

Basic Bible Study Skills

Interpretation

The three stages of inductive Bible study:

- Observation: What does it say?
- **Interpretation: What does it mean?**
- Application: What does it mean to me?

Interpretation

The aim in interpretation is to bring out the meaning of the passage based on the facts gathered in the observation phase. When interpretation is based on thorough observation, we can learn what the passage says, but interpretation without sufficient time and effort spent observing often leads to reading things into the passage that really are not there.

The basic tool of interpretation is the question.

- What does this mean? How is this defined? What is the surface meaning of this word or phrase?
- Why is this said and why is this said here and in this way? What are the reasons behind this statement?
- What does this imply? What is the author trying to communicate here? What are the author's basic presuppositions behind this statement?

These questions can be applied to the various points of observation.

- Terms – What is the definition?
- Structure – Why is this repeated?
- Literary form – Why did the author use this metaphor?
- Atmosphere – What was the author's emotional response to this event?

Principles (not formulas) of interpretation.

Interpret in context

- Culture and history will shed light on the meaning, why the author wrote, and how the words and phrases were used in that day.
- The rest of Scripture may shed light on how a passage is to be interpreted. Interpret the obscure in light of the clear. (WARNING: Bible study is not primarily cross-referencing and jumping from one passage to another and another. You should attempt to understand the passage at hand as much as possible first.)
- How is the same word used in different places? By the same author and by different authors?
- How is the same concept expressed in different places?
- How is the same event described in different places?

Interpret according to literary style.

Discourse – expect straightforward logical statements (Romans)

Prose narrative – historical record of events (Gospels, Acts)

- Doctrine should not be formulated on narrative alone.
- Many narrative passages include discourse (Matthew 5-7)

Poetry

- Figurative
- Form and structure are often used to communicate ideas
- Don't always try to draw major distinctions between the lines.

Parables – common story to illustrate a spiritual truth

- A parable makes one main point. Don't try to devise many interesting embellishments from the details.
- How to determine the main point:
 - What question(s) prompted the story?
 - What is the summarizing statement?
 - What is the spiritual condition of the hearers?

Allegory

- Figurative discourse illustrated by a familiar example (John 15:1-5)
- In order to interpret correctly we must understand the illustration correctly.

Proverb

- Short statement expressing a truth often seen in experience.
- Expect exaggeration
- Expect generalizations

Prophetic

- Predictive
- Commentary on the prophet's time period
- Proclamation of God's Word
- Differentiate between that which is predictive and that which is commentary or proclamation

Apocalyptic – truth revealed through visions and symbolism with extensive use of figurative speech

Interpret naturally

The easiest interpretation, the one that grows out of the observed facts most naturally, is usually the most accurate. It doesn't have to be tricky or mysterious.

Interpret the obvious before concentrating on problems.

- Don't get so bogged down in a difficult verse that you fail to see the meaning of the rest of the passage.
- Often the interpretation of the clear part will greatly aid in interpreting the obscure part.

Interpret fearlessly

- Don't prejudge a passage on the basis of traditional or denominational interpretation.
- Be prepared to honestly subject your beliefs to criticism. Truth will win out.

Interpret in constant dependence on the Holy Spirit; otherwise you are wasting your time and will end up with only foolishness (1 Corinthians 2:14)

Errors to avoid in interpretation

Proof-texting – disregarding context

Allegorical interpretation – attempts to make a spiritual meaning out of every detail of non-allegorical material

Literal interpretation – failure to recognize that truth can be expressed in figurative language

True but inaccurate interpretation – interpretation that results in a legitimate spiritual truth that is not actually found in the passage under study

Rationalistic interpretation – attempts to make Scripture completely acceptable to reason by avoiding miracles, etc. The Scriptures are rational and should be approached using your reason, but remember our finite minds cannot completely empty Scripture of its mystery.