



Truth

On Tough Texts

WWW.THESCRPTUREALONE.COM

A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

ISSUE 26 (September 2007)

Principles of Biblical Interpretation (1)

II Timothy 2:15

STUDY TO SHOW THYSELF APPROVED unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

Much has been said and written about interpreting the Bible. We have all heard more than one person say, "Oh, that's just your interpretation of the Bible," or "The Bible can be interpreted in different ways." Naturally, such statements are made by the skeptic and the infidel so that he can ignore the Scriptures.

If I may humbly submit, however, that is not only true of lost people, for professed Christians are also guilty of the same tendency. We sometimes "reevaluate" or "reinterpret" those parts of Scripture that we don't want to face. We sometimes justify our actions and attitudes with such statements as: "Well, that passage of Scripture was written in a different time and place; things are different now," or, "That is in the Old Testament, which *never* applies to the New Testament believer."

A vital key to understanding Biblical *authority* is understanding Biblical *interpretation*. How are we to interpret Scripture? The story has often been told of the man who wanted to be guided by Scripture, so he closed his eyes, opened his Bible, and pointed to a verse, which read, "And he [Judas] cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself" (Mat 27:5). He thought he should try again, so repeating the process he came upon Luke 10:37, "Go and do thou likewise."

Obviously, that is a ridiculous story, but in some ways it is characteristic of exactly how some people interpret Scripture. People rip verses from their context, ignore to whom the words were written, ignore the

historical setting of the verse or passage, ignore the grammar used in the verse, and in general *violate every rule of interpreting literature*.

Please notice those last six words. As I present some principles of Biblical interpretation in this two-part article, some people might accuse me of simply creating principles that fit my viewpoint, but that is not the case. In fact, in the final analysis, interpreting Scripture is little different than interpreting any literature. Now please do not misunderstand me here; I am *not* equating the Bible with all other literature. "God forbid!" The Bible is inspired, infallible, and authoritative literature, but It is still literature and is to be interpreted by certain rules that are universal to literature.

While the Word of God is deep, It is not complex. It says what It means and means what It says. God is not the One Who has muddied the waters of His Word, rather it is man who has done so. He has complicated the Scriptures so much that it is no longer clear, no longer means what the words *seem* to say.

Again, Scripture cannot rule in our lives if we do not know what it says. Therefore, in a moment we will examine twelve principles for proper Biblical interpretation. Before doing so, however, there is one general truth concerning Biblical interpretation on which the other principles are built: *Scripture interprets Itself*. As *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646) puts it:

The infallible rule of interpretation of scripture is the scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture [which is not manifold, but one], it must be searched and known by other places that speak more

clearly (Acts 15:15, 16; John 5:46; see II Pet. 1:20, 21). [Note: The *London Baptist Confession of 1689* is virtually identical.]

While the aforementioned statement, “Oh, that’s just your interpretation of the Bible,” is often true of some interpreters, proper Biblical interpretation simply allows the Bible to interpret itself. In other words, we simply allow the Word of God to tell us what It means. *There is nothing mystical or magical about interpreting the Bible. If we just get out of the way, It will make itself clear.*

Let us turn now to twelve basic principles of Biblical interpretation. (This will be followed in a subsequent issue of TOTT by a representative example of using all twelve principles to develop the Biblical teaching on a specific subject.)

The Reverence Principle

Of all the principles of Biblical interpretation, none today is violated more than this one. No longer is the Bible revered. It has been diluted, added to, subtracted from, treated flippantly, and generally considered by many as irrelevant. Often it is not consulted at all, but when It is, it is usually just added to the list of opinions collected from other sources.

This is not only true of Liberalism, but is true of Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism as well. Liberals attack the Bible by denying its truth. Other groups undermine the authority of Scripture by claiming new revelation through visions and other experiential means. We submit, however, that evangelicals and fundamentalists often undermine the Word of God as well. One way is in their failure to exposit the Word. Many preachers, while saying they believe in Biblical authority, nonetheless stand in their pulpits every Sunday and fail to boldly and authoritatively expound on the truth of the Scripture in depth and then apply It to people’s lives.

