To properly exegete a passage, it is necessary that we get in touch with some basic rules of interpretation. These rules are called “the science and art of Hermeneutics.” The word comes from the Greek verb that means to “translate,” or “interpret.” It is a science, because it is guided by principles, or rules, arranged into an orderly system of approach. It is also called an art, because as we will see, it requires skill and sensitivity to complete it.

Now, we are certainly not saying that only the scholars can understand the Bible. We should continue to emphasize what the 16th century reformers affirmed. They called it perspicuity—the way of salvation plainly set forth so that the simplest believer may read and understand it for himself. Salvation is plainly available, so that everyone can come to Jesus and find life (John 20:31; 2 Tim. 3:15).

Yet the Word of God is rich in revelation. It contains more than the simple way of salvation. It discloses God’s creation and control of the universe; His dealings with His people, Israel; the redeeming work of His Son; the coming of His Spirit; the beginnings and the mission of His church; His call to maturity through Christlikeness; His promises of Christ’s glorious return, of resurrection and of heaven, and much more besides. ¹ Therefore, if we are to enter more deeply into God’s Word, we must take the task of hermeneutics seriously, even if we can't spell or even remember the term.

The history of the church certainly confirms the need of such a code to guide our interpretation. For instance, Paul warned the Corinthians against a false approach which corrupts the Word of God (2 Cor. 2:17), and commanded Timothy to handle Scripture accurately (2 Tim. 2:15). We might say, then, that an understanding of hermeneutics is a necessary tool for every workman who handles the Word of God. Few believers, however, have a knowledge of the principles.

Here’s an example of a common need for hermeneutics: "Why, Jim, let’s invite several of our friends over to my house this Wednesday night for Bible study." The night comes, and everyone is present and reasonably excited. A passage of Scripture is assigned as the focus for the evening. After prayer and careful reading of the text, the leader asks the question: "What does
that mean to us today?" The people begin to share. On one verse, however, there are several disagreements. How do they resolve the situation? The only reasonable answer is by "consensus." If they can't arrive at that, the statement that resolves the conflict is, "Well, you have your interpretation and I have mine."

Does that sound familiar? This is a very popular way to study the Bible in homes around the world. No one can deny that a great deal of benefit does come from such gatherings, but the situation could also be improved measurably. This is especially true when a high percentage of people have a "creative" way of reading between the lines to find what they believe is the deeper meaning of Scripture. Of equal concern are those who resist any study, and insist on adhering only to the simple meaning of the text ("the simple gospel").

We certainly have ample evidence around us in the cults and through church history to know that reading the Bible is not enough to totally understand it. Scriptures are often taken out of context and misapplied, because the reader has established no principles of interpretation to guide him. Those who say, "I don't need help, I just read and let the Lord tell me what it means," are right in their confidence in the Lord, but lacking in their understanding of how the Lord tells us what it means.

We need to know some simple rules of interpretation. Take, for instance, 2 Cor. 6:14, which says: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness"? What does this verse mean? A yoke is a wooden bar laid across the necks of two draft animals. Does this verse say that a believer should not get under such a bar alongside someone who is not a Christian? That would be nonsense. Does it refer to the marriage of a believer with an unbeliever? Or does it forbid a Christian to join societies such as the Masons, or Rotary, when membership is mixed? What is an "unequal yoke?" These questions show us the need for hermeneutics.

The Principles of Interpretation

The Principle of Literal Interpretation

To get started, we will look at an umbrella principle to the whole process of interpretation: "The Principle of Literal Interpretation." In communication from one person to another, we know there is a meaning in the mind of the speaker or writer that he seeks to put forth in a form the listener can understand. The role of the recipient is to comprehend what the messenger is trying to say.
Every day we follow rules of interpretation, though we are not always aware of it. Often in our interaction with each other, we use universal laws of language to determine the meaning of our conversations. In many ways, then, what we are doing here is just a matter of becoming aware of these principles and putting them into the practice of our study of Scripture.

Bernard Ramm, author of Hermeneutics, comments on this:

When a person is familiar with the materials he reads or hears, the process of understanding occurs without effect. Interpretation is present, but it functions so spontaneously that it is not evident.

When a person is confronted with strange materials, his process of understanding becomes self-conscious. An effort is made to find rules that will guide the interpreter through such materials.  

The definition of "literal interpretation" most often quoted is by Bernard Ramm. "The literal interpretation as applied to any document is that view which adapts as the sense of a sentence, the meaning of that sentence in usual, or ordinary, or normal conversation or writing."  

