

**INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE, OR HERMENEUTICS** — the science and art of biblical interpretation. Correct Bible interpretation should answer the question, “How can I understand what this particular passage means?” Because there are rules that govern its use, it is a science. Because knowing the rules is not enough, it also is an art. Practice to learn how to use the rules is also required.

The question of how to interpret the Bible is not a minor issue. It is, in a sense, one of the battlegrounds for our souls. If Satan had a list of what he does not want us to do, Bible study would be at the top, along with prayer and worship. Through study of Scripture we learn who Jesus is and are enabled to become like Him. How can we become like Him, if we do not know what He is like? Devotional studies are important, but they must result from a serious study of Scripture. The apostle Paul prayed that the Colossians might be “filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” (Col. 1:9).

Knowing Scripture as well as obeying it are the twin foundations of a godly life. A godly life produces the further desire to study God’s Word. Bible interpretation done properly, therefore, takes the student from study to application back to study and on to further application in a mounting spiral toward God. Satan’s attempt to take away our desire to study Scripture is nothing less than an attempt to remove the basis of our spiritual growth and stability.

***The Basic Principles of Bible Study.*** Six basic principles are at the heart of a sound method of biblical interpretation.

**1. Because Scripture is a divine Book**, and because of our limitation as humans, **prayer is an absolute necessity as we study the Bible.** Paul teaches that the non-Christian and the spiritually immature Christian are limited in their ability to know Christian things (1 Cor. 2:14–3:3). Therefore, we must pray that God will bridge the gap that separates us from understanding spiritual things, by having the Holy Spirit teach us (John 14:26; 16:13). Without this illumination or insight from God’s Spirit, we cannot learn. This need for insight was the concept Paul referred to when he told Timothy to “reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this” (2 Tim. 2:7, NIV).

**2. The Bible is also a human book** and, to a degree, **must be interpreted like any other book.** This brings us to the principle of common sense. For example, the grammatical–historical method of studying the Bible instructs us (a) to look at the grammar of a passage carefully to see what it says, and (b) to understand a biblical statement in light of its historical background. We understand a historical statement as a straightforward statement and do not change its literal, grammatical sense. This is “common sense.”

Another example of the common sense principle is illustrated when Jesus says Christians can have anything for which they ask (John 15:7). Common sense tells us that there must be some limitation on this statement because we realize that Christians in fact do not have whatever they would like. (First John 5:14 confirms that the limitation is God’s will.) Using the common sense principle in this way can be dangerous because it could become an excuse for cutting out any portion of Scripture we do not happen to like. But if our common sense is controlled by God, it is a valid principle to use for interpreting the Bible.

**3.** We interpret the Bible properly when we learn to **ask the right questions of the text**. The problem here is that many people do not know what the right questions are, or they are too lazy to learn. Biblical interpretation is a science, and the rules it uses take time, energy, and a serious commitment to learn. But when learned, there is much more satisfaction in asking the right questions than in merely guessing.

**4.** The **primary rule of biblical interpretation is “context.”** This cannot be emphasized too strongly. If the Bible student would merely let a passage speak for itself within the context of the paragraph, chapter, or book, the majority of all errors in interpretation would be avoided.

The problem is our bias, or our subjectivity. Many times we approach a passage thinking we already understand it. In the process we read our own meaning into the passage. This is called eisegesis. (*Eis* is a Greek preposition meaning “into.”) But interpreting the Bible correctly demands that we listen to what the text itself is saying, and then draw the meaning out of the passage. This is called exegesis. (*Ex* is a Greek preposition meaning “out of.”) If we let a passage be defined by what it and the surrounding verses say, then we have taken a large step toward interpreting the Bible properly. Only by watching the context carefully and by letting the passage speak for itself do we give Scripture the respect it deserves.

Of course, it is impossible to dismiss totally our own bias and subjectivity. Our interpretation will always be colored by our culture and our opinions about the passage, or perhaps by our theological beliefs, which are partially based on the passage. But this should not discourage our attempt to let the passage speak for itself as freely as possible, without being weighed down with our personal opinions and views.

**5.** These **four key words—*observation, interpretation, evaluation, and application***—are the heart of all approaches to finding out what the Bible means. They provide the structure of what questions you ask of the text, and when.

