



**Study guide for  
INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE**

## 10 Foundational Principles of Hermeneutics.

1. "The Bible is to be read like any other book."

"The Bible is uniquely inspired and infallible, and this puts it in a class by itself. But, for matters of interpretation, the Bible does not take on some special magic that changes basic literary patterns of interpretation." (63)<sup>1</sup>

"But if the Bible is to be interpreted like any other book, what about prayer? Shouldn't we seek assistance of God the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Book? Isn't divine illumination promised to this book in a way that differs from other books?" (64)

2. "The Bible should be read existentially."

"I do not mean that we should use the modern 'existential' method of interpreting Scripture whereby the word of Scripture are taken out of their historical context for subjective meaning (for example, as Rudolf Bultmann does)." (65)

"What I mean is that as we read the Bible, we ought to get passionately and personally involved in what we read. I advocate this not only for the purpose of personal application of the text but for understanding as well." (66)

3. "Historical narratives are to be interpreted by the didactic."

"Didactic literature is literature that means to teach or to instruct. Much of Paul's writing is didactic in character... (for example) the Gospels record what Jesus did and the Epistles interpret the significance of what He did. Such a description is an oversimplification in that the Gospels often teach and interpret as they are giving narration. But, it is true that the emphasis in the gospels is found in the record of events, while the Epistles are more concerned with interpreting the significance of those events in terms of doctrine, exhortation, and application." (68)

4. "The implicit is to be interpreted by the explicit."

"In the business of language, we make distinctions between that which is implicit and that which is explicit. Often, the difference is a matter of degree and the distinction can be muddled. But, usually we can determine the difference between what is actually said and what is left unsaid, though implied. I am convinced that if this one rule were consistently followed by Christian communities, the vast majority of doctrinal differences that divide us would be resolved." (page, 75)

5. "Determine carefully the meaning of words."

"Whatever else the bible is, it is a book which communicates information verbally. That means that it is filled with words. Thoughts are expressed through the relationship of those words. Each

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<sup>1</sup> From Knowing Scripture, by R. C. Sproul (InterVarsity Press). Page number for all Quotes in parentheses after quote.

individual word contributes something to the whole of the content expressed. The better we understand the individual words used in biblical statement, the better we will be able to understand the total message of Scripture.” (page 79)

“Words with multiple meanings. There are scores of words in the bible that have multiple meanings. Only the context can determine the particular meaning of a word. For example, the Bible speaks frequently of the will of God There are at least six different ways that this word is used” (examples follow). (page 82)

On this important issue, see Knowing Scripture at the end of this article.

6. “Note the presence of parallelisms in the Bible.”

“One of the fascinating characteristics of Hebrew literature is its use of parallelism. Parallelism in ancient Near Eastern languages is common and relatively easy to recognize. The ability to recognize it when it occurs will greatly aid the reader in understanding the text.” (85)

“There are three basic types of parallelism: synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic.” (85)

7. “Note the difference between Proverb and Law.”

“A common mistake in Biblical interpretation and application is to give a proverbial saying the weight or force of a moral absolute. Proverbs are catchy little couplets designed to express practical truisms. They reflect principles of wisdom for godly living. They do not reflect moral laws that are to be applied absolutely to every conceivable life situation.” (89)

8. “Observe the difference between the Spirit and the Letter of the Law.”

“We all know the reputation of the Pharisees in the New testament who were quite scrupulous about keeping the letter of the law while violating the spirit constantly.” (90)

“There were a variety of types of legalist in the New Testament. The first and most famous was the type that legislated rules and regulations beyond what God had commanded. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for making the tradition of the rabbis as authoritative as the Law of Moses.... Another way the law is distorted is by trying to obey the spirit of the law but ignoring the letter. Letter and spirit are inseparably related. The legalists destroy the spirit and the antinomian destroys the letter.” (91)

9. “Be careful with Parables”

“People usually enjoy sermons that are based on parables... Yet from the viewpoint of the New testament scholar, the parables present unique difficulties in interpretation.” (94)

“(One problem) is the original intent of the parable... whether (Jesus) used parables to elucidate His teaching or to obscure it.” (91)

10. "Be careful with predictive prophecy."

