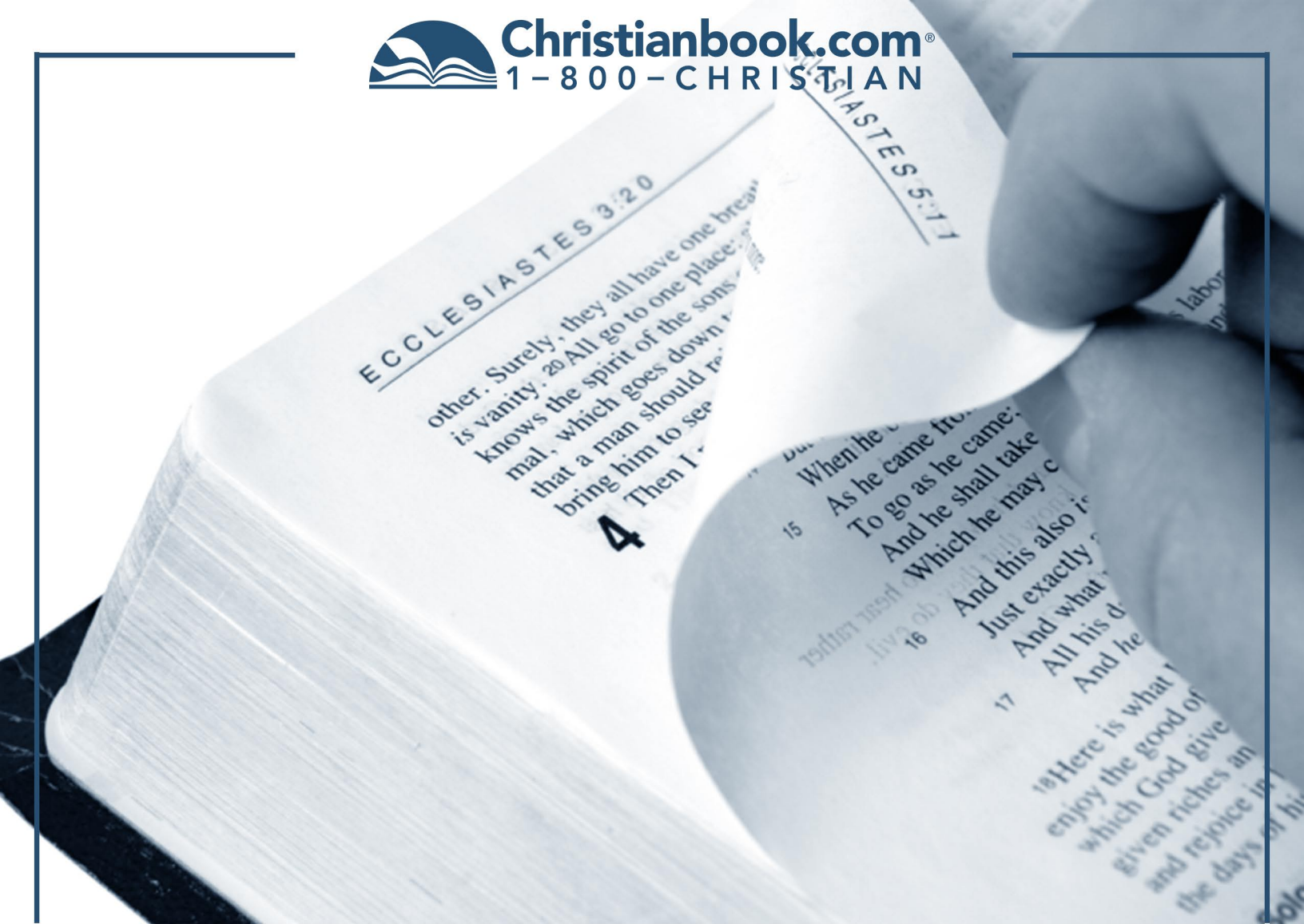




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# 5 BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR STUDYING THE BIBLE

HOW TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THE BIBLE  
ACTUALLY MEANS BY WHAT IT SAYS



# Introduction

If you are reading this now, my guess is that you don't have to be convinced of the importance of reading the Bible. Many of you have a regular program of reading the Bible but still want to know what the Bible actually means by what it says.

One writer, or speaker says the Bible teaches the necessities of war; another says it teaches pacifism. One person says the Bible teaches that women were created by God to be submissive to men; another says the Bible teaches that all are meant to have similar responsibilities and opportunities. How can the same book teach opposite viewpoints? Since there are differing viewpoints among Christians on many important issues of our day, how do we know whose interpretation of the Bible is right?

It is especially important that we use great care in interpreting the Bible, for we are dealing with material of infinite worth the very message and revelation of God. To the Christian, the Bible is the guidebook for all of life. It shows us the way to fellowship with God. It teaches what God expects of men and women. It is the one great record of God's full revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. Since fellowship with God is indispensable for a satisfying life, we dare not jeopardize it by a faulty reading or understanding of the Bible.

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All Christians are constantly faced with the need to properly interpret the Bible. This resource will not give anyone a one-two-three formula guaranteed to bring “instant understanding” to difficult passages, but it will give some basic principles to guide our thinking and help us weigh the interpretations we hear and read. Sound Bible interpretation demands that we ask two questions of every Bible passage that we study.





