

Being able to correctly handle the Word of God is important for every Christian. Paul, in exhorting Timothy to be a workman of God, writes, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). An important part of being a workman of God is to be able to correctly handle (study, interpret, and find meaning in) God's Word.

- First: The Bible was meant to be understood (Ephesians 3:3-4; 5:17).
- Second: Interpreting the Scriptures is not reserved exclusively for only a priesthood or a clergy.
- Third: The Scriptures have a definite and specific message. They do not convey a personal and/or mystical meaning to one person and something different to another.

The Bible often does require some explanation to people who are not familiar with it nor have studied it.

1. It was not wrong for the evangelist, Philip, to explain Isaiah 53 to the Ethiopian treasurer in Acts 8.
2. It was not a sin for the Ezra and the others "readers" in the days of Nehemiah to give "the sense" of the Scriptures to the people (Nehemiah 8:8).

Basic Principles For Understanding the Bible.

Rule 1: Historical Background.

- Bible students must be aware and have a knowledge of Jewish life and society at the time the statements were first made.
 - U.S. Supreme court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes states, "...Our only interest in the past is for the light it throws upon the present." *The World of Law*, Vol. 2, p. 630, 1960.
 - On opening any book in the sacred Scriptures one should consider the title; the author, the date, the place of composition, the readers for whom the book was intended; the occasion for the writing and the purpose of the book.
 1. **Title:** The title usually conveys some relevant information of the book's design, author, or recipient. Such as Numbers, Kings, Corinthians, Peter, etc.
 2. **Author:** We may notice peculiarities of the author, his style, mode of expression, and the types of illustrations he uses, and how he employs figures of speech.
 3. **Date:** This is important to understand the time-frame and historical events of the time of composition that may be very relevant to understanding the book, events, and people, etc. which are alluded.
 4. **Recipients:** Studying the historical background to a book can be helpful in understanding customs, historical references and events, allusions and illustrations used by the writer.
 5. **Purpose:** One should try to understand what is the purpose of the writer. (For example see John 20:30-31.)
 - This rule makes it imperative that one observes the dispensation of which the Scripture speaks
 - Ask which "age" or "time" is this book dealing.
 - It is Patriarchal, Jewish, or Christian?
 - Is a book, or a part of the book, (like 1 & 2 Kings) dealing with the united kingdom or the divided kingdom? This would determine who is meant by the term "Israel"-- whether all twelve tribes, or only the ten northern tribes.
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Rule 2: Logic

- This rule demands that we apply the common rules of logic and/or "common sense" in understanding the scriptures (Isaiah 1:18).
 - The Bible comes to us in the form of human language, and appeals to our reason. It invites investigation, and it is to be interpreted as we interpret any other volume by the same application of the laws of language and grammar.
 - R.A. Torrey stated, "It is one of the most firmly established principles of law in England and in America that 'a law means exactly what it says, and it is to be interpreted and enforced exactly as it reads.' This is just as good a principle for interpreting the Bible as for interpreting law."
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Rule 3: Definition

- Any study of scripture must begin with a study of words. These words must be properly defined and then used with such definition throughout.
- Determine whether the author is confining the definitions strictly to their literal or idiomatic meaning.
- Determine if the author is using a "figure of speech," or symbolism.

Example: In the prophetic book of Revelation 1:1 there is the indication that the revelation is made in "signs" or symbolic language.

Rule 4: Usage

- This rule demands that since the Bible comes out of a Jewish setting "first" its words and idioms should be rendered according to the Hebrew usage.

This rule would understand the book of Daniel in Babylonian setting, etc. (Especially note the way of dating time. etc.)

- The phrases and histories of the Testaments are not so much worth what we think of them from modern notions, but in the sense they were understood by the hearer and those actually present.
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Rule 5: Context

- Biblical passages must be understood from their own context.
- Every word you read must be understood in light of the words that come before and after it.
- One should ask a number of questions about the context of a passage.
 1. **Who is speaking?** Though the author is inspired by God, he may be quoting an un-inspired source.
 - a. Consider Job 2:9, Job's wife
 - b. Matthew 4:6, Satan
 - c. Isaiah 37:10-13, a letter from a pagan king.

2. **To whom is the passage addressed?** Is this passage for general application or is it directly specifically?
- a. Genesis 6:14 "make thee an ark"
 - b. John 2:7, "fill the water pots with water"
 - c. Matthew 10:19, 20 "take no thought how or what ye shall speak"
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Rule 6: Precedent

- That demands that we must not violate the known usage of a word and invent a meaning for which there is no precedent.

Example: The Jehovah Witnesses and their New World Translation frequently invent new meanings for biblical words. ("only begotten" and "firstborn", etc.)

- Nearly all false doctrines are distortions of biblical words.
 1. Satan deceived Eve with words in Genesis 3:1-4.
 2. False words were used to bring Jesus to the cross.
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Rule 7: Unity

- This demands that any passage must be interpreted with reference to its significance to the whole.
- A difficult passage should not be construed so as to contradict another passage which is clear in meaning.

For example, to interpret Acts 16:31 to mean salvation by "faith only" would contradict James 2:24-26.

As difficult as it is to understand to what I Cor. 15:29 is referring it is incorrect to conclude that it is proper for one to be baptized in behalf of a dead ancestor for his salvation. This would plainly contradict other passages which teach that each one is individually responsible for his obedience (2 Cor. 5:10; Romans 14:10, 12, etc.)