"Handling predictive prophecy from the New Testament and the Old is one of the most abused forms of biblical interpretation. Interpretations range from the skeptical, naturalistic method which virtually eliminates predictive prophecy to the wild, bizarre method that sees in every contemporary event a 'clear ' fulfillment of a biblical prophecy." (97)

"If we examine how the New Testament treats Old Testament prophecy (an example of Scripture interpreting Scripture), we discover that in some cases an appeal is made to fulfillment of the letter (such as the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem) and fulfillment in a broader scope (such as the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy of the return of Elijah." (97)

## More Nuggets of Wisdom on Biblical interpretation.

1. Historic Orthodox beliefs and systematic theologies are a one good test of one's interpretation.

"There is nothing new under the sun," wrote the Preacher of Ecclesiastes. "Ortho" means "straight, right, true." "Doxa" is simply doctrine or teaching. So, orthodox means "true teaching." In this case, it is true teaching that has occurred throughout church history. Whenever you hear some teaching that "does not quite sound right," that is, consistent with what one has heard in the church, red flags should go up in your mind. You should ask yourself or the person giving such teaching, "What has the church taught consistently and specifically throughout history" on this subject? Of course, this method is fraught with inconsistencies. However, the comparison of present teaching with that of the past is useful.

- 1) All Christians of all ages have the mind of Christ as the goal of their intellectual formation. (Epistemic virtues)
- 2) The study of the history of the Church interpretation of a text, particularly their doctrines, is a good exercise for us independent-minded moderns, who think we have "New ideas".
- 3) There is a consistency in historical orthodoxy that might be surprising to some Christians, when they study the central teachings of the Church by her best theologians, who are consistent over the centuries.

For example, there are The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. And, while the Westminster Confession with its Larger and Shorter Catechisms are not adopted by the majority of churches today, it grew out one of the most scholarly and transforming periods of the Church's history for the English-speaking world.

2. "Is" is not an equals sign.

A common verse quoted among Christians is, "God is love" (I John 4:8, 16). While God is certainly the highest and best meaning of love, His attributes and His Person are far greater than one word. He is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, just, merciful, jealous, unchanging, truth, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, etc. (just to name a few characteristics and names of God found in the Bible).

"Is" and "are" may be followed by a noun or an adjective. Rarely, is what follows these verbs equivalent to the subject of the sentence.

3. A text without a context is a pretext, that is, the meaning of a text is determined by its context.

- A) To understand what a verse means, it must be read and examined in the context of the passage in which it appears. For example, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The context is clearly about a person's being regenerated ("born again" or "born-from-above) and being translated into the Kingdom of God. It is also clear that "The wind blows wherever it pleases," meaning that the Spirit of God chooses those that become regenerated.

Another example is that of "where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20). That passage is in the context of church

discipline, not the special presence of God among more than one believer gathered for prayer. Indeed, if this passage were about community prayer, what would one do with "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16).

B) Ultimately, the context of any verse is the entire Bible. The context of book, chapter, and verse is not always sufficient to determine the meaning of a verse. This application requires a considerable knowledge of the Bible or a comprehensive cross-reference text. But, then, if every Christian read through the Bible periodically, would not an association of verses be more likely to be recognized? This application also requires a systematic theology, so that all statements can be fitted into the whole. This hermeneutic would also be one meaning of "Scripture is the best interpreter of Scripture."

4. The Bible -- for many words -- has its own definitions that would not be found in dictionaries written by non-Christians (and too often those written by Christians).

A good illustration of this hermeneutic is "love." Biblical love includes such statements, as "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15), "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10), and "For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:14). A definition of love must include those instructions.

A short definition that might be helpful is, "Love is an action that is aimed at the highest Biblical good of the one loved."

5. The Bible must be read with a consciousness of who and what God is... His attributes.

"Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." This is the first sentence of John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion. Too many Christians do not really know God.

Consider, "God is love" (I John 4:8). One cannot understand the love of God without understanding the God of the Law (commandments, precepts, statutes, etc. of Psalm 119), for Christ's sacrificial death was efficacious because He had fulfilled the law, in every detail. Further, an understanding of the depth and breadth of His sacrifice is greatly lessened without an understanding of God's requirement that His law be fulfilled.

God is knowledge, wisdom, power, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent (neither can exist without the other), Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, creator of a universe governed by laws, sustainer, Word, law-giver, etc., etc. Who he is inform what he does.