### The Two Questions

*First, what was the Bible saying through God's human servant to the first hearers or readers of that message?*

The Bible was not written in heaven and carried down to earth by an angel of God: "...no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Peter 1:21). Real people in specific times and places wrote or spoke to specific people about specific situations.

We need to try to put ourselves in the place of the first hearers or readers to understand what they thought was the meaning of the message brought to prophets who were moved by the Holy Spirit and spoke from God. This, of course, demands close attention to the context (the general subject) of the passage. Some understanding of the history and culture of the time of the writing also helps us see what meaning the first readers would have seen. The message was written originally to them first and comes to us because we can learn something from the teachings or experience recorded in that first situation. The second question then follows naturally:



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*How should we understand and apply the passage (if it should be applied) to people today?*

To decide, the Bible interpreter must understand that many of the teachings in the Bible fall into one of two categories. The first is the highest ideals, norms or standards. The second is the regulations for people where they were.

“The highest ideals, norms, or standards” are principles taught in the Bible that must take first place in our considerations and have top priority in all that we do. “Regulations for people where they were” deal with specific situations in a specific time and place and are not necessarily meant to apply to all peoples under all circumstances. For example, Leviticus 19:19 states, “...you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed, nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.” Most home gardeners in our day plant beans, radishes, and lettuce in the same plot and almost everyone’s clothing is made of more than one material (such as a cotton and wool blend or polyester.) Obviously, we do not believe this regulation has a timeless and universal application.

Sound Bible interpretation demands that we understand the difference between highest standards and the regulations for people where they were. We must try to see what the original message was for the first hearers and readers in the light of their particular historical and cultural situation. We must consider the literary and historical context of every passage and seek guidance of the Holy Spirit to hear and understand what the Scriptures are saying to us.



# The 5 Basic Principles

It is not easy to translate from one language to another. A good translator must be a master both of the original language and of the language into which he or she is translating. Most of us struggle to find the right words in our native language to express a feeling, fact, or idea we want to communicate. And often our words are misunderstood by those who hear or read them. Communication is difficult even under ideal circumstances.

## 1. Every Passage Must Be Studied Within Its Literary Context

When studying a passage, one must consider the literary context both the immediate passage and of the entire book. Ask yourself questions such as, *What is the purpose of the writer in this book? What question is the writer discussing in this immediate section?* For example, what is the topic under consideration in 1 Corinthians 11? A cursory examination shows that it is a discussion about how men and women are to pray and prophesy in public meetings of the Corinthian church. The chapter is *not* discussing how husbands and wives are to relate to each other at home. Whatever is said in this section must be read with the immediate context of praying and prophesying in public meetings in mind. Further, what is the larger context of 1 Corinthians? What basic problems was Paul (the writer) discussing? He was concerned with how to regain order and unity within the congregation.



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### 2. Every Passage Must Be Studied Within Its Historical and Cultural Context

What was life like for people in that day? What were their attitudes and practices? It is far easier to change people's doctrines than their traditions! Usually changes in traditional patterns of life come very slowly and painfully. The more we understand about the social life and attitudes of people in the Bible times, the more easily we can understand some passages of the Bible.

### 3. Study the Translations of the Bible

On this issue, most of us are dependent on scholars who are well-versed in Hebrew and Greek which are the major languages of the Bible. Translators are human, and they, like the rest of us, are not able to come to the Bible free of all preconceived ideas. We all tend to read the Bible in light of the cultural practices with which we are familiar and comfortable. This is also true of translators. It is helpful, when studying any passage in depth, to consult several versions. Most words in any language have more than one meaning. The meaning chosen by the translator will tend to be the one that fits his or her own preconceptions and traditions. Trying to translate so that the meaning is clear, the translator is influenced by his or her own beliefs and understandings.

Today, with so many Bible translations from which to choose, how can the honest Bible student know which one is best? The answer is not easy. There are two major types of translations: committee translations and one-person translations and paraphrases.

#### ***Committee Translations***

Committee translations are done by groups of scholars usually specialists in Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic and knowledgeable about the history and culture of the book they are translating.



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(Examples are the King James Version, New International Version and Revised Standard Version.)

### ***One-person Translations and Paraphrases***

These are produced by one person who is skilled in literary style. Such persons may not be skilled in biblical languages but they often have scholars or consultants to advise them on difficult passages. (Examples are the Today's English Version, The Living Bible and The Message.)

The committee translations, because of the interaction of well-trained scholars on a translation, often weeds out the gross inaccuracies and renderings that are strongly influenced by the personal doctrines or prejudices of individual members of the committee. However the one person translations usually have greater literary flair and more consistent style. They are basically easier to read.

### **4. Every Passage Must Be Studied in Context of the Author's Other Writings and Practices**

We dare not so interpret the Bible that we have Christ or the Apostle Paul teaching something contrary to their own practice. For example, can we interpret 1 Timothy 2:12 as saying that women should never teach men, when Priscilla had taught Apollos in the very town of Ephesus to which 1 Timothy was written? And we need to remember that Paul never had anything but praise for Priscilla.

### **5. Every Passage Must Be Studied Holistically**

Interpret the Bible in light of the entire message of the Bible.

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