

How Should We Interpret the Bible?

“Well, you’ve got your verses to support what you believe, and I’ve got mine.” So says the person when debating some issue of doctrine in the Bible. “We just have different views, and God will have to sort it out one day!”

There are some issues where Scripture is not precise enough for us to gain full consensus. But there are many areas, in fact -- the vast majority of areas -- where we can know what the Bible says. Why is it then, that Christians seem to come up with such vastly differing views on Scripture? Why don’t we agree, if we have the same Bible? Why can’t we get the same understanding of the same Scripture?

It really has to do with Bible interpretation. The truth is, God wrote the Word to be understood. He did not write a puzzle to confuse us. God’s Word has only one correct interpretation, but many different applications. You can get many practical applications out of one Scripture, but there can be only one valid meaning. When we get different meanings, it is because one of us is applying an incorrect form of Bible interpretation. For instance, a loved one may send you a letter with one sentence in it saying, “Make sure you use your time wisely”. Now there is only one interpretation of that letter (and it is simple): use your time wisely. But many practical applications can come out of it: don’t waste time, get up earlier, cut down on TV, and so on. But ultimately, no one could say that the letter was saying be kind to animals. It simply didn’t say that.

Now the same is true of the Word. God has one interpretation for His Word, with many, many applications. But the key is, how do we interpret the Bible? What are we to do, how are we to go about it? How do I interpret the Bible?

Fortunately, Scripture provides its own keys. The means to understanding the Word and interpreting it properly are found within Scripture itself. The Bible will teach us how to interpret the Bible.

1) Be saved & obedient.

The first requirement for interpreting Scripture is obvious, but it must be mentioned. That is, one has to be saved. You must be a believer to truly understand Scripture. Why? Because we are some special knowledgeable elite? No. Because the only one who can unlock Scripture is the author of Scripture, the Holy Spirit, and He is given only to believers. Because He indwells Christians, He gives believers the power to understand what He wrote. I Cor 2:9-12 tells us this: “But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. ¹⁰But God hath revealed *them* unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. ¹¹For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.” According to verse 14, the natural or unsaved man cannot know the things of God – they are beyond him, like human language to a beast.

Many believers will testify as to how they used to read the Bible before they were saved, but it was like a closed book. Only after they received the Lord Jesus Christ, did the light go on, and suddenly, they saw things they were sure were never there before. This is the work of the Spirit. We call it illumination: God turning on the light, showing us Himself in the Word. No unbeliever can truly understand the Word.

Oh, make no mistake, unbelievers can get extremely proficient in theology; many full-time Christian workers have shown by the fruit of their lives that they were never saved, but were still able interpreters of the Bible. Man can mentally tune himself into a system of teaching and become extremely well-versed in it. But no illumination is taking place.

Not only must you be a believer to properly interpret Scripture, but an obedient believer. Remember, God gives the Word for a purpose: for us to conform to His image. When we are not interested in repenting and changing our lives to conform to that image, why should God continue to give us new truth? He will not illuminate Scripture for the sake of increasing our knowledge or the size of our Bible trivia general knowledge. In fact, just the opposite will occur. A consistently disobedient Christian will find God withdrawing even the apparent illumination he has, until the man repents. Luke 8:18. "Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have." Woe to the man whose job it is to preach the Word, when his life is consistently disobedient, especially in the area of family life and loving your neighbour. For if God withdraws illumination, and yet he continues preaching, what is the source of his teaching? His own wisdom. Woe to the people that sit under such teaching. For proper interpretation of Scripture, there must be both a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and a life of obedience.

Those are what we would call the pre-requisites. Now, let's get into the nitty-gritty of interpreting the Bible.

- 2) Firstly, take Scripture literally. God did not write in code, much as some cults seek to make it seem so. Be careful of any group that tells you that the only correct interpretation of Scripture resides with them. Let me reiterate, there is only one correct interpretation of Scripture, but no group has the monopoly on it. It is not a carefully hidden secret, given to only those who stumble upon it. There are definitely hard things in Scripture, things which take diligent study, things which the casual and superficial seeker will not find, but God has not buried the meaning of Scripture deep inside its words, that only a special code of interpretation can crack. This was the teaching of Gnosticism in the early church which the apostles fought against. Scripture is meant to be taken at face value. When God says, repent and believe the Gospel, He means, repent and believe the Gospel. When He says, flee fornication, He means flee fornication. When He says, Behold, I Come quickly, He means just that. Now we don't mean that we do this idiotically, or foolishly. When Scripture uses a metaphor, it is obviously so. When Jesus says I am the door, we know He is using a metaphor. When God says, I will cover you with my wings, we know He does not have literal wings. Scripture makes it obvious when a metaphor or figure of speech is being used. We don't have to scratch our brains as to when to do this, it is obvious, as natural as the metaphors you use in everyday conversation.

