

General Principles of Bible Interpretation

1. Always work from the assumption that the Bible is completely inspired (God-breathed); inerrant (without error); infallible (cannot fail); and, authoritative (having authority over our lives). The first verse of the Bible says “*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.*” The position of the Bible is that God exists, and He is the Creator of all (time, space, matter) – thus having authority over all creation. Once the first verse of the Bible is accepted, the trusting the rest of the Bible should be without difficulty. No author ever tried to defend their existence, the mere fact that they are writing is evidence of that. God approaches His Word the same way, He starts the Bible assuming readers understand His existence. However, He later points to evidence of His existence that is clear to all His creation from what He made and what He put in each ones conscience (Rom. 1:19, 20).
2. Always remember that the Bible for the most part will interpret itself; *the* best interpreter of scripture is scripture itself. The truth of this principle enables us to approach the Bible literally, historically, and grammatically.
 - a. **Literally** = this is plain meaning, i.e., the people receiving the original communication would understand the message in a normal way (nothing hidden or mysterious). The literal (or normal) method is communication that involves the use of symbols, figurative, analogies etc., to express a particular point – no different than what we would expect in any written document today. All biblical writers utilized this method of communication, even the poetic sections are still addressing *literal* issues, not allegorical (see note on the problem with the allegorical method below) ones.
 - b. **Historically** = the Bible was originally given in a historical context and knowing this is essential to understanding the message within that given context. The background and situation are necessary to proper context; otherwise, the message is unrelated to a historical context, and this can easily result in misunderstanding. Without this context, the text is also isolated from the rest of the Bible and can be understood to say *anything*. This typically ends up being *anything* but what the original writer intended.
 - c. **Grammatically** = involves the sentence structure, word definitions, repeated words or phrases - or even how things are phrased. All these features need to be examined when trying to discover the authors’ message. The written word is made up of grammatical rules and principles based on the original language in which it was written (Hebrew, and some Aramaic for the OT, Greek for the NT). Like any language, grammar must be addressed for a more accurate understanding. Understanding grammar is necessary to comprehend any written communication in any language, it is no different with the Bible.
3. There is a host of problems with the allegorical method of interpretation. There is no *biblical* or *historical* basis for interpreting the Bible in general or prophecy in particular, in an allegorical manner. It always results in spiritualizing (removing the literal or plain

understanding) of the message and adding one in that is particularly the view of the interpreter. A few quotes from scholars will reveal this interpretive problem.

Milton Terry, in his book Biblical Hermeneutics, (1890 edition, Hunt & Eaton, NY. Page 60), said, "The allegorical method of interpretation is based upon a profound reverence for the Scriptures, and a desire to exhibit their manifold depths of wisdom. But it will be noticed at once that its habit is to disregard the common signification of words, and give wing to all manner of fanciful speculation. It does not draw out the legitimate meaning of an author's language, but foists into it whatever the whim or fancy of an interpreter may desire. As a system, therefore, it puts itself beyond all well-defined principles and laws." (underline added). Frederic W. Farrar, in his book History of Interpretation, (1886 edition, MacMillan & Co., London. Page 238-9), said, "When once the principle of allegory is admitted, when once we start with the rule that whole passages and books of scripture say one thing when they mean another, the reader is delivered bound hand and foot to the caprice of the interpreter." (underline added). Finally, Bernard Ramm, in his book Protestant Biblical Interpretation, (1970 edition, Baker Book House, page 125), said, "For centuries the parables of the Gospels were not properly understood because they were given allegorical and not literal interpretations. How do we resolve the competition among the various allegorical schools of interpretation? There is really only one way: grant the prior right to literal interpretation of Scripture, and the right of literal interpretation to act as judge and umpire of any proposed allegorical or mystical interpretation of Scripture. To rest one's theology on the secondary strata of meanings is to invite interpretation by imagination. That which supplies the imagination with its content is unfortunately too often non-Biblical ideas or materials. The only sure way to know the meaning of Holy Scripture is to anchor interpretation in literal exegesis. (underline added). Therefore, in dealing with allegory, we can conclude the following.

