Once the text has been thoroughly observed, the interpretation process can begin. It must be remembered that there is only one interpretation of every passage in Scripture. Although there will be some passages encountered where two or more interpretations seem feasible, only one interpretation is correct and consistent with other teachings in Scripture. Students must spend ample time interpreting the Scriptures literally in light of the context, culture, history and grammar. Various church denominations and even cults have resulted from erroneous and incomplete interpretations of the Scriptures.

I. INTERPRETATION DEFINED

A. Definition (cf. Acts 8:30-31):
   1. to determine the meaning of the Word of God
   2. to align your understanding as closely as possible with the understanding of the author in the passage under examination

B. Key Question: What does it mean?
   1. Observation asks “what does the text say?”
   2. Interpretation asks “what does the text mean?”

C. Authorial Intent:

1. Find original authorial intent, what the author meant
   1. Failure to find authorial meaning is failure in finding what the author meant; otherwise we are not communicating what God meant through His Word and we are telling people that God said something that He did not actually say (i.e. we are misrepresenting God!)

2. What did the author mean?
   1. Determine primarily from reading passage in context…to see the flow of the author’s thought

II. PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

A. The Literal Principle

1. Definition:
   1. Discover what the verse is actually saying in the most literal (normal, obvious) sense; the plain reading
“If the normal sense makes sense, seek no other sense and don’t depart into nonsense.” -unknown

2. Literal interpretation permits:

   a) symbolic language: a word that represents something else, illustrates (i.e. John 1:29)
   
   b) figurative language: uses figures of speech to convey truth. Creates imagery or paints a picture (i.e. Matt. 5:13; 1 Pet. 1:24)

3. Avoid allegorical interpretation

   a) Definition: to look for a hidden meaning of the text or to over-spiritualize a text
   
   b) Pitfalls of allegorical interpretation:
      (1) leads to subjectivity, not objectivity
      (2) leads to many interpretations rather than one
      (3) leads to inconsistent interpretations and contradictory interpretations

4. Key Questions

   a) What did the author intend by his words?
   
   b) What did the original readers understand the author to be saying?

B. The Grammatical Principle:

1. Definition: The grammatical relationships between words are crucial to understanding the meaning of the text

2. Observe verb tenses (past, present, future)

3. Observe significance of adjectives and adverbs

4. Observe the subject of the passage by tracking pronouns (he, she, it, they, you)
C. The Contextual Principle

1. The context of the surrounding verses

2. The context of the surrounding chapters

3. The context of the entire book
   - Read an introduction to the book in a Study Bible noticing themes and literary structure.

4. The context of the entire Bible
   a) All of Scripture is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16), truthful (John 17:17), unbreakable (John 10:34-35), and eternal (Isa 40:8).
   b) Scripture cannot contradict itself and must be interpreted consistently in light of other passages within Scripture (e.g. Rom. 4 and Jam. 2).
   c) Cross reference the passage being studied, taking into account what other passages of Scripture says about the particular subject.

D. The Historical/Cultural Principle

1. It is crucial to understand the historical setting and the culture in which the author wrote because he assumed a certain degree of knowledge upon his recipients because of their familiarity with their time period.

2. Historical: consider the writer, reader, social and political setting, place, date and reason.

3. Culture: consider traditions, religious norms, behaviors and practices of the time.
E. The Genre Principle (adapted from Mock, *Bible Study Methods*)

- Definition: Interpret in the light of literary form and style: When we interpret passages of Scripture we must be aware of the type of literature that is being studied. Literary forms convey spiritual truths in different styles and formats.

1. Narrative: story format in which themes are conveyed through characters and events
   - patterns of life in narrative cannot always be directly applied to life

2. Teaching: predominately includes commands and instructions for believers
   - typically contains Imperative commands that must be followed
   - Includes explanation of doctrines

3. Poetry: uses imagery and symbols to convey the spiritual meanings
   - literal truth is being conveyed through imagery, metaphoric and figurative language

4. Prophetic: declarations of God’s will through warnings and blessings
   - some prophecies are highly specific and directed only to the original audience (e.g. Jer. 29:11 – this passage is often applied to believers today but it was specifically written to God’s people in Babylonians captivity (v. 10))
   - consider if the prophecy has been fulfilled, partially fulfilled or a future fulfillment

F. The Continuity Principle

1. There is a tendency when interpreting Scripture to stray into contradicting and even heretical interpretations.

2. The beliefs and doctrines that we hold to cannot keep us from properly interpreting a passage but it should guide us into a proper interpretation.
RESOURCES CONSULTED


