

Keys to Bible Interpretation

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Revised Edition

Some “Keys” to Interpreting the Scriptures Accurately

Key Principles

To gain an accurate understanding of a book or passage from the Bible, the interpreter must:

Presuppositions

1. Believe that the Scriptures are inspired, infallible, and the authoritative rule for life and doctrine.
2. Realize that it is not possible to fully understand and apply the Scripture without:
 - having been “born from above” by faith in Christ.
 - being filled with God’s Holy Spirit.
 - being diligent to pursue its meaning through regular study.
 - being willing to obey its message, once revealed.
3. Allow the process of interpretation to engage the “whole person.” The study of Scripture should captivate your emotions and your will as well as your mind. “We aim to be objective but not disinterested readers.”
4. Understand that all Scripture is in some way a testimony to Christ. Christ is the Bible’s subject; all of its doctrine, teaching, and ethics point to Him.
5. Take into account both the Divine and the human side of Scripture.
6. Seek to “extract” or take out the meaning that is in the text (*exegesis*), not read into the text his or her own beliefs or ideas (*eisegesis*).
7. Seek to explain:
 - the “unclear” passages by the clearer statements
 - the symbolic portions by the stated teachings of Scriptures
 - the Old Testament by the New Testament.
8. Take into account the whole context of the book and the passage where any particular text is found.

Understanding the Original Situation

9. Identify the human author and the intended audience. Start by attempting to discover what the author was trying to say to the original audience. “A passage cannot mean what it never meant.”
10. Use information about the manuscripts, language, grammar, literary forms, history, and culture to help discover the author’s intended meaning.
11. Take seriously the genre and types of language used by the author, then interpret the Scriptures literally, meaning that we take the plain sense of the language as it is normally used in that genre.

Finding General Principles

12. Look for the ideas, values, and truths that a story, command, or prophecy is trying to communicate. Seek to state those principles in a way that is true and useful for all people, at all times, and in all situations.
13. Use Scripture to interpret Scripture. In order to understand any individual part of Scripture, compare that portion to the message of the whole Bible. Once this understanding has been reached, one must also reinterpret his/her understanding of the whole of Scripture (theology and doctrine) in light of the new information gained from the passage (The Hermeneutical Circle).
14. Understand the reason, tradition, and experience are significant factors in the process of interpreting Scripture. Principles must be clear, logical, and defensible; they must be compatible with the way Christians have interpreted the Scriptures throughout history; and they must help to make sense out of human experience.

Applying General Principles Today

15. Carefully move from that Scripture “meant” to its original audience to what it “means” for the current reader.
16. Apply the general truths to specific situations faced by people today.
 - Remember that the Holy Spirit is the primary guide in the application of truth. Ask Him for guidance about the meaning for today and then prayerfully meditate on the meaning of the passage.
 - Seek the Spirit’s guidance by seeing how He has led other Christians (both inside and outside your own denominational tradition) to interpret the meaning and application of the passage for today.

17. Put the principles and the applications in language that makes sense to modern readers.
18. Keep the proper “end goals” in view. The intent of all Bible study is to mature the reader in the life and love of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God. Not knowledge alone, but life transformation is the goal of Bible interpretation.