

How to Interpret the Bible the Bible Way

Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Have you ever heard people say, "That's just your interpretation" when they disagree with what someone says about a Bible subject? Everyone interprets the Bible - either correctly or incorrectly.

Is it possible for people to know the correct interpretation of Bible subjects?

Yes, according to Ephesians 3:3-5; 5:17; 1 Timothy 2:4; and 2 Timothy 2:15.

Paul warned about turning away from the truth in Galatians 1:6-9 and 1 Tim 4:1-2.

When people hear false teaching often enough, they start believing it!

The Bible is the inspired Word of God and we are guided by the commands and examples in the Bible. It contains all the information that we need according to 2 Timothy 3:13-17.

Common sense principles of biblical interpretation are ignored by many people today or not understood.

1. **Direct Command**
2. **Approved Example**
3. **Specific and Generic Authority and Exclusion**
4. **Do Not Add or Take Away**
5. **Consider All the Bible Says on a Subject**
6. **Consider the Context**
7. **Necessary Inference or Expediency**

Let's look at Bible examples and illustrations of these **Principles of Biblical Interpretation**.

1. Direct Command: Some people say that the most important thing is to just love Jesus, but Jesus said, "If you love me, **keep my commandments**" in John 14:15.

Example: How do we know that baptism is required for forgiveness of sins and salvation? The Bible commands baptism and gives the reason why it is required in Acts 2:38; 22:16; and 1 Peter 3:21.

2. Approved Example: Peter wrote that Christ left us an example to follow His steps in 1 Peter 2:21.

Paul said to follow or imitate him just as he followed Christ in 1 Corinthians 11:1 and Phil 3:17.

We must follow the **approved examples** of the New Testament church in order to be a New Testament church.

Example: How can we be confident that we are to worship and partake of the Lord's Supper and give our offerings on the first day of the week? Because of the examples in Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:1-2.

3. Specific and Generic Authority and Exclusion: The **principle of exclusion** means that when the Bible specifies something, it excludes doing something else of the same kind or type.

Example: God specified for Noah to use gopher wood to build the ark in Genesis 6:14-15, 22. That excluded using any other kind of wood. The dimensions were 300 cubits long, 50 cubits wide, and 30 cubits high (cubit = 18"). That excluded making it any other size. God always has a reason for what He specifies.

Example: In Numbers 3:9-10 God specified that only the Levites could serve in the priesthood. Specifying the tribe of Levi excluded the other 11 tribes of Israel. In 1 Samuel 13:8-14 King Saul had agreed to meet with Samuel. Samuel was delayed. Saul decided to offer the sacrifice himself. Saul was not authorized to make the sacrifice because he was from the tribe of Benjamin. As a result, Saul was punished by being told his kingdom would be taken away.

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Example: 1 Samuel 15:1-35 tells how King Saul did not learn his lesson and continued to ignore God's specific instructions in the battle with the Amalekites. Saul was arrogant, full of pride, did what he wanted, and made excuses for what he did. As a result Samuel pronounced God's final rejection of Saul as the King of Israel.

Example: In 2 Chronicles 26:1-21 Uzziah from the tribe of Judah became king at the age of 16 and ruled for 52 years. He got too smart for himself and decided to offer incense to God even though he was not authorized because he was not from the tribe of Levi. God punished him with leprosy for the rest of his life and he was cut off from the house of the Lord because he was engaging in unauthorized activity. Clearly there are consequences of violating the principle of exclusion.

Think about it! When the doctor writes a prescription and you take it to the pharmacy, does the doctor have to say what not to use? He only has to write what it is and the amount of it. If another medicine or amount is used by the pharmacist or patient, it is an addition because the pharmacist or patient added to or changed what the doctor prescribed. It might not make you well and could even kill you because it is an addition. We are also in danger when we add to or change what God has prescribed in His Word.

Example: Jesus is the head of the church according to Ephesians 1:22-23 and Col 1:18. That excludes anyone else who claims to be the head of the church including famous church leaders of modern day denominations.

Example: Eph 4:5 says there is "one lord, one faith, one baptism". That excludes other faiths and other baptisms. Jude 3 says "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints."

Example: Act 8:36 and 1 Peter 3:21 teach that baptism is in water. Roman 6:4 and Colossians 2:12 teach that baptism is a burial or immersion. That excludes sprinkling or pouring.

Example: The New Testament church is not denominational. Ephesians 4:4 says there is "one body" which is the church according to Paul in Colossians 1:24. The New Testament teaching of the one church excludes modern day denominations and community churches.

Example: The New Testament church is organized as independent self-governing congregations under elders/bishops/shepherds with deacons and evangelists according to Philippians 1:1; Acts 20:17; I Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; and other Scriptures. Other organizational structure and leadership are not authorized because God specifies what He wants and that excludes other arrangements and other titles for church leaders.

Example: The Bible clearly specifies using the **fruit of the vine** and **unleavened bread** for communion or the Lord's Supper in Matthew 26:17, 26-29 and 1 Corinthians 11:20, 23-29. Since God specifies what to use for the Lord's Supper, we cannot substitute other items.

Example: The Bible is just as clear on what kind of music to use in worship as it is about using the fruit of the vine and unleavened bread for the Lord's Supper. The New Testament gives us commands and examples to sing which is a specific kind of music. See 1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; and Colossians 3:16. Those specific commands and examples exclude the use of other kinds of music for New Testament church worship such as playing an instrument.

When the Bible specifies something, we cannot change it or add to it.

4. Do Not Add or Take Away: We are warned not to add to or take away from God's Word in Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Proverbs 30:6; and Revelation 22:18-19.

Additions are things that go beyond what the Bible specifies and add to a commandment of God. Just because the Bible does not say don't do something does not mean that it is approved by God.

