

Using The Standard Properly: Simple Rules For Honest Bible Study

Franklin Church of Christ
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February 8, 2004
AM Worship

Introduction:

Is the Bible an unfathomable book that only the most learned people can understand? My answer is a resounding, “No.” What then makes people who all claim to follow the same book come up with different conclusions? What makes so many say, “Well, the Bible is confusing so we must not be dogmatic”? Typically, these stances say far more about the individuals making them than about the Bible (*cf. Hebrews 5:11*). On the one hand, I recognize parts of the Bible are difficult to understand (*II Peter 3:16*). Regrettably, however, far too often, when we claim a part of the Bible is confusing, what we really mean is that it seems to contradict what we already believe. Myriads of people are absolutely convinced God would never require baptism. Passages such as **Mark 16:16; John 3:3-5** and **Acts 2:38** confuse them. Their defenses against such passages are statements such as the following:

“Well, we just aren’t sure that those last few verses of Mark are really supposed to be there.”

“Well, the Bible uses the word ‘water’ in a lot of different ways, so we can’t be dogmatic about that.”

“Well, we just can be sure whether ‘for’ means ‘in order to’ and ‘because of’ in **Acts 2:38**.”

To the unprejudiced reader, these statements can be seen as prejudiced confusion. But to those prejudiced against baptism, they are the final defense. Instead of spending our time pointing fingers at others, we must make sure we are using the standard properly.

In past lessons, we have already dealt with some issues along these lines. We have addressed the difference between the Old and the New Testaments. We have addressed the different styles and genres of literature used in the Bible. In this lesson, we will note five simple rules for honest Bible study.

Discussion:

- I. We must keep every scripture in context.
 - A. We must not take any word, verse or passage out of its context. Taking something in context means to take it “with text.” That is, we determine its meaning based on the text around it. Why is this important? As some have said, we can teach anything we want out of the Bible. For instance, the Bible says in **Psalms 14:1**, “There is no God.”
 - B. As we apply this very simple rule of Bible study, we will do two things. We first examine the immediate context of this statement. What does the Bible say in the immediate text around this phrase? We secondly examine the remote context. That is, we consider what the Bible says on this subject in other passages. In this case, we remember **Genesis 1:1**. The Bible begins with the existence of God. Certainly no verse would contradict that. In the immediate context, we see that this is actually a quote from one called a fool. The Bible does not support atheism.
- II. We must use the sum of scriptures, not just one passage.
 - A. We must use the sum of scripture to determine what God says on a topic. As **Psalms 119:160** says, “The sum of Your word is truth” (ASV). We cannot base our views on one passage.
 - B. For instance, the one verse known by more people than any other is **John 3:16**. Many base all their ideas regarding God’s nature and character on this verse. Additionally, many base their entire concept of salvation on it. However, we need to read passages that define love (**I Corinthians 13:4-7; I John 4**) and belief (**Hebrews 11; James 2**). We need to read passages that describe God’s multiple characteristics (**Romans 11:22**) and multiple requirements for salvation (**Romans 10:9-10; Acts 2:38**). We must use the sum of scripture.
- III. We must keep the scriptures in harmony.
 - A. Paul pointed out that what he taught was not contradictory saying both “No,” and “Yes,” at the same time (**II Corinthians 1:17-19**). Further, Paul told the Corinthians that he taught the same thing everywhere (**I Corinthians 4:17**). God’s message, no matter who is speaking or to whom, is consistent, unified and harmonious. Therefore, if our understanding of one passage contradicts our understanding of another, we are making a mistake somewhere.
 - B. We must learn not to jump on a shallow interpretations of any passage without harmonizing it with everything we know about other scriptures. For instance, we go back to **John 3:16**. We have to harmonize it with **Romans 10:9-10** and **Acts 2:38**. One passage says we need to

believe, another says we need to believe and confess, still yet another says we have to repent and be baptized for the remission of our sins. These passages are not to be argued against one another. Rather, we must see how they fit together. They fit together when we understand that the faith of which Jesus spoke in **John 3:16** is not just mental assent, but is true conviction, completed by obedience such as confession, repentance and baptism (**James 2:21**).

IV. We must allow the simple to define the complex.

- A. Study is a growth process (**I Peter 2:2; Hebrews 5:12-6:3**). It works from simple and shallow to complex and deep. That being the case, we recognize that the complex and deep issues of scripture will never come back to rewrite the foundational principles.
- B. There are several passages about which I am not convinced I know what they fully mean. However, with nearly all of them I am very convinced of things they cannot mean because of other simpler, straightforward passages. For instance, **Revelation 20:4** speaks of martyred saints reigning with Christ for 1000 years. I have some strong ideas regarding what this passage means. However, I am not convinced that I absolutely understand this verse or the entire chapter. Having said that, I am absolutely convinced of some things this chapter cannot be saying. It cannot be saying that Jesus is coming to the earth some time in our future to establish an earthly kingdom. Other passages forbid that interpretation. For instance, **John 18:36** said Jesus' kingdom was not of this world. **Mark 9:1** said some of those to whom Jesus was speaking would still be alive when His kingdom was established. **Colossians 1:13** said that Christians are already delivered into Christ's kingdom. Finally, **Revelation 1:9** said that John, along with his readers, were companions in the kingdom when he wrote the book of **Revelation**. He could not possibly be saying that the kingdom would be established thousands of years later. He must mean something else. Certainly, I continue to study **Revelation 20**, but allowing the simple to define the complex has helped me narrow the path a great deal.

V. We must remember that we are growing.

- A. We must keep this in mind when we come across passages that we are certain we still do not understand. Some Bible students come across difficult passages and decide that if they do not understand them, there must be no understanding them. They leave the faith, claiming the Bible cannot be trusted. If we are still growing, as **II Peter 1:5-11** demonstrates we must be, then we are going to find issues we do not understand. We must simply keep studying the Bible. The greater foundation developed by more study elsewhere will eventually answer our questions.
- B. We must also keep this in mind when we believe we have all the answers to any doctrinal questions already figured out. I have some pretty strong opinions regarding the meaning of **Job**, **Matthew 24**, anointing with oil in **James 5:14**, baptism of the dead in **I Corinthians 15:29** and blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. I have studied all of these issues repeatedly and I am certain that my present opinion on each one is correct. However, I thought my last opinion on each one of these was correct as well. If we ever forget that we are growing, we close ourselves off to being corrected in the areas where we might be wrong. Some areas, like the ones I have just mentioned, may not seem so critical. However, I have also studied the issue of baptism. I am absolutely certain I am right on it. I would stake my soul on it and everyone else's. But I also thought that when I did not believe baptism was necessary.
- C. I am not saying we should never take a stand on issues. We must take our stands based on what we believe the Bible teaches right now. We cannot make decisions based on what we might believe 10 years from now. However, we must always approach our Bibles freshly, recognizing we might be wrong. If we are right, the fresh look will only prove it to us again. If we are wrong, only the fresh look and willingness to grow will ever let us learn what is right.

Conclusion:

If we are going to use the proper standard properly and honestly, we have to follow these rules. Otherwise, we will continue to promote the confusion and division that is already rampant in our world. God's Word was not given to us to confuse us or divide us. Rather, it was given to save us. As Paul said in **Acts 20:32**, God's word, when used properly, will build us up and give us an inheritance among the sanctified. Let us pray that we always use God's standard properly.