



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

How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

Lesson #11

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

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

Syntax

Syntax refers to the arrangement of words in a sentence, paragraph, or in a longer passage. Every language has its own syntax. In studying the Bible, it is useful to understand the syntax of the language, such as the parts of speech and how they are used, the various forms of verbs and nouns, and the different types of word order that emphasizes different parts of the sentence or passage.

Sometimes there are two or more ways in which a particular sentence can be understood. Each way would be grammatically correct and not contrary to ordinary usage. For example, there are two ways of understanding Jesus' words in John 5:39. The Greek word for "search" may be imperative (a command) or indicative (stating a fact). The King James Version translators understood the form as an imperative and translated: "**Search the Scriptures.**" But the New King James Version translators understood the form as indicative and translated: "**You search the Scriptures.**" Neither understanding is contrary to what the Bible teaches elsewhere. So, we need to ask the question: Which understanding fits the context best? Which wording fits the point that Jesus is trying to make at this time? It seems that the indicative fits the context better than the imperative, but some may disagree. In cases like this, when neither understanding contradicts clear Bible teaching elsewhere, we do not accuse someone of false teaching if he has a different understanding of the grammar.

It is important to carefully study the context of Bible passages and to try to understand the particular point the author is trying to make. This careful study helps us to correct common misunderstandings and to gain a much better grasp of what God is saying to us. The Bible is a big book and a lifetime of serious study is not sufficient to fully understand all of it. At the same time, the Bible is so simple in what it says that a child can comprehend its plain message.

Genre

Genre refers to the type or style of writing. Some examples of genres found in Scriptures are: history, poetry, prophecy, proverb, doctrine, and apocalyptic. It is important to correctly understand the genre of a passage. For example, many false teachers today claim that Genesis 1-11 is poetry rather than history. They claim it is poetry, which is not to be understood literally, in order to deny creation and the flood so that they can accept the man-made theory of evolution. But this is a big mistake. A careful study of these chapters, as well as a comparison with what the Bible says in other passages, shows that they are history and describe what actually happened.

What genre is the book of Revelation? Some insist that we must understand it as a prophecy of future events that will take place in a literal sense. But it is an example of apocalyptic literature. We should not expect to see Jesus with a double-edged sword coming out of His mouth. He will not appear with seven horns and seven eyes, or coming riding a white horse. These are pictures that illustrate certain characteristics of our Savior. We should not take them literally.

Most of the Old Testament and New Testament passages are historical narratives. They simply tell us what happened at a certain place and at a certain time. This is why there are so many references to time and place in the Bible. The fact that Jesus suffered “under Pontius Pilate” reminds us that what the Bible tells us about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is all factual history. The flood in Genesis, the plagues in Egypt, the battles in the book of Joshua (including the sun standing still for a day) are all events that really happened. It would be wrong for us to call it pious fiction.

In most cases, the Bible itself clearly indicates what genre a certain section is. The way other portions of the Bible refer to a certain section can also help us to know the genre of the section. For example, Jesus Himself referred to creation, the flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the repentance of Nineveh, as well as Jonah’s being swallowed up by a fish as events that took place in history. Peter referred to the speaking of Balaam’s donkey as something that actually happened. These references by Jesus and Peter show us that we should understand these accounts as factual history.

Hebrew poetry is marked by parallelism where the same thing is said in two similar ways or one truth is contrasted with the another. In the prophetic writings, poetry is sometimes intermixed with historical narrative and doctrinal preaching. This parallelism can help us distinguish poetry from the other types of writing. In the epistles we often have historical narrative intermixed with doctrine as well.

Questions

1. What are some of the elements involved in syntax?
2. Do you think the context of John 5:39 favors “search” as an imperative or as an indicative?
3. What are some of the different genres in which the Bible has been written?
4. Why is it important to know the genre of a passage?
5. Why is it wrong to claim that Genesis 1-11 is poetry?
6. What mistake is made by many with regard to the book of Revelation?
7. If you have a concordance, list Jesus’ references to creation and the flood.
8. Give an example of parallelism in the Psalms.