

# Rules / Principles For Sound Biblical Interpretation

## 1) Introduction:

- a) <sup>CJB</sup> **Proverbs 23:23** Buy the truth, don't sell it, also wisdom, discipline and discernment.
- i) Where can one acquire truth, wisdom, discipline and discernment?
  - ii) How can we “buy” these things?
  - iii) How could we “sell” these things?
- b) <sup>NAS</sup> **2 Timothy 2:10** For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus *and with it eternal glory.* <sup>11</sup> It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him; <sup>12</sup> If we endure, we shall also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; <sup>13</sup> If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself.
- <sup>14</sup> ¶ Remind *them* of these things, and solemnly charge *them* in the presence of G-d not to wrangle about words, which is useless, *and leads* to the ruin of the hearers. <sup>15</sup> **Be diligent to present yourself approved to G-d as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth.** <sup>16</sup> But avoid worldly *and* empty chatter, for it will lead to further unG-dliness, <sup>17</sup> and their talk will spread like gangrene.
- i) Be diligent . . . at what?
  - ii) How is a workman approved?
  - iii) Why would a workman be ashamed?
  - iv) What is the “word of truth”?
  - v) What does “handling accurately the word of truth” have to do with being diligent?
  - vi) How does one accurately handle the word of truth?

**Our ability to correctly interpret the Scriptures is essential**

One interpretation; Many applications

## 2) The Literal Principle – The Rule of Definition:

- a) The literal Principle means understanding Scripture in its natural, normal sense. That is, what are the customary meanings of the words being used? Since G-d wants to communicate His Word to us, He will do so in the most obvious and simple fashion possible, in words clearly understood. The first thing to look for is the literal meaning, not some deeper, hidden, secret, or spiritualized interpretation. (John F. Mac Arthur Jr.)
- b) Occam's razor (or Ockham's razor), *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, is the principle that "entities must not be multiplied beyond necessity" and the conclusion thereof, that the simplest explanation or strategy tends to be the best one.
- c) Any study of Scripture . . . must begin with a study of words. (Protestant Biblical Interpretation; Ramm, Bernard, p. 129)
- d) The Bible writers could not coin new words since they would not be understood, and were therefore forced to use words already in use. The content of meaning in these words is not to be determined by each individual Bible expositor . . . (Studies in the Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament; Wuest, Kenneth)
- e) The cornerstone of Biblical interpretation is to deal with the Bible literally. Once we abandon the literal interpretation, we discard all hope of achieving accuracy. Instead, we have a free-for-all where only the imagination rules. When we deny the literal meaning, we are not serving Scripture by trying to understand it; we are making Scripture our slave by molding it to say what we want it to say. (John F. Mac Arthur Jr.)
- f) NOTE: The current or contemporary meaning of words is, for the most part, irrelevant. It is critical to correct interpretation that we understand what the words meant to those who wrote them and those who first heard or read them. (WEH)

### 3) The Historical Principle – The Rule of Usage:

- a) The historical Principle is basic when interpreting Scripture. It is most important to recreate the historical setting in which the passage was written, If one understands the historical scene in which a passage of Scripture was written, often the passage will practically interpret itself.

As we come to any book of the Bible, we have to understand the history involved. Who was ruling where? What countries were involved and in what way? What were the tensions, problems, and crises of society? What was the culture of the day really like? What were the customs of the people? Bible handbooks, Bible dictionaries and books about Bible customs are helpful. (John F. Mac Arthur Jr.)

- b) The whole Bible may be regarded as written to the Jew first. We must look at it through Jewish eyes to really understand much of it.
- c) Jesus was a Jew, spoke to and moved among Jews in Palestine . . . He spoke first and directly to the Jews, and His words must have been intelligible to them . . . It is absolutely necessary to view that life and teaching in all its surroundings of place, society, popular life . . . This would form not only the frame in which to set the picture of the Christ, but the very background of the picture itself. (The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah; Edersheim, Alfred)

### 4) The Rule of Context:

- a) Many a passage of Scripture will not be understood at all without the help afforded by the context; for many a sentence derives all its point and force from the connection in which it stands. (Biblical Hermeneutics; Terry, M.S.)
- b) Biblical words must be understood according to the requirements of the context. (Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament)
- c) Every word you read must be understood in the light of the words that come before and after it. (How to Make Sense; Flesch, Rudolph)
- d) Bible words, when used out of context . . . can prove almost anything. Some interpreters twist them . . . from a natural to a non-natural sense. (Irenaeus, second-century church father, quoted in Inspiration and Interpretation)
- e) Content without context is pretext.

## 5) The Grammatical Principle – The Rule of Grammar:

- a) If we consider the Scriptures to be without error we must also include the grammar used in each original language to also be free from error. Most languages, especially Koine Greek, have established grammatical formats and rules for the use of that language. These grammatical formats and rules are necessary to understand the meaning of what is being said or written in the language. (WEH)
- b) The grammatical principle is also necessary. What does the passage say in terms of words and grammar? Often (grammar) is necessary to explain certain words and their meaning. Sometimes prepositions are very important. It can matter great deal whether a passage says “into” or “in,” or “by” or “with”. Sometimes there is a crucial difference between “because of” and “through”. If a sentence refers to “this” or “it,” it is important to know the antecedent of the pronoun . . .in other words, to what is “this” or “it” referring?

