**The Eight Rules of Bible Interpretation**

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The scripture is God's Word. But some of the interpretations derived from it are not. There are many cults and Christian groups that claim their interpretations are correct. Too often, however, the interpretations not only differ dramatically but are clearly contradictory. This does not mean that the Bible is a confusing document. Rather, the problem lies in those who interpret and the methods they use.

Because we are sinners, we are incapable of interpreting God's word perfectly all of the time. The body, mind, will, and emotions are affected by sin and make 100% interpretive accuracy impossible. This does not mean that accurate understanding of God's Word is impossible. But it does mean that we need to approach His word with care, humility, and reason. Additionally, we need, as best as can be had, the guidance of the Holy Spirit in interpreting God's Word. After all, the Bible is inspired by God and is addressed to His people. The Holy Spirit helps us to understand what God's word means and how to apply it. 2 Peter 1:20, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation."

Many skeptics have complained that the Bible can't tell us anything of any real value because everyone interprets it differently. The reason why there are so many different interpretations is because people don't follow any sensible method. This naturally leads to inaccurate, inconsistent, illogical and naive interpretations. With so many different interpretations available, how is anyone supposed to know which is the correct one? This article will address this question.

Improper methodology in interpreting Scripture is nothing new, even in the first century. 2 Peter 3:16 tells us that mishandling the Word of God can be very dangerous. Indeed, mishandling the Word of God is a path to destruction. Contrary to the practices of some false teachers in Corinth, the apostle Paul assured his readers that he faithfully handled the Word of God (2 Corinthians 4:2). Paul admonished young Timothy to follow his example (2 Timothy 2:15).

Since the Bible teaches that God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33), how can the many disagreements today between Christians and the proliferation of the cults be explained since all, or nearly all, claim to use the Bible as the basis of their doctrines? Nearly all false doctrines taught today by Christians and cultists alike can be traced to the distortion of the **meaning of Biblical words**. These eight rules are prayerfully offered in the hope that they may help many come to the truth of what God says in His Word.

**Instead of superimposing a meaning on the biblical text, the objective interpreter seeks to discover the author's intended meaning** (the only true meaning). One must recognize that what a passage means is fixed by the author and is not subject to alteration by readers. **"Meaning" is determined by the author; it is discovered by readers.**

Our goal must be exegesis (drawing the meaning out of the text) and not eisogesis (superimposing a meaning onto the text). Only by objective methodology can we **bridge the gap** between our minds and the minds of the biblical writers. Indeed, our method of interpreting Scripture is valid or invalid to the extent that it really unfolds the meaning a statement had for the author and the first hearers or readers.

When two interpretations are claimed for a passage, the one most in agreement with all the facts of the case should be adopted. To lessen the errors that come in our interpretations, we need to look at some basic biblical interpretive methods. I offer the following **principles as guidelines for examining a passage.**

**1) The rule of DEFINITION:** What does the word mean? Any study of Scripture must begin with a study of words. Define your terms and then keep to the terms defined. The interpreter should conscientiously abide by the plain meaning of the words. We must not violate the known usage of a word and invent another for which there is no precedent.

In the last analysis, our theology finds its solid foundation only in the grammatical sense of Scripture. The interpreter should . . . conscientiously abide by the plain meaning of the words. (Principles of Biblical Interpretation, Berkhof, pp. 74?75, Baker Book House, 1960.)

The Bible writers could not coin new words since they would not be understood, and were therefore forced to use those already in use. The content of meaning in these words is not to be determined by each individual expositor . . . to do so would be a method of interpretation [that is] a most vicious thing. (Studies in the Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament, bluest, Kenneth. pp. 30-37, Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1945.)

Consider the Bereans in Acts 17:10-12 who were called "noble" because they searched the Scriptures daily to determine if what Paul taught them was true. This quite often may require using a Hebrew/English or Greek/English lexicon in order to make sure that the sense of the English translation is understood. A couple of good examples of this are the Greek words "*allos*" and "*heteros*". Both are usually translated as "another" in English - yet "*allos*" literally means "another of the same type" and "*heteros*" means "another of a different type." One can also look at the "archaic" definitions in one’s dictionary to get the KJV Bible meaning of words.

