

Way #6 - One may read the Bible subjectively.

Many read the Bible with a personal bias that is so subjective that one jumps over passages that do not agree with the bias. Many read the Bible to support their arguments. This kind of reading uses Bible verses as proof texts for one's present beliefs. This kind of reading is not really interested in objective truth and is not really searching the Scriptures to make proper changes in what one believes. This person reads the Bible with the notion, "my mind is made up, don't confuse me with the facts so I read my Bible to find verses that seem to support my views."

Way #7 - One may read and study the Bible hermeneutically, exegetically and objectively.

One may read with the goal of analyzing, observing and discerning all necessary factual technical data to arrive at a true accurate interpretation of what the passage or text actually says and what the author actually meant.

One may literally "search" a text and analyze exactly what the words say with the goal of understanding precisely what God's word is saying. This requires concentration, skill and effort.

We certainly would never or ever minimize the reading of the Bible, however, it is imperative that we seek to read with understanding; otherwise, we may never really know what the passage is actually saying. **Reading is the first step to understanding the Bible but it is not the only step.**

QUESTION #5 – What are the qualifications needed to study and accurately interpret the Bible?

There are nine qualifications if one is to be a true Bible interpreter:

Qualification #1 - One must be a believer in Jesus Christ, who has a desire to know truth and obey truth. **John 8:31-32**

Proper interpretation of the Bible starts here. **It is the Lord who must authorize and give a person an accurate understanding of His word (Luke 24:45; II Timothy 2:7).**

The believer is given the Holy Spirit that potentially enables one to grasp God's truth (John 16:13). However, it is the spiritually-minded believer whose mind will understand God's truth (Ephesians 4:23).

One who is not a believer does not have the capability of understanding the things of God. This is clearly stated in I Cor. 2:14. The unsaved person is spiritually blind (II Cor. 4:4) and spiritually dead (Eph. 2:2). In order for one to accurately understand and interpret the Bible, one must be born again and one must want to know and apply truth.

(15)

Now a non-believer could grammatically analyze the syntax of any Bible verse in the original language. An unbeliever could identify parts of speech like nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions. Any serious linguist could do that.

However, the non-believer has no capacity whatsoever to be able to accurately grasp these things spiritually in a way that is right and true and God-honoring. The unbeliever cannot give a true, accurate interpretation of a text because Jesus Christ will not authorize it.

There are many passages of Scripture that teach God will not allow someone to accurately understand His word—Is. 6:9-10; Is. 44:18; Luke 8:10.

Qualification #2 - One must have a reverence for God and His word.

Deuteronomy 32:46-47; Job 23:12; Psalm 12:6; Proverbs 30:5

Even in the New Testament Grace Age, the believer is challenged to “fear” God (I Pet. 2:17). Without a fear and reverence for God, one will never be a skilled interpreter of Scripture. Furthermore, in II Timothy 3:15, Paul called the Scriptures “sacred.”

One of the keys to properly interpreting the Bible is to approach the Scriptures in an honorable and reverent way. This is God’s Holy Word. When one approaches the Scriptures, one needs this very concept of Scripture; it is sacred. Without a high view of God’s word, there will never be a true interpretation of it.

This is the way it is to be viewed and handled. Dr. Roy Zuck eloquently says, “A lackadaisical or cavalier attitude toward the Bible does not contribute to proper understanding of God’s truth” (*Basic Bible Interpretation.*, p. 23).

Qualification #3 - One must be willing to pray to ask God for a proper interpretation and understanding. **Psalm 119:18; Matthew 7:7-8**

When Solomon taught his own son concerning the key to tapping into the knowledge of God, one of his instructions to his son was that he needed to cry out for discernment and lift up his voice for understanding(**Prov. 2:3**). In other words, he taught his son to pray. One who will arrive at true interpretations will be one who prays for true interpretations.

However, we want to point out something that is important here and that is **prayer does not replace careful study of God’s word. Prayer is a qualification, but not the only qualification.**

We must ask God to give us understanding of His word, but we also must carefully and systematically study the Scriptures to gain that understanding. We will never minimize prayer in

the process of rightly dividing Scripture, but just because one prays does not mean one will study to rightly divide Scripture.

John Wesley and George Whitefield were both godly men of prayer. In fact, they often stayed together in the same room and one time Wesley rebuked Whitefield for the fact that he didn't pray as long as Wesley did. George Whitefield believed in the sovereignty of God and John Wesley believed more in the will of man. Both of these men were believers and both of these men were men of prayer, but Wesley got off into some strange man-centered doctrines to the point that Whitefield said he could no longer associate with him. Whitefield saw Wesley drift into a man-centered Arminianism that was focused more on experiences than the word of God. So just because someone prays, does not automatically mean one properly interprets the Scripture.