Another way the holiness and seriousness of God’s Word is undermined is by what I call “Biblical Humor.” By this I mean making a joke at the expense of the Bible. Why is it that we teach our children not to make a joke at someone else’s expense, but then turn around and do this with God’s holy Word?

This practice is common today in cartoons. I was appalled, for example, at the cartoon of two doctors talking about a man they had just put in cryogenic freeze. The caption read, “In his will he said he wanted to be frozen until someone can see if his name’s in the Book of Life; if it’s not, leave him frozen.” How can any Christian think something that blasphemous is funny?

And what does this say about the “Christian comedians” that characterize “preaching” today? The argument that says, “Well, if you keep people laughing, you can get your point across” is worldly nonsense. *Truly spiritual people will desire spiritual Truth.* I certainly don’t

mind the occasional humorous comment or illustration, and use them on occasion myself, but “stand up comedy” has no place anywhere near the pulpit. We are dealing with holy, sacred things, and we had better treat them as such. That is God’s demand. So-called “Christian comedy” is one of the most serious errors of our day and is a scourge that should be excised. The pulpit is a place of *solemnity*, not *slapstick*. The man who God esteems is “him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word” (Is. 66:2). How many men in pulpits today tremble at the Word of God and teach their people to do the same?

So, first and foremost, we must approach the Bible with reverence and the utmost respect. Note the psalmist’s declarations (for the sake of space, we mention only the references): Ps. 138:2; 119:72, 127, 161. Note also Job’s conviction in Job 23:12.

How can we treat something that is this holy and highly esteemed flippantly?

The Diligence Principle

The second principle of Biblical interpretation is found in our text, II Timothy 2:15. This pivotal verse reveals four things concerning proper Biblical interpretation.

The Method of Proper Biblical Interpretation

Study is the Greek *spoudazō*, which speaks of being diligent or eager. Some think that a newer translation of the Bible that says “Be diligent” (NASB) or “Do your best” (a terrible translation in the NIV) is better here. One popular commentary says, “‘Study,’ (KJV) is obviously too narrow a term, usually referring today to the studying of books.”¹ On the contrary, the beauty of the Old English here actually says more. After all, in his unabridged dictionary, Webster says that study, to be diligent, and to be eager are all “akin,” and then defines study as, “A state of absorbed contemplation.” Now, in all honesty, isn’t that better?

Indeed, our attitude and approach to the interpretation of Scripture must be one of “absorbed contemplation.” How much slipshod, shallow, and sentimental Biblical interpretation there is today! Many think they can just sit down, read a few verses, make a quick “application,” and then hurry on to their next activity. Many preachers do likewise in their sermon preparation, spending an hour or two in the Word and coming away with a shallow, topical “sermonette for Christianettes” consisting of three points and a poem. Many Bible colleges are the guiltiest because that is the approach they teach.

Another deadly danger to honest interpretation is the common practice of approaching the Scriptures with preconceived ideas. In other words, there is always the danger of formulating an idea, opinion, or position and then going to the Bible to defend it. The story is often

told of the preacher who said, “I’ve got a really good sermon in mind; all I need is a Scripture verse to go with it.” That might be humorous, but it is more common than you think. It is also common among folks who have been taught a certain position all their lives and refuse to consider any other teaching. If we may say it as frankly as possible: get out of the way and allow God to speak. Lay aside whatever *you think*, and then go to the Scripture to find what *God says*.

Our text goes on to say that the pastor (and by application, every Christian) is a **workman**, one who labors over the Word of God, one who works at his study and interpretation. The words **to show thyself approved unto God** reemphasize this fact by showing that the workman is totally dedicated to God and God’s Word. This is first and foremost the responsibility of the pastor, since this Epistle is written to a pastor, who is called by vocation to do this and has the time to devote to this. By application, however, all Christians can (and should) study the Word under the guidance of their pastor.

The Goal of Proper Biblical Interpretation

Often we incorrectly think that the reason and goal for studying the Scriptures is knowledge. While it is true that we want knowledge (“Truth”), our chief goal should be to “*rightly divide* the Word of Truth.” The Greek word used here for **rightly dividing** (*orthotomeō*) is actually comprised of two words, *orthos*, meaning “straight” (as an orthodontist straightens teeth), and *temnō*, which means “to cut or divide.” The word was used in ancient times for cutting a straight furrow, something that a farmer is always concerned about as he plows. Similarly, a carpenter is concerned about making a straight cut on a board, and a seamstress is concerned about sewing a straight seam.

