

QUESTION #6 – Can the Bible be properly interpreted by the average Christian?

Another way to ask this question is “Would a believer have to go to Bible College or Seminary to be able to accurately interpret the Bible?” “Could any layperson properly interpret the Bible?” “Could the church actually teach the average Christian how to study and interpret the Bible?” The answer to this question is based on eight key presuppositions and observations:

Observation #1 - The Bible is the inspired word of God.

We start with this point: “all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable” (II Tim. 3:16). The whole point of this study is based on this presupposition. Donald J. Campbell, in his foreword to Dr. Roy Zuck’s book, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, says, “...since the Bible was given to reveal truth and not obscure it, God surely intends that we understand it” (p. 7).

The Bible is inspired by God and says it is profitable and to be profitable, one would need to understand it. So we would conclude that it is not only possible to interpret the Scriptures, it is profitable to do so.

The Bible is like no other book in the world because it is a book that has been given to us from God Himself (II Tim. 3:16; II Pet. 1:21). We can start on page one of the Bible and see that it keeps repeating “and God said,” which clearly indicates this is not a normal book.

Now because this is a book originally written by humans, but inspired by God, there are six key realities that we accept, believe and defend:

(Reality #1) - We believe the Bible is inerrant - this book does not contain any errors.

(Reality #2) - We believe the Bible is infallible- this book is incapable of containing errors.

(Reality #3) - We believe the Bible is authoritative - this book is the truth authority base for what we believe and all we believe.

(Reality #4) - We believe the Bible has a Divine unity - this book will not contradict itself and if all is studied, it will be proved to have a unity to it concerning any subject.

Martin Luther and John Calvin said Scripture will interpret itself. Multiple passages will ultimately reveal what the truth is on any subject. **We must always interpret obscure passages by plain passages.** There will always be a Divine unity in the various inspired books of the Bible.

For example, the prophetic portions of the Bible will have a Divine unity to them. Prophetic passages and books in the Bible will correspond in a unified way to other prophetic passages in books like Daniel, Matthew, II Thessalonians and Revelation.

(Reality #5) - We believe the Bible has supernatural depth - this book comes from the mind of God.

There will be things in the Bible that are very deep and complex because the Bible is rooted in the infinite wisdom of God. The Bible can captivate a child but it also can intimidate the greatest scholars in the world. Even an Apostle like Peter acknowledged that there are some very deep things that are “hard to understand” in the Scriptures (II Peter 3:16). So this is not just a simple book to unravel.

(Reality #6) - We believe the Bible is absolutely true - nothing in this book can be false.

Since God is a God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2), the Bible is a book that cannot lie on any subject or theme. For example, if the Bible says that an ax head actually floated to the top of water, it has to be the truth because it comes from a God who cannot lie (II Kings 6:1-7). If the Bible says Jesus walked on top of water, it has to be true (Matt. 14:22-33). Nothing in the Scripture can be false because all Scripture is the inspired word of God.

Observation #2 - God did put His word into written form.

This is a critical, observable fact. God’s word is written. When one opens the Bible, one does see written words on a page that people may read. We do have God’s word in existence and in our language. In fact, Proverbs 30:5 says this includes “every word.” Now one logical question is this: why did God go to the trouble to put His word in written word form? The obvious answer is so humans would have it, so they could read it and understand it.

By virtue of the fact that God’s word is in written form for humans, then we know that He will use words, grammar and syntax to form sentences and paragraphs. It will be important, then, to analyze all these kinds of things to arrive at a true understanding of a written text.

Observation #3 - God did use humans to write His word.

J. Robertson McQuilkin said, “When God created individuals in His own likeness; He created them with the ability to communicate” (*Understanding and Applying the Bible*, p. 61). Human language is a gift from God and it is a gift that means one person may communicate with another person.

Now when God gave His word, He used humans to write it and He did not use humans to write His word to communicate with angels, but with other humans. So we know God used real humans to write in real human language to communicate truth to other humans. He oversaw what the various men wrote but He did have men write His word (II Peter 1:21). God used normal humans to write His word. He used all kinds of different men: Fishermen (Peter, James, John); Political Kings (David, Solomon); Peasant Farmer (Amos); Tax Collector (Matthew); Medical Doctor (Luke); Religious Scholar (Paul). God used all kinds of men to write and the reason they all wrote was so that they could accurately communicate truth to other humans.

Now this is a very important point because what this means is that humans wrote this book in linguistic ways books are written for other humans. They wrote in intelligible language. These writers obviously had a message to communicate and they wrote in a way that others could read and understand.

Now because this is a book written by humans, we know that humans who write do so by following normal grammatical ways of writing in their particular language. These writers used words and sentences to form paragraphs and they followed the normal rules of grammar and language.

Normal humans write something in a way that is designed to make sense, not in a way that is designed to write nonsense. One of the basic presuppositions about God is that “God is a God of sense, not of nonsense” (Robert Cate, *How To Interpret The Bible*, p. 161).

