How to Study the Bible

Biblical hermeneutics is the theory and practice of biblical interpretation. It's the set of rules we employ in order to understand the meaning of what we are reading. Not surprisingly, there are hundreds of different interpretations when it comes to the Bible; so the real question is, who is right and who is wrong? How do we know the rules we follow for interpretation are correct?

The answer is multi-faceted yet simple. The closer you get to truth, the fewer the existence of seeming "contradictions." The closer you get to the truth, the more each verse and passage fits perfectly with other verses and passages. The closer you get to the truth, the less mental gymnastics one needs to do in order to force things to make sense. A clearer and clearer picture emerges. And so it should; the Spirit of God is our Teacher—

> 1 Corinthians 2:9-13
> But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." 10 But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. 11 For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. 13 These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.
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> John 15:26
> "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me."
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> John 16:13-15
> "However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. 14 He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you. 15 All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare it to you."

RULES OF BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

These rules are not exhaustive, but they do give us a framework in which to study and understand what we're reading. The following list is not in order of importance—

1. Start at the beginning of the Bible and end at the end.

- This sets forth certain principles, such as the 7-day *restoration* account in Genesis, which establishes the 7-day *structure* of Scripture. This sets up the concept that all of Scripture (and consequently the structure of time as we know it) moves toward a 7th day rest.
- Genesis 1:2b-2:3 is the foundation of God's revelation to man.

2. Employ proper use of exegesis.

    - The text cannot mean something different today than what the original author intended it to mean (this is from a strictly literal sense of reading and understanding the text).
    - We need to take into account (when possible) the identity of the author, who his intended audience was, and why the book was written in order to set proper context.
    - Historical and literary context is essential. No verse or passage can be divorced from its surrounding context.

3. Scripture must interpret Scripture and is its own best commentary.

    - Man's commentary is secondary.
    - One does not need a theological degree to understand God's Word.
    - Concepts in Scripture are explained using *numerous passages* throughout the Bible; there is rarely an instance where interpretations are found in only one verse. (I say "rarely" and not "never" because it would be presumptuous to say so with certainty.) Isaiah 28:9-10 explains exactly how this works: <u>precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little and there a little.</u>

4. Every word of Scripture is inspired by God and therefore every word has meaning.

    - Nothing written in Scripture is happenstance or unimportant.
    - Using a "functional equivalent" approach when translating or understanding Scripture (this is the "broad stroke" approach) minimalizes (and many times confuses) the truths found in Scripture. Each word was originally written in a specific order, in a specific way, for a reason. Therefore we need to stick with proper *word-for-word* translations.
    - *However*, we rely on translators to give us our current English version of the scriptures and *translators make mistakes.* So, we need to use additional word study tools to dig into the Scriptures <u>using the original languages</u>.[1]
    - One of the best ways to understand the meaning of various words is to find where else they are used in Scripture and use the context of their overall usage to determine their meaning. A concordance and lexicon are very useful for this.

[1] This seems monumentally intimidating at first. But it is immensely rewarding when time and effort is given to understand the original languages.

5. There are multiple layers of meaning to God's Word:

    - Not only the historical, textual meaning but also deeper spiritual truths.
    - There are primary and secondary (and many times more) applications to God's Word. This can easily be seen when Old Testament passages— which are seemingly about a certain OT character—are quoted in the New Testament as pertaining to Jesus.
    - The "milk vs. meat" idea is an example of this (Hebrews 6:1-3).

6. Scripture is highly "typical" in nature.

    - "God structured His revelation to man after a fashion in which not only true, correct history is presented but this history is highly *typical* in nature. God, within His sovereign control of all matters, brought things to pass after such a fashion (within the history of the earth, angels, and man) that He could, at a later time, have these events to draw upon in order to teach His people the deep things surrounding Himself, His plans, and His purposes. And this would be accomplished mainly through types and corresponding antitypes." – Arlen Chitwood
    - The "typology" of the Old Testament is the "picture language" in which the doctrines of the New Testament are prefigured (the brazen serpent and the crucifixion are one such example, John 3:14-15).
    - You cannot understand Leviticus without Hebrews, or Daniel without Revelation, or the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion without Isaiah 53— *types and antitypes*.
    - "The New is in the Old contained; the Old is in the New explained."[2]

7. The Bible is ONE book with a main storyline—it has a beginning, an end, and a plethora of characters in-between.

    - Each book of the Bible fits together to form the central plot, but individually each book develops or teaches certain points regarding the whole.
    - The main word picture (plot) of the Bible is about the person and work of Jesus Christ.

8. Scripture uses both literal and figurative language.

    - The literal rendering should be supposed first.
    - Figurative language is usually expressed as such and the meaning is always explained somewhere in Scripture (this is not talking about typology, which is a different process altogether).

9. A useful tool in understanding the spiritual truth of a word or passage is to look at the context in which it is <u>first used</u>—this is the "Law of First-Mention" principle.

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[2] This is a quote by St. Augustine, who many consider the most significant figure in all of Christian theology and philosophy, next to Paul. I believe this concise quote is worthy of repeating; however, I do not ascribe much to St. Augustine's theological conclusions. That, though, is a topic for another study.

- This is simply believing that God sets a pattern of usage perfectly at the beginning, and since He is perfect in everything, He cannot and does not deviate from perfection. Hence, the first establishes all else.
- This tool of interpretation is based on the belief that the *order of the books* in our Bible is God-ordained and therefore the first time a word appears in the Bible— even if it is not the first time it appears *chronologically*— its usage and meaning are established.