

Understanding the Bible: Common Sense Principles of Biblical Interpretation and Application

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Bible study is a subject of intense interest for most Christians and any believer who has spent much time reading and studying the Scriptures can testify to their life-changing truth. The Bible, however, should be read intelligently and understood in the light of the original intent of each inspired writer. The belief that "all Scripture is inspired by God" does not mean foregoing reason or doing away with historical, cultural and linguistic study. In order to get the most out of Bible study certain facts are simply essential to know. First, the Bible is a collection of written documents of various kinds. They were collected over many centuries and finally put in the form in which we have them today. These "books" are arranged logically. For example, in the New Testament: the Gospels, then Acts and then the NT Letters.

Originally, however, each New Testament Gospel, Letter, etc. was written independently to a specific group of people to address specific situations and needs. Each of these NT documents focused on some aspect of the "gospel" of Jesus Christ. But the inspired writers of these documents did not write them with the idea of their being put into a NT "canon" of Scripture - this occurred much later with the final form of our present canon being completed only in the 4th century. Originally each NT document was a self-contained "Gospel," "Letter," etc. and should be read as such. Since they each focus on some aspect of the "gospel" they all fit together "thematically." However, to try to make them fit together in every detail like a giant jigsaw puzzle is to go beyond their original purpose.

Most of us are not Bible scholars nor do we need to be. The "gospel of salvation" (Eph. 1:13) is a simple message and when explained correctly it is easy to understand. All of the NT books revolve around this same theme. However, if we are going to teach the Bible in our fellowships, churches, Bible studies, etc. then we have a responsibility to be as accurate as we can in what we present. To do this it is helpful to not only read the Bible itself but also to consult Bible study aids that are prepared by experts

in biblical studies. The last half of the 20th century - especially the last 25 years - has seen a virtual explosion in such study aids and this will be our focus in this article.

First though, a few preliminary comments may be helpful. It is common knowledge that many Bible believing Christians prefer to "just read the Bible" rather than to use Bible study aids. The fact is, however, that we all read the Bible under the guidance and tutelage of others whether we know it or not. To begin with, every version of the English Bible that we use today - i.e., KJV, NIV, etc. - is the result of a painstaking effort by the translators and editors of that version to understand the "original" text and to translate it into equivalent English that communicates its message faithfully. This very process requires knowledge of the original biblical languages, history, culture, etc. and forces the translator to make *interpretive* choices in the words he or she chooses for the translation. In addition, it is even more obvious that most people who read the Bible also listen to sermons, teachings, etc. - all of which are aids for helping us to understand the Bible. The question is not then, *if* we should use study aids? Rather it is, *which* study aids will we use and/or *which* teachers will we choose to listen to?

In this light, the Book of Acts presents a wonderful record that is very instructive for those of us who are interested in coming to a better and more detailed understanding of the Bible:

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go South to the road - the desert road - that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. So he started out and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Who among us has not felt at times like the Eunuch as we endeavor to read and understand the Scriptures? Who has not at times felt like he needed help? In this light there are three specific points in this record that can serve as basic principles for us in our own reading and study of the Scriptures:

(1). *Read, study and memorize the Bible.* This is the first thing that should be noticed about the eunuch. He was reading the Scriptures in order to gain an understanding of them. He was searching for truth. This is so very important for no matter what else you do you must read the Scriptures if you want to understand them. Without doing this there is not much point in trying to proceed any further. For it is impossible to gain a good knowledge of the Bible as a whole without putting forth a great deal of time and effort. Few things in life that are worthwhile come easy and biblical understanding is certainly not one of them. In this light it must be emphasized: *any sincere quest for understanding the Bible must rest on the foundation of one's own reading, study and memorization of the Scriptures.*

(2). When reading the Bible we should always endeavor to understand it according to its *original intent and meaning* and, then, to determine how it *applies it to our lives today*. Therefore, when reading and studying the

Bible we should always ask ourselves two very basic and important questions:

a. *What was the inspired writer's original intent and meaning of the Scriptural passage that we are reading?*

b. *How does this Scriptural passage apply to me and to other fellow Christian believers today?*

Now certainly the great majority of Scripture can be understood in the plain sense in which it is read without any great need for further research. But the key to this is always reading the Scriptures in their historical, cultural and linguistic contexts. To do this we often need to consult experts in the field of biblical studies. Is there any other field of study where this is not true? The Eunuch in the passage above needed help in understanding the Scriptures from someone who was better trained in the Scriptures than himself. First, he read them for himself. Then he sought help from someone else. The principle responsibility lies upon ourselves for making the necessary effort to study the Bible and then to seek out those resources or teachers that/who can best help us. They don't just automatically or instantaneously appear on our desks, beside our easy chairs, or under the Christmas tree. In sum, if we are to understand the Scriptures correctly we must put forth the effort that is necessary to do so

(3). The focus of our study should be *the gospel*; that is, God's plan of salvation which he brings to fulfillment through his Son, Jesus Christ. The focus of what Philip taught "beginning from that very Scripture" was "the good news about Jesus." This is where all biblical study should begin and where its central and abiding focus must be. The purpose of Bible study is not to find things that will tickle our itching ears. It is to enable us to understand and live in the light of God's wonderful plan of salvation. Keeping this focus will help us avoid all kinds of charlatans who would have us believe and follow "some new thing" which they have just discovered in the Bible.