

How to Interpret Scripture

The Bible—the Authoritative Source of Our Theology

Lesson #4 for April 25, 2020

Scriptures: Mark 7:1-13; Romans 2:4; 1 John 2:15-17; 2 Corinthians 10:5-6, John 5:46-47; 7:38; Isaiah 8:20.

1. Almost by definition, every Christian church uses the Scriptures to support its beliefs. However, how, when, and how often these churches use Scripture is not the same in all cases. What other influences might impact how people interpret Scripture? Some of the most important sources of influence are: Tradition, experience, culture, reason, and the Bible itself.
2. Think through the ways these five different sources impact your own thinking. When you read the Bible, how do you interpret it? Are there other factors that influence how you do that? Does what you learned as a child take precedence over what the Bible says? And finally, what is the ultimate source to which you look. We would probably be mistaken to suggest that anyone can interpret Scripture without being influenced at least partially by each of these sources. Just take a look at the variety of Christian churches, and this should be obvious. A definition of *tradition* is:

An inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (such as a religious practice or social custom).—Merriam-Webster, I. (2003). *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc.
3. **Tradition** usually connects us with our roots. An overall, total sum of a person's traditional beliefs is sometimes referred to as his/her *paradigm*. But, there are some dangers associated with just accepting traditions without scrutinizing them. Does it give one a sense of belonging?
4. Read Mark 7:1-13. The Jews had a very typical but unusual way of washing their hands and arms when they returned from the market. While this behavior may have originally been for hygienic reasons, it came to have a very religious significance. It was regarded as very bad for people to eat what came from the market without washing in those particular ways first. In fact, the worry was that what came from the market might somehow have been contaminated by coming into contact with some Gentile! In the days of Jesus, tradition had come to be regarded almost as equal to Scripture. In some cases, tradition superseded the teachings of Scripture. An obvious example was the practice of Corban mentioned by Jesus.
5. However, traditions can be very helpful. Read 1 Corinthians 11:2 and 2 Thessalonians 3:6. Paul had passed on to several different church groups some of the traditions and customs that had grown to be accepted by Christian groups in the early days. These traditions had such force that in some cases, those who did not accept them were excluded from the Christian community.
6. In the last few years, some authors have written books about how they tried to live a year or so following the exact traditions of ancient Israel as written in the Bible. As you might

imagine, that was in an attempt to make fun of the Bible. **Traditions must be understood in the context in which they were followed.** If everyone else was living that way, it would be considered normal.

7. Do we have any traditions in the Adventist Church? We certainly do. The way we conduct our Sabbath services has come to be very much a tradition. The way we conduct our Communion services is a tradition. There are other traditions which are accepted in some parts of the world among Adventist groups but not accepted in other areas.
8. What role should **experience** play in our Christian lives? Read Romans 2:4 and Titus 3:4-5. In Romans 2, Paul correctly took on some of the traditions of his very conservative fellow Pharisees. He said that their dependence upon their traditions in place of dependence upon Scripture made them worse than the heathen. (See Romans 2:12-16.)
9. But, experiences are a part of every human life. We cannot help but be influenced by our previous experience. It is God's plan for us to be influenced day by day in our relationship with Him through Bible study, prayer, and witnessing. Imagine how different Christian churches would be if each member studied his/her Bible, prayed, and witnessed on a regular basis.
10. More than that, God plans for us to enjoy beautiful relationships, beautiful art, and music and, most of all, the wonders of creation in nature. He especially wants us to appreciate the joy of His salvation and the powerful promises of His Word; but, each of us has experiences that could lead us away from God.

2 Corinthians 11:1-4: ¹ I wish you would tolerate me, even when I am a bit foolish. Please do! ²I am jealous for you, just as God is; you are like a pure virgin whom I have promised in marriage to one man only, Christ himself. ³I am afraid that your minds will be corrupted and that you will abandon your full and pure devotion to Christ—in the same way that Eve was deceived by the snake's clever lies. ⁴For you gladly tolerate anyone who comes to you and preaches a different Jesus, not the one we preached; and you accept a spirit and a gospel completely different from the Spirit and the gospel you received from us!—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation** (2nd ed., 2 Corinthians 11:1–4). New York: American Bible Society.

11. Paul had planned for the Corinthian believers to remain faithful after he had worked so hard for them for one and one-half years. But, they had started to slip back into their old ways. And he warned them about what happened to Eve!
12. Our world today is cluttered with influences intended to lead us away from God's plan for our lives. Think of how the advertising industry influences our lives. Before we engage in any of these worldly experiences, we need to consider how they might relate to what God's Word says?

Mark 12:28-31: ²⁸ A teacher of the Law was there who heard the discussion. He saw that Jesus had given the Sadducees a good answer, so he came to him with a question: "Which commandment is the most important of all?"