This, then, is the goal of the interpreter of Scripture, to cut It straight, to rightly divide It so that It is clearly understood and plainly applied. Our goal is spiritual, not intellectual. How, then, do we accomplish this? Again, it takes work, hours of laborious study. We will not properly interpret if we grab a verse here and a principle there. We must labor to rightly divide. That is our goal.

The Difficulty of Proper Biblical Interpretation

This rightly dividing will inevitably and unavoidably cause problems from time to time. In other words, we will at times run into either textual or practical problems. Tragically, what often happens nowadays is that when problems occur, they are simply ignored. A commentator, for example, might simply skip over a textual problem. Or a pastor might just avoid dealing with an issue so as not to upset anyone.

This practice, however, is not only dishonest, but it also violates the clear admonition of Paul to the Ephesian elders, “For I have not shunned to declare unto

you *all* the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). He goes on to say that the shepherd is to “oversee” (v. 28), “feed,” and “warn” (v. 31) the sheep, all of which might “step on toes” once in awhile.

Diligent study, therefore, demands that we deal with problems. For example, some Bible students have problems with the verse that instructs older women to teach the younger women to be “keepers at home” (Tit. 2:4-5). Does that mean a women can never go out of the house? Or what does Paul mean when he speaks of being “baptized for the dead” (I Cor. 15:29)? Or what does the Bible mean when It says that “God repented?” (Gen. 6:6 and Jon. 3:10).

Using the proper principles of Biblical interpretation will reveal the solution to these problems and all others, but only if we are committed to diligence.

The Result of Proper Biblical Interpretation

Finally, Paul assures his pupil of the result of this kind of diligence. What will be the result of diligent study? *We will never be ashamed* (**needeth not to be ashamed**). This assurance is really twofold. First, our diligent study of the Word of God is a testimony to others that we are not ashamed of It, that we are not ashamed to stand on Its authority. Second, since we *are* diligent laborers in the Word, we won’t be **ashamed** when our Lord inspects our works.

The Plain Principle

There have been Bible interpreters through the ages who interpret the Bible with an allegorical approach. This type of approach doesn’t take the words of Scripture as they are, rather it looks for some deeper “spiritual” meaning. This approach is often used by those who want to escape some theological or practical difficulty or by those who want to teach some far out religious view. One of the most notorious of this type of interpreter was the 3rd Century scholar Origen. His allegorical approach to Scripture and “spiritualizing” of It is well-known, going so far as to turn the entire Law and the Gospels into an allegory; in his own words, in fact, he said, “The Scriptures are of little use to those who understand them as they are written.”

But does this approach make any sense? Do we take this approach with other types of literature? Do we just automatically assume a book or magazine article is allegorical? On the contrary, if a piece of literature is supposed to be allegorical, does it not plainly tell you so as you begin to read it? Likewise, as we’ll see, *the Bible is to be taken in its plain meaning unless it makes it clear that It is to be taken otherwise*.

The chief danger of the allegorical approach is obvious. Using this approach, Scripture no longer means what It says, and therefore, for all practical purposes, is no longer authoritative. Interpretation of Scripture now depends upon the mind of the interpreter, not God.

In contrast to allegorical interpretation, there is what is commonly called “literal interpretation.” In regard to this term, however, Charles Ryrie makes a very important distinction: “Since the word “literal” has connotations which are either misunderstood or subjectively understood, labels like “plain” or “normal” serve more acceptably. “Literal” is assumed to preclude figures of speech, etc. (which is not the case).”² To interpret plainly is to explain the original sense of the speaker or writer according to normal, customary, and proper usage of words and language.

