

# Eight Rules of Bible Interpretation

“... knowing this first, that no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit..” (2 Peter 1:19-20).

“A wise man will hear and increase learning, and a man of understanding will attain wise counsel, to understand a proverb and its interpretation” (Proverbs 1:5-6).

The Bible was written by men who were inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit. God amazingly gathered these writings together into one book, the Holy Bible. God wants us to understand and know Him and His ways through it. The Bible is a complex book full of mysteries and revelation that we can understand more and more as we grow in our lives in God. Let's not be frustrated if we don't understand a passage right away. God loves us and will teach us and reveal Himself to us.

Here are some important points to remember:

1. We must be born of His Spirit.
2. We must believe the Bible is the inspired, infallible, authoritative word of God.
3. We must rely on God's Holy Spirit to reveal the truth in each Bible passage.
4. We must come to God with a humble and teachable heart.
5. We must not simply read the Bible, but study it.
6. We must trust God to reveal Himself, not all at once, but more and more as we grow in Him.
7. We must check various versions of the Bible. Some are more accurate and spiritual than others.

The following “Eight Rules” are the heart of all grammatical interpretation. They have been accepted and used by scholars from Socrates to our present time (except for rule 8, which is specifically for the Bible). These “Eight Rules” should always be used when we seek to interpret the Holy Bible.

God is not the author of confusion (1 Cor.14:33), and though there are so many disagreements between Christians, the Lord can gently show us the way if our hearts are humble and we trust the words of Jesus, “*The Spirit of Truth... will guide you into all truth*” (John 16:13). These “Eight Rules” will assist us in recognizing the proper meanings and messages found in the Bible. Biblical interpretation is more than knowing a set of rules, but good interpretive skills demand that we learn the rules and then apply them when reading the Bible. Rules are a way to discipline the mind to allow the Bible to mean what it really means, not what we want it to mean.

## The Eight Rules

### 1) The Rule of Definition:

**Define the terms or words in the Bible passage 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 meaning of the words. You may often need to use a Hebrew/English or Greek/English lexicon (a dictionary that shows all the different meanings of a word) in order to make sure that the sense of the English translation is understood. You don't have to be a Bible scholar to use these books!!

### 2) The Rule of Context:

**Always interpret a passage in harmony with the context.**

By context, we mean the entire section of written thought in which the passage is found. The meaning must be gathered from the context. That means that 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. Many passages will not be understood at all, or at least will not be understood correctly, without understanding it in its context.

### 3) The Rule of Historical and Cultural Background:

**Do not separate interpretation and historical investigation.**

We must have some awareness of the life, society, and cultural times in which the scriptures were written. Each spiritual principle we discover in the Bible is eternal but often can't be properly understood or appreciated without this awareness. We must not have preconceived thoughts from our own society and culture when we look for the interpretation of the text. If we can have in our mind what the writer had in mind when he wrote the text, then the true thought or meaning of the scripture can be captured.

#### 4) The Rule of Logic:

**Be certain that words that have been interpreted agree with the overall premise.**

Logic is the principles of reasoning that apply to any branch of knowledge or study. A premise is the basis on which this reasoning proceeds. Interpretation is logical reasoning. Logic is not against God or faith. God said, *“Come now, and let us reason together”* (Isaiah 1:18). When interpreting the Bible the use of reason is assumed everywhere. When we seek to interpret a passage in the Bible, we should ask ourselves, “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. The Bible is to be interpreted as we would any other writing, applying the laws of language and grammatical analysis. Logic and evidence help us remove false theological conclusions based on unclear premises.

#### 5) The Rule of Precedent:

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

A precedent is something that has been agreed on or proved in the past. 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 a certain 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. In 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul tells us to be those who are “rightly dividing the word of truth.”

#### 6) The Rule of Harmony:

**Each passage must be interpreted in harmony with all other passages.**

The Bible is the work of one mind, God's. So scripture can't contradict scripture. Truth has many sides. Each passage, though true, does not always give all the truth. Usually a passage has the specific purpose of clearly presenting a facet of truth. We should never come to a conclusion on any Bible subject until all passages concerning it have been collected, considered, and compared. An interpretation must be consistent with the rest of scripture. An excellent example of this is the doctrine of faith. One or two verses are not going to be sufficient to fully explain the doctrine. The various passages that teach it must be consistent with the teaching of the whole of the Bible.

#### 7) 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 that is reasonably implied (suggested or understood without being directly stated) from another fact. It is a logical result. It reaches a conclusion from a given fact or premise. Such facts or propositions that have been inferred are sufficiently binding when their truth is established by adequate and satisfactory evidence.

#### 8) The Rule of the Work of Christ in the New Testament:

**Keep in mind the relationship and differences between the Old and New Testaments.**

When we first read the Bible we see big differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament. These differences sometimes seem to contradict each other. God shows Himself to man by what is called “progressive revelation.” He doesn't reveal Himself all at once, but over time and by many means. In the Old Testament He showed man many things. Then Jesus came! We read that, *“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds”* (Hebrews 1:1-2).

*“The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed”*

Augustine wrote this simple but wise saying that helps us understand that the Old and New Testaments are so closely interrelated with each other. We see the revelation of the Old Testament fulfilled in the New Testament. The Old Testament looks forward in time, preparing God's people for the work of Christ in the New Testament. Jesus came to bring us into new life in the Holy Spirit, which is so different than the life the people in the Old Testament experienced. So now we must understand the scriptures from this point of view. The letter to the Hebrews is excellent helping us to understand what it means that God has now spoken to us through His Son.