

The Ten Principles of Bible Interpretation

1) The principle of private interpretation of the Scriptures

1 John 2:27; "As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit--just as it has taught you, remain in him."

1 Corinthians 2:14-15; "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things..."

If we are born again, we have God's Spirit within us. One thing the Spirit does is to teach us what the Scriptures mean. We have the ability to understand the Holy Scriptures on our own, without the need of another man to tell us the meaning. In fact, if we are of noble character, we will examine the Scriptures privately to determine if a teacher has spoken the truth [see Acts 17:11].

The psalmist says:

"I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts." [Psalm 119:99-100]

This means that a private individual can have more insight and understanding than all his teachers because God has not withheld knowledge and insight from the individual apart from an organization or teachers. Put another way: God does not always speak to us and teach us through teachers, but often teaches us privately and through his Word. Paul himself was not taught the truth of the gospel by men, but he was taught by Jesus Christ [Galatians 1:11-12].

This point is brought home very clearly by Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:13-14 where he says, "For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us..."

Paul here says that nothing is written that we cannot understand! Furthermore, our understanding of Scripture can grow throughout time. But through it all the Bible affirms that it is perspicuous, or clear. The New Testament itself was written in common Koine Greek for the common man. It was written to be understood privately, apart from the absolute necessity of a hierarchy of teachers to interpret it.

This does not mean that we should avoid teachers and preachers, because they are a gift from God to help us to grow in our faith and to prepare us for good works [see Ephesians 4:11-12]. But we must remember that we are not utterly dependent upon other men to understand the Scriptures.

Other religious faiths do not teach this principle. The vast history of Catholicism was based upon the fact that man could not privately understand the Scriptures, but rather he understood them only as he was taught by the Church hierarchy. The Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons and other cults also share this distinction.

2) The Context is paramount.

"Jesus is Lord and Context is king"

"A verse taken out of context is a pretext for a proof-text"

2 Peter 3:15-16; "our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some

things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.”

Most poor theology results from taking a verse out of context. Likewise, a thorough understanding of the text can only be found in its immediate and overall context.

An example of the most blatant twisting of Scripture by taking a verse out of context can be found in I Peter 3:18, the banner verse of the Universalist Church [which believes that everyone will go to heaven and that there isn't a hell]. “For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.” The context of this passage is about doing good and suffering for that good, with Christ as our ultimate example of One who did good and suffered. The verse in no way is intended to comment on the lack of hell and that all will be saved. The broader context of Scripture speaks authoritatively against the belief in universal salvation. Christ did indeed die FOR all, but not all will accept this gift.

An less dangerous example of taking a text out of context can be found in *John 12:32-33*. This is perhaps the most misused verse in the New Testament in my experience. The verse is often quoted as this: “But I, when I am lifted up...will draw all men to myself.” Then the teacher will go on to say that if we exalt Jesus, He will draw the sinner to Himself and it is our job to merely exalt Jesus. I believe that the conclusion is correct, but that it cannot be drawn from this particular passage. That is why this is not a highly dangerous removal of a verse out of context, because a reasonable conclusion is drawn [the necessity of the exaltation of Jesus]. A full examination of the context reveals what is found in the “...” and the verse following it: “But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.” So now we see that this verse is a prophecy by Jesus of His crucifixion. It is not about preaching.

3) Scripture interprets Scripture

The dreams and visions and prophecies found in the book of Daniel are accompanied by the interpretation. Occasionally Jesus gave the interpretation of His own parables. The Book of Revelation also interprets itself, with Revelation chapter 17 being an example. Based upon these examples of Biblical “self-interpretation” we can accurately identify the logical meaning of similar passages that are not accompanied by its own interpretation. Thus the classic statement expressed by many non-Christians, “The Bible can mean just about anything” is refuted based upon Scripture’s habit of interpreting itself and thus giving us guidelines for interpreting other similar passages and helping us to determine which passages are meant to be taken literal, and which are to be taken as figurative.

Many times the Bible will use *repetition, emphasis, or specificity* when making it clear that a passage is intended to be taken literally. Take for example:

Repetition: John 1:3; “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

Emphasis: Romans 3:10-12; “¹⁰As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. ¹²All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."R

Specificity: Revelation 7:4-8; “⁴Then I heard the number of those who were sealed: 144,000 from all the tribes of Israel.

⁵From the tribe of Judah 12,000 were sealed,
from the tribe of Reuben 12,000,
from the tribe of Gad 12,000,

⁶from the tribe of Asher 12,000,
from the tribe of Naphtali 12,000,
from the tribe of Manasseh 12,000,
⁷from the tribe of Simeon 12,000,
from the tribe of Levi 12,000,
from the tribe of Issachar 12,000,
⁸from the tribe of Zebulun 12,000,
from the tribe of Joseph 12,000,
from the tribe of Benjamin 12,000.

