

## Ten Rules of Biblical Interpretation

**1. Scripture is the very word of God, and is inerrant in its original autographs.** This means we don't believe that the NIV, NASB, KJV or any other translation is inerrant. There may be printing errors in them, or words may have been mistranslated. However, we do believe that the original writings by the prophets of the OT and the writers of the NT were inerrant in all they affirm. These original manuscripts have been copied and re-copied for thousands of years. We assume, and are very confident, that they have been accurately copied. But we also expect that, from time to time, we will find missing paragraphs or better manuscripts than we currently have. As long as they do not conflict with what we have in our hands as far as doctrine is concerned, we may use them to derive better translations.

**2. Scripture is best interpreted by Scripture itself, and not by external events or writings.** We assume that the Bible has a single voice, and that voice is God's. He spoke through men as the Spirit moved them (2Pet. 1:21). Each writer had a personality, a culture, and a point in time, that affected the *style* of what was written (rules 7 and 8), but not the *content*. Because there is a single voice, we further assume that there is a single story that runs from cover to cover. It is a single message of God's sovereignty, and his plan to redeem us. If we want to understand a particular passage, we may rightly assume that the Bible itself has the information we need to understand it. We say that the NT is the fulfillment and explanation of the OT; the OT is the promise and foundation of the NT. It is a package deal. Trying to use external documents that are *not* inspired, to understand that which *is* inspired, would be a fruitless task. Using external events in our time to explain a message written to someone in another time likewise produces strange conclusions (rule 7). Using a commentary, confession, or systematic theology, is helpful, but these external writings are not conclusive. Only God's word is conclusive.

**3. The majority of passages on a specific topic will outweigh any exceptional passages on the same topic.** The main point here is that we cannot mix apples and oranges when interpreting. We must first determine whether two passages are in fact speaking to the same issue. A passage that at first glance seems to be an exception to a particular teaching, or seems to create a conflict, may not be exceptional or conflicting at all. It may be addressing a different topic or circumstance altogether. We assume, because of rules 1 and 2, that there are no irreconcilable conflicts in the Bible. They may be mysteries, but they not contradictory. When we encounter such passages, there are very good tools available to help us resolve apparent conflicts. For example, try Gleason Archer's, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*.

The most glaring passage, as far as a seeming contradiction goes, is Heb. 6:4. We are apparently told that we can lose our salvation. Yet the overwhelming majority of NT passages say that we are completely and finally saved when we believe in Christ. We are not made salvable for the moment; we don't receive eternal life for the moment. We are eternally saved by God's grace and sovereignty, the continuing mediation of Christ, and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:14). The majority of passages on this topic must therefore over-rule this apparent exception. Now we are left to explain it. Maybe we misunderstand the context, or maybe it's a bad translation, or maybe the person was never saved in the first place. That makes good material for an ongoing debate.

Another example would be the apparent conflict between Romans and James with regard to works. But it is only apparent. In point of fact, we are looking at two very different processes between these two books. When James talks about the necessity of works, he is talking about what arises from our salvation, as a natural and inevitable consequence of it. When Paul talks about the inadequacy of our works, he is talking about the cause of our salvation, which is the atoning sacrifice and works of Christ alone. Thus, our works are the necessary result, not the procuring cause, of our salvation. Our works are necessary, but inadequate: no conflict.

**4. A specific passage outweighs a general passage *on the same topic*. Consequently, a specific passage would also outweigh a majority of passages that are only general in nature.** There are passages that state a proposition in very general terms. And then there are very specific passages concerning that same proposition. The specific passage is the controlling one. For example, John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” This is a *general* passage. We have questions about the word “world” and whether it means the whole world: every man, woman, and child. We have questions about the word “whoever” and whether it means that everyone is capable of choosing Christ. We need something more specific to help us determine how these two words are being used. Are there specific passages, on the same topic, that have more detail? If so, they can help us answer these questions.

In John 6:37, 44, for example, we have the same book, the same author, and the same topic. We read, “All that the Father gives to me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never cast out... None can come to me unless the Father, who sent me, draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.” In John 15:16 Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you...” So we know that “whoever” does not mean everyone, but only those who were drawn to Christ by the Father. These are referred to as “the elect.”

