

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

**For some reason** the act of studying the Bible is thought by some to be a random process. This assumption is not made with any other field of inquiry. The search for truth in any other field has a certain procedure or specific rules to follow. This is necessary because without some guidelines any research would produce some facts which could/would be misinterpreted.

These guidelines are even more important when studying the Bible because the consequences of error are eternal. In Bible investigation hermeneutics, the art or science of interpreting literature, provide these rules of investigation. If we diligently follow valid hermeneutical principles during our search for the truth in the Bible we will ensure the results reached are, indeed, truth.

Because it is outside the scope of this book to prove, we are assuming for this study the verbal inspiration of the Bible. There are many books which prove beyond a reasonable doubt the truth of this statement. Just search the Internet for "Bible inspiration" and you will find more than enough evidence. If you in any way doubt this fact please delay this study until you have resolved this issue to your own satisfaction.

Have you ever wondered why there are so many ways to (mis)understand the Bible? Everyone reads the same book and yet get so many different meanings out of the same words. How is this possible? Most are honest, sincere people. I am convinced that in every single case of contradictory views, at least one of the parties has ignored or rejected one or more of these valid principles of hermeneutics.

Every single case of religious error can be attributed to a lack of consistency in applying these guidelines.

I know that the last sentence will be challenged by every thinking Bible student, and that is all of you, else you wouldn't be reading this book. I only ask you to reserve your judgment until you have read the entire list of guidelines and the evidence that supports each one. If you still disagree with the last paragraph then please email me one example of someone who followed all these guidelines consistently and still reached an erroneous conclusion.

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

If, on the other hand, consistently following these guidelines will always produce truth, then these principles of hermeneutics should be a required course in every Christian college, taught in every Sunday-school in the land, studied by every sincere Christian and taught to every new convert. The consequences of not doing so are obvious, catastrophic and eternal.

Therefore, if we have a sincere desire to know the truths set forth in God's word we must approach the effort with a careful and steadfast application of these guidelines to ensure our end result matches our original desire. Thankfully, most of these guidelines are common sense. Many people have even acquired some of these principles subconsciously. Any way of learning these rules is good. Most of us, however, need to see a detailed, orderly explanation in writing in order to strengthen our study habits and ensure that the results of our "seeking the truth" are rewarded with just that, ... The Truth.

With this in mind let us now examine several principles of hermeneutics or prerequisites to Bible study, that will assist us in our search for the truth. After a study of each guideline we will then consider the implications of not conscientiously and consistently applying that prerequisite to *every* search for the truth, or the *consequences if neglected*.

After studying each prerequisite ask yourself this question: "Are there *any* queries for Bible truth where this prerequisite should/can not be applied?"

## **Prerequisite 1** | *First and foremost we must love the truth!*

Now, before you just nod agreement to this obvious axiom and skip to the next prerequisite please allow me to emphasize one scripture, 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12. (NIV)

*(9) "The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, (10) and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. (11) For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie (12) and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness."* (emphasis added -cb)

Notice verse 11. Paul says that if we do not have a love for the truth God himself will send us a delusion so that we will believe the lie. In other words,

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

if we want to believe something so badly that we ignore the available evidence or reject it, then God will give us enough evidence via a strong delusion to believe the lie that we want to accept ... and thereby be lost. We should all have an idealistic, philosophical and practical love for the truth, being always ready to change our views in accordance with the truth of the Word. We must have a commitment to follow the evidence wherever it leads or as Alexander Campbell said:

*"... Never to hold any sentiment or proposition as more certain than the evidence on which it rests; or in other words that our assent to any proposition should be precisely proportioned to the evidence on which it rests. All beyond this we esteem enthusiasm –all short of it, incredulity,"* (Preface to the First Edition of The Christian Baptist, July 4, 1823).

This is the only way that we can know that what we believe is, in reality, *truth* and not a delusion from God.

This is not as easy as it sounds. Several years ago in a Sunday school class, in an effort to illustrate this idea, I asked "If the Bible told us to change our religion and become a \_\_\_\_\_ how many of you would change?" Only a very few held up their hands. Most could not (or maybe would not) accept the idea of change even if the Bible gave the instructions!! We have to ask ourselves if the positions we hold are a result of loving the truth which prompted us to study and reach conclusions based on the evidence of scripture and logic or, if we hold our positions because we have always been taught them or maybe just because we **like** them? Are we really willing to change our thinking if the evidence leads us to do so? Consider the following logic:

**If** we do not love the truth, **then** God, himself, will send us a strong delusion (a working of error - ASV) and we will believe the lie, 2 Thessalonians 2:11.

