

QUESTION #8 – What are the false ways and systems people use to interpret the Bible?

As we mentioned earlier, the Bible is the most butchered book in the world. Almost every person who owns a Bible thinks he is in some position to interpret it. The problem is there are many systems used and ways that the Bible is interpreted which actually are counterproductive to what the Bible really says.

Some pick up the Bible and say it teaches Arminianism and others pick up the Bible and say it teaches Calvinism. Some pick up the Bible and say it teaches premillennialism, postmillennialism or amillennialism. Those who do have their proof texts and they have some system of interpretation they follow.

What we are after is the truth. We are after true interpretation of exactly what the Bible says and means and obviously when there are contradictory viewpoints, someone is right and someone is wrong. Usually the matter is resolved in the system one uses for their interpretation.

There are at least eight false systems or false ways that the Bible is interpreted:

False System #1 - The Allegorical System of Interpretation.

This system of interpretation believes that **the Bible says one thing literally but really means something else figuratively. The Bible does not really literally mean what it literally says.** The Bible is an inspired, figurative book of riddles and everyone must study to unravel the hidden riddles.

The Allegorical system of interpretation has its roots in Greek philosophy. Philo was a Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria, Egypt in the first 50 years of the first century. He tried to bridge the gap between the Bible and Greek philosophy so he promoted and preferred allegorical interpretation of the Bible. He took the position that there were deeper hidden meanings to everything in the Bible. He rejected a literal approach to the Bible.

For example, in Revelation 20:1-6, the Bible speaks of a period of time of 1,000 years. But the allegorist says that 1,000 years is just a riddle number for something else. When Revelation 7 says there are 144,000 Jewish men, 12,000 from twelve tribes of Israel, the allegorist says it really doesn't mean that literally, it is figurative for something else such as the Church. The dietary laws found in the Old Testament are not really literal dietary laws to be followed but they really represent bad types of behavior associated with that particular animal.

Around the year AD 100 there was a letter that showed up in a collection of Apostolic fathers called "*The Epistle of Barnabas*." Many believe this was the Barnabas that split from Paul. If it was him, he ended up with some strange doctrinal quirks. He interpreted all of the dietary Laws in Leviticus with various immoral vices that he "imaginatively associated with those animals." For example, the law against eating swine (Lev. 11:7) is actually a law that means don't associate with people who live like pigs.

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The law against eating rabbit (Lev. 11:6) actually means to stay away from people who are promiscuous (J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers, Second Edition, Epistle of Barnabas*, p. 174).

This allegorical system is one of the oldest systems of interpretation in the history of the Church. Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215) believed that the Scriptures are written in such a way that the true meaning is hidden.

Origen (AD 185-254) believed that all of Scriptures was “one vast allegory” (Henry Virkler, *Hermeneutics*, p. 60). He taught there were three levels of interpretation to a Biblical text: 1) The flesh interpretation; 2) The soul interpretation; 3) The Spirit interpretation.

He was known for inventing some bizarre interpretations of passages of Scripture. For example, he taught that Noah’s ark story was a story that really represents the Church and that Noah represented Christ. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, he said the donkey represented the Old Testament and the colt represented the New Testament.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-37:

- 1) The man robbed represents Adam.
- 2) The city of Jerusalem from where the man came represents Paradise.
- 3) The city of Jericho where the man was headed represents the world.
- 4) The priest who passes by represents the O.T. Law.
- 5) The Levite who passes by represents the prophets.
- 6) The Samaritan represents Jesus Christ.
- 7) The Donkey represents Christ’s physical body.
- 8) The wounds of the man represent his sins.
- 9) The Inn where he is to be cared for represents the church.
- 10) The Samaritan promise to return represents Christ’s second coming.

Martin Luther, who prior to salvation said that he was “an expert in allegories,” totally denounced this approach to the Bible after his salvation. He said, “Origen’s allegories are not worth so much dirt” (Cited from Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, pp. 44-45).

John Calvin said that those who interpret the Bible allegorically are “torturing the Scripture in every possible sense, from the true sense” (*Ibid.*, p. 47).