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We should speak only where the Bible speaks and remain silent where it is silent.
We must find the authority in the Bible for what we believe and do.

Leviticus 10:1-2 makes it clear that God is not pleased when we add or substitute something when He has given his directions to us. We are not free to go beyond what is commanded and treat His Word casually like a food recipe.

Example: The New Testament church is described with terms such as the church, church of God, or churches of Christ in passages such as Romans 16:16. Describing the church in any other way than what is found in the New Testament is adding to the Word of God and is not authorized by Him. Modern churches which were started after the first century were often named after their founder, methods, or doctrines rather than the biblical descriptions.

Example: Qualifications are set forth for church elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. It would be wrong to impose an additional requirement that is not found in the Bible. Likewise, it is not permissible to omit one of the qualifications just to appoint a favorite person. Someone recently suggested that some of those qualifications are not as important as others. Then why did God list them? God knows best. It is not our place to second guess God or try to soften what is stated.

God is not satisfied with partial obedience.

1 Corinthians 4:6 says do not go beyond what is written.

1 Peter 4:11 requires our speaking to be consistent with the oracles of God.

2 John 9 warns that we are to abide in the doctrine of Christ, not just believe and practice the parts that we like or choose.

5. Consider All the Bible Says on a Subject: Use the Bible to interpret the Bible. Clear passages can help interpret unclear passages. Paul did not avoid teaching the whole counsel of God - Acts 20:27.

Example: We must consider all the Bible says about a subject to get the complete and accurate scriptural answer. Some people try to prove a Bible subject by going where it is not mentioned.

Because Acts 16:31 does not mention baptism, does that mean baptism is not essential? It also doesn't mention love but does that mean love is not necessary? How do we know that we must love the Lord? Because it is taught elsewhere.

Jesus said in Mark 12:30 to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." Likewise, when you read on in Acts 16:33 and elsewhere such as Acts 2:38 and 22:16, it is clear that baptism is required to be saved. You have to find where a subject is mentioned to know what the Bible commands about it.

6. Consider the Context: The situation may help determine the meaning.

Example: In Acts 4:34-35 all the Christians who had houses and land sold what they had and gave all the proceeds to the Apostles for distribution. This met a special need at that place and time. Some use this Scripture to preach a social gospel and even advocate a form of communism, socialism, and a welfare state and try to bind it on all others.

However, a little study of the Scriptures will show many other examples where that was not done and that Christians shared and gave in other ways. Acts 12:12 tells of Mary opening her house for the church to meet and pray. Acts 16:14-15 tells of Lydia, a business woman, inviting Paul and his missionary associates to stay in her house. Philemon, who had a slave named Onesimus, opened his house for church meetings as well as a guest room for the Apostle Paul.

Furthermore, 2 Thessalonians 3:10 teaches personal responsibility, "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat."

7. Necessary Inference or Expediency: Some things are left to our discretion and good judgment. If the Bible has not specified something, then it is **necessarily inferred** that we can arrange to do it in any way that does not violate

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any other Scripture. **Expedients** are things necessary to carry out a command of God. **Expediency** helps us apply a Bible teaching.

Example: Expediency required Noah to select tools to build the ark so he could use an axe, saw, hammer, nails, etc. to carry out the command to build the ark. The tools were not additions because they were not a different kind of wood.

Example: Baptism requires immersion as shown in Acts 8:38 and Romans 6:4. Where we do it is left to expediency. We can use a baptistry, pool, river, lake, or a bathtub, just so there is enough water to put them under.

How should we immerse? We can dip them forward or backward, sitting or laying down, or sit them in a chair, just so they get all the way under the water.

Example: Heb 10:25 commands us to assemble. The church met on the first day of the week according to Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. We need to determine what time of the day we are going to meet.

Example: We are taught to worship together in Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2, and many other places. We are not told where we have to meet. Therefore, we can choose to meet in a house, public meeting place, down by the river, in a synagogue, etc.

Example: We are taught to drink of the fruit of the vine in Matthew 26:29 when we commune with the Lord's Supper. We are not told whether to use one cup or multiple cups, glass cups or paper cups. They do not change the nature of what we are told to drink.

Example: We are commanded to sing in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16. How are we to carry out the command? We can stand or sit, sing fast or slow, sing with a leader or without a leader, chant or sing in four-part harmony, and sing with or without books. Those things are not changing or adding to the command to sing because they are not a different kind of music. They are simply carrying out the command to sing.

Conclusion:

Some people minimize the seriousness of disobeying God's Word. There are people today just like in the first century working within the church operating like termites eating away at the foundations of New Testament Christianity to change what God has authorized. Don't let people confuse you. We must test what people teach by interpreting the Bible the Bible way with principles of biblical interpretation.

1 John 4:1 says "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world."

1 Thessalonians 5:21 says "Test all things; hold fast what is good."

1 Corinthians 16:13 says "Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong."

2 Timothy 1:13 says "Hold fast the **pattern** of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus."

2 Thessalonians 2:15 says "Stand fast and hold the **traditions** which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle."

1 Corinthians 11:2 says "Keep the **traditions** just as I delivered them to you."

Tradition is not a dirty word. Many people today are using the word tradition in order to get rid of the Bible teachings that they do not like. This is not a new problem. Paul warned about it almost 2000 years ago. The next time someone criticizes the traditions of the church, ask them to read what Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 11:2 and 2 Thess. 2:15.

Some traditions are not based on biblical commands or apostolic examples. Some are simply expedients initiated in order to carry out a Bible command. They are not wrong if they are not violating any other scripture. Just because something is a tradition does not make it a bad thing. Certainly we can improve some of the expedient traditions. But it should never be used as an excuse to change what God has directed.

Let's consider common sense principles of biblical interpretation as we study Bible topics - Acts 17:11.