



Research Report

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How to Understand Scripture

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Every wind of doctrine (Ephesian 4:14) is blowing today. There is doctrinal confusion everywhere, which is illustrated in the bewildering variety of viewpoints on every doctrinal matter available on the Internet. Yet, Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would guide us into all truth (John 16:13). What went wrong? While there is no deficiency in the Divine promise, and while there are other reasons for the confusion, a major reason is that people are not approaching Scripture on its own terms. They are using methods that are not approved in Scripture itself.

The need to approach Scripture on its own terms is clearly taught in Scripture. Here is Isaiah 55:8 and 9: (8) “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. (9) For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Amongst other things, these verses explain four very important things:

1. Why revelation is necessary;
2. The need to accept Biblical revelation on its own terms;
3. Why man cannot call God’s inspired writing into question; and
4. Why nothing can be added to or taken away from Scripture.

Revelation is necessary because, unless God bridges it, there is an unbridgeable gap between God’s mind and mankind’s mind, between God’s knowledge and mankind’s knowledge. Once we understand that point, it is obvious that we must accept Biblical

revelation on its own terms. That implies that God's revelation cannot be called into question, further implying that mankind can neither add to nor subtract from Scripture.

We read in Job 11:7: "Canst thou by searching find out God?" It is clear that we need God's revelation to understand things that otherwise would remain inaccessible to us. Yet, it is also true that Scripture is meant to be understood by all (2 Timothy 3:15). Even as a child, Timothy was able to understand God's plan of salvation from Scripture. Thus, we would expect that Scripture is not unnecessarily complex and that it will yield its teachings to those who are prepared to apply the simple methodology that Scripture lays out for us when we read and study it.

Isaiah 1:18 reads: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Here we are invited to reason in relation to the plan of salvation. So the plan itself must be consistent with logic, reason, evidence and coherence. Thus, we would expect that the methodology for understanding that God lays out in Scripture will not only be accessible to all who desire to know the truths of Scripture but also that it will follow simple principles of reason and evidence to guide us to the truth.

Jesus knew that the set of the heart had more to do with understanding spiritual truths than the intellect. In Luke 5:22, He said to the scribes and Pharisees, "What reason ye in your hearts?" In another place, Jesus said, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (Matthew 11:25). So God never intended that scholars and theologians were to define how we should approach Scripture. That is not to say that learned scholars and theologians cannot add to our appreciation of Scripture, only that there is no privileged class when it comes to spiritual discernment.

Yet, we must avoid the other extreme. The unlearned must be careful to avoid wresting Scripture by a failure to apply the methodology laid down in Scripture. Peter warns that there are some parts of Scripture that are more difficult to understand than others and that some who are unlearned or unstable wrest these Scriptures to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16). So we must avoid the twin errors of considering Scripture too complex to be understood by any other than those learned in Biblical or theological studies or so simple that we do not need to apply any rules whatever in our study of Scripture.

With these principles in mind, the following table, which is spread over three pages, has been constructed. It examines some relevant texts or passages from Scripture, draws from them simple principles or methods that can be applied in our study of Scripture and indicates the consequences of our failure to apply them consistently.

Text or Passage	Principle or Method	Application	Failure to Apply
2 Timothy 3:16 “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All Scripture is to be used for establishing doctrine • All beliefs must harmonise with all of Scripture • Scripture is the benchmark 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek the consensus of Scripture as it is the only basis for true doctrine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple, conflicting beliefs or winds of doctrine e.g. universal justification and unconditional salvation
Isaiah 28:9, 10, 13 (9) “Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine?... (10) For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little...(13) But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little...”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All the Biblical testimony relevant to a particular doctrine or subject must be considered before conclusions are drawn • Each part of Scripture relevant to a topic must be carefully compared with other relevant parts • When the truth is discovered, all passages of Scripture relevant to a topic will be in harmony with each other • Scripture is self-interpreting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not accept any belief that is not consistent with all the Scriptural evidence and which has not emerged from the application of Biblical methodology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irreconcilable conflict over doctrine – Scripture is not essentially contested – its truths can be understood • Factionalism and disunity
Acts 17:11 “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scripture is the benchmark for belief • Check conclusions against Scripture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test all conclusions against the clearest statements of Scripture before you accept them • Where conflict remains, abandon the conclusion and try again to bring the Scriptural evidence into harmony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No self-correction available • Isaiah 43:1, 10, 11 – deny the conclusion that Jesus came into existence after the Father • Revelation 14:12; 22:14 – deny the conclusions that the law cannot be kept or that it has nothing at all to do with our salvation

<p>2 Timothy 2:15 “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give due weight to each part of Scripture • Scripture is self-interpreting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be faithful to the text, sensitive to the context and take it as it reads unless there is clear evidence it is to be taken figuratively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God’s disapproval and the needless shame of the incompetent use of Scripture
<p>2 Peter 3: 16 “As also in all his (Paul’s) epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We must allow the clearer passages to unlock the less clear passages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not build a case upon unclear or difficult passages, while ignoring the clearest statements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wresting of Scripture i.e. building a case on unclear passages – e. g. rejection of Godhead • Distorted beliefs, attitudes and practices that end in the spiritual destruction of the individual
<p>1 Corinthians 2:12-14 “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. (13) Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. (14) But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under the influence of the Holy Spirit, we are to compare spiritual things with spiritual • Spiritual discernment is needed to understand Scripture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply all Biblical methodology under the influence of the Holy Spirit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejection of truth • Inability to comprehend truth • Inappropriate regard for the opinions of people • Beliefs are treated like possessions • Fanaticism and extremism • Careless indifference to truth

<p>Isaiah 1:18 “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The truth is consistent with the demands of reason, evidence and coherence • Reason is subject to Revelation (See also Luke 5:22) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the context of submission to God’s revelation, apply the rules of reason, logic, evidence and coherence consistently and impartially 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irrational and harmful beliefs and practices • Emotional religion unconstrained by reason • Weakened and confused minds and mind control
<p>John 7:17 “If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We must practice what has already been revealed to us if we wish to maintain spiritual discernment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take active steps to preserve spiritual discernment • Remain aware of human fallibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Susceptibility to deception
<p>Matthew 5:6 “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We must hunger and thirst after righteousness • We must approach Scripture with a desire to apply its truths if we are to kept from error 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not approach Scripture without soul hunger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Susceptibility to accept beliefs that are pleasing to the carnal heart (Jeremiah 17:9)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revelation 22:18, 19 “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: (19) And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deuteronomy 4:2 reveals that the warning in Revelation 22:18, 19 apply to all of Scripture • We must not add to Scripture by taking it beyond what it says or reading into it that which is not there • We must not subtract from Scripture by denying what it says or failing to consider all of the Scriptural testimony on a subject 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always approach Scripture with due regard for the revealed consequences of misapprehending it and misusing it 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adding to Scripture is the sin of going beyond the truth [Principle approach]. It is to be found in tradition, legalism and extremism. • Subtracting from Scripture is the sin of apostasy or falling short of the truth. It is to be found in careless disregard of or rejection of what God reveals • Both groups are lost eternally