**2) The rule of USAGE:** It must be remembered that the Old Testament was written originally by, to and for Jews. The words and idioms must have been intelligible to them - just as the words of Christ when talking to them must have been.

The whole Bible may be regarded as written for "the Jew first." and its words and idioms ought to be rendered according to Hebrew usage. (Synonyms of the Old Testament, Girdlestone. R. B., p. 14..)

The majority of the New Testament likewise was written in a milieu of Greco-Roman (and to a lesser extent Jewish) culture and it is important to not impose our modern usage into our interpretation. It is not worth much to interpret a great many phrases and histories if one's interpretations are shaded by pre-conceived notions and cultural biases, thereby rendering an inaccurate and ineffectual lesson.

Christ then accepted the usage He found existing. He did not alter it. Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew, spoke to and moved among Jews in Palestine.

He spoke first and directly to the Jews, and His words must have been intelligible to them... It was absolutely necessary to view that Life and Teaching in all its surroundings of place. society. popular life.... This would form not only the frame in which to set the picture of the Christ, but the very background of the picture itself. (The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Edersheim, Alfred. V, 1, xii, Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1953.)

In interpreting very many phrases and histories of the New Testament, it is not so much worth what we think of them from notions of our own . . . as in what sense these things were understood by the hearers and lookers on. according to the usual custom and vulgar dialect of the nation. (Bishop Lightfoot, quoted in The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament, xii. Moulton & Mulligan, Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1959.)

**3) The rule of CONTEXT:** The meaning must be gathered from the context. Every word you read must be understood in the light of the words that come before and after it.

Many passages will not be understood at all, or understood incorrectly, without the help afforded by the context. A good example of this is the Mormon practice of using 1 Cor. 8:5b: "...for there be gods many and lords many..." as a "proof text" of their doctrine of polytheism. However, a simple reading of the whole verse in the context of the whole chapter (e.g. where Paul calls these gods "so-called"), plainly demonstrates that Paul is not teaching polytheism.

Seeking the biblical author's intended meaning necessitates interpreting Bible verses in context. Every word in the Bible is part of a verse, and every verse is part of a paragraph, and every paragraph is part of a book, and every book is part of the whole of Scripture. No verse of Scripture can be divorced from the verses around it. Interpreting a verse apart from its context is like trying to analyze a Rembrandt painting by looking at only a single square inch of the painting. The context is absolutely critical to properly interpreting Bible verses.

In interpreting Scripture, there is both an immediate context and a broader context. The immediate context of a verse is the paragraph (or paragraphs) of the biblical book in question. The immediate context should always be consulted in interpreting Bible verses. The broader context is the whole of Scripture. The entire Holy Scripture is the context and guide for understanding the particular passages of Scripture.

We must keep in mind that **the interpretation of a specific passage must not contradict the total teaching of Scripture on a point. Individual verses do not exist as isolated fragments, but as parts of a whole.** The exposition of these verses, therefore, must involve exhibiting them in right relation both to the whole and to each other. Scripture interprets Scripture.

**4) The rule of HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:** The interpreter must have some awareness of the life and society of the times in which the Scripture was written. The spiritual principle will be timeless but often can't be properly appreciated without some knowledge of the background.

If the interpreter can have in his mind what the writer had in his mind when he wrote - without adding any excess baggage from the interpreter's own culture or society - then the true thought of the Scripture can be captured resulting in an accurate interpretation.

Historical considerations are especially important in properly interpreting the Word of God. The Christian faith is based on historical fact. Indeed. Christianity rests on the foundation of the historical Jesus whose earthly life represents God's full and objective self-communication to humankind (John 1:18). Jesus was seen and heard by human beings as God's ultimate revelation (1 John 1:1-3).

This is why He could claim "If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also" (John 14:7).

