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HOW DO I INTERPRET THE BIBLE?

BY ROBERT VELARDE 📅 JANUARY 1, 2009



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Unlike some postmodern approaches to written texts that claim there really is no objective meaning to writing throughout the centuries, Christians have interpreted the Bible and continuously drawn out Christianity's essential foundations.

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"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." -2 Timothy 2:15 (NIV) The Bible contains God's messages to us, but if we cannot properly interpret what it says, we're destined to become confused, misinterpret and probably misapply biblical content. As Paul writes to Timothy, we need to "correctly" handle "the word of truth." But how do we go about interpreting the Bible? This article will cover some basic principles of interpretation that will go a long way towards equipping everyone to correctly interpret God's Word.

Understanding the Context

Interpreting the Bible is part of a field of study known as *hermeneutics*. While this sounds complicated, its underlying principles aren't that difficult to grasp and can be applied to any written form of communication. Trying to understand what the text says is, in short, hermeneutics. Applied to the Bible, principles of interpretation are meant to help, not hinder, our ability to make sense of what the Bible records. Another article in this series will address how to handle Bible difficulties, but having a basic foundation in hermeneutics will often help in that area, too. Unlike some postmodern approaches to written texts that claim there really is no objective meaning to writing, throughout the centuries Christians have interpreted the Bible and continuously drawn out Christianity's essential foundations. The Bible, then, does indeed communicate objective truths.

The Importance of Context

Perhaps the greatest principle of biblical interpretation is context. Too often passages or portions of Scripture are quoted, cited or otherwise used to make a point or argue against a point when in reality the entire context of the passage is ignored. Although there are many books in the Bible, it is a cohesive whole wherein God distinctly communicates to us. This means that every passage is part of not only its immediate context, but also a broader context. The words used are important, as is the context of those words. Whenever seeking to rightly interpret the Bible, make sure you understand the immediate context. What is the passage about? What comes before the passage you are examining? What comes after? Along these lines, not only is immediate context important, but so is the broader context. In other words, given a particular passage that speaks to a certain topic, what does the Bible as a whole say on the subject? Don't overlook the immediate context or the broader context. It's also wise to avoid citing passages selectively just to try and bolster a particular point without keeping the context in mind. That's why theologians caution against building elaborate doctrines on obscure or isolated passages, or doing so by only referencing passages that appear to agree with our particular pet doctrine, while ignoring other significant passages that tend to argue against our position.

Draw Out or Read Into?

In addition to understanding the context of Bible passages, it's also crucial to keep two other related principles of interpretation in mind. These are known as *exegesis* and *eisogesis*. Exegesis has to do with reading and interpreting the text by drawing out from it what it is communication. Eisogesis, on the other hand, is when we attempt to read into the text what really isn't there. Exegesis, then, is the right way to approach a passage, as we seek to determine what the author intended, fairly looking at the text to see what it really says. Eisogesis, however, can lead to many errors, especially if we approach a passage with assumptions or presuppositions that really aren't in the text at all. The "golden rule" of interpretation applies here: seek to interpret a text as others would seek to interpret what you have written or said. In other words, just as we would not want someone reading ideas into what we have said or written that are not there at all, we should not seek to do this with biblical writings either.

The Clarity of Scripture

Related to biblical interpretation is a concept known as *perspicuity*. In short, the term means that the Bible is always clear when it comes to communicating truths about the essentials of the faith. There are no great secrets, hidden message or esoteric interpretations that will grant us additional clarity when it comes to the essentials of Christianity. As Jesus said, "I have spoken openly to the world ... I always taught in synagogues or at the temple, where all the Jews come together. I said nothing in secret" (John 18:20). Biblical clarity on the essentials of the faith brings up a related point. It's important that we do not allow interpretational disagreements on secondary matters to cause division among Christians on essential or primary matters. In interpreting the Bible, then, we should ask ourselves if a particular interpretation of a passage will cause harm to an essential doctrine such as the deity of Christ, the resurrection, the atonement and so forth. If so, we'd do well to study the passage in more detail, keep in mind the broader biblical teaching on the subject and consult resources – including knowledgeable people – to determine if our interpretation is misguided. A certain degree of humility is in order as well. Human beings are fallible, but our mistakes of interpretation do not mean that the Bible is flawed or lacking in authority. Usually it is our flawed interpretation that is the problem.

Kinds of Biblical Writing

Another point to keep in mind has to do with the kind of biblical literature we are dealing with when seeking to interpret a passage. The Bible contains a variety of genres or styles of writing ranging from the overtly poetic, such as the Psalms, to prophetic writings, wisdom literature, apocalyptic literature and more. Knowing what kind of passage we are dealing with often helps our interpretation of it. Related to this are questions of interpreting the Bible literally or figuratively. Both are valid approaches so long as they are judiciously employed. For instance, when the biblical writers share evidence of the resurrection of Jesus they do so quite literally. Despite some liberal interpretations arguing that the biblical writers are, for example, merely speaking of Christ's resurrection figuratively or as a symbol of some kind, the biblical text is clear that the resurrection is viewed as literal. Even Paul acknowledged, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). However, there are certain passages clearly intended as figurative. When Christ says he is "the gate" (John 10:7-9), he does not literally mean that he is a physical gate, complete with hinges and handle. Instead, he is using figurative language. When we read in Psalm 91:4 that God will cover us "with his feathers," we are not supposed to literally picture God as having feathers. Again, this is figurative language. Mistaking figurative language for literal language, or vice versa, is very important when it comes to biblical interpretation. Again, context will often help us understand what is truly meant. Correctly handling "the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15) is something we are all called to do. Learning some basic principles of hermeneutics, or biblical interpretation, will help us do so consistently.[1] [1] There are many helpful resources offering introductions to biblical interpretation. These include R.C. Sproul's *Knowing Scripture* (InterVarsity, 1977) and James Sire's *Scripture Twisting* (InterVarsity, 1980). A more advanced work on the topic is *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* by William Klein, Craig Blomberg, et. al. (Thomas Nelson, 2004).

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Robert Velarde is author of "Conversations with C.S. Lewis" (InterVarsity Press), "The Heart of Narnia" (NavPress), and "Inside The Screwtape Letters" (Baker Books). He studied philosophy of religion and apologetics at Denver Seminary and is pursuing graduate studies in philosophy at Southern Evangelical Seminary.

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