

How to Interpret the Bible

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE: All scripture quotations are taken from the Authorized King James Bible. Any deviations are not intentional. All underlines, bold and items within parentheses are the author's.

Introduction

Why are there so many people today holding to so many differing beliefs? The various denominations are too numerous to mention. Although these groups would agree on many things, they disagree on many others. Why? After all, each claims that they get their beliefs from the Bible. How can so many different beliefs come from one book? The problem lies not with the Bible itself, but with people's interpretation of it.

How are we to interpret scripture? We aren't interested in any man-made methods here. Does the Bible itself tell us how it is to be interpreted? Surely, since God gave us a book, he also provided principals in that book to tell us how to interpret it. In this article we will look at a number of these principals. Once we understand them, the source of the doctrinal confusion around us today will be obvious.

1. There is Only One Correct Interpretation of Any Given Passage.

*Knowing this first, that **no** prophecy of the **scripture is of any private interpretation**. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*

2 Peter 1:20-21

Scripture is of no private interpretation. God has an intended meaning for each passage. **There is only one correct interpretation**. All the rest are false interpretations. Have you ever been to one of those "Bible studies" where people sit around and say: "This verse means this to me" or "that verse means that to me". Everyone has an opinion, each of them conflicting with the others. All feel that they are right and no one dare tell anyone that they are wrong.

God did not give us the Bible so that we could find in it what we want it to mean. God gave us the Bible so that we could study it diligently to find out what it actually means (2 Tim. 2:15). There is only one correct interpretation of any given passage. There may be many applications, but only one interpretation.

2. Always Interpret Scripture With Scripture.

To properly interpret a particular passage of scripture, we need to interpret it in light of other scriptures.

*Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; **comparing spiritual things with spiritual**.*

1Corinthians 2:13

There is a lot of "mans wisdom" out there today regarding what the Bible supposedly teaches, but the Holy Ghost (Spirit) will enlighten our minds (teach us the truth) as we compare scripture with scripture (spiritual things with spiritual).

When we desire to know what a particular passage means, the first thing that we should do is look up other passages that deal with the same subject. Each of these passages will help us to better understand the one that we are considering. Studying scripture is like putting a puzzle together. Each particular passage is like one piece to that puzzle. With each additional piece that is added, the picture becomes clearer and clearer. Scripture is its own best interpreter. This will also help us in determining whether or not a person is teaching us the truth.

And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither [there] went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

Acts 17:10-11

When Paul the apostle came to Berea, the Bereans searched the scriptures daily (for days) to see if what he was teaching was true. What were they looking for? They were looking for scriptures that either confirmed or contradicted what Paul was teaching. One of the best ways to make sure that our interpretation of scripture is correct is to search all that scripture says on a given subject. If we only look at one passage, our interpretation may be incorrect.

3. Interpret Unclear Passages In Light of Clear Ones.

Some passages of scripture are clearer than other passages.

*And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are **some things hard to be understood**, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, [twist] as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.*

2 Peter 3:15-16

Since some passages are clear and some passages are unclear, we should always interpret the unclear passages in light of the clear ones. People who fail to do this often end up twisting scripture.

A good example of this would be Premillennialism (the teaching that Jesus will come back before the millennium). The passage that is used to teach this doctrine is Revelation chapter 20. This passage is an unclear passage, as is all of the book of Revelation. People interpret this passage to teach that Jesus will come back prior to the millennium despite the fact that many clear passages of scripture make such an interpretation impossible (see our article "The Great End-Time Error" for more information).

4. No Scripture May Be Interpreted In A Way That Causes It To Contradict Any Other Scripture.

God does not disagree with Himself. He does not say something in scripture in one place and then say something else to contradict it in another. We see this most clearly in Matthew chapter 4.

*Then the devil taketh him [Jesus] up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for **it is written**, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. Jesus said unto him, **It is written again**, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.*

Matthew 4:5-7

Here we find the Devil quoting scripture. There is nothing wrong with Psalm 91 which he is quoting. It means what it says and says what it means. The problem is with the Devil's interpretation & application of Psalm 91 — Therefore you (Jesus) ought to jump off this temple. Notice how Jesus responds. Being infinitely familiar with scripture, He did not need to search its contents for days as the Bereans did. He simply quotes another passage that contradicts the Devil's interpretation. If Jesus would have jumped off the temple He would have forced God to prove Himself, thereby testing (tempting) Him. This would be a sin according to Deuteronomy 6:16, which Jesus quotes.

There is a very important principal in all of this. No scripture may be interpreted in a way

that causes it to contradict any other scripture. As we said before, God does not disagree with Himself.

5. Get All Assumptions From The Bible Alone.

Sometimes people assume something to be true that is not true. Then they begin to view scripture through the lens of that false assumption. This results in a misinterpretation of scripture.

*He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, **teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition.** For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death: But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free. And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother; **Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition,** which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye.*

Mark 7:6-13

When the Bible says that people are to honor their father and mother it means much more than just paying them respect. It also means that we are to care for them financially when they are older.

