

HOW TO INTERPRET THE BIBLE

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My announced theme this evening is “How to Interpret the Bible.” I became concerned to speak on this subject when the few weeks ago I was giving the teaching in regard to the positive confession movement. It seems to me that most of the problems people have with either heresies, cults or misplaced emphasis is many times the inability the understand properly and interpret properly the scripture. So out of that developed this concern this evening to share some with you.

Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:5-16 very plainly “All scripture is given by inspiration of God.” It ought to be noted that the word “inspiration” in the Greek is actually the word “God breathed out.” Maybe the term expiration rather than inspiration would be more appropriate. Because God didn’t breathe in the scripture. He breathed out the scripture. Scripture is a product of his breath. God creates out of nothing. He speaks into the void and something comes into existence that was not. In the same way he speaks his word. And it comes. Reliable and trustworthy since it’s from him. “The scripture is inspired by God, and it is useful for teaching for rebuking, for correcting and for training in righteousness so that the man/woman of God will be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

One of the really key tests for any scripture teaching first of all is does it take its basis from the authority of the word of God? And does it treat the Bible as a whole?

I many times think of the Bible as a beautiful tapestry. The problem with any false teaching or group that comes alone is that they want to take a piece of that, and tear it away from the whole so as to rend the fabric and hold up the part and say, This is the totality of scripture. Instead of taking the whole of scripture and letting scripture be its own best interpreter. Any view which sets the scripture against the scripture is a false view. If you have a person that comes along and attempts to elevate one aspect of teaching to a degree that the totality of scripture will not allow they are setting the scripture against the scripture. And Jesus tells us himself in John 10 that the scripture cannot be broken. That is the scripture is a yardstick and you don’t break the yardstick in half. Or you don’t take an inch of the yardstick off and elevate it to being the whole stick. It must be a unity, a whole. Timothy is saying that to us in the fact that all scripture is inspired of God.

It’s very fascinating to see how Jesus deals with scripture in terms of complimentary principles. For example in John when the woman was taken in adultery is brought to him, certain parts of scripture would certainly invite her condemnation and stoning. Yet other aspects of scripture would invite mercy and freedom. The Lord in the answer “Neither do I condemn her. Go and sin no more,” perfectly upholds the balance in scripture of the righteousness of God’s law and yet the care of God’s mercy.

There are four fundamental principles of interpreting the Bible which help me and I think will help you stay out of doctrinal error and misplaced emphasis. The four principles simply are there:

First, the New Testament interprets the Old Testament.

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Jesus, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount lays down the rule for this, “You have heard it was said by men of old, but I say to you.” He does this time after time after time. The Old Testament for example talked about an earthly kingdom. Talked about a political kingdom. How does Jesus redefine that? Jesus brings the kingdom in its spiritual reality. He redefines the kingdom.

The Old Testament prescribes salvation in terms of observance of Jewish rules and dietary laws and the like. But the fundamental issue of the New Testament is to show how the New Testament community in Acts 15 wrestled with those laws and began to see within the Old Testament that liberating seed of the gospel which would make any person a candidate of full admission into God’s community irrespective of certain provisions of the law.

Therefore when we study the Old Testament we must remember that there is always from Jesus’ own view and from the apostles’ view, there is always a filter on the Old Testament. When reading any particular passage on the Old Testament we must put over against that the teaching of the new so that we read properly the underlying principle of the old without necessarily reading all the time the specific application that the Old Testament would make.

An illustration: When I was in college, you know how everybody signs yearbooks in a Christian college with their name and a scripture verse under it. My scripture verse – I wasn’t as spiritual as I am now and I thought, nobody ever checks out those verses anyway – was “George O. Wood, Exodus 22:18. Exodus 22:18 say “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.” Wrote that in all my girlfriends annuals.

How do you take that from the New Testament perspective? Obviously in the New Testament perspective capital punishment has been assigned to the state government. Christians, the community of God, are no longer a theocracy, a nation with identifiable boundaries and kings that are anointed by God. But Christians exist in the world under a world system, Romans 13 says “Where the civil magistrate has been given power to even execute vengeance by use of the sword.” That is to bring about the upholding of the law if necessary through the death of the offender. So writing and understanding that Old Testament law from the New Testament context it means that in the church if we suspect somebody’s involved in the occult and we find them guilty as a church we are not therefore taking them out to the side of the building and throwing stones at them till they die. We leave their fate in the hands of the state in terms of any corporal punishment or any judicial verdict of any kind. The church has no power to levy fines, no power to impose punishment, except the punishment of excommunication and the delivery of the body to Satan that the spirit might be saved unto the day of Jesus Christ.

