

How to Read and Understand the Bible

(And to identify essentials and non-essentials)

Ken Radant, November 2018

Why do people disagree in their reading of the Bible? (What can we do to help?)

I. The background we bring (heart)

Our interpretation is influenced by things we bring to a text

Some types of baggage we bring:

- Things we know (or think we know) about what we're reading
- Our own personal experiences and feelings
- Prior ideas we have on the subjects we're reading
- Our culture and language

Two things can turn a challenge into a problem: entrenching or ignoring our baggage

Some things that can help

1. Acknowledge the fact that we have baggage
2. Encourage discussion of our backgrounds
3. Create an environment where it's safe to share
4. Let interaction with other's background refine our awareness of our own
5. Intentionally adopt a learner's posture (humility)

We can't eliminate all our baggage, but we can manage its impact

II. The rules we follow (hermeneutic)

Dealing with background isn't enough

- Whenever we interpret anything we follow a set of "rules"
- People sometimes adopt different rules for interpretation
- Different rules will result in different conclusions
- Common rules don't guarantee agreement, but they help
- Being explicit about our rules is important
- Some interpretive rules are better than others

Some common problems

- Ignoring (or inventing) conventions
- Ignoring context
- Backward process – from conclusions to meaning
- Private interpretation with no public accountability
- Interpretation only by the enlightened
- The best interpretation is always easy

Poor rules are often linked to poor understanding of what Scripture is

What does classic Protestant Evangelical Christian theology actually teach about the Bible?

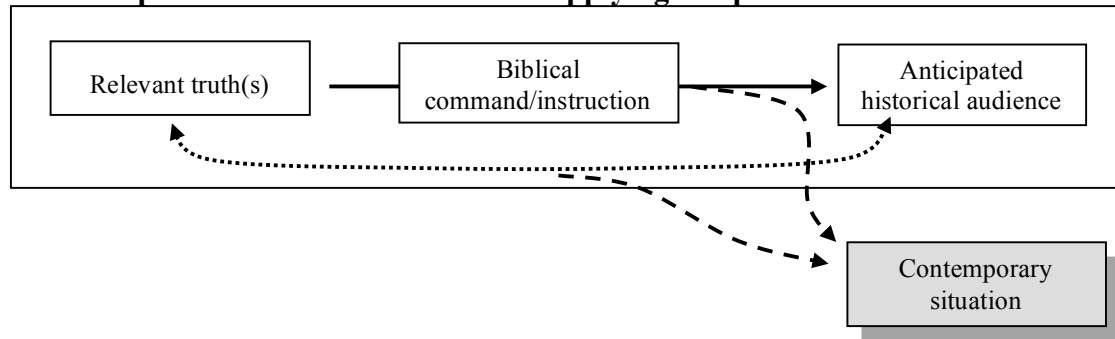
- Inspired: the Spirit of God guided what was written so the result was what He wanted
- Authoritative: it is the guide and standard for Christian faith and practice

- Divine/human: God communicating through the thoughts and words of human authors, guiding—not bypassing—their thought-processes and intentions
- Using normal human language: interpreted the way we read other comparable literature
- Set in history: written to the language, culture, and circumstances intended by the author
- Written to an anticipated historical audience: for us, but not “to” us
- Spirit-illuminated: which works with and through—not in opposition to—study

Basic rules for interpreting the Bible in your study:

1. Understand and examine the basic building-blocks: words and grammar
2. Always read in context
3. Consider how the genre might affect the message
4. Ask: what questions is the author trying to answer in this passage? What answers are given?
5. Test your interpretation by how well it makes sense of the flow of thought
6. Study what the whole Bible says
7. Study in community, drawing on the gifts/insights of all

Also: A quick look at an essential tool: applying Scripture



III. The text we study (“hefty-ness”)

We “weigh” data when we do theology

- Not evaluating whether Scripture is inspired, true, etc.
- BUT assessing the clarity of the ideas we find in Scripture
- We do this because Scripture is not arranged systematically, does not address every subject directly, is easier to understanding in some places than others, presents different perspectives

