

Interpreting and Understanding the Bible

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Introduction

Some religious groups claim that they have been given the authority to interpret Scripture for all. Others believe that the Bible can be understood only with further miraculous and discriminatory help from the Holy Spirit, and that such help is given only to them. Probably most denominational groups believe their particular interpretation of Scripture is the only right one. Can any person of normal intelligence pick up a Bible and understand its message? Is it reasonable to believe that the Bible can be understandable to those who read its words?

2 Peter 1:20-21 and Interpretation

Many who claim that ordinary people cannot understand the Bible have misapplied the words of 2 Peter 1:20-21: "But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." Some have used this passage to claim that ordinary people are not able to interpret Scripture, but that is not what Peter said. The verb "is" in v20 is translated from the verb *ginomai*, meaning to become or spring into being.

The context itself shows that Peter is stating that Scripture does not come (or spring into being) from the writer's ("one's") own personal ideas or interpretation, but from the Holy Spirit's inspiration only. This is clearly shown by viewing v20 in light of v21. The passage is about the authors of Scripture; it has nothing whatsoever to do with the reader's understanding.

Scripture Written to Ordinary People

The Bible itself indicates that it is intended for ordinary people to understand. The letters which are assembled together to form the New Testament were originally addressed to ordinary Christians or to entire congregations of people. Consider a few examples:

- "Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus...to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints." Romans 1:1,7
- "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timotheus our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ which are at Colosse: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Colossians 1:1-2
- "Simon Peter, a servant and an apostle of Jesus Christ, to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Savior Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 1:1
- "And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea." Colossians 4:16
- "I charge you by the Lord that this epistle be read unto all the holy brethren." I Thessalonians 5:27
- "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: the time is at hand." Revelations 1:3

New Testament writings were written to ordinary members of the church and it was intended that the writings be read by or be read to those people. The divine instruction is "read", "hear", "read to", etc. Thus, the scriptures themselves tell us that we are to read them ourselves; no mention is made of needing an interpreter to understand them. It is God's will and desire that His word be studied and understood by each individual who would believe and become obedient to that will.

Notice what Paul said in Ephesians 3:3-5: "By revelation (from God) there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. And by referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit." Paul clearly states that we can understand what he wrote by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Why do People Interpret the Bible Differently?

If the Bible is indeed written in a manner that is intended to be understandable, why are there so many different interpretations on various issues? There may not be a simple answer for this question, but following are a few possible explanations...

1. Some have not asked for wisdom.

James 1:5 says, "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him." God has promised to help those who sincerely ask for such.

Not only do we perhaps often fail to ask for wisdom, but perhaps we also often fail to ask with the proper motive. James 4:3 says, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." Though the context of this verse is not specifically about wisdom, it may be that our prayers for wisdom may not be answered because something is amiss in our hearts.

2. Some are not diligently searching for truth.

Jesus often spoke in parables; perhaps He did so in order that those who truly wished to know the truth would understand, but the rest would not. Those who were not diligently searching for truth would hear only stories and would not comprehend the deeper truths being given.

In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter spoke of Paul's writings and said, "As also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction." Peter acknowledged that some teachings of Scripture would be difficult to understand. Notice he says it is the untaught and unstable who twist such things to their own destruction. Perhaps they do so because their hearts are not truly searching for the truth of God's word.

2 Thessalonians 2:7-12 speaks of God sending a deluding influence upon those who did not love the truth. Romans 1:28 says that God gave some over to a depraved mind.

In contrast, consider the example of Cornelius in Acts 10. He is described as "...a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayed to God continually (Acts 10:2). The context of the chapter shows that he was a man who was diligently searching for the truth, and thus he was provided a way to learn (by way of Peter).

3. Some look for proof texts to support what they already believe.

The task of Bible students today is to interpret Scripture in light of its true context. Productive and responsible Bible study requires a proper **exegesis**, which is defined as a critical examination and interpretation of Scripture based upon its historical setting and meaning to its original readers.

Some Bible students, however, often go to Scripture to find support for what they have already decided (perhaps influenced by their culture or the traditional viewpoint espoused by his/her fellowship). This process is generally called **eisogesis**, which is defined as reading one's own meaning into a text.

While those who practice this method of interpretation may do so with the most honest of intentions, it is nevertheless a dangerous practice if one is truly in search of the truth (consider the example of the unbelieving Jews in Romans 10:1-3 and 1 Corinthians 2:8).

We need to strive to be like the Bereans in Acts 17:11 who searched the Scriptures daily to make sure they held only to the truth.

4. Some use different methods of interpretation (hermeneutics).

Not everyone holds to the same method of interpretation (even though acknowledging the authority of Scripture), perhaps because Scripture itself does not apparently give one and only one acceptable manner of interpreting Scripture.

There appears to be several variations...

- Some think that many things are acceptable if not specifically condemned in Scripture; others think many things are NOT acceptable if not specifically mentioned and authorized in Scripture.
- Some espouse the authority of commands, examples, and necessary inferences, while others hesitate to recognize and bind anything beyond clear and relevant commands.
- Some believe that some commands or accounts of historic events are relevant only to the people and culture of the early church, while others seek to apply such things to people of all time (speaking in tongues, feet washing, etc.).
- Some believe every item of Scripture is to be interpreted literally, while others believe that some items are intended to be figurative in nature. Not everyone agrees on what is intended to be literal and what is intended to be figurative (for example, the book of Revelation).

5. Some misunderstand due to insufficient scholarship.

Some set out with all sincerity and honesty to understand what the Bible teaches but fail to accurately interpret Scripture simply because they have not studied sufficiently. Perhaps they have not adequately determined the proper context, or misunderstand the historical setting, or perhaps they make some other mistake in trying to properly understand a passage. (for example, 1 Corinthians 11 regarding veil).

6. Some are deceived or misled by false teaching.

Perhaps because of a lack of love for truth, some seem to be easily swayed by false teaching. In 2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 13-15, Paul was greatly concerned that the church in Corinth might be led away and deceived by those who were "false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ."

Paul said in Ephesians 4:14 that some are "children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming." He sadly declares in 2 Timothy 4:3-4, "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate to themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths."

1 Timothy 4:1 says, "But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons." Destructive false doctrines of that day were Jewish legalism, gnosticism, asceticism, antinomianism, and docetism.

Note: It is apparently improper to label all who would err in their teaching as false teachers. Compare the example of Apollos in Acts 18:24-28 and the false teachers of 2 Peter 2:1-3. Apollos was not called a false teacher because his motive was pure; he simply needed help to better understand the truth. On the other hand, those whom Peter called false were called such because they indeed had false motives and were of poor character.

Conclusion

Christians believe the Bible is infallible, but certainly we ourselves are not. When we as mere humans set out to interpret the Bible, we sometimes fail to do so as God intended. Some no doubt interpret Scripture more accurately than do others, but it is doubtful that anyone has mastered every point of doctrine perfectly (see James 3:1-2).

And, while some things may be difficult to understand, surely those things that are truly necessary to come into a saved relationship with the Lord are clear and easily understood by honest people searching for truth.

Christians will likely always have differing viewpoints on various issues. But let us remember the admonition of Paul in Romans 14:1, 13, 19: "[Let us seek to] accept the one who is weak . . . let us not judge one another anymore, . . . [nor] put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. . . So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another."