

II. Interpretation

When studying a passage of Scripture it is your goal to find out the meaning of the passage. In order to find the meaning you will need to employ hermeneutical¹ skills that will enable you to rightly divide the Word. By making use of these skills, you move from the question “what does this say?” to “what does this mean?”. Here are some simple hermeneutical steps to follow: *consider*, *compare*, and *consult*.

A. Consider

The first hermeneutical step is to *consider*. When reading a passage, there are at least two things you need to take the time to carefully consider. Consider the context and consider the clear meaning.

1. Consider the Context

The context reveals the setting for what was stated. When this principle isn't applied, verses taken out of context can result in dangerous theology. When we interpret a passage in light of its context, this will include a consideration of the immediate context, section context, book context, Biblical Theological context, and historical context.

2. Consider the Clear Meaning

When you read a passage, don't approach it with the view of trying to find out what it means to you. Your goal is to carefully read what the passage says, and then seek to draw out the clear meaning intended by the author. John Calvin made the following helpful remarks,

“Let us know, then, that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning; and let us embrace and abide by it resolutely. Let us not only neglect as doubtful, but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions those pretended expositions which lead us away from the natural meaning.”²

What is the clear, plain, and natural meaning of the text? What is it saying? A part of the process of considering the clear meaning of a passage involves consideration of the grammatical and historical factors. Regarding the importance of the grammatical consideration, Lois Berkhof notes, “The Bible was

¹ The word “hermeneutics” is derived from the Greek word *hermeneuō* (ἑρμηνεύω) which means “to translate” or “to interpret”. Over time it became a technical term to refer to the science and art of Biblical interpretation.

² John Calvin, *Galatians*, Baker Books, p. 136

written in human language, and consequently must be interpreted grammatically".³ When looking at the grammar, you are looking at things like the sentence structure, the meaning of the words, the main subject, and the commands, among other things. When considering historical factors you are to be mindful of who the author is, why are they writing it, and what were some of the social circumstances.

B. Compare

The second hermeneutical step is to *compare*. The best interpreter of Scripture is Scripture. The Westminster Confession of Faith states this principle clearly, "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly" (1.9). If a passage or phrase is not clear, then we are to interpret in light of another passage in Scripture that states the same principle with clarity. The principle of comparison also takes into consideration how a single passage of Scripture fits into the overall story of the Bible. Albert Mohler points out the importance of the overarching story,

"The Bible is not just a book of stories. It reveals one grand narrative from beginning to end. Borrowing from literary scholars, many Christians now speak of the Bible's metanarrative – its all-encompassing story line. In the Bible, God has revealed the story that underlies every true story, and in which every other true story finds its meaning. That is the story of God's determination to glorify Himself by saving sinners through the atonement accomplished by His own Son. As Christ Himself made clear, every word of Scripture serves to tell this story."⁴

When we are reading and striving to interpret a portion of Scripture, we are to understand it in comparison with the setting and storyline of the Biblical narrative.

C. Consult

The final hermeneutical step is to *consult*. After you have spent time carefully considering the passage, comparing with the rest of Scripture, it is then helpful to compare your findings with others. The best way to do this is to read and consult reliable Bible commentaries. This is not the place to provide a comprehensive list of the best commentaries and Bible study recourses, but below is an introductory list.

³ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, Baker Book House, 1950, p. 67

⁴ Albert Mohler, *The Conviction to Lead*, Bethany House Publishers, 2012, p. 40

Study Bibles	Bible Commentaries
<p>The following study Bibles provide helpful book introductions covering historical background and theological themes, book outlines, timelines, cross-references, and have around 20,000 study notes covering most verses in the Bible.</p> <p>ESV Study Bible The ESV Study Bible was released in 2008. It also contains some very helpful theological articles. The general editor is Wayne Grudem, and some of its contributors are JI Packer and Thomas Schreiner.</p> <p>MacArthur Study Bible The MacArthur Study Bible was first released in 1997 and is available in the following translations: ESV, NASB, NIV, and NKJV. The general editor is John MacArthur with contributions by some of the Master’s Seminary Faculty. A unique feature is that almost all of the NT notes have come as a result of MacArthur’s expository preaching.</p> <p>Reformation Study Bible Originally the <i>New Geneva Study Bible (1995)</i>, the updated Reformation Study Bible was released 2015. In addition to the study notes, it has many articles. The general editor is R.C. Sproul, and some of its contributors are Greg Beale, Sinclair Ferguson, and Michael Horton.</p>	<p><i>Expositor’s Bible Commentary</i> (12 Volumes)</p> <p><i>Calvin’s Commentaries</i> (22 Volumes)</p> <p><i>MacArthur New Testament Commentary</i> (33 Volumes)</p> <p><i>Baker’s NT Commentary</i> By Hendricksen and Kistemaker (12 Volumes)</p> <p><i>Wiersbe Bible Commentary Series</i></p> <p>Individual Books For a helpful list that give five commentaries on each book of the Bible, see: https://www.challies.com/best-commentaries-on-each-book-of-the-bible/</p>