

Attitudes Necessary for Understanding the Scriptures

1. The author intended to be understood by his immediate audience. The author's intention is the only valid understanding.
2. Context determines meaning. A definition from one place cannot be transplanted to another place. Context determines if language is literal or figurative.
3. Conflicting understandings cannot both be true, although they can both be false.
4. We must seek what the Word of God is trying to tell us, rather than trying to use the Word of God to validate our beliefs. We must have more confidence in the Word than in our own understanding of it.
5. The meaning must be apparent to an ordinary person. Special training is not required.
6. If the explanation is longer than the verse, you have added something that God did not.
7. Sin is never excusable, but is forgivable.

Rules of Interpretation

1. Who was the speaker or writer? The Bible contains statements that were accurately recorded, but are totally false.
2. Who was the original audience? Did the author intend for the audience to include me?
3. What does each word mean in this context?
4. What kind of writing is it (e.g., history, letter, song, prophecy, instruction, exhortation, sermon, genealogy, law)?
5. What is the historical setting? Events current to that time may affect understanding.
6. Is the language literal or figurative?
 - a. What is the author's interpretation?
 - b. What is the point of the context?
 - c. If it is figurative, it still has a meaning that cannot be discarded.

How do I know if it pertains to me?

1. Am I similar to the audience?
 - a. Moses and the prophets spoke to the nation of Israel. Yet, both wrote things that are important for Christians. The key is whether they were describing a general truth, or something that was specific to a certain era or population. As Paul pointed out in Romans 2, the Gentiles are not condemned because they did not follow the Law of Moses, because they were not addressed by the Law of Moses. This did not mean they had no law, just not Moses' Law.
 - b. Jesus spoke to Jewish audiences, and both were subject to the Law of Moses. Some of Jesus' remarks apply to Israelites. Others are general truth. The context will tell us which is which. For example, the Great Commission was given to eleven men. If we say it applies to us, we must also cast out demons, speak with new tongues, handle snakes, drink poison, and heal the sick (Mark 16:15 – 18). The Great Commission for the Corinthian Christians is in 2 Corinthians 3:12 – 6:10. It extends to us because of parts like 3:16 – 18, "Whenever a man..." and "We all .."
 - c. The authors of the letters in the New Testament wrote to specific groups of Christians, often in response to specific problems or needs. For example, 1 Corinthians 16:2, "On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save as he may prosper." This was a special collection in response to a prophecy about a future famine. It ended when Paul took the money to Jerusalem. Most churches have turned this into a command to all Christians, even though Paul said specifically that it was not, "I am not speaking this as a command." (2 Corinthians 8:8).
 - d. A careful inspection of each of the examples that have been made into rules for all Christians will reveal that, in each case, only part of the example is preserved. Those details that would invalidate the example are left out. Some require that evangelists be ordained by elders (1 Timothy 4:14), conveniently overlooking the need for a prophet as well.
 - e. The context reveals whether it is general truth or specific to the addressees.
2. Is the instruction reversed later?
 - a. The easiest example is the Law of Moses. A large part of the Bible requires certain sacrifices and holidays, yet we know that their time has passed because of many New Testament passages.
 - b. In Acts 15, when James (with the other elders and prompted by the Spirit) wrote his circulating letter to the Gentile churches (Acts 15:22 – 29, he was very clear about abstaining from things sacrificed to idols. Yet, in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul puts some explanation around it that puts a whole new spin on it.
 - c. In the time of Jesus and the book of Acts, Satan was in charge of this world and could do all sorts of stuff, including miracles. His campaign was characterized as "deceiving the nations." (Revelation 12:9) But, Satan knew that this freedom to pursue his goals would be only for a short time (Revelation 12:12). Not long after, he was "bound" so that he "should not deceive the nations any longer." (Revelation 20:3). After the thousand years are over, Satan will again set out to "deceive the nations," but will be stopped by Judgment Day before he can get started. Being bound has to mean something. It cannot be ignored.