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9 Ways to Misinterpret Scripture

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Interpreting Scripture is no simple thing, and many of us fall prey to nine common mistakes. If you want to interpret the Bible incorrectly, just make sure you do one of the following:

1. Interpret one piece of Scripture in a way that contradicts another piece of Scripture.

If your interpretation contradicts another part of Scripture, you have likely misinterpreted either your current text or the piece of text you are comparing it to.

Example: "Paul says we are saved by faith, but James says we are saved by works, so they contradict each other."

2. Interpret a passage in a way that would not have made sense to the Bible's original audience.

If your interpretation only makes sense to those living today but would not have made any sense to the original audience, it is probably not correct. Said another way—if your interpretation of a New Testament text would not have made sense to a Jewish Christian living 2,000 years ago, it is probably wrong.

Example: "The locusts in the book of Revelation are Apache helicopters."

3. Interpret a passage without regard to its genre.

The Bible contains different types of literature: history, poetry, wisdom literature, prophecy and more. You don't read Matthew the same way you read Revelation. You don't read

Genesis the same way you read Proverbs. Scripture has to be read in light of the rules of its genre.

Example: “There is no way my child won’t be saved because [Proverbs 22:6](#) is an absolute promise, always.” (Proverbs are principles, not promises.)

4. Interpret a passage in a way not held by anyone in church history.

It is possible that the church could have missed something major, but it is more likely that if you interpret a passage in a way not held by any major Christian thinker ever (or until the 1800s), your interpretation is probably incorrect.

Example: “Unless someone speaks in tongues, they cannot be saved.”

5. Interpret a passage without looking at its context.

Context is key. Context includes not only the surrounding passages of a text, but also its placement within the book, its placement within the larger theological context of the Bible and its historical and cultural context.

Example: “We can’t eat bacon because the Old Testament expressly forbids eating pork.” (see “[Christian Responsibility and Mosaic Law](#)”)

6. Never check your interpretation with other Christians.

A good way to wander into error is to interpret a passage in opposition to all other commonly held interpretations. Be humble enough to know you may be wrong. Scripture is meant to be interpreted in community.

Example: “God showed me what this passage means, even though nobody else agrees with me.”

7. Interpret a passage in a way that changes the meaning because you do not like what the passage seems to say.

This is a heart check. If you find yourself doing “interpretive gymnastics” to avoid the straightforward interpretation of a passage, you may be trying to bend the interpretation to suit your own ends.

Example: “I know the Bible says only certain situations are grounds for divorce, but I’m just not happy in this marriage. Jesus wants me to be happy.”

8. Build major doctrines from obscure passages.

If 100 passages address the same topic and one seems to not fit, reinterpret the one passage in light of the other 99, not the other way around. Put another way—interpret less-clear passages in light of more-clear passages, not the other way around.

Example: "Let's start baptizing people for the dead because there is an obscure reference to it in 1 Corinthians."

9. Read your presuppositions onto the text.

If you come to the text with certain preconceived notions about what it says, you will presumably misinterpret the text. Try to come to the text with as much of a "blank slate" as possible. We can never eliminate our presuppositions but we can minimize them. Also, be careful not to read your definition of a word back onto the Bible. For example, don't assume that Paul means the same thing by "salvation" that you do. Don't assume that Jesus means the same thing by "heaven" that you do.

Example: The idea that men and women are to have different roles and responsibilities is antiquated, chauvinistic and naturally leads to abuse. Therefore, the Bible cannot be saying that to modern-day Christians.

In most of these common errors, we see a common thread.

The fact that a passage can be interpreted a certain way does not necessarily mean that it should be interpreted that way. Texts "can mean" a lot of things. However, the question is: What does it actually mean?

By becoming familiar with common errors of interpreting the Bible, we can better identify and avoid them. May we seek to be good students of Scripture by taking every effort to interpret it correctly.

Recommended Resources

[How to Study the Bible](#) by Matt Chandler

[Tools for Studying the Bible](#) by Geoff Ashley

[40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible](#) by Robert Plummer and Benjamin Merkle

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