Augustine (AD 354-430) came up with a list of solid rules and guidelines for the handling of Scripture. One of them was “The literal and historical meaning of Scripture should be held in high regard.” He stressed that the job of an interpreter of Scripture was to determine the meaning of the Scripture and not to bring meaning to it. But then later he got into allegorizing the Scriptures. For example, he taught that the four rivers named in Genesis 2:10-14 are really four virtues and that Noah’s drunkenness (Gen. 9:20-23) really represents Christ in His suffering and death.

Many people today allegorize the Bible in the way they interpret it. For example, when God promised Israel a land, a king and kingdom, there are many who teach He really didn't mean that, He meant something else.

There are some major problems with this method of interpretation:

- 1) If God doesn't mean what He says, how can we ever know what He means or what to believe?
- 2) How do we know who has the correct interpretation, if it is not based on literal words?
- 3) One person says a passage means one thing and someone else says another and how would one ever know truth based on Allegory?

Robert Palmer said, "If the Bible does not mean what it says, there is no way we can know what it does mean" (*How to Understand the Bible*, p. 44).

False System #2 - The Mystical or Devotional system of interpretation.

This is another system of interpretation that has been around for a long time. This approach to the Bible came about as a reaction against the cold, intellectual, dead, religious orthodoxy that developed between the years of AD 600 - AD 1500.

This is the system of interpretation that says **it really doesn't matter what the Bible says or means as long as it warms your heart and you have some type of feeling experience**. There is no need of precise understanding in your grasp of the Bible, as long as it warms your heart and touches your heart.

This system of interpretation believes that people can get direct knowledge from God through their experiences and feelings apart from Scripture (Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 50). In fact, **this system of interpretation rejects the objective analysis of Scripture and elevates the subjective analysis of Scripture**.

Don't worry about the words or grammar or doctrinal differences because the important thing is that the Bible speaks to you and you feel good in your heart.

Often times these people talk about their experiences and you hear things like "God told me" or "God revealed to me" or "God really spoke to me." There are several problems with this view:

- 1) God did not give His word to warm hearts; He gave His word to transform and develop sound minds (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 1:15-18; Philippians 1:9-11; Col. 1:9-11).
- 2) A heart that is truly rightly warmed is one that is right with God and that means one is after an accurate understanding of God's written word.
- 3) When God challenges His people to "accurately handle" so that one is unashamed before Him, His own focus is not on emotion but exegesis (II Timothy 2:15).

- 4) Without a proper accurate grasp of God's word, there will never be a proper development of emotions. Emotions will tend to be emotional, irrational and sensational until they are Biblical.

False System #3 - The Liberal or Rationalistic system of Interpretation.

In the late 1800's what was called the "Scientific Age" began in Europe and by the 1900's it had spread to the United States. Men began to discover things and invent things and they became proud of their intellectual achievements.

A pride began to seep into man when it came to the Bible. They began to approach it from a very intellectual and rational way. They would only accept and believe the Bible if their minds could rationally figure it out or explain it.

Actually this was not a new system to the late 1800's because Thomas Hobbs (1588-1679), who was an English philosopher, taught that the Bible was only true if man's mind could reason it and if man's mind can't reason it, then it is to be rejected. Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), was a Dutch Jewish philosopher who taught the same thing. He taught that human reason was totally separate from Biblical Theology.

In the Liberal or Rational method of Bible Interpretation, the words of the Bible are not the authority; man's mind is the authority. The Bible may only be accepted and believed as long as it does not violate human reason or logic. This system totally rejects the supernatural so man's mind determines what is significant in the Bible and what isn't.

This system of interpretation postulates many false views:

- 1) There is no such thing as miracles because miracles go beyond the boundaries of our minds and beyond the boundaries of what we can scientifically prove or reason. The feeding of the 5,000 was really a story of a young boy who shared his lunch so others saw this and shared theirs. It wasn't a real miracle of Jesus.
- 2) The Bible is a history book, but not an inspired book.
- 3) Man is basically good and if you give him a good education, he will turn out fine.
- 4) When the Bible says something with which we don't agree or understand, we reject it. i.e. Such things as depravity, sin and hell are rejected.

