

CHAPTER SIX

PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

OBJECTIVES:

Upon completion of this chapter you will be able to:

- C Write the Key Verse from memory.
- C Explain what it means to "rightly divide" the Word of truth.
- C List six rules for properly interpreting the Bible.
- C Define each of these six rules.
- C Define verbal and plenary inspiration.

KEY VERSE:

Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (II Timothy 2:15)

INTRODUCTION

Read the Key Verse again. "Rightly dividing" as used here is taken from the rules for Old Testament sacrifices and means to "cut straight." In the Old Testament, when a person brought a sacrifice for sin, the animal was divided into three parts. One part was offered to God. Another part was given to the one who brought the offering. The third part went to the priest. From this practice the expression "rightly dividing" developed. It means to "give to each that which belongs to him."

In Bible study it is important to rightly divide the Word of God. This means you must understand what is being said to whom. You must also interpret and apply the meaning correctly.

There are three major groups to which the Word addresses itself. These are listed in I Corinthians 10:32:

Give none offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the Church of God. (I Corinthians 10:32)

All Scriptures were given FOR us, but not all verses are directed TO us. For example, God told Noah to build an ark. The story is recorded as an example from which you are to learn spiritual truths but it does not mean YOU should build an ark. Some of the Bible is directed to the Jews. Portions are directed to the Gentiles (nations other than the Jews).

Other portions are directed to the Church (all those who are true believers in Jesus Christ).

In order to find the correct meaning from the Bible you must learn to rightly divide it. Another word for this is "interpretation" which means to give something proper meaning. You must learn how to arrive at the proper meaning for each Scripture. Jesus pointed out to the religious leaders of His time:

. . . Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God.
(Matthew 22:29)

Spiritual error results from not knowing God's Word. There are certain principles you must follow in order to properly interpret the Bible. There are six basic rules for interpreting the Bible which help to "rightly divide" the Word of God.

THE RULE OF DIVINE AUTHORITY

The rule of divine authority means that we accept the Bible as the final authority. We believe that all the Bible is inspired by God, from Genesis through Revelation:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine,
for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.
(II Timothy 3:16)

For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of
God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. (II Peter 1:19-21)

There are two different types of inspiration: Verbal and plenary inspiration.

By verbal inspiration we mean that every word in the original manuscripts was inspired by God. By plenary inspiration we mean full inspiration of all Scripture as opposed to partial inspiration. Every portion of the Bible is inspired.

When we accept the rule of divine authority, then there is no conflict between the Bible and history or science. If there is an apparent conflict it is because:

1. We have failed to understand science or history.

or else. . .
2. The current scientific knowledge is not accurate. When conflicts are apparent, the Bible is taken as the final authority because it is the divinely inspired Word of God. In the past, when apparent conflicts between the Bible and history or science

arose, later investigations always proved the Bible to be correct.

THE RULE OF LITERAL INTERPRETATION

To interpret the Bible literally means to believe it means exactly what it says. Always interpret the Bible literally unless the context clearly indicates otherwise. When the Bible says Israel crossed the Jordan River on dry ground, accept it literally. When the Bible tells about the walls of Jericho falling down, accept it as it is recorded by the Holy Spirit.

The Bible does contain various "types." Certain persons, places, or events, while literal in themselves, also represent something that will happen in the future. Chapter Twenty-One of this course will help you recognize these.

Symbols are also used in the Bible. A symbol stands for a meaning in addition to its ordinary one. For example, in Mark 14:22 the wine is used as a symbol of the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. (They were not drinking actual blood.) Symbols are often used in Bible prophecy. For example the great image of which Nebuchadnezzar dreamed in Daniel has symbolic significance. Each part of the image represented a future world kingdom (Daniel 2). The Bible usually explains symbols when they are used. For example, Daniel's interpretation of the symbolic image is recorded in Daniel 2:31-45.

Jesus often used parables when He taught. A parable is a story that is told for the purpose of illustrating a spiritual truth. Whenever Jesus used a parable it is always stated in the Bible. If it does not say it was a parable then the story should be accepted as an actual event.

THE RULE OF CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATION

Every verse of the Bible should be studied in its context. This means it should be studied in relation to the verses which precede and follow it, as well as in relation to the rest of the Bible. Many false doctrines and cults have been created because verses or parts of verses were taken out of their context.

For example, the Bible says there is no God. Did you know that? You will find this in Psalm 14:1. Right there it says "there is no God." But if we read all the passage then we have this:

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. (Psalm 14:1)

The complete verse in its context is quite different in meaning than the portion removed from the context.