Therefore when you take an Old Testament law like Deuteronomy 21:18-21 which has to do with the stoning of a rebellious son, you filter that again through the light of the New Testament and who the New Testament is giving power to in regard to. The state is being power.

This becomes a critical issue in the whole area of prophecy and dispensationalism because those who are dispensationalist in viewpoint will hold to a very literal fulfilling of all Old Testament prophecies including the reinstatement of blood sacrifice in the temple. That is a critical area of interpretation. How far do we press this matter? Are we looking forward to a day when the temple is reinstated and in effect Christianity and the gospel goes into reverse gear while we revert to blood sacrifice system in order to look at that as a means of salvation.

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Some of the dispensationalists have looked at that and said if blood sacrifice is reinstated it will only be a memorial. It will look back to Christ. It will no longer have the significance it did in the old. They say that because they recognize a right principle that the new must interpret the old.

You look at what are called the imprecatory psalms. As you're reading along in the psalms you find David every once in a while saying "Kill em all. Slay the wicked. Why do you let them live?" That's a problem with reaching the psalms in a public worship service. I struggle a lot in choosing psalms for the worship service because there's a beautiful psalm and then you come to the end of it and it's a real kicker! Saying, "God, smash their teeth against the wall!" We live in this age that we ought to love one another so how do we pray the imprecatory psalms?

Bonhoeffer had a superb understanding that. The Lutheran pastor martyred by the Nazis at the end of the war, made the comment that Jesus Christ alone is the only one who had the kind of spirit who could rightly pray the imprecatory psalms. He alone could offer the psalms on judgment of the wicked in a right spirit. The rest of us would have the tendency to do it from the standpoint of vengeance.

So what do I do with the imprecatory psalms? I translate them, filter them through the New Testament and I understand in doing that when I come to a prayer like, God, kill my enemies I am saying, "Lord, I know that in the end I know that justice is yours and you will deal equitably. In the meantime let me remember the word of the Lord: Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who do you wrong, pray for those who spitefully use you. Filter the Old Testament through the life of the New Testament.

Hebrews 10 tells us that the Old Testament is but a shadow of the better things to come. The whole old system, Moses was a servant in God's house but Christ is the Son and therefore has the permanent right.

This therefore ought to keep us from attempting to build obscure doctrines out of Old Testament passages. It also means that we ought to be real careful in interpreting the Old Testament in looking at it. We always ought to go for the principle.

I struggled with this a few years ago when I preached through the book of Leviticus. How do you preach through the book of Leviticus to a modern congregation. Some people do that by allegorizing it. They find a meaning in every color and every thread and a hidden symbol in everything. It seems to me that Jesus did not use that kind of interpretative method. But what he did always go for was the key underlying principle. There's always a key principle that underlies the external reality. The New Testament always tells us to go to the heart of the law rather than the external trapping of the law itself. So we attempt to do that. That's just a fundamental rule when you start out and you're looking at scripture. You read a passage in the Old Testament, you don't understand it – "I don't understand all that killing going on..." That was for a time and place. It's like revelation. God's revelation to his people is a dawning, a gradual dawning kind of a process. It's like the rising of the sun over the horizon. As the light continued to rise you see more clearly. When the light was dimmer was it because the sun was less? No. It was because at that point in the horizon it was at a different zenith. It was at a different perspective. So God, in order to train his people, the law was our pedagogue to Christ. It taught vital principles. There were different gradations of light until Christ who is the light appears and makes all things perfectly clear to us.

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This keeps us from all these entanglements about is Christmas a pagan holiday. Do we observe laws? Jesus really forever settled the question of the Sabbath when he said that man is not the slave of the Sabbath but the Sabbath of man. Jesus rose again on the first day. The Christians kept the first day instead of the seventh day. They radically altered the calendar. We don't need to go back to that because what Christ did was redefine that commandment. It filtered through the life of the New Testament.

That's the first vital principle.

The second vital principle of biblical interpretation is that as a general rule the epistles (the letters) interpret the gospels or Acts the historical portions.

Why do I say this? Because as you're reading along in the gospels you may discover a particular historical incident. A matter being described and you err if you attempt to build doctrine from that without consultation of the epistles.

Specific example: Let's take the parable of the ten virgins. The five wise virgins and the five foolish virgins. In my "eternal insecurity" background – some of you are eternal securitists, I'm an eternal securitist or was. I believe strongly in the eternal security of the believer. I say nothing about the security of someone who is walking in unbelief. The scriptures do teach the eternal security of the believer. If you're walking away from the Lord you don't want me to pat you on the shoulder and say everything's all right. I'm going to afflict you with the word of God and tell you to get your act straightened out with the Lord.

