

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

The pastor, evangelist, Bible teacher, or simply a Christian who desires to know and serve the Lord better, can greatly benefit from being able to correctly interpret the Bible and then apply it in their lives and the lives of others. No one can apply God's word unless they know it and that begins with an accurate interpretation. God cannot bless His word that is incorrectly interpreted which makes biblical interpretation vital. He has not left us in the dark as to how to interpret His word. The Lord explains *"Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation."* (2 Peter 1:20) Our Creator has given us a precise method that anyone can apply with a little understanding and effort.

The purpose of this book is to take the mystery out of interpreting the Bible and show God's method of interpretation. By applying God's principles of interpretation, a person develops the skills needed to rightly know what God has said. This is letting God interpret His revelation to us.

Biblical Principles of Biblical Interpretation has been used in several schools and colleges in their Biblical Interpretation courses. It is written on a level that anyone can understand and apply.



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Biblical Principles For Interpreting God's Word

Cooper P. Abrams, III

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**BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES
FOR INTERPRETING
GOD'S WORD**

**By Cooper P. Abrams, III
January, 2019**

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-7321746-8-9

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A companion booklet titled "*Expository Bible Study Course - Lesson and Sermon Preparation*" is available from Dr. Abrams

Published by:
THE OLD PATHS PUBLICATIONS, Inc.
142 Gold Flume Way
Cleveland, Georgia, U.S.A. 30528

Web: www.theoldpathspublications.com
E-mail: TOP@theoldpathspublications.com

DEDICATION

To Carolyn, my faithful help meet for over a half a century.

SAMPLE

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INTRODUCTION

Biblical Principles for Interpreting God's Word

It is apparent from all the contradictory teachings of the many denominations and cults of Christendom, that they all cannot God's word. "For God is not *the author* of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints." (1 Corinthians 14:3) Confusion as to what God has truly said is the work of Satan. The verse tells us God, He seeks "peace" in all the churches. That peace comes from knowing God true word in its purity without distortion. This book seeks to dispel the confusion caused by a false interpretation as the result of ignorance of the principles God has given us to know without question His word and then apply it in our lives.

For the most part, each claim to use the Bible as the source of their teachings which is confusing to anyone who wants to know God's truth. Knowing God's pure revelation, it's vital for salvation and living God's will for the believer's life.

For example, most biblical churches, teach that salvation is by one's faith through God's grace apart from works. However, some churches emphatically teach that good works and religious rituals such as baptism is necessary for salvation.

Both may claim the Bible as the source of their belief. Roman Catholics and most Protestants practice baptism by sprinkling, whereas Baptists baptize by immersion. The Roman Catholic Church teaches it is the only true church, and that Peter was the first pope based on their interpretation of Matthew 16:18. No one else outside Catholicism accepts this interpretation.

Even the "Christian" cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses use the Bible to deny the deity of Jesus Christ, the existence of Hell, and most carnal doctrines of the Christian faith. The Mormons, another cult, use a false interpretation of verses such as 1 Corinthians 15:29 as the source for their practice of baptisms for the dead. They believe that God was once a mortal man who became a god, is married and a polygamist, and was exalted to become the God of earth. They believe if they are worthy, meaning, faith to their church's teachings, and live the Mormon Gospel, plus do enough good works they too can become gods and have their own world to rule. In simple terms they believe they can earn godhood and have a world of their own to rule. Although they now call themselves Christians, in the not so distant past, they were offended at the name, wherein now they are identifying themselves as Christians. No one else accepts their beliefs or interpretations. Seventh Day Adventists and

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several other churches have their church services on Saturday, the Jewish "Sabbath Day." They teach this based on their understanding of the Bible's instruction in the Old Testament concerning the Jewish Sabbath. They and others ignore Exodus 31:12-17 that specifically states the observance of the Sabbath was given by God to the Israelites. It was not given to be an observance for Christians in this age. Pentecostal churches, the modern Charismatic, and emergent church movement teach and practice speaking in "tongues" and miracle healings are valid gifts of the Holy Spirit today. All fundamentalists and biblical Christian based on the plain teachings of (1 Corinthians 12-14) strongly reject these false teachings.

There are also others who in the past were sound Bible believing churches, who now rejecting God's word and patterning their churches after such worldly things a so-called Christian rock music, false translations, unbiblical practices. At the heart of these modern trends, that turn man away from God's word is often a false or a contrived interpretation of the Bible.

