

# How to Obtain Objectivity in Interpretation

## Introduction

Missionaries living in a remote village in the Amazon were beginning to learn the language and culture of the indigenous people that they hoped to reach with the gospel. As they began to develop friendships, there was one particular couple who caught their attention. From their Western perspective, this couple seemed to be “very much in love.” Unlike other married couples in the village, these two “love-birds” did everything together. The missionaries were quite confused when the village elders announced that they were going to have a “marriage counseling session” with this couple who seemed to be hopelessly in love. There was a reason that this couple seemed to be so “close” with one another. In reality, the two were extremely jealous and suspicious of each other. They didn’t dare let their spouse out of sight for fear of adultery. In this Amazonian culture, spouses typically do not “hang out” together as they go about their everyday routine. The missionaries came to the wrong conclusion because they viewed the indigenous people through their Western perspective. A proper grasp of the language and culture of the people helped them to avoid future mistakes as they progressed in their understanding.

Reading the Bible through the lens of our own cultural perspective can only result in drawing wrong conclusions. As students of God’s Word, we need some principles and guidelines that will help us obtain objectivity in our interpretation of Scripture.

When discussing passages in the Bible, people might say, “That’s just your interpretation!” Unfortunately, this statement often implies that there is no “correct” interpretation. This claim is typical of the postmodern world that we live in. It denies the possibility of objective interpretation. What they are really saying is, “I don’t agree with your interpretation of the Bible, and since no one really knows for sure what it means anyway, let’s just drop this discussion.”

This postmodern attitude cannot be an option for the student of God’s Word. Objective interpretation of God’s Word means discovering what the text means. To settle for anything less is to be satisfied with something other than the actual Word of God. We will never have definitive answers for every puzzling text in the Bible. Yet, we should diligently seek to understand the intended meaning of each passage of scripture.

## The Purpose of Language

The purpose of language is to enable effective communication between intelligent beings. Language was given by God for the purpose of being able to communicate with man. God is the originator of language. He needed a way to convey His message to mankind. God (being all-wise and all-loving) originated language to communicate all that was in His heart to us. It's only logical that He would expect people to understand it in its literal, normal, and plain sense.

God does not use language to play mind-games with us. The Word of God was not written in some special language or special code that needs to be deciphered in order to unlock some deeper meaning that is embedded in the words of the text. Since language was created by God for the purpose of conveying His message to mankind, then we must view the language of the Bible as sufficient to accomplish that purpose.

The postmodern mindset is that no one can really know for sure what the text of Scripture means. This philosophy contradicts God's very purpose for giving to us the gift of language. What God intends to communicate through His written Word can be known. But we need a set of principles to guide us so that we are not led astray by our own biases or cultural perspective.

## Preunderstanding

Our preunderstanding affects how we interpret God's Word. Preunderstanding includes what we understand, believe, or assume to be true before we study the Bible. Like a lens, we see everything through our preunderstanding. Postmodernism says that our preunderstanding so warps our view that we can never be totally objective as we attempt to interpret God's Word. However, if this were true then it would defeat the very purpose of the God-given gift of language. Objectivity is possible. Without objectivity, communication would be impossible. There would be no way to know whether we had correctly understood what was said. Even Postmodernists, who claim that objectivity is impossible, assume that others have the ability to objectively understand their claim. It is possible, at least in part, to have an objective view of God's Word. While we need to recognize that our preunderstanding affects how we view God's Word, it does not mean that it is impossible to be objective. We need to be aware of our preunderstanding in

order to guard against incorrect interpretation. And we need to yield our preunderstanding to the truth of God's Word in order to correct our faulty ideas or beliefs.

## Absolute Truth

Postmodernists will often argue that there is no such thing as absolute truth. They can often be heard saying, "that may be true for you, but it is not true for me." Or they might say, "what is true for one culture is not necessarily true for another culture." However, truth is the same for everyone, everywhere and at all times. If a Postmodernist tells you that there is no such thing as absolute truth, just ask him one question: "Is that absolutely true?" If he says "yes", then he has contradicted his own argument. If he says "no", then he opens the door for the possibility of absolute truth to exist. His contention that absolute truth does not exist is a self-defeating argument.

Since absolute truth is a reality, you can expect to find absolute truth when you read the Bible. In fact, the absolute truth found in Scripture will change the way you think and change what you believe. God's Word does correct our faulty ideas and beliefs; therefore, it is imperative that we yield our preunderstanding to the authority of God's written revelation.

Paul wrote, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17)."

As we bring our preunderstanding into subjection to the inspired Scripture, it will bring about correction in our thinking.