- a. **No biblical basis:** The OT prophets, Jesus, and the apostles always interpreted and understood the Bible literally. This applies to doctrine and prophecy. For example, Daniel understood the prophecy of Jeremiah regarding the 70 years of captivity of the Jews time in Babylon as coming to a close (Daniel 9), because 70 years was literally nearly completed. Daniel was then given a prophecy that was very specific regarding when the Messiah would come and be crucified. This was prophesied and fulfilled literally. Daniel prophesied of 70, seven year periods (weeks of years), 69 of them ending with the death of the Messiah Daniel 9:26). There is the 7 year period (Daniels 70th, seven year period) still awaiting fulfillment, which Jesus made specific reference to (Matt. 24:15). This period is well prophesied in both the OT and NT. Jeremiah, Daniel, and Jesus made it clear that it hasn't been fulfilled, for they all categorized it as *the* worst time the earth would see in human history (Jer. 30:7, Daniel 12:1, Matt. 24:21). There is no reason to allegorize or spiritualize it since the first portion of the prophecy was given and received literally – there was nothing allegorical about it. A few other examples of how the Jesus and the apostles understood prophecy should be sufficient.

- i. In Luke 4:16-30, **Jesus** quoted Isaiah 61:1-2a and *literally* applied it to Himself saying, “*this day is this scripture is fulfilled in your ears*”. The people certainly understood what He was saying because they tried to stone Him for making the application to Himself as Messiah.
- ii. **Peter** on the day of Pentecost answered the people in Acts 2 regarding the 120 speaking in tongues by *literally* applying it to the prophecy of the prophet Joel. Peter said “*this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel*” (Acts 2:16, Joel 2:28-32).
- iii. **Matthew** quoted the OT at least 11 times saying “*that the scripture might be fulfilled*” in response to the *literal* activity of Jesus to demonstrate that He *literally* fulfilled the scriptures that only the Messiah was prophesied to fulfill.
 - a) Understanding biblical prophecy literally was the key to knowing *who* the Messiah was. There was a group that spiritualized certain aspects the Messiah’s coming and that was the Pharisees, and some of the other Jewish leadership. They spiritualized His suffering (Isaiah 53 as an example) and applied it spiritually (allegorically) to Israel as a nation, or ignored this aspect of His coming completely because they were looking for Messiah to come and reign, not suffer and die. They were more interested in the aspects of prophecy that reflected their desires, instead of taking the scriptures for what they were plainly saying. Thus, we see the problem of arbitrarily allegorizing scripture and prophecy. In the Pharisees case, they missed the Messiah because they spiritualized their own scriptures. It was a disastrous result then, and it would be no less dangerous today, if Jesus’ second coming is allegorized by interpreters. It is for this reason we understand the Bible as teaching both the pre-tribulation rapture and pre-millennial return of Christ to setup His kingdom for 1000 years (Rev. 20). Jesus will *take* His Church out from the world prior to Daniels 70th week (aka the tribulation period). He will then return *with* His Church at the end of the seven-year tribulation period to establish His millennial reign on earth from Jerusalem as described by various OT prophets and Revelation 20.
 - b) What is interesting in this regard is that those who allegorize prophecy typically do not even agree among themselves. There is a simple reason for this. The allegorical method makes the *interpreter* the basis of the interpretation and not the *scripture* itself. As we have seen, the prophets do not intend for their message to be taken in an allegorical manner. The various allegorical interpreters apply prophecy based on their own views of historical and political data, combined with their theological *bias*. In the end, their allegorical interpretations of prophecy are based on their own privately harbored perspectives and not balanced with comparative scriptures. However, Peter tells us “*no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation*” (2 Pet. 1:20). We can only hope the allegorist is not spiritualizing *that* scripture verse. Moreover,

allegorical interpreters of prophecy agree that if you take the Bible and its prophecies literally, it will result in the pre-millennial position.

b. **No historical basis**: The history of the allegorical interpretation of the whole Bible can be traced back to Origen of Alexandria around the 3rd century A.D.. No conservative Bible believing scholar would ever agree with Origen's interpretation of the Bible for he was always looking for a meaning that was "behind the text" instead of just accepting the text itself. This allegorization methodology led Origen to multiple heresies as is the result. Around the 4th century A.D., the great Augustine applied this method to prophecy resulting in an allegorical interpretation of the millennial reign of Christ, and prophecy in general. The Roman Catholic church adopted this view of end times and maintains it to the present day, thus they are Amillennial (i.e. not a literal 1000 year reign) in their view on Revelation 20 and the 1000 year reign of Christ. Prior to this the ante-Nicene fathers (Christian leaders who lived prior to the Nicene council in A.D. 325) were Chiliasts (chili = 1000 in Greek). They believed in the *literal* coming of Messiah to setup His kingdom on earth to reign for 1000 years.

a) The Reformers in the 1500's did not address eschatology (study of end times) in their move away from the authority of the Pope, and maintained the traditional position of the Roman Catholic churches Amillennialism. However, there is a severe problem with this position. The consequential result of an Amillennial position and allegorical reign of the Messiah is that none of the promises or prophecies to Israel for their land, King or kingdom can be *literally* fulfilled, and God is left making promises that He never keeps. This is an attack on God's character by declaring that God did not mean what He said. Truly, the millennial kingdom is the time of Israel's fulfillment of these critical promises introduced in the OT. Dr. Norman Geisler gives the following 7 reasons for the millennial reign:

1. Restore Paradise Lost
2. Fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant
3. Fulfill the Davidic Covenant
4. Fulfill Daniels Predictions
5. Provide a Climax for History
6. To Destroy Death
7. To Defeat the Devil

b) If these promises and prophecies are spiritualized (allegorized), and Israel is not to have these fulfilled in them as a nation, the only group left to fulfill them is the church. Unfortunately, this view has been the foundation of various churches' anti-Semitism throughout the centuries. Its resurgence in seminaries today is seen in the current *replacement theology* (spiritualizing the prophecies for Israel and

making them apply to the church, thus *replacing* Israel with the church). This method is dishonoring to God and His Word, and should never be embraced by Christians. It is adhering to the tactics of the forces of darkness that battle against the prophetic program of God. Frankly, I am shocked that in our present time in history, with all the hindsight and history of biblical interpretation behind us that any Christian who claims to believe the Bible would even consider such a view.

c. **Bottom-line:** There are four fundamental problems with using allegory as the means of interpreting the Bible. Dwight Pentecost in his classic book Things to Come (1958 edition, Zondervan) provides the first three, and Dr. Andy Woods in his presentation on The Protestant Reformation (available on his website, slbc.org) gives us the fourth, they are listed here:

- a) First, the *text* of the Bible is not being interpreted. In other words, it's really a matter of the interpreter making the Bible say whatever they want it to say, since the text itself is not allowed to speak for itself.
- b) Second, the *authority* is transferred from the text to the interpreter. The interpreter's doctrinal positions and bias is allowed to drive the interpretation wherever the interpreter wants to go. They have the authority in this case, not the text itself.
- c) Third, there is no way to *test* the conclusions of the interpreter. Since the basis of the interpretation is in the mind of the interpreter and not the text itself, there is no test that can be applied to measure the accuracy of the interpretation.
- d) Finally, there is no way of controlling the interpreter's *imagination*. Since no one can control the thinking of another, the interpreter can use speculation, spiritualization, allegorization and misinformation (whether intentional or not) as the basis of what they impose on the text of the Bible.

1. We encounter these serious problems once we remove the literal (normal) method of Bible interpretation. In contrast, the literal method:

- i. Allows the *text* to be interpreted,
- ii. Allows the text to maintain the *authority*,
- iii. Allows for the interpreters conclusions to be *tested* against the text and comparative texts,
- iv. Removes the need to control the *imagination* of the interpreter, since the text is where the focus is directed and not the thinking of the interpreter.

4. A total reliance upon the Holy Spirit is always necessary to achieve a sound interpretation of the Biblical text. The Holy Spirit is the Author of the scripture (2 Peter 1:21), and He is the One that makes the truth of God known to those who read it (John 16:13).
5. Experience must always be interpreted in light of what scripture says, and never scripture in light of personal experience. Our experience should be within the boundaries of what scripture allows, thus we should not allow our experience to dictate our understanding of the Bible. The scriptures should be taken plainly and dictate our experience – not the opposite.
6. Biblical examples are authoritative only when supported by a command. Narrative portions of the Bible are not necessarily authoritative regarding instruction. If an apostle in the book of Acts is speaking to a group, the speech must be put in context to have it applied properly. The narrative has the speech in it, but it does not always apply directly to the reader – the context has to be examined. At times it may apply directly, or it may only in principle. For example, in Acts 2, Peter spoke directly to Jews who crucified Jesus and addressed them as such. In that instance, we learn the truth from the sermon, and should respond in faith to the message as they did. However, the public requirement for baptism (Acts 2:38) would not be a necessary component of repentance for all people. They publically rejected the Messiah and Peter was calling for public repentance, this would be through their identifying with the risen Christ through public baptism. Christians today should also be baptized, but the sermon Peter preached was to those who publically shouted for Jesus crucifixion, and the Holy Spirit required a challenging public display of repentance, which baptism would have afforded in that setting. Later in Acts 10:43, when Peter was preaching to Gentiles, required belief for salvation, and the baptism came after they were saved (10:48). Furthermore, Peter *commanded* the Gentiles to be baptized so they could be identified with Christ and His work on their behalf.
7. Church history is important but not decisive in the interpretation of scripture. The church does not determine what the Bible teaches; the Bible must determine what the church should teach! We can learn from the past how church leaders viewed and interpreted scripture, which can be helpful in our own pursuit for understanding the Bible. However, their views are not necessarily the correct interpretation. As discussed above in the issue of Amillennialism, church history is a good barometer for how things progressed and is helpful in discovering the principles used for biblical interpretation in the past. We are all subject to the authority of what the Bible says to us, not what others say it says. Anyone can wrongly apply the scriptures based on faulty analysis, personal bias, or ignorance. Everyone is subject to biblical scrutiny – even big name Christians from the past.
8. The primary purpose of the Bible is to change our lives, and not merely increase our knowledge – it is not only for information, but it is for transformation – the information should help in the transformation. Any application of scripture must be in keeping with the correct meaning, as determined by sound interpretative principles (as listed in this document). Learning the truth is the first step in applying the truth. Jumping from *observation*

