

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORD, PART II

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FIVE MAJOR AREAS OF UNDERSTANDING

The general principles of right interpretation can be summarized here under five headings: words, grammar, context, historical circumstances, and harmony of all truth. The study of these five master guides to understanding is *grammatical-historical interpretation*.

Words

First, we must recognize the meaning of the words. Words are the basic symbols of ideas. A word is accepted by a group of people as the sign of some thought or experience which they have in common, and which they are able to suggest to one another by it.

1. A word means whatever it is used to mean; and we must learn its meaning from its uses. It may be used for various meanings, by different people and in different areas or departments of knowledge. A good reader needs a broad and accurate knowledge of words that he may recognize any of their meanings. For this we need most accurate and complete dictionaries, and must supplement them by continual observation of the various uses of Bible words.

2. Investigation of word meaning must be made from the point of view of the author we are interpreting, giving attention to his special uses and to all uses nearest him in time, in territory, and in subject matter.

3. A writer's own explanation of his expressions is sufficient and final. We must not depart from what the author tells us he meant.

4. Words of the writer's original expression in his own language are always surer evidence of his meaning than words of any translation.

5. Etymologies of translation words must not be substituted for etymologies of those translated. The etymology of a word is the study of the root meaning of each of its component parts. For example: analyzing the root meanings of *repentance* does not properly explain the Greek word *metanoia*.

6. Words in any language are likely to change in meaning and to depart considerably from etymology: i.e. from the import of words from which they were derived.

7. Not only the kind of meaning, but also the extent of meaning or degree of force a word has is greatly affected by a) the connection it has with other words, b) the purpose of the author at the time, and c) the opposite which its user has in mind for it in each instance.

8. Words may be used either literally (with their usual meaning) or figuratively (to designate something quite different from what they usually name, but suggesting some vivid association or comparison between the two).

9. Figurative meaning, or any new meaning, should not be assumed by the reader if ordinary well-established meanings fit the passage being read.

Sentences

Second, we must interpret the grammatical structure of the sentences. Understanding grammar is an important part of interpreting the words in any sentence. Words are the bricks and boards of which a house of meaning is built; grammar is the design by which they are put together to make it a house instead of a heap. What the author thinks about the things designated by his words is shown by the grammar he uses; also the way he feels about them is indicated in the syntax. Even people who think they know no grammar do grasp the meaning of the most usual and simple grammatical constructions or they would not be able to read.

Most people who have studied a foreign language can remember instances of students' being able to give a meaning for every word in a sentence to be translated, yet being unable to translate it, to make meaning out of it. What was lacking was ability to perceive the relation of the words to each other and the meaning indicated by those relations: that is grammar, or syntax. There is meaning in syntax that is not found in any single word. There is meaning, meaning that must be perceived by the reader, in every different voice, mood, tense, number, person of the verb, also in every other inflection (different spelling to indicate the kind of grammatical connection) of any part of speech. One who cannot see the sentence construction and grasp its meaning cannot read what the author was thinking when he wrote it.

Anyone who has not had the experience of analyzing Bible sentences, and perhaps diagraming the analysis, ought to try it and see how it can clarify and determine definitely the interpretation.

There are many things to look for in grammar, such as: whether the sentence is a statement, question, or command; what the subject is; what noun a pronoun refers to; what the modifier modifies; whether the expression is singular or plural; and whether the clause expresses a purpose or a result; whether a modifying word or phrase is restricting and designating the noun it modifies or simply adding description without limiting its use in this sentence.

In English, word order and punctuation are often the main indication of grammatical connections. We must observe the punctuation marks and determine what they were used to indicate.

Context

Third, we must read in the light of the context and abide by its guidance. By means of careful attention to the paragraph, section, chapter, or book in which any expression occurs, we should: (1) perceive the subject of which the author is speaking and not apply his words to something far from his thought; (2) follow his course of thought or plan of presentation; (3) find his purpose for each word or phrase; (4) feel his own places and matters for emphasis, with the degree thereof; (5) see his mental or explicit antitheses so that the exact sense of his words is seen by the way they fit what he has in mind as the opposite of what he is saying. Of course, (6) for the context to be used properly it must be determined of what it really consists.

Some isolated passages, like many proverbs, may not have any context on the same subject. Some contexts are quite limited, others are extended, even to the full length of a book, or related books by the same author. A helpful context may be remote from the focus of attention, especially in the case of intervening digressions. The full context will usually supply some of the facts to be discussed under the next heading.

The very best method for learning to interpret by the context

(letting the author lead your mind in his line of thought) is to practice making a true outline of each book, section, or passage. Chapters are often convenient portions, but important sections may continue through more than one chapter or not end where the chapter does. Outlining is simply comprehension of the contents in their parts and the relation of each part with the rest. We should develop the habit of seeing the outline (contents and connections) of everything that we read.

Another good practice is to write a paraphrase stating briefly the main ideas of the passage you are studying. Then write longer paraphrases until you include all the content and indicate the intended connection of each of its parts. This does not need to be difficult to do, and it can be enjoyable. It will surely help you see each part in its context.

Historical Circumstances

Fourth, we must take into account all relevant historical circumstances. The meaning may be indicated, limited, or affected otherwise by any or all of the following particulars: Who wrote this? About what? In what form? To whom? When? Under what covenant? Under what personal circumstances? With what helps? For what purpose? What knowledge of the subject and of the readers did he have? What related facts did he suppose to be familiar to his readers?