***Observation:*** Do I understand the basic facts of the passage such as the meaning of all the words? ***Interpretation:*** What did the author mean in his own historical setting? ***Evaluation:*** What does this passage mean in today’s culture? ***Application:*** How can I apply what I have learned to how I live my life?

**6. Interpreting the Bible correctly is a two-step process.** We must first discover what the passage meant in the day and age of the author. Then we must discover its message for us in today’s culture. *Observation* and *interpretation* apply to the first step; *evaluation* and *application* apply to the second.

Why are these two steps important? First, the Bible was not actually written directly to us, and it makes sense to put ourselves in the shoes of the original audience if we are to understand its message properly. Second, these steps force us to *understand* the meaning of the passage before we *apply* it to our lives. Surprisingly, this step is often overlooked. Third, the two steps separate us from the text, thereby helping to prevent eisegesis, since it separates what the text says from how it affects us today.

**The Four Stages of Biblical Interpretation.** Using the four key words in their proper sequence, we are ready to interpret the Bible correctly.

**1. Stage one: *observation***—The questions asked in this stage are, **Do I understand all the facts in this passage?** Do I know the context before and after this passage? Do I know the meanings of all the words? Do I understand the general flow of the discussion? Do I understand the cultural background? **It is necessary to clear up all the factual problems before moving into the theological meaning of the passage.**

For example, in 1 Corinthians 8 the apostle Paul discusses eating meat that had been offered to idols. What is the background? When meat was sacrificed to an idol, that which was not eaten by the priests was sold at the market. Some Corinthian Christians said it was permissible to eat the meat since idols are nothing but wood and stone. Others thought it was not permissible because it might appear they were still involved in pagan worship. Only after we understand these facts may we go on to the next stage of interpretation.

**2. Stage two: *interpretation***—The basic question asked in this stage is, **What did the author mean in his own historical setting?** We must put ourselves in the shoes of Scripture's original audience. To answer this question, there are two further questions we may ask. The first is, **What does the passage actually say?** Many times we forget to look carefully at what a passage says. Some cite Matthew 5:21–22 as proof that to think bad is just as wrong as doing it. Is anger as bad as murder? Of course not. (Common sense tells us that, if nothing else.) But the text does not actually say they are the same. It says the law against murder is not fully obeyed by mere outward obedience, but by maintaining the proper attitude of not being angry, which in turn prohibits the outward act of murder.

The second question is, **Does the context help define the meaning of the passage?** For example, what does Scripture mean when it says, “There is no God” (Ps. 53:1)? Context shows this is a statement made by a fool. What does Paul mean when he says Jesus will return like “a thief in the night” (1 Thess. 5:2)? Context shows it means His coming will be sudden (v. 3). Should women remain totally silent in the church (1 Cor. 14:34)? No, since the context of 1 Corinthians 11:5 shows that women may pray or prophesy.

Does Jesus' statement, “When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites” (Matt. 6:16) demand that His disciples fast? No, because Matthew 9:14 shows that Jesus' disciples did not fast while He was alive. (The beauty of using Scripture to interpret Scripture is that when the Bible answers its own questions, then we know the answer is correct.) The twin matters of what the text actually says and the passage's context help complete the second stage of interpretation.

There are times when even these two questions will not help us understand the meaning of a passage. Sometimes we have to read between the lines and make an educated guess as to what the passage means. This is fine when necessary. But we must remember that we are guessing, and we must keep an open mind to other possible interpretations.

**Integrity is also a necessary element in all biblical interpretation.** If we tell someone about what a friend said, we should try to be as accurate as possible. If we are not sure about a certain point, we should say, “I think this is what he said.” We all do this with our friends.

So why then, when we interpret Scripture, do many of us lose that integrity? Why do we not read the text carefully? Why do we read between the lines, make fanciful interpretations that are more a product of our imagination than reverent study, and then insist that this is what the text actually says?

In interpreting the Bible, we must never forget whose letters we are reading. They have come from God Himself, and they demand respect. They demand to speak for themselves. They demand that we be honest and have integrity. We must not put our guesswork on the same level as the words of God.

