

# Who needs Hermeneutics?

by

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Have you ever wondered why godly, Holy Ghost filled men of God differed on their interpretation of certain passages of scripture? The issue here is one of hermeneutics. It is not that either one is lacking in sincerity or love for God. They are just not approaching it with the same set of rules for interpretation.

Hermeneutics is the study (or the science) of interpretation. It is an effort to seek out guidelines that we can agree on as we try and interpret the Bible. The Greek word from which it is derived is found in 1 Cor. 12:10 in the phrase "interpretation of tongues." The verb form is found in Luke 24:27, "*And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself*" (NKJV).

Paul exhorts Timothy to "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth*" (2 Tim. 2:15, NKJV). The word translated "rightly divide" here is *orthotomeo*. It is a compound word from *orthos* (straight, upright) and *tomeo* (to cut). It is found only here in scripture but in extra-biblical literature it meant to cut a path in a straight direction. This is what we want to do with scripture. We must not be careless with our interpretation, rather we need to "rightly divide" it with great care, with a surgeon's precision, playing close attention to context, rules of grammar and sound hermeneutical principles. In 2 Corinthians 4:2 Paul mentioned that he was "*not handling the word of God deceitfully.*" We want to treat the word of God with the utmost respect.

The apostle Peter tells us that "*no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation*" (2 Peter 1:20). So, "This is what this passage means to me" will not work! There must be a way for others to check out what you are saying. When you come up with some strange doctrine there needs to be a way for me to check it out. Every false teaching uses scripture to support itself. How can we tell what is right interpretation and what is wrong interpretation? Titus 2:1 tells us to speak the things which become "sound doctrine." Ephesians 4:14 warns us about being "carried about by every wind of doctrine." If we don't have a way to check these things then anybody's doctrine is as good as the next guy's. Without some type of guidelines to go by, people can create whatever teachings that they want to. How will we know whether or not it is "sound doctrine?"

In 2 Peter 3:15-17 we read:

*15 and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation -- as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, 16 as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they*

*do also the rest of the Scriptures. 17 You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked;*

The word translated "twist" in this passage was used of twisting someone's arms or legs for torture. They were forcing their limbs to go in directions that they were unnatural, that they were not designed to go in. What a picture Peter used for those who were "twisting" the word of God already in his day. These individuals were using Paul's own words, but in a way contrary to that which he intended. We find an example of this is in the book of Romans where Paul says, "*And why not say, 'Let us do evil that good may come?' -- as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just*" (Rom. 3:8). Paul had been preaching about grace and about how God will forgive sin, but people twisted his words to say that it was ok to sin, that we should "*do evil that good may come.*"

We want to be careful not to do this! We do not want to twist God's words to make them mean what we want them to, but instead we must be careful listeners and allow the text to speak to us. We need to let the text change our thinking and not the other way around! We should never start with what we believe and then look for scriptures to support it. Rather we need to get what we teach out of the book. I had a teacher in Bible school who used to say, "I may be wrong; Bro. So-and-so may be wrong; but the Bible is ALWAYS right!" The Bible alone is our final authority. Jesus said, "*My words will judge you in the last day*" (John 12:48). At the Great White throne judgment it said that the books were opened and everyone was judged by the things written in the books (Rev. 20:12). As the preamble to the articles of faith of the United Pentecostal Church reads:

The Bible is the only God-given authority which man possesses; therefore, all doctrine, faith, hope, and all instruction for the church must be based upon, and harmonize with, the Bible.

It is of utmost importance that our doctrine comes from the Bible. And it is equally important that we learn to interpret it correctly, that we "rightly divide the word of truth" and teach things which become "sound doctrine." And it is for this reason that a study on how we are to interpret scripture (hermeneutics) is so important.

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For an excellent introduction to hermeneutics see Daniel Segrave's book: *You Can Understand the Bible*, published by Go Teach Ministry (2000).

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