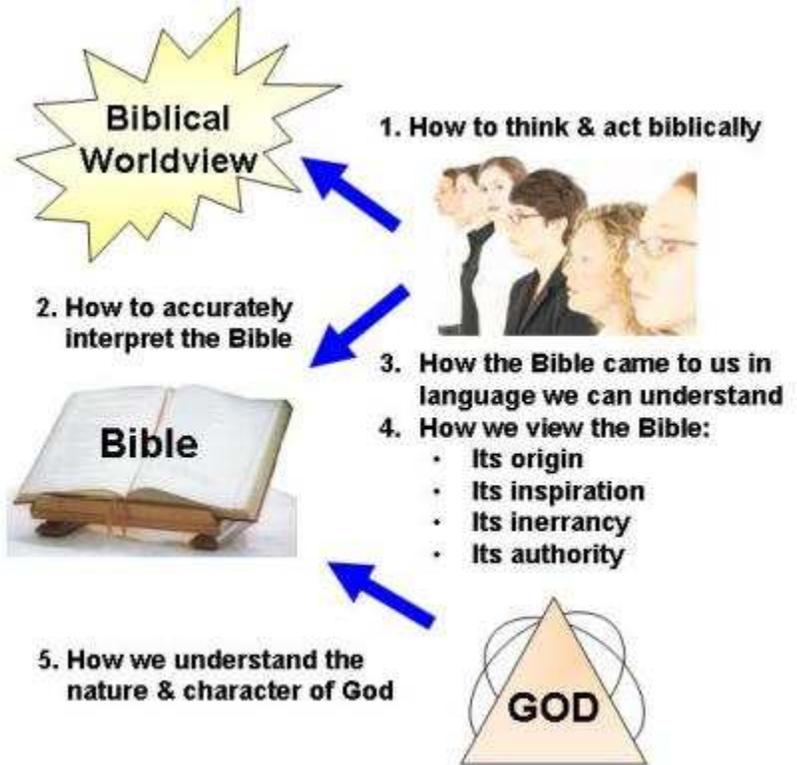


Basic Bible Interpretation

Introduction

A Biblical Worldview

- What determines whether someone has a Biblical worldview?
- When confronted with any issue his first question will be, "What does the Bible say about about this?"
- But we should ask a more fundamental question: "How can we accurately determine what the Bible does say about various issues?"
- Without a solid foundation for being able to accurately interpret the Scriptures, every person could make the Bible say almost anything he wants it to say. Obviously, this is not what God intended when He gave us the Scriptures.
- Therefore, we need to understand and apply the basic principles of Bible interpretation ("*hermeneutics*" in theological terms).



A Bigger Picture

- When we say we want a Biblical worldview, some of the issues involved are shown in the diagram above.
 - In this workshop we will not be dealing with all of these issues. We will focus on developing sound principles for interpreting what the Bible says. *However*, there are some "rules" for interpretation that arise from these "big picture" issues:
1. Work from the assumption that the Bible is God's *only inspired*, *inerrant*, and *authoritative* revelation to us.
 2. Understand that *saving faith* and the *illumination* of the indwelling Holy Spirit are required in order to properly interpret God's Word.
 3. Interpret personal experience in light of Scripture, rather than interpreting Scripture in light of personal experience.
 4. The Church does not determine what the Bible teaches, the Bible must determine what the Church should teach.
 5. Every Christian has the right and responsibility to study and interpret God's Word for himself.

Why Do We Need These Principles?

Write a "Thank You" Note

- Take a moment to write several sentences expressing your thanks to someone for something they have done for you recently.
- Try to give some specific details of the situation, and describe how you felt as a result of their actions. Or share something you learned about yourself or the other person as a result of the situation.