But the parable of the five wise and the five foolish virgins always left me with the impression, a kind of off the wall impression, that the Lord would time his coming to coincide with something wrong I was doing. And when I should have been filled with oil at that moment I would have run out. How scary that is! Does the Holy Spirit present a doctrine of salvation from the parable of the five wise and the five foolish virgins or is that a story that helps us to know preparedness and how do we prepare for the Lord's return, how do we keep oil in our lamp? We keep it through having a relationship with Jesus Christ, through being justified by faith. It is the epistles, specially the book of Romans and Galatians which in a very clear way outline to us our condemnation before God and our righteousness in Christ. Even as I am not saved by doing righteous acts but I am saved by my relationship with Jesus Christ so it does not necessarily follow that if at the moment of the Lord's return I am doing something wrong like maybe having lost my temper does that forfeit my salvation? On the basis of the gospels we say If you believe in your heart and confess with your lips that Jesus is the Christ you will be saved, we take that because that is the scripture which gives us the doctrine of salvation. We don't therefore use incidents like this and distort them and take them out of the totality of scripture and say Yes, you're justified by faith but you're raptured by works. That would be to subvert things.

I've shared with you that as a ten year old kid I initially came to the Lord because I dreamed that the Lord had returned and I wasn't ready. I was ten years of age and dad was pastoring in Oklahoma. I remember tip-toeing out of my bedroom about three in the morning to see if the folks were there and I couldn't see anybody. My brother and sister were in Bible school. I got so scared I went back to bed and trembled the rest of the night. In between being afflicted with terror that I'd been left behind I mused upon the fact that I was the only ten year old kid left on

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the block with a 1950 Hudson. When you're a kid you think so crooked. So strange. Your thoughts aren't straight.

Same way with the rich young ruler. He comes to the Lord and the Lord says, Sell all you have. In need of interpreting that does that become a universal command to all believers or does that become a specific rule related to that man that the Lord read into his deeper heart and into his deeper need and said This is what you need to do.

We say yes, that is what it meant. It was not a universal command to all believers of all time always sell your possessions as condition of entering the kingdom of God. We know that because when the systematic doctrine of salvation is laid out in the epistles we're again given the requirements: the just shall live by faith.

We develop then our stewardship off of that and recognize in the epistles that yes some do have a special calling to leave all and follow. Others are given a calling to stay where they are and serve in the midst of that context of being faithful to God and following within the order of their own life.

A third kind of a key in interpreting the scripture is that systematic passages interpret incidental or specific passages.

For example the Mormons build a doctrine from 1 Corinthians 15:29. A doctrine of being baptized for dead. In that specific passage Paul is talking about the resurrection and saying to some of the Corinthians how is it that some of you are saying there is no resurrection for the dead. And he gives a line of reasons why they shouldn't be saying this. Among the things which he uses as an argument is if there is no resurrection what will those do who are baptized for the dead if the dead are not raised at all why are people baptized for them? Mormons take this and say here is Paul teaching a doctrine of proxy baptism, baptism for the dead. Here is an incidental passage where persons are trying in that particular cult to build more weight on that particular doctrine upon that text than it can support. Paul nowhere is saying he endorses the practice. It is an argument that he is appealing to in the course of putting down the Corinthian position that some of them were saying there is no resurrection from the dead. Paul said if there is no resurrection from the dead then why are you baptizing on behalf of the dead? That's the sum and substance of it. He's not approving the practice. Neither is he specifically disapproving it. But he doesn't teach it as a doctrine.

Where do we go for specific passages which outline for us the doctrine of salvation? Is there any specific passage in talking about a relationship that says when all else fails and you die have somebody else be baptized for you and you'll get saved? No. "It's appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment."

An early church father actually explains to us what actual practice was going on at Corinth. He talks about a practice they had. He said when somebody who was being initiated in the Christian life but hadn't yet been baptized, they were simply in the process of being given the catechism, when he dies they hide a living man under the dead man's bed. The corpse is asked if he wants to be baptized and the hiding man responds "Yes."

Take an incident passage like this and apply it to systematic passages which give doctrine of salvation.

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The same thing as the incidental passage James 2:24. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. James at this moment is not like Paul in Romans laying out a systematic understanding for how salvation operates. He is correcting an abuse of faith. He is not in that particular passage teaching a doctrine of salvation. He is rebuking a corrupt understanding of salvation which simply holds that it is intellectually assent without active fruit.

