

Cutting Straight

Seven Simple Rules for Understanding and Interpreting Scripture

KEVIN GEOFFREY

Be diligent to bring yourself near—proven to God, a workman irreproachable, straightly cutting a *path* for the word of the truth. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15

Reading and understanding the Scriptures can often be a challenge, especially given that the words and ideas were originally communicated between about 2,000 to 3,500 years ago in a foreign language to an ancient people. Add to this the fact that people today tend to read and teach the Scriptures piecemeal, and treat the text in an overly spiritualized and individualized manner, it is no wonder that people often have difficulty arriving at the same understanding of what the Scriptures say. But with just a little bit of work, we can easily overcome such tendencies, and find that the simple teaching of God's perfect Word is waiting to be revealed.

So here are seven simple rules for understanding and interpreting the correct meaning of Scripture.

- 1. When the plain sense makes sense, seek no other sense.** This is the overarching rule. While all truth is spiritually discerned (see Yochanan 16:13, 1 Corinthians 2:12-16), we cannot abandon simple logic and common sense when it comes to reading the Book. Though it may sometimes require some thought and effort on our part to understand what the author is communicating, the words on the page will, for the most part, have a plain, simple meaning—no hidden meanings or secret revelations.
- 2. Context is key.** Words have meaning, but the same word can often have multiple meanings, depending on context. When we read the Scriptures, we need to consider individual words in the context of their sentences, sentences in the context of their paragraphs, paragraphs in the context of their chapters, chapters in the context of their books, and books in the context of the rest of Scripture. Another crucial part of context concerns the author and his audience. Who is the author? Under what circumstance is he writing? What was his purpose for writing? Who is his audience? How would they have understood what the author is saying? Context enlarges the field of communication, thereby narrowing the specific meaning of what is being communicated.
- 3. Scripture interprets Scripture.** The Scriptures are perfect (without error, trustworthy), sufficient (all the instruction from God we need to be guided through life) and supreme (has utter authority to instruct, inform and command us). Therefore, the primary source for interpreting Scripture is Scripture itself. When we encounter a passage that appears unclear in its immediate context, we should look to other parts of Scripture which discuss the same topic or use the same words. This will help to illuminate our understanding of the passage in question. By the same token, our interpretation of any given passage of Scripture must not be in conflict with any other passage of Scripture. If it is, our interpretation is wrong. Scripture does not contradict itself. While we need to be able to accept certain tensions and even paradoxes that are beyond

full human comprehension, outright contradictions in interpretation mean that we, not the Scriptures, are in error.

4. **Consult secondary sources sparingly.** In order to successfully navigate through Scripture, practical tools such as Bible concordances, lexicons, interlinear Bibles, and searchable electronic Bibles are often crucial aids. Other works such as Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias may also sometimes be helpful for understanding Scriptural background and context, especially as they deal with history, culture and archeology. But extreme care must be taken when consulting more subjective sources such as Bible commentaries; other religious works, like the Talmud; and even ancient, classical, or contemporary Christian teachers. God has certainly provided teachers to the Body of Messiah (Ephesians 4:11) to help believers grasp and apply the truth of His Word. However, given the utter authority of the Scriptures over the fallibility of man's word, we must not be too quick to turn to sources which are not inspired by God.
5. **Be aware of the type of literature you are reading, and be able to recognize figures of speech.** The Scriptures were written in four main literary genres: historical narrative, prophecy, poetry, and personal letters. Each of these will have their own distinctive ways of conveying thoughts and ideas. Additionally, the reader will not only encounter plain facts and events, but also a wide variety of metaphors, similes, hyperbole, analogies, allegories and colloquialisms, which are not meant to be taken at face value, but are intentionally figurative in order to creatively and effectively make the author's point. As with any kind of written (or verbal) communication, when the recipient fails to recognize such figures of speech and types of literature, it can result in grave misunderstanding.
6. **Determine the author's intended meaning, free from your own presuppositions.** The goal of reading the Scriptures is not to reinforce or find support for our presuppositions, feelings or experiences—and especially not to force onto the text what we *want* the Scriptures to say (which can be influenced by tradition, expediency and rationalism). If we fail to grasp the author's original and intended meaning, we fail to understand and rightly interpret the Word of God. While a given passage of Scripture can and does impact each person differently, and carry different emotional and spiritual weight at various times of our lives, we do not have the ability, nor the right, to approach the text individualistically, and change its meaning to suit our needs. Every Scripture has one, single meaning, which we must rightly determine, if we are to abide by God's Word.
7. **Apply the Word to your life.** Reading and understanding the Scriptures is not enough—we must then put them into action, and do what they say. The Scriptures often plainly communicate how one must think and act in a given situation. Other times, we can find guidance by looking at specific examples, identifying patterns, then extrapolating from these into more general Scriptural principles. This process requires great care to not suppress God's Word with our own ideas; however, with spiritual discernment and wise counsel, it is possible for such principles to be safely derived. By applying the Scriptures to our daily lives, we discover the fullest meaning of the text, and the perfect truth of the Word of God is powerfully enacted in us.