

Understanding Scripture

The variety of reactions of individuals to reading the Bible is almost as broad as the choice of flavors at a Baskin-Robbins or Gelateria in Florence. The views cover a wide range of opinion and reflect an amalgamation of good, bad, and indifferent experiences, reports, and approaches to the reading of the scriptures.

“It’s such an old book it really doesn’t apply to life today” and
“I just can’t understand the Bible” to
“The Bible means different things to different people”
and “The Bible says what it means and it means what it says”

If we are going to read the Bible, and I would contend that such reading is necessary for Christians and for those who would understand their belief system,¹ then there needs to be some way to do so that is not so threatening and which provides at least some objective standards to guard against subjective, often self-serving interpretations.²

Such reading involves two processes which are interrelated though distinct from one another. The first process is referred to as *exegesis* while the second has the imposing name of *hermeneutics*.

These two studies provide guidance in answering several of the most common questions that arise as one reads the Bible. Other questions are outside of their focus and must be dealt with separately. Below are some of the more common questions asked about the Bible and how to read and/or study the Bible.

1. What, exactly, does the Bible say and how can we learn what it means?
2. How can we feel confident that the English translation we have received is accurate?
3. How confident can we be of the interpretations that we hear offered?
4. Can the Bible simply be read at “face value” without any helps?
5. How do we guard, if we need to, against going to the Bible to receive answers that sound good but are not addressed to the questions we have asked?

On the next page you will find an outline that can help in the process of exegesis. Exegesis, put simply, is the process of discovering the original, intended meaning of a text. This is first step in the process of understanding the Bible.

The process of hermeneutics, which can be more volatile, begins where the discovery of the original, intended meaning of the text (if hermeneutics is to be done with any sense of objectivity it must follow an exegesis of the text) ends. Hermeneutics has as its aim the understanding of the text in the current setting (application to today).

¹ 2 Timothy 3:16-17

² 2 Peter 1:20-21

1st Task- Exegesis (discovering the original, intended meaning)

1. Establish the text. (Read the text within its larger context)
 - a. Specific context (use, but do not depend on, “headings” in your Bible)
 - b. Larger context (use, but do not depend on, chapter and verse divisions)
 - c. Context of biblical book (read the entire book- look for themes, etc.)
2. Immediate context.
 - a. Who is the author? Who is speaking? (can be different answers)
 - b. To whom is the author writing? Speaker speaking? (different answers possible)
 - c. What has occasioned the text? (Specific event? Questions? Reports?)
3. Historical context.
 - a. At what time did this take place? (Pre- or post- exile, resurrection, Pentecost, etc.)
 - b. What are the customs of the day? (Washing feet; holy kiss; day’s wagers)
 - c. Geographical considerations? (Mountains around Jerusalem; desert place, etc.)
3. Literary context.
 - a. Related to “establishing the text.”
 - b. Includes recognizing genre (parable, narrative, wisdom literature, etc.)

Tools which may prove helpful in understanding a text.

1. A good translation of the Bible (consider a Study Bible)
 - a. There are several translations available.
 - b. My favorites: NIV, KJV, ASV, RSV, NAB
2. At least two other translations.
 - a. Three basic schools of translations: Literal, dynamic equivalent, free
 - b. NIV- dynamic equivalent
 - c. Literal- KJV, ASV, NASB, RSV, (NRSV-→)
 - d. Dynamic equivalent- NIV, NEB, GNB
 - e. Free- Phillips, Living
 - f. Difference? (Money, Euphemisms, Grammar & Syntax)
3. An exhaustive concordance
4. Bible dictionary
5. Topical Bible
6. A Bible handbook
7. A library card to OVC’s library

2nd Step- Hermeneutics (building the bridge)

Do you know the meaning of the phrase, Good-bye? (Change in spelling to good-by)

What does that tell you about what it meant in the beginning?

What does its present use mean?

What does this change reveal?

What would it mean if we spoke of the “original” meaning and then applied it to a contemporary situation? What mistakes could we make in such a situation?

Quick Note (aside): Word studies have both strengths and weaknesses.

Hermeneutics is the study of biblical interpretation.

1. A common, reformation hermeneutic:

Command

Example

Necessary Inference

2. The regulative principle(s).

RP1- Whatever the church practices must be authorized by scripture or, by good and necessary consequences (necessary inference), be deducted from scripture; what is not authorized is forbidden.

RP2- Whatever is church practices must be consistent with scripture and biblical principles; what is not authorized is allowable so long as it does not undermine biblical principles.

3. Macro-traditions and micro-traditions.

Macro-traditions- Those doctrines believed among all orthodox Christian believers throughout the centuries which are based on the clear teaching of scripture.

Micro-traditions- Those doctrines believed not held in concert with traditional, orthodox, historical Christianity that are based upon individual interpretation of the teaching of scripture.