

How To Interpret The Bible

by Michael Gowens

"Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:15

Recently I sat in a hospital waiting room visiting with a family whose daughter was ill. This, however, was no ordinary visit, for this family's middle-aged daughter was deaf. A number of her friends, who were also deaf, sat around the room and I sat spellbound as I watched them communicate by sign language. I sensed some of the frustration deaf people must feel living in a soundless world as I watched them converse with their hands and I realized that I could neither hear nor understand their language. Because we spoke different languages all we could do was gaze and smile at each other. A great barrier called "sound" prohibited communication and comprehension. Fortunately, a young lady named Bonnie was present who possessed both the sense of hearing and the capacity to converse in sign language. Her ability to bridge the gap between our two worlds allowed us to communicate freely and to understand each other. Bonnie signed and spoke simultaneously, interpreting words of silence into words of sound, and vice versa. I was intrigued (to say the least) by the experience, stimulated by the interaction, and grateful for the opportunity to minister via Bonnie. I left the hospital that day with a new appreciation for the role an interpreter plays in connecting two worlds that would otherwise remain disconnected. The experience of Bible study is not unlike my experience in the hospital room that day. To most people, stepping into the world of Scripture is comparable to visiting a foreign country. The people of the Bible world speak a different language, practice strange customs, wear eccentric clothes, and express themselves in unusual ways. It's very interesting to read about kine and unicorns, mitres and sceptres, ephahs and homers, but what could all of those things possibly mean to someone who lives in the Western world at the conclusion of the Twentieth Century? What was a smoking furnace and a burning lamp? Or a bruised reed and a smoking flax? What is a "portion," a "lot," a "brazen laver," and a "cherubim?" What does it mean to "sit in the gate" or to "cast lots?" Obviously, the Bible world was culturally and linguistically different from ours.

I am convinced that for this reason, many people feel lost when they step into the world of Scripture. The experience is akin to visiting a foreign country. The sense of intrigue at the novelty of the experience is soon replaced by a sense of frustration at the unfamiliarity of the environment. The Bible, consequently, seems remote and disconnected to the contemporary world.

The interpretation of Scripture is essentially a matter of traversing this deep cultural and linguistic gap between the ancient and the contemporary world. This process involves the asking of three basic questions: (1) What does a text say? (2) What does it mean? (3) How does it apply to me? Nehemiah 8:8, by implication, summarizes this three stage approach to Biblical interpretation: "So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly (*What does it say?*) and gave the sense (*What does it mean?*) and caused the people to understand the meaning (*How does it apply?*)." So, the challenge facing every interpreter of Scripture is to bridge the gap of understanding by both faithfulness to the ancient word and sensitivity to the contemporary world so that God's word is handled with both accuracy and relevance.

Second Timothy 2:15 is the New Testament precedent for the science of Biblical interpretation (called *hermeneutics*). The phrase "rightly dividing the word of truth" literally means "to cut straight." Perhaps Paul, a tentmaker by profession, drew the imagery of cutting straight from his

trade. Tentmakers, like a modern-day seamstress, followed specific patterns in the making of a tent. Most tents were made from animal skins. If the pieces of skin were to fit together according to the pattern, the tentmaker had to cut straight. Likewise, in an attempt to understand God's word, the interpreter must cut straight, matching verses and thoughts that go together, making distinctions between different aspects of a subject, and seeking to find a level of consistency that makes the Bible harmonious rather than self-contradictory. To make a straight cut in Biblical interpretation furthermore, the interpreter must approach every Scripture with certain convictions about the Bible he desires to understand. These convictions, or presuppositions, establish a framework within which Scripture must be interpreted. They are basic and fundamental to the discipline of hermeneutics. It is not an exaggeration to say that many controversies regarding the meaning of Scripture can be traced back to a failure to be consistent with these basic parameters and guidelines within which the Bible is to be interpreted. There are six of them.

Convictions We Bring to the Interpretive Process

(1) The Inspiration of Scripture - 2 Timothy 3:16 says, "All scripture is given by the inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." Inspiration means "God breathed." The Bible is, then, the word of God. In Augustine's famous phrase, "What Scripture says, God says." The Bible is God's self-revelation (not just man's opinion about God, but God's own revelation of Himself) and inspiration is the process by which God has made Himself known by speaking through the Biblical authors. These men spoke (and wrote) as they were "moved [lit. carried along] by the Holy Ghost" (2 Pet. 1:20). So, the Bible is, in a very real sense, the word of God.