I think another passage which has greatly been abused by charismatic is a practice we've fallen into – binding. I've done it myself so I'm not picking on anybody. But as I've looked at the scripture I realize we may be putting more weight on that than it can bear. Jesus says to Peter in Matthew 16 that "Whatever he binds on earth will be bound in heaven." 16:19 and "Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Then in chapter 18 he gives the same power to all of the disciples. He indicates to them in 18:18 "I tell you the truth whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." We then develop out of that word "binding" carte blanche anytime we need something bound – some evil spirit or situation. "Lord, I bind this in your name."

If you look very specifically at those passages you'll find that the way we're using them often is an incorrect usage. We're letting a whole theology control a specific passage. And the New Testament does not support Christians getting together and binding things in that realm. The binding passages have to do with entrance into the body of Christ and discipline within the body of Christ. They have to do with, for example, the terms of salvation. As you watch and see how they're interpreted as you flow through the book of Acts you'll find that the question that confronted the early church is, What constitutes the grounds of salvation? Adherence to the law and circumcision? Or faith in Christ? Shall the Gentiles come in without the other?

When Peter with the others, with the apostles, being led by the Spirit said from the book of Amos that God has reached the Gentiles and a man shall be saved on the basis of his faith not upon obedience to the law. They in effect opened the kingdom of heaven to those who would come in.

On the other hand when the church disciplines a person who is unrepentant, Matthew 18, and refuses the process of the one, the two and the many and are put out, what God is saying that he recognizes that process – whatever is bound on earth will be bound in heaven. Nothing is said in that passage about binding any spirits. It has to do with a specific matter of entrance into the body of Christ, what constitutes entrance into the body of Christ and specifically what constitutes discipline or expelling from the body of Christ.

We look at all the passages on binding and we find out wonder of wonders, Jesus has already bound the devil. So when we bind him, maybe if we want to think of binding him, ok. But see him with his hands already thoroughly tied and all the ropes are around him. Christians cast out evil spirits, yes. I'd rather cast them out than bind them. I'd rather throw them away than tie them up. That's exactly where the scripture that's this position. I think sometimes we perhaps are not as careful with the scripture. I include me in that.

There's a new view going out in the positive confession movement about sending your spirit someplace. Using the scripture where Paul says "absent from the body present with you in spirit," talking about the discipline of the man in 1 Corinthians 5. And Paul was caught up in 2

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Corinthians 12 “whether in the body or out of the body I don’t know.” That suddenly becomes a text for sending your spirit somewhere. Again a misunderstanding of a text, building doctrine on incidental passages rather than taking systematic passages and literalizing. Paul is not literalizing. Scripture denies that. It belongs in the realm of the occult. People who just take a little verse and build major doctrines from it are in trouble.

A fourth interpretation that will really help us is universal passages interpret local passages. That is, those passages which are universal in scope and application interprets specific cultural applications. For example you can read the book of Philemon as many did during the Civil War and many use that as an advocacy of slavery. Paul’s sending back a slave to his owner. Yet the universal in that is Galatians 3:28 “In Christ there’s neither Jew nor Greek.” Paul, in that moment is laying out the universal and saying that there are specific situations where that universal is not yet come. How are Christians to behave while they’re waiting for the full impact of the glorious gospel to break into culture and society?

The practice of greeting one another with a holy kiss is a given local kind of phenomenon. We replace it with a handshake or hug. We’re taking a local and understanding it from a universal scripture and going with the universal process of hospitality of saints one toward another.

Wherever you come to interpreting the scripture you come to the need for balance. Everybody can quote scripture but that doesn’t mean they use it rightly. The devil quoted scripture to Jesus. Psalm 91:11-12 he quoted specifically from that psalm. In Matthew 4 about if you dash your foot against a stone the angels will pick you up before you do. What does Jesus do? He answers scripture with scripture. There must be a balance. True, God will take of you. But also true, do not test, do not put the Lord your God to the test. One scripture does not allow you the presumption of ignoring the other. But things go in balance.

That’s why when you look at the whole subject of faith we always remember that faith is a two sided coin. One side is what might be called active faith or faith that believes and sees God change the circumstances. The other side is perseverance. Which holds on when the circumstances aren’t changing. Both sides are faith.

There are people who are the claim-it people who say faith is only this side. And there are the suffering people who say it’s this side. But it’s both. Faith is seeing God act to change the circumstances and faith is empowering us to be strong when the circumstances aren’t changing. It’s the balance within scripture that’s needed.