Any Communication Requires Interpretation

- Whenever we use language in order to communicate something, the "rules" of proper interpretation must also be used.
- All thought and language require the stability of categories in order to be effective. If something could be a dog one minute and then transform into a sheep the next, we would never be able to talk about it.
- In the field of logic, this would be called the *Law of Non-Contradiction*: "The same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect." In other words, it is not possible for something to be "A" and "not-A."
- This "stability of categories" is unavoidable because it was built into the fabric of the universe by God. Therefore, the Law of Non-Contradiction must be assumed to be true by anyone who wants to think or say anything meaningful. It is necessary for making any kind of distinction, affirmation, or denial. "If someone were to say, 'There is no such thing as truth, and the Law of Non-Contradiction is meaningless,' he has done two things. First, he has assumed that his view is true as opposed to false, and thus he uses the Law of Non-Contradiction.... Second, he has violated the Law of Non-Contradiction by suggesting that there is no such thing as truth while at the same time and in the same sense insisting that there is such a thing as truth – the truth of his own view." ¹
- When applied to language, this means ... "that every word in the sentence '*The line is straight*' has a specific meaning. *The* does not mean *any*, *all*, or *no*. *Line* does not mean *dog*, *dandelion*, or *doughnut*. *Is* does not mean *is not*. *Straight* does not mean *white* or anything else. Each word has a definite meaning. In order to have a definite meaning, a word must not only mean something, it must also *not* mean something." ² When applied to the language of the Bible, this means that every word in every verse has a specific meaning.
- Is it possible to determine what is the valid meaning of a text? Are there *multiple* valid meanings? If so, are some meanings *more* valid than others? Can I arrive at the meaning of the text simply by asking, "What does it mean *to me*?" These are questions that we must answer before we can accurately interpret the Bible.
- As in the example of your Thank You note, each word and phrase was intended to have a specific meaning. But who was the determiner of that meaning? It was the author of the text that decided which words to use in order to express a single, specific intended meaning.
- As with any other book, the Bible was written in languages that were intended to communicate specific concepts to the readers. "The desired result is that the hearers or readers will understand in their minds the ideas conveyed from the mind of the speaker or writer. A person can know the mind of a speaker or author only by what he says or writes. Since the Bible is written in human languages, obviously the purpose is to convey truths from God, the ultimate Author, to human beings." ³ In studying the Bible, we must arrive as closely as possible to the meaning that *God* intended to communicate through the inspired words that His servants wrote.

How do we know whether we have determined the true meaning?

- We think carefully, study in a disciplined manner, and follow the best possible principles of interpretation.
- These principles will be the subject of the remaining sessions of this workshop. We will be discussing:
 1. Understanding the written language of the Bible.
 2. Understanding the history, geography, and culture of the Bible writers.
 3. Understanding the literary forms of the Bible, as well as how to interpret special types of language.
 4. Understanding the unity of the Scriptures, as well as how to interpret the Bible theologically and systematically.
 5. Understanding the principles for proper application of the Scriptures to our lives today.

Why study the principles of interpretation?

- Without learning how to think properly and to accurately interpret the words and phrases of the Bible, we will be in danger of misinterpreting Scripture. The apostle Peter warns against the destruction that comes from distorting the meaning of Scripture (2 Peter 3:14-16). A study of sound principles of biblical interpretation will help us to avoid twisting Scripture to make it say something that it was not intended to say.
- "History shows that erroneous principles have often spoiled the exegetical work of fine men, some of whom are great saints. This should be a warning to us against careless interpretation. There is less excuse for us because we can profit by the lessons of the past." ⁴
- "Understanding the Bible is a lifelong process. As you study the Word, you will be asking yourself, What does this mean? Is this view correct? Why or why not? What about this interpretation? Is it valid? As you hear sermons and listen to teachers, you are continually confronted with the question, Is what he is saying about the

Bible correct? As you discuss the Bible with others, you will be faced with the question of which of several possible views is more likely the meaning of the passage being considered. Seeking to determine what a passage really means is an intriguing intellectual and spiritual challenge. And as you share the Word of God, people will be asking you, "What does this verse mean? How are we to understand this passage?"⁵

Interpretation as a Step in a Larger Process

OBSERVATION	What does the text say?
INTERPRETATION	What does it <u>mean</u> by what it says?
CORRELATION	How does this fit with the rest of the Bible?
APPLICATION	How does this apply to my life today?

Resource List for General Bible Interpretation

Hermeneutics Books

1. Roy Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation
2. Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible
3. Henry Virkler, Hermeneutics: Principles and Process of Biblical Interpretation
4. Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation

Bible Study Methods

1. Kay Arthur, How to Study Your Bible
2. Tim LaHaye, How to Study the Bible for Yourself
3. Gordon Fee & Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth
4. Walter Henrichsen & Gayle Jackson, Studying, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible
5. Woodrow Kroll, How to Understand the Bible
6. Irving Jensen, Enjoy Your Bible

Endnotes

- ¹ Norman Geisler & Peter Bocchino, Unshakable Foundations (2001), 24.
- ² Gordon Clark, Logic (1985), viii.
- ³ Roy Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation (1991), 61.
- ⁴ A. Berkeley Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible (1963), 20.
- ⁵ Zuck, 15.

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