Specificity: see also Revelation 21:15-21

4) Look for Jesus.

The Scriptures are primarily about Jesus, not man.

John 5:46; “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.”

John 5:39; “These are the Scriptures that testify about me.”

Jesus is the Supreme Subject of the Scriptures. In the Old Testament, He is not only the prophesied Messiah, but He is the God of Abraham, the Creator, the “Y’shua”, and the subject and object of the narratives found therein. The New Testament also has Him as its subject, with the Gospels being the account of His life, the epistles being the proclaimed faith in Him, and Revelation pertaining to His second coming.

5) **The Primary Meaning** of a text is its original intent by the original writer to the original audience.

The **Implied Meaning** is the full original intent by the original author.

The **Extended Meaning** is based upon this Primary Meaning and reaches to the reader with application to his/her life.

For example: Ephesians 5:18; “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit.” The Primary Meaning is the command that the Ephesians [and others the letter circulated to] are to not be drunk with wine, but to be filled with the Spirit. The Implied Meaning is that the Ephesians are not to be drunk on ANY alcoholic beverage or other mind-altering drug, but to be filled with the Holy Spirit. The Extended Meaning is that you and I are not to let a medication, drug, or alcohol affect our mind so that we cannot be led by the indwelling Holy Spirit. God may even use this verse to rebuke a single reader living 2,000 years later by speaking directly to his heart through the text of Scripture. “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” [Hebrews 4:12]

6) **Inspiration, Transmission, and Translation; the inerrancy of the Scriptures**

II Timothy 3:16; “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”

II Peter 1:21; “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.”

Acts 4:25; “You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David”

Inspiration: God's own word declares that Scripture comes directly from God. The original authors of the original autographs wrote by God's own breath as they penned the very words of God Himself. The original manuscripts would be, by definition, free from errors since they come directly from God.

Transmission: The passage of God's written word was originally done by hand, through scribes, who meticulously copied God's word for dissemination and personal usage. The development of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1436 allowed the copy work to be done error free from that moment on. All copies of bible texts prior to 1436 are called MSS, or "manuscripts". We know that God has providentially protected the transmission of His Word because the New Testament writers did not read or refer to original autographs, and yet still referred to them as "Scripture" repeatedly, and quoted confidently the Old Testament. Similarly, Jesus said, "It is written..." many times as He quoted Old Testament Scripture that was available to the people. Also, comparison of MSS from different areas of the world show there to be very few differences. The vast majority of differences deal with the spelling of a word, such as "Joannhn" vs. "Joanhn". No doctrine of the faith is affected by any difference between any manuscripts ever found. This could only happen if God providentially protected the transmission of His Word.

Translation: The translation of any document into another language is wrought with difficulty. The nuances of the original language are often hard to express in the translated language. The same is true when translating the original Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek into English or any other language. This step is the most liable to error and bias, both intentional and unintentional. For instance, the translators of the New World Translation used by the Jehovah's Witnesses intentionally remove, alter, or change any reference in the Scriptures to the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Other translational errors are unintentional, or occur by the very nature of translation. I believe that most modern English translations are well done and accurately reflect the meaning of the original languages, yet in different ways.

A thorough understanding of Inspiration, Transmission, and Translation when it comes to Bible interpretation will help us to refute the idea that we do not have an accurate copy of God's Word in our hands due to errors. This same understanding will also help us to refute the idea that one English translation is "God's Word" in pure, error-free form, since all translations are wrought with difficulties by nature.

One way to avoid the problem of translational errors or biases is to learn the original languages for yourself! This will take time, but is very rewarding and helpful in seeing the finer, more detailed aspects of Scripture.

7) There are no contradictions.

Apparent contradictions highlight our lack of understanding, usually because of an assumption or bias.

Some "contradictions" do arise from improper transmission, but this is uncommon. However, translational issues should come to mind as a possible explanation. A classic example of this is found in Luke 3:36 with the insertion of Cainan, father of Selah. This name is not found in any of the Old Testament genealogies, and raises the concern for error. It is possible that this "Cainan" does belong there, as Hebrews often left one or more generations out of a genealogy, but the repetitive specificity of the OT genealogies does make one wonder why this one name is left out. The name "Cainan, father of Selah" however is not found in any manuscripts or writings prior to AD 220 and likely represents a scribal transmission error. [see Appendix 1 for more on Cainan, Father

of Selah] Transmission errors are known to occur, but never change the overall meaning, nor any element of theology or doctrine.

