

# Studying the Bible

Hermeneutics & Exegesis

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### Introduction

What is the most important thing to remember about studying the Bible? It is vital to begin with prayer. We must never forget that if we are really to discover the treasures contained within the Bible, we must ask the Holy Spirit to give us insight and wisdom, to open our eyes. We only need to look around us today to see what happens when Christians do not approach the Bible with humility and reverence, when Christians interpret the Bible out of context - remember even satan quoted from the Bible.

Real Bible study sets your heart on fire.

I wonder how many of us here have heard of the words 'hermeneutics' and 'exegesis', or even know what they mean? But when we discover their meaning together, we will begin to realize that they are at the heart of practically every way in which we can study the Bible, and that we have all applied them in part in our daily study times with God.

### EXEGESIS

Exegesis is discovering the original meaning of the text. It involves asking careful questions about:

- **perspective:** this is to do with the historical focus of the text; the times, culture, geography and politics of the age.
- **structure:** this is to do with the framework of thought and flow of the argument (context). It has been said that "Text without context is pretext" (empty text). We must recognise the units of thought and their relationship to each other. Over each sentence we must ask the questions:
  - "What has been said before?"
  - "What is being said next?"
  - "What is actually being said?"
  - "What is the point being made?"
  - "Why is it being said right here?"
  - "Why is this being said?"
- **meaning:** this is to do with the language and concepts being used. This leads us to the important science of linguistics. What are the words being used, what are the ideas they are wanting to communicate? We all have our 'favourite' Bible; it may be the one that we have been brought up on, the one we had at school, or the one the Church uses etc. But why are there different translations of the Bible? At the end of the day, ALL translations of the Bible are equally valid, and TOGETHER they provide us with a fuller picture of what the writers are trying to communicate. A literal translation of the word 'eirene' in classical Greek is the sense of 'a truce', but from the New Testament Greek we are to understand, from the context or meaning, that the word is used to represent 'peace' in the sense of the Hebrew 'shalom' meaning 'wholeness' (Romans 8:6). It is easy to translate a word in Greek into many different English words, but often-times they are all equally valid. That is why meaning is so important in exegesis.

### HERMENEUTICS

Hermeneutics is working to discover the present meaning of the text. It involves key principles and guidelines:

- a text cannot be given a meaning which it would have been impossible for it to have had originally. The true meaning of a text is what God intended it to mean when it was first spoken. Any deeper understanding and insight in terms of the new covenant is built on the original meaning. Jesus Himself built upon and fulfilled the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures. He often quoted directly from the Hebrew Scriptures (Matthew 26:31 {cf Zechariah 13:7}), and indirectly (Matthew 19:4-6 {cf Genesis 1:27, 5:2, 2:24}).
- when we share common ground and circumstances with the people who heard the original words of the text the meaning of the text is the same for us as it was for them. There is a 'dynamic equivalent' between us.
- we can only extend the application of the text where the principle in the text can be seen to stand apart from that particular text. For example, "don't be unequally yoked with unbelievers" (2 Corinthians 6:14) is not about marriage so is it valid to apply it?
- always distinguish between what is central to a passage and what is not. Would the subject have been an issue if it was not being mentioned here [eg "baptism for the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:29) The issue here is resurrection not baptism for the dead]. So many cults around us today have grown into existence by reading things into the Bible that simply are not there, e.g. Central Church of Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Christian Scientists. We need to stand for truth, for God's Word.
- identify what issues are essentially moral and therefore absolute [eg forbidding murder, Exodus 20:13] and those that are not [eg eating blood, Deuteronomy 12:23].
- note where attitudes to a Scriptural subject are consistently interpreted [e.g. forbidding adultery] and where there is a change [e.g. polygamy].
- learn to distinguish between absolute principles and specific applications. Paul talking about women and long hair (1 Corinthians 11:5-12) is simply illustrating the key issues of attitude. Eating meat (Romans 14:13-18) is dealing with the issue of evangelism and outreach, compare with (Acts 15:29). Sins are never cultural, but foot washing may be.
- determine the cultural options open to the writer; is this what we would expect a person writing at this time to say? The fewer the cultural options open to the writer, the greater the chance that what is being written is culturally relative. For example, the ancient world accepted both slavery and homosexuality, the New Testament challenges both. It is the truth that stands.
- keep alert to the cultural differences that may not immediately be obvious. Attitudes to women; they were considered to be chattels, rarely given education, so the New Testament attitude is more radical and liberating than often realised. Political structures were totalitarian, not democratic, so biblical statements need to be read in this light.
- keep sensitive, prayerful and teachable.

Think about hermeneutics and exegesis as you come to meditate on the bible in private either incorporating these principles into your own readings or practise them first on a passage such as Luke 7:11-17. What is most important is that these guidelines are used to help you grow in your understanding of the bible and can be built on by God as your personal bible study develops deeper.