**If** God sends us a strong delusion, **then** we will not know it and we will believe the falsehood.

**If** this possibility is real, **then** we must be very careful about what we believe.

**If** we must be very careful what we believe, **then** we must believe only what is supported by the most and best evidence.

If you ask anyone if they love the truth, every rational person would say "yes." But how do we really know we love the truth? Is there a test that will verify that we really do indeed love the truth? There seems to be only one test to

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

verify that a person really does love the truth: if we are willing to objectively evaluate the evidence and change when the evidence warrants!

If you think or say something like, “you’re not going to change my mind!” Then your mind is closed and you cannot evaluate the evidence fairly. Therefore, you do not love the truth. *Meditate on that thought.* It could have profound effect on your future Bible studies and, maybe, on your eternal destiny.

When I have a controversial Bible subject to study there is a procedure which I go through to help me answer the question “Do I really love the truth?” I mention it here because it helps me to know that I am willing to change if the evidence so warrants and I hope it may also help you.

I retire to a quiet place, close my eyes and see myself standing before the church, or all my friends and telling everybody that I have been wrong and have now changed my mind on a given subject and now accept the position that I, at one time, denied. I then visualize myself telling them why. Next I make a solemn promise to God that I will accept this new idea if the evidence supports that change. I end my prayer by asking God for the wisdom to examine the evidence objectively. If I can feel comfortable with these thoughts, knowing that my prayer was sincere, then I know I can face the study with an open mind. When you try this procedure I know that it will have a positive influence on your spiritual growth.

You must love all the truth, every truth, and every part of the truth. You cannot love the truth on baptism and have a closed mind on the subject of marriage and divorce. You cannot love the truth and take the Lord's Supper every Sunday and then have a closed mind on the question of instrumental music. A closed mind is an awesome and deadly virus which never sleeps. It is always growing or dying depending solely on how you treat it. If you ignore it, this virus will grow and will take over your whole mind, on every subject! Your only hope for success over this deadly virus is the conscious, active practice of gaining and evaluating the evidence. Doing this with constant prayer for wisdom is the only way to produce confidence *and* truth.

Some have misunderstood confidence as proof of truth, thinking if you are confident enough then you must have the truth. This, of course, is false. If confidence produces truth then the Jehovah Witnesses, the Mormons and the Muslims are all correct and in possession of the truth!

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

Truth is only established by an objective evaluation of and a following of the evidence as we adhere to each of the principles of hermeneutics presented herein!

## **Consequence if neglected:**

If this prerequisite is not applied to every search for the truth, the result is simple, obvious, scriptural and very serious: you will believe the God sent delusion and be lost. The only hope for salvation is to change and acquire ***an honest and sincere love of the truth***, demonstrated by a sincere evaluation of the evidence, 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12.

## **Prerequisite 2 | *Pray for wisdom.***

We must always be searching for the truth, and asking for God's help. James 1:5 says that we should ask for wisdom. Wisdom can be, in a practical way, defined as "the proper use of knowledge." It is generally agreed that a person can only get knowledge through experience and/or the effort of studying. After gaining some knowledge then we should ask for God's help in using that knowledge correctly, to His glory. When praying for wisdom we must ask in faith as James 1:6 says, really expecting and believing that God will give us the wisdom we seek.

That simply means we must have an open mind (see Prerequisite 1 above) and always be willing to go where the evidence leads. If our mind is "made up" before we pray for wisdom, there is no need to ask. We can't pray for wisdom in faith if we already know that we are not going to change our minds.

Is the strength of our convictions the result of careful examination of the evidence or just stubbornness? The importance of the answer to this question cannot be overemphasized. Stubbornness is the product of, or will certainly lead to, a closed mind. A closed mind never grows because it cannot change. A person cannot grow if he does not change! A non-growing Christian is a great disappointment to God. Please read each of these verses: Ephesians 4:15, Colossians 1:10, 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 2 Timothy 2:15, Hebrews 5:11-14, 1 Peter 2:2, 3:15, 2 Peter 3:18.

If we have a strong conviction, that's great. And we should give thanks to God for the evidence that led us to that conviction. But, we can't pray for wisdom if we can't reevaluate the evidence with an open mind. This principle of praying for wisdom must be our constant companion throughout our life.