It is easy to see that the many different sects of "Christendom" use the Bible to prove contradictory teachings. Paul Lee Tan, in his book *Literal Interpretation of the Bible* says, "Apparently the Bible can be made to prove almost anything."¹

May I add that Tan's statement is only true when correct principles of biblical interpretation are ignored and violated. Considering all the contradictions in the various teachings, all supposedly based on the Bible, one must ask the question, *"Who is right?"* Surely, God is not teaching, for example, that one is saved by earning salvation by good works and also teaching man is saved by God's Grace without works. God says, *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."* (Ephesians 2:8-9) There is nothing ambiguous in the words or structure of the verses. God plainly states works do not save and that salvation by God's grace through faith is a gift. Gifts are not earned.

God cannot contradict Himself nor can He lie. The question is then can God's truth be determined with absolute certainty? Hanging in the balance is the knowledge of God's truth and the eternal destiny of every soul on earth.

Where is the problem in determining what is God's true word?

God says in 1 Corinthians 14:33, He, *"God, is not the author of confusion."* Therefore, the problem is not with God, but with finite men who for various reasons misused His word knowingly or negligently. Clearly, men have taken great

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latitude in interpreting what the Bible says. It should be obvious that God did not give us His written word to be a source of confusion or contention. God gave us His word in written form, whereby it would be available, studied, and examined so that everyone could know His truth. Further, He wrote it in such a way as to be clear and not be complicated nor misleading. He said in 2 Peter 1:20, *“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.”* The word translated “interpretation” is only found in this one verse in the Bible and means “an explanation.” Therefore, private interpretations or private explanations meant that what the prophets wrote did not originate with them, but rather as verse 21 confirms, they wrote God’s very words as God intended.

“For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” (2 Peter 1:21)

This is the first principle of interpreting God’s written word. That simply means that no one person, church or group has the exclusive interpretation of God’s word. The Scriptures can accurately be understood by all. Any of those who teach or preach are only correct in their interpretation when it is based on sound biblical

principles of interpretation. This answers several important questions. First, can we absolutely know what is God's truth? Second, "What teacher or church is right?" The answer is that the ones who are right are the ones who correctly interpret God's word. More will be said about this through the article.

However, the problem is that sinful and fallible men have ignored what the Bible literally says and stated what they "think" it says, gave their opinion, what it means to them, or what fit their agenda. Some have based their interpretation on false information rooted in a lack of scholarship in studying the Bible. Clearly, this is not an acceptable hermeneutic,² which refers to the science of interpretation. Scripture is not what we think it says or what it means to us, but rather literally, what God plainly stated. In other words, truth is what God literally said and meant when He communicated His word in a known language to those, whom He chose to record it. God chose the correct words, placing them in the proper grammatical order to convey what He wanted to reveal. Sadly, ignoring this basic truth of how God communicated His revelation to us has caused great confusion and division among those seeking to know the Lord and His truth. The tragedy is that it need not be so! Eternal life and heaven are only for those who accept and believe God's truth,

accepting Jesus Christ as their Savior.

All this confusion is not caused by God. It would make no sense for God to give us His written word if we could not clearly and accurately know the truth it teaches. That would mean that God authored confusion, which He absolutely denies. It would also mean that a man could not truly know what is right or wrong concerning God. That is totally not acceptable, as God is perfect and omniscient. He does not make mistakes.

For example: When a person applies for a driver's license, they are given a manual to study. The manual contains the necessary instructions for one to pass successfully a written exam. It clearly states the laws that govern driving a vehicle safely using correct grammar, spelling, and definitions of words. Suppose you ignore what the manual states and on your exam, answer the questions with your opinion or what you think the answer should or would like it to be? Your test would be graded by the examiner, based on the law as stated in the manual, and if you did not give the proper answers from the manual, you would fail the exam and not get a license.

God's word is no different. The Bible was written in the language of men and can be easily understood if we follow the proper rules of language. Nothing is cryptic in the way that God inspired what He wanted to reveal. It is not

complicated and in fact written very simply that all men can understand it correctly if they wish to. God states in Romans 10:17,

“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

This statement would mean nothing if we could not understand the written word. The question that begs an answer is how can a man have faith, which comes from hearing the word of God, if he cannot absolutely know what that word is? God made sure that men would be able to read and understand His word in order to be saved and live for Him.

