

Understanding Scripture

by David Stewart

Communication is a vital part of our everyday lives. We speak, listen, write, read, demonstrate, and observe. All of these actions take place with the universal assumption that we can understand other people and they can understand us. Our ability to communicate is not flawless, as we are often distracted or fail to find the right words to express ourselves. In spite of the possibility of miscommunication, we still engage in the process. The Old and New Testaments are God's communication to us today. By revealing himself to us in this fashion, God assumes our ability to understand his message. The following considerations would be made in our own conversations and should be made when reading God's Word.

1) Consider the intended meaning of the author. The inspired writer usually wrote with a clear objective in mind. Therefore, we must understand what a passage originally meant to the first readers before we can apply it to our own modern situation. A passage *cannot* mean today what it did not mean when it was first written. If two people have different understandings of a passage, then *at least* one of them is wrong; perhaps both are mistaken. Authorial intent is basic and foundational to any communication.

2) Consider the translation. The Bible was originally written in languages foreign to us—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—and therefore must be translated into English. Unfortunately, Bible translation is not a divinely-inspired process. It is helpful to compare the main committee versions (KJV/NKJV; ASV/NASB; RSV/NRSV; NIV; ESV). Paraphrases and one-man translations should be used with caution, since they tend to embellish the text and are easily biased. Idioms and other difficult expressions which are held in more literal (“word for word”) translations will be explained by the more dynamic (“thought for thought”) versions.

3) Consider the immediate and fuller contexts. A passage is related to both the verses and chapters which precede and follow it. Early Christians would have read a whole letter written to them when it first arrived, rather than just a few lines. Chapter and verse divisions were a much later development in the history of the Bible. A verse taken out of its context, called a “proof text,” can be easily misapplied and lose its original meaning. It has been repeatedly stated that you can make the Bible say almost anything you want it to. We become upset when we are quoted out of context. Why would we do the same to God?

4) Consider the type of literature. There are many different classifications within the Bible: Law, History, Wisdom Literature (Poetry), Prophecy, Gospels, Letters, and Apocalypse. We can avoid misunderstanding Scripture by keeping in mind the literary type of a particular text. For example, we should read a parable differently than a law. We should respect the versatility of the Bible, just as we do the various categories within a newspaper: news, weather, sports, cartoons, editorials, and advertisements.

5) *Consider the historical context.* It is important to know the historical setting in which a document was written. Who was the author? Who was the audience to whom he wrote, and what was their location? What was the date? What were the specific problems or circumstances the audience was facing? The answers to these questions are not always available. Yet, when they are, we should take them into consideration as we read. If you were to find a letter today that had no date, address, recipient, or sender, you would only partially understand what was written in it. Perhaps there would be enough details within the letter that would help you to reconstruct the circumstances. Historical context makes a difference.

6) *Consider the cultural context.* It is important to realize the differences between the cultures of the Bible and our own. We do not dress the same way, eat the same foods, or live in the same types of houses. Whereas the people of the Bible were highly agricultural, we live in an industrialized society. They did not enjoy modern conveniences. Everything they wrote was by hand; they were not blessed with printing presses, computers, or copiers. They had a different sense of carrying out justice and a different concept of authority. Without recognizing these kinds of differences, we will have difficulty transferring a biblical concept to our own time.

7) *Consider the whole biblical canon.* What do other passages say about a particular subject? Do they shed any more light on God's will concerning the matter? By asking these questions, we will avoid doing only *part* of God's will. We also need to recognize what period the text is in, whether Patriarchal, Mosaic, or Christian. Is a particular command part of the new covenant and binding upon Christians? Or, is it from the old covenant, which was once bound upon Jews but has now been fulfilled in Christ? Is a particular command a permanent principle that we should follow today?

8) *Consider the specific commands and examples.* What commands were given to the early Christians? What do these imperatives say about the nature of God and his will for our lives today? Is there anything within the commands or examples restricting them to a specific location or time? Or, are they permanent principles to be observed by Christians throughout the ages until Jesus comes again? Is there anything present in the culture of the writers and readers that is different from our own circumstances and, as a result, may change the way we apply the text?

Conclusion. By considering these facets of Bible study, we will become more accurate interpreters of God's Word. Paul's admonition to Timothy is fitting for us today: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

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