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

All reasoning or logic is a use of, or manifestation of, wisdom. To know several facts and reach a conclusion from those facts is what we call reasoning or logic. This ability is obtained and/or improved through Bible study and prayer for wisdom. Practicing this over a period of time will give us a greater ability to use our wisdom to reach valid conclusions.

You may have heard it said, “you can prove anything with logic!” This is only said by those who don’t understand the process of reasoning. If *invalid* logic is used then, of course, any conclusion can be reached. But if we train ourselves through study and prayer to recognize the valid logical processes then we will know that valid logic only and always leads to valid conclusions.

Our knowledge only comes through experience and diligent study. The proper use of this knowledge, i.e. wisdom, can and must be gained and/or increased through prayer. The use of this wisdom and understanding will produce in us the confidence and strength of conviction that gives peace of mind and the joyous life God wants us to have.

## **Consequence if neglected:**

This prerequisite must be applied to every search for the truth otherwise: “...*you do not have because you do not ask God,*” James 4:1-4. This does not mean that we will have no wisdom without asking God because some people of the world have some wisdom. However, we will not have the spiritual wisdom and understanding that God wants to bless us with if we do not ask. Without this wisdom from God it is very difficult, if not impossible, to understand the deep things of His Word, or the difficult things that Paul wrote about, 2 Peter 3:16. Reading 1 Corinthians 2:11-14 will also be helpful.

*For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no-one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. 13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. 14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.*

## **Prerequisite 3 | Define your terms, i.e. understand the words you read.**

One of the best ways to do this is to have several translations available for comparison. At a minimum you should have the KJV, the ASV (1901 edition), and the NIV. These will help tremendously as you study.

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

So many misunderstandings are caused by two people using the same word in different ways. Both definitions may even be proper, but if you don't have the same meaning in mind when using the word there will be no communication, learning, or agreement. This is also true as you study God's Word. As we study we should have two good English dictionaries handy and if at all acquainted with the original Greek at least two good sources for defining the Greek words, i.e. Thayer's Greek Lexicon and Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich (BDAG) Greek Lexicon.

Example 1: John 21:15-17. In this famous passage Jesus asks Peter "do you love me?" three times. Peter answers each time "...you know that I love you." To really understand this passage you have to look at the Greek words used. The first two times Jesus uses agape (agapav) for our English word love, and in each reply Peter uses a different Greek word, philo (filw). Agape is the highest form of dedicated, sacrificial Love. Peter uses philo, a kind and gentle brotherly love. Finally when Jesus asked the question of Peter the third time He also uses filw and that is what hurt Peter's feelings. By using Peter's word of filw Jesus was pointing out the difference. Peter did not love Jesus on the same level as Jesus loved Peter. That is why the text is worded as it is: "Peter was grieved because He said the him the third time 'filw me.'" Without the meaning of the Greek words you miss the reason for Peter's grief.

Example 2: Mt 8:22 "But Jesus told him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.'" Although the meaning here is more obvious it is still necessary to realize the word "dead" has two different meanings in this one verse. The first usage means spiritually dead, and the second usage means the physically dead. The context makes this clear.

## **Consequence if neglected:**

Two people often "talk past each other" with no learning or teaching simply because, unknowingly, they are using different definitions of the same word. In the same way, as we read God's Word, if we don't have a clear meaning of the words we are studying *in context* we simply cannot understand the truth of a passage. This is true for every passage and every search for the truth. We must always adhere diligently to this prerequisite.

**Prerequisite 4** | *Always read the context and all other scriptures on the same subject.*

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

So many false doctrines are taught simply because proper attention is not given to the context. The context is made up of those sentences and paragraphs immediately surrounding the sentence or word under consideration.

Example 1: 1 Corinthians 14:1 "*Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy.*" This verse teaches the Corinthians to eagerly desire spiritual gifts. Considered in the broader context of chapters 12 - 14, noting especially 1 Corinthians 13:8, 13 we see that the spiritual gifts were to cease. Therefore, we know that verse 1 of chapter 14 is to be understood and followed only as long as the spiritual gifts were in effect. Since spiritual gifts are no longer in effect, verse 1 of chapter 14 is not to be understood as giving us instructions today.

Example 2: John 9:31 says, "*We know that God does not listen to sinners.*" For years many have understood this to mean that God does not hear the prayers of non-Christians. We should first note that we are all sinners; therefore, if this quotation is a teaching from God then God hears the prayers of no one.

We also have the example of God hearing the prayer of a non-Christian, Cornelius, in Acts 10:4, 31. This alone should cause us to seek another understanding of John 9:31. If we further note that the context plainly identifies the speaker as a non-inspired man we can conclude that John is simply accurately recording what the man said. John is not saying that this is a teaching of God, only that the non-inspired speaker says it is from God.

