

BEYOND “THAT SOUNDS RIGHT TO ME” - SOUND RULES FOR A SOUND INTERPRETATION

From *The Navigator Bible Studies Handbook*

The conclusions you draw from your study will reflect your basic beliefs about the Bible. Three fundamental beliefs lead to proper understanding of Scripture.

BASIC BELIEFS

THE BIBLE IS THE LITERAL WORD OF GOD

The apostle Paul stated categorically, “All Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Timothy 3:16, NASB). This statement is foundation to Bible study. Because the Bible is God’s inerrant communication to us, it deserves careful study and investigation.

The Bible is literal in the sense that its accounts are records of actual happenings, not a collection of myths and legends. The writers of Scripture, however, do at time use figurative statements, allegories, and symbols.

THE BIBLE IS GOD’S MEANS OF REVEALING TRUTH TO HIS PEOPLE

Man alone cannot discover God’s plans; God must reveal them. His truth is not revealed in the silent contemplation of your own life or of nature around you, but through the Holy Spirit’s illumination of the inspired Word. Jesus taught, “If you hold my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

THE BIBLE IS AUTHORITATIVE

The Bible has authority because God is its author and has absolute authority over humans. Every area of every person’s life is subject to the Word of God. During His temptation Jesus declared, quoting the Old Testament, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4; see Deuteronomy 8:3).

KEEPING ON TRACK

In order to handle the Word of God properly, it is important to follow certain guidelines of interpretation (*hermeneutics* is the academic word.) Observing these guidelines does not always guarantee correct conclusions, but disregarding them frequently leads to error.

Walt Henrichsen wrote a helpful book on this subject: *A Layman’s Guide to Interpreting the Bible* (Nav Press, 1979, out of print). The rules he suggests are summarized below.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. Work from the assumption that the Bible is authoritative.
2. The Bible interprets itself; Scripture best explains Scripture.
3. Saving faith and the Holy Spirit are necessary for us to understand and properly interpret the Scriptures.
4. Interpret personal experiences in the light of Scripture and not Scripture in the light of personal experience.
5. Biblical examples are authoritative only when supported by a command. (For example, the book of Acts records that the apostle to replace Judas was chosen by casting lots – i.e., drawing straws. This does not mean the Bible teaches that drawing straws is the only or even the best way of choosing church leaders. *A corollary:* The believer is free to do anything that the Bible does not prohibit.
6. The primary purpose of the Bible is not to increase our knowledge but to change our lives. *Two corollaries:*
 - A. Some passages are not to be applied in the same way they were applied at the time they were written. (For example, Deuteronomy 22:8 says one should always build a parapet around the roof of his house so that no one will fall off the roof. This was a wise instruction when

people used their flat roofs as additional living space.)

- B. When you apply a passage, it must be in keeping with a correct interpretation.
7. Each Christian has the right and responsibility to investigate and interpret the Word of God for himself. (Of course, humility is in order—everyone from the rankest beginner to the most experienced scholar can be wrong.)
 8. Church history is important but not decisive in the interpretation of Scripture. *A corollary:* The Church does not determine what the Bible teaches.; The Bible determines what the Church teaches.
 9. The promises of God in the Bible are available to the Holy Spirit for believers of every generation. (One should avoid a demanding, presumptuous attitude when “claiming” promises given to individuals. For instance, just because God promised Sarah a baby does not mean that every woman who “claims” Genesis 18:10 will have a baby.)

GRAMMATICAL PRINCIPLES

Scripture has only one meaning and should be taken literally.

1. Interpret words in harmony with their meaning in the times of the author.
2. Interpret a word in relation to its sentence and context.
3. Interpret a passage in harmony with its context.
4. When an inanimate object is used to describe a living being, the statement may be considered figurative. *A corollary:* When life and action are attributed to inanimate objects, the statement may be considered figurative.
5. When an expression is out of character with the thing described, the statement may be considered to be a figurative one.
6. The principal parts and figures of a parable represent certain realities. Consider only these principal parts and figures when drawing conclusions.

7. Interpret the words of the prophets in their usual, literal, and historical sense, unless the context or manner in which they are fulfilled clearly indicates they have a symbolic meaning. Their fulfillment may be in installments, each fulfillment of prophecy being a pledge of what is to follow.

HISTORICAL PRINCIPLES

1. Since Scripture originated in a historical context, it can be understood only in the light of biblical history.
2. Though God’s revelation in the Scriptures is progressive, both Old and New Testaments are essential parts of this revelation and form a unit.
3. Historical facts of events become symbols of spiritual truths only if the Scripture so designate them.

THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

You must understand the Bible grammatically before you can understand it theologically.

1. A doctrine cannot be considered biblical unless it sums up and includes all that the Scriptures says about it.
2. When two doctrines taught in the Bible appear to be contradictory, accept both as scriptural in the confident belief that they resolve themselves into a higher unity.
3. A teaching merely implied in Scripture may be considered biblical when a comparison of related passages supports the teaching.

If all these rules sound daunting, don’t panic. Common sense generally prevails. Probably the most helpful and readable book you could find to help you with sound interpretation is *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart (Zondervan 1981,1993.)

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