

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia
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Elementary Apologetics
Lesson #6

WHY I BELIEVE

The Bible and Interpretation

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Bible is perfect in every detail and is a sure foundation for one's Christian Faith. However, there is the matter of interpretation of the Word. Theoretically there is one Bible and one supreme interpreter of the Bible, the Holy Spirit; therefore there should be one interpretation. However practically this does not work out, for Christians, though all agree on the fundamentals of the Faith (things clearly taught), often disagree with one another on secondary theological issues. NOTE: There is nothing wrong with the Bible, nor has the Holy Spirit failed His task, but Christian men still have sin natures and are liable to error in interpretation.
- B. Much of the problem in interpretation comes from ministers who are not qualified or trained to be good students of the Word of God. They have not been grounded in Hebrew, Greek, Theology and Church History; therefore they cannot and do not study the Bible.

II. REASONS FOR DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

- A. Lack of objectivity. Men often come to the Bible to substantiate their own ideas rather than letting the Bible speak for itself.
- B. Human prejudices. Men come to the Bible with their personal backgrounds and prejudices and will not open their minds to the clear and plain teachings of the Bible.
- C. Ignorance. Some folks are just ignorant of what the Bible teaches and with ignorance usually comes a great deal of dogmatism.
- D. Farfetched ideas. Often men will let their imagination run and read things into the Bible that are not there.
- E. Narrow mindedness. Men get set in their ways of preaching so dogmatically on secondary issues that they would not and could not change their view if they were shown the truth because their pride is at stake.

- F. Poor principles of interpretation. Many men simply do not know how to properly interpret scripture and their Bible reading and preaching is more devotional than doctrinal and exegetical.

III. **BASIC LAWS OF INTERPRETATION (HERMENEUTICS):** Just as in every other science there are laws that govern the search for the truth, there are also basic laws that govern the interpretation of scripture. This is called the science of hermeneutics.

- A. Word study: The first step is to make a word study, seeking to find the basic meaning of a word. For instance, the word repent has two meanings in the Greek, but it is just translated “repent” in the English Bible. Metamellemi, which means to be sorry, speaks of the emotional element in repentance, but has nothing to do with weeping and crying (although this may accompany true repentance in some). Metanoieo means to change one’s mind and looks at the intellectual and volitional elements of repentance. This is the most frequent use of “repentance” in the New Testament.
- B. Immediate context: The study of words and sentences should be studied in the immediate context of the paragraph or paragraphs.
- C. Context of the book: The meaning of the paragraph should be analyzed in light of the total argument of the book. NOTE: More error is made in interpretation by taking verses out of context than for any other reason.
- D. Compare scripture with scripture: Words, sentences, paragraphs, etc., should be compared with other parts of the Bible. For instance, if studying a Pauline epistle, then we should look in other writings of Paul for the meaning before going to other New Testament writers.
- E. Difficult passages are to be interpreted by clear passages: Doctrines should not be built around unclear verses or passages but verses or passages that are clear should be used to interpret the unclear verses and passages.
- F. Compare with other interpreters: It is wise to compare one’s conclusions with other interpreters in the area of commentaries or systematic theologies. NOTE: It is wise to beware to your interpretation if no one else has ever commented the same way on a passage. There is no new truth under the sun.
- G. Church History: It is wise to see how the Holy Spirit taught others in the past. Christianity is a dogmatic religion and is not subject to change because it is based on objective fact. The history and development of Christian doctrine is very important. This enables us to see the sweeps in doctrine and the heresies held and helps us interpret the scriptures more accurately.

IV. **LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE**

- A. Evangelicals hold to a literal interpretation of the Bible; that is, what the Bible says is what the Bible means. They accept the normal or plain meaning of the words of the Bible. Spiritualizing scripture is to take away the obvious meaning. Evangelicals believe that the Bible is to be interpreted in the sense in which the authors intended it to be received by readers.
- B. To believe in the literal interpretation of scripture does not mean that there are no figures of speech in the Bible. The Bible is filled with poetry, prose and other literary forms. For instance, when Isaiah speaks of “trees clapping their hands” (Isa. 55:12) and the “mountains skipping like rams” (Psa. 114:4, 6) it does not mean that one who takes the Bible literally views such statements as literal. This is obviously figurative language. However, all figures of speech and symbolism in the Bible is designed by God to teach a literal truth.
- V. A PRACTICAL PROBLEM IN INTERPRETATION (II Peter 3:9): What is the meaning of “God is not willing (boulomai) that any should perish (apoluo) but that all should come to repentance (metanoieo)?”
- A. Universalism: The word “willing” is the Greek word boulomai which usually means a planned purpose or a sovereign will. If this verse refers to salvation and the “any” and “all” refer to mankind in general, then this verse teaches universalism, for it is God’s sovereign will that none should perish and all will come to repentance. OBJECTIONS: Obviously this contradicts other teachings of the Bible, for we know that not all will be saved (John 3:16; 3:36; 14:6).
- B. Desire of God: Most interpreters make a distinction between the desire and the sovereign will of God; that is, it is not God’s emotional desire that any should perish but in His hidden plan some do perish. OBJECTIONS: (1) the word for “willing” is the strong word which means a planned purpose, referring to God’s sovereign will; (2) it is difficult to make a distinction between God’s will and God’s desire for several Old Testament passages indicate that God’s desires do come to pass (Job 23:13; Psa. 132:13-14).
- C. Elect of God: The above explanations are unsatisfactory for the keen Bible student, so he must now go to the immediate context of the Epistle of Peter. The “any” and “all” refer back to the “usward” of the same verse and to the “beloved” of verses 1 and 8. Thus it is God’s determined purpose to save all the elect before the second coming of Christ. The “any” and “all” refer to the total community of the elect of God who will come to Christ before the promise of His second coming. NOTE: This view is acceptable if the context is referring to salvation, for it fits grammatically, contextually and theologically.
- D. Believers and False Teaching: If one takes the immediate context and the general argument of II Peter, he may get a different interpretation. The context is about those false teachers who were denying the coming of the Lord (3:4). Apparently some of the Christians had fallen prey to this false teaching. Thus God is

longsuffering towards those who had fallen into apostasy, not willing (purposing) that any should perish (perish in the sense of holding to this false doctrine), but that all should come to repentance (that these Christians should repent of this false teaching). NOTE: Many times “perish” and “repentance” are used in a non-saving sense in the New Testament.

VI. CONCLUSION

- A. No Christian has all the truth for we are all in need of further illumination on the Word of God. We must keep studying the Bible and check all teaching by the Bible itself. Take no man’s word for anything and check everything that you hear by the Word.
- B. Do not close your mind to truth. Every person has blind spots and if God should show you new truth do not be too proud to admit your wrong. It is not too wise to be dogmatic on secondary theological issues, for you may get new light upon further study of the inspired Bible.