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A 6-SESSION STUDY
FOR DIALOGUE IN
COMMUNITY AROUND
THE SCRIPTURES



HANDLING THE WORD WITH CONFIDENCE

First Principles of Bible Study

BY JEFF REED

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A COMMITMENT TO ACCURATELY HANDLING THE WORD 1

As we attempt to build our lives upon the first principles of the faith, it is critical that we develop the ability to handle the Word with accuracy. We must be sure that we are right in our interpretation of each passage. Yet, in our postmodern culture, even the sound of being *right* produces an air of discomfort. The essence of the age in which we live assumes that no one can claim to have the truth and demands that we accept everyone's view and "interpretation" as valid.

Yet the Bible demands to be accepted as *the* truth in a believer's life, and God expects us to handle it with great care. We are challenged to interpret the Bible accurately and warned not to distort it. How can we know that we have the correct interpretation of a given passage or a whole book of the Bible, for that matter? How can we validate our interpretation? To begin addressing this matter, we will look at three passages that will help us form an initial answer. This study will open a path of exploration that will increase our confidence that we are indeed "handling accurately the word of truth." We will begin with Paul's mandate to Timothy and then turn to two passages in Peter's letters.



Study the Scriptures

READ THE PASSAGES: 2 TIMOTHY 2:14–15;
2 PETER 1:19–21; 2 PETER 3:14–18

Think Through the Questions:

1. What is assumed in the command "handling accurately the word of truth"?
2. What sorts of things lead one away from carefully handling the Scriptures?
3. How were the Scriptures given? What role did the Spirit play? What role did human authors play?
4. How does Peter describe Paul's letters? What did false teachers often do to Paul's intended meaning in his letters?

Summarize the Core Teaching of the Passage:

Write a paragraph, outline, annotate, or chart your conclusions— whatever best communicates for you. Describe how we are to handle the Word, how we received it from God, and what cautions we must take with God's Word.

Core teaching of 2 Timothy 2:14–15; 2 Peter 1:19–21; 2 Peter 3:14–18



Consult the Scholars

The following comments are designed to help you better understand the passage and to stimulate your thinking on the implications of the teaching.

Read and Reflect on this Brief Commentary on 2 Timothy 2:14–15; 2 Peter 1:19–21 and 3:14–18

We begin our study of these passages with Paul's challenge to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:14–15. Here he exhorts Timothy to stay on the path set by the Word, as he uses the Word in his ministry. He is literally not to get off the path that it cuts. One way he could get off the path is by getting into discussions about words. This implies that it can be tempting to leave the "straight path" of the Word and to start speculating about all sorts of hidden

meanings in specific words, rather than the objective meaning of the Bible itself. This is very insightful. It appears that, if one is careful, one can tell the difference between understanding and teaching the intended meaning of the Word and debating and teaching things that are not clearly in the passages. It also implies that Scripture was written using the normal conventions of language. Timothy was to avoid those who were speculating about certain words—words used beyond their normal meaning, that is, the meaning that can be seen by the context in which they are found.

Peter adds additional insights in his two passages in 2 Peter. In 2 Peter 1:19–21 he is very clear about a basic principle: No one can come up with his own private interpretation of Scripture other than the meaning that the prophets wrote, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The formula is this: Men spoke and wrote the Word directly from God, as moved by the Spirit. It is important to note that men are part of the equation. If you study the different writers of Scripture, you will see that the style of each is very different, showing the human element. But the message is protected and accurate—directly from God. This implies that there is one interpretation—the one given to a specific author at a specific time.

In 2 Peter 3:14–18 Peter refers to those who are distorting the teaching found in Paul's letters. Clearly Peter refers to the letters of Paul as Scripture. Some of the things Paul talks about are hard to understand and are easily distorted. Consequently, there are some who distort his intended meaning for their own purposes. Peter warns believers to watch out for such teachers. As you can see from this passage, the one true meaning is the author's meaning, in this case Paul's, and false teachers are those that distort that meaning in some way for their own purposes.

We can draw several principles of interpretation (hermeneutics) from these passages. Though these principles were once obvious to readers, they have been lost to many today because of the prevailing philosophy of Western postmodern culture that has banished the author in favor of a form of interpretation that lets the reader determine the meaning. Here are a few principles drawn from these passages that can guide us in interpreting the Bible:

1. Interpretation is not a personal matter. Rather, it involves finding the meaning uniquely written by a human author as he delivered God's message, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
2. The authors wrote with an intended meaning. This can be seen in Peter's passage concerning those who were distorting the intended meaning of Paul's letters.
3. We are to stay with the author's intended meaning of the text, using the normal conventions of the language in which it was written, avoiding the tendency to make up special meanings by using individual words of the passage to create debates, arguments, and special interpretations.

4. We are to take care to accurately interpret the Scriptures, being careful not to distort what the author actually said, recognizing that some passages may be difficult and require the skills of a careful workman.

