

Hermeneutics 101

The 8 Rules of Scriptural Interpretation

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15).

1. ENLIST THE AID OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN YOUR STUDY OF SCRIPTURE

Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come (Jn 16:13).

But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, ***and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him*** (1 Jn 2:27).

Those who merely rely on their intellectual reasoning without enlisting the help of the Spirit are bound to arrive at a flawed understanding of Scripture:

But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man (1 Cor 2:14-15).

If a Christian only has knowledge of the Bible, but very little inspired revelation, it may be that he or she has not yet experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The inspired revelation to which I refer is the difference between two important words found in the original NT Greek, namely *gnosis* (knowledge) and *rhema* (inspired revelation). In this case, *gnosis* refers to the knowledge of God's Word (the *logos*), while *rhema* refers to the **Spirit-derived understanding of the Word**. These two are very different. Famed author Watchman Nee has this to share about the subject:

"In Matthew 4:4 Jesus said, "'It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word (*rhema*) that proceeds out through the mouth of God.'" ...Can we say that man shall not live by bread alone, but by the Word of God recorded in the Bible? No. We are not saying that the written Word of God is of no use, but that *logos*—the Word of God recorded in the Bible—is of no use to us **by itself**. “**...for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life** (2 Cor 3:6). ...Both *logos* and *rhema* are the Word of God, but the former is God's Word objectively recorded in the Bible, while the latter is the word of God **revealed** to us at a specific occasion."

To show you what *rhema* looks like in context of Scripture, notice the following example:

*And take the helmet of salvation, and the **sword of the Spirit, which is the word (RHEMA) of God*** (Eph 6:17).

It is interesting that while the Word of God normally appears as *logos* in the Greek text, here in Ephesians 6:17 the word *rhema* was chosen instead. This leads us to wonder if Christians who are deficient in *rhema* are more likely to wield the Word of God like a blunt sword with little penetrating power, instead of using it like the “sharp two-edged sword” described in Scripture (Heb 4:12).

So as much as we want to understand the spiritual themes of the Bible, we cannot go about it with an intellectual or logic-only approach. **We must approach the Word of God as though an encrypted document that needs supernatural interpretation which only the Holy Spirit is able to provide.**

But there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding (Job 32:8).

2. AVOID PRIDE AND SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS SO THAT GOD DOES NOT BLIND YOU!

The Pharisees were convinced that they knew everything. They were self-righteous and proud. And so they scoffed at Christ's message and mocked Him. But even today the

leaven of the Pharisees still persists in the lives of many Believers, causing them to become spiritually blind:

They have not known nor understood: for he hath shut their eyes, that they cannot see; and their hearts, that they cannot understand (Isa 44:18).

He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them (Jn 12:40).

3. RECOGNIZE THAT THE BIBLE DIVIDES INTO THE FOLLOWING FIVE CATEGORIES

1. Historical record of factual events
2. Law and commandments
3. Prophetic text
4. Parables with allegorical meaning
5. Doctrinal and theological teachings

Historical Record

The stories that exist in the Bible **are part of historical record and must be taken literally**. If we try to “spiritualize” the Bible’s factual events, such as the 6 day creation or the Red Sea crossing, and make them symbolic for something else, we are in grave error and inconsistent with proper hermeneutics.

Law and Commandments

God’s laws and commandments can be applied practically and literally to every area of our life.

Prophetic Text

Like parables, prophecy is rife with symbolism. We must be careful then not to immediately extract the plain meaning. Also, in addition to the five categories by which we may divide the Bible, there are a further four categories pertaining specifically to the interpretation of prophecy. Notice:

1. Prophecies containing apocalyptic imagery and symbolic language.

2. Prophecies with dual interpretation, containing symbols that correspond to multiple things.
3. Prophecies that apply to either the past, present, or future. And some that apply to all three.
4. Prophecies that apply to the New Testament Church but appear to describe ancient Israel.

Since much of prophecy is written in an ancient poetic style it contains a great deal of **apocalyptic imagery and symbolic language**. So it is important to cross-reference prophecy with other prophecy to better distill its meaning. Also, prophecy may often contain dual interpretation of common symbols. Or it may even apply equally to the past, present, and future. Lastly, many prophecies that appear to describe or portray ancient Israel may actually apply to the New Testament Church instead.

Parables

Illustrations like parables and allegories are clearly symbolic and explained as such by scripture.

Doctrine and Theology

Most of doctrine and theology can be taken at face value or applied practically. Some of the more complex doctrines or theological paradigms may require careful and **prayerful** study.

4. ALLOW SCRIPTURE TO INTERPRET SCRIPTURE

It is dangerous to force our own interpretation upon the Scriptures. If in doubt, we should consult a concordance in order to study a particular word or phrase to see how it appears in the rest of God's Word. By allowing Scripture to interpret itself we will greatly deepen our understanding of the Bible.

5. DISCOVER THE MEANING OF A PASSAGE USING CONTEXT

Have you discovered a hard-to-understand passage? Go back to the beginning of the chapter where it is found and read carefully through in order to locate the subject and theme. Often this will help you solve the meaning of the passage. However, it is sometimes necessary to go back to the beginning of the book, as in the case with certain epistles, in order to extract the narrative meaning and how it relates to a particular verse.

6. WHEN IN DOUBT CONSULT A CONCORDANCE

Some Bible versions contain mistranslations of particular words. In order to rule out this possibility it is important to always consult a concordance to discover the meaning of the original word in the Hebrew or Greek. This is especially helpful when attempting to dissect a controversial doctrine or teaching.

7. CONSIDER ANCIENT HEBREW AND GREEK CULTURE TO DERIVE MEANING FROM CERTAIN NARRATIVES

Not everything expressed in the Bible can be applied to our time and culture. For instance, the Bible records certain idioms and expressions or recounts traditions and practices which make perfectly good sense for people in Bible times, but would hardly mean anything to those of us in the modern era. It is important to realize that the grammar and speech and even lifestyle practices of Western society have evolved greatly since the Bible period. **So study history first before cementing your assumptions on a particular issue.**

*And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. **For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ** (2 Pet 1:5-8).*

8. REALIZE THAT BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING IS BEST GAINED WHEN THE BIBLE IS READ FROM COVER TO COVER (GEN-REV)

No one reads a book by starting in the middle, or at the end and working their way backwards. The same can be said of the Bible. We need to see it as a progressive narrative with a vital message about God's relationship with man. To gain crucial perspective, we need to start at the beginning (Gen) and work our way to the very end (Rev). By reading it thus we will be able fully comprehend its message. Sadly, many Christians are too lazy to read the Bible in this manner and chop it up instead into all kinds of segments according to their particular bias or reading preferences. So is it no wonder the Church is so rife with confusion?!

In Christ alone,
John A.