There are obviously many fallacies with this heretical way of thinking:

- 1) Man's reason becomes superior to God's written Revelation
i.e. Darwin's theory of evolution is better than the Bible, A day in the Genesis creation story cannot really be a day because man's mind has figured out the earth is billions of years old.
- 2) Man's reason is the authority for what we believe and do and not God's word.
- 3) Man's reason must determine which parts of the Bible are acceptable and which are not.

False System #4 - The Neo-Orthodox or Existential System of Interpretation.

In the early 1900's, liberal and fundamental clashes occurred concerning the Bible. World War I (1914-1918) proved that man was not good and that man could not solve world problems. When the Great depression hit, it proved that man could not solve economic problems and that liberalism could not give any answers or solutions.

There was a huge gap between liberals and fundamentalists. Some developed a new system that was called "Neo Orthodoxy."

Neo-Orthodoxy taught that the Bible is not the inspired word of God by the words written, but it becomes the word of God when a person by faith experiences it. The Bible is the word of God when it is experienced. When the Bible touches a reader's heart, it becomes the word of God.

There was no need to worry about words or doctrine but only whether or not it touches your heart. That is what makes it God's word to you. **This system rejects the objective and elevates the subjective.**

There are many problems with this view:

- 1) It denies the Bible is inerrant.
- 2) It denies the Bible is infallible.
- 3) When the Bible touches someone's heart, it is the word of God.
- 4) Things may be interpreted as myths - creation, fall of man, resurrection. These myths aren't important but personal experience is important.

False System #5 - The Ecclesiastical System of Interpretation.

The Ecclesiastical system of Bible Interpretation is a system that says it does not matter what the words of the Bible actually say, what matters is what the church believes and says.

This position says some things are more important than other things and the church is our authority for what we believe or think.

This system of interpretation is prevalent among many today.

The Roman Catholic Church is known for its emphasis on the churches ability to give true interpretation. Church teachings and church traditions are far more important than God's word.

Back in 1925, a Catholic writer named Andrea Fernandez invented what he called the “sensus plenior” which means fuller sense or deeper meaning. The Catholic Church took the position that to get the true interpretation of a passage there must be an authoritative guide, which was the Roman Church officials. They became the guide to all kinds of distortions of God’s word.

There are many Reformed and Christian Reformed Churches who are guilty of the same kind of thing. They become the authority base for trying to put people back under the O.T. law. They read the commandments and regardless of what a book like Galatians or Romans teaches, they try to keep people under the law. They even call Sunday the Sabbath Day and they are authoritative in the way they do that.

There are Baptist Churches that are the same way. They become the authority for all kinds of things from versions of the Bible to what people can or cannot do. At times, it doesn’t matter what the actual words of Scripture say and mean, they are disregarded and the church gives its own interpretation. One example we may give of this is that most Baptist churches use Romans 6:3 and Colossians 2:12 as a basis for their promotion of water baptism. Neither of these passages is dealing with water baptism, but spirit baptism. But the church says otherwise.

In an Ecclesiastical system, the Church becomes the authority and not the literal word of God.

False System #6 - The Dogmatic System of Interpretation.

The dogmatic system of interpretation says it does not matter what the words of the Bible say, but what matters is what I dogmatically believe and will continue to believe and I will not change my mind. One’s own system of belief becomes more important than the actual words of the Scriptures.

In this method of interpretation, a person has his own beliefs and then goes to the Bible in an attempt to find verses that support the beliefs. This method often uses isolated verses as proof texts for what they believe.

One illustration of this is the Roman Catholics who go to Matthew 16:18-19 to support their position that Peter was the first Pope. They have their dogmatic view and use this text to support it, when in fact it is not teaching that at all.

Another is the Jehovah’s Witness who go door to door promoting the 144,000, a number they get from Revelation 7:4; 14:1. When you show them the truth of the number, they dogmatically hold to the dogma of the religion.

In this system the individual is the authority and not God’s word.