Weighing involves:

- a) Identifying ideas taught in Scripture (interpretation)
- b) Gathering and sorting those ideas (collating)
- c) Prioritizing the clarity of concepts (“high” to “low”)
- d) Building conclusions in order of priority
- e) Using clear (“high”) concepts to help interpret unclear (“low”)
- f) Determining overall clarity in Scripture (“high” or “low”)

In principle, the ideas which we weigh as very “high” (very clear) in Scripture are the essentials

Criteria for weighing the concepts you find in your study

- Extensiveness: how much evidence, how widely taught?
- Clarity: how easy/hard is the language to decipher
- Consistency: always the same perspective, or tension of perspectives?
- Directness of relevance: are the biblical authors trying to answer your question?

October 23.

Dear Janine,

Hi honey. It was good to hear from you again this past week. I'm glad you are enjoying your courses at the Bible school. I hope that you will grow in a real, profitable understanding about God as you study the Bible and other subjects there this year.

I'm afraid your mother has been feeling poorly again this past two weeks. Please don't worry about her too much, though--I'm confident that she will get over it again real soon. Last time you mentioned that you wondered if you should come home if this happened again, but I don't think that will be necessary. Our family is in good hands; I'm sure things will come around before very long.

John is going to be visiting some friends in B.C. on the first weekend of next month. He said he would stop by to see you on his way through. Tell that brother of yours to stay out of trouble when you see him, OK?

I should probably get this note in the mail. We'll be in touch. Have a good week.

Love, Dad.

A little more information about the situation (a)

Janine – is a hard-working first-year Bible-school student. She grew up in a Christian family who encouraged her to do at least one year at the college.

Her dad – is a Christian business man. He has always been close to his kids and stays in regular contact. He strongly encouraged Janine to attend Bible school.

Her mother – is a lovely Christian woman with a chronic arthritis problem. The condition is not critical, but it makes her life painful and difficult. Her husband and family help wherever they can.

John – is a fun-loving, mature Christian young man. He is close to his parents and sister and they like to joke around with each other.

Some questions about the meaning of this letter as you interpret it:

1. Do you think Janine's Dad is optimistic that this will really be a positive growing experience of Janine, or is he a little ambivalent about the benefit of her study?
2. How worried is Dad about Mom? Is his advice to stay at school influenced by a tendency to downplay her symptoms, or by a concern for his daughter and willingness to do what's needed to help Mom himself?
3. What do you think Dad most likely means by saying the family "is in good hands"?
4. Does Dad actually think John is likely to get in trouble on his trip?

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Love, Dad.

A little more information about the situation (b)

Janine: is a new believer who grew up in a family that attended church occasionally but has never taken the Christian faith very seriously.

Dad: is actually Janine's step-father, though they get along OK. He attends church occasionally (mostly on special holidays), but is the least committed member in the family, and has become increasingly skeptical over the years. What faith he has leans strongly into theological liberalism. He thinks it is good to know about faith traditions, but doesn't get "fundamentalist" on him.

Mom: is also a nominal believer. She has a history with alcoholism and bipolar disorder, and she tends toward hypochondria—going through periods where she copes with her anxieties and seeks sympathy from others by manifesting "symptoms" of illness, though there are no diagnosed physical responses for these. Overall she is a pleasant lady, but friends and family will admit that she's a little imbalanced. Her psychologist finds her fascinating.

John: is Janine's blood-brother. He is not at all interested in matters of faith. He is fun-loving and friendly, but he has a temper and hangs out with a rowdy and sometimes trouble-making crowd. As a result he has been arrested on a couple occasions for minor misdemeanors. The friends he is going to visit have been an unhelpful influence in the past. John gets along OK with his Mom, but not so much with his Dad.

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Exercise: What's the problem with these interpretations?

Here are some real interpretations of Scripture which we would all (hopefully) say are misguided. (Also one made-up one just for fun. See if you can guess which it is.)

