

Basic Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics

The Bible is the perfect, inerrant word of God and is to be the final authority for truth in the life of the Christian believer. The way we approach the Bible is critical to our understanding of God and of how we ought to relate to Him and to our fellow man. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the importance of several key elements of sound bible study, interpretation, and application.

The importance of the author's intended meaning:

The **wrong** question to ask: What does it mean to me?

- it means what I want it to mean
- authority rests with me

The **right** question to ask: What is the author's intended meaning?

- it means what the author meant for it to mean
- authority rests with the author, who ultimately is God (II Pet. 1:19-21)

A **further** question to ask: How does the author's meaning apply to my life?

- This application is driven by God's authoritative meaning
- There is one principle meaning which can direct a variety of applications

*We are not to harness God's word, but rather we are to be harnessed by it.

- Harnessed by the Spirit of God through the true meaning of the word of God (I Cor. 2:14)
- The Spirit's involvement does not eliminate our responsibility to diligently study (II Tim. 2:15)
- The Holy Spirit inspired the structure, style, and flow of scripture, and we do well to heed it

The importance of context:

What is meant when someone says, "I'm blue!"

- My skin is covered in blue paint?
- My skin is turning blue, and I'm going to pass out?
- I am feeling down?

*The context of the specific situation in view has significant bearing on what this person means.

*If his skin is turning blue and he is going to pass out, he may also be feeling down. However, when he says he is blue, we need to understand that he does not want someone to sit down and counsel him about how to feel better; he wants someone to call 911 or get some medical assistance quick! Though you may be able to make some other observations about him by implication from his situation, his statement has one ultimate meaning.

The importance of observation:

The scriptures are filled with **principles** which are intended by God to reveal to us how we ought to think and live in accordance with truth and His design. I like to think of discovering these principles as “mining for gold.” The principles of scripture are golden nuggets of truth that we must dig out from the text. Some nuggets are very close to the surface, like in some New Testament letters, while others are more challenging to grasp, such as those that are illustrated in Old Testament narratives or implied by prophecy. Peter affirms that some things in the scriptures can be hard to understand and are misinterpreted by many (II Pet. 3:15-16). We must be willing to give the time, patience, and commitment that it takes to mine these principles; these treasures are worth the effort. Ultimately we must bathe this process in much prayer. We must ask for the Holy Spirit to empower and guide our efforts in studying the scriptures which He has inspired and to help us be honest and fair in our handling of the text. We must adopt standards that will protect our thoughts from going where the author of a particular passage would not want us to go and will channel us through a careful and thorough process of arriving at an accurate interpretation of scripture.

The importance of moving from broad to specific:

“Curse God and die!” This is a quotation from Job 2:9. Without understanding that this phrase is the bad advice of Job’s wife to her husband who was facing great trial and suffering, one could read this as a command for us to curse God and die. We should begin our observations from a broader scope before moving to the level of isolated sentences and phrases. The following gives a pattern for this process:

- Is the text in the Old or New Testament?
 - If in the OT, understand that the original audience is Israel
 - If in the NT, understand that the original audience is people of the 1st century
- In which book of the Bible is it contained?
 - Is the author of the book identified?
 - Are there clues in this book or other books that further describe the author and the conditions under which he is writing?
 - Does the author identify his audience?
 - Are there clues in this book or other books that further describe the audience and the conditions under which they are receiving the text?
 - Are there clues pointing toward a major theme for the book as a whole?
 - What is the literary genre of this book?
- Is the text contained in a particular section in the book?
 - Are there any clues that would indicate the theme of the section?
 - What sections surround the section in which the passage is found?
 - Sections do not necessarily abide by chapter numbers, because these were added later to help in referencing the scriptures; they are not inspired.
- What is the content of the passage containing the text?
 - What is **the main idea** of the passage?
 - Are there clues or **sub-points** that support the main idea?

- These questions can only be effectively answered after utilizing the smaller units of the passage.
- What passages surround the text in view?
- Have I properly grouped verses to carry across the whole idea of the passage?
- Passages may also not be entirely contained in only one chapter.
- What are the smaller units of the passage?
 - Sentences (often correlates with verses, but these are not inspired)
 - Clauses (contains a subject and verb)
 - Phrases (does not contain a subject and verb)
 - Words
 - Nouns – these can be the subject, object, indirect object, etc.
 - Verbs – these can be active or passive and have different tenses
 - Adjectives – these describe specific nouns
 - Adverbs – these describe specific verbs
 - Prepositions – these also describe nouns and verbs and how they relate
 - Transition words – these indicate movement from one idea to another
 - “therefore”, “finally,” etc. indicate that one should look to the material coming before them

*You can learn to identify key words that would be beneficial to look up in the original language. The Old Testament is primarily Hebrew and the New Testament is primarily Greek. You do not have to be a Greek scholar to accomplish this task. At www.greekbible.com one can bring up a particular text and click on the words to find some basic definitions. An analytical Greek to English lexicon can be very helpful for finding in depth definitions of Greek words and understanding their function in sentences.

The importance of bridging the gap:

After arriving at the main point of the passage using a broader scope as well as examining the fine details, it is important to be able to bring the principles revealed by the author to his audience into our present context for application. For example, the ceremonial and dietary laws given to Israel in the Old Testament were generally meant to teach a spiritual principle such as holiness. Israel was to be a people distinct among the nations around them. Therefore God gave them practices and diets that set them apart from others in very physical and tangible ways. In our context today we may apply these principles by realizing that God desires for His people to be separated from the sinful desires and practices of the world. God is the same God, has always been the same God and will always be the same God. Therefore, there is much for us to learn about Him based on His interaction with Israel in the Old Testament. We may gain much insight into His heart; the things He loves; the things He hates; His mercy; His justice; His power; His personal nature. The same applies with the New Testament. Because we are in the age of the New Covenant today, just as people of the 1st century were, the gap between our context and theirs is smaller. Not to mention that we are also much closer in time. Still there may be some historical and cultural gaps to be considered when applying principles in our context today.