But we must make sure we guard against spiritualizing and allegorizing Scripture unnecessarily. John MacArthur tells of a man who preached on Joshua's battle with Jericho and taught that the battle represented dating. A man was like Israel – he was to go around the girl's heart 7 times, and if she gave in, it was meant to be confirmation. Now, that is a ridiculous spiritualizing of the text. The text is simply, literally about a historical battle. There are many lessons to learn there about faith, about not being ashamed, and even humility, but *dating*? That's stretching it. People generally spiritualise and allegorise for two reasons: 1) To construct a teaching, like in the example just mentioned. 2) Because they are ashamed of the Word. Quite simply, so-called Christians exist who want to keep up appearances with the world, and so they could never believe in the Red Sea crossing, or Jonah in the belly of the great fish, or basically anything in Genesis 1 to 11. It's all one big metaphor, stories to teach us truths. Ok, well, how about I apply that to the cross, to Jesus' resurrection? What happens to your salvation then? Is it all one big metaphor? We need to have Scripture's authority before we declare something to be a metaphor. Jesus treated Jonah's experience as historical in Matthew 12:40. Paul regarded Adam and his sin as historical in Romans 5:12, 19. Peter regarded the flood as literal in 1 Pet 3:20. Scripture is teaching us the **literal principle**. Take the Bible literally, unless it is clearly a metaphor in which you are not supposed to do so. Christians who allegorise more often than not already believe what the world says about human origins, history and miracles, and therefore judge the Bible by secular wisdom, rather than secular wisdom by the Bible.

- 3) The next principle in interpreting Scripture is perhaps the cardinal one: Compare Scripture with Scripture. Scripture interprets itself. To know what Scripture teaches in one place, read Scripture in other places. You cannot interpret a verse in isolation. The Bible teaches this: 1 Cor 2:13: "Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual". The Bible is so full of examples one has no place to start, because almost every verse has another verse or verses that teach similar, identical or balancing truths. One of the most dangerous things to do is to take a single verse, and build a whole doctrine or practice on it. For instance, imagine taking I Cor 7:1: "Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: *It is* good for a man not to touch a woman." On its own, that would teach celibacy for every man in the world. We must compare Scripture with Scripture. Other teaching on celibacy is found in Matthew 19:11-12. Then we would read the verses on marriage found further in I Corinthians 7, In Ephesians 5, in I Peter 3. God wrote all the Bible and meant every believer to read the whole Bible. God did not write a large reference work, to be accessed and used whenever we need advice on a particular area of life. Some Christians think the Bible is like a buffet meal. "Let's choose what we want – a bit of prophecy, some encouragement, some verses on God's love, but that stuff on sin and righteous living, mmm, no thanks."

No, God meant us to read the whole Bible. Yes, even the seemingly boring parts on the tabernacle. Just keep Rom 15:4 in mind.: "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope." How would you feel if you wrote your beloved a fantastically long letter to last her a lifetime, and then heard that she had never actually read all of it. How must God feel when the

majority of Christians have never read the entire Bible? If you want to get a balanced view of Scripture, and be able to compare each verse with another, you need to read all of Scripture. How about reading through the Bible in a year? 4 chapters a day, and you will do it. Become saturated and full of Scripture – Col 3:16. That way you will be able from memory, to be able to compare Scripture with Scripture.

- 4) Thirdly, look at the context of the passage. Context refers to where the text is situated in time, in circumstances, in biblical history, in the book itself, and in the flow of the author's thought. Start small and work your way out. What do the verses before and after it say? For instance Phil 4:19: "But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus". The context is Paul speaking to a church that was giving to missions. Or how about "where two or three are gathered together in my name – there am I in the midst of them"; the verses before it are speaking about church discipline. So many go wrong here. What is the context? What is the author speaking about when those words were written? Look at the surrounding verse. Then look at the surrounding section or chapter or chapters. What theme is being discussed? For instance, I Corinthians 13, the chapter on love, Paul is discussing spiritual gifts. He is emphasizing how spiritual gifts are meant to be used with love, unselfish and kind, not the way the Corinthians were using them.