There is actually more allegorical interpretation among evangelicals than one might think. One of the chief areas in which we find this is in the interpretation of prophecy. One example is how some fancifully interpret Revelation 9, where we find the description of the plague of locusts that sting like scorpions, which will inflict mankind during the Tribulation Period. One commentator writes about his Vietnam veteran friend who thought this has to be describing Cobra attack helicopters and that the torment of the sting will be nerve gas sprayed from the aircraft’s tail. The commentator admits that this might be “conjecture” but that it does “fit the composite description.”³

Another commentator writes that these locusts may be of the insect or animal variety, but that they might be men with jet packs strapped to their backs, who emit a chemical substance from a canister that inflicts a painful sting.⁴

Still another commentator says that the old opinion of this being B-29 bombers that sting from their tail (because of the tail guns) is “fanciful,” but then turns right around and says they are “spirit-beings who probably will not be seen by men, but whose effects will be strongly felt.” He continues by saying that “they are not to be taken literally, nor symbolically, but spiritually.”⁵

May we ask these men, what’s wrong with the plain interpretation that this plague will be a literal plague of locusts that sting like scorpions? Why ignore Revelation 9:5 that plainly says the plague will last five months, *which is the natural life-span of locusts*? Compare these fanciful interpretations with that of rock solid expositors, such as William Newell, who not only brings out what we’ve noted here, but who also has this to say about other “interpretations”: “Now no one who believes the Bible has any trouble believing the record of that last plague. Nor has any one any *right* to have any difficulty about the terrible locust plague of Revelation 9. It is because of *the fog of unbelief*, and *the super-fog of “historical interpretation,”* that this passage has been considered “hard to understand.” If we do not *believe* that God means what He so plainly and explicitly says in Revelation 9, let us *say* we do not believe it, and be

honest. But let us not dare to bring in vain imaginations and call them interpretations of Scripture.”⁶

All this is a vivid illustration of allegorizing and spiritualizing Scripture. This kind of Biblical interpretation is dangerous because it allows every person to think of something different. Was this God’s intention? Certainly not! It matters not what we *think* Scripture means, rather what It really *does* mean according to the plain language of Scripture.

Spiritualizing Scripture is also a common practice among preachers. I recently read about the pastor who preached on Jericho. He told how God gave the Israelites the city, how they marched around the city seven times, and how the walls fell down. His “application” of this truth was that if a young man believed God had given him a girl, he could claim her, march around her seven times, and the walls of her heart would fall down! Believe it or not, that couple (and other couples) got married on that basis, but as you might expect, marital problems came soon after.⁷ Other preachers are “hyper-typers,” teaching such things as each pillar of the temple having a deeper symbolic meaning.

Another result of non-literal interpretation is the total rejection of a literal 1,000-year reign of Christ on the earth, that is, Premillennialism. With a wave of an allegorical hand, Postmillennialists and Amillennialists dismiss countless Old Testament prophecies that speak of a *literal* Kingdom. Inexplicably, while they take *non*-prophetic subjects literally—the virgin birth, the cross, the resurrection, salvation, etc.—they view the millennium as non-literal. Such an arbitrary departure makes no sense whatsoever, especially when they teach that *some* prophecies—Christ’s Second Coming, the Great White Throne judgment, and the new heavens and the new earth—are literal.

Does this mean that the Bible never speaks figuratively? Of course not. *But when Scripture is used figuratively, It makes it plain that It is doing so.* When Paul writes about putting on the “armor of God” (Eph. 6:11-17), for example, he makes it clear that this is figurative, illustrative language. Certainly, the Word of God is not a literal sword, but It is our only offensive weapon (as was the soldier’s sword), and It is used in much the same way. Hebrews 4:12 gives us the same analogy, saying the Word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword, cutting through pretense, and discerning not only our thoughts but even our very intentions.

The late Dr. David Cooper summed up the matter very well when he said: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore; take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicated clearly otherwise.”⁸

Again, the main reason many shy away from a plain interpretation of the Bible is to escape what It demands. Taking the Bible plainly is, indeed, demanding. The Word of God has something to say about every aspect of human life; It leaves nothing to chance and never leaves us to “decide for ourselves.”

