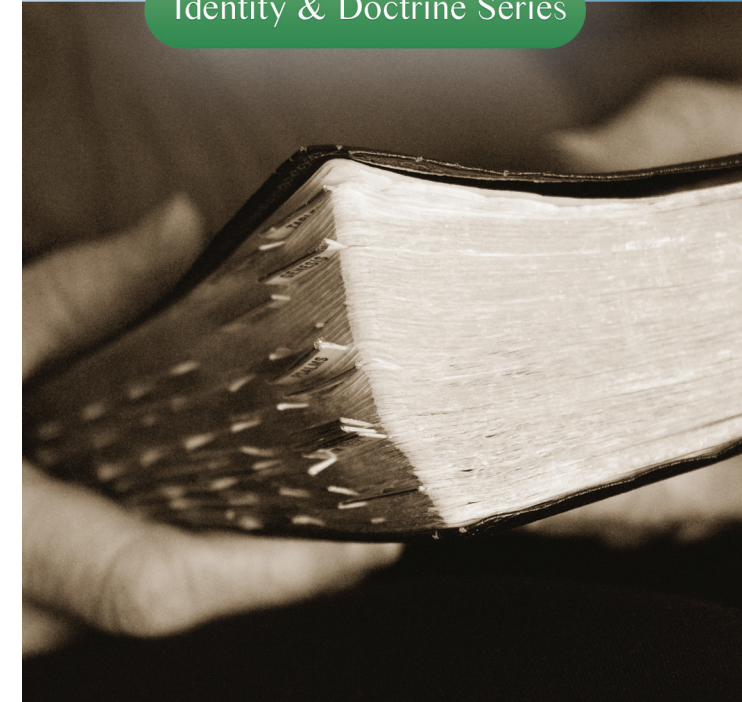


The Bible: Reading with Understanding

Identity & Doctrine Series



tearing a verse or paragraph out of its context. Just imagine the perverse teachings one could dig out of Ecclesiastes if one didn't pay attention to the overall purpose of this piece of wisdom literature. For example, one cannot take Ecclesiastes 3:19, where it states that "the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same," to teach that there is no life after death for human beings.

Sometimes the writers of the biblical books appear to go in opposite directions. For example, Paul stresses salvation by grace through faith, but James puts the emphasis on works. However, when these teachings are seen in their wider context, faith and works do not stand in contradiction to one another, for a living faith always manifests itself in good works.

8. Bible readers fail to see that the Old Testament must be understood in the light of the fuller revelation in Christ.

The Old Testament writings were inspired by the Spirit of God just as those of the New Testament. However, the Old Testament was God's preliminary word; his final revelation came to us through his Son (Heb. 1:1-2). Jesus and the apostles looked upon the Jewish Scriptures (our Old Testament) as God's word, but they interpreted and applied it in a new way. Although there is a profound unity between the two Testaments, there is also what is called "progressive revelation."

Christians must therefore be careful not to bypass the teachings of Jesus and the apostles in their use of the Old Testament. The great moral laws of God—as found, for example, in the Decalogue—are valid for all times, but there is much in the Old Testament that has passed away in light of Christ's coming. Christians are not obligated to follow ancient Israel's religious practices, such as temple worship, the priesthood, the sacrificial system, the dietary laws, Israel's wars, or some of its social practices (e.g., polygamy). These are not models for the Christian believer. The Mennonite Confession of Faith defines progressive revelation in this way: "We understand and interpret the Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ as well as led by the Holy

Spirit in the church. . . . God has spoken above all in the living Word who became flesh and revealed the truth of God faithfully and without deception" (p. 21).

9. Bible readers sometimes ask more of the Bible than it was meant to give.

The Bible is not an encyclopedia; it is a history of salvation. It does not answer all the questions a natural scientist might ask. It is a religious book and speaks to the deepest problems of human existence—the problem of sin and suffering, of life and death—and our eternal destiny.

The long conflict between scientists and theologians would not have been so acrimonious if it had been recognized that the Scriptures show us "how to go to heaven," as Galileo put it in the 17th century, but not "how the heavens go." Natural scientists go beyond their fields when they make judgments about the ultimate origin of our universe. And theologians should not force the Bible to answer the many intricate questions posed by natural scientists.

We should not be embarrassed to admit that the Bible does not have the answers to all the questions of life. Even Paul admitted that we know only in part (1 Cor. 13:12). The Bible has been compared to the headlights of a car. The lights enable us to drive in the dark. If we stay on the road illuminated by the headlights, we will arrive safely at our destination. The Scriptures are the good news of salvation and provide us with sufficient light for our journey here on earth until we enter the gates of splendour. Until that day comes, let us faithfully read Scripture and apply its truths to our daily lives. ■

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Faith and Life

The Bible: Reading with Understanding

As evangelical Christians, we confess that the Bible is our ultimate authority in matters of doctrine and ethics. Although we often fail to observe the teachings of Scripture, it is our sincere desire to be faithful to the Word of God. Yet many devout Bible readers are puzzled that Christians often argue over the meaning or the application of biblical passages. Why is this? Let me give nine brief answers to that question.

1. Bible readers come to the Scriptures with different pre-understandings.

We come to the Bible with our own experiences, prejudices, attitudes, and convictions—our own coloured glasses. Usually, we are not even aware of them. If, for example, we hold to the eternal security of the believer, we will have trouble with the many warnings of Scripture not to depart from the faith. Or, if the many statements of Jesus about the “kingdom of God” are interpreted to mean the future millennial kingdom, his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount may be seen to be irrelevant for believers today.

