

SYSTEMATIC INTERPRETATION

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Is there a verse or set of verses in scripture that supports the hermeneutical principle (biblical/systematic) that specific passages are to be understood within the overall context of scripture itself, or is this a logical principle of interpretation put together from experience?

The question about systematic interpretation of the Bible can be asked about the interpretation of any body of communication. Systematic harmonization is the natural thing to do in interpretation; there is nothing surprising about it. We always take an individual comment in light of the whole conversation because we know enough about language to know that a person cannot say everything in every sentence. The same principle applies to a book or an author's set of books. For the time being, we assume the author is speaking consistently between the parts of a conversation, between articles, or between books spread out even over several years.

The catch is that people are not always consistent, and consistency of thought is what we assume in our willingness to listen to people without trying to pit one comment against another before we have heard the whole presentation. There may be a difference, then, from speaker to speaker as to how willing we are to look for a harmonization between statements that may look contrary to each other at first hearing. Their personal character, known from elsewhere perhaps, our experience of previous conversations with them, our sense of their ability to think and speak coherently, and the like determine how much benefit of doubt we apply to interpreting what they say.

The case with the Bible is no different. The view we take of scripture's reliability determines the approach we take toward reading it. At this point, those of us with a high view of scripture's reliability build our interpretation process on the high claims of scripture for itself as God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:16-21, and the many other texts that involve inerrancy, infallibility, reliability discussions). If we agree that the Bible has essentially one author—the Holy Spirit—as these texts claim, then we treat it the way we would treat any other set of writings by a self-consistent writer.

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