Example 3: A little less than 50 years ago I was talking to an elderly man about the church being the body of Christ and that Christ only had one body. His response was "Yes, but Jesus said 'I have other sheep which are not of this fold.'" I was taken aback by this statement because I thought it sounded like a saying of Jesus and I remembered something like what he quoted. So I went home and found John 10:16a "***I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen***" (NIV). As you know, of course, the very next sentence says "***I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.***" I learned a valuable lesson that day, never just listen to someone quote the Bible, always read it, in context.

The context can be extended to include the whole New Testament when we consider that any understanding of any verse must agree with the overall teachings of the entire New Testament. Therefore, we must also read all the scriptures that deal with the subject that we are studying. For instance, if we want to know how to handle the worldly wealth that God blesses us with we

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

must read what Jesus said in Matthew 5:42 *“Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”*

In this context Jesus is teaching submissiveness to and even love for, our enemies. If we only read this scripture we might conclude that we should never say “no” to anyone who wants to borrow money from us. But if we read the parable of the Good Samaritan we see that he had enough money to take care of a stranger. This implies that he had some form of good judgment in expensing his funds, so that he had enough to meet the needs of this stranger.

We also read Paul’s instructions to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:8 *“If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”* But how can he do this if he never said “no” to those who would borrow from him? Again we must conclude that some discretion must be used so that a person can keep enough money for his own personal use and that of his family.

We sometimes act as if we have forgotten that the entire Bible was written by God. This means that in many, many cases (if not all) the Bible will explain itself, if given a chance. If I could give a star to those prerequisites that are the most important, this one would have two.

## **Consequence if neglected:**

If we ignore this prerequisite and claim to obey the word then we must all go out and hang ourselves because Matthew 27:5 says *“...Then he [Judas] went away and hanged himself.”* Luke 10:37 *“... And Jesus said unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.”* This ridiculous example shows how easy it is to teach false doctrines if we ignore this prerequisite. If the context of a passage or all the other passages on the same subject are not considered in a search for the truth, it will never be found. Instead, we will find in the Bible and believe whatever we desire, .... and be lost. It is obvious why this prerequisite can never, under any circumstances, be ignored.

**Prerequisite 5** | *We must make our decisions based on the evidence available, whatever it is.*

There is a story of a man who wanted to buy a motor home. He said “I did a detailed study of the pros and cons. I checked the loan interest rates. I evaluated the MPG and the depreciation. I investigated its maneuverability and safety. I evaluated the insurance costs. ....And, ...well, "I bought it

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

anyway!" Sometimes we are like that. We decide things based on our desires and not on the evidence. We simply cannot do that with our spiritual lives. The consequences are just too great! We must seek and find the evidence *before* we make a decision.

We must always base our conclusions on the most (or best) evidence, ***or else we are guilty of accepting a conclusion with less evidence than an alternative, and we are accusing God of establishing truth with less evidence than a false alternative.*** Remember, one day we will have to explain our decisions to God. Matthew 12:36 says "*But I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken*" (see also Romans 14:12, 2 Corinthians 5:10). We may not have as much evidence as we would like, but if it is more than supports any alternative position it must be accepted, at least until the quality and/or quantity of the evidence presented changes. If more evidence is presented later we must evaluate it and change our conclusions when warranted.

For Example: When should we take the Lord's Supper? We don't have many scriptures to help us. Acts 20:7 says "*they met together on the first day of the week to break bread,*" implying that they met on this day for this purpose. This statement is very clear.

Check what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:18, 20 "*when you come together in assembly*" you are to follow the instructions in verses 19-34 while partaking of the Lord's Supper. Since the regular church meeting was each "first day of the week" (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2) and great importance was put on taking the Lord's Supper as an act of worship we conclude that the congregation shared this spiritual meal every Sunday, since that was the purpose for their meeting.

Combine this with 2 Timothy 3:16-17 which says that the Bible "*will thoroughly equip us for every good work.*" That is, everything we do religiously is completely described by the scriptures. Then evaluate the scriptures we do have on when to take the Lord's Supper.