Look further: who is the book written to, by whom, and when. I Corinthians 14 on tongues and prophecy was written to a carnal church in Corinth in about 55AD by the apostle Paul. It is an instructional epistle, written to correct the wrong practices in a very disobedient church. The history is a church in transition from the Old to the New, from primarily Jewish to primarily Gentile. This is a baby church, not yet mature. This makes a huge difference then when we interpret those chapters.

Scripture teaches us the principal of context. Especially the book of Hebrews is a prime example. Here the author, speaking to Christian Jews, uses examples from the Old Covenant to explain the new. He shows that the old rituals were patterns, shadows and types of the real and true found in Jesus Christ and heaven itself. He is making distinctions. He knows the context of the verses he quotes from, and fits them correctly into their place in Scripture, time and history, and thus makes the correct interpretation and application. Christians are to make distinctions, which is really all context is, seeing where things fit. Often we do this without noticing. For instance, why don't you sacrifice a lamb for your sins? Because you know that Christ is the lamb of God who died for you. But the law in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy is still there, isn't it? Yes, but we believe Jesus has fulfilled the law, and so we see a distinction. We know what fits where with regard animal sacrifices. We use context to interpret the law now that we are in the New Covenant. So it is with every Scripture. Consider the context: verses, chapter, theme, book, author, audience, date, period in history, period in God's plan. Consider what type of literature is it: poetic, prophetic, historical, instructional. All of that influences context.

- 5) Consider the actual words. II Tim 3:16 says: "All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:" That leads us to believe that the Bible doesn't contain the word of God; it **is** the Word of God. God has not made mistakes in the words He has used. Each one is precious. And to truly understand Scripture and interpret it properly, we must look at the words, the

grammar, the language. Now some balk at this, but Scripture bears me out. Listen to how Paul focused on the exact words of Scripture when interpreting Genesis 22:18 for his Galatian readers in Galatians 3:16: “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.” Clearly Paul believed Scripture was accurate down to the number of the noun: plural or singular. Scripture is teaching us the **grammatical principle**. Look at the words, the language, even the parts of speech. The repetition of phrases or words, the descriptions, the negatives. You don’t have to have an ‘A’ in English to look for if it is a command, a request, a suggestion, a statement. Look out for parts of speech like similes, metaphors: it helps you avoid confusion and again maintain a literal interpretation of Scripture. Look for connectors like *because*, *therefore*, *for*, *wherefore*. Look for the subject in the sentence, the one performing the action; look for the object, the one receiving the action. Good translation of Scripture in your home language will suffice, but where necessary, a deeper study of the original languages can be done. Those who expound the Word should at least have some working knowledge or some tools to assist them in making sure they are accurately reflecting what was written in the Hebrew and the Greek. Sometimes this can be crucial to understanding what a passage means. I Corinthians 12:13 is an example “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether *we be* Jews or Gentiles, whether *we be* bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit.” . Paul is using the aorist tense with regards Spirit baptism – teaching us that it is something that has happened to true believers.

- 6) Use the teachers God has given the Body of Christ. There are those who say, “I don’t consult man’s teaching or wisdom! I am completely Spirit-taught. They even quote I John 2:27, and say, “There – we have the Spirit.” But that Scripture is dealing with the discernment that God gives His children to identify false prophets. If we did not need teachers, then God would not have given the gift of teaching to many believers, nor would he have gifted the body of Christ with evangelists and pastor-teachers. (Eph 4:11) God gave these things for a purpose: for the equipping of the saints, to do the work of the ministry. It is not wise to depend solely on other men to shape your interpretation of Scripture, but nor is it wise at all to ignore what other diligent students of Scripture have written. Consider sound teaching, against the Word of God. Be like the Bereans who searched the Scriptures daily to see whether the things Paul taught were so. We are to look for the fruit of the Spirit in a godly teacher, and then consider his exposition of Scripture against the Word itself. No one bows to another man’s interpretation just because of his position. We respect God-ordained authority, but that never means we must swallow everything that a man says without discernment. Yet consider those who study the Word (I Timothy 5:17). God gave gifts & gifted men, use them to aid you in your interpretation of the Bible. It may be a pastor, a godly Christian, a commentary or a helpful Christian book. But it is always wise to try and wrestle with the meaning of a Scripture, before you go to another man to figure it out. It’s how you learn, and will put on spiritual muscle.

Interpreting Scripture: it’s part of our adventure with God. But to do it in a way which God did not permit is to invite heresies, divisions and false teaching. God has given us the keys to understanding His Word. First be saved, and live

obediently. Second apply the **literal principle**. Next, **compare Scripture with Scripture**. Next, Look at the **context**. Then, consider the **language**. Finally, **consult the gifted men** that God has given the body of Christ.