²⁹ Jesus replied, "The most important one is this: 'Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only Lord. ³⁰Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all

your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’³¹ The second most important commandment is this: ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself.’ There is no other commandment more important than these two.”—*Good News Bible*.*

13. How often do we think of God first when we are tempted to follow some worldly plans? How often do we think of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves? What is **culture**? One definition of *culture* is:

The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group. *also*: the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or way of life) shared by people in a place or time.—*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*.

14. We grow up in a culture of some kind. And those habits, customs, and ways of thinking that we inherited from our parents and acquired from others when we were young often impact how we interpret all aspects of our later lives.
15. How many of our young people are being literally carried away from the church by cultural influences from their peer groups? Christian groups or churches have a specific culture. But, in what ways should the Bible transcend established cultural categories of ethnicity or social status? Should we allow our cultural backgrounds to determine who we are willing to associate with at church?
16. Read 1 John 2:15-17. How often do we allow our love of certain things in the world to overrule what we know from Scripture? It may be necessary for a church that wants to grow and in order to keep its young people faithful to produce a counterculture leading them away from the evil influences around them.

The followers of Christ are to be separate from the world in principles and interests, but they are not to isolate themselves from the world. The Saviour mingled constantly with men, not to encourage them in anything that was not in accordance with God’s will, but to uplift and ennoble them.—Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students** 323.1; *Mar** 112.3. Compare *Review and Herald*, July 27, 1905, par. 5; *HP* 311.3; *LHU* 189.4.

17. Can you think of some cultural influences that are impacting you or your family that are in direct opposition to what the Bible teaches? How much are we influenced by television and movies? It is just about all that some people think about! How should we react when we observe something like that taking place?
18. Read 2 Corinthians 10:5-6; and Proverbs 1:7; 9:10. God has given us brains and minds that serve very important functions. Without a brain no other part of the body would function. And **God has given us the ability to think and to reason things out**. So, what role should **reason** play in our theology? Back in the 18th century, what came to be known as the *Age of Enlightenment* rose to a high position of influence in Western society. It suggested that reason alone, without any outward guidance, could ascertain truths and evaluate them. Ultimately, this meant that human reason was a test or norm for truth.

Everything that was not self-evident to human reason was discarded and its legitimacy questioned. This attitude affected large parts of Scripture. All miracles and supernatural acts of God, such as the bodily resurrection of

Jesus, the virgin birth, or the six-day Creation, to name but a few, were no longer considered true and trustworthy.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Wednesday, April 22.

19. How much influence does sin have on our reasoning powers? One obvious example is the way in which drugs or alcohol impact our thinking. People can do crazy things under the influence of certain substances.

Centuries ago, American President Thomas Jefferson made his own version of the New Testament by cutting out anything that, in his view, went against reason. Gone were almost all of the miracles of Jesus, including His resurrection. What should this alone teach us about the limits of human reason for understanding truth?—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Wednesday, April 22.

20. And what about **the Bible**? What role should it play in guiding our religious thinking? **The most important work of the Holy Spirit down through the centuries has been to give us the Bible.** When we ask Him to guide our thinking, He will always be in agreement with the teachings of Scripture since He is the overarching Author of Scripture. How can we make the Bible our ultimate authority in all that we do and say?

John 5:46-47: ⁴⁶ “If you had really believed Moses, you would have believed me, because he wrote about me. ⁴⁷ But since you do not believe what he wrote, how can you believe what I say?”—*Good News Bible.**

21. How many people in the days of Jesus could even read or understand Hebrew? Jesus made a very important point in this passage as He does elsewhere. If we accept the truth as presented in the Old Testament, then we will also accept the truth as presented in the New Testament and in the life of Jesus. Since the Author in both cases is the same, there should be no discrepancies. Compare the Jesus that came down on Mount Sinai with the Jesus who gave the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew 5-7.
22. However, there are people who have claimed to receive certain special “revelations” from the Holy Spirit. We have been told clearly that at the end of time, for example, Satan and his associates will convince the world that Sunday is the correct day on which to worship. (See Revelation 13:3-4,7-8.) Is it really possible that almost the whole world will worship the Devil? How should we respond when we come across someone who claims to have been guided by the Spirit but what they are teaching is in direct conflict with Scriptures? Think of how Jesus responded to the Devil during the temptations in the wilderness.
23. Read Acts 4:1-22. When put in prison for preaching in the temple, Peter and John, having been called to account before the Sanhedrin simply said: “You yourselves judge which is right in God’s sight—to obey you or to obey God.” (Acts 4:19, *GNB**) Wouldn’t that be a safe question to ask of any experience?