We can look at the word “world” in the Greek to see if it has a specific meaning. It is “kosmos,” and it refers to the orb of the earth, or to its inhabitants in general: the masses. And so the world here is the world of men, with no indication of the scope of those who are the object of God’s love. There was a promise in Isaiah 49:6 that Israel would be a light to the Gentiles. Paul tells us that the “mystery” revealed in Christ is that the promise was not only to the Jews but to the world beyond them: the Gentiles or non-Jews (Rom. 11:25; Eph. 3:3-6). We could say that this promise was made to the world at large, and not just to the Jews. But we could not say that it was made to everyone in the world. Are there specific passages to confirm this conclusion?

Look at John 8:42-47. Jesus tells his audience that they cannot hear the promise, that their father is not his Father, that there are two families: one condemned by their sin, whose father is the devil, and one saved by grace, whose father is God. This is confirmed in Mal. 1:3 and Rom. 9:6-13 where we learn that God hated Esau before he was born, before he had yet done right or wrong. Paul explains that some are created for common purposes, and some for noble purposes (Rom. 9:16-24). And so these specific passages clarify and limit the general passage in John 3:16. You may have heard that “all means all;” but it seldom does.

**5. The truth of any given verse will be consistent with the whole truth of Scripture.** Because the Bible is a single, consistent story told many times over by a single mind, there is a coherent body of truth contained in it. That body of truth reveals who God is, who we are, our relationship to him, his plan for us, etc. When we come across a passage that seems inconsistent with that body of truth, we can be sure that we misunderstand what is being said. God says that he alone is God, there are no others (Isa. 46:9-10). And yet we read in John 10:34-35 that we are called “gods.” Mormon theology picks up on this. The passage quoted in the NT is Psalm 82:6. The word is “*elohim*” which is the word for God. But it also means “judges” or “mighty ones” – the verse goes on to explain that this title is ours because we are children of the Most High. We are possessed of God (Eph. 1:14), not independent gods.

**6. Therefore, the context of any given verse is also the whole of Scripture.** Some folks think that if they read the paragraph before and the paragraph after, that they are reading a verse “in context.” Rules 4, 5, 7 and 8 show why the context is far larger than the surrounding text of a verse, and yet why it must be limited to passages that are topically related. The Bible is a unity as well as a collection of books. It tells a single story of God’s redemptive plan in Jesus Christ. We call that a meta-narrative, an over-arching and unifying story. If we don’t read each passage with that broad view in mind, then we can easily misinterpret or misapply a single passage. We can take extraordinary measures to ensure all our pieces are authentic and accurate, and yet still go wrong if we don’t know how each fits into the whole. Irenaeus wrote that biblical interpretation requires knowing what the pattern is supposed to be before you begin assembling the pieces. He said to think of an image of a king made from a pile of mosaic tiles. By rearranging them you can turn the image of that king into a fox with the very same “authentic” tiles.

**7. The meaning of any given verse is determined by its author, audience, circumstance, and intent.** In other words, it was written by a known author (even if we don’t know his name), to a known audience (even if we don’t know their names), at a known point in time (even if we can’t specify the year), with a message intended for *them*, not for *us*, using language that was clear and meaningful to *them*, not necessarily to *us*. From this message, as it was understood by its original audience, we may extract an ageless *principle* that may be applied to similar circumstances in our own time. It is tempting to think that a passage speaks directly to us, as if there was no original audience. God does speak directly to us through his word, but only *after* we have determined what is being said. The principles are what speak to us, indirectly. The text does not speak to us directly. Let me explain what I mean by that. The words of the text are place-holders and containers for principles, or teachings. Indeed, the word “*logos*” which means “word” as in the “Word of God,” refers to the doctrines of Scripture, the teachings that it contains. If we take the message to be the text itself, without putting it in context, the meaning will become distorted. “Pluck out your eye if it offends you” has a context that suggests we ought to keep our eye, but clean up our attitude. We must derive its meaning before we can determine its application.

**8. The author, audience, circumstance, and intent, are determined in large part by the language that is used.** This rule refers to vocabulary, grammar, style, syntax, idioms, allusions, symbols, types, etc. Style refers to whether the specific verse we are reading is literal, metaphorical, poetic, prophetic, etc. You may have heard a rule of interpretation which says that we should take a passage literally unless there is a good reason not to. Well, that rule is a little too broad to be useful. In prophetic literature, we actually take it *figuratively* unless there is good

reason not to. So the style of the verse we are reading determines how we are to take it, not the other way around. Psalm 61:4 says that we are protected under God's wings. Our first inclination should not be to take it literally, as if God were a large chicken. In other words, we don't take it literally and then find a reason not to take it that way. We first recognize what kind of style we are dealing with, and then we proceed to interpret it accordingly.

