

Christian Discipleship 104: Christian Life and Practice

Basic Hermeneutics (Reading and Interpreting the Bible)

“You can make the Bible prove anything”. “I hear what you are saying, but that is just your interpretation of the Bible.” These are things that you may have heard people say or likely will hear at some point. It is true that people have used the Bible to justify all types of things that it really does not. False teachers have twisted the Scripture to support the bad theology that they teach. So how do we read the Bible so that we are getting the true meaning of it? We do this by God the Holy Spirit guiding us through good hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the “art and science of interpreting the Scripture. It can be a broad topic, but a few important principles will be shared here. A video study called “Herman Who?” led by Todd Friel is a good basic course that goes into more detail on hermeneutics.

1. Prayerfully read the Bible. Before reading and studying, pray that the Lord will lead and guide your study of His Word. As with other things, the more you do the activity, the more comfortable and skilled you will become at it. Read your Bible daily!

Here is a good example from the ancient church:

Blessed Lord, since You have caused all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and take them to heart that by patience and comfort of Your Holy Word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

2. Understand that as human beings we are fallen creatures and our understanding is darkened. We shouldn't impose our own backgrounds and views on the Bible. We approach it humbly, understanding our limitations, with the attitude of wanting to learn from the Holy and perfect God of the universe who has so graciously revealed His Word to us. We are not to interpret God's Word in any way that we please, but as God intends it to be understood.

3. Context, context, context. A single verse or portion of a verse can easily be twisted to promote all types of things that are not in line with God's truth. Read the verses before and after the verse in question and this will usually bring a greater understanding of what God is saying through the text. See the provided chart for more information on context.

4. Keep the main message and doctrines of the Bible in view when reading it. The Bible is ultimately a book about Jesus. It is the story of God's redemption of His creation. Remember Law and Gospel are the two great doctrines of the Bible: man's sinful rebellion against God and inability to keep the Law perfectly and God's mercy and grace in saving His people through Jesus' death on the cross.

5. There are different types of literature in the Bible including history, prophecy, parables, and poetry. Knowing what type of literature a passage is and what literary devices (simile,

metaphor, personification, anthropomorphism, hyperbole, literal vs. figurative, etc.) are being used is important to understanding the portion of the Bible that you are reading.

Discussion: Do we take the Bible literally?

6. Much of the Bible is clear and straightforward in its meaning when we read it. However, there are some parts that are very difficult and less clear in their meaning. Clear passages of Scripture can help us understand the ones that are less clear. Some background of the culture and historical context of the Bible times is helpful in understanding the Bible as well.

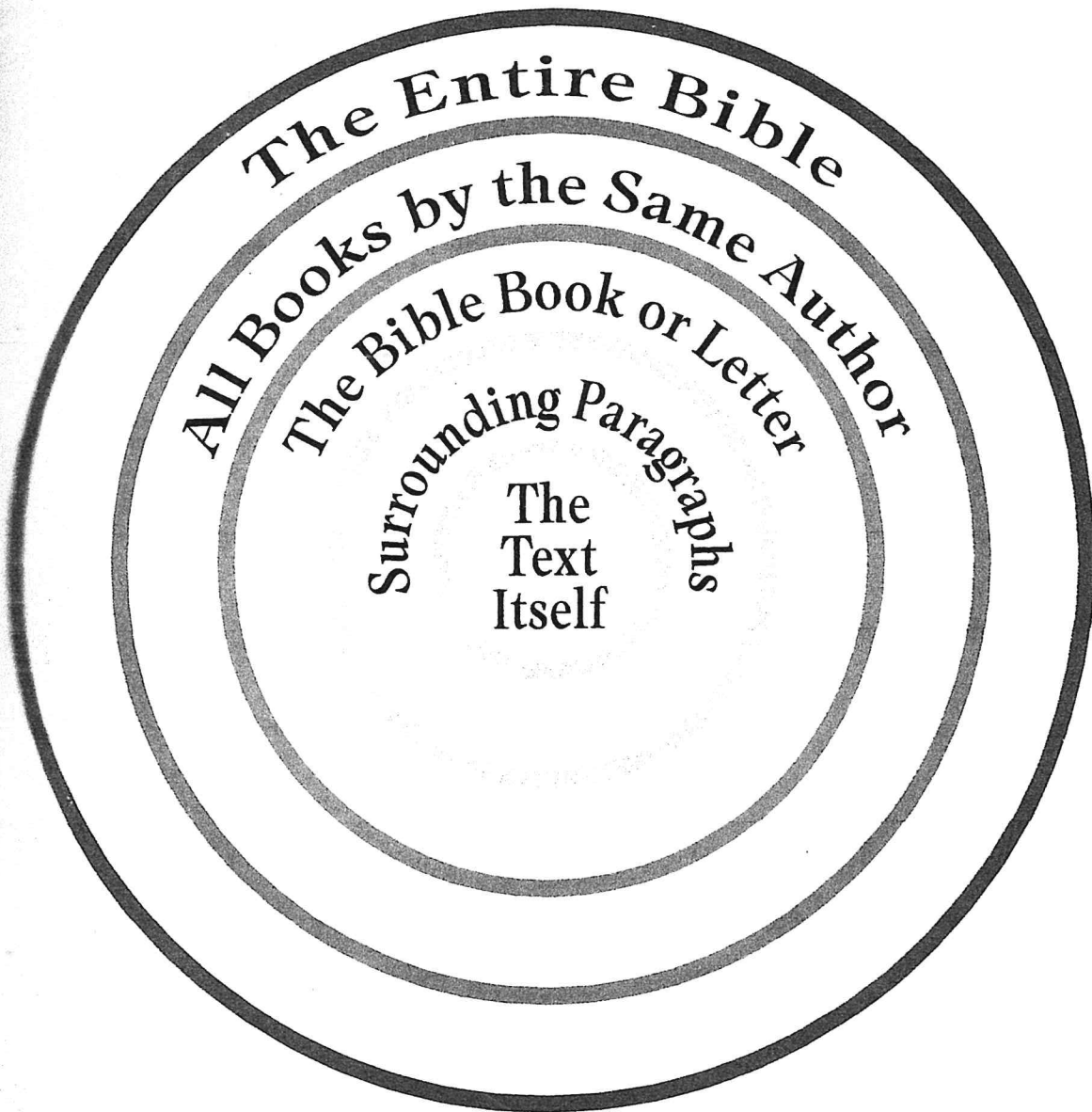
7. Consider who is speaking/acting in the text. Is this God giving a directive? Or is describing someone who is doing or saying something wrong (ex. the advice of Job's friends). Is God speaking to a specific situation or people at a specific time?

