

Correctly Interpreting the Bible

In order for you to correctly “handle” Scripture (2 Tim 2:15), you must have a correct method of interpreting the Bible, otherwise known as *hermeneutics*. How should you interpret the Bible? Basically, you need to let the Bible “speak for itself,” and this is accomplished through what is called a consistent grammatical–historical interpretation of Scripture.

We will first consider what this method of interpreting the Bible means and involves. Then we will look at several *general* rules for interpreting the Bible that apply to every portion of Scripture. After that we will consider *special* rules that deal with specific things in Scripture (for example, how to interpret parables).

1. The Right Way to Interpret Scripture

The following four points will help you see that the Bible must be interpreted by a consistently literal or normal method of interpretation.

1) Communication Depends on Words Having **One** Meaning on a Given Context

- In a single context words can only have one meaning—they cannot have two or more meanings. If this were not the case, communication be impossible and would be nothing but gibberish and nonsense!
- There is a world of difference between a word being able to be used a number of different **ways** and a word in a single context having multiple **meanings**.

For example, consider the English word “run.” Webster’s says that this word can be used as a verb, a noun, and an adjective. As a verb it can be used 12 different ways if it doesn’t have an object and 15 different ways if it does have an object. When used as a noun it can have 12 different meanings, and when it’s an adjective it can have 3 different meanings.

So, while “run” can have at least 39 different meanings, when it is used in a sentence it has only **one** meaning. If it had more than that, how would you know which meaning it carried? You would never know what was meant then!

- The Bible was written in human languages by human authors and from their human personalities, cultures, and backgrounds. It wasn’t written in a special language, such as “Heavenly Hebrew” or “Holy Ghost Greek.”
- Because words only have one meaning in a given context, a passage in the Bible cannot have a “deeper” meaning or more than one meaning.

2) The **Author** Determines Meaning

- When interpreting the Bible—regardless of whether it is poetry, history, epistle, gospel, or prophecy—the goal is to find out *what the biblical author meant* by a particular statement. A helpful, guiding principle is found in Fee & Stuart’s *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 27—

“A text cannot mean what it never meant.”

- This principle will help you understand what a biblical passage *did* mean and what it *did not* mean. When weighing someone’s interpretation of a biblical passage ask this question which is an important principle—

“Is this what *the biblical author* wanted to get across?”

- If someone does not accept the literal or normal interpretation of a passage, it is usually because he or she has an agenda they want to prove or uphold. Their beliefs do not come *directly* from Scripture and so they must make the Bible’s statements fit into their system.
- Correctly interpreting the Bible results in giving the **same** meaning today that the biblical author intended when he wrote it.
- The biblical authors communicated by using words in association with other words. A word in and of itself does not have meaning—all it is a group of signs. Words have meaning in relation to other words, sentences and even the book itself. Here’s another important principle to keep in mind—

The basic unit of language is not the word but the **sentence.**

3) The Unitary Authorship of Scripture

- A third principle that must guide the consistent interpretation of all the Bible focuses on **who** wrote the Bible.
- Many people say that the Bible has a “dual authorship”—a human author and God. The problem here is that when you have two authors, you end up with two different messages! So instead of “dual authorship,” it is more biblically correct to think in terms of a **united** authorship.
- How could Amos the shepherd and God be unified in the production of a written message so that they both meant the same thing? The answer is the doctrine of inspiration. Consider again these two important passages:

2 Tim 3:16 “All Scripture is inspired by God”

2 Pet 1:21 “no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God”

- When the Holy Spirit moved Amos to write a message to Israel, *God guided him to write exactly what God wanted him to write and protected him from making any errors.* God guided Amos the shepherd to write a message that used all of Amos’s personality and style of writing (grammar and syntax), yet protected Amos from making any errors. The result of this *united* authorship was a **single** message given to and understandable by human beings that is absolutely true because of God’s guidance and protection.
- The result of inspiration is a single message: What God said, the human author said; what the human author wrote, God wrote. **The only way we can know what God meant is through the human author’s words.** Because of this, no one can say that Amos meant one thing, but/and God meant another. Principle:

What the human author meant is what **God meant.**

4) **The Meaning is Based in the **Text****

- Where can we find what the biblical author meant? Only in the text. There is only **one** correct interpretation and meaning of a passage, and that is the one that the biblical *author* intended. There cannot be two or more different meanings to the same text.
- How can we find out what the author meant? Through consistently interpreting Scripture with a grammatical-historical method of interpretation. What does that mean?

Grammatical: what the **words** mean and how they function

Historical: the **setting** of a biblical book (culture, geography, etc)

- In order to find out what an author meant, you must study the meaning and use of words in a given text. You must understand the important historical and cultural factors that were present when the words were used. **If you cannot “see” a meaning in a passage, it’s because it’s not there!** The only way you will get a meaning foreign to a biblical text is by putting it in there.
- If the Bible is not **consistently** interpreted in a literal, normal way, what will the result be?
 - (1) Interpreters will find more than one meaning or say that a passage can have “multiple fulfillments” or a “fuller sense.”
 - (2) This raises a problem: where do you stop? If a passage can have two legitimate meanings, why stop there? Why not 3? Or 7? Or 70?

- (3) Another problem is what controls the interpretation—if the **text** does not control interpretation, then what does? Your imagination?
 - (4) Sometimes well meaning Christians will say that they “see” a particular meaning in the text and ascribe that work to the Holy Spirit. The idea is that the Spirit “reveals” what God intended and knew something entirely different from what the biblical author meant in the text. This, however, is about the same thing as saying that God is continuing to give new revelation today.
- All of Scripture must be consistently interpreted in a literal, normal manner using a grammatical-historical method. **That is the only way to learn what the Bible says, to let the Bible “speak for itself.”**

What is the significance of all this?

Why is this important to studying the Bible?

- (1) What the Bible says is really important—unless it doesn’t mean what it says.
- (2) If it’s up to you what the Bible means, then it really doesn’t mean anything.
- (3) Since the Bible *does* communicate something, you must work hard at correctly understanding what *it* means.
- (4) Don’t make the Bible say what it doesn’t say. You don’t have that right.
- (5) If what you believe doesn’t match up with what the Bible says, you’d better change your mind so it’s in line with the truth!
- (6) If you stick to the text, you won’t go wrong.