How do we interpret 1 Corinthians 8? Once we understand the facts and background of the passage, once we have asked what the passage actually is saying and what is its context, then we see that Paul is teaching the principle of voluntarily refraining from a practice that, although not wrong in and of itself, might be harmful to a fellow Christian. We have completed the first step of interpretation. We have seen what the passage meant in the day and age of the author.

**3. Stage three: *evaluation***—The stage of evaluation asks, **What does the passage signify in today's culture?** It is the issue of whether a passage of Scripture applies to us today, or whether it is limited to the culture in which it was originally written.

The question raised by the evaluation process is answered one of two ways. **Either the passage is applied directly to our culture, or it must be reapplied because of cultural differences.** The vast majority of New Testament teaching can be applied directly to 20<sup>th</sup> [21<sup>st</sup>]-century culture. If we love God, regardless of when or where we live, then we must obey His commandments (John 14:15). This teaching is true in any culture for all times.

But sometimes a biblical teaching is directed so specifically to the culture of the ancient world that another culture cannot understand it. For example, Western culture today generally does not sacrifice meat to idols, and therefore the meaning of 1 Corinthians 8 may be lost. How then do we evaluate its meaning for us?

It is helpful at this point to define two terms. A “**cultural expression**” is a statement that can be understood only within a certain cultural context. An “**eternal principle**” is a principle that God uses to govern the world regardless of culture. “I will never again eat meat, lest it make my brother stumble” (1 Cor. 8:13), is a cultural expression because it is understandable only within those cultures that offer meat to idols. “God is love” (1 John 4:8) is an eternal principle because it is understandable in all cultures.

But we should clearly understand that every cultural expression in the Bible is the result of some eternal principle. And even though a cultural expression cannot be carried over directly to another culture, the eternal principle behind it can. Just because it is cultural does not mean it can be ignored.

A good example of this important principle might be the teaching that we should always be polite when we are guests for dinner. In America, this principle could express itself as “Eat all the food on the table lest you insult your host's cooking.” But in Uganda it is important

that food be left on the serving plates lest it appear your host has not sufficiently provided for you.

Therefore, whereas the principle shows itself in America as “Eat all the food,” the same principle shows itself in Uganda as “Leave some of the food on the serving plates.” *The task of the Biblical interpreter is to look through any cultural expression to the eternal principle that gave rise to it, and to reapply the principle in his own culture. This is the process of evaluation.* Is it cultural? If it is, how does the eternal principle that gave rise to the cultural expression reapply in the new culture?

Two implications can be drawn from this. First, if a statement is cultural, then there must be a principle that gave rise to the cultural statement. But if no principle can be found, then what was thought to be cultural must in fact be an eternal principle. Second, if the interpreter is not sure whether a statement is cultural, would it not be better to be safe and view the statement as eternal, lest a command of God be ignored?

We should also remember that just as a biblical passage can be set in its culture, so interpreters are likewise controlled to some extent by their own culture. Many people today do not believe that the biblical accounts of miracles are true. For example, some scholars argue that miracles were a part of first-century culture and were believed by the people in Jesus’ day. But this is the 20<sup>th</sup> [21<sup>st</sup>] century and people do not believe in miracles in this culture. But these scholars’ views on the impossibility of the supernatural are likewise influenced by the materialistic, science-oriented culture in which they live. We must be careful not to allow our own culture to influence our view of Scripture.

**4. Stage four: application**—Up to this point, the process of interpreting the Bible has been academic. But it is absolutely essential to recognize that the purpose and goal of Bible study is a godly life. Study is not complete until we put into practice what we have learned.

The question to ask at this stage of interpretation is, “**How can I apply what I have learned to how I live my life?**” The academic and the practical are thus fused into a meaningful approach to the Bible’s message. Some people dismiss the academic as boring and trivial. Others reject the application as unnecessary. Both extremes are equally wrong. The Bible interpreter must walk the tightrope between these approaches. A three-act play is unsatisfying without the final act. The last act, without the first two, does not make sense. Sometimes in Bible study it is necessary to emphasize the academic when the passage is difficult to understand, or to emphasize the application when the passage’s practical relevance is confusing. But one of these approaches should never be used to the exclusion of the other.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald F. Youngblood, F. F. Bruce, and R. K. Harrison, Thomas Nelson Publishers, eds., [\*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary\*](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1995).