

**REVELATION**



**INSPIRATION**



**ANIMATION**



**COLLECTION**



**TRANSLATION**



**ILLUMINATION**



**INTERPRETATION**

**1**

**APPLICATION**



**COMMUNICATION**

## THE WRITTEN WORD

Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, October 25, 2009

# Knowing What The Bible Really Says

*“Interpretation” is the first step in the process of taking the revealed word that God has provided to us, and making personal use of it in the way that He wants it best to be used in our lives.*

Much of what we have learned so far in our study can rightly be called the “theory” of God’s word. It laid the necessary groundwork for our understanding of what the Bible is. Now comes the “practice”--in which we put this thing called the Bible to use in our lives. This practical aspect of our handling of God’s word is understood to be in three successive stages: (1) Interpretation, (2) Application, and (3) Communication. And the first step is absolutely essential. We cannot rightly apply God’s word to our own lives, nor can we faithfully communicate God’s word to others, unless we have first taken the time to accurately interpreted its meaning.

Ordinarily, Bible colleges and seminaries devote several semesters of study to the subject of Bible interpretation. But in this lesson, we’ll just lay out some basic presuppositions, principles and practices that you can begin putting to use right away.

### I. BASIC PRESUPPOSITIONS OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION.

- A. This first subject is vital. We handle the Bible the way we do because of what we believe it is. Everything that we have considered so far in our study of the nature and preservation of the Bible, then, gives us the basic presuppositions we should bring with us in the task of interpretation.
- B. This means that . . .
  1. Because we believe that it is a revelation from God, we do not accept only parts of it, but consider the whole of it in our interpretive work (Acts 20:27). We don’t pick and choose what’s important. God does.
  2. Because we believe it is inspired (‘God-breathed’), we believe that its authority thus extends to every word (2 Timothy 2:15); and that we never add to or subtract from the text of Scripture (Revelation 22:18-19) but treat it with the utmost respect and reverence (Isaiah 66:2).
  3. Because we believe it to be animate (that is, that God actually stands behind every word of Scripture, and that it is ‘living’ in its impact upon us), we don’t study it in order to master it. Rather, we study it in order to let it master us (1Thessalonians 2:13).
  4. Because we recognize that the Bible we have today is the product of many years of God’s providential work through human efforts of collection and translation, we trust it as protected by God to give a reliable representation of the texts of the the original documents of Scripture, and to be the message God wants His people to hear (John 16:13-15).
  5. Because we believe that it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to illumine Scripture to the understanding of fallen man, we see the study of the Bible as a spiritual work that must be done with complete dependency upon His enabling power (1 Corinthians 2:14-15).

### II. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION.

- A. The Principle of Perspicuity. When something is “perspicuous”, it means that it is clearly seen and easily understood. It’s safe to assume God meant for His word to be understood and accurately obeyed. And so, this principle means that the most accurate interpretation is likely to be the one that makes the most sense. This is summed up well in what Dr. David Cooper once wrote: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek

no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”<sup>1</sup>

- B. The Principle of The Analogy of Scripture. When something is said to be ‘analogous’ of something else, it means that it corresponds to it in some way. We can safely assume that the whole Bible is inspired by one God; and that we can therefore trust Scripture to interpret itself. This means that if a particular passage on a particular subject seems obscure, we should interpret it on the basis of another passage of Scripture on the same subject that is clearer. It would also mean that any interpretation of one passage of Scripture that puts it in clear contradiction to another is not a correct interpretation. (Remember, by the way--there are *no* contradictions in the Bible! Whenever someone boasts to have found one, the apparent problem is almost always solved by simply showing how the different elements “complement” one another rather than “conflict” with one another.)
- C. The Principle of the Progressive Revelation. Simply stated, this principle recognizes that God’s revelation was not given all at once in Scripture, but was revealed “progressively” over time and in different stages (see Hebrews 1:1-2). What was merely ‘hinted at’ in early portions of God’s revelation has been more clearly revealed in later times (see 1 Peter 1:10-12). We should be careful not to ‘read’ meaning into an early text of Scripture that would only have been clearly understood in a later period of God’s revelation. (For example, the Old Testament Jewish saints would not have understood the relationship of the New Testament Gentiles to the covenant promises of God; because this was a ‘mystery’ later revealed. See Ephesians 3:3-6; Colossians 1:24-27.)

### III. BASIC STUDY PRACTICES FOR GOOD INTERPRETATION.

- A. Always pray before studying Scripture. Ask for help from the Author.
- B. Study inductively. Strive to understand all the parts in the context of the whole before you try to read the whole into the parts. (It helps to see the Bible as a tree: First, examine the trunk and the roots. Then, examine the individual branches. Then, shake every twig. Then, finally, check under every leaf. When you do this faithfully, each leaf is understood in the context of the whole tree, rather than the whole tree through just one leaf.)
- C. Read all the way through the Bible regularly. You’ll find that those portions of Scripture which seem obscure will become more clear over time; because you will grow to see how they fit in with the flow of Scripture.
- D. Read passages repeatedly. The great Bible teacher G. Campbell Morgan would not preach from a book of the Bible until he had read it fifty times.
- E. When you don’t understand something, look it up. It’s tempting to pass this step by, because it usually takes hard work. But each time you resist the temptation, and do the hard work of using a dictionary or a map, you “build a bridge” in your understanding that more truth can cross over later.
- F. Look for key themes. John’s purpose for writing his Gospel is clearly stated in John 20:31. We understand a book of the Bible best when we understand what the human author was seeking to accomplish through it.
- G. Meditate on Scripture. This is what Psalm 1:1-2 teaches us to do. To ‘meditate’ on Scripture means to bring it to mind again and again until it sinks deeply into our thinking. Don’t hurry from one passage to another. Chew a piece of God’s word for a while and give it time to be digested.

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<sup>1</sup>Cited in *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee* (Pasadena, CA: Through the Bible Radio, 1981), Vol. 1, p. xvii.