

8 Common Ways People Interpret the Word of God

Throughout my years of advanced study in ministry and theology, I've delved deeply into hermeneutics, the science of biblical interpretation. In my view, no subject is more crucial for anyone seeking to understand the Scriptures. Hermeneutics is the key to unlocking the true meaning of the Bible, yet many believers are unaware of the lens through which they interpret it.

In this article, we'll explore eight common approaches to interpreting Scripture.

1. Through the lens of truth from the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised His followers that the Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth, a promise reaffirmed by the apostle John (John 14:26, 1 John 2:27). This assurance, however, comes with a profound responsibility: the task of discerning, with the Spirit's help, what the Word of God is truly conveying both individually and to the church as a whole. This journey is not quick; it requires years of study and careful distinction between personal assumptions, cultural influences and the Spirit's divine insight.

2. Interpreting through the lens of culture. A widespread tendency is to interpret Scripture through the lens of contemporary cultural values, placing the Bible on par with the prevailing ethos of society. When this happens, people often approach Scripture primarily as a means to extract lessons that align with their cultural context. This approach, in my view, significantly diminishes the transformative power and divine intent of the Scriptures, reducing them to mere anthropological artifacts, literary works that are treated no differently than other texts esteemed by society's intellectual elite.

3. The lens of truth for culture. This approach to interpretation focuses on using Scripture primarily for apologetics—to speak truth to contemporary culture. While there is undeniable value in this, it can fall short of Scripture’s deeper purpose: the pursuit of knowing God intimately and understanding His ways (2 Pet. 3:18). The Bible certainly provides a comprehensive worldview that offers eternal principles relevant to politics, law, education, science, music, art and culture. However, it is far more than a handbook for shaping societal norms, ideologies or policies.

The ultimate aim of Scripture is not merely to inform nations’ governance but to transform individuals’ hearts. This should be the ultimate aim of all biblical interpretation, guiding us beyond cultural engagement to a life centered on communion with our Creator.

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4. Through the lens of culture for faith. Many believers inadvertently read the Scriptures through the lens of their cultural values, interpreting biblical passages through frameworks like the American value system rather than through a purely biblical lens. While this is common, particularly among Christians in the U.S., it’s essential to recognize that this approach is not unique to any nation. Christians worldwide often view the Bible through the lens of their own national cultures, whether African, Asian, Latin American or otherwise.

Despite these cultural filters, God’s Word remains powerful enough to reach and transform lives, ministering to people even within the constraints of their cultural, emotional, mental and historical contexts. However, as we grow in our faith, moving beyond these national frameworks becomes crucial. We must strive to read the Scriptures through a truly biblical lens, ensuring we do not impose our national values

or worldview upon the sacred text.

5. Through the lens of a doctrine. Many Christians approach the Bible with a preconceived doctrinal bias, already committed to proving a particular theological framework before they even open the Scriptures. This mindset can severely limit one's understanding of the text. For instance, a hyper-Calvinist might interpret every passage through the lens of God's sovereignty, often downplaying or ignoring human responsibility. Conversely, an Arminian might focus so heavily on human free will that they overlook the significance of divine sovereignty.

To interpret the Bible accurately, we must resist the urge to impose our doctrinal assumptions onto the text. Instead, we should let the Scriptures speak for themselves, allowing their content to unfold naturally in the way and order they were written. Only then can we grasp the full depth and truth of God's Word, free from the constraints of our own theological biases.

6. Through the lens of inward mystical truth. Some Christians, particularly those with a hypermystical bent, tend to overlook the literal, historical and grammatical meaning of Scripture, choosing instead to interpret it solely through the lens of allegory and mysticism. For them, the plain text is merely a surface layer, obscuring what they believe to be a more profound, hidden spiritual meaning that the Holy Spirit reveals only to a select few.

While it is true that the Holy Spirit illuminates and reveals profound insights within the Scriptures, we must be cautious not to veer into subjective interpretations that disregard the fundamental principles of biblical hermeneutics.

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To fully grasp its meaning, we must honor the text as it is written, allowing the Holy Spirit to guide us within sound interpretive practices. Only then can we avoid the pitfalls of mysticism that distort the Word of God and remain anchored in the truth it seeks to convey.

7. Through the lens of political activism. Over the past several decades, I've encountered books by so-called public theologians on the far Left and popular preachers on the far Right. Despite their opposing views, they share a troubling commonality: both engage in proof-texting, cherry-picking Scripture to support their political agendas while disregarding fundamental principles of biblical interpretation.

When the gospel is manipulated to serve political ends, it becomes entangled with the flawed and often corrupt systems of human governance that overshadow the message of Christ's kingdom, which transcends any earthly political framework.

8. Through the lens of moral principles. Many believers approach the Bible primarily as a devotional tool, seeking principles for business, leadership, purpose and moral living. While the Scriptures indeed offer profound wisdom for these areas, reducing them to a mere guidebook for personal success is to miss their true essence.

The Bible is far more than a collection of practical tips; it is the living Word of God, revealing the all-consuming presence of a God who desires to engage with us. Through its pages, we are invited into a transformative encounter with Him through His Son, Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

To read the Scriptures for anything less than this is to view them through a human-centered lens, risking losing the Christ-centered focus at the heart of the sacred text. The ultimate purpose of the Bible is not just to enhance our lives but to draw us into a deeper relationship with the living God, where

His grace and truth continually transform us.

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