Grammar may not be the favorite subject of most of us but we need it when interpreting Scripture. We just can't pluck something out of passage and make it say what we want it to say. We have to follow the sequence of the words and phrases to know precisely what the Word of G-d says. (John F. Mac Arthur Jr.)

## 6) The Synthesis Principle – The Rule of Unity:

- a) The synthesis principle is what the old reformers used to call “alalogia Scriptura” or “the analogy of Scripture.” The Synthesis Principle is based on the idea that no part of the Bible contradicts any other part. One “Author” . . .the Holy Spirit . . .inspired the whole Bible. It has one marvelous unity. If we hear an interpretation of one passage that does not square with something in another passage, one of the passages (possibly both) is being interpreted incorrectly. The Holy Spirit does not disagree with Himself.
- b) In his fine book “G-d has Spoken,” J. I. Packer said; “The Bible appears like a symphony orchestra, with the Holy Ghost as its Toscanini; each instrument has been brought willingly, spontaneously, creatively, to play his notes just as the great conductor, Toscanini, desired, though none of them could ever hear the music as a whole . . . the point of each part only becomes fully clear when seen in relation to all the rest.” (John F. Mac Arthur Jr.)
- c) It is fundamental to a true interpretation of the Scriptures that the parts of a document, law, or instrument are to be construed with reference to the significance of the whole. (Commentary on Matthew; Abbot, Dean)
- d) Where a transaction is carried out by means of several documents so that together they form a part of a single whole, these documents are read together as one . . . They are to be so read, that, that construction is to be preferred which will render them consistent. (Interpretation of Documents; Sir Roland Burrows)

## 7) The Practical Principle – The rule of Logic:

- a) The Practical Principle is what we should use to apply the Bible to our own lives. Always, the final question we should ask is, “so what? What does all this have to do with me?” 2 Tim. 3:16 says, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of G-d, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:” (John F. Mac Arthur Jr.)
- b) The use of reason in the interpretation of Scripture is everywhere to be assumed. 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 rigid application of the same laws of language, and the same grammatical analysis. (Bible Hermeneutics; Terry, M.S.)
- c) What is the control we use to weed out false theological speculation? Certainly the control is logic and evidence . . . interpreters who have not had the sharpening experience of logic . . . may have improper notions of implication and evidence. Too frequently such a person uses a basis of appeal that is a notorious violation of the laws of logic and evidence. (Protestant Biblical Interpretation; Ramm, Bernard)
- d) 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 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. (The Importance and Value of Proper Bible Study; Torrey, R.A.)
- e) Charles Finney, lawyer and theologian, said he interpreted a Bible passage as he would have understood the same or like passage in a law book.
- f) “Unless I am convinced by Scripture and by plain reason and not by Popes and councils who have so often contradicted themselves, my conscience is captive to the word of G-d. To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. I cannot and I will not recant. Here I stand. I can do no other. G-d help me.” (Martin Luther)

## 8) Rule of Precedent:

- a) We must not violate the known usage of a word or invent another for which there is no precedent. (The Greek New Testament for English Readers; Alford, Dean.)
- b) The Bible can not mean what it never meant.  
i.e., Scripture cannot be interpreted to mean something today that is different from the meaning (interpretation) when the words were originally spoken or written. There are applications today that were quite unknown two or three or four thousand years ago but the meaning – the interpretation – cannot change.

## 9) The Rule of Inference:

- a) In the law of evidence, an inference is a fact reasonably implied from another fact. It is a logical consequence. It is a process of reasoning. It derives a conclusion from a given fact or premise. It is the deduction of one proposition from another proposition. It is a conclusion drawn from evidence.

Yeshua proved the resurrection of the dead to the unbelieving Sadducees by this rule and the rule of grammar.

<sup>NAS</sup> **Matthew 22:31** "But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by G-d, saying, <sup>32</sup> 'I am the G-d of Abraham, and the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob '? He is not the G-d of the dead but of the living."

- b) A proposition of fact is proved when its truth is established by competent and satisfactory evidence as the nature of the thing to be proved admits. By satisfactory evidence is meant that amount of proof which ordinarily satisfies an unprejudiced mind beyond reasonable doubt. Scripture facts are therefore proved when they are established by that kind and degree of evidence which would in the affairs of ordinary life satisfy the mind and conscience of a common man. When we have this kind and degree of evidence it is unreasonable to require more. (Systematic Theology; Strong, Augustus H.)

## 10) One Thing More:

- a) As valuable as these "Rules / Principles for Sound Biblical Interpretation" are, they are useless without the illumination of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>NAS</sup> **1 Corinthians 2:12** Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from G-d, that we might know the things freely given to us by G-d, <sup>13</sup> which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*. <sup>14</sup> ¶ But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of G-d; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

Paul was saying that only the Holy Spirit can show us the truth. Apart from the Holy Spirit the Bible is locked. It is a mystery. But, with the Spirit of G-d comes illumination – understanding of what has been written – because the believer has the Holy Spirit, the One who inspired the writers of Scripture.

We should keep in mind however, that the Holy Spirit is the illuminator, not some kind of medium who zaps us with "new and unique interpretations" that require no study. ." (John F. Mac Arthur Jr.)