

## **What are the basic rules?**

Introduction: To compete meaningfully in any sporting contest, one must know and apply the rules to that particular game. Without rules, the game would be universally meaningless. Likewise, the communication of ideas through words is meaningless unless universal rules are applied to them in order to determine their meaning. Without accepting and then applying universal guidelines, language becomes as meaningless as a game without rules.

The rules of hermeneutics have not been arbitrarily dreamed up by the academic elite; otherwise the Bible would be subject to man's authority and not vice versa. Rather, certain universally accepted facts govern the way we must view the Bible:

Universal fact # 1: The Bible is a book.

Regardless of his belief about the Bible or about what the Bible teaches, everyone agrees that the Bible is a book, and as such, it is designed to communicate something.

A book is a collection of written words compiled for the purpose of communicating a message.

A primary goal of any book is the communication of ideas through words. Written communication itself involves three components:

a. The writer

The writer is the communicator of the ideas. Because he is unique, his style will be unique. His background and experiences must be considered in light of the words that he has written.

b. The message

What language has the author employed? What did these words mean to the contemporary audience? How would these words be understood in the religious/political climate of the day?

c. The reader

What have been the life experiences of the reader? Is he Jewish? Is he saved? Does he understand Bible terminology? Is he familiar with Bible themes? Does he have access to resource materials?

Universal fact #2: The Bible is a human book.

To clarify, we emphatically affirm God the Spirit to be the author of the Word of God. This universal fact is simply the acknowledgement that God used human beings to accomplish this work.

Written by humans for humans, the Bible is to be approached as one would approach other books. Elements such as context, literary style, setting, and authorship all play a vital part in the understanding of the Bible as a human book.

- a. The Bible is to be understood in a normal, straightforward way. The language of the Bible is that of normal grammatical meanings, including figurative speech.

There is no magic code to the unlocking of hidden deciphers.

The messages of the Bible were often recorded sermons, and like the rest of Scripture, were meant to be understood when confronted with the message itself.

If modern readers could be given the same context of the original audience, the Bible is generally understood at face value.

The basic rule to understanding the Bible in this straightforward way is this: If the literal sense makes sense, seek no other sense! (Figurative language shall be discussed later.)

The goal of the reader is exegesis—reading the meaning out of the text. The opposite of exegesis is eisegesis—reading a meaning into the text.

We tread on dangerous ground when we make statements such as, “What this means to me is...” or “What the author intended here was...”

- b. Bible messages were written by certain people to certain people, at certain times, in certain places, for certain purposes.

Understanding the historical, geographical, and political/religious climate is vital to understanding the text.

Before I can determine what a text means for me, I must determine what a text meant to the original reader.

When God told Noah to build an ark, or Philip to go to the desert, or Timothy to stay in Ephesus, what did the command mean to them? What can we learn from these commands?

When God commanded men like Samson to honor the Nazarite vow, what did that mean to him in those days in that place?

- c. Not only is the interpretation of the Bible influenced by one’s understanding of the historical context, it is also affected by an understanding of the cultural environment in which the author wrote and the audience received the message.

To establish the historical/cultural context of a particular passage is vital to one’s understanding of it.

It is often helpful to begin one's study in this area by asking certain questions:

- (1) Who wrote the book?
- (2) At what time was it written?
- (3) What prompted the author to write?
  - Problems? Needs? Special situation?
- (4) What are the themes of the book?
- (5) To whom was the book written?
  - Who were the first readers?

Historical/Cultural context includes understanding something about the way human beings behaved at a certain time and in a certain place. Cultural discrepancies abound even among contemporaries in modern society; how much the more in an altogether different time and place?

Human behavior can be broken down into what people think, believe, say, do, or make.

Within this context we might categorize belief systems, forms of communication, customs, tools, weaponry, housing, etc.

Culture would also include one's relationships including family, nation, church, work, and social class, and more specifically would also include the agricultural, architectural, geographical, military, political, legal, social, economic, and religious contexts.