

How To Interpret Scripture

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The technical word for the study of biblical interpretation is *hermeneutics*. This is a subject that all well educated pastors are required to take. However, the importance of proper biblical interpretation is not unique to professionals; lay Christians, especially those in teaching positions, should also be familiar with the principles of proper Scriptural interpretation. The value of that kind of knowledge was clearly expressed by the New Testament author and Greek physician, Luke when he wrote the following words about some 1st Century Christians, *Now the Bereans were of more noble character. . . for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.* (Acts 17:11) Imagine that, a group of lay men and women, having heard the greatest theologian of all time speak to them and then questioning his veracity. The profitable lesson there is this; no matter how impressive, intelligent or charismatic a person may appear, unless his or her teaching is in accord with God's Word it is false. The Word is the plumb line upon which all assertions are to be judged. No man or woman has the right to expect anyone to believe in something that is contrary to that which the Bible teaches.

G.K.Chesterton, 19th Century apologist wisely said this, "If a line be not perfectly directed toward a point, it will actually move further away from it as it moves closer to it." So it is with teaching the Word. If one makes a slight error in biblical interpretation, down the road a heresy will likely develop in that person's spiritual thinking. That is especially so when one is being discipled during the early stages of spiritual development. If the line of instruction is not in perfect alignment with biblical truth, the longer that person remains off course, the further away from Truth that person will move. David has taught us that, *The law of the Lord is perfect . . .* (Psalm 19:7) In theological terms that means it is inerrant (i.e. contains no error) and infallible (i.e. is incapable of error). Thus, if interpreted correctly the Bible is entirely true and

trustworthy. Jesus said in His high priestly prayer to the Father, *Sanctify them by the truth; thy word is truth.*(John17:17)

Of the many rules concerning hermeneutics, three are of absolute necessity; context, frequency of usage and the original meaning as expressed in the language of the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts; other means will be considered as well.

Context

The word *context* means that the word or phrase immediately preceding or following another word or phrase gives the proper meaning to it. *Context* is a compound word, derived from two Latin words meaning to “weave” (*texere*) “together” (*con*).The safest method of determining the meaning of a particular verse of Scripture is to examine the context within which it was stated. Thus, one should always read the verses that precede and/or follow any passage that may be in doubt, or even assumed to be true, in order to learn what the Holy Spirit had in mind when He inspired its author.

One of the most blatant examples of taking a verse of Scripture out of context has to do with a passage that is commonly utilized when a sermon or teaching on stewardship is presented. The verse reads, *Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.* (Luke 6:38) The first time that this author ever heard that verse, the pastor had a bag of beans and a Mason jar in the pulpit. He first filled the jar with the beans. Then after he had pressed the beans down with his hand he was able to add some more beans. Next he shook the jar and banged it lightly on the pulpit and sure enough was able to add some more beans. Lastly he poured the remaining beans onto the jar full of beans and they ran all over the platform. That he said was an illustration of how God will bless us when we give money to the church.

There is little question that God does bless a cheerful and generous giver, for the Bible is replete with such promises; that verse however, is not one of them. Reading the

verse immediately preceding the “sermon text” gives the proper meaning to Luke 6:38. It reads, *Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven.*(Luke 6:37) Thus the passage utilized in the stewardship sermon has nothing whatsoever to do with stewardship. In stead it is a caveat regarding improper attitudes. Mind sets that judge and condemn the actions of others and lack a spirit of forgiveness when another person has asked to be forgiven will get back what they’ve meted out. The message of Luke 6:38 is this; judge and you will be judged. Condemn and you will be condemned, Do not forgive and you will not be forgiven. Money has nothing whatsoever to do with that portion of God’s Word.

For centuries Christians have battled over the context of Genesis chapter one in regard to the length of the days of creation. While God’s repeated use of the phrase “evening and morning” surely suggest a literal 24 hour day, opponents point out the fact that the Hebrew word for day, *yom*, is used in two contexts throughout Scripture; a literal 24 hour day and an indefinite period of time. Old earth advocates and theistic evolutionists use the latter context for the six *yoms* of creation

With that in mind the context of Exodus 20:8-11 is highly instructive. *Remember the Sabbath **day** by keeping it holy. Six **days** you shall labor and do all your work. . .for in six **days** the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh **day**. . .* (Emphasis added) No one doubts the length of the Sabbath day or the six week days during which work was permitted and encouraged. Why then should anyone doubt the length of the six days of creation? The context of the verses preceding, 8 and 9, and the words that follow within verse 11, clearly teach any reasonable person the obvious truth that God created the universe in a matter of six twenty-four hour periods of time. God has the power do that, and in fact could have done it faster had He not desired to establish a time frame which mankind calls, the week.