The Jewish leaders, however, assumed that if a person were to, instead, give their money as a gift to God (Corban), they would then be released from their responsibility to their parents. Where did scripture say that? It didn't. The Jews just assumed that it was true. Jesus rebuked them for this and said that they had placed their tradition (man-made practice) above the teaching of scripture.

A good example of this today is the doctrine of a Pre-tribulation rapture. Many teach that the rapture will take place prior to the tribulation. The Bible does not actually teach this, but many, assuming it to be true, misinterpret the Bible because of their false assumption (for more information see our article "The Rapture"). We should only suppose to be true what the Bible says is true. All of our presuppositions are to come from scripture alone.

6. All Scripture is True But Not Necessarily A Statement of Fact.

Thy word is true from the beginning: and every one of thy righteous judgments endureth for ever.

Psalms 119:160

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

John 17:17

We must remember that although all scripture is true, not every scripture is a statement of fact. For example, people in scripture said that: Jesus was possessed by an evil spirit (John 7:20), that he cast out evil spirits by the power of Satan (Matt. 12:24), and that he was not a true prophet because he was from Galilee (John 7:52). None of these statements are true. How, then, can it be said that all scripture is true? It is true that these people said these things. All scripture is true but not all scripture is necessarily a statement of fact. In scripture we have recorded not only the words of God the Father, Jesus Christ and the apostles; we also have the words of liars, false teachers and the devil himself. A proper interpretation of scripture must take these things into account.

7. Always Interpret The Old Testament in Light of The New Testament.

The New Testament helps us to properly understand the Old Testament.

And not as Moses, which put a vail over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away.

2 Corinthians 3:13-16

Reading the Old Testament without a proper understanding of the New Testament would lead us to some wrong conclusions. We would mistakenly conclude that we need to: go to Israel; convert and become Jews; rebuild the temple; begin offering animal sacrifices for our sins; keep the Old Testament food laws, feasts, Sabbath day etc. etc.. After all, that is what the Old Testament taught. Without a proper understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, we would not know that these practices have been fulfilled and set aside by God. Many people get off into false doctrine today because they do not understand this principal.

8. Be Careful Not to Improperly Spiritualize or Literalize Any Given Passage

Oftentimes people get into trouble by interpreting scripture as symbolic when it is to be taken literally, or taking it literally when it is symbolic.

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for

they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.

2 Timothy 2:15-18

These false teachers (Hymenaeus and Philetus) were teaching that the resurrection was a past event. How in the world could they have been teaching that the resurrection of the dead had occurred and no one noticed? There is only one way. They spiritualized it. They took all of the references in the Bible that talk about the Physical resurrection and said that they were only talking of a spiritual resurrection.

Now don't get me wrong, the Bible does talk about a spiritual resurrection that takes place at salvation (John 5:24-25, Col. 3:1). But the Bible also talks about a physical resurrection that takes place at the second coming of Christ (John 5:28-29). Many in Jesus day, mistakenly, did not believe in a physical resurrection (Luke 20:27).

On the other hand, we dare not take everything in scripture literally (physically), either. We must study the text, context, and other passages in order to determine whether a passage is to be taken literally or symbolically. There must be a scriptural basis for our interpretation, we can't just follow our own whims and desires. One false doctrine that results from violating this principal is preterism. Preterism interprets all of Matthew chapter 24 as already having been fulfilled. Jesus' coming in the clouds, with the angels at the end of the great tribulation is just seen as symbolic. The clouds aren't really clouds, and the angels aren't really angels etc.. All of Matthew 24 is said to have been fulfilled in 70 AD at the destruction of Jerusalem.

9. Pay Careful Attention to The Exact Wording of Each Passage.

Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.

Galations 3:16

We must pay careful attention to the exact wording of a passage. Sometimes the proper interpretation of a passage may hinge on a particular word, phrase, verb tense, or, as in the case of the previous verse, a single letter. Scripture also contains many figures of speech which must be taken into account as well.

10. It Only Takes One Clear Verse (Correctly Interpreted) To Refute a False Teaching.

Let us also keep in mind that we only need one clear verse (correctly interpreted) to refute a false teaching.

*Jesus said unto him, **It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.***

Matthew 4:7

Jesus did not say it is written again, and again, and again. He simply quoted one verse, and even the Devil knew that was enough. There are many scriptural truths that are only recorded in one place in the Bible. Does that make them any the less true? Of course not. Since all of scripture is true (Psalm 119:160) and the scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35), provided that we have followed all of the other principals listed in this article, we only need one clear verse to refute a false teaching.

Our Vision

There are many false doctrines being taught today, both inside and outside of the Christian Church. We at Grace Bible Church have a great desire to see that these false teachings are exposed and refuted by the Word of God. It is our desire to produce articles that may be placed (free of charge) in the hands of God's people - to enable them to share the truth with those who have been misled by false doctrine.

Would you like to have a part in this ministry and help us get this message out to others? If so, you may make as many copies of this article as you need to give to those who have been misled by the false teaching exposed here. To place this article on your webpage in its entirety, write to Grace Bible Church. Permission is usually granted.

May God bless you as you do His work.