If someone writes “the man went for a ride in his car,” you do not understand that to mean “the man was carried away by a demon-possessed vehicle.” You take it at face value. If we write: “I decided to take a course on how to study and interpret the Bible,” we would expect the reader to interpret those words in exactly what they meant. We would not expect the reader to say what those words mean is that “this person decided to change his course in life in order to study to give interpretive meaning to the social world and business world.” We would expect someone to read the statement and interpret to mean this person decided to take a course on how to interpret the Bible. The meaning is precisely this and the normal use of human words conveys that very point.

So when a Biblical writer, like Luke, writes for example that Jesus would return to Jerusalem (Acts 1:4, 11-12), that is what he expects the reader to understand. He is communicating exactly what he means for other humans to read. He does not write so people may read it and then say it really means He will return to Salt Lake City.

When a Biblical writer like John writes that Christ will have a reign of 1,000 years (Rev. 20:1-7) on this earth, he expects that when other humans read this, they will know this and not tamper with the number or invent some strange interpretation to it. God used humans to write His word in human language.

Observation #4 - God used men to write His word so His people could read it.

God’s whole point in putting His word into written form was so His people could read it. It is written in normal human language for normal humans to read. We know that man was made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). We also know that every believer has the indwelling Spirit of God, whose work is to guide God’s people into all the truth (John 16:13). Furthermore, every believer is a priest unto God (I Pet. 2:9) and certainly one of the responsibilities of a priest was to understand and interpret God’s word. In Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, he writes: “**I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren**” (5:27). So by virtue of the fact that God’s word may be read by humans, we conclude it may be understood by humans.

Observation #5 - God challenges His people to read His word. **Psalm 1:1-3; Col. 4:16**

In **Colossians 4:16**, Paul writes: “When this letter is **read** among you, have it also **read** in the church of the Laodiceans and you, for your part **read** my letter that is coming from Laodicea.” In this one verse Paul challenges people to read God’s word three times. The word “read” (anaginwskw) not only means to read it, but to read it recognizing and knowing what it means (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 28).

What this actually means is that God’s word must be read, understood and applied. Since this was to be done in church, we must conclude that the person going to church could read and understand it.

When we analyze the Bible, we see many challenges in the word of God to read the Word of God to the people of God (Col. 4:16; I Thess. 5:27; II Thess. 3:14; I Tim. 4:13-16; II Tim. 4:1-2). We must initially assume that God has made it possible for His people to hear it, understand it and properly apply it in an accurate way. **True understanding of God’s word demands true interpretation of God’s word and that starts with reading.**

Observation #6 - God challenges His people to apply and obey His word. **II Thess. 3:14**

This is a significant text on this point. “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person and do not associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.” Paul expected the word of God not only to be understood, but applied.

Over and over again this admonition is given in both the O.T. and the N.T.. The assumption is that people will be able to read the word, understand the word and apply the word and obey the word. As we have already previously studied, obedience to truth is a key to grasping more truth. Now in order to actually obey God’s word consistent with what pleases God, one must properly interpret it and apply it.

Observation #7 - God challenges His people to defend His word. **I Pet. 3:15**

In I Peter 3:15, Peter says we are to be able to give a defense to everyone. To be able to defend the truth concerning everyone requires tremendous knowledge of God’s word.

Observation #8 - God gave His Holy Spirit to every believer so every believer has the potential to interpret it and understand it. **John 14:26; 16:13**

Dr. Roy Zuck writes: “Its interpretation is not in the hands of an elite few scholars” (*Ibid.*, p. 24). God’s Spirit was involved in the writing process and lives within every believer and therefore every believer may potentially understand it.

(24)

Based on these observations we conclude that if we meet the qualifications, **it is possible for the average Christian to properly interpret Scripture**. God wants His people to carefully and accurately understand His word.

However, this does not mean the average Christian will actually be able to do this and, based on observations we have made, we are of the opinion that the “average” Christian will not be given to the kind of study and hermeneutical discipline required for proper Biblical interpretation.

QUESTION #7 – What role does the Holy Spirit play in a person being able to accurately interpret the Bible? **John 14:26; I Cor. 2:10-13; I John 2:27**

The question boils down to this—how does the Holy Spirit guide and direct a person in the interpretive process of the Word of God? There are sixteen thesis truths we want to observe:

(Truth #1) - The Spirit’s ministry **does mean** we cannot grasp truth without Him. **I Cor. 2:14**

No person without the Holy Spirit will ever be able to properly interpret Scripture, no matter how much they read it or study it.

(Truth #2) - The Spirit’s ministry **does mean** we cannot grasp truth by normal human methods without Him. **John 14:26; I Cor. 2:13-14**

As John said, the Holy Spirit is who guides us into all truth (**John 16:13**). This cannot happen without Him. Academic courses invented by humans apart from the Holy Spirit will never come to terms with the deep truth of God. Bible study does follow certain study rules, but no rules can replace the need of the Holy Spirit in Bible study.