The Grammatical Principle

Just as grammar and word usage is vital to understanding any literature or spoken word, it is likewise indispensable in interpreting Scripture. I once heard a well-known speaker and author speak on Jude 3. He read the verse (“ . . . earnestly contend for the faith”) and then proceeded to speak about *subjective* faith, that is, our personal faith. While much of what he said was true, this verse has nothing whatsoever to do with subjective faith or the *action* of faith. Because of the definite article, the words “the faith” refer to *the body of revealed truth that makes up historical, evangelical Christianity*. This meaning is further emphasized by the words “once delivered,” which refer to the preaching and teaching of the Apostles as the historical basis of our faith. In fact, “deliver” (*paradidomi*) means “to hand down, pass on instruction from teacher to pupil”⁹ (see I Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:3).

Countless errors have resulted from improper grammatical interpretation. The modern Charismatic Movement builds much of its foundation on a glaring grammatical error. It teaches that the “baptism of the Holy Spirit” is something we must seek now. But I Corinthians 12:13 *plainly* says that *all Christians* (even the appallingly carnal Corinthians) have been baptized (*past tense*) into the Body of Christ, that is, placed into His body. The grammar is absolutely inarguable.

Speaking of “baptism,” the entire doctrine of baptism has been perverted due to improper grammatical interpretation. The Greek *baptizō* means “to dip, immerse, or plunge” and was used to describe the dying of clothes.¹⁰ The whole point of baptism is being placed into something to show *identification*. Baptism pictures our being placed into Christ and our identification with His death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-6). Other modes of baptism (sprinkling and pouring) are wrong because they do not properly picture this identification, this *placing into*. After all, how many of us would dye a piece of clothing by sprinkling or pouring the dye on it?

It is also extremely significant that there is absolutely no doubt whatsoever, and non-immersionists admit, that immersion alone was the universal practice of the Apostolic church, a fact John Calvin points out in his *Institutes*.¹¹ In a footnote, Calvin even admits that deviation from immersion is seen in the *Didache* (*Teaching of the Twelve*), a second century apocryphal book. It says that if running water was not available, “Pour water on the head three times.” That is clearly

unscriptural and serves as an excellent example of how men add to the Word of God by saying, “Well, this a special circumstance, so we can add this practice to meet the need of the moment.” What men need to do is *obey* the Word of God not *add* to it.

One of the most beautiful illustrations of this grammatical principle appears in Nehemiah 8:7-8, where we are told that Ezra and the Levites read from the Law, “gave the sense, and caused the people to understand.” After the Babylonian captivity, Hebrew had been largely replaced by Aramaic as the spoken language of God’s people. So when the Law was read in Hebrew, few understood It; It had to be explained in their own language. How this is needed today! Preachers need to know the language and must be able to exposit the deep truth of the Word.

Several years ago I was preaching this principle in a church, strongly emphasizing the need for pastors to know something about the Biblical languages. Without having any knowledge of the pastor of that church, I made it clear that a pastor does not have to be a Greek scholar, but that he at least needs to know how to use the Greek tools that are readily available today and how to present the Word with grammatical accuracy. The pastor was offended by this and later said to me, “If you’re right, I’m not even qualified to be in the ministry.” It is sad, indeed, that he is not the only one of whom that is true; there are many men in pulpits today who simply do not adequately study the Scriptures and, therefore, disqualify themselves from the very office they occupy.

Dr. J. D. Watson
Pastor-Teacher
Grace Bible Church

NOTES

¹ Frank E. Gaebelin (General Editor), *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 402.

² *Basic Theology*, p. 111.

³ Hal Lindsay, *There’s a New World Coming* (Santa Ana: Vision House Publishers, 1973), pp. 138-139.

⁴ Salem Kirban and Gary Cohen, *Revelation Visualized* (Chicago: Moody Press, p. 201.

⁵ Tim F. LaHaye, *Revelation: Illustrated and Made Plain* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), p. 185.

⁶ William Newell, *The Book of the Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1935), p. 129-131.

⁷ Cited in John MacArthur’s *Charismatic Chaos*, p. 90.

⁸ Cited in J. Vernon McGee’s *Guidelines for the Understanding of the Scriptures* (Pasadena: Thru the Bible Books), p. 20.

⁹ Colin Brown (Editor), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan), Vol. 3, pp. 772-773.

¹⁰ Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

¹¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter XV, Section 19 (abbreviated, IV.15.19).

