



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

Lesson #10

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle Five: The Only Meaning of the Words Is the Simple, Plain Meaning

The Meaning of Words

The Bible was not written in code or a secret language. The words that the Holy Spirit breathed into the writers of Scripture are meant to be understood in the way that we commonly understand them. In other words, there is not a hidden meaning to the words of Scripture but only their obvious meaning. If we think that what God says to us means something different from what the words obviously say, then we are putting a different meaning into the words than what God intended.

Some Bible students have tried to find hidden meanings in Scripture. This is called allegorizing, that is, understanding words to mean something different from their ordinary meaning. For example, Genesis 24 says that Abraham's servant met Rebekah at a well. If we wanted to allegorize, we could say that Abraham's servant represents the Christian, Rebekah represents Christ, and the well represents the Word of God. In telling us that Abraham's servant met Rebekah at a well, what God is really saying to us is that we meet Christ through the Word of God. This may be true, but it certainly is not what the words say in their obvious meaning. The obvious meaning, and the only true meaning, is that Abraham's servant met Rebekah at a well. In other words, it happened just as the words say, and this is the meaning God wanted to convey to us with these words. There is not deeper, hidden meaning.

Allegorizing is dangerous. Using allegory, one can make the Bible mean just about anything one wants it to mean. But then the Bible cannot be the light that guides our way. The Bible would not be clear and understandable. But the apostle Paul told Timothy: **"From childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus"** (2Timothy 3:15). Only clear and simple understand of the words are able to make a child wise, therefore Paul says the Bible speaks clearly.

In order to correctly understand the Bible, one must know the correct meaning of the words the Bible uses. In order to determine the meaning of words, it is helpful to compare all the different places that particular word is used in the Bible and in other writings written in the same era as the Bible. Sometimes words change in meaning over time. We should study how the words were used when the Bible was written or when the translation we use was made.

Let us consider the meaning of the Greek word *baptizo* (βαπτίζω). This word is generally translated by the English word "baptize". In the centuries before the writing of the New Testament, the word *baptizo* generally meant "to sink under water". But if we study the use of the word *baptizo* as it is used in the New Testament, we realize that that meaning is not always possible. Consider Mark 7:3-4: **"For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they baptisoontai. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the baptismous of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches."** Certainly, the Bible is not saying that the Pharisees put themselves under water every time they came from the market, nor that they put cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches under water. The Bible simply means that they applied the water in some special way. Therefore, those who insist in our day that the only correct method of baptism is

immersion (putting someone under water) say something that the Scriptures do not say. That is not the way the word *baptizo* is used in the New Testament.

There are some words that are used rarely, even only once, in the entire Bible. In such cases we can look how the word was used in other writings outside the Bible from the same period. Serious Bible students should learn how to use language tools such as lexicons and concordances. But we have to be cautious in the use of these resources, because many Bible scholars today do not believe that the Bible is God's Word and they are therefore not as careful as they should be in their studies. Unbelieving Bible students may even deliberately mislead Bible students in order to get them to understand the Bible in a wrong way. For example, today scholars who promote feminism or same-sex marriage may try to make the Bible conform to their ideas, instead of accepting and explaining what the Bible really says.

Questions

1. What is meant by allegorizing or code language?
2. How does the use of allegory make the Bible unclear?
3. Why is it important to learn the meaning of individual Bible words?
4. How does the fact that words change meaning over time affect our Bible study?
5. How would you answer someone who insists that immersion is the only proper method of Baptism?
6. What is a lexicon and how is it to be used?
7. What is a concordance and how is it to be used?
8. Why do we need to be careful in the use of these resources?