False System #7 - The Hyper-Literal System of Interpretation.

This is the system of interpretation that takes things stated in the Bible in a hyper-literal extreme way that is really not the intention of the text and in a way that disregards any dispensational data.

There are several examples we may cite of this system:

- 1) Discipleship passages demand people need to sell everything and move into a commune.
- 2) Moses parts a sea so we may go to a lake or sea and God will part it.
- 3) Jesus walked on water so with enough faith we may walk on water.
- 4) Jesus washed feet of disciples so we need to wash feet at church.
- 5) Jesus said that a deadly snake will not hurt Apostles so we need snake handling in church.
- 6) Jesus said that drinking poison would not hurt Apostles so we need to drink it in church.
- 7) Jesus was nailed to a cross so one should be nailed to a cross.

These are just a few of the many ways that people hyper-literally interpret the Bible.

False System #8 - The isolated verse or proof text system of interpretation.

This is a system of interpretation in which the interpreter picks isolated verses out of the context to support the teaching.

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote: “It is sometimes claimed that anything good or bad may be proved or defended from the Scriptures. Such an impression could be sustained only by the permission of violent misuse or disuse of the Sacred Text. It is noticeable that all theological systems and even modern cults make use of the Bible” (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 114).

QUESTION #9 – What is the true way and true system to study and interpret the Bible?

The goal of studying to interpret the Bible is to know the exact meaning that the Spirit of God intended when He inspired the words that were written in every context. The goal is to accurately understand every specific text. There is only one system of interpretation that can do this. We dogmatically hold to this system and teach this system.

The only true way to arrive at the true interpretation of any passage of the Bible is to interpret the Bible text literally. We call this the Literal Method of Interpretation. The literal method interprets the text in light of the plain meaning of the words of the text.

When God told Noah to build an ark with specific dimensions because He was going to send a worldwide flood, Noah interpreted that literally and he took it seriously (Gen. 6:14-17, 22). He did not fool around with the words by inventing some allegorical meaning that God really wants him to build a zoo for animals or some rationalistic system of interpretation which didn't see the real need because there was no water. He interpreted God's word literally. This is the only way to properly interpret God's word.

It is clear from Nehemiah 8:8 that this is exactly the way God intended His word to be handled. When God says in Genesis 2:10-14 that four rivers flowed out of Eden, they are four rivers, not four virtues.

This method of interpretation was critical to the Reformation when The Catholics were butchering the Bible with their bizarre interpretations. This method of interpretation was practiced by Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli. Roy Zuck observed that “The Reformers built on the literal approach...” (*Ibid.*, p. 44).

Martin Luther stressed this approach to interpreting the Bible. Again we cite Zuck, “...Luther stressed the literal sense (*sensus literalis*) of the Bible.” He went on to say that the Scriptures “are to be retained in their simplest meaning ever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids.” He also concluded anything other than a literal interpretation was not worth “dirt” (*Ibid.*, p. 45). **He believed that every spiritually-minded believer could understand the Bible if he approached the Bible this way.**

John Calvin said that anything other than a literal interpretation was nothing more than “frivolous games.” Calvin said, “it is the first business of an interpreter to let His author say what He does say, instead of attributing to Him what we think he ought to say” (*Ibid.*, p. 47).

Ulrich Zwingli stressed that one must take the words literally in light of the context. He said to take a text out of its context is like “breaking off a flower from its roots” (*Ibid.*, p. 48).

William Tyndale (1494-1536) said, “Scripture has but one sense, which is the literal sense” (*Ibid.*, p. 48).

The Literal method of interpretation is that method that interprets the Bible literally understanding that the words mean exactly what they say in the most simple, direct and ordinary meaning, unless something in the passage suggests the words should be interpreted figuratively (i.e. Revelation 17:3/10-12; Daniel 7:1-3/17; John 2:18-20/21-22).

The literal method is that which accepts the words of the writer at face value in their normal, usual, natural, customary way of use. For example, when John writes “Jesus wept,” it means exactly that.