What problem(s) do you see with these interpretations? Ie, what "rules for interpreting" are they following that you would say are inappropriate?

1. To be in the "center of God's will," pay special attention to the "center verse" in the Bible: Ps 118:8: "It is better to trust in the LORD than to put confidence in man."

Why? Ps 118 is between the shortest chapter of the Bible (Ps 117) and the longest (Ps 119), and there are 594 chapters before it and 594 chapters after it.

This adds up to 1188 chapters.

The center verse of Ps 118 is verse 8, so we have Ps 118:8 above, the "center" of the Bible.

2. The Pope has the right to command France to invade England to punish them for disobeying his directives, because of this passage, which teaches that the Pope has authority over both spiritual and political affairs:

³⁶ [Jesus] said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. ... ³⁸ The disciples said, "See, **Lord, here are two swords.**" "That's enough!" he replied. (Lk 22:36-38)

3. A large community of Mormons followed Joseph Smith across the Midwest and the desert areas of the central US to Utah because God told Smith to go with these and other words:

The LORD had said to Abram, "**Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.**" ² "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (Gen 12:1-3)

4. Pope to Copernicus: put away that stupid telescope and stop teaching heresy. Of course the sun goes around the earth! This is clear in Josh 10:12-13 ...

¹² On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: "**Sun, stand still** over Gibeon, and you, moon, over the Valley of Aijalon." ¹³ **So the sun stood still**, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. **The sun stopped in the middle of the sky** and delayed going down about a full day.

5. The Protestant Reformation rebelled against the idea that a person is saved by performing the church's sacraments. That idea was based to a large degree on ...

³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ Peter replied, "**Do penance and be baptized**, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins..." (Acts 2:37-38)

6. At a time of life-decision a young man was having his devotions, and he asked the Lord what he should do.

He flipped his Bible open and pointed at a verse. It said "And **Judas went away and hanged himself.**" (Mat 27:5)

This didn't seem right, so the young man closed his Bible and flipped it open again. This time his finger landed on Luke 10:37: "**Go and do the same.**"

Concerned that he had made a mistake, he tried again. Now his finger came to John 13:27: "**What you do, do quickly.**"

Exercise: How do we prioritize evidence?

Last Friday night a bright light appeared in the sky a short distance from town. It moved in a circle, then dropped below the hills on the horizon. The sky darkened.

An hour later the sky became lighter, then the light appeared, circled, and moved rapidly north until it disappeared in the distance.

You are to report on what happened for the local paper. You talk to a number of people who observed this sight, and received various descriptions and explanations.

How would you prioritize the following groups of witnesses, if you had to rank them from (1) Most useful for determining exactly what had happened to (7) those in which you place the least confidence?

- a) 20 young adults were on a campout in the hills. Nearly all claimed that they had seen a UFO. They gave at least 6 different descriptions of its shape, size, sound, and movement. One thought it was a stealth helicopter, and 2 others were unsure what they had seen.
- b) 1 amateur astronomer observed the light through a telescope, concluding it was a drone which landed and took off.
- c) 1 other amateur astronomer accompanied by 4 friends all watched the light, through a telescope and binoculars. They all agreed that they had seen a drone landing and taking off. The astronomer had a photo taken through her telescope.
- d) A hitchhiker was sleeping under a bridge on the road out of town. He was a little high and also a little drunk, so slow to wake up. When the light roused him, he saw what he took to be a small, fast jet plane.
- e) 6 families who live on the edge of town all saw the light in the security cameras from their houses. The images were similar in each case: a pattern of fuzzy light moving up, down, left, and right at 2:20 am. Several thought they saw fireworks, and another 4 thought it was an airplane.
- f) Quite a large group (28 people altogether) shared that they woke up during the night and saw a pattern of light through their curtains out the west-facing window of their bedrooms. Of these, about 20 thought a plane with bright landing lights was flying by, another 8 felt it was more likely a helicopter.
- g) 10 employees of a local tech company told you that their company was testing a new search-and-rescue drone in the night, and that they watched its flight path from trucks on the hillside.