In this definition, two factors stand out as being important:

1. **The normal sense.** This definition, as it is applied to any document, means that the interpretation will place its emphasis upon the natural, usual, ordinary, normal, proper, and obvious meaning of words as they are used in that language. The literal method makes the assumption that the writer is using his own language in a normal manner. This is, again, the way all ordinary people understand the language in which they speak. They use the meanings—in deciphering verbal and written communications—commonly understood by everyone in their culture.

2. **The one sense.** Closely entwined with the normal sense is the one sense. This means that the expression one uses to convey his thoughts has one meaning. The job of the diligent scribe is to find out what the one meaning is. This is, again, what communication is all about, and the one sense often takes effort to discover. Our problem in discovering it, is that:

   - We don't believe that every statement of Scripture has one sense. We surmise it has
multiple or deeper meanings.

- We read into the passage our preconceived biases and assumptions, and don't allow it to simply speak for itself. As a result, we don't discover what the text is really saying, because we have colored it, and the single sense is lost!

In the light of this difficulty, it is important that we seek to comprehend the author's intended meaning, and in the process, filter out our preconceptions.

Tyndale, in his wonderful King James style of English, has written the following:

Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the Scripture hath but one sense, which is the literal sense. And the literal sense is that root and ground of all and the anchor that never faileth, where unto if thou cleave, thou canst never err nor go out of the way. And if thou leave the literal sense, thou canst not but go out of the way. 4

That is the most important principle of all. With that in mind, however, let's move to other principles that should govern our interpretation of a text. These will not be in order of priority.

**The Principle of Narrow to Wide**

We are to study the Bible inductively, and interpret the narrower context before the wider.

A passage must first be understood (interpreted) by its immediate surroundings (context) by inductive study, before it's studied in the light of the broader application to the whole Bible. Start with the smallest unit and move to the largest unit (i.e., paragraph, chapter, section, book).

A frequent error, for example, is to interpret a phrase by Paul on the basis of its use in John. We must realize, however, that each biblical writer—like each of us—used language differently. In fact, most of us use words differently than we did 10 to 15 years ago. Concordance messages that trace one word through Scripture are often inaccurate, because they don't take into account the verses surround the word.

When we understand a passage in its context, then we can move to a bigger context.
The narrow must then be related to the rest of Scripture, as well as to the historical, social, and cultural settings of the passage. Thus, no part of Scripture can be interpreted, that will contradict the teaching of the whole of Scripture or its setting.

The complementary principle is: "Scripture interprets Scripture." "Scripture interprets Scripture" has been called a circle. The whole of Scripture can be learned by interpreting its part by part. No man's attention span is so great that he can ingest the whole of Scripture at once. Yet no part can stand in isolation to the whole (or its historical and cultural context). So the interpreter must go from part to whole and from whole to part.  

I call the process "the telescope/microscope balance." We need the close view as well as the big picture. They balance each other out. It is crucial to interpret a phrase

1. by its use in its own immediate context, then
2. by its use in the broader sphere of the major section of the work, then
3. by its use in the book as a whole (check cross references). Next, one may check the corpus of works
   4. by the same author. Only after that would one check the concept
   5. through the testament and then
   6. in the Bible as a whole. (bullet points ours)  

Remember the following sub-principles:

- If your interpretation of a text is not logically consistent with what is otherwise taught by the Scriptures, then your interpretation is not valid.
- If your interpretation does not fit the flow of thought or unity of purpose in the relevant context, then your interpretation is not valid.
- If your interpretation of some text does not interpret the author in such a way that it is consistent with what is otherwise known of his beliefs, then your interpretation is probably not valid.
- If your interpretation of a text suggests a meaning which is not consistent with any passage which is truly parallel, then your interpretation is not valid. (Truly parallel is one which describes the very event or expresses exactly the same thought as another passage to which it is parallel.)
I think we all see the need for this as we look at the cults. One of their most familiar traits is that they take an incidental passage of Scripture out of its context, and build on it to form one of their "pillars of truth."

**The Principle of Simplicity**

*Important truths are not hidden—look for the simplest interpretation.* This is very close to our umbrella principle of Literal Interpretation. We must understand that major doctrinal truths of our faith are plainly seen in Scripture, and often repeated throughout the Bible. Therefore, we know that the important truths are not hidden in obscure passages, or in figures of speech. This understanding helps us not to major on minors in our study.