Frequency of Usage

Another way in which a student can grasp the meaning of a particular word, phrase or teaching is to examine the frequency with which it is used in a particular context. Continuing in the theme of the days of Genesis one, the Bible student finds that whenever the word *yom* (*meaning day*) appears in Scripture, 90% of the time it refers to a literal twenty-four hour period of time. The other 10% of the references have to do with indefinite periods of time; such as “the day of the Lord.”

Persons who deny the security of the believer’s soul, that is, “once truly saved always saved,” can always point to certain passages that bring that doctrine into doubt. However, the vast majority of Scriptural references on that subject, the preservation or perseverance of the saints, lend a strong sense of hope to the Christian heart and thus support the doctrine of eternal security; believers are thus assured a place with Christ for all eternity. Numerous Scripture references speak of the guarantee of eternal life that the indwelling Spirit offers and two of the most often quoted are as follows: *Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit **guaranteeing** our inheritance. . .* (Ephesians 1:13-14) and *Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, **guaranteeing** what is to come.* (II Corinthians 5:5, emphasis added). The “purpose” of which Paul wrote there was the glorification of our bodies in heaven, for that is the context of verses II Corinthians 5: 1 -4.

Original Languages

The most reliable way in which to know the meaning of a particular verse or doctrinal statement is to look at the original language that the author utilized in writing down the inspired message that he received from the Holy Spirit. (II Peter 1:20-21). Old Testament authors wrote in Hebrew while New testament writers used the Greek language in the original manuscripts. Later the Old Testament was translated by 70 transcribers into Greek over a period of about 200 years; 250-50 B.C. That edition is known as the *Septuagint*, abbreviated LXX, which is the Roman numeral seventy. The Greek Bible was first translated into Latin and later into German (Luther) and English

(Tyndale).

Obviously because of the fact that one word in a given language (I.e. English) might carry four separate meanings, another language (I.e. Greek) must utilize four individual words to distinguish the four meanings. In the process some things can be lost in the translation. For example, in the Gospel of John one finds the following conversation taking place between our resurrected Lord Jesus and the apostle Peter. *Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?* Peter then answered, *Yes Lord. . .you know that I love you.* (John 21:15) Again in the 16th verse Jesus asks the same question and receives the same answer from Peter. Then in verse 17 one reads that Jesus asks Peter a third question, which when read in English seems highly redundant, *Simon son of John, do you love me?* Peter then answered, with a sense of shame, *Lord you know all things, you know that I love you.*

The basis of the conversation was lost between the original Greek manuscript and the English NIV that was just quoted. The Greeks use four individual words for the English word love. The love of “lovers”, a physical attraction full of sensuality is *eros*, it may be very superficial: The love of friends is *phileo*, its highly conditional: The love of parents, especially mothers is *storge*, it comes very close to being unconditional: and the unconditional, eternal, infinite love of God is *agape*. With that in mind the if the actual meaning of the original manuscript had been translated into English it would have read something like this. “Peter, do you love me unconditionally?” Peter then answers, “Well Lord you know that I am your friend.” Jesus then said, “Yes, I do know that we are friends, but that kind of love is conditional. Do you love me unconditionally.” At that point Peter again gave the standard answer about being a very good friend of Jesus. Then Jesus acquiesced to Peter’s inability to love Him unconditionally, and, as is Jesus’ loving and gracious way, He met Peter just at the point where he was and said, “Okay Peter, we will agree on this; we are the best of friends.”

There are so many other places in Scripture where the Greek word gives new meaning to the English translation. For example when the English word “anyone” is used, as in II

Peter 3:9, the Greek word is *tis*. That literally means “certain ones.” The context of that passage identifies the “certain ones” as God’s chosen people. In I Timothy 4:10, the English word “all” is used for *pas* in the Greek language. In I Peter 3:9, the English word “everyone” is used for the Greek word *pas*. That means individuals within the total. By reading those verses with the Greek translation in mind, the reader will undoubtedly arrive at a different conclusion regarding their true meaning. A useful tool in this means of Biblical interpretation is the work of Spiros Zodhiates, Th.D. entitled, *The Complete Word Study-New Testament*. There are also Hebrew lexicons and interlinear translations available.

Implicit as opposed to Explicit

The word Trinity is conspicuous by its absence throughout the entire sixty-six books of the Bible. Critics of our Trinitarian doctrine, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses are quick to point this out. The teaching about the Trinity is admittedly not “explicit”, but it is surely “implicit” from the very beginning to the extreme end of God’s revealed truth.

The very opening statement of God’s word implies a plurality of Persons in the God-head. *In the beginning God. . .*(Genesis 1:1) The Hebrew word for God utilized there by Moses is *Elohim*. That carries a pleural connotation. It would seem to the mere finite mind of a human that the better term for God there would have been *El Shaddai*, or God Almighty since Moses was about to describe a very powerful series of events that God would be performing during the first six days of the universe’s existence. Instead, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Moses wrote *Elohim*. That fact is lost in the English translation because there is no English word that means that God is a trinity and only by adding the letter “s” can one communicate the fact of plurality. Unfortunately adding “s” sends the wrong message of many gods. Thus the Christian has to explain the inexplicable and say that our God, while being One in essence is three in Person.

