

EDITOR'S NOTE: Here is part three of our four-part series dedicated to helping sensitize our readers to sensible traits and habits of understanding the Bible.

PART THREE OF FOUR

Four foundational strategies to ensure a Christ-centered interpretation of the Bible:

1) Always understand that old covenant references are understood in the light of the new covenant, rather than the other way around. This principle may sound obvious, but as many (including the author) know from painful experience, it is often overlooked and leads to a world of hurt.

2) Consider the author and his audience—a passage may not have a meaning now unless it had an original meaning. Any contemporary application of a passage must in some way be related to the original meaning. Contrary to the claims of sensationalists who use and abuse the Bible to achieve their own purposes, biblical passages are not solely intended to be understood by any specific generation—past, present or future. A text cannot mean what it never originally meant.

Any meaning the Bible may have for any reader will never be in isolation from, nor will it be completely divorced from, the meaning it had to those who first heard or read its message.

Paul reminds us “Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit” (2 Corinthians 2:17). The word “peddle” is translated “corrupt” in the KJV and “adulterate” in the Moffatt translation. All study of the Bible is genuine and valid (or invalid) based on the degree to which the reader is faithful to the original purpose and intent of the author, the cultural setting and the literary genre the author used. A text without a context is a pretext, and pretexts often become the fuel to prove anyone’s already

Reading and UNDERSTANDING the BIBLE SENSITIVELY and SENSIBLY

existing theories and teachings—thus becoming *proof-texts*.

To check your own subjective ideas about a book or passage you are reading or studying, before you begin to study, write down what you believe to be the author’s purpose—then compare your initial

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impression of the author’s purpose with your later conclusions, after deeper study.

3) **Determine the genre of the book or passage.** The genre—the literary style—used by the author helps to further determine the author’s purpose. God inspired the message of the Bible, but he did so in and through humans and he did so in human language. In order to understand the message God has for us in the pages of the Bible we must read it using the normal rules and principles governing the message contained in any book.

The Bible is written in a wide variety of literary styles, including

narrative (story), history, poetry, letters, laws, psalms, proverbs (wisdom), parable and apocalyptic. All genres must be read within their goals and limitations of that genre of literature. It is a mistake, of course, to read the book of Revelation as if it is prose, or to read the wise sayings and advice of the proverbs as if they are laws or the book of Deuteronomy as if it is an instructive or corrective letter from the apostle Paul.

4) First, try to interpret the book or passage you are studying in its literary sense, according to the authors’ intended genre.

When a literal reading does not make sense, or when you wonder about someone who insists that the words you are reading be taken literally, then consider that the passage might be a figure of speech and taken symbolically. Sometimes this is virtually automatic: Isaiah

55:12 says the trees of the field will clap their hands. We realize this statement is a metaphor. We do not believe Jesus to say that he is literally bread—but that when he says “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35) he is using a metaphor, a physical symbol to point to a greater spiritual reality. Words like “as” or “like” are often a sign that a figure of speech follows. □

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