In scriptural interpretation some little pieces of counsel.

Watch out for those who build major emphasis from obscure and debatable passages. That’s key and fundamental.

Watch out for those who claim to have found a secret key or who insist upon being exclusively listened to.

If there is a practice that is biblical that has fallen into disuse in the church we do need to renew. But we’re talking about some hidden mystery of interpretation of scripture that can only be got for \$29.95 in a book. Watch for anybody who insists that they be exclusively listened to. God

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has placed many teachers in the body of Christ and we ought to be careful about just being tuned in to one narrow span.

In my life I have profited from a great diversity within the body of Christ which have helped form my faith. I think that keeps us, the balance, the dialogue, keeps us out of error. I find when I'm dialoguing with genuine believers that it sharpens my faith, it sharpens my awareness of what I myself stand for and what the body of Christ represents and stands for. Where we can find the major issues where we agree and where we can agree to disagree. Where I get my concerns is where persons insist that a particular interpretive view is the only view possible when it's clear from the scripture it's not. We have to watch those who say only listen to me or be my groupie, my follower, who insist on a secret key.

Be like the Bereans who searched the scriptures. That's the key. May you never receive anything from me just because I said it. My authority for teaching always stem out of the word of God and if it's not supported by the word then you have every right in the world to challenge me on it.

Mel White who did the book Deceived and the film which is the tremendous analysis of Jonestown and all that happened there spoke last year at chapel at Bethany Bible College. There was a glorious chapel service, a high emotional state. After being introduced, Mel White stepped up and he said, I love being here but I must tell you in all honesty that you're the kind of people and have the kind of worship that brought into Jonestown. Why would that happen to you? Because you do not challenge authority. You simply receive and you don't ask questions.

There's great truth to that. I am not a rebellious person. I'm not a person trying to go around and set somebody's apple cart of authority off. I believe there's properly constituted biblical authority in the church and there is wrongful rebelliousness. But there is a time when we need to ask leaders questions. If leaders are unwilling to answer the questions from the scripture then they ought not to lead. A person derives their right to lead and teach only from their loyalty to the scripture. We ought not to simply set and accept everything that goes by the board. We ought to challenge it with the scripture.

I'll never forget the impression that was made upon me by my father when the Latter Rain movement came out in the early 1950s. They began to have a phenomena of oil appearing on the palm of the hand. People would be in a service and oil would appear suddenly on the palm of their hand. There was an evangelist preaching this as kind of a third or fourth blessing experience. They invited anybody who was curious to come up and actually see the phenomenon. My dad being the searching person that he is and not gullible, it was an old friend of his that was preaching this. He walked up and sure enough there was oil there. Literally.

On the other hand my dad knew there were other people who didn't have oil miraculously appearing but in the cold weather would go out and put Vaseline on their hands and come into the worship service and start clapping their hands and rejoicing and suddenly oil would be there.

What did my dad do with this? He said there's no scriptural precedent for oil happening on the hand. I suppose it could happen. It could be in the category of Peter's shadow. Nobody else's shadow was falling upon people and healing them. If you don't find it in scripture that must mean it's not a universal then. If it's not in scripture it's not universal. It's not for all believers at all times for all places. It's some unique manifestation of God. We rejoice in it. We deplore

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the pattern of getting everybody into the same mold. And deplore the copying that goes on to be accepted as spiritual. We go on. He challenged authority. That taught me a lot as a kid that it's ok to challenge authority. You don't have to be rebellious to challenge authority. God has not made us to simply be gullible people.

The third thing to watch out for are those who neglect passages that differed from their view.

It's the whole of scripture that needs to be proclaimed. Here's where I've had my problem with positive confession people. They'll say of Job, "What I feared has come upon me." Negative confession. But turn right around and ignore the next verse which says, "In all this Job did not sin against God." God himself proclaimed him innocent. How can anybody declare him guilty?

Plain sense of scripture – neglecting passages or totally subverting them that differ from their point of view.

The fourth thing to watch out for is those who twist and distort the scripture on a rather continual basis.

We know the cults do this rather regularly. Just talk to a Jehovah Witness about the identity of Jesus Christ and you'll see it. Scripture is given for our profit. If we'll be careful to let God's word speak to us in the way that the scripture itself insists on speaking to us. Principles within the scripture. Scripture is the best interpreter of scripture. We seek only to understand those principles by which the scriptures interprets itself as good rules for interpretation.

I think this kind of hits the highlights of what we need to be looking for when we are properly understanding the word of God – rightly dividing the word of truth as the author of Hebrews tells us.

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