The literal method does not look for hidden secret meanings. It looks straight at the text. It attempts to understand the literal meaning and intent of the writer in view of the words he literally uses.

God put His word in written form and He did this so that man could learn about Him. Because God chose to use human language as His vehicle for communication, we interpret the language as literally as possible with the words the writer uses.

The Golden Rule of Literal Interpretation is this:

“When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense. Therefore, take every word at its ordinary, primary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context indicate otherwise.”

Ordinary language contains figures of speech; however, figures of speech are always given for communicating a literal truth. Whenever a figure of speech is used, it is for that purpose.

In a literal interpretation of the Bible, we realize and accept the fact that writers sometimes use figurative language; however, we also realize that any symbolic language is designed to communicate a literal truth.

For example, we realize that language uses:

1) Metaphors - a figurative quality or name given to something that cannot possibly have a literal applicability.

For example, in John 10:7-9, Jesus calls Himself a door. Well we know that He cannot be a literal door, but metaphorically He is the door to life in that one must go through Him. When Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 5:13-14 that they were the “salt of the earth” and “the light of the world,” He did not mean they were literally a bag of salt or 100 watt light bulb. Interpreting something literally does allow for use of metaphors.

2) Similies - a figure of speech in which one thing is likened to another thing by a comparison to make a point. This uses words such as “like” or “as.”

For example, in I Peter 5:8 Peter says the Devil prowls around “like” a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. When we examine the context we observe that the Devil is a vicious being who is out to devour and crush a believer specifically through pride (I Pet. 5:6).

3) Allegories - a figure of speech in which one communicates a literal truth by using another story or illustration in an allegorical or figurative way to make the point.

A good example is Galatians 4:24. Paul specifically states that he is using the O.T. story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac as an illustration of being under law versus being under grace (4:21, 31). Notice Paul says he is allegorically speaking and writing.

To actually come to an accurate, literal interpretation of a text, there are three areas of study that come into play.

QUESTION #10 – What are the three courses closely related to a literal interpretation of the Bible?

There are three main fields of study or disciplines closely connected to the study and literal interpretation of the Bible:

- 1) Hermeneutics;
- 2) Bible Study Methods
- 3) Exegesis.

QUESTION #11 – What is Hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics is the art and science of Bible interpretation. It is a science because there are specific rules that must be followed. It is an art because the more one practices the more skilled one will become.

The actual Greek word “hermenenia” (ερμηνια) and its verb “hermeneuo” (ερμηνευω) occurs some 19 times in the N.T.. The word literally means to give an interpretation and is used exactly this way in Luke 24:27, which means to give a thorough explanation, also I Cor. 12:10; 14:26 (G. Abbott-Smith, p. 180). **Interpretation is an accurate analysis and explanation of what actually is in a text of Scripture.**

Hermeneutics deals with the principles, which are necessary, in order to come to a true, accurate interpretation and understanding of a passage of Scripture. Hermeneutics is often closely related to Bible Study Methods, but it is not the same.

QUESTION #12 – What is the difference between Bible Study Methods and Bible Interpretation?

Bible study methods deals with how to study the Bible whereas Bible interpretation deals with how to interpret a text in the Bible. Bible study methods deals with study methodology with the goal of discovering the actual meaning; Bible interpretation deals with the science of how to analyze a passage to arrive at the actual meaning. To this point in our study, we have been looking primarily at Bible Study Methodology.

It is true that paths cross in these two disciplines; however, they are not identically or technically the same. When one wants to come to a true interpretation of a passage, the question is much more than how does one study the Bible; it is what do I need to do to accurately interpret the meaning of this passage?

Dr. Elliott Johnson said the difference between the two is this: Bible Study Methods is how do I go about to discover the meaning of the text and Hermeneutics is how do I know that I have discovered the true meaning of the text? (*Expository Hermeneutics*, p. 8).

When it comes to studying the Bible to interpret a text, Michael S. Heiser observed that “A better synonym for Bible study than ‘Bible reading’ would be ‘Bible research.’ And research isn’t easy. It takes tools, tenacity and time.”

