

# TECHNIQUES FOR STUDYING & INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

(Adapted from William M. Ramsay's original article by Pastor William Hale)

**COMPARE SCRIPTURE WITH SCRIPTURE** ~ The Westminster Confession of Faith say that "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question... [the answer] may be known by other places that speak more clearly". For example, compare a story in one gospel with the story as found in another gospel, or a difficult passage in Paul with one that is clearer. Interpret each Testament in the light of the other, and what Scripture says throughout, and ultimately in the lessons of Christ.

**INTERPRET ALL SCRIPTURE IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST JESUS** ~ This is probably the most important rule in interpreting the God's Word. Christ is the Truth to which all the scripture points. If any interpretation of scripture contradicts the love God reveals in Jesus, it is a misunderstanding of the ultimate intent of God's Word. In some way every part of the Bible points to him.

**LOOK AT WHOLES BEFORE LOOKING AT PARTS, SET EACH PART IN ITS CONTEXT** ~ Each verse should be interpreted in the light of the whole passage (meaning, *in context*), and each passage in the light of the great repeated themes of its book and the whole Bible. Ask how a verse or a paragraph relates to what comes before it and to what comes after it. Don't just take a sentence by itself, ask "what does this statement mean in perspective to everything else being said around it?"

**INTERPRET IN THE LIGHT OF THE KIND OF LITERATURE A BOOK IS** ~ The psalms are not literally factual; they are poetry, statements of faith, declarations of anger or devotion. Paul's epistles are letters, from a real man to real people, addressing what their issues were. Apocalyptic literature such as Revelation has special characteristics and calls for a special kind of interpretation. With narratives, look for characters and at how each part helps develop the plot. Christ's parables used symbolism to tell a particular message or to make a specific point, while in other moments Christ took what the Old Testament declared and revised or updated God's rule on the matter. The prophetic writings are primarily sermons that God placed upon the hearts of his messengers to specific issues and situations.

**SET EACH BOOK IN ITS HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT** ~ If you can, find out what a historian might say was going on at that time with the author and with the people to whom it was written. Many "Study Bibles" provide introductions to each chapter that helps to put that part of the Bible in historical context, and commentaries are written to do this for you. In what way does a passage reflect, and in what way does it transcend, the culture of the time?

**LOOK FOR REPEATED WORDS AND IDEAS** ~ Often, though not always, this can be a key to understanding what the author wanted to emphasize. What's the theme, subject or lesson that's being emphasized?

**ASK WHAT INSIGHT SPECIAL GROUPS MIGHT HAVE** ~ Women scholars and African American scholars, for example, have long been ignored, but today they are bringing new understanding from new perspectives.

**STUDY THE LANGUAGE AND COMPARE DIFFERENT ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS** ~ Remember that the original Hebrew and Greek are our primary authority; but different translations, especially the newer, stronger, translations of the past thirty years, bring new life and clarity to God's Word. Take note, the King James Version was written in the old English of the early 1600's. The New International Version is translated at a modern Elementary reading level, while the New Revised Standard Version was translated at a modern High School and College reading level. The Living Bible is a paraphrase translation, paraphrased from the KJV; while The Message, translated by the Rev. Eugene Peterson, is a paraphrase of the original languages (Hebrew and Greek, respectively).

**NOTE THE INTERPRETATIONS OF SCHOLARS IN THEIR COMMENTARIES, BUT ALSO OF ARTISTS AND MUSICIANS** ~ Artists and musicians bring special and often deep insight into the meaning of passages.

## *The "ways" we Read & Study Scripture...*

- Devotionally
- Topically
- Contextually
- Theologically
- Linguistically
- Historically
- Culturally
- Critically