**9. We rely on the original language, and not a translation of it, to determine the actual meaning of a Scriptural passage** (*that's why altering the original language text of Scripture using questionable manuscripts from apostate churches is so dangerous*). As in English, the Greek and Hebrew words of Scripture can have a number of meanings, and a number of English words could be used to render the meaning of the original. Some of those words have connotations (implied meanings) in addition to their denotations (direct meanings). In large part, we rely on the translators to work out those details. However, there are often biases in theology and doctrine that sway the choices they make. We want to use a number of translations to get a better feel for what is being said. Some translations are word-for-word (NASB, NKJV, KJV, ASV, ESV). Others are idea-for-idea (NIV, NLT). Some are paraphrases (LB, ECV). Some are restatements (e.g. The Message, The Book of God). Some ideas in Greek or Hebrew don't exist in English, and so word-for-word substitutions cannot be made. Idea-for-idea substitutions are only approximations by necessity. In other words, language itself is a problem.

Here's an example: In John 13:23, the usual translation goes something like this, "Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom [or against his breast] one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved." Others say that this disciple was "at table" with Jesus, or reclining next to him. If the disciple is leaning against Jesus, it seems overly affectionate for the setting. And it makes us wonder why that same disciple had to "lean over toward Jesus" when Peter asked him to find out who the betrayer would be (v. 25). If he was already lying against him there, why would he need to lean over? The issue is the word "bosom." This same word is used to describe a bay for boats (Acts 27:39). It means an enclosed, private area, like a breast-pocket, or something u-shaped, like a bay. In the verse in John, it could be describing something like a booth in a restaurant. That fits with Acts. As it turns out, it is a figure of speech in Greek that means you are sitting in a position of honor at the table (near the host). So the translations affect our understanding of the verse. Having seen several translations, we realize there is a point of contention about the phrase. Looking at the Greek (or an explanation of the Greek) may clear it up for us.

**10. To understand the things of God, we depend on the illumination of the Holy Spirit, and not on our own knowledge, logic, or intellect alone; and certainly never on our feelings.**

Some of us think that because we have the Spirit of God to guide us, our personal impressions about a passage will be correct. "Well I feel like it says..." Being guided by the Holy Spirit does not mean we have our own personal guru who gives us independent insights – insights that conflict with what he has told the church as a whole. Others are convinced that God's word is propositional. They believe it is logical and understandable through reason. "Well logically it must mean..." Although God is knowable, logical, and consistent, our intellect alone will fail us. We are corrupt creatures. Intellect will not and cannot help non-believers. That's where the Holy Spirit comes in. He renews our mind (Rom. 12:2), not our emotions, so that we can understand the word of God (1Cor. 2:12). The problem is that our fallen nature continues to influence our renewed mind. As a result, we cannot know *everything* with complete confidence

and accuracy, but we can know *many* things confidently and accurately. We grow more and more in our knowledge as we practice the truth of Scripture in the way we live.

Well, if reason and emotions are always suspect, does this mean we are incapable of determining the meaning of God's word? Not at all! That's one reason God has given us the Church. It is God's school for believers. It is the corporate and historic understanding of God's word, the give and take between believers over time, which establishes the truth of God's word. And yet, the word of God always supersedes the teaching of any individual elder, church, or denomination. This lack of clarity shouldn't cause us to *doubt*. Instead, it should cause us to study God's Word with *diligence and humility*. We should never think that we have arrived and know all things (Phil. 3:12). We learn from one another and we teach one another with respect, deference, and submission. We always seek to edify, encourage, and comfort one another from God's word. It is not a tool of manipulation and control. It is not a means to gain glory and a following for ourselves. It is for the glory of God alone. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

Augustine wrote, "*If you chance upon anything (in Scripture) that does not seem to be true, you must not conclude that the sacred writer made a mistake; rather your attitude should be that the manuscript is faulty, or the version is not accurate, or you yourself do not understand the matter.*" (DePotent., IV, 1,8)