To study a verse in its context ask yourself the following questions:

1. Who Is Speaking Or Writing?

Although all the Bible is God's Word, different men were used in writing and speaking it.

2. What Is Being Said?

Summarize the main points of what is being said by the speaker or writer.

3. To Whom Is It Being Said?

Israel? The Gentile nations? The Church? A specific individual?

4. Why Was It Said?

What is the purpose in the passage? The Bible itself states purposes for some books and passages:

And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book:

But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name.
(John 20:30-31)

For other parts of Scripture the reason for writing is not so clearly stated. You must examine the context more closely to determine why the message was recorded.

5. When Was It Said?

The time and circumstances of some scriptures help us understand the meaning. For example, when there was confusion in church services at the church of Corinth Paul wrote a special passage of scripture. He told the women to keep silent in the Church. Did this mean women could not sing, pray, teach, or worship out loud in the Church?

To find the answer, we must examine when, why, and to whom this was said. In Jewish church services men were seated on one side of the building and women on the other. The Corinthian women were disrupting services by shouting questions to their husbands on the other side of the room. This was the occasion when Paul found it necessary to write:

Let your women keep silence in the churches; for it is not permitted unto

them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. (I Corinthians 14:34)

Interpreting a Scripture within its context helps explain the meaning of the passage. Taking a verse out of context can result in incorrect understanding. Often the context of a Scripture in the Bible gives the interpretation. A good example of this is the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-9. If you continue to read the context, the parable is interpreted in verses 18-23. In many cases similar to this the Bible interprets itself within the context. This is why contextual consideration is important.

THE RULE OF FIRST MENTION

The rule of first mention is as follows: The first time a word, phrase, object, or incident is mentioned in the Bible, it gives the key to its meaning anywhere else it occurs.

For example, in Genesis 3 there is the first mention of fig leaves. Here, Adam used fig leaves to try to cover his own sin and nakedness by his own efforts. Fig leaves speak of self-righteousness, rejection of God's remedy, and an attempt to justify ones self before God.

This is the meaning of fig leaves wherever they are mentioned afterwards in the Bible. For example, the last time fig leaves are mentioned is by Jesus in Matthew 21 and Mark 11 and 13. Here we find a fig tree with leaves but no fruit. Jesus cursed it and it withered away. To understand this act we need to remember the law of first mention and go back to Genesis 3. Fig leaves represent man's rejection of God's remedy and a self-righteous attempt to justify himself. The fig tree represented the self-righteous nation of Israel who had rejected Jesus. They rejected Him as King and would not accept His plan of salvation from sin. They were trying to be righteous through their own self-efforts.

THE RULE OF REPETITION

All the Bible is divinely inspired. There are no unessential parts of the Bible. Each word is inspired and necessary. For this reason, when something is repeated in Scripture it is for special emphasis. It means that a truth is of such special importance that it needs to be repeated.

John 3 illustrates this rule of repetition. Jesus tells Nicodemus of the necessity of the new birth experience and repeats it three times:

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.
(John 3:3)

Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit he cannot enter into the

kingdom of God. (John 3:5)

Marvel not that I say unto thee, Ye must be born again. (John 3:7)

Remember: Whenever the Bible repeats, it is the Holy Spirit's way of saying "Stop and really look at this."

THE RULE OF CUMULATIVE REVELATION

This rule is actually stated in the Bible:

Know this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation.

For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of men; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. (II Peter 1:20- 21)

The Schofield Bible gives this translation:

No prophecy of scripture is its own interpretation; That is, it is not isolated from all the that the Word has given elsewhere.

The rule of cumulative revelation is this: The full truth of God's Word on any subject must not be gathered from an isolated passage. The cumulative (total) revelation of all the Bible says regarding a truth must be considered. This is why it is called the rule of "cumulative" revelation.

You cannot base your doctrine, teaching, or beliefs on a few isolated verses about a subject. You must keep studying until your interpretation becomes consistent with the whole of the Scriptures.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

There are several passages in the Bible which confirm the inspiration of the Word by God. Look up each passage in your Bible and summarize it:

Scripture	Summary
Hebrews 1:1	<hr/> <hr/>
I Thessalonians 2:13	<hr/> <hr/>
II Timothy 3:16	<hr/> <hr/>
I Corinthians 14:37	<hr/> <hr/>
I Corinthians 2:7-13	<hr/> <hr/>
I Corinthians 11:23	<hr/> <hr/>
Galatians 1:11,12,16,20	<hr/> <hr/>
Ephesians 3:1-10	<hr/> <hr/>
I Peter 1:10,11,21	<hr/> <hr/>
II Peter 3:16	<hr/> <hr/>