Archaeology furnishes the answers to some of these questions. It also gives valuable help toward our understanding of the customs, times, and peoples referred to in the Bible.

Special questions of historical circumstances relate to ancient books like the Bible. Have they come down to us unchanged? Has the text suffered some alteration or loss? Is it an accurate and effective translation of the original? Is it the most accurate and clear translation that can be made?

Four key words label the four necessary parts of the study of

Biblical Introduction: *integrity*, the wholeness of the text as it was originally written; *genuineness*, the reality of its authorship; *authenticity*, the historical truthfulness or reliability of its contents; and *inspiration*, the divine origin of the message and guidance of the writer.

In the interpretation of predictive prophecy the surest guide is found by knowing the event that clearly fulfilled the prediction (e.g. Isa. 7;14; 53:1-12; Psalms 22).

Harmony of All Truth

Fifth, we must interpret in harmony with parallel passages and in the light of all Bible teaching on the same subject.

1. Any true statement must be consistent with all related inspired statements and established truths. An intelligent man will not knowingly contradict himself, although some may fail in this regard and make inconsistent statements. Inspired writings, if accurately preserved and correctly understood, will never conflict.

2. Hence, passages which are obscure or capable of more than one meaning must be interpreted to agree with those which are clear and definite in meaning.

3. Those which are general or incomplete in expression must be considered to include or make room for all specific statements on the same subject.

4. Every verse must be allowed to stand and speak its part and never be completely overshadowed or denied by another.

There is some danger in interpreting by means of parallels too exclusively, especially when an alleged parallel passage is practically pasted over one that is not allowed to say what it has to say.

5. Every passage must be read as fully as possible in its own context and by its own wording, or we cannot even tell whether another is parallel with it.

6. One cannot be a guide to or limitation on the meaning of

the other unless they treat of the same subject. The same words may be prominent in two passages and still not be on the same specific subject. Observe the meaning of *faith* in Romans 10:17 and 14:23.

7. A real knowledge of any Bible subject is formed by observing and comparing all the statements relating to that subject. There needs to be a true inductive investigation of all the truth.

INFERENCES AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE SCRIPTURE

Inference is the action of the mind which derives (deduces) from given statements what must be true if they are true. Often errors are committed, not in the simple reading of the Bible, but in the use made of it in constructing conclusions or systems of doctrine. Many devout persons seem able to put two and two together and get seven, when they devoutly feel that seven is more perfect religiously. Others look too much at the surface of things and they put two and two together and get twenty-two.

A favorite indoor sport is jumping to conclusions. One man's interesting speculation may be picked up by another and made a doctrine important in proportion to the respect he feels for the first man. We may be inclined to believe what a passage only suggests to our minds but does not prove in any sure way.

In order to comprehend and apply the full teaching of the Bible it is often necessary to draw some inferences or see the implications which are clearly associated with its words. In fact, we often intend to convey somewhat more thought than we formally express because we expect the hearer or reader to draw the necessary inferences. One clear statement, when understood and fully accepted, establishes in the mind all the immediate and necessary inferences such as the converse and obverse of the same, and refutes all which actually contradict it.

In a broad and practical sense we fully interpret a passage only when we can safely and accurately draw the immediate in-

ferences. In drawing even the simplest inferences our accuracy depends upon the correctness of our understanding of the original statement, not as it appears we may use it, but exactly as its author intended it.

On the one hand, it is not fair to dodge the clear, immediate inference of a God-given truth or command. On the other hand, although such inferences are binding on the conscience of the person who sees them, they must be regarded as human statements liable to human error. They may be taught as our conclusions and have some importance; but they must not be bound upon others as the actual words of scripture, or be made a test of fellowship excluding those who cannot see them as the real meaning of divine utterances.

Think through the following *principles* and try them out for truth:

1. No Bible verse can honestly be used as authority for anything except the one meaning it was intended to convey.
2. No statement denies anything except that to which it is essentially opposed.
3. A passage of scripture actually supports only that conclusion which must be true if it is true — only necessary inferences from its intended meaning — not merely possible or probable implications.
4. Analogies may clarify an affirmation, or indicate its probability, but they furnish no positive proof of any inferential conclusion.
5. There cannot be proof for more in the conclusion than is actually contained in the premises, or evidence from which the conclusion is drawn. (A *premise* is a statement of evidence from which a conclusion is drawn.)

If these were carefully observed, many faulty conclusions now common would be avoided.

Study Questions

1. List the five headings for the general principles of right interpretation.
2. What is the correct meaning of a word?
3. Distinguish between the literal and figurative meaning of a word.
4. What does it mean to analyze the grammar in a sentence?
5. What kind of things should one look for in grammar?
6. What is the context of a statement?
7. List six things to look for in establishing the context.
8. Why is it helpful to outline a passage, chapter or a book?
9. What basic questions help us establish the historical circumstances of a passage?
10. List and briefly define four words in the study of Biblical introduction.
11. A true statement will agree with all other true statements. Do you agree?
12. What is an inference?
13. What meaning of any Bible verse is the only authoritative one?

Project

List three or four rules under each of the five master guides to understanding. State them clearly in your own words. Type them on one sheet of paper or make a flip chart with a separate poster for each heading or make an overhead transparency for each heading.

Your arrangement should look like this:

I. WORDS

1. A word means what it is used to mean.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

II. SENTENCES

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

etc.