Some may think we do not have enough evidence to reach the conclusion that we should only take it once on every Sunday, but consider the alternatives. There are only eight options. The Lord's Supper should be shared by Christians:

1) Only once on every Sunday

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

- 2) Only once on any Sunday
- 3) Any frequency on every Sunday
- 4) Any frequency on any Sunday

Or

- 5) Only once on every day
- 6) Only once on any day
- 7) Any frequency on every day
- 8) Any frequency on any day

All the specific information we have on this subject supports option 1. Any evidence to support options 2 - 8 is only reasonable assumption, at best, and dangerous additions at worse. Since there are no instructions, and no clear examples to take it other than once on every Sunday, why risk offending God like Nadab and Abihu, Leviticus 10:1-2?

Remembering 2 Timothy 3:16-17, if a person decides to take the Lord's Supper other than only once on every Sunday, he must:

- 1) assume that in Acts 2:46 and 20:11 "breaking bread" was the Lord's Supper and not a regular meal, which is inconsistent with the immediate context, and
- 2) assume that this assumed practice was not corrected by the example of Acts 20:7 or the teachings and I Corinthians chapters 10 - 16 (especially 10:14-22, 11:17-34, 16:2), and
- 3) assume that the Lord will be happy with these assumptions.

Everyone agrees that the Bible teaches it is acceptable to God to take the Lord's supper once every Sunday. Why change a practice that is certainly pleasing to God for one that probably is not?

We should not "test the Lord" (NIV), "tempt Christ" (KJV), "make trial of the Lord" (ASV), as some of the Israelites did and they were punished by being killed by snakes, 1 Corinthians 10:9.

If someone will not accept option 1 because we have too little evidence, how then can they accept any one of the other options which has significant less, if any, support? This question cannot be overlooked or ignored. *If we live we will observe one of the 8 options listed above*, why not observe the one recognized by all to be acceptable to God.

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

## **Consequence if neglected:**

If this principle is not followed during every scriptural search we have three undesirable outcomes:

- 1) a constant state of uncertainty on several subjects, claiming insufficient evidence,
- 2) always being open to the charge that not enough evidence is available for any decision on any subject making everything doubtful, ... and probably most important,
- 3) charging God with producing an instruction book, which we *must* follow, without sufficient clarity.

## **Prerequisite 6** | *The Bible is not only correct, it is complete.*

2 Timothy 3:16-17, Galatians 1:7-9

We all know that the Bible is inspired by God through the Holy Spirit, making it correct in every respect. But the idea of the Bible also being complete is often given less attention. When we say “complete” we are, of course, only talking about things religious. Since the Bible is not a book of science or history it certainly is not complete when talking about those subjects. Although it *is* absolutely correct when it says something about science or history or any other subject. Please read 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

Galatians 1:6-9

*¶ I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! 9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*

This principle of completeness taught in these two passages simply implies that anything we teach and/or practice religiously today must be supported by the scriptures. For example, we cannot have instrumental music in our worship service because it is not supported by scripture. We cannot have a

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

bishop over several congregations because it is not supported by scripture. We must use unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine for communion and nothing else because only these two items are supported by scriptures. Basically *if we have no scripture to support a religious teaching or practice, we cannot believe it, teach it or practice it.*

Since the Bible is complete there no need to supplement it with catechisms, rules of faith, books of dogmas, or any other such *authoritative* works of man. All information outside the Bible is relegated to the equal status of opinion, to be consulted only as a last resort and scrutinized carefully for errors.

## **Consequence if neglected:**

Without following this prerequisite steadfastly, we would have chaos in the church and everything religious. We could add *any* practice to our worship service. We could add *any* restrictions to those who want to become Christians. We could add any number of actions, ideas or words to the list of sins and condemn those who think, say, or practice such things. If we falsely assume these extra-biblical rules and actions to be approved by God then we could rightly say that God was the author of confusion, in direct contradiction to what the scriptures say, (1 Corinthians 14:33, Galatians 5:10).

## **Prerequisite 7 | *The Law of Exclusion***

This principle could almost be included in Prerequisite 6 because they go together. Each supplements the other. The law of exclusion says that when the Bible specifies something, we are limited by that statement to teach and/or practice only what is specified, that is, *all other things of like character are excluded.*

Example 1: The Bible specifies unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine for the Lord's supper, therefore we are limited to only these two items and, likewise we *must* use both these items when taking communion.

When attending the early service at church and having missed breakfast, maybe a little more sustenance at the Lord's table would be helpful (a bacon and egg biscuit maybe) but if we did this it would be a sin. Yes, a sin, because we would be going beyond what is written in God's word, (1 Corinthians 4:6). We cannot forget what happened to Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1-3.