History, in two ways, plays a very large part in Bible interpretation, yet many today seem to forget it. First of all, to truly understand the Bible, you must have at least some familiarity with the Jewish language, beliefs, and practices at the time of the biblical writing. Otherwise many terms, phrases, and sayings in the Scriptures will make little to no sense to us today. Even for most of the New Testament writings, we must know and understand what was happening in the first century when they were written. What problems faced the Apostles in their time to make them say some of the things they did?

The Bible, in most cases, gives us only a limited amount of insight and background into the surrounding problems at the time. When Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthians, for instance, the Corinthian people to whom it was addressed knew the surrounding problems of the time, as well as the customs, laws, and practices of that era. Thus, Paul may not have dwelled on, or even mentioned them in his letters. This would leave us twentieth-century readers puzzled and guessing if we just read the letter at face value, as many attempt to do.

To understand the Corinthian Epistle, we must "become," as it were, a first century Corinthian. We must understand their practices, their terminology, the social issues of the time, etc. We must also look to the original Bible text languages of the time (Greek and Hebrew) as they were understood, meant and intended at the time, to those being addressed. We cannot take our modern language understanding and try to force first-century Greek into it.

So! How does a man have the time or know how to study all of this history, language, etc. in order to properly interpret the Scriptures? It would take many hours a day, and much learning to do, wouldn't it? True, and that is why God has called and set aside certain men to the ministry of leading His flock into truth. Elders are called to spend their time in much prayer and studying to accomplish this deed, and then bring the fruit of their labor to their flock (1 Tim.3:2,6; 5:17).

**5) The rule of LOGIC:** Interpretation is merely logical reasoning. When interpreting Scripture, the use of reason is everywhere to be assumed. Does the interpretation make sense? The Bible was given to us in the form of human language and therefore appeals to human reason - it invites investigation. It is to be interpreted as we would any other volume: applying the laws of language and grammatical analysis.

The use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture is everywhere to be assumed. The Bible comes to us in the forms of human language, and appeals to our reason . . . it invites investigation. and it is to be interpreted as we interpret any other volume by a rigid application of the same laws of language, and the same grammatical analysis. (Biblical Hermeneutics, Terry, M. S., p. 25. 1895.)

What is the control we use to weed out false theological speculation? Certainly the control is logic and evidence . . . interpreters who have not had the sharpening experience of logic . . . may have improper notions of implication and evidence.

Too frequently such a person uses a basis of appeal that is a notorious violation of the laws of logic and evidence. (Protestant Biblical Interpretation, Ramm, Bernard. pp. 151153, W. A. Wilde Co., 1956.)

It is one of the most firmly established principles of law in England and in America that "a law means exactly what it says, and is to be interpreted and enforced exactly as it reads." This is just as good a principle for interpreting the Bible as for interpreting law. (The Importance and Value of Proper Bible Study, Torrey. R. A., pp. 67?70, Moody Press, 1921.)

Charles G. Finney, lawyer and theologian, is widely considered the greatest theologian and most successful revivalist since apostolic times. He was often in sharp conflict with the theologians of his day because they violated these rules of interpretation. Finney said he interpreted a Bible passage as he "would have understood the same or like passage in a law book" (Autobiography, pp. 42-43). Finney stressed the need for definition and logic in theology and said the Bible must be understood on "fair principles of interpretation such as would be admitted in a court of justice" (Systematic Theology. Preface, ix).

**6) The rule of INFERENCE:** An inference is a fact reasonably implied from another fact. It is a logical consequence. It derives a conclusion from a given fact or premise. It is the deduction of one proposition from another proposition. Such inferential facts or propositions are sufficiently binding when their truth is established by competent and satisfactory evidence.

Competent evidence means such evidence as the nature of the thing to be proved admits. Satisfactory evidence means that amount of proof that would ordinarily satisfy an unprejudiced mind beyond a reasonable doubt. Jesus used this rule when he proved the resurrection of the dead to the unbelieving Sadducees in Matthew 22:23-33.

We must not violate the known usage of a word and invent another for which there is no precedent. (The Greek New Testament for English Readers, Alford, Dean, p. 1098, Moody Press.)