6. As one reads the Bible, he must develop some systematic approach that fits the whole together.

An example is the *ordo salutis* or order of salvation in this sequence: effectual calling, regeneration, faith and repentance, adoption, justification, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. (How ever you order it!)

Of course, such a systematic approach challenges the concept of "no creed but the Bible" or "no creed but Christ." But, these statements are creeds in themselves, as they are statements about

Scripture and Christ which are not quotes of Scripture. Indeed concerning Christ, there are many claims to whom Christ is. For those who would argue that system in theology, ethics, or any other area of knowledge is not necessary are challenged to "prove the virtue of disjointed truths," to quote from Gordon Clark in his Introduction to Christian Philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

7. The Bible is not to be read magically.

This principle primarily has to do with those who "lucky-dip." That is, they look for an answer to a problem by opening the Bible blindly, run their finger down a page, and then look to see what it says to apply to their lives. This approach is not different that the person who claims that "God" or the "Holy Spirit" told me to do such and such. This claim is the same as adding to the Scriptures which is clearly condemned (Revelation 22:18-19).

8. The process of formal, logical reasoning from true propositions of Scripture reveals conclusions that are equivalent to propositions of Scripture.

The Trinity is one example. No orthodox, Bible-believing Christian would deny "Trinity," as being fully Biblical and equivalent to Scripture. The phrase "mere human logic" is inaccurate and shows ignorance of the syllogisms of formal logic and the truth that it yields when based upon true propositions. See the hyperlink in this paragraph.

9. "It must forever be kept in mind that a theologian's (any person's) epistemology controls his interpretation of the Bible." (Gordon Clark, The Incarnation, page 46.)

For example, "all truth is God's truth" is used by some to equate inductive (empirical) conclusions with revelational truth. The posit of "theistic evolution" is one illustration.

Another example is the Roman Catholic acceptance of the equal authorities of Scripture, the magisterium, tradition, and the Pope speaking ex cathedra (officially from his position as head of the church).

10. Induction can be uniquely applied to Scripture.

In the natural world, no investigative (empirical) method can examine every particular in its universe. For example, every dog cannot be examined, and neither can every star. Thus, conclusions are drawn from an examination of a limited number of examples. Such induction is never truth because of this limited study. However, the inductive method as applied to Scripture can determine truth because every example of a particular can be examined in Scripture—a finite book or a limited "field" of investigation. For example, every occurrence of the word "love" can be examined in its context and a definition or definitions can be derived that is (are) a true representation of the whole. (As an aside, "love" ought to be investigated in this way. I have never found where that has been done. Thus, "love" is one of the most hackneyed and misused Biblical words in the modern world.)

This method is not that of Bacon hermeneutics (The philosopher not the delectable breakfast food) which ignores all past and present theology and interpretation. This method seeks to be consistent with true systematic theology and the Scripture together.

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<sup>2</sup> for more See In Defense of Systematic Theology by Charles Hodge.

## 12. Words have more than one definition in Scripture.

In English everyone recognizes that words have more than one definition. A dog may be a dog or it may be a bad result or a bad person. But, it seems that Christians want every appearance of a word in the Bible to mean the same thing. Perhaps, the most egregious error is that of "law." One theologian has estimated that "law" has 12 or more meanings in the New Testament alone. Sometimes it means the whole Bible; another time it means the Torah; another time it simply means instruction. Particular care must be taken in Romans. For example, in the same sentence in Romans 8:2, law is used as the principle of life and also as its opposite, the principle of death!

Of greatest concern is the antipathy of law and grace. Christians say, "We are under grace. The law has no application for us any longer." However, Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Commandments are law; commandments are instruction; the whole Bible is law; the whole Bible is instruction. Now, certain ceremonial and communal laws of the Old Testament no longer apply, but someone has estimated that there are 800-1200 "commands" (instructions) in the New Testament alone. And, if a person is a newborn, as in "born-again," he is going to need instruction (laws) for him to know how to behave. Behavior is inescapably tied to instruction... to law. We are "under grace," but we inevitably need law to give direction to our actions.

