



## Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

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### Interpreting the Bible

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#### Introduction

Correct interpretation of Scripture is absolutely vital but it is possible many ministers, busy as they are, do not consciously spend much time making sure their understanding of a passage of Scripture is correct. This guide asks many questions in the course of giving a skeletal overview of the subject. It needs to be adapted to the fraternal; it is certainly not intended that all the questions should be attempted.

#### Questions to get you started:

- 1) 1 Corinthians 2:9 (quoting Isaiah 54:4): 'Every preacher I have heard has used these words to talk about heaven' [Stuart Olyott, *Preaching Pure and Simple*, p.43]. Were they right or wrong to do so?
- 2) Revelation 3:20: 'But the context leaves us in no doubt that it is a backsliding Christian church that is being addressed here, not the unbeliever' [Brian Edwards, *Nothing but the Truth*, p.128]. Can this verse be used evangelistically or not?
- 3) 'The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false' [David Steinmetz, *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics*, p.77]. Really? What do you think?
- 4) Most heresies arise from misinterpretations of Scripture. True or false?

#### 1. First Principles

The Bible is the locus of God's special revelation:

- It explains general revelation in creation
- It reveals the gospel which is centred in Jesus Christ our Lord
- It makes known all that God desires us to know (Deut.29:29)
- It gives us principles which cover the whole of life
- So to misinterpret the Bible can lead to the most serious consequences

Explaining and applying the Bible lies at heart of the ministry of the pastor/teacher:

- He ministers the Bible to people in general
- He ministers the Bible to the church in particular
- He ministers the Bible to the personal needs, problems and questions of people of different ages, temperaments, backgrounds, intelligence and circumstances
- He seeks to ensure that his own personal life, ministerial life, family life, and the life of the church and of its members is ordered biblically

Teaching the Bible involves understanding it correctly and communicating it accurately. Interpretation is necessary because:

- The Bible is a collection of books
- These were written in the distant past, at different times from each other and in different cultures
- They consist of different literary forms
- They were written in Hebrew and Greek (and a little Aramaic)
- The Bible includes the most elevated themes and most important subjects
- It is not all easy to understand

The pastor/teacher needs to be competent in interpretation:

- In his own use of the Bible and preparation for ministry
- In setting an example of careful interpretation in his preaching
- In interpreting the Bible for the church and the world
- In appropriate application of the Bible to the church and life issues

### **Questions for discussion:**

- 1) Do you think you give enough time to considering questions of interpretation?
- 2) You have prepared a really good sermon but at almost the last moment you are not sure it interprets the Bible correctly. What do you do?
- 3) Do you give any guidance in interpreting the Bible to your congregation?

## **2. Basic principles of interpretation**

It is possible to classify principles of interpretation in various ways. These are fairly broad principles. The order is roughly logical, but they are all important:

### **A) Interpret according to the genre (literary form) of the text**

- There are broad genres: narrative (more than half the Bible); poetry (a third of the Bible); law; apocalyptic
- There are large number of narrower genres, sometimes called 'embedded' genres as they are usually found in larger generic contexts (e.g. parable, doxology, genealogy, proverb, benediction, sermon)
- Many of the books of the Bible can be classified in broadly generic terms: letter, Gospel, prophecy, songs, proverbs, law

### **Questions for discussion:**

What are the main features of Hebrew poetry?  
How does narrative work?

### **B) Interpret according to the context of the text**

- There is the historical and cultural context in which the text was written
- There is the context of the book in which it occurs
- There is the more immediate context in which it occurs: section, paragraph, perhaps even sentence
- There is its context in the overall storyline of the Bible

### **Questions for discussion:**

How does Esther fit into the Bible's storyline? Or Job?  
How far should historical background find a place in sermons?

### **C) Interpret according to the natural meaning of the words in their grammatical arrangement**

- The smallest unit of meaning is the sentence
- Words take their specific meaning from the way in which they are used in particular cases

- There is a frequent use of metaphor in the Bible, especially in poetic passages. In this case the natural meaning is not the literal meaning (e.g. 'the Lord is my shepherd')
- All languages have idioms (i.e. expressions which cannot be simply transferred into another language) e.g. 'I'll run you over and drop you off'
- Poetry uses words in a particular way which affects understanding of what is being said

**Questions for discussion:**

Think of the different ways these words are used in the NT: flesh; spirit; sleep; world. How can you determine the exact nuance?

Many evangelicals make mistakes in interpretation because they interpret the Bible too literally. Is this a fair judgment?

**D) Interpret according to theological principle**

- As God's Word the Bible is true and harmonious
- Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture
- Scripture's centre of unity is salvation in Jesus Christ

**Questions for discussion:**

What dangers must be avoided in attempting to interpret Scripture by Scripture?

In what ways do we find Christ in the OT?

**Concluding questions**

- 1) When was the last time each member read a book on biblical interpretation? What was it?
- 2) What book on interpretation would they recommend to a Bible Class teacher/ local preacher?
- 3) What book on interpretation would they recommend to someone preparing to go for theological training?
- 4) What book on interpretation would they recommend to each other?