Martin Luther was a man of great prayer and there was a time in his life when he didn't think the book of James should be in the Bible. Jacob Arminius lived in the time of John Calvin. They both prayed but they had very different interpretations of the Bible. John Calvin was very God-centered and Jacob Arminius was very man-centered. Both men prayed. So prayer does not automatically mean one grasps truth.

Qualification #4 - One must be willing to give himself to intense research and study.

Again, in the same context when Solomon taught his son some keys to grasping the wisdom of God, he brought out the importance of intense search and research. He compared the intensity of study to the intensity of searching for treasure (**Prov. 2:4**). To become a skilled Bible interpreter requires intense effort. To accurately interpret a text is work. What we will discover is an accurate interpretation of a text is far better than a warm, fuzzy feeling, but it will require work.

Bible study is study. **Study is a verb, which means it requires intense action.** It requires skills, tools and effort. **Bible study is not initially looking for a feeling or a blessing; it is searching for God's truth.** It is seeking to understanding infinite truth from the Infinite God. Bible study and interpretation is like climbing a mountain; it is tough but when you get there, it is worth the struggle, especially to understand "the knowledge of God."

Michael Heiser said, "If you don't think Bible study is work, you aren't doing it" (*Brief Insights on Mastering Bible Study*, p. 41).

Qualification #5 - One must be willing to be taught by others who are skilled in the word.

In **Proverbs 2:2**, Solomon challenges his son to be willing to listen to instruction. One of the wisest things for an interpreter to do is to surround himself with other scholarly teachings of men who have met the qualifications and have struggled with the text. These are men of sound minds and serious focus on God's word.

(17)

This is not suggesting that one bypass the discipline of hermeneutics, but it is suggesting that there is a willingness to be taught by others who are skilled. If anyone thinks he has arrived to some level where he no longer needs to be taught “he has not yet known as he ought to know.” (I Cor. 8:2).

The kinds of teachers, writings and teachings to which I am referring are not the shallow drivel that is often found in Christian Bookstores and some Bible studies. To learn, one must be taught by those skilled which includes studying skillful works and studies taught or written by skillful men of God. It is God who actually structured this teacher/student process of learning.

Paul said in **II Timothy 2:2** - “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” True interpretation demands this process.

To gain true knowledge and skills, we must learn and be taught. We must surround ourselves with skilled things. One such scholarly writing that this teacher truly loves to examine are the theological journals known as *Bibliotheca Sacra* published by Dallas Theological Seminary. I have a collection of these journals that date back to the mid 1930’s. It is iron-sharpening reading to think through a text in view of some of the most skillful and godly scholars to ever interpret the Bible.

Qualification #6 - One must be willing to study doctrine and be taught doctrine.

This is a major problem with many who teach and lead Bible studies. They have never really studied Systematic Theology and do not know what they are doctrinally doing. That minister who tried to walk on water and was killed by an alligator had no true understanding of Christology and the proof of the Deity of Jesus Christ. True interpretation demands true doctrine.

In **Romans 6:17**, Paul stresses the fact that a critical key to growth is being “obedient from the heart **to that form of teaching to which you were committed.**” Those words imply that there was a system of instruction in doctrine that was presented to the believers and they needed to know that and they needed to have a heart committed to that.

True doctrine and true systematic theology sets the parameters for legitimate and true interpretation. Remember this, **not every interpretation of a text is legitimately or doctrinally plausible.** No true interpretation of God’s word will ever contradict sound, true doctrine that is found in the word of God. To arrive at a true interpretation, two key systematic studies are needed: 1) One needs Systematic Theology; 2) One needs Systematic Bible book study.

Years ago, there was a man who was talking to people about prophecy and was using the Trumpet Judgments of Revelation as a basis for saying this is when the Rapture will occur because Paul said we will be caught up in the air at the sound of the last trumpet (I Cor. 15:52).

(18)

His problem is he had never been taught doctrine to know the difference between Israel and the Church. So he was sharing what he thought was truth and it was not truth.

Qualification #7 - One must believe that a true interpretation of a text is possible.

When it comes to interpreting the Bible, you most definitely have a desire to be right. James says that when we ask for something we must ask in faith without any doubting and then he says that if we pray doubting, God will not let us receive that for which we pray (James 1:6-7). **Whenever we prayerfully approach a text of Scripture, we must approach it believing it is possible to properly interpret it. We will not deny that some things are, as Peter said, “hard to understand” (II Pet. 3:16), but that does not mean they cannot ever be understood.**

There are those who take the position that there are so many different views about verses that we cannot really ever know. **We believe there is one true interpretation of every text, which quite honestly means all other interpretations are wrong.**

In my years of Biblical study, I have accumulated quite a sizeable library. I am very particular about the commentaries I purchase. I have on occasion purchased a commentary that actually jumps over a text, because it seemed too difficult. One such commentary said, “We’ll leave this for the scholars to decide.” I thought, “You are writing the commentary, isn’t part of the responsibility to interpret what is there so others will know?”