(2) The Inerrancy of Scripture - Since the Bible is God's word, and since it reveals a perfect God who cannot err (Deut. 32:4), then it is supremely truthful. Inspiration assumes inerrancy. The interpreter can trust the Bible's historical accuracy, as well as the infallibility of each word. The Bible is the truth. This conviction is indispensable to the interpreter of Scripture. If we approach the Bible with a conviction concerning its inerrancy, we will not presume to attempt to censure or correct it. Neither will the interpreter set Scripture against itself and attempt to discover discrepancies.

(3) The Authority of Scripture - Since the Bible is God's word, it speaks with ultimate and absolute authority. The interpreters task is not to doubt the validity of the claims of Scripture, but to bow in submission to the authority of the Bible. It is the final rule for faith and life. The failure to approach the Bible with a conviction regarding its authority is responsible for interpretive aberrations like the tendency (common to the Charismatics) to make experience the ultimate test of truth and the anomaly (common to the cults) of producing extra-Biblical literature as a necessary supplement to Biblical revelation. The individual who comes to the Bible with a conviction regarding its ultimate authority cannot simply sidestep passages that are personally unpalatable, or that are inconsistent with his particular theological position. The authority of Scripture forces the interpreter to face every verse squarely and to seek to interpret it accurately, regardless of how unpopular or unpleasant it may be. For example, I have heard people attempt to circumvent the New Testament's teaching concerning the role of women in the church. Paul plainly states in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:34 that the woman is not to occupy a teaching position in the local church. In the final analysis, a person who attempts to explain Paul's teaching away (for whatever reason) by interpreting the verses in terms of modern attitudes, demonstrates by the mere attempt to circumvent such plain language a personal struggle with the authority of Scripture.

(4) The Unity of Scripture - Another presupposition the interpreter brings to the Bible is a conviction concerning the unity of Scripture. The Bible is not an encyclopedia, designed to give a little information about a variety of subjects. It has one basic message from start to finish - the drama of redemption. All of Scripture builds around this theme, in its various parts and facets. This conviction

compels the interpreter to synthesize Scripture with itself and to attempt to discover the way that two Bible verses harmonize.

(5) The Clarity of Scripture - Psalm 19:8 says "...the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes." Pure means clear and transparent. Scripture is perspicuous. It is clear, plain, evident, and understandable, not ambiguous and obscure. Yes, it is true that the inspired text is a partially closed text; hence, it needs to be opened up (Neh. 8:8). That's the reason God has given pastors and teachers to His church. The Ethiopian eunuch even recognized his need of teaching if he would come to understanding: "Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me?" (Acts 8:30-31). But Scripture is clear in its central meaning. The failure to recognize the clarity of Scripture leads to the anomalies of spiritualizing and allegorizing God's word. We must not "read between the lines" or look for hidden meanings in God's word. We must not think that words are secret codes or esoteric symbols representing some mystical or fanciful idea. At the risk of being simplistic, Scripture means what it says and says what it means.

(6) The Practical Purpose of Scripture - Scripture is meant to be applied to life. It is not remote and distinct from life. For instance, the book of Esther is not meant to teach us Persian history, but the reality of God's providence in the lives of common and ordinary people. The failure to grasp the practical purpose of Scripture turns the discipline of Biblical interpretation into a strictly academic exercise. Scripture is always contemporary and relevant to life. With these presuppositions, the believer is now ready to interpret God's word. There are five basic principles involved in proper Biblical interpretation.