For example, the professional ability of lawyers in arguing a question of law, and the judges in deciding it, is thus chiefly occupied with a critical study of previous cases in order to determine whether the previous cases really support some alleged doctrine. (Introduction to the Study of Law, p. 40, Woodruff, E. H., 1898.) The understanding of a word or phrase can be studied and understood in the same way. To understand the intent of the author it is important to discover how the author is using the same word or phrase in other sections of his writings. As the two are compared the true meaning intended by the author will be revealed.

**7) The rule of GENRE JUDGMENT:** A "literal" approach to Scripture recognizes that the Bible contains a variety of literary genres, each of which has certain peculiar characteristics that must be recognized in order to interpret the text properly.

The Old testament: The first 5 books of the Bible are called the Pentateuch, which is Hebrew for the number 5 (Genesis - Deuteronomy). The next 5 books are historical books (Joshua - 2 Samuel). The next 12 books are poetic (1 Kings - Solomon). The next 5 books are major prophets (Isaiah - Daniel). The next 12 books are minor prophets (Hosea - Malachi).

The New Testament: The first 4 books are the gospels (Matthew - John). The next one is Historic (Acts). The next 14 books are the epistles (Romans - Hebrews), which are letters addressing specific problems. The next 7 books are general epistles (James - Jude). And the last book is prophetic (Revelation).

Obviously, an incorrect genre judgment will lead one far astray in interpreting Scripture. A parable should not be treated as history, nor should poetry or prophesy (both of which contain many symbols) be treated as straightforward narrative. The wise interpreter allows his knowledge of genres to control how he approaches each individual biblical text. In this way, he can accurately determine what the biblical author was intending to communicate to the reader.

Now, even though the Bible contains a variety of literary genres and many figures of speech, the biblical authors most often employed literal statements to convey their ideas. Where they use a literal means to express their ideas, the Bible expositor must employ a corresponding means to explain these ideas - namely, a literal approach.

A literal method of interpreting Scripture gives to each word in the text the same basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary usage - whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking. Without such a method, communication between God and man is impossible.

**8) The rule of dependence upon the HOLY SPIRIT:** Scripture tells us that we are to rely on the Holy Spirit's illumination to gain insights into the meaning and application of Scripture (John 16:12-15, 1 Corinthians 2:9-11). It is the Holy Spirit's work to throw light upon the Word of God so that the believer can assent to the meaning intended and act on it. The Holy Spirit, as the "Spirit of truth" (John 16:13), guides us so that "we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Corinthians 2:12). This is quite logical: full comprehension of the Word of God is impossible without prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God, for He who inspired the Word (2 Peter 1:21) is also its supreme interpreter.

Illumination is necessary because man's mind has been darkened through sin (Rom.1:21), preventing him from properly understanding God's Word. Human beings cannot understand God's Word apart from God's divine power (Eph.4:18). This aspect of the Holy Spirit's ministry operates within the sphere of man's rational capacity, which God Himself gave man (Gen.2-3). Illumination comes to the 'minds' of God's people - not to some nonrational faculty like our 'emotions' or our 'feelings'.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit in interpretation does not mean interpreters can ignore common sense and logic. Since the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). He does not teach concepts that fail to meet the tests of truth. In other words, **"the Holy Spirit doesn’t guide into interpretations that contradict each other or fail to have logical, internal consistency."**

It must also be kept in mind that the function of the Holy Spirit is not to communicate to the minds of people any doctrine or meaning of Scripture that is not contained already in Scripture itself. The Holy Spirit makes men "wise up to what is written, not beyond it." Indeed, "the function of the Spirit is not to communicate new truth or to instruct in matters unknown, but to **illuminate what is revealed in Scripture**."

**The Example of Jesus Christ**

Jesus consistently interpreted the Old Testament quite literally, including the Creation account of Adam and Eve (Matthew 13:35; 25:34, Mark 10:6), Noah's Ark and the flood (Matthew 24:38-39; Luke 17:26-27), Jonah and the great fish (Matthew 12:39-41), Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15), and the account of Lot and his wife (Luke 17:28-29).

