

Why Do We Need To Interpret The Bible?

Bible Answers About The Bible

"God said it, I believe it, and that settles it." "I may not understand the Bible, but I believe it." "You don't have to interpret the Bible. Just read it and do what it says." People make these statements and others like them without realizing that the Bible needs to be interpreted. For example what does a parent do when the Bible says, "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death" (Exod. 21:17)? What is one to do when reading, Mark 9:43, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out."

Furthermore, just because someone places an interpretation on a passage doesn't necessarily make it right. After chloroform was developed in England, doctors wanted to use it to help women with childbirth. However, women refused because of Gen. 3:16— "with pain you will give birth to children." Only when it was shown from Gen. 2:21 that God "caused the man to fall into a deep sleep" to create woman would women accept chloroform.

By Biblical interpretation we mean "to explain the meaning of; make understandable" (Webster). When one interprets the Bible one is trying to determine what a biblical statement meant to its author and his readers, and then how it applies to us today. This is in harmony with what the Lord commands us to do in 2 Tim. 2:15—"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth." In other words we are called to interpret correctly the "word of truth."

This practice is not new. Moses interpreted and applied the Ten Commandments given in Ex. 20. The Book of Deuteronomy is Moses' interpretation and application of them. The prophets interpreted God's Law for the people and challenged them to obey it (Neh. 8:8). Jesus Christ interpreted the Old Testament scriptures concerning Himself for His disciples (Lk. 24:27).

We are not strangers to this business of interpretation. Lawyers interpret the law for their clients, judges interpret the law for the lawyers, and police interpret the law for citizens. Also counselors help families interpret their problems. These are just a few examples of the fact that interpretation is a fact of life.

When Paul used the expression "handling accurately the word of truth" he meant to handle correctly, to teach the truth correctly and faithfully. This requires that we study diligently so that in every circumstance and situation we may handle correctly the word of God. To do this requires that we recognize some fundamental truths about three dispensations of religion which have existed on earth. After the creation of mankind in the beginning, there was instituted the Patriarchal Age or dispensation. This age began with Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and continued until God

gave the Law through Moses, about 1491 B.C. During this age a family type of religion and worship prevailed. The father of each family was the prophet and priest. God dealt with each family directly through the father. What was a command to one patriarch and his family may not have been a command in every case to all the others, although the moral and religious laws were uniform.

The Mosaic or Jewish dispensation began with the giving of the Law of Moses at Horeb. It was given only to the people with Moses there and their descendants. It was not given to the Gentiles nor the people before them (Deut. 5:1-3). This law contained the ten commandments and all of the ceremonial laws. This was a national system of worship and religion for the Jews as the chosen nation of God. One purpose of that law was to keep Abraham's race distinct until the seed should come (Rom. 4:16-19). This temporary dispensation lasted until Jesus died on the cross (Col. 2:14-17). The nature of this dispensation was both civil and religious.

The Christian dispensation had its beginning after Jesus arose from the dead, ascended to His Father's right hand in heaven, took His seat on David's throne, and sent the Holy Spirit upon the apostles in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost to empower them for the great work of preaching the gospel and converting precious souls. This is the final age or dispensation and it will last until the end of the world (Matt. 28:18-20). The New Testament is the written law of this age. It contains 27 books: the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; one book of history, Acts; 21 letters; and one book of prophecy, Revelation.

The laws of previous dispensations do not apply to us in the Christian dispensation unless there is specific provision in the New Testament. For instance, such things as circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, animal sacrifices, burning of incense, and instrumental music in worship are definitely not taught in the New Testament for God's people today (Gal. 5:2-4). Therefore, it is absolutely essential to "handle accurately" or "interpret" God's word.

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