to *application* without *interpreting* the things observed can lead to faulty application. An entire analysis should be sought with the use of the multiple of helps available to all who desire to learn the Bible.

9. Do not seek to justify the interpretation you favor, but to arrive at the interpretation that best fits the text and context. Everyone has biases; none of us is free from them. However, when we approach scripture, we should be conscious of the fact that we are seeking to be *objective* (having no personal bias). There are things I wish the Bible did not say, and things that would be more pleasing to my sin nature if the Bible said differently. Knowing that ahead of time can save me a lot of grief and misunderstanding of God's Word. No matter what I want the Bible to say, I have to deal with what it does say and not seek to change it to satisfy my personal biases.
10. Always stay within the context of the passage under consideration in order to prevent an isolated interpretation. All verses fall in the context of a paragraph, and the paragraph within a book, and the book within the chronology of books that make up the Bible. Thus, it is helpful to read the verses before and to read the verses after the passage under consideration. All books in the Bible have a plan by the writers, and the Holy Spirit that guided them in the process of laying out their message. Therefore, they are both logical and understandable. People that approach the scriptures like a fortune cookie, will inevitably lack understanding the overall message of the Bible in general and the isolated verse in particular. The verses are not just short snippets of ancient wisdom collected to gain ethereal wisdom. These verses are the grammatical foundation of a larger message that must be understood in its entirety (the whole Bible), for there to be proper understanding and resultant application of particular verses (limited passage).
11. Do not set one part of scripture against another part, but interpret each part on its own terms and in its own context, before seeking to understand how they relate to one another. Many Bibles give cross references for verses that seem to apply to each other. However, before cross-referencing areas in the Bible, make sure that each passage is understood within its own context first. Cross-references in study Bibles are not *always* accurate; God inspires nothing but the text, so everything else is added for study helps. Cross-references in Bibles are based on the contributors understanding of the text. For example, a Bible that is based on a theology different from what I adhere to would have cross references to verses I may not agree should be tied together. Each section of scripture that is cross-referenced should be understood in its own context first, and then compared to see if the comparison actually fits properly. The three rules of real estate are location, location, location. The three rules of Bible interpretation are context, context, context.
12. The normal and obvious meaning of a passage (in context) is usually the correct one. As Dr. Norman Geisler says, "When the literal sense makes good sense, seek no other sense, lest it result in nonsense". Great and necessary advice!

13. Read the surrounding chapters or verses to make sure that the context is understood. When that is done, do it again and again. The primary problem with all cults, isms and extremist church groups is their *wrong* understanding of the Bible, breeding a heretical interpretation and finally a misapplication. This is usually the result of a lack of "*proper*" study, which results in "*improper*" conclusions. These false interpretations set the foundation for further errors in belief. Ignoring the overall context is a major problem in any false teaching. These errors will continue to increase as we move closer to the 2nd Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Many cults make Jesus a somewhat lesser or secondary god in relation to God the Father. The immediate problem with this is that ANY god other than the One True and Living God (Isaiah 45:5) is by definition, a false god since there is only One God. The point is, before people are hung up on isolated verses and what they may *appear* to say, they should make sure their understanding is aligned with the truth found in other places in the Bible and properly compared.

Summary:

It is of vital importance that we do not approach the Bible with preconceived ideas, ideals or theologies (as much as possible). This will cause us to be biased to the true meaning of scripture before we actually read it. It is of the utmost importance that we do not try and *make* the Bible say what we prefer it to say, but to *allow* it to say what it clearly says. In this way, we can understand Gods message to us, opposed to forcing the Bible to say something God never intended it to. Value the time that you can spend in the study of God's Word, and use the above principles to guide you. This will maximize your understanding of scripture and make the best use of your time. It is far better to completely understand a few verses by the end of your study time, than to read multiple chapters and never know what they really mean. Our time is valuable, our time in the scriptures is priceless, make it all count for Christ.

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