God plainly states,

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

If we cannot accurately know what God's word is then how can a man accept that the Bible is “. . . profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

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The answer is plain, we can know and those who correctly apply the rules of language and interpretation know they are following the Lord in truth. The Lord Jesus Himself said in John 8:32 *“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”* God's word, properly interpreted, frees us from the lies and distortions of Satan who seeks to distort and confuse the understanding of God's word. A belief in God's word overcomes not only, sin and death, but also false doctrine that enslaves a man and separates him from God.

John 1:1 proclaims that the Word is Jesus Christ. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John 1:1) Verse 14 of John 1 plainly interprets for us who the Word is. “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

This passage says plainly that Jesus is the Word. They are one and the same. If you corrupt, misinterpret, misuse, ignore or pervert the Word of God, it is a personal attack on the Lord Jesus. It is calling Him a liar and that the false interpreter is presenting the truth. It is a rejection of the Lord Himself in that degrades Him. This should be a stern warning to those who misuse God's Word. The “Word of God” is Jesus Christ.

Note 1 Chronicles 17:3:

*“And it came to pass the same night, that the **word of God** came to Nathan, saying,” (1 Chronicles 17:3)*

The “word” was a preincarnate appearance of Jesus Christ.

Further, God says in Proverbs 30:4-5:

“Who hath ascended up into heaven, or descended? who hath gathered the wind in his fists? who hath bound the waters in a garment? who hath established all the ends of the earth? what is his name, and what is his son's name, if thou canst tell? Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him.” (Proverbs 30:4-5)

Did you note in verse 4 God is using pronouns referring the word as a Person? Who then is the answer to the questions in verse 4? Verse 5 explains...” every word of God” the Lord Jesus.

The Proper Method of Interpretation of God's Word is the Christian Mandate

The great need today, then, in determining what the Bible really teaches, is to determine the correct and biblical method of interpretation. If the Bible is the Word of God and God's revelation to man, then surely God would give us a way to

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discern accurately what He meant. For God not to give us a way to interpret the Bible is to leave the interpretation of Scripture to human wisdom that is at best faulty. To have the interpretation of scripture rest on man's wisdom is to have "flesh" interpreting that which is spiritual.

The word "interpretation" means to arrive at the original meaning the writer intended when he penned the words. The original meaning the author intended is the interpretation and must be found before you can understand, and make the application of the passage. A faulty interpretation will produce a faulty application and therefore it is vital to interpret correctly the Scriptures. Here lies the problem. As stated earlier, many have for various reasons misinterpreted God's word and caused confusion.

Some out of ignorance teach erroneous doctrines. Others, who claim to teach God's word, are dishonest and use the Bible for their personal gain. (See Titus 1:11) Their purpose is not to teach truth, but rather to manipulate it to deceive and influence men for their sinful purposes which involves money and personal recognition. These false teachers deceive many people, but not those who make the effort to know correctly, what God has said. It is my belief that the leaders of false churches and cults know they are in error, but realize the truth would destroy their churches or

groups, and they would lose power, influence, and the money that they receive. False doctrine is very profitable.

Often, we hear the platitude that we must not “major on the minors,” which is saying that part of the Word of God is not as important as other truths. It implies we do not need to emphasize all the Scriptures, just the major or important parts. A preacher is to preach not only the Gospel, but the all of the word of God. (Acts 20:27)

This espouses the idea that if a preacher, church, or denomination teaches the semblance of salvation by grace, even though it also has many false teachings, is okay because it teaches the Gospel. This is a false assumption. All of what God has said is inspired is by Him. (2 Timothy 3:16-17). To leave out any part makes it incomplete and mixes God's truth with error it becomes corrupt and not His truth. Would God approve if a person never committed a major sin, but only sins that might be humanly considered a minor or less important sin? In God's eyes, does He not condemn all sin? A believer is to accept and live by all of God's word, not just some parts he thinks is more important than other parts. God is the Judge of what sin is and what is not. Further, all of God's word is rightly fitted together. If we do not major on living all of God's word, then are we not sinning when we ignore the parts, we

might consider less important. Once a respected mission board president pressed me to accept a practice that violated the autonomy of the local church. When it was pointed out what the New Testament plainly taught on the matter, he tried to defend this practice saying “God has given us great latitude in this matter.” I then asked him to provide the chapter and verse in the Bible that his idea was based on and, of course, he could not. As a church planter, establishing biblical churches, I could not be a part of a mission that had such an unbiblical position on God word and His plan for a local church. I had to separate from that group.

