

Understanding Your Bible Rules of Interpretation

“The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.” (I Corinthians 2:10-16)

If you have experienced spiritual rebirth through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, ala John 3, you have within you the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-17). This same Spirit also inspired the writing of God’s Word or his self-revelation and will give you understanding, instruction, expression, acceptance, discernment and judgment regarding the mind, thoughts and words of God.

In other words, you don’t need a seminary education to grow in your understanding of God’s Word. But there is a great difference between your discovery of what God’s Word means and what you or someone else *wants* it to mean. Furthermore, there are people and groups who use the Bible to hold and teach false doctrine either out of their own pride or ignorance or evil motives. Who is unqualified to interpret the Bible? Answer: the man or woman who does not have the Spirit of God. Paul says, they will not “accept” it, it is “foolishness” to them, and they cannot “understand” it.

Therefore, it’s to your spiritual benefit to examine the scriptures carefully by applying rules of interpretation that guard and guide us to the truth. Notice the comment Luke makes regarding the Jews and Greeks in the city of Berea in Macedonia:

“Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.” (Acts 17:11-12)

Luke calls them “more noble”. They were humble seekers. They were not proud and argumentative. They hungered for the truth of God. And so must we!

The following list will acquaint you with the rules of interpretation (hermeneutics) that are used to discover a more accurate or clear or complete meaning of any words in written form including your

Bible. The greater the distance we are from the original manuscript by time, history, culture, language and geography, the more important these rules become.

Rules for Interpreting God's Written Word

Rule: Inductive over Deductive

Induction begins with a search for particular ideas or statements to reach an accurate and clear meaning or understanding. Deduction begins with a pre-conceived meaning and searches for one particular idea to support or "prove" it. To be honest, we must let Scripture interpret Scripture to determine its unity or lack of contradiction.

Rule: Progressive Revelation

God reveals himself not all at once but progressively throughout human history by many forms of communication. In the early stages of history he communicates by audible voice, miracles, signs and visions. Later He reveals himself in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and then through the Apostles. Throughout Scripture God reveals his nature and purposes.

Rule: Original Languages

In God's self-revelation we could say that he humbles himself to condescend or accommodate human language. In Hebrew God reveals himself to Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In Greek God reveals himself in the common language of the first century. These languages are unique in their structures and vocabularies.

Rule: Cultural Setting

God also accommodated himself to human cultures. Simply, culture is the way we speak and do things with each other acceptably. Cultural norms can be either moral or immoral—good or evil. While evil is always evil, good cultural norms or ways can vary a great deal. An accurate meaning of Scripture depends on cultural understanding.

Rule: Text and Context

Words only have meaning in sentences, and sentences only have meaning in the sentences before and after. Ultimately, the paragraph has meaning in the greater contexts. This answers the question: What is the train of thought? A text cannot mean what it could never have meant for its original readers.

Rule: Literal over Allegory

By literal is meant that the words of Scripture signify their natural and normal meaning. The words of Scripture have singular meanings not plural or hidden meanings. Allegory is the attempt to find imagined hidden meanings for impure motives and is contradictory to proper interpretation.

Rule: Target Recipients

While the Old Testament was written for a Jewish audience, the New Testament was written to individuals, Greeks, Gentiles and Hebrew Christians. What were the needs of those people or churches? Did they need doctrine or practical teaching or encouragement? How different were their cultural, economic, political and religious settings?

Rule: Authorship

God further accommodates himself to use human instruments to author his eternal words. These writers were not passive or robotic or secretaries taking dictation. They were “carried along” by the Holy Spirit while maintaining their personality and writing style. Their first-person references indicate they were immersed in the process. The proof of this divine intervention is the unity in their writing and thought.

Rule: Parables and Metaphors

Parables and metaphors have a single meaning and are meant to be illustrative to give a window of limited light on a truth of Scripture. There are no hidden meanings in parables and metaphors, and illustrations will fall apart when taken too far to explain God’s revelation.

Rule: Teaching over Narrative

The teaching portions of Scripture explain or interpret the narrative or stories within Scripture. Therefore, narratives illustrate doctrine. The narratives, stories or events have no hidden meanings or allegories. The events of Scripture are not meant to be replicated. When God chose to act, he is not obligated to act in the same way again.

Rule: Clear over Obscure

While there are unclear passages of Scripture for modern man, they were originally clear to both the human author and recipients. Archeology and discovery has proved this. Therefore, what is clear must have authority over what remains to be obscure. Doctrine, theology and practice must rest on clear interpretation. Attempts to find the “hidden meaning” in the obscure leads to discarding the clear.

Rule: Historical Setting

How does that moment in history affect both the understanding of the authors of Scripture and the original recipients? What was going on that called for a revelation from God and the inspiration of the author to record it. This will vary from gospel to gospel and epistle to epistle. There is both a world history and local history to consider. War and peace, poverty and prosperity, Christians, Jews and pagans and the treatment of women, children and minorities of the day need to be understood.

Rule: Geographical Setting

While geography seems less important to other rules of interpretation, it can bring clarity to some passages of Scripture that would otherwise seem odd or shallow in their depth of meaning. A visual of the first century world adds depth to understanding of travel, isolation, community and occupations.