

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

THE PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

There are certain principles that will help us to accurately handle the Word of Truth. These principles are embedded in the Scripture itself. We do not need to go beyond the boundaries of the Bible to discover these laws and maxims that are used to determine the meaning of Scripture. The Bible interprets itself (Scripture interprets Scripture).

Principle #1: The Literal Interpretation Principle

We take the Bible at face value. We generally take everyday things in life as literal or at face value. This is a common sense approach. Even symbols and allegories in the Bible are based on the literal meaning of the Scripture; thus the literal meaning is foundational to any symbolic or allegorical meaning.

The golden rule of interpretation is: “When the plain sense of the Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.” Therefore, take every word at its primary, usual, meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and fundamental truths, clearly indicate otherwise.

Principle #2: The Contextual Principle

D.A. Carson has been quoted as saying, “A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text.” By “proof text,” of course, Carson means the abuse of a single verse or phrase taken out of context to “prove” a particular view. The word “text” is derived from the Latin word, which means to “weave.” The context is that which accompanies the text. The Word of God is a perfect unit. The Scriptures cannot be broken; they all hang together, a perfect unity. We must look and consider the verses immediately before, after, and around the passage. We must consider the book of the Bible and the section of the Bible in which the passage occurs. The Bible must be interpreted within the framework of the Bible.

Principle #3: The Scripture Interprets Scripture Principle

We may rest assured that God did not reveal an important doctrine in a single, ambiguous passage. All

essential doctrines are fully and clearly explained—either in the immediate context, or somewhere else in the Bible. This principle is best illustrated by what is known as “topical Bible study.” There are two essential ‘rules’ for applying this principle: 1) The context of the two passages must be the same; and 2) The plain passage must be used to guide our interpretation of a less clear passage—not the other way around!

Principle #4: The Progressive Revelation Principle

The Word of God is to be understood from the Old Testament to the New Testament as a flower unfolding its petals to the morning sun. God initiated revelation, but He did not reveal His truths all at one time. It was a long and progressive process. Therefore, we must take into account the then-current state of revelation to properly understand a particular passage. For example, an interpretation of a passage in Genesis which assumed a fully delineated view of the “new Covenant” would not be sound. As the saying goes, “The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.”

Principle #5: The Accommodation Principle

The Bible is to be interpreted in view of the fact that it is an accommodation of Divine truths to human minds: God the infinite communicating with man the finite. The Bible was written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The Bible was also created in space, in time, and in history so that man could understand it. The truths of God made contact with the human mind at a common point, the Bible, to make God (and, indeed, all of reality) knowable. We must be careful, then, not to push accommodating language about God and His nature to literal extremes. God does not have feathers and wings (e.g., Psalms 17:8); nor is He our literal Father in the same sense our earthly father is.

Principle #6: The One Interpretation Principle

Every verse in the Bible has only one interpretation, although that verse may have many applications.

The one correct interpretation is that which mirrors the intent of the inspired author.

Principle #7: The Harmony of Scripture Principle

No part of the Bible may be interpreted so as to contradict another part of the Bible. The Christian presupposes the inerrancy and harmony of Scripture as a necessary result of a perfect Creator God revealing Himself perfectly to Mankind. Proper application of hermeneutical principles will resolve apparent conflicts. The key here, of course, is the word “proper,” for exegetical fallacies can easily result from a zealous but ill-informed attempt to “save” Scripture from an apparent contradiction.

Principle #8: The Genre Principle

Genre is a literary term having to do with the category or “genus” of literature under consideration. Proper interpretation must take the general literary category of any given passage into consideration. Are we dealing with poetry or prose? Are we dealing with history or prophecy? It is important that when we interpret the Word of God, we understand as much as possible the author’s intent. For example, if the author is writing history—the genre of the Pentateuch of Moses—it would not be proper to interpret a single reference (such as the speech of Balaam’s ass) as a poetic personification, unless a variety of contextual markers compelled us to do so.

Here are some books of the Bible and their respective genres:

- Psalms – Poetry
- Proverbs – Wise Sayings
- Isaiah – History and Prophecy
- The Gospels – Biography and History
- The Epistles – Teaching and Doctrine
- Revelation – Eschatology and Prophecy

Principle #9: The Grammatical Principle

The Bible was originally written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. While we have several highly accurate translations of the Bible in English, all

translation involves a certain amount of interpretation on the part of the translator. Thus, the study of word meanings, grammar, and syntax of the original languages is important for a proper understanding of Scripture. This doesn’t mean that every student of the Bible must learn Hebrew or Greek. There are a number of tools available—lexicons, Bible dictionaries, detailed exegetical commentaries—that can provide a deeper understanding of crucial passages.

Principle #10: The Historical Background Principle

The Bible was composed in a specific culture at a particular point in time. While they are universal in application, the truths in the Bible can most fully be realized only when taking the surrounding culture and history into account. For example, when Jesus is called “the first fruits” (1 Corinthians 15:20), we may have some understanding of this title from the Old Testament, but a study of Jewish religious practice in the first century can provide a deeper understanding of why Paul chose this title in this passage, as opposed to another title with the same general meaning of “first.”

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