

Reasoning from the Scriptures Ministries

Rightly Interpreting the Bible

by Ron Rhodes

Methodology

The word "method" comes from the Greek word *methodos*, which literally means "a way or path of transit." Methodology in Bible study is therefore concerned with "the proper path to be taken in order to arrive at Scriptural truth."

This clearly implies that improper paths can be taken. Of course, proper methodology is essential to many fields of endeavor. A heart surgeon does not perform open heart surgery without following proper, objective methodology. (Would you trust a heart surgeon to operate on you who told you that he intended to discard objective methodology, instead opting for a subjective approach - cutting you where he feels like cutting you?)

Improper methodology in interpreting Scripture is nothing new. Even in New Testament times, the apostle Peter warned that there are teachings in the inspired writings of Paul "which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest [distort], as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16, insert added). This verse tells us that mishandling the Word of God can be very dangerous. Indeed, mishandling the Word of God is a "path" to destruction.

Contrary to the practices of some false teachers in Corinth, the apostle Paul assured his readers that he faithfully handled the Word of God (2 Corinthians 4:2). Paul admonished young Timothy to follow his example: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, italics added).

A Foundational Truth: God Created Language for a Purpose

A plain reading of Genesis indicates that when God created Adam in His own rational image, He gave Adam the gift of intelligible speech, thus enabling him to communicate objectively with his creator (and with other human beings) via sharable linguistic symbols called words (Genesis 1:26).

God sovereignly chose to use human language as a medium of revelational communication. If the primary purpose of God's originating of language was to make it possible for Him to communicate with human beings, as well as to enable human beings to communicate with each another, then it must follow that He would generally use language and expect man to use it in its **literal, normal, and plain sense** [emphasis mine].

This view of language is a prerequisite to understanding not only God's spoken word but His written Word (Scripture) as well. The Bible as a body of literature exists because human beings need to know certain spiritual truths to which they cannot attain by themselves.

Thus these truths must come to them from without - that is, via objective, special revelation from God (Deuteronomy 29:29). And this revelation can only be understood if one interprets the words of Scripture according to God's original design for language - that is, according to the ordinary, plain, literal sense of each word.

Seeking the Author's Intended Meaning

Instead of superimposing a meaning on the biblical text, the objective interpreter seeks to discover the author's intended meaning (the only true meaning). One must recognize that what a passage means is fixed by the author and is not subject to alteration by readers. Meaning is determined by the author; it is discovered by readers.

Our goal must be exegesis¹ (drawing the meaning out of the text) and not eisogesis (superimposing a meaning onto the text). By using eisogesis² instead of exegesis, a Marxist interpreter could, for example, so skew the meaning of the U.S. Constitution that it came out reading like a socialistic document.

Cultists have done the same type of thing with Holy Scripture. They so skew the meaning of the biblical text that it comes out saying something entirely different than what was intended by the author.

Only by objective methodology can we bridge the gap between our minds and the minds of the biblical writers. Indeed, our method of interpreting Scripture is valid or invalid to the extent that it really unfolds the meaning a statement had for the author and the first hearers or readers.

The Importance of Context

A woman entered the Democratic primary for governor of the state of Texas. She was convinced that the Bible had told her she would win the nomination. When she received the official list of names from the primary she saw her name printed last. Then she read in her Bible, "Many that are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:30). On the basis of that verse she thought God was telling her she would win. But she lost. This amusing story illustrates the need for interpreting Scripture in its proper context. Taken out of context, the Scriptures can be twisted to say just about anything.

Seeking the biblical author's intended meaning necessitates interpreting Bible verses in context. Every word in the Bible is part of a verse, and every verse is part of a paragraph, and every paragraph is part of a book, and every book is part of the whole of Scripture. No verse of Scripture can be divorced from the verses around it. **Interpreting a verse apart from its context is like trying to analyze a Rembrandt painting by looking at only a single square inch of the painting, or like trying to analyze Handel's "Messiah" by listening to a few short notes** [emphasis mine]. The context is absolutely critical to properly interpreting Bible verses.

In interpreting Scripture, there is both an immediate context and a broader context. The immediate context of a verse is the paragraph (or paragraphs) of the biblical book in question. The immediate context should always be consulted in interpreting Bible verses.