8. Going along with #7 when reading the Old Testament remember that the OT is always interpreted in light of the New Testament. This is especially important with the Old Testament Laws. God's moral Law never changes as God's character never changes. But the civil law of Israel and ceremonial law (temple rituals, diet, etc.) are no longer binding on the Christian (Lutheran Satire video example).

Bible Study Helps (only use sources that are authored by people with a correct understanding of the Bible):

- Atlases
- Bible Handbooks
- Commentaries
- Study Bibles
- Concordances
- Guidance of pastor and other mature Christians

Circles of Context



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Given the dangers associated with downhill skiing, it's hard to imagine people who are blind successfully navigating difficult courses, but blind skiers can learn to do slalom skiing in relative safety. It works like this: blind skiers and sighted skiers are paired up. The sighted skier skis beside the skier who is blind, directing the blind skier with words such as "Right!" "Left!" "Go straight!" Trusting their partner and the words the partner speaks, skiers who are blind are able to ski selected courses confidently and with ease. Working in this way, skiers who are blind are even able to compete in races. But if a blind skier would suddenly decide not to trust the words of his or her partner, the results could be deadly.

Like the skiers who are blind, each of us is blinded to God's plan of salvation. But we are not left alone. Jesus comes beside us. Through God's Word, He speaks to us, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die (John 11:25-26).

If someone considers the prophetic writings with all the diligence and reverence they are worth, while he reads and examines with great care, it is certain that in that very act he will be struck in his mind and senses by some more divine breath and will recognize that the books he reads have not been produced in a human way, but are words of God. (Origen)

How to Read the Bible

[Martin] Luther said that he studied the Bible the way he gathered apples. First, he shook the whole tree, that the ripest might fall. Then he climbed the tree and shook each limb, and when he had shaken each limb, he shook each branch, and after each branch every twig, and then he looked under each leaf.

Let us search the Bible as a whole, shake the whole trees, read it rapidly as we would any other book; then shake every limb, studying book after book. Then shake every branch, giving attention to the chapters (when they do not break the sense). Then shake every twig by careful study of the paragraphs and sentences. We gain additional insights as we look under every leaf by searching the meaning of the words. (Encyclopedia of Sermon Illustrations, 73)

We should not use the Bible

1. as only a storage container for souvenirs, clippings, and keepsakes;
2. as merely a table centerpiece;
3. as a charm to bring good luck to a household, like a horseshoe or rabbit's foot.

But we should

1. read the Bible;
2. learn it;
3. hear it preached;
4. believe it;
5. live according to it.

The Bible is alive, it speaks to me; it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me. (Martin Luther [attributed])
