

**MOVING ON TO MATURITY**  
*Self-Feeding from the Word of God*  
1 Peter 2:2

What a month this has been in my household. Each of my daughters and all of my grandchildren — who normally live in three different time zones — converged on our house. We have had an exhilarating, but exhausting time.

But one thing I've noticed about my six grandchildren. They all like to eat (photo of grandkids eating Popsicles) and they like to feed themselves. Now the littlest one, Gabriela Rose, will sometimes allow me to feed her (photo of Gabriela Rose eating a peach out of my hand), but usually even she prefers to feed herself (photo of Gabriela Rose eating corn on the cob). That's the way it is. It's okay to help my 16-month-old granddaughter eat, but my oldest grandson Noah who is seven, would not stand for me "babying" him by feeding him.

And so it is in our Christian sustenance. There comes a time in our spiritual walk with God to be self-feeding from the Word of God. The words of 1 Peter 2:2 come to mind: *"Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow up in your salvation now that you have tasted that the Lord is good."*

As a pastor, I urge you to become self-feeders from the Word of God. There are too many forks in the road, too many situations that need God's input, too many times you need to know true doctrine. And when those times come, there is not always a sermon right then that addresses it.

But some of you may be saying, "Pastor Reilly, I've tried to read the Word of God myself, but it seems confusing. When I want to know what God has to say about in issue, it is like searching for a needle of truth in a haystack of words. If only there were some guidelines, some principles that could help me find the truth when I am feeding on the Word of God myself."

For your benefit, then, today I would like to present eight guidelines or principles to use that will help you find God's truth when you are reading his Word. If you'd like a thousand dollar word for what we are talking about today it is this word: Hermeneutics.

***Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpreting the meaning of the Bible.***

And in my personal pilgrimage in handling accurately the Word of Truth, I've found these eight principles to be of great value.

**Principles to guide us to truth:**

**1. We follow an inductive rather than a deductive approach. This way prejudices and personal hobbyhorses are minimized.**

There are two ways people can approach the study of Scripture. One way is to have a pre-conceived idea of what it has to say, and then we look for verses that back up what we already believe. That is a deductive approach. We cannot always avoid this, especially as we learn more

and more about God and His Word, so we have pre-built boxes in our minds into which we sort the data we read.

But as much as possible, we should approach the reading of Scripture with the excitement of finding a new discovery. Rather than telling to Word what it is saying, let the Word speak to us freshly each time we open it.

## **2. Keeping the distinctive purpose of each book in view is helpful.**

The Bible is made up of 66 books. They are unified—non-contradictory in truth, progressive in their revelation. But each of the 66 books was written with a distinctive purpose.

For example, the books of Chronicles were apparently written by someone from the priesthood, so while giving the history of Israel (covering much the same ground as the books of Kings), they have a distinctive purpose of highlighting the temple and the sacrificial system.

You may have heard how each of the four Gospels tells the life of Jesus from four different perspectives. Again, non-contradictory in truth, they nevertheless highlight particular aspects of the life of Jesus. Matthew, written toward a Jewish audience, sees Christ as the fulfillment of Israel's promised King and quotes most extensively from the Old Testament. Mark sees Jesus as a servant—and a servant's lineage is unimportant—so Mark omits the genealogy that is prominent at the beginning of Matthew and Luke. Luke writes to present Jesus as the perfect man. John presents Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, with the anticipation that you will believe and find life through his name.

If you want to find a book to defend the purity of the Gospel of grace against the intrusion of works, read Galatians. If you want to know about a problem church and how to address various church maladies, read Corinthians.

Knowing the purposes of the books will help you find what you are looking for.

## **3. Genre (the kind of literature we are studying) influences interpretation.**

The Bible is composed of different sections and different kinds of literature. Poetry—consisting in Hebrew verse with parallelism not rhyme—makes up much of the Old Testament. Narrative accounts of historical events makes up another large section of the Old Testament, including the first five books called the Pentateuch and the historical sections of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. The prophetic sections of the Old Testament, often in poetic format, is yet another genre of literature. And then there is the Wisdom Literature, sayings and advice like the books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. The New Testament, too, has various genres or types of literature, including the historical records of the Gospels and Acts; epistles or letters written to churches or individuals, like Romans, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy. And, of course, there is the Apocalyptic book that concludes our Bible, Revelation.