The broader context is the whole of Scripture. The entire Holy Scripture is the context and guide for understanding the particular passages of Scripture. We must keep in mind that the interpretation of a specific passage must not contradict the total teaching of Scripture on a point. Individual verses do not exist as isolated fragments, but as parts of a whole. The exposition of these verses, therefore, must involve exhibiting them in right relation both to the whole and to each other. Scripture interprets Scripture. As J. I. Packer puts it, "if we would understand the parts, our wisest course is to get to know the whole."

¹ The explanation or interpretation of texts, especially religious writings [notation mine].

² Reading into or interpreting a text in a way not meant by its author [notation mine].

The Importance of Historical Considerations

Historical considerations are especially important in properly interpreting the Word of God. The Christian faith is based on historical fact. Indeed, Christianity rests on the foundation of the historical Jesus whose earthly life represents God's full and objective self-communication to humankind (John 1:18). Jesus was seen and heard by human beings as God's ultimate revelation (1 John 1:1-3). This is why He could forcefully claim, "If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also" (John 14:7).

The apostle Paul, when speaking with the religious men of Athens, affirmed that the reality of the future judgment of all humanity rests on the objective, historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 17:16f.). This evidence is recorded for us in the New Testament Gospels, documents that are based on eyewitness testimony and written very close in time to the events on which they report. Based on how people respond to God's objective, historical revelation contained in Scripture, they will spend eternity in a real heaven or a real hell.

Making a Correct Genre Judgment

A "literal" approach to Scripture recognizes that the Bible contains a variety of literary genres, each of which has certain peculiar characteristics that must be recognized in order to interpret the text properly.

Biblical genres include the historical (e.g., Acts), the dramatic epic (e.g., Job), poetry (e.g., Psalms), wise sayings (e.g., Proverbs), and apocalyptic writings (e.g., Revelation). Obviously, an incorrect genre judgment will lead one far astray in interpreting Scripture.

A parable should not be treated as history, nor should poetry or apocalyptic literature (both of which contain many symbols) be treated as straightforward narrative. The wise interpreter allows his knowledge of genres to control how he approaches each individual biblical text. In this way, he can accurately determine what the biblical author was intending to communicate to the reader.

Now, even though the Bible contains a variety of literary genres and many figures of speech, the biblical authors most often employed literal statements to convey their ideas. Where they use a literal means to express their ideas, the Bible expositor must employ a corresponding means to explain these ideas - namely, a literal approach. A literal method of interpreting Scripture gives to each word in the text the *same basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary usage - whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking* [italics mine]. Without such a method, communication between God and man is impossible.

Interpret the Old Testament in Light of the New Testament

God gave revelation to humankind *progressively* throughout Old and New Testament times. He didn't just give His entire revelation for all time to our first parents, Adam and Eve, or to Moses, the Lawgiver. Rather, as time went on - as the centuries slowly passed - God provided more and more revelation that became progressively full so that by the time the New Testament was complete, God had told us everything He wanted us to know.

In view of this, a key interpretive principle is that one should always interpret the Old Testament in view of the greater light of the New Testament. The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted. The introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before. The Old Testament revelation of God is not corrected by the fuller revelation which follows it, but only perfected, extended, and enlarged.

Again, then, the Old Testament should be interpreted according to the greater light of the New Testament. The Old Testament is much clearer when approached through the lens of the New Testament.

Dependence on the Holy Spirit

Scripture tells us that we are to rely on the Holy Spirit's illumination to gain insights into the meaning and application of Scripture (John 16:12-15; 1 Corinthians 2:9-11). It is the Holy Spirit's work to throw light upon the Word of God so that the believer can assent to the meaning intended and act on it.

The Holy Spirit, as the "Spirit of truth" (John 16:13), guides us so that "we may understand what God has freely given us" (1 Corinthians 2:12). This is quite logical: full comprehension of the Word of God is impossible without prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God, for He who inspired the Word (2 Peter 1:21) is also its supreme interpreter.

Illumination is necessary because man's mind has been darkened through sin (Romans 1:21), preventing him from properly understanding God's Word. Human beings cannot understand God's Word apart from God's divine enablement (Ephesians 4:18). This aspect of the Holy Spirit's ministry operates within the sphere of man's rational capacity, which God Himself gave man (cf. Genesis 2-3).

