

Chapter 16

HERMENEUTICS

HOW TO INTERPRET THE BIBLE

Bible interpretation can be challenging. For example, the Old Testament law commanded the Jews to consider any woman unclean for seven days after giving birth to a male child ([Leviticus 12:2](#)). Obviously, in our Christian-based society we do not practice this nor does the church recommend it!

Consequently, on what basis of interpretation can we ignore some commands and follow others? This is a very important question to answer to avoid confusion, believing lies about God, and guilt!

BASIC RULES

Here are the basic rules of biblical interpretation:

- All of the Bible is true and God's word.
- Scripture is progressive in revelation revealing more information about God and His great plan of salvation as the Bible proceeds chronologically.
- Scripture should be interpreted in a normal, literal fashion. In other words, interpret it as it would have been understood at the time and by the type of literature it entails. For example, a normal interpretation of I Samuel as a historical book written 3000 years ago will be different than a letter in the New Testament after Christ's first advent. Poetry should be recognized as poetry. Prophetic literature may contain symbols but indicate actual events.
- Salvation is always by grace in scripture.
- God manages His people in different ways at different times. In other words, how He handled former slaves in the book of Exodus is different than how He handled those in the church. This leads to different commands and expectations from God.

MAJOR SECTIONS OF THE SCRIPTURES

Having mentioned some basic rules then, let's look at several different major sections of scripture.

1 Old Testament and the Old Testament law

There were three basic reasons for the Old Testament law:

- To legally organize the Jews as they came out of Egypt.
- To teach them about the coming Messiah and salvation.
- To provide a central place of worship to keep them away from alternative gods.

Law and Salvation

The law was not intended to give salvation but to teach about the need for God's saving grace ([Galatians 3:21-23](#)).

Salvation is based on the Abrahamic covenant ([Genesis 12:1-3](#)) and completed by the coming of Christ ([Romans 4](#)).

Consequently, the Old Testament law was *temporary, meant for a specific people and time*. Christ fulfilled the law and it is now *inactive* ([Romans 10:4](#); [Hebrews 7:11-12](#), [Galatians 3:24](#); [5:18](#)).

2 Gospels

The Gospels must be interpreted through Jewish eyes! Christ came initially to the Jews to present their promised kingdom ([Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 10:7](#)). Consequently, His presentation in the temple, teachings, temptation, miracles and Davidic ancestry are recorded to show that He was the promised Messiah.

- He was rejected by the Jewish leadership (Matthew 12) and subsequently by most of Israel (John 12).
- He then generally concentrated on teaching His disciples (Matthew 14-18) and confounding the Pharisees with His questions, and answers to their tempting Him and teaching in parables (Matthew 19-23; Luke 10-18).
- Consequently, the commands in the Gospels appeared to encourage the Jews to follow Christ in faith until His death, resurrection, and ascension, as well as to warn of God's righteous wrath to those rejecting Him. The commands were not directed to those in the church.

3

Church

Following Christ's resurrection and ascension as well as the coming of the Spirit (the beginning of the church [Acts 2]), a believer's faith, unlike in the times of the Old Testament or Gospels, causes regeneration and sealing by the Spirit until Christ's coming again and their ultimate eternal salvation (Romans 6:2-12; Ephesians 1:13-14)

- However, believers from all ages are chosen by God unto salvation (Psalm 14:1-3, John 6:37, 44, 65, Romans 8:28-30; 11:4-7).
- The Epistles (from Romans to Revelation 3) are teachings directly to the church from God through Christ and the Spirit to the apostles. Paul specifically was chosen to explain to the church the meaning of Christ's coming (Colossians 1:25; Ephesians 3:1-6). In a number of instances commands from the law, such as 9 of the Ten Commandments, and 'love one another' from the Gospels are repeated in the epistles.
- However, it is from the Epistles that we derive God's directives as Christians in this time where God manages people through the church.

Proper technique in interpreting the Bible is vital. Misinterpreting scripture based on an improper view of how to interpret will cause us to believe lies about God which can have a profound psychological impact on ourselves as well as others. In the extreme, it can cause the formation of Christian cults, leading others astray and causing wasted lives in service to God. Further, misinterpreting scripture can lead to disunity and, to the extreme, church splits again wasting valuable time and resources.

DO NOT BELIEVE WHAT IS NOT IN SCRIPTURE.

REMOVING AND ADDING TO SCRIPTURE

As dangerous as it is to not believe scripture, it is also dangerous to add to the scripture ([Revelation 22:18-19](#)). Both removing and adding to scripture teaches lies about the character, actions, desires, and requirements of our holy God. Unfortunately, adding to scripture is quite common, often from well-intentioned teachers and leaders. Adding to scripture is most commonly done by:

- Using philosophic arguments that are not in the Bible in an attempt to assign personal beliefs to God
- Over interpreting a verse according to one's prejudice
- Interpreting a verse in isolation and not understanding the historical, cultural or textual context
- Poor hermeneutics (basis of interpretation, please see above)
- Poor Bibles study technique

One typically can find adding to scripture in conversations with your friends, sermons, denominational doctrine, and parachurch organizational teaching.

Make a strong habit, as people tell you what to believe about God, to check the veracity in scripture itself (yes, even the Teleios materials) especially if it will strongly affect your or others' lives and beliefs. You may need to ask the person who first made the statement where it is in the Bible. By this method, over time you will learn what is actually in scripture and what God really desires from Christians. It is quite freeing and helpful to your life.

WHAT DO YOUNG CHRISTIANS BELIEVE REGARDING BIBLE INTERPRETATION?

Teleios Research recently surveyed 505 adolescents and millennials on the Christian Instagram account, InstaPray. The survey questions were meant to reveal common interpretations of the Old Testament. More from that study [here](#).

- *What is the purpose of the Old Testament law?*
 - Half or more chose correctly that it provides an organizational structure for the nation Israel (51%), and reveals the coming Messiah (62%). However, only 37% chose correctly it provides for a unified worship process for Israel. In contrast, 44% incorrectly indicated it gives commands and direction for Christians today.
- *What is the current status of the Old Testament law?*
 - The correct answer, Christ is the end of the law so the Old Testament law is not to be followed by Christians, did have the highest response (38%). However, 25% chose incorrectly, that the law should be followed in its entirety and 18% the law should be followed in the sections that are practical today.
- *What is the purpose of the Old Testament?*
 - The majority (58% or more) chose the correct responses: provides practical wisdom; prophesies the coming kingdom of God and its Messiah King; teaches about Messiah through prophecy and types; reveals the sinful character of man; reveals the righteous character and actions of God; and provides an account of God's vengeance and judgment on mankind when they disobey.

- *What is the purpose of the gospels?*
 - The highest responses were correct: reveals the coming kingdom of God and its Messiah King (62%); reveals salvation through Messiah (83%); and gives revelation of God's plan for the ages (57%).
- *What is the purpose of the New Testament epistles?*
 - The correct responses were chosen by 65% or more: completes the revelation of Jesus Christ in His coming and its meaning for the church; provides directives, guidance, and commands for New Testament believers; and reveals prophecy regarding the end times and Christ's second coming.

SUMMARY

Scripture is progressive in revealing more information about God and His great plan of salvation as you proceed reading through the Bible; and should be interpreted in a normal, literal fashion. Otherwise, interpret is as it would have been understood at the time and by the type of literature it entails. But remember, God administrates His people in different ways at different times.

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