## The Law of Non-contradiction

An important aspect of absolute truth is the law of non-contradiction. This law is a rule of logic that says, "A statement cannot be both true and false in the same sense at the same time." For example, I could say, "I am here." That statement is either true or false. It cannot be both true and false at the same time. The law of non-contradiction is an aspect of our preunderstanding which is universal. It is the same for everyone, everywhere and at all times. Without it there would be no way to tell the difference between what's true and what's false. The law of non-contradiction helps to make communication between

people possible. When people communicate, it must be on the basis of the universality of truth, or communication is not possible.

## Principles of Objective Interpretation

Some aspects of our preunderstanding are universal. This makes communication possible between people. Because truth is universal, it is possible to discover truth in God's Word. However, there are also aspects of our preunderstanding which are unique to us as individuals. Some aspects of our preunderstanding are also unique to us as members of a particular culture. These present potential pitfalls as we seek to understand the truth of God's Word. In spite of these challenges, we know that "the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12)." God's Word can change the way we think and can change our lives. Good principles of interpretation can uncover the truths of God's Word which is able to mold us into the image of Christ.

Let's briefly consider some of these principles of interpretation.

## Literal Interpretation

What do we mean by "literal" interpretation? To interpret "literally" means to explain the original sense of the speaker or writer according to normal, customary and proper uses of words and languages. Every word is given the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether used in writing, speaking, or thinking. This method has also been called "normal" interpretation. The literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It has also been called "plain" interpretation.

The literal principle does recognize figures of speech. Symbols, figures of speech, and types are all interpreted plainly in this method. These are not contrary to literal interpretation. In fact, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.

Literal interpretation results in accepting the text of Scripture at its face value. Based on the philosophy that God originated language for the purpose of communicating His

message to man and that He intended man to understand that message, literal interpretation seeks to interpret that message plainly.

David L. Cooper explained the meaning of literal interpretation: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”

If one does not use the plain, normal, or literal method of interpretation, all objectivity is lost. What check would there be on the variety of interpretations which man’s imagination could produce if there were not an objective standard which the literal principle provides? To try to see meaning other than the normal one would result in as many interpretations as there are people interpreting.

### Historical interpretation

Scripture must be studied in light of its historical context. We must consider the times in which the passage was written, as well as the circumstances and conditions. Was the passage you are studying written in the Old or New Testament? Which dispensation was it written in? Who was the author? Knowing the historical context is vital to understanding the meaning!

### Grammatical Interpretation

The meaning of the words in the passage of scripture should be studied. This involves considering how words are used in their context and the resultant meaning. It may also involve considering the etymology and history of the words being studied. The grammar, or relationship of the words to each other, must also be considered.

### Context

When it comes to Bible interpretation, context is king! Interpreting a verse apart from its context is like trying to analyze a painting by looking at only a single square inch of the canvas. It would be like trying to evaluate a piece of music by listening to a few short notes. The context is absolutely critical to properly interpreting Scripture.

Both immediate context and remote context must be considered. That means comparing Scripture with Scripture as well as the study of the immediate context. No verse of Scripture can be divorced from the verses around it nor from the rest of the Bible.

In language, words gain their meaning from context. A given word may have different meanings in different contexts. For example, a mother might ask her son getting out of the bath tub, “are you clean?” In other words, have you washed off all of the dirt? In contrast, a police officer might ask a known drug addict, “are you clean?” In this context, the officer wants to know if the known drug addict is free from drugs.

When determining the meaning of a word, you must consider its immediate context. How is the word used in that verse? Its near context must also be considered. How is the word used elsewhere in that passage or book of the Bible? Also consider its distant context. How did that author use the word in other books of the Bible? How did other authors use it in the Bible? It can also be helpful to consider its root meaning and origin. Considering its cultural usage in non-Biblical writings may also be helpful.

## Conclusion

Objectively understanding the intent of the author is our goal in Bible interpretation. How is this done? It can only be accomplished by taking the words of Scripture at face value. It is done through the consideration of the grammatical (according to the rules of grammar), historical (consistent with the historical setting of the passage), and contextual (in accord with its context) method of interpretation.

The goal of literal, grammatical-historical interpretation is to discern the author’s intended meaning. We need to consciously separate the author’s meaning (interpretation) from the significance for today (application). We need to first ask, “What did the author mean?” Only after that question has been answered should we ask, “What does this mean to me?” Unfortunately, many people skip the first question and jump immediately to the second question.

We can discover the author’s intended meaning by 1) piecing together the world that he lived in (historical interpretation); 2) studying the entire discourse (literary section) to obtain the context; and 3) considering the grammatical issues within the text.