



Cutting It Straight

Lesson 2: Common Pitfalls in Bible Interpretation

Key Verse: 2 Timothy 2:15

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.”

Three Ways to Mishandle God’s Word¹

1. Mis-interpretation: ascribing the _____ meaning to a passage.
Ex: The true meaning is A, but the interpretation is B.
2. Sub-interpretation: failing to ascertain the _____ meaning of a passage.
Ex: The true meaning is A, B, and C, but the interpretation is A.
3. Super-interpretation: attributing _____ to a passage than actually exists.
Ex: The true meaning is A, but the interpretation is A, B, and C.

Common Pitfalls in Interpretation

1. Ignoring the _____

One of the most common pitfalls in Bible interpretation is ignoring the context in which a verse occurs.

Ruth 1:16b: for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people *shall be* my people, and your God, my God.

This verse is often read at a wedding. It is meant to express the wife’s devotion to her husband.

What is wrong with this interpretation? _____

Psalm 2:8: Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, And the *very ends* of the earth as Your possession.

This verse has been used by missionaries to speak of anticipated conversions that will happen while they are out on the mission field.

What is wrong with this interpretation? _____

¹ The following is adapted from Matt Waymeyer *BI 505 Hermeneutics Course Syllabus*, 9-17.

Matthew 18:20: For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.

This verse has been used to encourage small Bible study groups or prayer meetings that Jesus is present with them.

What is wrong with this interpretation? _____

2. _____ **the Passage/The Finger Point**

Many people take a verse and personalize it to fit their own situation. They read the Bible in a devotional manner in which they skip over the context and the meaning of the verse and look for a direct connection to their own situation or circumstances. This then becomes their way of interpreting the Bible. Some will open their Bible to a random page, point to a random verse on the page, and then apply that verse to their own circumstances in life. This is what I call “the finger point” Bible interpretation.

Personalizing the Passage

Jeremiah 29:11: ‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.’

This verse is often applied to a person’s personal life. They take the “you” in the passage and apply it to themselves because they fail to understand the proper interpretation. They then believe that God is promising them welfare in their future.

What is wrong with this interpretation? _____

Is there application for us today? _____

The Finger Point

This is often used when a person wants God to speak directly to a certain situation or circumstance in their life. For example, Jennifer desperately wants a child. She randomly opens her Bible, and it opens to Matthew 1. She randomly points to a verse on the page that reads this:

Matthew 1:21: She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.

How does Jennifer interpret this verse? “I knew it! The Lord is promising me a child!” She runs to tell her husband that God showed her they were going to have a child.

What is wrong with this interpretation? _____

What is wrong with personalizing a passage?

While the reader may not intend to contradict Scripture with their personal interpretations, they go beyond what Scripture has revealed and find meanings that were never intended by God in His Word. They place upon the Bible extra revelation. They also undermine the authority of God’s Word because they want it to say something that God never said, and therefore claim authority over God’s words.

Also, if two people read one verse and each comes up with their own personal interpretation, who is to say which one is right? Are they both right?

A helpful question to ask when interpreting the Bible is,

“What did this mean _____ I was born?”

3. Interpreting through a _____ System

Another common pitfall is to start with a theological system and read it into a given passage. This can happen in one of two ways. The first way this can happen is when a person finds a disagreement between his theological beliefs and a given passage of Scripture. At this point he may be tempted to twist that passage and interpret it to fit his theological system rather than let the Bible correct or refine his theology. The second way this can happen is when the interpreter will read more into a passage than is actually in the passage because he wants it to fit his theological system. In this case, his theology may be true and biblical, but if it’s not taught in the passage, he can’t read his beliefs into the passage. Both are example of eisegesis.

The Prosperity Gospel in Matthew 21:1–9 and John 10:10

One contemporary preacher supported his belief in the prosperity gospel by saying that Christ riding on a donkey in Matthew 21 was the cultural equivalent of driving a luxurious automobile today.