In the Bible’s opening statement God was communicating the fact that He is one in essence but more than one in person; at this point the exact number of Persons was not

revealed to Moses. Once again in Genesis 1:26 the pleural nature of God is found where one reads of Him saying, *Let **us** make man in **our** image, in **our** likeness.* The same plurality is explicitly stated in Genesis 3:22 where the personal pronoun *us* is used in reference to God. If that were not enough, again in Genesis 11:7 one reads of God saying at Babel, *Come, let **us** go down and confuse their language.* . .(Emphasis added to all of the above personal pronouns)

One of the most implicit of all New Testament Scriptures regarding the Trinity is found in the passage known as The Great Commission. *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the **name** of the **Father** and of the **Son** and of the **Holy Spirit.*** . . (Matthew 28:19 emphasis added) The name, singular stands for the one essence or being of God, the three separate designations represent the Three Persons of the Trinity.

Cross Referencing

When Dr. Luke wrote about the Berean believers (mentioned above) who “examined the Scriptures everyday” (Acts 17:11) he was talking about the exercise of cross referencing. It has been said that “the best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself.” That is so very true. In fact the Bible encourages its student to do just that. Solomon wrote these words long ago, *My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you **look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.***(Proverbs 2:1-5, emphasis added)

Solomon thus encourages the student of the Word of God to first “accept” the Bible as the inerrant, infallible and inspired message of God to all believers. Next he advises the student to be open to the Bible’s instruction, listening for its message and applying what is learned. If there is a problem with interpretation he instructs the student to pray and/or

ask questions of the better informed Christians (“call out” and “cry aloud”) and finally and importantly he says “look” and “search”. There he uses the metaphor of a miner working very hard, seeking great and precious treasure; which of course is a perfect analogy for the Truth in God’s Word.

Every study Bible is replete with cross references, usually in the margin. Those are there for the expressed purpose of enabling the student to gain a greater understanding and true contextual meaning of a particular verse. The cross referenced verses will likewise have other cross-referenced verses that can be used to further enlighten ones understanding.

Applying Reason

Many Christians take great pride in their claim to take the Bible “literally.” There are many instances in the Scripture where taking a passage “literally” is utterly irrational. For example, the Bible clearly teaches on the one hand that “God is Spirit” and on the other hand uses terms that suggest that He possesses eyes, ears, hands and other parts of the human anatomy. To take these literally is to humanize God. They are meant to communicate God’s infinitely powerful, ubiquitous and omniscient actions in simple terms that a mere finite human can begin to understand. Such passages of Scripture are called *anthropomorphic*; meaning in the form of mankind.

C.S. Lewis once said, “When our Lord told us to be harmless as doves, He did not mean for us to sprout feathers.” Furthermore, Jesus variously referred to Himself as a “vine”, a “door”, “bread” and a “Rock.” Each of those inanimate analogies or metaphors was merely an effort to teach a spiritual truth.

Another way in which to apply reason in one’s biblical interpretation is to allow the Bible to say what the Bible says. When humans are called “sinners” one should not interpret that to mean “morally challenged.” When the Bible says that one needs to be “regenerated”, or born again, it does not mean that one needs to be “reformed.” The act

of reforming a reprobate is like putting a new suit on a man, while the act of regeneration is putting a new man in the suit. (See II Corinthians 5:17) If the Bible says that God does something in a day, which some human cannot conceive of being accomplished in such a short span of time (Like an act of creation), one should not seek to reinterpret the word “day” to fit into the fallen and finite scheme of incomplete human comprehension or the utterly unprovable theory of evolution.

An example of trying to teach the long “day” in the first chapter of Genesis by using another Scripture as a proof text is citing the fact that “*With the Lord a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day.*” (II Peter 3:8) In fact, since God is timeless, no “time” has passed in the mind of God since He first created the universe; but I digress. The context of that passage has nothing whatsoever to do with creation. Instead God is communicating the fact that, unlike most of us, He is patient regarding the conversion of a reprobate soul to Christ. He further implies that judgement will not come until the last soul to be saved is saved.

Anyone who doubts the value of God’s Word because of the “alleged” errors and contradictions has either not spent sufficient time in prayerfully studying and learning how to properly interpret the Bible (See Proverbs 2:1-5) or they have bought into the spirit of the age, the “spirit” who first posited, *Did God really say. . .?* (Genesis 3:1) Hopefully this short work will enable the devoted student of Scripture to better understand its lessons.

Soli Deo Gloria