(Truth #3) - The Spirit’s ministry **does mean** the Holy Spirit knows all truth perfectly.
I Cor. 2:10-11

The Holy Spirit knows all truth about God perfectly; we do not. We will need to depend on Him as we carefully study the Scriptures to learn and grow. He does not need more knowledge, we do. He does not need to change, we do. For us, understanding God’s word is a process.

(Truth #4) - The Spirit’s ministry **does mean** we must be properly related to Him if we are to grasp truth. **Ephesians 4:30; I Thess. 5:9**

In order to study the Bible and grow in truth, we must be properly related to the Holy Spirit, since He is so critical to our development. What this in part practically means is that we do not quench the Holy Spirit (I Thess. 5:9) and we do not grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:30). We must be spiritually-minded and not fleshly-minded and be properly related to Him. Dr. Roy Zuck said, “a Christian who is living in sin is susceptible to making inaccurate Bible interpretations because his heart and mind are not in harmony with the Holy Spirit” (*Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 24).

(Truth #5) - The Spirit's ministry in interpretation **does not mean** He gives new revelation.

God's Spirit will always work within the framework of the written inspired Scriptures and will never go beyond it either by way of addition or subtraction (i.e. Rev. 22:18-19). Our goal is to carefully and accurately understand what the Holy Spirit actually inspired in writing from Genesis to Revelation.

(Truth #6) - The Spirit's ministry in interpretation **does not mean** one's interpretation is infallible.

When the Holy Spirit inspired the original manuscripts, He guarded them in such a way that they were without error (inerrancy) and incapable of error (infallibility).

When it comes to interpretation, the Spirit will guide one into truth, but He does not automatically guard against infallibility. For example, the Roman Catholic Church claimed that it was the only group who could understand and interpret the Bible in an infallible way. We totally reject this. Every person has a right to try and privately interpret the Bible, but that does not mean that the private interpretation is accurate or true.

Just because someone believes something about a Bible verse, does not make it true. If the qualifications are not met for true interpretation, it is highly probable that the interpretation will be faulty.

A key is to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit in our own life and be very honest and accurate with the text. The text is infallible, but we are not.

(Truth #7) - The Spirit's ministry in interpretation **does mean** one who has a true Spirit gift of Pastor/Teacher should be able to see and understand truths beyond the level of many.

A spiritual gift is a supernatural enablement that enables a believer to excel in a spiritual area way above and beyond the average. A truly gifted minister should excel far above and beyond the average believer in the ability to understand God's truth.

We must be very careful on this point because any Pastor or religious leader may claim that the Spirit has permitted him to see something that may not be God's Spirit at all. Some of the guidelines for one truly gifted are:

1) Usually if a careful interpreter thinks he has unlocked something from God's word, other skilled interpreters will have observed the same truth. God teaches us that Scripture is not a matter of "one's own interpretation" (II Pet. 1:20). This does not mean we may not discover some new things, but they will be confirmed by others.

(26)

For example, this teacher was carefully analyzing the Greek text of I Peter and observed that the parsing of the verb which charges us to “be holy” is passive, not active (1:15). This point completely changes the emphasis for victory. We must be the recipient of the action, not the source of it. Since very few had actually spotted this key grammatical point, I wondered if I had parsed it wrong. I immediately went to other Greek scholars to determine if I were seeing it correctly, which I was.

2) If an interpreter presents discovered truth to God’s people, others who are serious, dedicated students and teachers of the Bible will see it, sense it and embrace it. There will always be a certain spiritual ring to God’s truth presented to God’s spiritually-minded people.

(Truth #8) - The Spirit’s ministry in interpretation **does mean** that the unsaved person may be able to comprehend statements in the Bible but cannot appropriate them properly to their own faith system and life.

There are many unbelievers who have understood historical facts of the Bible. In fact, some have undertaken archeological digs based on their geographical understanding of Biblical facts. Most unsaved people have cognitively grasped certain Biblical data, such as information about the birth of Jesus Christ and even His death and resurrection. However, the unsaved person has no capacity to be able to properly apply these truths to their lives or to the Biblical faith system.

This is precisely why one can actually know that Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again, but also believe that to get to heaven he must do the work.

(Truth #9) - The Spirit’s ministry in interpretation **does not mean** that only Bible scholars can understand the Bible.

We have previously addressed this point; however, we must realize that the Bible was given by God to be accurately understood and if the previous mentioned qualifications are being met, one may come to a great level of understanding.

(Truth #10) - The Spirit’s ministry in interpretation **does coincide** with the real spirituality of a person.

A worldly or carnal Christian, not yielded to God, will not ever be able to grasp God’s word fully at a meat level (I Cor. 3:1-3; Heb. 5:13). As we already mentioned, the Christian whose life is full of sin is very susceptible to inaccurate interpretations of Scripture. A truly spiritually-minded believer has a far greater depth level and discerning ability which is actually produced by the Spirit of God.