English word used to translate a Greek or Hebrew word can be understood in several different senses. Furthermore, if a sentence refers to "this" or "it," it is important to know the antecedent of the pronoun.

Grammar is probably not your favorite subject — it's certainly not mine! But, we need to grasp the basics when interpreting the language of Scripture. We need to be able to follow the sequence of the words and phrases to be able to know precisely what the passage is teaching.

Good inductive Bible study occurs by breaking down the English verses into phrases, showing nouns, verbs, modifiers, and other parts of speech to see their meaning more clearly.

For example, in Acts 2:38, Peter said, "Repent, and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Identifying the subject and verbs in this sentence helps us understand just what Peter is saying, which is: "Let everyone of you repent and be baptized for the remission of sins; and as a result of doing these things you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." In other words, in this passage Peter is teaching that whatever one is to repent for, he is also to be baptized for.

Nevertheless, some who do not want to accept the literal truth this passage is teaching about baptism, reject the sequence of this sentence by ignoring the import of the coordinating conjunction "and" which links the verbs "repent" and "be baptized." Having done this, they teach that what Peter is actually saying is, "Repent

(in order to be saved), and let everyone of you be baptized because of the remission of sins (you received when you were saved)."

They translate "for" as "because of" because, they say, the English word "for" sometimes means "because of." For instance, we might say a person is in prison for murder. If we were to do so, what we would be saying is he is in prison because of a murder he committed.

The problem with all this is that we should not be trying to determine the different meanings of the English preposition "for." Instead, we need to know the meaning of the Greek preposition *eis* which is translated "for" or "unto" in our English translations.

According to Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, *eis* denotes "entrance into, or direction and limit; into, to, towards, for, among." In other words, in Acts 2:38, Peter taught that one repents and is baptized "unto," "for the purpose of," or "in order to" the remission of sins.

Another example of the grammatical principle is found in Acts 2:1-4, which reads: "Now when the day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues as of fire, and one sat upon each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

The question is: Who are the "they" and "them" of these verses? To learn this, we must locate the nearest antecedent of these pronouns. In this case, it happens to be the twelve (eleven plus one) apostles of Acts 1:26. Consequently, the "they" and "them" of these verses are the twelve apostles and not the hundred and twenty disciples of Acts 1:15, as some teach. Grammar is important!

4. THE SYNTHESIS PRINCIPLE.

The ancients said, "*Scriptura scripturam interpretatur,*" or "Scripture interprets Scripture." If the Bible is God's word, then it must be consistent with itself. One divine Author -- the Holy Spirit -- inspired the whole Bible, and it is absolutely impossible that it would contradict itself.

The synthesis principle puts Scripture together with Scripture to arrive at a clear, consistent meaning.

In II Peter 1:19-21, Peter wrote: "We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

In other words, there is never any place in Bible study for, “*To me this passage means...*” It can't have one meaning for you and another meaning for me. Whatever Scripture is saying, it is saying the same thing to you as it is to me. Consequently, the best way to interpret Scripture is to let it interpret itself.

If the Bible is thought of as a symphony orchestra, and the Holy Spirit as its conductor, then just as the orchestra plays the notes the great conductor desires, so the Bible, with its great assortment of instruments, produces the message the Holy Spirit wants (i.e., “*no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation*”).

When synthesized or put together, we have the entire symphony or word of God, as the case may be. Just as each instrumentalist's part becomes fully clear when played in relation to all the other parts, so any one passage of the Bible becomes clear only when compared to all the other passages.

If we hold an interpretation of one passage that contradicts another passage, at least one of the passages is being interpreted incorrectly. The Holy Spirit cannot disagree with Himself.

For example, one passage cannot be saying that one is saved by faith alone (Romans 3:28) if there is another clear passage that says we are not saved by faith only (James 2:24).

Therefore, passages where the obvious meanings are clear help us to understand passages that are sometimes less clear. One must never build a doctrine on a single obscure or unclear passage of Scripture.

Furthermore, comparing Scripture with Scripture helps us in understanding “*for the remission of sins*” in Acts 2:38, the passage we examined previously under the grammatical principle.

In Matthew 26:28, Jesus said He shed His blood “*for the remission of sins.*” The prepositional phrase in the English and Greek read the same here and in Acts 2:38. Whatever it means in one place it means in another. In Matthew 26:28, it cannot be “*because of the remission of sins,*” because then it would mean that the Lord's blood was shed because they had already received the remission of sins, which clearly cannot be correct. Jesus, according to Matthew 26:28, shed His blood “*for,*” “*unto,*” “*in order to,*” or “*for the purpose of*” the remission of sins. About this truth there can be absolutely no question. Therefore, Acts 2:38 teaches one is to be baptized “*unto,*” “*in order to*” or “*for the purpose of*” the remission of sins.

5. THE PRACTICE PRINCIPLE.

The final question we should always ask ourselves — and our study is not over until we do this — is, “*What does this have to do with me?*”

In II Timothy 3:16-17, Paul says, *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."*

All Scripture is profitable to make us complete and thoroughly equipped for every good work. In other words, all of God's word applies to our lives in one way or another. It is beneficial for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness.

There are many today who are clamoring for *"practical"* lessons from the pulpit. In doing so they often are heard to rail against *"doctrinal"* lessons. On the other hand, there are those who think their only responsibility is to preach and teach doctrinal lessons. These two extremes are inconsistent with the clear teaching of Scripture.

If we don't know the doctrine, we will never be able to understand how to apply it to our lives in practical living. Doctrine is teaching, and it is the beginning point. Doctrine is the basic divine truth that any passage teaches. It encompasses the principles we live by. What we believe determines how we behave.

For example, the Bible contains doctrine regarding marriage -- the husband and wife relationship, the family. The Bible teaches us who we are. It tells us who God is and what our responsibilities to Him are. What the Bible says about these and many other things must be applied to our lives.

Reproof is how Scripture unmask our sin, reveals our hidden guilt, and drives the skeletons out of the closet into the light of day. In applying what we have been taught from Scripture, the first step is often reproof. This is probably why a lot of people just don't study like they should. They don't want to be reproofed. But, to those who love His word, reproof leads to correction, which involves repentance or a turning away from the sin we have been reproofed for.

Then comes instruction in righteousness or training -- the laying out of the new, righteous path in response to true doctrine.

All this is the practical work of God's word.

If one will put these five principles for sound Bible interpretation to work, then one will undoubtedly be a better student of the word of God and, as a result, a better Christian.