Read and Reflect on Key Quotes:

The following quote is taken from *Validity in Interpretation* by E. D. Hirsch, an English professor. This text has influenced several major evangelical theologians, including Walter Kaiser and Elliott Johnson, to write major works clarifying the process of interpretation in very significant ways. Here is a quote that centers on his core idea—the importance of the author’s intended meaning for validating interpretation.

“It is a task for the historian of culture to explain why there has been in the past four decades a heavy and largely victorious assault on the sensible belief that a text means what its author meant. In the earliest and most decisive wave of the attack (launched by Eliot, Pound, and their associates) the battleground was literary: the proposition that textual meaning is independent of the author’s control was associated with the literary doctrine that the best poetry is impersonal, objective, and autonomous; that it leads an afterlife of its own, totally cut off from the life of its author....

“Thus, when critics deliberately banished the original author, they themselves usurped his place, and this led unerringly to some of our present-day theoretical confusions. Where before there had been but one author, there now arose a multiplicity of them, each carrying as much authority as the next. To banish the original author as the determiner of meaning was to reject the only compelling normative principle that could lend validity to an interpretation. On the other hand, it might be the case that there does not really exist a viable normative ideal that governs the interpretation of texts. This would follow if any of the various arguments brought against the author were to hold. For if the meaning of a text is not the author’s, then no interpretation can possibly correspond to the meaning of the text, since the text can have no determinate or determinable meaning.”¹

The next quote is by Walter Kaiser, from his seminal article entitled “Legitimate Hermeneutics.” In this article—working from Hirsch and others—he sets forth essential principles to guide us in interpreting the Word accurately. His work is unsurpassed in current evangelical scholarship.

“No definition of interpretation could be more fundamental than this: *To interpret we must in every case reproduce the sense the Scriptural writer intended for his own words.* The first step in the interpretive process is to link only those ideas with the author’s language that he connected with them. The second step is to express these ideas understandably.

“Yet at no point has modern society, including many evangelicals, resisted hermeneutical rules more strenuously than at the point of this definition. In our post-Kantian relativism, most interpreters have concluded, as E. D. Hirsch correctly analyzes, that ‘all “knowledge”

is relative' and a return to the author's own meanings is considered both unnecessary and wrong. Instead, meaning has often become a personal, subjective, and changing thing. 'What speaks to me,' 'what turns me on,' 'what I get out of a text' are the significant concerns, not what an author intended by his use of words....

"All our own notions of truth and principle must be set aside in favor of those the sacred writers taught if we are to be valid interpreters. In fact, the basic teaching of all of sacred theology is inseparably connected with the results of our hermeneutics; for what is that theology except what Scripture teaches? And the way to ascertain what Scripture teaches is to apply the rules and principles of interpretation. Therefore it is imperative that these rules be properly grounded and that their application be skillfully and faithfully applied. If the foundation itself is conjecture, imagination, or error, what more can be hoped for what is built on it?

"The Bible Is to Be Interpreted by the Same Rules as Other Books

Now it may be laid down as a first rule that the Bible is to be interpreted in the same manner and with the same principles as all other books.... God has deliberately decided to accommodate mankind by disclosing Himself in our language and according to the mode to which we are accustomed in other literary productions. While the content is vastly different, the medium of language is identical.

"The Principles of Interpretation Are as Native and Universal to Man as Is Speech Itself

A second rule is that man's basic ability to interpret is not derived from some science, technical skill, or exotic course open only to the more gifted intellects of a society. The general principles of interpreting are not learned, invented, or discovered by people. They are part and parcel of the nature of man as a being made in the image of God. Given the gift of communication and speech itself, man already began to practice the principles of hermeneutics. The art has been in use from the moment God spoke to Adam in the Garden, and from the time Adam addressed Eve, until the present. In human conversation, the speaker is always the author; the person spoken to is always the interpreter. Correct understanding must always begin with the meanings the speaker attaches to his own words.

"My Personal Reception and Application of an Author's Words Is a Distinct and Secondary Act From the Need First to Understand His Words

But some will contend that it is God who speaks in the Bible and not men; the men who wrote the Scriptures were the mere receptacles of what God wanted to say through them. Revelation, in this view, perhaps concealed as much from the authors as it made known to them. Therefore the normal rules of interpretation do not apply.