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

Can you imagine being there when Nadab and Abihu were deciding what to do and listening in on the conversation. It might have gone something like this:

Nadab: “Come on Abihu it’s time to fire up the altar of incense. I’ve got some fire here. Let’s use it. That way we won’t have to go all the way over to the other side of the temple to get that ‘authorized’ fire.”

Abihu: “I don’t think that’s a good idea. God is always pretty specific about what things to use in worshiping Him.”

Nadab: “Ah, come on Abihu, it’s no big deal. If He had wanted us not to use this fire He would have told us. Remember He told us ‘*Ye shall offer no strange incense thereon, nor burnt sacrifice, nor meat offering; neither shall ye pour drink offering thereon.*’ (Exodus 30:9, KJV) He did not condemn "other" fire so come on Abihu, this is much easier and quicker and besides, no one will ever know the difference!”

When they acted together they both suffered the consequence of not following instructions as God specified, *"And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD."*

Example 2: The Bible teaches that we are saved by grace (Ephesians 2:5). If the Bible mentioned nothing else about salvation then we could and should conclude that we are saved by grace *only*. But Ephesians 2:7 says that we are saved by grace through faith. If we had no other information on salvation we could and should conclude that we are saved only by grace through faith. But we do have other scriptures on this subject. We do have Acts 17:30, Romans 10:9-10, 1 Peter 3:21, and several others which say that repentance, confession and baptism are required for salvation. Therefore, we must conclude that we are saved by grace, faith, repentance, confession **and** baptism.

*All* these things are required for salvation and *only* these things are required to have one’s sins forgiven and gain entrance into a saved condition and membership in the Lord’s church. Man cannot ignore any of these nor add any other conditions to this list because the law of exclusion eliminates all conditions not listed by scripture. We cannot say that to be a member of God’s church (and therefore, saved) you must be single, or over twenty-one, or be of a particular social or financial class, or any other restriction. Nor can we leave out any of the things specified by God through His holy scriptures.

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

Example 3: The Bible tells us to sing in the worship service. Since no other type of music is mentioned we can and should conclude that when worshipping God, in the congregational worship service, we cannot have any other type of music and likewise we *must* sing. Since God did not specify any adverbs describing the verb “to sing”, we are free to do any type of singing we like; slow, fast, loud, softly, alto, tenor, bass, many or few songs, etc. If God had said “worship me with music,” then we could have any type of music. But He said “sing” (Ephesians 5:19). That simple command excludes all other types of music but allows any type of singing, within limits of decorum, of course (1 Corinthians 14:40).

Example 4: In a very well-known passage in Matthew 19:4-6 Jesus says,

*“Haven’t you read that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ and said ‘for this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.”*

Without the law of exclusion we would be able to argue that Jesus would also allow other kinds of marriages: men with men, women with women, one man with many women, one woman with many men. But if we have any respect for the Son of God we must do just what He says: no more, no less. This, His positive statement on marriage, excludes all other types of “marriages.”

## **Consequence if neglected:**

Without the law of exclusion all manner of strange doctrines and practices would pollute God’s church. This law is directly taught in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Galatians 1:7-9, 2 Peter 1:3-4, Hebrews 7:13-14 and is clearly implied by the principle taught by Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians in chapter 4, verse 6. This law is in perfect agreement with common sense because without it God’s acceptance could be claimed for all types of doctrines, practices and moral behavior in addition to those specified by scriptures. Without this law there would be no reason for God to specify anything to us, because we could always claim that he would also accept any additional practices or beliefs we suggested. This law must be applied to every effort to understand any scripture, else confusion would rule everything religious.

**Prerequisite 8** | *The words are always taken literally unless there is sufficient evidence to prove it figurative.*

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

On the surface this may seem so obvious that you wonder why it is even mentioned. However, in my experience there are far too many times when a brother thinks, or even sometimes says, “Yes, I know what it says, but those words don’t mean that.”

This is a ploy used by many false teachers, and even by many sincere brethren, to escape the force of the words which might call for a change in their thinking and/or actions. Since this is so important we must ask “how can we tell when the words are to be taken literally and when they are to be taken figuratively?”