No matter what the field of sport or occupation, you don’t get to the top without hard work and consistent pursuit. So it is with some interpretations. You must keep digging and believe a true interpretation is there.

We have very accurate translations of God’s word that does communicate God’s truth and that makes interpretation possible and we must believe that it is possible.

Qualification #8 - One must have an attitude of humility.

The Scriptures must be approached in a reverent way and in a humble way. There is no room for pride in connection to God in anything, including reading the Bible. **There are two extremes to avoid: 1) Unhealthy proud independency; 2) Unhealthy proud dependency.**

The Apostle Paul said it well when he wrote “If anyone supposes that he knows anything he has not yet known as he ought to know” (I Cor. 8:2). **God never blesses pride, even if it is in studying His word.** God never wants any of His people to think more highly of themselves than they ought (Rom. 12:3). We are all students and we all need to grow more, and learn more, and study more.

(19)

Coming to terms with God's truth requires a humble attitude and contrite spirit. People become proud of their church, denomination, religion, and even their beliefs, but that does not mean they actually really understand the Bible. Proud people don't. Proud people never grow deep because God will not ever permit them to grow deep (Heb. 6:1-3).

If we are going to accurately understand God's word, we must be humble enough and honest enough to admit we were wrong and to submit ourselves to God's truth and be willing to make changes when one sees truth and not arrogantly refuse it or stand against it.

I was raised in a Baptist Church background that quite honestly had ministers who loved the Lord but did not know what they were doing with God's word. So before I seriously studied the Bible, I just accepted what they said and figured it was true. But when I went to school and began to be taught doctrine and Scripture, and as I was exegetically pouring through passages, there have been at many times I have come to a crossroad where I had to decide whether or not I would humble myself to truth or proudly defend what I was being taught in the church at the time - 1) Charismatic movement; 2) Legalism versus Grace; 3) Election; 4) Water Baptism; 5) The phrase "Husband of one wife"; 6) Drinking Wine; 7) Using wine at communion; 8) Altar Calls that beg people to come forward; 9) Versions of the Bible; 10) Gray Issues; 11) Leadership offices; 12) Lordship Salvation; 13) Divorce and remarriage. Each time in every one of these cases, I had to decide would I humble myself to truth or stay in some proud frame of mind against it because some guy in a church said it?

James brings out a critical point in James 4:6 when he writes: "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Those who approach the study of God's word with a humble, contrite spirit wanting to understand truth will discover they will learn more truth and grow deeper in truth and go far in their understanding of God's word.

Qualification #9 - One must have a sense of responsibility and passion to know truth and obey truth. **John 8:31-32**

To know truth of God, one must have a passion to know it and once one knows it, he has the responsibility to obey it and defend it. It is our job to know truth to grow and defend truth to others (II Tim. 4:1-4; I Pet. 3:15).

We must be able to sift through the opinions of others and sort out the true meaning. We are to be able to give answers to people who ask us things. We cannot defend truth unless we know truth. So a key to knowing truth is to be on a quest to know truth.

QUESTION #6 – Can the Bible be properly interpreted by the average Christian?

Another way to ask this question is "would a believer have to go to Bible College or Seminary to be able to accurately interpret the Bible?" "Could any layperson properly interpret the Bible?" "Could the church actually teach the average Christian how to study and interpret the Bible?"

The answer to this question is based on some presuppositions and observations:

Observation #1 - The Bible is the inspired word of God.

We start with this point—"all Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable" (II Tim. 3:16). The whole point of this study is based on this presupposition. So we would conclude that it would be profitable for one to be able to study and properly interpret the Bible.

The Bible is like no other book in the world because it is a book that claims to have been given to us from God Himself (II Tim. 3:16; I Pet. 1:21). We can start on page one of the Bible and see that it keeps repeating "and God said," which clearly indicates this is not a normal book.

Now because this is a book originally written by humans, but inspired by God, we believe at least six realities about it:

(Reality #1) - We believe the Bible is inerrant—this book does not contain any errors.

(Reality #2) - We believe the Bible is infallible—this book is incapable of containing errors.

(Reality #3) - We believe the Bible is authoritative—this book is the authority base for what we believe and all we believe.

(Reality #4) - We believe the Bible has a Divine unity—this book will not contradict itself and if all is studied, it will be proved to have a unity to it concerning any subject.