We must remember, God is not trying to hide His truth from all but the wisest and the most diligent seeker. God's purpose is to reveal, not conceal.

The implicit, therefore, is to be interpreted by the explicit. That which is assumed to be implied in Scripture, is to be interpreted in the light of passages that are fully developed and formulated. In other words, interpret the obscure in the light of the clear. R. C. Sproul says: "The basic rule is the rule of care. Careful reading of what the text is actually saying, will save us from much confusion and distortion. No great knowledge of logic is necessary, just the simple application of common sense."  

If your interpretation of a text does not construe its meaning in the simplest, least complicated, most natural and straightforward manner, then all things being equal, your interpretation is probably not valid.

*Example:* I have read many references to the fact that angels are sexless. Where does the Bible say that angels are sexless? The passage used to support this teaching is Mark 12:15, where Jesus explains that in heaven there will be no marrying or giving in marriage, but that we will be like the angels. That implies that angels do not marry, but it does not imply they are sexless. It is possible the angels could remain unmarried for other reasons than that they are sexless. So then, we can't build a teaching on a possible implication, especially if the rest of Scripture does not confirm it.

Let me clarify: this is not to say that the study of the text is unimportant. These are riches to be
acquired for the diligent student who will carefully study and meditate on the major teachings of the Scripture.

**The Principle of Progressive Revelation**

*The Bible is progressive revelation.* A basic understanding of the Bible is that God chose *not* to tell us everything He intended, all at once. The revelation became fuller in content and meaning as it progressed. This does not mean the former truths became untruthful, but simply that former truth was made clearer by the addition of more details or information. The most obvious example of this is the progression of revelation from the Old to the New Testament.

**Progressive revelation means, then, that each truth was made clearer by the addition of more and more of God’s truth.** As time unraveled, the purpose of God became clearer and fuller (e.g., the enlargement of the ideas of ethics, worship and redemption in the Bible).

Another principle is that **the Old Testament is to be understood in the light of the New Testament**. This does not mean the Old Testament does not make sense alone, but simply that the New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old. For example, "The New Testament does away with the Old Testament sacrificial, ceremonial and dietary system, by showing the true reason for them is in Jesus. In spite of the Old Testament commands, we are free from the restrictions because of the New Testament teachings.

If there is any tension between the Old and New Testaments, then, the older gives way to the newer. On the other hand, if the New Testament does not add to, address, or expand upon the teachings of the Old Testament, then it stands on its own (e.g., teaching, worship, and attributes of God in the Psalms).

Another rule stemming from this principle that the Bible is progressive revelation, is that **the Gospels and Acts are interpreted, for the most part, by the Epistles**. The emphasis of the Gospels and Acts is found generally in the record of events, while the Epistles are generally more concerned with interpretation of the significance of these events in terms of doctrine, exhortation and application. If we are confused, then, about something in the Gospels or Acts, we ought to check on what the Epistles have to say about the issue. They will help us to interpret the narrative portions.

This rule is not absolute, especially when the Gospels and Acts have teaching recorded. For instance, in many of the passages in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts, not only is there a
record of the acts of Jesus and the apostles, but teaching recorded as well. Does that mean that Jesus' teaching and the apostles' teaching in the Gospels and Acts is given less authority than that of the Epistles (the letters of the apostles)? That is not the intent of this principle. Whenever the teaching of Jesus or the apostles is recorded, it is authoritative.

This rule is important, however, to warn against drawing too many references from records of what people do in the narrative passages.

Examples:

"Jesus visited people on the Sabbath who had needs, so we must do the same." No where in the Gospels does Jesus command us to do acts of mercy on the Sabbath, nor is this command in the Epistles (they command us to do acts of kindness, but there is no mention of when).

"Jesus remained unmarried; this shows that celibacy is good and marriage is bad." Celibacy does not demand that we say marriage is bad. The Epistles make it clear that marriage is holy and a picture of the relationship that exists between Christ and His church.