It is important to realize that the Bible, as no other book, is God’s book but as all other books, it is a book for humans. God did inspire His word for people to read. The fact that it is God’s book demands the utmost care in coming to true and accurate interpretations.

The fact that it is a book for humans means that there can be many human misunderstandings and misinterpretations. It is precisely this point that demands a course like this.

Someone wisely said, **“hermeneutics should teach us to read the Bible as any other book and at the same time read the Bible as no other book.”**

The truth is although we have not taken a formal course on how to interpret a newspaper or a conversation, we have been doing this all of our lives. Every time we watch a program or read a book and follow the context or analyze what it is all about, we practice hermeneutics. For us, a system of hermeneutics is applied, but not formally studied or learned.

When it comes to God’s word, the stakes are much higher than us having a conversation with someone or reading a book about something which perks our interest. For one thing, the Bible was written at a different time, in a different language and in a different culture.

To properly interpret the Bible means we must crawl back into various contexts. One must know something about language, about culture and about history. We cannot superimpose our linguistic rules of English to rules of Greek or Hebrew because this will perhaps lead us to faulty conclusions. Furthermore, there are different spiritualities and different spiritual gifts that come into play, making the interpretation of a passage not just a simple academic matter.

But perhaps the most significant reason for studying hermeneutics is to clearly understand the true interpretation of God-breathed, God-inspired truth. If we do not understand the true interpretation of God’s word, we may be very sincere but also very wrong.

When it comes to the Bible, there are many that speak about a variety of important issues and then use the Scripture to defend their position. There are a variety of interpretations which cause confusion and as a result the average person is left with the idea that “one interpretation is as good as another.” “Your interpretation is as good as mine.”

In fact, Bible studies and small study groups are taking all kinds of forms and most “forget what a risky business it can be” (*Ibid.*, p. 8). One of the main dangers is that people go to some home Bible study and they tend to discuss some passage and what it means to them, without knowing what it means.

For example, Roy Zuck cites an example of John 10:28. This verse says, “I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand.” One person at a home Bible study says this means when we believe in Christ we have eternal security. Another person says it means that no one else can take you out of God’s hands but you can take yourself out. In Nahum 2:4, we read “the chariots race madly in the streets and rush wildly in the squares.” One person at the Bible study says to me this means there will come a time when there will be major automobile traffic in the cities. Do you actually think that God intended His precious word to be handled like that? Do you think God’s idea was whatever it means to you is fine?

Bible study is not a free for all of whatever it means to you. When it comes to interpreting God’s precious word, someone is right and someone is wrong.

The science of interpretation says that there is one true interpretation to God’s inspired word and that by following a system of true hermeneutics, one may come to a true interpretation.

QUESTION #13 – What is Exegesis?

The word “exegesis” comes from a Greek verb (exhgeomai) that means to lead out, show the way, unfold and declare (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 100). As it relates to Biblical study, **exegesis means to go to a text of Scripture and precisely bring out or lead out or draw out and show by way of the actual written words that are used in a text the exact meaning of the text.**

The goal of Exegesis is to carefully examine the written words of a text and determine the writer’s actual meaning. John Grassmick defined Exegesis as meaning “to explain a word, sentence, paragraph, or a whole book by leading out the true and proper meaning of the text” (*Principles and Practices of Greek Exegesis*, p. 7). “Exegesis is a high-definition form of reading and studying the Bible” (Darrell L Bock; Buist M. Fanning, *Interpreting the New Testament Text*, p. 17).

QUESTION #14 – What are some related fields of study when it comes to Hermeneutics?

There are at least five major disciplines to which Hermeneutics is related:

Hermeneutics is the art and science of the rules that must be followed for interpreting the true meaning of a Biblical text.

Exegesis is drawing out the exact historical and grammatical and technical meaning of a text expressed by the written text by careful application of hermeneutical rules.

Exposition is the verbal communication of the meaning of a text with a relevance to the hearer.

Homiletics is the art and science of organized structure for public communication of a text.

Pedagogy is the art and science of teaching the true meaning and relevance of a Biblical text.