## 13. "All" does not ALLways mean "all."

Yes, you see correctly, "all." A pesky word that has wreaked havoc in Biblical theology. Sometimes, "all" does not mean all. We use it in a limited way in everyday conversation. "All" people everywhere watched the Super Bowl. Well, not "all" even have TVs or neighbors with TVs. Caesar Augustus decreed that "all" the world should be taxed—were the American Indians or Indian Indians taxed? I Timothy 2:4 says that God desires that "all" men should be saved—is universalism then inescapable? Could Paul mean only the elect? Dear readers, that "all" is not "all" is basic language usage, but what havoc has been wrought by trying to make all every particular of a class in the universe

# Interpreting Scripture: learning to fly

## A Short self-study guide

### Introduction:

Flying a plane is a lot like interpreting the Bible.  
Consider being a pilot and flying a plane.  
What are steps before flying?

### 1. Intro: at the gate

*Get the Bible in play.*

2 Tim. 3:14-17.

[What observations about the Bible are in the text?]

[Do they give you confidence in scripture?]

### 2. Approach: taxiing to/down the runway

*Handle the Bible with humble faith.*

A. Faith [Study should be Faith seeking understanding]

[What are some presuppositions we should bring to the text?]

B. Humility. [intellectuals honesty - I think I am right BUT I may be wrong]

### 3. Practices: take-off

*3 contact points to ensure the Bible is interpreted properly.*

A. What is the original author's intended meaning?

1. Where does meaning come from?

2. How can I determine an author's meaning?

a. Examine the words and grammar of the passage

b. Examine the literary context: what happens before and after?

c. Examine the historical context: when and where did this take place? What was happening historically?

## B. What is the genre?

1. Genre is a type or style of literature
2. Genres in the Bible [write in definitions, look online, or see reference section].
  - a. Poetry
  - b. Narratives
  - c. Parables
  - d. Letters
  - e. Prophecy
  - f. Proverbs
  - g. Lamentations
  - h. Laws

## C. Where is Christ?

1. Scripture tells a 4 part story
  - a. Creation
  - b. Fall
  - c. Redemption
  - d. New Creation
2. Scripture converges on the person and work of Christ
  - a. Luke 24:44 Then [Jesus] said to [his disciples], "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."
  - b. The overall storyline of the Bible is: *God sends His Son into the world to redeem sinners*

### 3. Finding Christ

- a. How does this passage connect to the overall storyline of the Bible?
- b. How does this passage reveal man's need for a Savior?
- c. How does this passage reveal God's disposition to provide a Savior?
- d. How does this passage predict, point to, or reflect on Jesus Christ?

### 4. Problems: avoiding crash landings [look up and define in your own words]

- A. Allegorizing
- B. Moralizing
- C. Atomizing [interpreting a verse in itself without context]
- D. Subjectivizing [importing meaning by feeling or personal bias]

### 5. Case studies

- A. Proverbs 22:6 Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it. [Hint: consider what the genre excludes]
- B. 2 Corinthians 5:7 for we walk by faith, not by sight. [read chapter context]
- C. Matthew 22:39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
- D. Consider I overheard this at a small group, "I was reading Esther this week and I really see how Esther is like the Holy Spirit, the one God wants to take up residence in my soul and defeat the evil Haman." [please Don't think that is interp. text]
- E. Consider if you read this in an old Journal or Christian book: "just as one of David's mighty men, Benaah, went into a pit on a snowy day and slew a lion, so the Lord wants you to fight against the devil's attacks." [Sometimes application can be too direct to be right]
- F. David & Goliath
  - a. Authorial intent? [look for Author's statement or hints in larger context]
  - b. Genre?
  - c. Christ?

G. Ps. 119

- a. Authorial intent?
- b. Genre?
- c. Christ?

## **6. References For future travel**

Understanding the how to read the Bible

- *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth (4th ed.)* by Fee and Stuart
- *Knowing Scripture* by RC Sproul

Understanding the storyline of the Bible

- *God's Big Picture* by Vaughan Roberts
- *According to Plan* by Graeme Goldsworthy

Understanding authorial intent

- *Getting the Message* by Daniel Doriani (chapters 1-4)
- *For the Love of God*, by D.A. Carson
- *Knowing Scripture* by RC Sproul

Understanding genres

- *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible* by Robert Stein
- *Words of Delight* by Leland Ryken