Through the Scriptures the Holy Spirit speaks to the mind, and impresses truth upon the heart. Thus He exposes error, and expels it from the soul. It is by the Spirit of truth, working through the word of God, that Christ subdues His chosen people to Himself.—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages** 671.1. Compare AG 199.2; *LHU* 179.6; *YRP* 13.2.

24. God has not given us the assignment of judging Scripture. We are not capable of safely

picking out what we should follow and what not to follow. God's Word should, in fact, be our judge and guide each day. See 1 Timothy 4:6.

25. So, how should we respond to those who tell us they have received new light on some particular Christian belief? If it was our church's practice to accept every teaching brought in by some person suggesting they have new light, soon our theology would be in total chaos. However, if your picture or understanding of God has not grown and changed in the last year, you are worshiping a graven image!
26. To be honest, each of us must admit that tradition, experience, culture, reason, and the Bible all impact us as we study and accept the Word of God in our lives. So, which of these influences is the ultimate authority? **Do we always accept the Bible as the ultimate authority?**

In one sense, culture, experience, reason and even tradition, in and of themselves, might not of necessity be bad. They become problems when they contradict what Scripture teaches.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide** for Friday, April 24.

27. Jesus has given us the ultimate rule: Love God first and our neighbors as ourselves. (Matthew 22:37-41) Why is it so hard to stick strictly to those guiding principles each day in our lives?
28. Do we allow the sources we have discussed in this lesson to guide us when interpreting the Bible? Is that always safe? How good are we at hating the sin but loving the sinner?
29. In what ways can we make sure that our churches exhibit a friendly, welcoming atmosphere and have social activities together that help to form a kind of culture that God will appreciate and bless? Particularly our young people need to experience this kind of counterculture to guide them against the many other influences that impact them in the world.
30. Sometimes, it is very difficult even to admit to ourselves which of these sources of influence are impacting our thinking. It is very difficult to go against the traditions with which we have grown up. Some churches like the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches allow tradition to play a decisive role in their practice and teachings.
31. In other churches such as the Pentecostal churches, experiences often serves as the final authority. For example, if you have not spoken in "tongues" during church, you are not regarded as a real church member!
32. In other situations such as in liberal theology, human reason often serves as the last word in making decisions about what is true. So, how can we be honest with ourselves? How can we help others around us recognize which of these sources is operating as the ultimate and highest authority in matters of faith and practice?
33. We cannot avoid the influence of tradition. It does not always need to be a bad influence. But, we must beware lest tradition sets itself against the teachings of Scripture. In the churches in Galatia, Paul was forced to take a very strong stand against those who were trying to lead church members away from the gospel they originally had learned from Paul.

Galatians 1:8-9: ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel that is different from the one we preached to you, may he be

condemned to hell!⁹We have said it before, and now I say it again: if anyone preaches to you a gospel that is different from the one you accepted, may he be condemned to hell!—*Good News Bible*.^{*} [How do you think Paul felt about the influence of those Judaizers/Pharisees? They were trying to force the new church members to practice all of the Jewish traditional customs.][‡]

34. Each of us as faithful Christians is supposed to be an example, especially to the young in our churches.

2 Corinthians 3:2-3: ²You yourselves are the letter we have, written on our hearts for everyone to know and read. ³It is clear that Christ himself wrote this letter and sent it by us. It is written, not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, and not on stone tablets but on human hearts.—*Good News Bible*.^{*}

35. While we accept the Bible as the ultimate source of authority, we need to recognize that it was given in a specific culture and at a specific time in history. We need to understand, as far as possible, the context in which each passage was given.

36. Think of the impact that the Bible had on certain groups in the past. Think of the Waldenses and the Pilgrims.

37. How much influence does culture have on the way we worship God?

God created us with the ability to think. Much of the Bible calls us to reflect upon what is written in Scripture and stimulates our thoughts and thinking. The repeated question “What do you think?” (*Matt. 17:25, Matt. 18:12, Matt. 21:28, Matt. 22:17, Matt. 22:42, Matt. 26:66, etc.*) or the related question “Have you not read?” (*Matt. 12:3, 5; Matt. 19:4; Matt. 21:16; Matt. 21:42; Matt. 22:31; etc.*) implies that God wants us to use our minds in understanding Him and His Word. While we can understand God correctly and truthfully, we have to acknowledge that we will never *fully* comprehend everything about God. After all, we are created beings. We are not God!—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*^{*} 54.[§]

38. When reading the Bible, do we recognize that the Holy Spirit has guided each of its authors in what he did and said? Jesus and the apostles repeatedly referred back to Scripture as normative in their teachings.

39. We recognize that we need a reliable source of truth that goes deeper than what we feel, is higher than what we think, and is more meaningful than any human traditional culture? Thank God for His enduring and trustworthy words that we find in the Bible. We have more truth than any other group that has ever lived.

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