In E.W. Bullinger’s epic work “*Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*” he gives this direction on the first page of his ‘NOTE ON FIGURES IN GENERAL’:

*“...whenever and wherever it is possible, the words of Scripture are to be understood literally, but when a statement appears to be contrary to our experience, or to known fact, or revealed truth; or seems to be at variance with the general teaching of Scriptures, then we may reasonably expect that some figure is employed.”*

In “*Hermeneutics, a Text Book*” Professor D. R. Dungan on page 184, Rule 1 puts it this way:

*“All words are to be understood in their literal sense, unless the evident meaning of the context forbids,”*

J. S. Lamar, on page 103 in his book “*The Organon of Scripture: or The Inductive Method of Biblical Interpretation*” looks at the question from the other angle. After a lengthy explanation of figurative language he says:

*“From all [of] which we may deduce this brief, but plain and comprehensive rule:*

*“That all scriptures are to be regarded as figurative which are either declared to be such, or which the various attending circumstances show to be such, or which when taken literally contravene any general precept, or are contrary to evident reason and the nature of things.*

*“There is, we think, no instance of figurative language that does not come under some clause of this rule...”*

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

We can summarize these three authorities by simply saying that any word or phrase must be taken literally, unless there is sufficient contextual evidence to justify a figurative meaning.

## **Consequence if neglected:**

This prerequisite must be true of every word in every passage; else *any* suggested “meaning” of a passage would be as acceptable as the basic meaning of the words. Ignoring this guideline would lead to chaos and imply that any verse could mean anything, which is contrary to God’s character of omniscience, omnipotence and love for us. We simply must have this prerequisite to help us determine the literalness of every passage in God’s Word. The above suggestions I take to be necessary and sufficient.

**Prerequisite 9** | *We must always let the simpler passages explain the more difficult or figurative ones.*

It simply is not acceptable to use a passage in Revelation to explain a question of salvation, i.e. the 144,000 of Revelation 14:1-4.

*“Then I looked, and there before me was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father’s name written on their foreheads. 2 And I heard a sound from heaven like the roar of rushing waters and like a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. 3 And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders. No-one could learn the song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. 4 These are those who did not defile themselves with women, for they kept themselves pure. They follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They were purchased from among men and offered as firstfruits to God and the Lamb. 5 No lie was found in their mouths; they are blameless.”*

This is a clear description of the saved as seen by John in this vision. Should we therefore conclude that only 144,000 people can/will be saved? How can this be so when we have Mark 16:15-16, Matthew 28:18-20 and the entire New Testament telling us that *whoever* chooses to obey God will be saved. This 144,000 is seen in a vision in the book of Revelation. We cannot accept this specific number (144,000) as literal when it is in a figurative passage, in a vision, in a figurative book, because that acceptance would mean denying all the other plain scriptures on the subject of salvation. This particular conclusion is particularly obvious after you read the seventh chapter of Revelation. This whole seventh chapter clearly establishes the number 144,000 as figurative.

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

Another way to say this is to let the literal passages explain the figurative ones. This principle is so well-known and accepted I will consider it axiomatic.

## **Consequence if neglected:**

If we choose to ignore this guideline then we can use Revelation to explain teachings like salvation, judgment after life, worship, the resurrection, the second coming, etc. The biggest problem with this procedure is the implication that the simpler passages must then be explained as figurative, without any evidence, or else they are simply mistakes! Neither of these conclusions is acceptable.

## **Prerequisite 10 | *Ockham's razor*.**

The philosopher William Ockham lived at the end of the thirteenth century. He formulated a general principle of investigation that is so widely accepted that it is almost axiomatic. It says "*Pluralitas non est ponenda sine neccesitate*", which translates as "entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily" or "Plurality should not be posited without necessity." This principle gives precedence to simplicity; if there are two (or more) competing theories, the simplest explanation is to be preferred.

Although this subject can occupy several pages in some books on philosophy it can be simply stated as: "The simplest solution to a problem is the preferred solution." Please note that it does *not say* that the simplest solution *is* the *correct one!* It only says that the simplest solution is the preferred one. In our case, when searching for the truth in the scriptures, we should first examine the simplest explanation. If this explanation accords with the most facts and has the fewest difficulties, when compared to the other explanations, then the simplest one is probably the correct solution. This also agrees with the idea that God's love implies that His writings are such that they can be understood by any sincere seeker.

Postulating additional theories and possibilities beyond what is necessary to explain the known facts is counterproductive to our search for the truth. Thus the name "*Ockham's razor*," it cuts away all extraneous ideas, superfluous suggestions, and needless hypotheses, leaving the simplest concept that fits all the known facts.

## **Consequence if neglected:**

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

Not following Ockham's *razor* will allow extraneous ideas, superfluous suggestions, and needless hypotheses to be added with no practical limitation. This will lead to incredible and unnecessary complexity, confusion, doubt and chaos which will increase the probability of error.

