



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

Lesson #2

Why the Bible Is Sometimes Hard to Understand

The true author of the Bible is the Holy Spirit. He gave the prophets and apostles the words that they wrote. But the Bible says: **“The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned”** (1 Corinthians 2:14). Therefore no one who is still an unbeliever can really understand the Bible. Even true Christians still have their sinful flesh, which always fights against the new man in the Christian. We learn this from Galatians 5:17: **“For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another.”**

Many teachers of the Bible introduce their own ideas that come from the flesh into their explanations of the Bible. This misleads those who hear these explanations. If a person has been taught to understand a Bible passage in a wrong, it is sometimes difficult to correct wrong understanding. For this reason, the devil tries to get Bible teachers to inject their own ideas into their teaching, so that he can mislead both the teacher and his students into error.

The Holy Spirit gave the prophets and apostles the words they wrote in the languages of Hebrew and Greek. It is good for teachers of the Bible learn these ancient languages well, so that they can compare the translations they use with the original text. Translators need to know the original languages as well as the language into which they are translating the Bible. This is a rare skill, and some translators are not as gifted as others. They can make mistakes. Some Bible passages are hard to understand because a translator did not correctly understand the original text or because the translation is not a good translation. If you are unable to read Greek and Hebrew, you should read the passage in different translations (and languages you may know). This can help make sure you are not misunderstanding the text by focusing on just one translation.

The Bible is written in many different styles. Some of it is factual history. Some of it is poetry. The Bible uses various figures of speech, such as comparisons, questions, personifications. When we do not correctly understand the style of a section, we can misunderstand what the Bible says. For example, Genesis 1-11 is a clearly historical section. A very serious misunderstanding occurs when someone understands these chapters to be a myth or to be poetry. Likewise, we misunderstand the Bible when we understand symbolic language in a literal way. This is especially true with much of the book of Revelation.

The writings of the Old Testament prophets are sometimes hard to understand because occasionally there is an abrupt change in subject matter or an abrupt change in the speaker.

Another thing that can make the Bible difficult to understand is that neither Greek nor Hebrew have quotation marks. It is sometimes difficult to know when a quotation comes to an end. An example of this is John 3:10-21. Did Jesus Himself speak all the words recorded in John 3:10-21, or did He only speak the first few verses and the rest are John’s comment on what Jesus said? In this particular case, it makes little difference whether Jesus spoke the words Himself, or some of the later verses are John’s commentary. Whether Jesus said the words or John wrote them, they are all still the Word of God.

Another reason the Bible can be difficult to understand is that people in the Bible lived in a culture different from our own. We are separated from them by hundreds of years. Things that they

understood clearly because they knew their own culture and time are not so easily understood by us. Their way of living, their customs, their daily lives may be quite different from the way we live and from our customs today.

The two main teachings of the Bible are Law and Gospel. The Law includes all those words of God in which He tells us what we must do; the Gospel includes those words of God in which He tells us what He has done for us. If we confuse the two, we will misunderstand what God is saying to us.

Questions

1. Why are unbelievers unable to understand the Bible?
2. What are the two forces that fight against each other in the believers?
3. How does the devil make use of false teachers?
4. Why is knowledge of Hebrew and Greek so important for the Bible teacher?
5. How can one determine whether a translation of the Bible is in error?
6. List some of the various styles in which the Bible is written.
7. What makes the writings of the prophets difficult to understand?
8. Give an example of a Law statement in the Bible.
9. Give an example of a Gospel statement in the Bible.