Jesus affirmed the Bible's divine inspiration (Matthew 22:43), its indestructibility (Matthew 5:17-18), its infallibility (John 10:35), its final authority (Matthew 4:4,7,10), its historicity (Matthew 12:40; 24:37), its factual inerrancy (Matthew 22:29-32), and its spiritual clarity (Luke 24:25). Moreover, He emphasized the importance of each word of Scripture (Luke 16:17). Indeed, He sometimes based His argumentation on a single expression of the biblical text (Matthew 22:32,43-45; John 10:34).

**Is the Bible Alone Sufficient?**

That the average man can understand Scripture without having to rely upon a church for the "authoritative teaching", is evident in the fact that Jesus taught openly and with clarity, and expected His followers to each understand His meaning. According to Jesus, those who heard Him would be able to clearly enunciate what He had openly communicated (John 18:20-21). There were no confusing or obscure meanings in His words that required an "authoritative interpretation" by a church.

2 Timothy 3:15 points to the complete sufficiency of Scripture in the life of a believer, and indicates that the Scriptures alone are sufficient to provide the necessary wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ. The Scriptures alone are the source of spiritual knowledge. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that all Scripture is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

This verse does not say that Scripture as seen through the lens of a Church is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof," and so forth. It’s Scripture that does these things, and the reason Scripture can do these things is that all Scripture is **inspired by God** (v. 16).

Scripture alone makes a man complete, capable, and proficient. Scripture furnishes all that one must know to be saved and to grow in grace. Jesus said His words lead to eternal life (John 6:63). But for us to receive eternal life through His words, they must be taken as He intended them to be taken. A cultic reinterpretation of Scripture that yields another Jesus and another gospel (2 Corinthians 11:3-4; Galatians 1:6-9) will yield only eternal death (Revelation 20:11-15).

**Correctly Handling the Word of Truth**

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*Solomon said:*
A wise man will hear, and will increase learning . . . to understand a proverb, and the interpretation. (Proverbs 1:5-6)

*Apostle Paul said:*
Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.
(2 Timothy 2:15)

**This document summarizes the rules so the reader can see them together in one place. These rules are the center of all grammatical interpretation. They were developed by specialists in the "science of meaning" over the past 2500 years, from Socrates to the present day. They apply equally to legislative or theological language. Critical analysis is impossible without them. Interpretive scholarship accepts them.**

Jesus and the apostles used these rules, and also many prominent fathers of the early church, and also the master theologians of the Middle Ages. to Luther. Wesley, and Calvin, although some were not consistent in their use of them.

When the Emperors Constantine and Justinian tried to settle the doctrinal disputes of their time, they learned that the "word wars" of the theologians were exceedingly difficult wars to deal with because each word warrior was determined to make the words mean what he wanted them to mean.

This is true of the twisted mass of doctrinal confusion in Christendom today. All false doctrines, or nearly all, are distortions of biblical words. "The Council of Trent avoided a clear definition of terms" (Seeberg).

"God is not the author of confusion" (I Cor. 14: 33). Who then is the author of these many centuries of confusion about the divorce texts? Who are the authors of all the doctrinal confusion about other texts?

The Bible is a legal document, and throughout the Bible there is frequent use of legal terms and illustrations, and much importance is attached to these legal ideas. The word Testament is a legal term, and hundreds of times God spoke of His commandments as "laws." Why then should our interpretation be objected to as "legalistic" when the biblical writers used the contemporary legal language of the Mediterranean world?

The Apostle Peter said, "We have also a more sure word of prophecy. . . " and, that no Scripture "is of any private [personal] interpretation" (II Pet. 1:1920). We cannot have a sure word about the meaning of Scripture or anything unless we have a sure method to interpret the words. Always remember that Satan deceived Eve with words.

When two interpretations are claimed for a Scripture, the construction most in agreement with all the facts of the case should be adopted. When all the facts of an interpretation are in agreement they sound together in harmony, like notes in a chord.

Biblical interpretation is more than knowing a set of rules, but it cannot be done without the rules. Learn the rules, and rightly apply them, and you can disregard what Jerome, the learned Latin father of the Middle Ages, said: "What fools these people be' Everybody thinks he can interpret the Bible."