**Prerequisite 11** | *Implications*, i.e. any doctrine which implies a false doctrine is itself false. (Logic and the Bible, Thomas Warren, p.31)

Every conclusion has implications. An implication is something that necessarily follows from the decisions we make. When we arrive at any *truth* religiously we must make sure that there are no implications from that *truth* which contradict to any other scriptures. This is another test of the validity of our conclusions. If our *truth* implies a contradiction, then our *truth* is not really a truth at all. We must then rethink our conclusion and reevaluate all the evidence upon which that conclusion was based.

This prerequisite is a corollary to prerequisite 4, looked at from a different perspective. In the following examples the *implications* from the conclusions, not the conclusions themselves, contradict some other scripture.

Example 1: If we conclude Jesus was just a human child born out of wedlock, this implies He was not the son of God and that implication contradicts John 1:1-2, 3:16-18, 17:21-22, etc. Therefore we must rethink our conclusion and reevaluate all the evidence upon which we based that conclusion.

Example 2: If we conclude that God inspired the Koran, the Book of Mormon or any other work outside the Bible then that conclusion implies the time of inspiration was not finished by c. 100 A.D. This implication contradicts Galatians 1:6-9, 2 Corinthians 11:2-4, 2 Peter 1:3 ("has given" - past tense), and Acts 20:27 therefore that conclusion must be false and we must then rethink our conclusion and reevaluate all the evidence upon which we based that conclusion.

Example 3. If we conclude salvation is before or in any way separate from baptism, our conclusion contradictions Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38, 22:16 and 1 Peter 3:21. Therefore we must rethink our conclusion and look at the other evidence.

## **Consequence if neglected:**

This is another test of our conclusions. If we have used these prerequisites religiously, thinking we have a valid conclusion, but this conclusion

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

contradicts another teaching of the Bible, then this, our new conclusion, must be considered in error and reevaluated.

## Summary

If we are in constant prayer and use *all* these prerequisites in our search for the truth, we will always ...repeat, will *always* be able, with God's help, to ascertain the correct understanding of any scripture. Please notice there is no time limit on that last sentence. Some scriptures can be understood at the first reading, some take more time because they are hard to understand, as Peter mentions in 2 Peter 3:16. Some, of course, take years of study and toil. But, never give up because learning a new truth is very exciting and most rewarding. And remember, God did not write anything that *cannot* be understood (Ephesians 3:4-5, 1 Corinthians 2:12-14), so with perseverance and adherence to these Bible Study Prerequisites we will be successful.

Following these prerequisites for valid interpretation should be our greatest desire. These prerequisites will offer the necessary and sufficient assistance needed in arriving at the truth as we study God's word.

***Neglecting any one of these guidelines will greatly hinder, if not totally cripple, our search for the truth.***

We simply cannot follow the world's current viewpoint that theory is the same as truth. We cannot be led into accepting possibility as reality, nor fantasy as fact, nor supposition as evidence. As Christians we must pay the price. We must spend the required time and make the necessary effort to find and evaluate the evidence if we are ever to know the truth and experience the confidence that God wants us to have in our study of His word.

We will end this chapter with a few scriptures on the subject of understanding what God has written and an implication from each verse:

### 1 Peter 3:15

*"But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,"*

***IMPLIES WE SHOULD STUDY.***

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

## 2 Peter 3:16

*“He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.”*

**IMPLIES IT’S NOT ALWAYS EASY.**

## James 1:5

*“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”*

**IMPLIES GOD WILL HELP US.**

## 1 Corinthians 2:12

*“We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may Understand (know - ASV) what God has freely given us. 13 This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. 14 The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand (know - ASV) them, because they are spiritually discerned.”*

**IMPLIES THE HOLY SPIRIT WILL HELP US TO UNDERSTAND  
OR KNOW THE THINGS GOD HAS GIVEN US.**

## 2 Corinthians 1:13

*“For we do not write to you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.”*

**IMPLIES WE CAN UNDERSTAND.**

**FACT:** God is all powerful and all wise. **This implies He could make his word understandable.**

**FACT:** He loves us. **This implies that He did!!**

**If there is something in the Bible that we *cannot* understand, why did God put it there?**

## **Additional Reading**

Hermeneutics, by D. R. Dungan

Introduction to Logic, by Irving M. Copi

The Reasonableness of Christianity, by John Locke

Logic and the Bible, by Thomas B. Warren

# Bible Study Prerequisites

HERMENEUTICS FOR US COMMON FOLKS

Is there a God? by Richard Swinburne, chapter 2