Principles of Interpretation

(1) Interpret Organically. See the verse, passage, or concept in terms of the whole. This is the most basic rule of interpretation. This principle, known as "the synthesis principle" or "the analogy of faith," is best expressed by the idea "Scripture interprets Scripture." The Bible is an organic whole and its message in one part is not contradictory to its message in another part. So, to understand the meaning of any verse, a person must start by viewing that verse in terms of its immediate context. An examination of context is crucial to the proper interpretation of a particular verse. In fact, contextual assessment is the most important principle in Biblical interpretation. For example, Hebrews 10:26 says, "For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins." What does that verse mean? Obviously, it means that any wilful sin after conversion has extreme consequences in the life of the believer. But in context, the wilful sin is specified. What is it? It is the sin of forsaking the local assembly (verse 25): "Forsake not the assembling of yourselves together as the manner of some is, but exhort one another, and so much the more as ye see the day approaching. For if we sin wilfully...." The interpreter should be careful about a common hermeneutical mistake known as a "semantical transfer." When a word's meaning in one context is taken and inserted into a different context without reassessing the new context, a semantical transfer has occurred. For instance, the verb "to save" in Ephesians 2:8 refers to salvation from sin in the basic theological sense. If that definition, however, is inserted into another verse, say, I Timothy 2:15 ('Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing...'), a contradiction emerges between the two verses, for Ephesians 2:8 teaches that salvation is by grace and I Timothy 2:15 teaches that salvation is in the process of parenting. Does 1 Timothy 2 refer to the same kind of salvation as Ephesians 2? Obviously not. The salvation of 1 Timothy 2:15 must be interpreted in terms of its immediate context. Be especially careful when studying by subject or topic that you don't lift proof texts out of their respective contexts. Secondly, the verse must not only be interpreted in terms of its immediate context, but it must also be synthesized with the total teaching of the book in which it appears. Its meaning must be determined in the light of that book's flow of thought. Thirdly, the verse must be considered in terms of the message of the Bible as a whole, allowing basic doctrine to set the parameters for the meaning of the text. A good rule of thumb is to interpret unclear passages in light of clear, unquestionable truths. For example, John 14:28 says, "My Father is greater than I." Does this mean that the Son was personally subordinate to and inferior to the Father? It can't

possibly mean that. How do I know? By virtue of the numerous other references to the Son's personal equality to and oneness with the Father (Jno. 10:30; Jno. 5:18; Phi. 2:6; I Jno. 5:7; etc.) So whatever John 14:28 means, that one verse does not nullify Scripture's conclusive internal evidence concerning the Deity of Christ. The unclear must be interpreted in terms of the clearer umbrella truth.

(2) Interpret Literally - Seek the meaning of the human writer by interpreting according to the most apparent meaning. By literally, I do not mean that the interpreter should disregard literary forms, figures of speech, or literary style. Scripture uses similes, metaphors, hyperbole, synecdoche, and other forms of rich imagery to romanticize, illustrate, and emphasize truth. By literal, I mean that a verse must be interpreted according its most apparent meaning. "A text means what its author meant, not what its readers think it means," wrote A. B. Hirsch in *Validity in Interpretation*. That is true of every kind of document, whether historical, legal, medical, literary, or sacred. Literal interpretation, therefore, involves putting oneself in the shoes of the writer and asking the question, "What was the thought in the writer's mind when he penned these words?" The interpreter must think himself back into the mind of the author and search for the original meaning of the text. Because Scripture is clear, it should be interpreted according to its most normal and natural sense. Interpretation, consequently, is a matter of exegesis, taking meaning out of the text, rather than eisegesis, reading meaning into the text that the author never intended to be there. The interpreter must let the author say what he is saying and not make him say what he wants him to say.

Literal interpretation is called "The Grammatical/Historical" method of interpretation. To interpret literally, the interpreter must first study the grammar of the text. He must study the definitions of the words and the structure of the sentences. He must note the verb tenses, the use of prepositions, and the punctuation of the sentence. He must consider the speaker and the audience to whom the verse is addressed. Secondly, he must study the historical dimension of the text. He must learn about the culture, the geography, and the setting of the book. He must know the approximate date the book was written and the circumstances that occasioned the writing. A person who does not know, for example, that Ephraim was the principal tribe of the Northern Kingdom of Israel and that Samaria was its capitol city, will be very confused in the prophecy of Hosea when God says things like "Ephraim is joined to idols" and "When I would have healed Israel, then the iniquity of Ephraim was discovered" (Hos. 4:17; 7:1). Historically, the Supreme Court was created as an interpretive body. Its purpose was to interpret the United States Constitution and apply that interpretation judicially. To interpret the Constitution, the Court employed the Grammatical/Historical method. They studied the words of that document in terms of what those words meant when they were used at the time the Constitution was written. Supreme Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, however, broke with precedent and began to interpret the Constitution in terms of modern attitudes. As other Justices followed suit, the Court gradually exchanged an absolute standard for a relativistic one. The result? The Supreme Court has now become a legislative rather than an interpretive body. The real issue now is not "What does the Constitution say?" but "What do the people want?" It is possible to do the same thing with Scripture; therefore, the interpreter must always start here, asking, "What does it actually say?" He must refuse to look for hidden meanings and read ideas into the text that could not possibly have been in the minds of the authors. He must bow humbly to the authority of God's word, interpreting Scripture by normal and natural standards, not by his own perception. The ultimate question is not "What does it say to me?" but "What does it say? (period)."