Other “contradictions” highlight our misunderstanding, due to assumptions or bias. This is the most common cause of a perceived contradiction. One example of this is found in Galatians 3:17; “What I mean is this: The Law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God...” This makes it appear that Paul is saying that the Law was given 430 years after the promise was spoken to Abraham. We know that the children of Israel were in Egypt 400 years, so that leaves only 30 years for Isaac to be born and grow up and have Jacob, who needed to grow up and have Joseph, who would need to grow up and serve in Pharaoh’s court for at least 14 years until his death, which predated the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt. The assumption here is that the “clock” begins after the first promise to Abraham. But Galatians 3:16 says that the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. A thorough study of this reveals that The Promise was spoken to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, AND Judah [and his brothers at Joseph’s death in Genesis 50]. So the “clock” starts at the time of the last speaking of The Promise by Joseph to his brothers in Genesis 50, that leaves 30 years before the 400 years of oppression would begin. Here we see that the assumption of promise rather than promises leaves us with an apparent contradiction that is easily resolved!

Translational contradictions do occur from time to time. An example can be found in I Samuel 6:19; “But God struck down some of the men of Beth Shemesh, putting seventy of them to death...” [NIV]; “Then He struck the men of Beth Shemesh, because they had looked into the ark of the LORD. He struck fifty thousand and seventy men of the people...” [NKJV] The NIV does not translate the words “50 eleph” because of the apparent difficulty in the idea that 50,070 people would be found in such a small town of Beth Shemesh. But the issue is easily resolved when we find that “eleph” means both “oxen” and “thousand”. The proper translation should state that 70 men and 50 oxen were slain by God.

8) Don’t let your systematic theology allow you to ignore the plain meaning of the text.

All too often a plain verse is twisted to say the exact opposite of what it means just to fit the presupposed theology of the reader. This is a dangerous habit and can lead to the reader being unable to gain new insights in God’s Word in addition to a misunderstanding of the text at hand. Often times the plain meaning is ignored because of another verse that seems to say the opposite. Let the reader then try to find the resolution between the two verses, understanding that the Bible does not contradict itself. Many times when comparing two verses, it is not a matter of “either/or” but a matter of “both/and” because we know that both verses are true! Keep this in mind when you read the verses that seem to contradict your theology!

9) Don’t let a single verse be the basis for a theology or belief.

“Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.”

[2 Corinthians 13:1; Matthew 18:16; Deuteronomy 19:15]

A sure way to come to wild and erred conclusions is to base a belief upon a single verse. Preterists base their belief that all prophecy of Scripture, including the second coming of Christ, has been fulfilled upon Matthew 24:34 [and its sister verses in Mark and Luke] “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened.”

Universalists base their belief that everyone will be saved upon I Peter 3:18

Many other false beliefs arise when a single verse becomes the basis for a theology. It isn’t that we should ever ignore a verse, but if the whole context of Scripture argues for a different conclusion

than the one we come to based upon a single verse, then it is likely that we have not properly understood the verse. This should cause us to pray for guidance and wisdom in understanding the verse at hand, and not merely coming to a conclusion that is not consistent with the whole of Scripture.

10) Bible interpretation should lead to lifestyle alteration.

“The meaning is meaningless if it doesn’t mean we will change because of it”

Matthew 7:24-27; "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

Ultimately, if we understand every Bible verse thoroughly, and yet fail to repent and change what we do based upon our understanding, our knowledge is worthless.

Remember the 4 “M’s” of Bible interpretation;

“Meaning, Meditate, Memorize, Make it happen” First we understand the meaning of a text. Then we should meditate on its meaning and how it applies to us. Then we should memorize the passage. Finally we need to make it happen in our lives!

Appendix 1:

Cainan, father of Selah

Luke 3:36

NET Bible Commentators

tc (3:36) It is quite possible the name *Cainan* should be omitted, since two key MSS, ð75 and D, omit it. This name is not found in the editions of the Hebrew OT, though it is in the LXX at Gen 11:12 and 10:24. The reappearance of the name in v. 37, where it does parallel Gen 5:9 and 1 Chr 1:1 means that the text could simply have an erroneous scribal insertion here as a copying error.

<http://www.answersingenesis.org/docs/3748.asp>

‘All these predate the New Testament Greek text. And while Josephus was not a Christian writer and would not have been influenced by copies of Luke genealogies, Julius Africanus was a devout Christian. In his Epistle to Aristides ch. 3, he made an extensive study of the genealogies of both Luke and Matthew. In fact he quotes Luke 3:23.⁹ Hence, Africanus had copies of both the Gospel of Luke and Matthew. So one cannot claim that Africanus did not know about Luke’s gospel or his genealogies. If the copies of Luke’s writings had this spurious Cainan, no doubt Africanus would have amended his chronology to include it. In fact, the earliest known extant copy of Luke, the 102-page (originally 144) papyrus codex of the Bodmer Collection labeled P⁷⁵ (dated between AD 175 and 225¹⁰), omits the extra Cainan. Thus the reading in Luke 3:36 cannot be shown to exist before AD 220.’