Another false concept purports that we really cannot be sure about what the Scripture teaches, but rather what is in one’s heart, how we feel about it, or what do we think it means to us. Scripture has only one interpretation. That is what the verse or passage literally states. The interpretation is not subject to what we might think it means, but what it literally states which is determined by applying sound hermeneutical principles. For example, some would say it is not important whether a church baptizes by immersion or sprinkling as it should be left up to one’s heart or preference to decide. In other words, the mode of baptism, though clearly proclaimed in the New Testament by the use of the word meaning to immerse, is not important. The word in the New

Testament is “*baptizo*” and means to immerse in water. It does not mean to sprinkle water on someone’s head. We often hear that how a person is baptized, regardless of how it is done. It is only important that they submitted to baptism. This idea concludes the specific details of God's word are not important and the specific use of the word of God is arbitrary. It does not seem to matter to those who have no biblical standard of interpretation that baptism other than by immersion is not scriptural baptism, nor what God instituted to be scriptural baptism. It in fact is disobeying God.

The truth is in the details. First, God inspired the New Testament writing to use the word meaning to immerse. Further, baptism by immersion symbolizes the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ and sprinkling does not. (See Rom. 6:1-6) God says baptism is to be by immersion and if we obey, His word one must be immersed. So why would a man or church disregard what God has said and still claim to believe in Him or be operating with His approval? If they truly believed God, would they not respect, fear Him, and obey what He says. Jesus said “*And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?*” (Luke 6:46) Where in God’s word does, He tells us that His instructions are up for arbitration?

Do the details and specific instructions of the Bible really matter to God? The only place to find the answer is to ask God Himself and the only non-subjective place to seek the answer is His written word. Therefore, to resolve the matter and find what God wants we must determine what *“thus saith the Lord”*, because God is the only Authority. He is our Creator and it is His word! We should respect Him and obey Him. This makes it paramount that one is able to interpret the Bible and determine its absolute meaning because that is what God said. *It is a cunning trick of the Devil, that has convinced some men that* we cannot know accurately God's truth.

The Grammatical-Historical Method of Interpretation

Again, the problem today is not, that God did not give us a method of interpretation. God gave us a method, but many men and churches have refused to use it, or not been diligent in seeking it! The method that God gave is the literal method, or what is called the Grammatical-Historical Method. The Grammatical-Historical method interprets Scripture by taking into consideration the context of a passage, the grammatical uses of the words, and the historical setting in which they were written. The literal method, therefore, *“lets Scripture interpret Scripture.”* It is not a new

method in any sense of the word, and is the only method in which the Scriptures interpret the Scriptures which means God is the Interpreter.

Surely, God is best qualified to tell us what He means and the literal method is letting God interpret what He has said. The Bible is the complete word of God to man. Being His complete revelation, it addresses directly or in principle, everything that man encounters in life. Revelation 22:18-19, says man is not to add to or subtract from the Word of God, the Bible. In 2 Timothy, clearly God states He inspired the Bible. The verses *tell us that*, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works." (2 Timothy 3:16-17) When God "breathed" on the writers of Scripture, He superintended what they wrote, and they literally produced the Word of God, completely, accurately, without error. God explains this saying,

"Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." (2 Peter 1:20-21)

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This is called the doctrine of “verbal plenary inspiration,” meaning God *chose* each word for its specific meaning. He verbally (orally), plenary (fully) inspired the recording of His written word. God supernaturally inspired or superintended the writers to use each word because that word conveyed a certain and particular meaning. The words God inspired were given to communicate a specific meaning to those who read it. This means that if we find what is the correct meaning of each word, considering its context, normal and customary usage at the time it was used, we can know the correct interpretation. The interpretation is the meaning God wanted His words to convey.

It is the purpose of the book to show that we can accurately properly and know what is God's word. The confusion in understanding God's word is the result of unlearned and/or unskilled men, and some who are dishonest, mishandling the word of God. This does not mean one has to be a scholar or expert to understand and properly know God's truth, but it means that anyone can learn to apply the simple and proper biblical principles of interpretation and accurately understand what God has said. Anyone can discern what is right and wrong and distinguish false teachings from God's truth. He can positively know if what his church or teacher is presenting is God's word or the word of man. It is certainly not the mystery that so many try to make it

out to be. It is therefore the responsibility of every person who claims the name of Christ to know what *"thus saith the Lord"* that he not be misled.

Let us then look at eleven principles of literal interpretation that lets the Scriptures interpret Scripture. When we say let Scripture interpret Scripture, we are saying, let God interpret His Word for us.