(3) Interpret Practically - Search for concrete way to apply the meaning to life. Ezra "caused the people to understand the reading." He applied truth to life. He took the abstract principles and inserted them into real life situations people could grasp and implement in their own lives. The best way to do this is to ask yourself questions. Ask, "What does the verse tell me about God? about life and the human situation? What does it tell me about myself and how does it challenge me to change?" Put yourself into the shoes of the Bible characters. Ask yourself, "What inward struggles must Abraham have experienced when God commanded him to sacrifice his son Isaac? What struggles would I have experienced if he had called upon me to sacrifice my child?" And, "What

went on in the lepers mind when Jesus touched that untouchable man? Can I identify with his sense of humiliation and defilement? How long had it been since someone had touched him?" And, "How did Euodias and Synteche respond as they sat in the church at Philippi listening to Paul's epistle being read, when suddenly, the reader said, 'I beseech Euodias and Synteche to be of the same mind in the Lord'? How would I have felt to be exposed like that?" 5 Principles of Interpretation 1. Scripture Interprets Scripture. 2. A Text Means What Its Author Meant. 3. Truth Must Be Applied to Life. 4. Listen to the Insights of Others. 5. Ask God for Understanding.

(4) Interpret in Community - Stand on the shoulders of others by consulting them for their views and learning from their experience. Ask others for their insights. Read the writings of those who lived in former times and notice their position on a particular verse. Interpreting in community will provide at least three benefits: *First, it will broaden perspective.* Biblical fellowship is a corporate effort to know God better by sharing the knowledge, experience, and resources God has given us with others. It is a reciprocal activity involving both giving and taking. Paul captures the essence of the broadening effect of Christian fellowship, the mutual give and take, in Romans 1:11-12: "For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end that ye may be established; that is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me." We should not only be willing to share with others the things that God has taught us, but should also be willing to receive from others the things that God has taught them. He may teach us through them. It is only in the fellowship of the local church that anyone will come to a full understanding of the Christian faith. Paul prays in Ephesians 3:18 that the Ephesian believers "may be able to comprehend **with all saints** what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of the love of Christ [emphasis mine]. *Second, interpreting in community enhances accountability.* Exposing your views to the scrutiny and insights of others produces a kind of checks and balances, discouraging maverick interpretations of God's word. Mutual accountability is crucial in all dimensions of church life, especially when it comes to the serious task of the study of Holy Scripture. *Third, interpreting in community provides stimulation.* There is nothing like interaction with fellow believers to warm cold hearts, sharpen dull minds, and renew lagging enthusiasm. Personally, I need regular exposure to the views of others, whether through tapes, books, sermons, or interpersonal dialogue concerning God's word. Their perspective enlarges mine and challenges mine to a greater degree of precision. No dimension of Christian living, including the interpretation of Scripture, is a solo flight.

(5) Interpret Prayerfully - Saturate the hard work of exegesis with a humble dependence upon God. Last but not least, pray for understanding. Only the Holy Spirit can give illumination. Paul strikes the right balance between hard work and humble dependence upon God in his advice to Timothy: "Consider what I say, and the Lord give thee understanding in all things" (2 Tim. 2:7). Sometimes when people tell me that they understand very little of the Bible, I ask them, "Have you asked God to help you to understand?" Without doubt, we frequently have not because we ask not. We should always pray when we approach God's word, saying with the Psalmist, "Open thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law" (Ps. 119:18). God will hear that prayer, and light will disperse the darkness of your mind. God's word is not only meant to be understood. It is also meant to be obeyed. The principles outlined in this article are not intended to be employed to turn Bible study into a strictly academic exercise, but to spur the student of Scripture on to growth in holiness as he implements the things he learns into life. Above all else, the discipline of Biblical interpretation should drive us to our knees in worship before the God who has given us the invaluable and inestimable and indescribable resource of His word. God help us all to learn, therefore, to the glory of His holy name.

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