

Doctrine of Interpretation

1. The *Bible* uses the term “*interpretation*” at least 46 times.
2. The normal usage of the Hebrew and Greek word means to “*explain*”.
3. To help interpret or explain His *Word*, spoken or written, God has given to the church prophets, pastors and teachers.
 - *Ephesians 4:11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:*
4. The *Scriptures* indicate how individuals interpreted the *Word of the Lord* for people by explaining what was meant.
 - Joseph interpreted or explained the dream of a chief butler. *Genesis 40:12 And Joseph said unto him, This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days:*

Special Note.

A teacher must be confident.

- Joseph interpreted or explained the dream of a chief baker. *Genesis 40:16 When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was good, he said unto Joseph, I also was in my dream, and, behold, I had three white baskets on my head: Genesis 40:18 And Joseph answered and said, This is the interpretation thereof: The three baskets are three days:*

Special Note.

A teacher must be consistent.

- An unknown man correctly interpreted or explained the meaning of a dream which encouraged the heart of Gideon. *Judges 7:15 And it was so, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream, and the interpretation thereof, that he worshipped, and returned into the host of Israel, and said, Arise; for the LORD hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian.*

Special Note.

A teacher must be correct.

- The Proverbs of Solomon were given to be properly interpreted or explained. *Proverbs 1:6 To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings.*

Special Note.

A teacher must be able to communicate.

- It is possible to give a false interpretation or explanation of a matter. The Chaldeans were capable and willing to give a false meaning to the dream of Nebuchadnezzar had he been willing or able to share what he had dreamed. *Daniel 2:4 Then spake the Chaldeans to the king in Syriack, O king, live for ever: tell thy servants the dream, and we will shew the interpretation.* Unfortunately for them the king could not remember what he had dreamed. *Daniel 2:5 The king answered and said to the Chaldeans, The thing is gone from me: if ye will not make known unto me the dream, with the interpretation thereof, ye shall be cut in pieces, and your houses shall be made a dunghill.*

A spiritual teacher must not be motivated by commercial gain.

- Knowing he had a prophetic gift Daniel asked for time to show Nebuchadnezzar what he had dreamed. *Daniel 2:16 Then Daniel went in, and desired of the king that he would give him time, and that he would shew the king the interpretation.*

A teacher must believe he has a spiritual gift and calling.

- Daniel was able to interpret the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar in such a way that the king understood the explanation and was satisfied for the interpretation of the dream was “*sure*” or certain.

Daniel 2:45 Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure.

Daniel 4:18 This dream I king Nebuchadnezzar have seen. Now thou, O Belteshazzar, declare the interpretation thereof, forasmuch as all the wise men of my kingdom are not able to make known unto me the interpretation: but thou art able; for the spirit of the holy gods is in thee.

A teacher must be able to leave the unconverted convinced.

5. To *properly* interpret or explain a passage is pleasing to the Lord and is always permissible. Sometimes in *Scripture* the proper interpretation or explanation is given within the body of the text.
 - *John 1:42 And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone.*
 - *John 9:7 And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is by interpretation, Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.*

- *Acts 9:36 Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did.*
 - *Acts 13:8 But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith.*
6. As words need to be properly interpreted or explained so do spiritual actions illustrated by Abraham giving a tithe to a man named Melchizedek. The author of Hebrews explains to the reader that Abraham understood the uniqueness of Melchizedek as a King of righteousness and thus a prototype of the Lord Jesus Christ who would merge the office of king and priest into one, after the order of Melchizedek.
- *Hebrews 7:2 To whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all; first being by interpretation King of righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of peace;*
7. Properly interpreting or explaining the *Bible* is never forbidden for the *Scriptures* cannot be studied without coming to some understanding of what a passage means. Christians are commanded to study the *Bible*. In the process of studying the *Bible* there will come an understanding because the passage has been interpreted or given meaning.
- *2 Timothy 2:15 Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*
8. What the *Bible* does forbid is a misinterpretation and a mishandling of the *Scriptures* by taking a passage out of context and giving it a meaning which it would not have in a normal reading of the chapter.
9. To mishandle the *Bible* is to “wrest” or twist the *Scriptures*. In the early church some individuals were taking certain words and teachings of Paul and giving them a twist, an explanation, an interpretation Paul never meant. That was wrong but it was easy to do because some of the thoughts of Paul were and are “*hard to be understood*” as Peter freely admits.
- *2 Peter 3:16 As also in all his [Paul’s] epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.*
10. It is good for every minister of the gospel and every Christian to be guided by some simple concepts when trying to interpret or understand a passage of *Scripture*.
- First guiding principle to believe. There is a body of doctrinal truth which is embodied in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ who said of Himself, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me*” (John 14:6).