"The answer to this charge is easy. What God spoke, He spoke in human, not heavenly, language! Moreover, He spoke through the vocabularies, idioms, circumstances, and personalities of each of the chosen writers."²

Record any insights from the brief commentary and quotes:



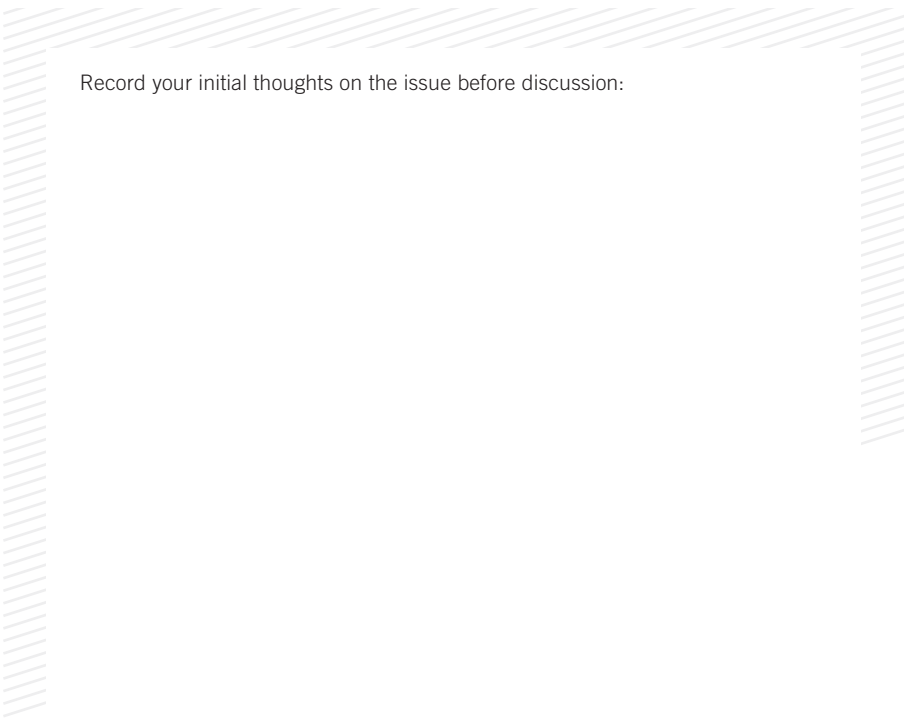
Think Through the Issues

It is common today for Christians to assume that there are many meanings to a biblical text. This is often accompanied by the unstated assumption that each person has a right to his or her own personal interpretation. This is most commonly seen in the small group movement where each participant takes a turn leading or facilitating the group. Each person is encouraged to share “what the passage means to you” or share “what you got out of the passage,” which is usually divorced from a search for and attempt to validate the author’s intended meaning. In this issue we will explore why it is critical to first determine the author’s meaning as well as identify key guidelines for doing so.

ISSUE: Accurately handling the Word

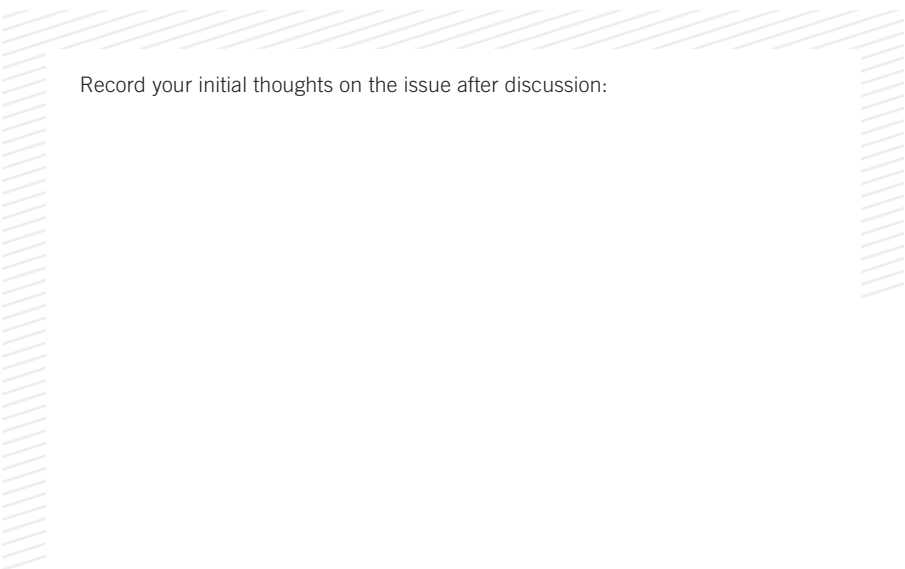
Think Through the Issue Before Discussion:

1. Why is it critical that we develop an ability to handle the Word with accuracy?
2. What problems will result from failing to be serious about sound principles of interpretation?
3. What are some of the arguments used by people to defend hidden meanings in biblical texts?
4. When can we fall into a Bible study style in which we merely share “what the text means to me” rather than what it really means?
5. What are some core principles of interpretation that can guide us in accurately handling the Word?



Record your initial thoughts on the issue before discussion:

Discuss the issue in your small group.



Record your initial thoughts on the issue after discussion:



Apply the Principles

It is now time to respond to what you have studied and discussed. Take your time on this section.

Think Back Through the First Three Steps.

Design an Application for Your Life.

Think through your approach to the Scriptures. Do you seek to discover the author's intended meaning of a passage before you begin working on the significance of the passage in your life? Do you have confidence that you are accurately handling the Word?

Write a brief summary of your emerging conviction on the importance of accurately handling the Word. Then list a few core principles to guide you in the interpretive process.