Illumination comes to the 'minds' of God's people - not to some nonrational faculty like our 'emotions' or our 'feelings' [like a 'burning in the bosom']. To know God's revelation means to use our minds. This makes knowledge something we can share with others, something we can talk about. God's Word is in words with ordinary rational content.

The ministry of the Holy Spirit in interpretation does not mean interpreters can ignore common sense and logic. Since the Holy Spirit is "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), He does not teach concepts that fail to meet the tests of truth. In other words, "the Holy Spirit does not guide into interpretations that contradict each other or fail to have logical, internal consistency."

It must also be kept in mind that the function of the Holy Spirit is not to communicate to the minds of people any doctrine or meaning of Scripture that is not contained already in Scripture itself. **The Holy Spirit makes men "wise up to what is written, not beyond it."** Indeed, "the function of the Spirit is *not to communicate new truth* or to *instruct in matters unknown*, but to **illuminate what is revealed in Scripture**" (emphasis mine).

The Example of Jesus Christ

Jesus consistently interpreted the Old Testament quite literally, including the Creation account of Adam and Eve (Matthew 13:35; 25:34; Mark 10:6), Noah's Ark and the flood (Matthew 24:38-39; Luke 17:26-27), Jonah and the great fish (Matthew 12:39-41), Sodom and Gomorrah (Matthew 10:15), and the account of Lot and his wife (Luke 17:28-29).

In his book *The Savior and the Scriptures*, theologian Robert P. Lightner notes - following an exhaustive study - that Jesus' interpretation of Scripture "was always in accord with the grammatical and historical meaning. He understood and appreciated the meaning intended by the writers according to the laws of grammar and rhetoric."

Jesus affirmed the Bible's divine inspiration (Matthew 22:43), its indestructibility (Matthew 5:17-18), its infallibility (John 10:35), its final authority (Matthew 4:4,7,10), its historicity (Matthew 12:40; 24:37), its factual inerrancy (Matthew 22:29-32), and its spiritual clarity (Luke 24:25).

Moreover, He emphasized the importance of each word of Scripture (Luke 16:17). Indeed, He sometimes based His argumentation on a single expression of the biblical text (Matthew 22:32,43-45; John 10:34).

Is the Bible Alone Sufficient?

That the average person can understand Scripture without having to rely upon a church for the "authoritative teaching" is evident in the fact that Jesus taught openly and with clarity, and expected His followers to each understand His meaning. Recall that following His arrest, Jesus was questioned by the High Priest about His disciples and His teaching. Jesus responded:

Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and *I spoke nothing in secret. Why do you question Me?* Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; they know what I said" (John 18:20-21, emphasis added; NASB). According to Jesus, those who heard Him would be able to clearly enunciate what He had openly communicated. There were no confusing or obscure meanings in His words that required an "authoritative interpretation" by a church.

In keeping with this, the apostle Paul instructed young Timothy: "from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15; NASB). This verse points to the complete sufficiency of Scripture in the life of a believer.

Jewish boys formally began studying the Old Testament Scriptures when they were five years of age. Timothy had been taught the Scriptures by his mother and grandmother beginning at this age. Clearly, 2 Timothy 3:15 indicates that the Scriptures alone are sufficient to provide the necessary wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ.

The Scriptures alone are the source of spiritual knowledge. Then, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us that all Scripture is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

This verse does not say that Scripture as seen through the lens of the Mormon Church is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof," and so forth. It is Scripture that does these things. And the reason Scripture can do these things is that all Scripture is inspired by God (vs. 16a). The word inspired means "God-breathed." Scripture is sufficient because it finds its source in God. It is noteworthy that the phrase thoroughly furnished ("that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished") means "complete, capable, fully furnished, proficient in the sense of being able to meet all demands." Scripture alone makes a person complete, capable, and proficient. Scripture furnishes all that one must know to be saved and to grow in grace.

Correctly Handling the Word of Truth

Jesus said His words lead to eternal life (John 6:63). But for us to receive eternal life through His words, they must be taken as He intended them to be taken. A cultic reinterpretation of Scripture that yields another Jesus and another gospel (2 Corinthians 11:3-4; Galatians 1:6-9) will yield only eternal death (Revelation 20:11-15).

The above article is an example of the quality materials produced by Reasoning from the Scriptures Ministries. Write us for a full listing of other available free resources:

Reasoning from the Scriptures Ministries
P.O. Box 80087
Rancho Santa Margarita, CA 92688