- Second guiding principle to believe. There is a body of spiritual truth that can be known to the heart of the Christian because spiritual knowledge is not dependent upon human intelligence. *John 7:16 Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. 17 If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.*
- Third guiding principle to believe. There is a body of spiritual truth which has been entrusted to the church in every generation which is to be contended for. Truth does not change. *Jude 3 Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.*
- Fourth guiding principle to believe. At no time is it right for a person to give any passage of *Scripture* a private interpretation in the sense that one's understanding is divorced from the simplicity of the context and is different from the understanding of the church over the past two thousand years. Every passage of *Scripture* is to be *properly* interpreted or explained, but not *privately* interpreted in the sense that the church has not known of the understanding. In other words the voice of a faithful pastor will be the voice of the saints over the centuries. As an ambassador represents his country so the Christian represents the King of kings. As an ambassador does not alter or change the message or explain it in such a way the original meaning is changed so the pastor and people of God do not change the message of the *Bible* once delivered to the church.

11. The apostle Peter reminds the church that when the *Bible* was being written, it was being superintended by God the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit did not allow the prophecies of the *Scripture* to be based upon an individual's own private interpretation or understanding of what God said. Rather, the Holy Spirit personally guided the authors in what they were to record by giving them proper understanding.

- *2 Peter 1:20 Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. 21 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.*

The apostle teaches that the truths which the prophets communicated were not originated by themselves; they were not of their own suggestion or invention; they were not their own opinions, but were of higher origin, and were imparted by God;

12. By way of application, no pastor and no person should try to make any passage of *Scripture* be a matter of *private* understanding. Rather, a person should be guided in their understanding of any passage in the *Bible* first by what is plainly stated in context and second by what the church has believed down through the centuries under the superintendence of God the Holy Spirit. These two boundaries will help protect a person in their understanding of the *Bible*.

13. Spiritual misunderstanding and doctrinal error begins when the simplicity of the *Scripture* is set aside and the historic understanding of the church is rejected in favor of new sensational teachings which might allude to the *Bible* but upon investigation the text does not say what is being attributed to it. There are many examples which might be given to illustrate this.

Summary.

Every Christian has a holy responsibility to study the *Bible* for, “*All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 17 That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).*”

Every pastor is to faithfully preach the *Word of God* in context and only the *Word*. *2 Timothy 4:1 I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; 3 Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. 3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; 4 And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. 5 But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.*

The *Bible* cannot be studied by anyone unless the mind is engaged and a proper understanding takes place of what the text says. The divine invitation is, “*Come now and let us reason together*” (*Isaiah 1:18*). This natural understanding is simply another way of interpreting the *Bible*.

What must guide a person’s interpretation of the *Bible* is striving to find the meaning of a verse in context and also what the church has consistently taught down through the ages. There are to be no *private* interpretations but there must be *proper* interpretation or explanation for the purpose of understanding.

A Closing Question of Concern

With so many people teaching so many different ways who is to be trusted and who is right? That is a problem for every Christian including myself. For myself, I have learned to trust the simplicity of the Biblical text, the *Baptist Confession of 1689*, and the early Creeds of Christendom, such as the *Apostle’s Creed*. I also value the writings of those men and women known as the Puritans, having found them to be sound in doctrine, conservative in theology and holy in heart.

Addendum

Example. Jesus prayed that His people would NOT be taken out of the world and yet many are convinced that one day millions of Christians will be taken out of the world.

- *John 17:13 And now come I to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves. 14 I have given them thy word; and the world hath hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 15 I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. 16 They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. 18 As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world.*

Example. The *Bible* teaches plain and simple that when Jesus returns there will be a lot of noise associated with His return. There will be a divine shout and the voice of the arch angel and the trumpet of God. And yet millions believe in a secret silent coming of Christ.

- *1 Thessalonians 4:16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first:*

Example. Jesus said that when people start talking about a secret silent return of His, such people were NOT to be believed. Today, many people read, and worse, do believe the talk and the writings of those who teach a secret, silent coming of Christ.

- *Matthew 24:23 Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not.*

Example. Jesus told people NOT to look to signs as proof of His near coming, and yet many sermons are preached on the signs of the times.

- *Matthew 24:6 And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.*