



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

How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

Lesson #13

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle Six: The Only Safe and True Interpreter of Scripture Is Scripture Itself

In the Roman Catholic Church, the ultimate interpreter of Scripture is the Roman Catholic Church under the authority of the pope. The Lord Jesus and His apostles have warned us, however, that it is dangerous and sometimes even fatal to put our confidence in human beings. Jesus said: **“False christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect”** (Matthew 24:24). The apostle Paul told the pastors of Ephesus: **“From among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves”** (Acts 20:30). The apostle Peter wrote: **“There will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies”** (2 Peter 2:1). The apostle John said: **“As you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come”** (1 John 2:18).

An antichrist is someone who opposes Christ. Every false teacher is an antichrist. There is, however, one main Antichrist in particular that the apostle Paul describes in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12. This Antichrist is one **“who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God”** (2 Thessalonians 2:4). This is a perfect description of the Roman pope, who claims to be the head of Christ’s Church and the infallible interpreter of Holy Scripture. Instead of submitting to Scripture as the Word of God and to Christ as the head of the Church, he claims to be the rightful head of Christ’s Church on earth. He claims that there is no one who can call into question any decision or interpretation that he makes. That is why the confessional Lutheran Church has declared, as part of its confession, that the papacy is the Antichrist foretold by the Lord and His apostles. We cannot let the pope tell us what the meaning of the Scripture is.

Most Protestant churches claim that the Scripture is their final authority. With regard to certain doctrines, however, it becomes clear that the Bible is not their final authority. Rather it is their own reason that stands in judgment over the Bible and determines what the Bible must mean. For example, most Protestant churches cannot understand how the washing of water in baptism can forgive sins. They therefore teach that baptism does not actually forgive sins but is only a *picture* of the forgiveness of sins. The Bible, however, declares in several places that baptism is **“for the remission of sins”** (Acts 2:38). Since God, in Scripture, is the highest authority, it was right for Martin Luther to teach in his *Small Catechism* that baptism *“works the forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe, as the words and promises of God declare”* (The Sacrament of Holy Baptism, Question 2).

The pope, human reason, or any other earthly consideration cannot serve as the ultimate interpreter of the Bible’s meaning. The ultimate interpreter of the Scripture is God Himself, speaking to us through the words of Scripture. Scripture interprets Scripture. What this means is that unclear passages must be interpreted in order to agree with those passages that are clear on the same subject. We must use the clear passages to help us understand the passages that are less clear.

There is one God and one Holy Spirit. He does not disagree with Himself. If two clear passages seem to contradict one another, we must let them both stand as correct, even if we cannot explain how they

can both be true. God is always right, whether we can figure Him out or not. This is what all teachers in Christ's Church must remember. **"If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God"** (1 Peter 4:11). **"He who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully"** (Jeremiah 23:28).

There are Bible teachers today who say that the Old Testament and the New Testament contradict each other. Some claim that Paul disagrees with James, that John disagrees with Peter, or that one of the four Gospels contradicts the other Gospels. Since we believe that the Holy Spirit is the One who gave the words to all the Bible's writers, we cannot accept the point of view that there are contradictions and differences between the various human authors of Scripture. These *apparent* contradictions usually have an easy explanation when we study them more carefully. If we cannot understand or explain some differences, we must let God's Word stand as it is, because God is wiser than we are.

Apparent differences can usually be explained by the fact that the circumstances under which the passages were written are different from one to the other. The way of salvation in the Old Testament is the same as the way of salvation in the New Testament, but in the Old Testament God's people were living under a code of laws that no longer apply to us in the New Testament. These laws no longer apply because Christ and His work fulfilled these laws. The Old Testament was shadow; the New Testament is substance (Colossians 2:16-23).

Sometimes apparent differences can be explained by the difference between the law and the Gospel. One case demands God's condemning law, whereas another case demands the comforting words of the Gospel. When Paul and James talk about justification, they are addressing people with different problems, and so what they write seems to be contradictory. James says: **"A man is justified by works, and not by faith only"** (James 2:24). Paul seems to say the opposite: **"A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ"** (Galatians 2:16). Even Martin Luther was at first troubled by this apparent contradiction. But a careful study of the context in both cases will reveal that they are not saying two opposing things, but the same thing, with a different emphasis in each case.

When we quote individual Bible passages to prove a point, it is important that we know the context of the Bible passage. The devil also likes to quote the Scripture, so we need to be on our guard. By context we mean the setting of the passage in the Bible. We need to read and study the entire chapter or section where it is found, so that we can be sure that we are correctly understanding the point of the individual passage. We should ask:

1. To whom is this Word addressed?
2. What problem is the passage dealing with?
3. Is it a *description* of the way things were being done, or is it *instruction* for us as to how we ought to do thing?

It is easy to quote a Bible passage out of context to try to make it say something we would like it to say rather than what it actually says in its context. As we gain a more complete knowledge of the all Bible we will be less likely to use a Bible passage out of context.

If someone points out to us that we have misunderstood a certain passage of Scripture and have used it incorrectly, we should be humble enough to admit that we could have made a mistake. We should make a more complete study of the passage to determine if we did misunderstand it. We should not stubbornly defend something we have said just because we said it or because we do not want to admit we might be wrong. Even Peter once had to be corrected by Paul (Galatians 2:11-14). Jesus often had to correct His disciples when they misunderstood what He was saying. We cannot, however, give in to criticism when a Bible passage is clear about what it teaches and other teachers whom we trust agree that we have the right understanding. We must lovingly hold to the truth of what God's Word says.

The most important thing you can do to become a Bible teacher is to be like Mary of Bethany and sit at Jesus' feet (Luke 10:38-42). Listen to His teaching, not just once or twice, but throughout your life. **"You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen"** (2 Peter 3:17-18).

Questions

1. How do we know that not all teachers who call themselves "Christian" are true teachers of the Bible?
2. How does the papacy show itself to be the Antichrist foretold in the Bible?
3. What causes most Protestants to be led astray in their interpretation of the Bible?
4. Who is the only one who can interpret the Scriptures? How does he do it?
5. How does the Old Testament differ from the New Testament?
6. Why can there not be any actual contradictions in the Bible?
7. What is meant by quoting the Bible out of context?
8. Why is it important to know who the speaker is and to whom he is speaking?
9. How should we respond to someone tries to correct our explanation of a Bible passage?
10. What makes Mary of Bethany such a good example for us to follow?