

Eight Principles of Hermeneutics

(Biblical Interpretation)

THE WORD OF GOD APPENDIX FOUR

- 1. The importance of context.** No passage of scripture can be correctly interpreted by itself. Each needs to be understood within the context it is found. There is an *immediate* and a *general* context. The *immediate* context is made up of the verses just before and just after the one in question. The *general* context refers to what the Bible as a whole says about the subject matter. If our interpretation of any passage is in contradiction to any other passage, we have erred.

Example: Look at Mark 11:24. If this was all a person knew about prayer, he would think prayer was a way to get “whatever” he might want, simply by believing. If he looked at the immediate context, he would learn from verse twenty-two that his faith must be in God. That helps a little more, but it still doesn’t tell the whole story. The general context of the Bible tells us that we are to pray according to God’s will (John 15:7, 1 John 5:14-15). This is a classic example of the importance of context.

- 2. Allow the clear, simple, and explicit to interpret the unclear, complex, and implicit.** There are passages that are more clear and those that are less clear. We need to understand the complex in light of the simple, not the other way around. If we have to stretch the interpretation of an otherwise clear passage to accommodate our interpretation of a less clear passage, we are mistaken.

Example: In some cases the Bible interprets itself clearly (e.g., the lampstands and stars in Revelation 1:12 & 16 are clearly interpreted in v.20.) Other passages, though not directly interpreted, are obvious (e.g., the Lamb in Revelation 5, though not named, is clearly the Lord Jesus.) When studying portions that are not as clear (especially prophecy), care must be taken that they are not interpreted in a way that challenges or changes the interpretation of the passages that are clear.

- 3. Grammatico-Historical Method.** Because the Bible was written long ago in another culture and in a language other than 21st century American English, we must seek to understand what the words in a passage meant to those who wrote them in their historical setting. We must not interpret scripture based on modern usage of words or modern culture.

Example: When Jesus pronounced several “woes” on the Pharisees in Luke 11, we must understand the term “woe” in the setting in which Jesus used it, rather than as we might use it today. To us, “woe” is a term used to describe sorrow. When a Biblical prophet used the term “woe,” he was pronouncing the strongest form of denunciation or curse.

Paul’s many references to circumcision are confusing and embarrassing to many modern readers, but in Paul’s time circumcision was vitally important and understood within a religious, rather than a medical or private context.

Even words in older English translations can be misleading. When the King James Bible was written in 1611, the word “rent” meant something different from what it means to people today. To us it means use for a price. To them it meant tear or rip. So when we read, “he rent his coat in twain,” we should not think he was using his clothing for a price, but instead, that he tore his coat in two.

- 4. Progressive Revelation.** The writers and characters in the earliest writings did not know what God would reveal later in history. More details of God’s grace were known to Paul than to Abraham, for instance. As God has revealed more of Himself and His plan for His people, the picture has become clearer. Therefore, while not discounting the revelation of God in the Old Testament, we must give special attention to how the later pieces of God’s revelation complete the earlier pieces. The New Testament provides commentary on the Old Testament.

Example: Genesis 4 does not make it clear what made Abel's sacrifice acceptable and Cain's unacceptable. Hebrews 11:4 clarifies it, saying the issue was faith.

King David had many wives. Though God allowed it, in the New Testament, however, it is clear that God's plan since creation was for a man to have only one wife (Matthew 19:1-8).

- 5. Recognize what kind of literature you are reading.** Poetry in the Bible needs to read like poetry. The Bible contains sarcasm, hyperbole (exaggeration), and symbolism. To read it as though it were an encyclopedia of religion is to misunderstand it.

Example: If I were reading a poem about a man's love for his wife and it said, "Your teeth are like the stars shining in the night sky," I would know that the woman's teeth were not stars. I would realize that the author was speaking figuratively, not literally. Likewise, when I read in the Psalms that God covers us with His wings, I realize that God is not a heavenly chicken. I understand that the Psalmist is speaking figuratively, not literally.

If I hear a person say he was so mad he "could have killed his boss," I know he wasn't really homicidal — he was just really angry. In the same manner, when Jesus instructs us to cut off our hands and gouge out our eyes if they cause us to sin, I must understand that He doesn't want us to physically maim ourselves, but to be serious about avoiding sin.

- 6. Learn to diagram sentences.** Much of the Bible, especially the writings of Paul, contains long and complicated sentences with, at times, several digressions. We must be able to grasp the subject and predicate, or the many digressions are likely to confuse our understanding of the basic meaning of the text.

Example: In 2 Peter 3, Peter has been talking about the fact that Jesus will return, just as He promised He would. The fact that He hasn't

returned yet is not because He is slack concerning His promise, but rather because He is giving time for more people to come to saving faith. Look at 2 Peter 3:14-16. This is one sentence. There are ten commas, a semicolon, and an en-dash. This sentence is long enough with enough digressions, that one could easily miss the point: that we must be diligent to be found by Christ in peace when He returns. Ironically, Peter digresses from that point and ends up speaking about how hard it is to understand Paul's writings!

- 7. Interpretation v. Application.** There is only one correct *interpretation* of a passage (what it means), but there may be many different *applications* (how it directs my life). As long as the interpretation is correct, and as long as the applications I might derive from the interpretation do not alter the interpretation, I may find a number of applications.

Example: Proverbs 11:1 is about weights and measures in business. That is the interpretation. However, there are other applications to the truth of God's disdain for imbalance. So while the passage is about honest weights and measures, there is an application to be honest in all things.

- 8. Do not formulate doctrine on narratives alone.** The Word of God accurately records what is written in it, but God does not sanction or endorse all the events that are recorded. For this reason, only when what is recorded in a narrative (story) passage is also found in a didactic (teaching) passage should we formulate any doctrine or conclusion about how we are to live.

Example: Genesis 12 and 20 record Abraham lying about his relationship with Sarah (calling her his sister instead of his wife). Genesis 26 records Isaac doing the same thing. I must not conclude that lying is okay based on these accurate narratives of the Patriarchs' sins. In didactic portions like Revelation 21:8, we read that liars will be cast into the lake of fire.

These are eight of many principles of biblical interpretation and are not intended to represent an exhaustive list of all principles of biblical interpretation.