The words God said to Israel in a time of disobedience can be directly applied to us. Do you remember how so often after they had spurned His acts of kindness and provision, He would pronounce judgment on them? I've known Christians to read those passages and try to directly apply the judgment of God to their own situation, or to those they think need it. They will take several passages relating to the judgment of God on Israel, and then try to directly relate them to others today. We can't do that. We need to first understand that judgment in light of God's work in Israel at that time, and then filter it through the doctrinal teaching passages of the New Testament. Then we can determine if it is saying anything to us, or just providing us an example (see 1 Cor. 10:6,11, and other examples in Appendix 7).
The Principle of the Historical, Cultural, and Geographical Setting

We must rid ourselves, as much as possible, of our 20th century trappings, and attempt to interpret a passage in the light of the original situation in which the biblical writers wrote. The cultural and historical gap is the major difficulty in interpretation; thus, the interpreter must uncover and understand the cultural intention of the author before he can put it in the language of the day.

Cultural elements in the text—e.g., references to persons, events, social practices—need to be studied, as do matters of geography—cities, towns, rivers, mountains, etc. The political and social context must be comprehended as well. When you know the history behind a passage, for example, it will really help your comprehension (see Appendix 8, by John MacArthur).

We need to ask these types of questions constantly:

- Why did he say it that way?
- What historical factors lie behind the form of his writing?
- Was this a usual practice?
- Would this have been unusual or ordinary in this culture?
- What is the purpose of this writing?
- Who were the original recipients of this document?
- What did it mean to the people to whom it was written or spoken?
- What did he intend to say in that context and by those words?

Some specific questions might be:

- Why were the Galatians easy victims for the Judaizers?
- Why did the church at Corinth tolerate sexual impurity?
- What kind of church received the Epistle to the Hebrews?

The Principle of Grammar

We need a literary study, too. To study the grammar, we must look at the sentence, the prepositions, pronouns, verbs, nouns, and phrases. And what about the dependent clauses and
the subordinate phrases? We must study how the words relate to each other in the sentences and in the paragraphs in order to study carefully. The careful interpreter will observe "little things!"

In Matt. 28:19-20, for example, we have the Great Commission—"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them... teaching them to observe all that I commanded you... " (the New American Standard Bible).

As you first read it, "Go" sounds like a verb; "make disciples... , baptizing... teaching" all sound like verbs. But as you study the sentence, you find there's only one verb, matheutate, "make disciples." "Go" is nothing more than a participle. "Baptizing," is a participle, and "teaching," is a participle, which means they modify the main verb. What the Great Commission says is, "Make disciples," and "teach." When you understand that, the fullness of that concept comes out of the text.

John MacArthur tells of another example, of the man who preached on the fact that women shouldn't have hair on top of their heads. His text was, "Top Knot Come Down." He used Matt. 24:17 where it says, "Let him who is on the housetop, not come down." John goes on to say:

You can approach the Bible like the guy who said, "I've already got a sermon, I just have to find a verse for it." That's having a preconceived idea and then getting some verses to support it. I know if I try to make a sermon, I wind up forcing the Bible to fit my sermon. But if I try to comprehend a passage, out of the understanding of that passage flows a message. You can think of some great stuff and some fabulous outlines, but then you have to twist the Bible to make it say what you want it to say.

The Principle of Literary Style (Genre)

When we study a passage, we have to determine the literary style (genre). This, in fact, is the first matter to be settled. In which style of writing were the individual words written? Scripture can be poetry, proverbs, history, parables, sermons, letters, apocalyptic, etc. The determination of the text's literary genre will determine what rules we use to interpret the passage.

It is wrong to treat a parable and an epistle in the same way. Each type of literature must be approached differently. For example, one cannot build a doctrine of the afterlife on the interpretation of the rich man and Lazarus. The concept of different compartments in Hades occurs only there in Scripture. We do not know if Christ meant this to be a precise picture of heaven and hell.
Note: Each parable is meant to teach a single point, and we are in danger if we take the details too far. The central message of the rich man and Lazarus story is the danger of misusing wealth. On the other hand, each point of an epistle is important, and often the key to one aspect is found in the previous point. We need to know, then, the various rules of interpretation for each area of literary genre.

Conclusion
In review, the principles of interpretation we must keep in mind are the following:
1. The Principle of Literal Interpretation
2. The Principle of Narrow to Wide
3. The Principle of Simplicity
4. The Principle of Progressive Revelation
5. The Principle of the Historical, Cultural, and Geographical Setting
6. The Principles of Grammar
7. The Principles of Literary Style

End Notes


4 Earl Radmacher, "Understanding the Bible," tape series from Western Conservative Baptist Seminary.

5 Ramm, Hermeneutics, p. 24.
Session Four: The Principles of Interpretation

Written by Bob Stone


10 Ibid., pp. 50-51.