A well-known German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, writes: “Because I am not an angel but a human being, my perspectives are limited. They are European and Protestant, western and middle class; they arise out of the 20th century . . . and, finally, they are determined by my personal experiences and limitations.” Not all Bible readers are willing to make such an admission.

One of the best ways to check our own pre-understandings of the Bible is to study it in the context of the Christian community, where our interpretations can be challenged, affirmed, or corrected.

2. Bible readers use different Scriptural translations.

The Old Testament books were originally written in Hebrew (some parts in Aramaic) and those of the New Testament in Hellenistic Greek. Every translation is an attempt to convey the meaning of the original texts. Some translations adhere more closely to the wording of the original, but that approach usually leads to a stilted English. Hebrew and Greek have different sentence structures and these need to be recast to render the sense of the original into more readable English.

There are many variant readings in the original manuscripts from the days when they were copied by hand, and that accounts, in part, for some of the differences in our English Bibles. Also, English is a living language; words change meaning with time. So our versions need to be brought up to date from time to time. Moreover, a translation can move on a high literary level, or it can use simple, popular language. Some versions make good study Bibles; others are better for use in worship. Some versions use language that assumes familiarity with biblical terminology; others are meant for readers who don’t know words such as “propitiation,” “expiation,” or “justification.”

It also makes a difference whether our Bible is a revision of an earlier English version (of which there are many), or a fresh translation. Generally speaking, all English versions are sincere efforts to give us the meaning of the original writings in reasonably flowing English. When we study Scripture, it is always better to have several English versions at hand. They will keep us from leaning too much on expressions found in any one translation.

3. Bible readers do not always distinguish between the message of the Bible and the cultural wrappings in which it has come to us.

The world of the Bible is not our world. God’s earlier revelation was given to people who lived in a Semitic culture and was recorded in Hebrew, with portions in Aramaic. His final revelation was recorded in the

Greek that was spoken in the Mediterranean world of the days of Jesus and the apostles. But culture is more than language. The Bible reflects, for example, the material culture of its day, the houses people lived in, the work they did, the coinage, the roads. Also, the religious practices of Israel, such as synagogue and temple worship, Sabbath, and festivals, form the context of much of biblical teaching. Some knowledge of Canaanite religion is helpful in understanding the Old Testament, as is a knowledge of the religious practices of the pagan world at the time of the apostles.

We have no mandate to imitate the cultural practices reflected in the Bible. Our task is to hear the message of the Scriptures and then carry it into our situation. The apostles exhort their readers to greet one another with a holy kiss. If, in our culture, we greet each other with a handshake or a hug, we do no violence to the biblical command. We need not dress like the people in Bible times did either, when men did not wear trousers and respectable women wore kerchiefs in public. Certainly we need not imitate the marriage customs of the ancient Near East. All such things belong to the cultural wrappings in which the good news of the gospel has come to us.

4. Bible readers often disagree on what is literal and what is figurative.

The biblical authors often express themselves in pictorial language. They are fond of similes. Israel’s love for God is likened to a morning cloud (Hos. 6:4). Jesus will come again like a thief in the night (1 Thess. 5:2). There are a great many metaphors in the Bible. John the Baptist called the Pharisees and Sadducees a “brood of vipers” (Matt. 3:7). There is even hyperbole in the Bible. For example, the Psalmist laments that he floods his bed with tears every night (Ps. 6:6). Such exaggerations are not meant to deceive. There is also a great deal of symbolism in the Bible—symbolical acts (e.g., shaking the dust off one’s feet), symbolical visions (e.g., the four apocalyptic horsemen), symbolic numbers (e.g., the 144,000), and symbolic colours (e.g., white is the colour of heaven, purity, and victory).

When figures of speech occur, we must ask what truth the biblical writer is trying to convey. The truth must be taken literally, even though it comes to us in pictorial dress.

5. Bible readers do not always differentiate between interpretation and application.

A biblical text has essentially one meaning. It is the task of the reader to capture that meaning and then apply it to his or her life. The meaning remains constant, but the application may vary greatly. When John the Baptist, for example, said, “He must increase and I must decrease” (John 3:30), he meant that his own ministry was nearing completion while Jesus’ ministry had just begun. But when we read that line today, we might apply that to our lives, hoping that Christ might become more preeminent and our own egos less prominent. What the apostles say about the behaviour of Christian slaves and masters, for example, cannot be carried over directly to employer/employee relations in our day. The application has to be adjusted because we do not have slavery in our society as they did in the first century.

6. Bible readers do not always distinguish between the literary genres of the Bible.

A genre is a type of literature, such as narrative, prophecy, poetry, gospel, letter, or apocalyptic. We cannot treat all in the same way. A Psalm cannot be interpreted in the same way as wisdom literature, such as Job, Proverbs, or Ecclesiastes. The gospels cannot be treated like the apostolic letters or apocalyptic literature as found in the Revelation to John. God used different types of literature to communicate his word of salvation.

7. Bible readers sometimes fail to observe the wider context of the biblical text.

We have already mentioned that the context often determines the meaning of words, but that applies equally to sentences and paragraphs. Many errors have been made in the name of the Bible by