



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

## How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

### Lesson #6

#### Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

We turn now from the rules of Matthias Flacius for understanding the Bible to the six principles of Bible interpretation laid down by David Kuske, a retired Lutheran seminary professor. These principles come from his 1995 book, *Biblical Interpretation – The Only Right Way*.

#### Principle One: The Only Books That Are God’s Word Are the Canonical Books of the Bible

The Bibles that we use in our work are Bibles that contain 66 books: 39 Old Testament books and 27 New Testament books. These are the canonical books of the Bible. We believe and teach that these books are in their entirety the Word of God. They were breathed out by the Holy Spirit during the course of many centuries. They begin with the writings of Moses and end with the writings of Jesus’ apostle John.

The Old Testament used by the Jewish people at the time of Christ contained these 39 books. It had three divisions: the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms. Jesus put His stamp of approval on these books in Luke 24:44-45: **“Then He said to them, ‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.’ And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.”**

Jesus included the whole Hebrew Bible from the first book to the last when He told the Jewish leaders **“that the blood of all the prophets which was shed from the foundation of the world may be required of this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who perished between the altar and the temple”** (Luke 11:50-51). Abel is mentioned in the first book, Genesis, and Zechariah is mentioned in the last book, Second Chronicles.

The Greek New Testament was assembled after Jesus completed His work on earth. But while He was still with His apostles, Jesus told them:

- **The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you** (John 14:26).
- **When the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me** (John 15:26).
- **When He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you”** (John 16:13-14).

These promises of Jesus were fulfilled when the Holy Spirit came down on Jesus’ apostles and gave them the words they used in their teaching. Over and over again the apostles and their assistants who wrote the New Testament books claimed that the words they were writing came to them from God. For example, the apostle Paul wrote:

- **Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches** (1 Corinthians 2:12-13).

In the same way, Peter put the writings of the apostles on the same level as the Old Testament prophets when he wrote:

- **Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle...that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior** (2 Peter 3:1-2).
- **Our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures”** (2 Peter 3:15-16).

So also, the apostle Paul said that the believers in Christ are **“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone”** (Ephesians 2:20).

As the apostles and their assistants wrote the words given to them by the Holy Spirit, these writings were gradually put together into one book, which we call the New Testament.

Other writings were being circulated also, but the early Christians tested these writings in order to determine if these writings were really written by the apostles or if they were written by others. Jesus Himself commended the congregation in Ephesus for doing this testing:

- **You have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars** (Revelation 2:2).

As a result of this testing, the books of the New Testament were assembled under the direction of the apostles. Most of the books of the New Testament were accepted by all. The books that were accepted by everyone are: Matthew Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, First and Second Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, First Peter, and 1 John.

A few of the books were not accepted by everyone. A few of the Christians at that time had some reservations about including these books in the New Testament. These books include: Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation. Today almost all Christians who believe that the Holy Spirit is the true Author of Scripture are convinced that the Holy Spirit is also the Author of these books as well.

The Roman Catholic Church has included other books in its Old Testament. These are the so-called apocryphal books. These books were not written in the Hebrew language and they were not quoted by Jesus or the apostles as God’s word. Some of these books even teach things that disagree with the genuine Scriptures. These books may be helpful for understanding the history between the Old Testament and the New Testament, but there is no reason for believe that these writings are the work of the Holy Spirit.

It has become popular in our times for false teachers to claim that some of the writings that were condemned by the early Christians should be considered equal with the New Testament books. Two examples of these false writings are the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas. These books are clearly unscriptural and false because of their content. None of them are authentic apostolic writings breathed out by the Holy Spirit.

## Questions

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1. Which are the canonical books of the Old and the New Testaments?
2. Which are the three divisions of the Hebrew Old Testament?
3. What did Jesus say about these three divisions?
4. What did Jesus promise to His apostles while He was still on earth?
5. How was this promise fulfilled?
6. How can we be sure that the New Testament is just as much God's word as the Old Testament?
7. What did Peter say about the writings of Paul?
8. What is the difference between books like Matthew, Mark, 1 Peter and books like 2 Peter, Hebrews, James, and Revelation?
9. Why do we say that the apocryphal books are not part of the Bible?