

The Eight Rules of Interpretation

“A wise man will hear, and will increase learning: and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels: to understand a proverb, and the interpretation.”

“And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation.” (2 Peter 1:19-20 NAS)

As mentioned above, we cannot have a “sure word” about the meaning of Scripture (or anything else) unless we have and utilize a sure method of interpreting the words.

The following “Eight Rules” are the heart or center of all grammatical interpretation. If one's interpretation rests upon the foundation of these accepted “Eight Rules”, then one may feel confident and sure regarding that interpretation which is attributed to those passages. These “Eight Rules” have been accepted and used by scholars from Socrates to the present time. These “Eight Rules” should always be used when one is ready to “rightly divide the word of Truth” found in the Holy Bible, and they are equally applicable to legal, historical, and other such documents down through the ages to our present day.

Since the Bible teaches quite plainly that God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor.14:33), how is it that there can be so many disagreements today between Christians and the proliferation of so many different churches and their various theologies since almost all of them claim to use the Bible as the basis of their many doctrines. Almost inevitably one must conclude that not all of these doctrines taught in these various churches, sects, and even synagogues are correct. And since these doctrines are false, even though they claim Biblical precedent, one must conclude that these false doctrines have arisen due to the distortion of the Biblical words.

As far as Scriptural truth is concerned, these “Eight Rules” are offered so that they may assist the reader in recognizing the proper meanings and messages found in the Word of God. A Biblical scholar once said: “When two interpretations are claimed for a certain Scripture, the interpretation or construction which is most in agreement with all the facts of the case should be adopted. When all the facts of an interpretation are in agreement they sound together in harmony, like notes in a chord.

Biblical interpretation is more than knowing a set of rules, but it cannot be accomplished well without the guidance of these rules, none the less. Good interpretive skills demand that we learn the rules and then apply them when reading the Scriptures.

The Eight Rules

1) The Rule of Definition.

Define the terms or words being considered and then adhere to the defined meanings.

What does the word mean? Any study of Scripture must begin with a study of the word. Define your terms and then keep to the terms defined. The interpreter should conscientiously and almost always abide by the plain meanings of the words. This quite often may require using a Hebrew/English or Greek/English lexicon in order to make sure that the sense of the English translation is understood. For example, there are two Greek words “allos” and “heteros” that are both translated as “another” in the English scriptures. Strictly speaking however, “allos” literally means “another of the same type,” and “heteros” means “another of a different type.” (See John 14:16. Which “another” is referenced here in this verse?)

2) Rule of Usage:

Do not add meaning to established words and terms. What was the common usage in the culture and time period when the passage was written?

It must be remembered that the Old Testament was written originally by, to, and for Israel. The words and idioms must have been intelligible to them - just as the words of Christ must have been when speaking to his disciples. The majority of the New Testament likewise was written in Jewish culture and it is important not to impose our modern customs, ideas, and usage into our interpretation. It is not worth much to interpret a great many phrases and histories if one's interpretations are shaded by pre-conceived notions and cultural biases, thereby rendering an inaccurate and ineffectual rendition of the passage.

3) The Rule of Context:

Avoid using words or phrases out of context. Context must define terms and how words are used.

The meaning must be gathered from the context. Every word you read must be understood in the light of the words that come before the verse or verses, and the words that come after the particular verse or verses in question. Many passages will not be understood at all, or at least will be understood incorrectly, without the help afforded by the context.

4) The Rule of Historical Background.

Do not separate interpretation and historical investigation.

The interpreter must have some awareness of the life, society, and cultural times in which the scriptures were written. The spiritual principle will be timeless but often can't be properly understood or appreciated without some knowledge of the times or background in which the text was written. If the interpreter can have in his mind what the writer had in mind when he wrote the text - without adding any excess baggage or preconceived thoughts from his own society and culture to the interpretation of the text - then the true thought or meaning of the scripture can be captured resulting in an accurate interpretation. Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Our only interest in the past is for the light it throws upon the present."

5) The Rule of Logic:

Be certain that words as interpreted agree with the overall premise.

Interpretation is merely logical reasoning. When interpreting Scripture the use of reason is everywhere to be assumed. Does the interpretation make sense? The Bible was given to us in the form of human language and therefore appeals to human reason - it invites investigation. It is to be interpreted as we would any other volume applying the laws of language and grammatical analysis. As Bernard Ramm said: "What is the control we use to weed out false theological speculation? Certainly the control is logic and evidence. . . interpreters who have not had the sharpening experience of logic. . . may have improper notions of implication and evidence. Too frequently such a person uses a basis of appeal that is a notorious violation of the laws of logic and evidence."

6) The Rule of Precedent:

Use the known and commonly accepted meanings of words, not obscure meanings for which there is no precedent.

We must not violate the known usage of a word and invent another for which there is no precedent. Just as a judge's chief occupation is the study of previous cases, so must the interpreter use precedents in order to determine whether they really support an alleged doctrine. Consider the Bereans in Acts 17:10-12 who were called "noble" because they searched the Scriptures to determine if what Paul taught them was true. (2 Tim. 2:15 - rightly dividing the word).

7) The Rule of Unity:

Even though many documents may be used there must be a general unity among them.

The parts of Scripture being interpreted must be construed with reference to the significance of the whole. An interpretation must be consistent with the rest of Scripture. An excellent example of this is the doctrine of Faith. No one or two verses is going to be sufficient in delineating or fully explaining the doctrine. No single

passage explains it fully, but the various passages that does teach it must be consistent with the teaching of the whole of Scripture.

8) The Rule of Inference:

Base conclusions on what is already known and established or can be reasonably implied from all known facts.

An inference is a fact reasonably implied from another fact. It is a logical consequence. It derives a conclusion from a given fact or premise. It is the deduction of one proposition from another proposition. Such inferential facts or propositions are sufficiently binding when their truth is established by competent and satisfactory evidence. Competent evidence means such evidence as the nature of the thing to be proved admits. Satisfactory evidence means that amount of evidence which would ordinarily satisfy an unprejudiced mind beyond a reasonable doubt.