In John 10:10, Jesus is contrasting Himself with false shepherds in Israel who were leading the people astray. They are like the thief who doesn’t care about the sheep. Jesus, however, came to give eternal life. That is the abundant life, not financial riches.

Arminian Theology, Election, and Ephesians 1:4–5 and 1 Peter 1:1–2

Those who hold to Arminian theology will interpret Ephesians 1:4, “just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” and verse 5, “He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ” to mean God, by means of his foresight or omniscience, knew who would have faith in Him, which then became the basis of his election of them.²

The word *chose* in the Greek (*eklegomai*) means “to make a choice in accordance with significant preference; select someone or something for oneself.”³ The word *predestined* (*proorizō*) means “decide upon beforehand; predetermine.”⁴

Peter says in 1 Peter 1:1, “who are chosen” and in verse 2, “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father.” The word *chosen* in the Greek (*eklektos*) means “pertaining to being selected, chosen; generally of those whom God has chosen from the generality of mankind and drawn to himself.”⁵ The word *foreknowledge* (*prognōsis*) means “predetermination, of God’s omniscient wisdom and intention.”⁶

Roger Olson says, “Election is simply God’s foreknowledge of who will freely receive this grace unto salvation. Reprobation is simply man’s rejection of this grace and God’s foreknowledge of that.”⁷ One can see how Olson has redefined election not to mean “to make a choice; being selected; or predetermination.” He redefines election and bases it upon a foreknowledge of God rather than a choice or selection by God. His redefinition of election is based upon his theological system.

4. Interpreting Scripture through the Lens of _____

A popular way to interpret the Bible today is through experience. The interpreter’s experience becomes the standard by which they interpret certain passages. The danger comes when that person’s experience seems to contradict the teaching of Scripture. When this contradiction comes, the temptation is to silence the Bible’s teaching and interpret the Bible based upon one’s personal experience.

Example: A person went to a charismatic church and claims to have experienced speaking in tongues. Their experience was uttering ecstatic gibberish, not a known human language. Because they claimed to have spoken in tongues when they were uttering ecstatic gibberish, when they read passages about the gift of tongues, they interpret the gift of tongues to mean ecstatic

² Herald W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 177. Hoehner does not agree with this viewpoint but makes a case against the foresight view in his commentary.

³ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Fredrick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Accordance, 305.

⁴ *Ibid*, 873.

⁵ *Ibid*, 306.

⁶ *Ibid*, 866.

⁷ Roger E. Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 129.

gibberish they experienced at the charismatic church. In this case, experience has become the lens for their interpretation.

What do we do with experience?

- a. When an individual's experience contradicts the teaching of God's Word, the solution is not to deny that this experience occurred.
- b. The solution is to *reinterpret* that experience in light of the Bible instead of interpreting the Bible in light of one's experience.
- c. In doing so, the interpreter upholds and reveres the authority of God's Word and is open to letting Scripture correct and refine his current understanding of his experience.

5. Interpreting the Bible through _____

One way people interpret the Bible is through church tradition. They claim to make biblical arguments based upon traditions in the church that have been passed down through the ages. They will read their traditions back into the meaning of a passage. This is often expressed in the phrase, "We have always taught it that way." Although tradition can be helpful in interpreting Scripture (i.e., what did the early church fathers teaching about this?), believers must be careful not to allow tradition to become the authority or lens through which the Bible is interpreted. As Kenneth Boa said, "The church does not decide what Scripture teaches; Scripture determines what the church teaches."⁸

Conclusion

- a. In one way or another, the various pitfalls in Bible interpretation consist of reading into a Bible passage a meaning that is foreign to the text itself (*eisegesis*) and thereby distorting its true meaning.
- b. The most effective way to avoid these pitfalls is to pursue the divinely intended meaning of the author who wrote the text by letting the text of Scripture speak for itself.

Application

1. What do these pitfalls reveal about the authority of Scripture?
2. How can you avoid these pitfalls in your Bible study?

⁸ Kenneth Boa, *Interpreting the Bible*. <https://bible.org/seriespage/v-interpreting-bible>, accessed on January 4, 2023.