

The Bible

The Basic Principles of Bible Study

As children we were taught that words were a means of communication. In time we understood that if we were to make clear that which we were trying to convey through composition or communication, there were certain “laws” or “principles” which had to be followed. The same is true in Bible study. There are principles which, like the laws of grammar, guide us in the correct understanding of a passage, and toward the intended goal of the writer.



There are a number of principles, some of which are:

Ignore Chapter Divisions

They are very useful but oftentimes they disturb the thought flow through a passage. I give two illustrations:

- a) For instance, the Lord goes to Jerusalem for the Passover (Jn. 2:13) but we cannot stop at (Jn. 2:25) for the story has not indicated a change of location. That does not happen until (Jn. 3:22). John will remind us that it was the Passover (Jn. 2:23) and informs us of events on that very day. With this in mind, we observe that everything in-between John 2:13 and 3:22 happened at the time of Passover. There is recorded the cleansing of the temple, the Lord’s discourse on the temple, and the coming of Nicodemus. They are all related to the Passover. The narrative of Nicodemus must not be isolated, yet this is exactly what the chapter division does.
- b) Again we read: “Every man went unto his own house” (Jn. 7:53) and the chapter ends, yet the first verse of chapter eight says: “Jesus went unto the mount of Olives” (Jn. 8:1). It is telling of the contrast in how the day ended, the people went to their houses and the Lord to the mount of Olives. What a truth this teaches. The Lord had nowhere to lay His head, the great Teacher was left alone while the others went to their homes to commune with others. He went to commune with His Father. Do not let the chapter divisions hinder the study.

Context

In our developing education we learnt that one word can be used in various contexts. For instance, we learnt that the word “record” meant different things which changed depending on the a context. Consider how the word is used. There is a different meaning between saying, “John broke the record for the school’s 100 meter dash”, “Elvis made a new record”, or when at school they kept a “record of our educational progress”. It was the same word but its meaning changed with context. In gospel preaching verses are often taken out of context because the speaker only wants to make a certain point. Possibly we have all heard the gospel preached from the text: “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and the preacher spoke of how man is under the condemnation of God. The truth of universal condemnation is clearly taught in the scriptures, but not from that verse. The context has finished dealing with the proving of universal guilt (Rom. 1:18-3:20) and the inspired writer is showing the unbiased offer of God to all who need salvation (Rom. 3:22). This begs the question, who needs this salvation? The answer is: “All *who* have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23 paraphrased). At times the student must get free from the gospel application and look at the context of the passage.

Accuracy

A principle of major importance is accuracy, more accuracy, and still more accuracy. In Biblical study there is no room for assumptions. God deals with facts. Many years ago in speaking with my dad, I asked, “How do you reconcile the words: ‘Then Jesus six days before the Passover came to Bethany . . . The woman came and anointed the Lord’ (Jn. 12:3) with the words of Matthew informing his readers that it was *two days* before the Passover when the woman anointed Him? (Matt. 26:2, 6-11; Mk. 14:1-7).” Dad told me, “read what it says, does John write that the woman anointed the Lord two days before the Passover or that He came to Bethany six days before the Passover?” The scriptures inform us He came to Bethany six days before the Passover and we assume

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that it was then the woman anointed Him. Such an imagined contradiction is the result of inaccurate reading. In Bible study we must learn to read what it says not what we think it says.

God's Hidden Secrets

I find it interesting that we do not want God to have His own secrets! This is an important practice in Bible study, to discern what God wants us to know and what He has "concealed or kept to himself". At times an individual may hear ministry on the "mysteries" of the New Testament (Matt. 4:11; 1 Cor. 15:51; Eph. 3:9), but they are matters which God kept secret until a certain time, place, and group of people. God does not tell us everything we want to know but what he deems we need to know, and lets us know there are boundaries regarding the information given to us. God informs us that: "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29). How much time has been spent on, "Who wrote Hebrews?" The reality is, God has not revealed who wrote it and that finishes the matter, or at least ought to. Again, "Who are the twenty-four elders in Heaven?" (Rev. 4:4) and, "Was it a Sunday when God gave the vision to John, for he was in the Spirit on the Lord's day?" What explicit scripture do we have for saying it was a Sunday. Does it make a difference if it was Monday afternoon at 3:00 PM or Friday at 10:00 AM? What God has not revealed we must not make conjectures and try to discover what has not been clearly revealed. God has revealed more than enough for us to study without wasting time and energy on who wrote Hebrews, etc.

Never Let an obscure passage destroy or dull the truth of plain scripture

How many saints have been concerned over the words of Hebrews 6 and worry they could lose their salvation? It will be stated and rightly so, the scriptures warn: "It is impossible . . . to renew them again unto repentance" (Heb. 6:4-6), and there are saints this causes a lot of concern to. This is an obscure passage which theologians have interpreted in various ways, but we must not let it rob an individual of the plain truth of John 3:16! Rejoice in those verses which are so clear a child can understand them. There is nothing difficult about understanding: "For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Jn. 3:16). Scripture never contradicts itself. It may appear at times to be contradictory, but that is only because we have failed to grasp certain facts.

Interpretation

"Scripture must be interpreted by scripture"! It is highly dangerous to ignore what the scriptures teach and put one's own interpretation on it. For instance, the outer covering of the Tabernacle was "badger skins" (Ex. 25:5), so the question is, "What do they signify?" The truth is, we do not know what sort of animal this was, consequently, we do not know what color it was. Yet, quickly the answer is given, "They were drab skins thus foreshadowing the words: "There is no beauty that we should desire Him" (Isa. 53:2). Where do we get the grounds biblically or otherwise to make such an interpretation? I say, "let scripture interpret itself". If we do this then we discover God gives us the meaning when speaking of Israel. God says: "I clothed thee also with brodered work, and shod thee with badgers' skin, and I girded thee about with fine linen, and I covered thee with silk. I decked thee also with ornaments, and I put bracelets upon thy hands, and a chain on thy neck. And I put a jewel on thy forehead, and earrings in thine ears, and a beautiful crown upon thine head. Thus wast thou decked with gold and silver; and thy raiment was of fine linen, and silk, and brodered work; thou didst eat fine flour, and honey, and oil: and thou wast exceeding beautiful, and thou didst prosper into a kingdom" (Ezek. 16:10-13). She was beautiful to God and God clothed her in the most magnificent clothes and, "shod thee with badger skins". They were something beautiful. Let the scriptures be their own interpreter. The badger skins tell me of the lovely life of Christ in the world that was only known by God.

Progression of Knowledge

Just as when at school, we were not taught higher mathematics in grade one, rather our education was progressive, so God teaches us "line upon line" (Isa. 28:10). No believer has the right to think of themselves as unimportant

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because of not seeing truths in the scriptures that others see. Every saint, no matter how deep the thinker, or how original, had to start with the most elementary stages of study. When my dad was saved at seventeen years of age, he did not know there was a book called Genesis and could not have found John 3:16! Yet, he became a mighty minister of the scriptures. He, like everyone else, had to learn “line upon line”. He did not become a teacher of the scriptures until thirty-seven years after his conversion. I have his study writings and there can be seen in them the development of the spiritual mind over the years.

Determining Why The Book Was Written

It is always a benefit when the Holy Spirit caused the human penman to tell the reason, or reasons, the book was written. At times the answer is imbedded in the response to situations such as the false teachings at Galatia which caused spiritual unrest among the saints (Gal. 1:6; 3:1). At other times in response to a letter of enquiry (1 Cor. 7:1); another to confirm that which had been taught (Lk. 1:1-4). Peter writes so that the saints will have a hard copy of the things he taught (2 Pet. 1:12-15). When it is known why the book was written, then the individual needs to get into the mind of the writer and by the Spirit follow his method of answering a letter, or correcting a situation. Considering Paul’s response to the Corinthians and the letter written to them, he writes:

- a) “Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me” (1 Cor. 7:1)
- b) Then: “Now concerning virgins” (1 Cor. 7:25)
- c) Then: “As concerning therefore the eating” (1 Cor. 8:4)
- d) Then: “Now concerning spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:1)
- e) Again: “Now concerning the collection for the saints” (1 Cor. 16:1)

It is my belief that the true structure of a book will be based on its purpose for being written. To assist in finding the structure of a book I suggest the individual buys at least one book which surveys every book in the scriptures. There are four which I have found fulfill this very important role. They are:

- a) “Explore the Book” by Sidlow Baxter
- b) “Exploring the Book” by John Phillips
- c) “The Analyzed Bible” by G. Campbell Morgan
- d) “The Outlined Bible” by Robert Lee (very hard to find)

Thought Flow of The Passage or Book

I often find a verse which does not fit into my understanding of the subject. For instance: “By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:19-21). What has this to do with the passage? What is the point the Spirit is seeking to make? Since we believe that the scriptures in their entirety as inspired and believe the truth that, “All scripture is given by God and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction,” (2 Tim. 3:16) then there are no superfluous passages in the scriptures. God did not just decide to put a verse in to make understanding difficult. It has a purpose for being there. When we get the right “key” of the thought flow then every verse will fit perfectly into place.

Observations

When beginning to study a book, have the note book or use the computer to write observations as you see them. Keep considering questions such as those which Miles Coverdale wrote when speaking of the study of the scriptures. “It will greatly help ye to understand the Scripture if thou shalt mark, not only of what is spoken or written, but of whom, and to whom, with what words. At what time, where, to what intent, with what circumstances, considering what goeth before, and what followeth.”

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**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

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