Knowing which genre you are reading in will help you understand the verses you find there. You'll recognize that historical sections usually record events rather than give sermons about them. Thus, the events are truly portrayed, but sometimes the reasons they turned out as they did

is not overtly stated. You're just supposed to observe the outcome and draw your conclusions. Brigham Young observed the Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—had plural wives and thought that gave him permission too. But these descriptions are in historical books. You are reading in historical sections that ask the reader to observe carefully the outcome rather than always expecting a pronouncement or commentary on the behavior. Based upon the family turmoil and generational despair that resulted from the plural marriages of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the astute reader should conclude, "Polygamy, a bad idea."

Once I met a distraught father in my office. He was having a crisis of personal faith because of Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it." The father explained, "My child has grown old and has rejected the Faith of my wife and me. Either I haven't trained up my child (and I am, therefore, a failure before God) or God has lied to me and is no longer worthy of my trust." What would you say to such a distraught father? What I told him related to the topic of genre, and it sent the father away from his time in my office with a renewed vigor without oppressive guilt or rejected faith. What I explained was that Proverbs is wisdom literature. It gives adages that are not promises, but rather sayings that are generally true. It is generally true that when you train a child in the way he should go, he will adopt it as his own as he becomes an adult. It is generally true, but it is not an iron-clad promise because God does allow all of us—including children in Christian homes—to have freewill. Proverbs 22:6 is not a promise like promises found in other kinds of Scripture, such as John 3:16. God declares there, "Whosoever believes in God's Son shall not perish but shall have eternal life."

#### **4. It must be determined to whom a given passage is address. All Scripture is for the Christian, but all is not to him or about him.**

Sometimes God has made specific promises to Israel, his Chosen People. It is wrong to take a promise made to Israel, and claim it for the Church as a whole or for you as an individual. 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, who are called by My name...humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." That was a promise given to Solomon upon the night he finished the temple. It is not to the Christian or about him. It was not given to America.

But all Scripture is for the Christian, including this verse. This verse tells us about the kind of God we serve. He is a God who values these things—humbling ourselves, praying, seeking his face, and turning away from evil. The same God who said that to Israel is the same God who will hear and forgive and heal us too. Not because we have this promise, but because we have this same God.

#### **5. The importance of context, context, context.**

When I was about eight years old, I was looking forward to our family's camping trip. But on the morning we were to leave, my mom came out of her daily devotional Bible reading to announce she had a word from God about our intended trip. We were not to go. The Bible reading for that very day had said, "Go thou not upon the mountain."

I was greatly disappointed, and I wondered if God really had written a note to our own little family about our plans for the day. A few years later, when I was self-feeding on the Word of God, I came upon the very passage that had impressed my mom for personal direction. It was either from Exodus 19 or Deuteronomy 5, “I declare to you the word of the Lord. Do not go up the mountain.” It was God’s instructions through Moses to Israel when he was about to come down upon Mt. Sinai to give into Moses hands the tablets of stone upon which were the Ten Commandments. So awesome was to be that event with God’s holiness blazing forth, that Mt. Sinai was to be off limits. “Go thou not upon the mountain.” “Hey,” I thought, “God wasn’t talking about camping trips. I’ve been cheated.”

It’s one thing to miss a fun family event when the Word is used like a seer’s crystal ball. It is even more destructive when the Word, taken out of context, is used as an excuse for our sin or our resistance to confronting truth. One little girl had been sexually abused by a relative. She went to her mother, but her mother did not believe her or protect her. So the abuse continued. Later, when the little girl had become a woman, she went back to confront her mother. She wanted to hear some acknowledgement or the grief or maybe even a word of apology. But all she got was a refusal to bring up the subject at all. Phil. 3:13 was used by this church-going mother to turn aside the conversation: “‘Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,’ is all we should do,” she said. But if the context were consulted, one would see Philippians 3 has nothing to do with refusing to confront truth or deal with hard subjects in confrontation or counseling. What does it say in its context? Paul writes about all the works-oriented credentials he had going for him as a young Jewish man. But then he concludes, “Although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh...whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ...forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” The context is clear. When it comes to piling up our works-oriented credentials, we should forget what lies behind and reach forward to what lies ahead. It has nothing to do with the refusal to deal with family skeletons in the closet.

## **6. Let the many interpret the few, and the clear interpret the cloudy.**

Let’s turn and read 1 Peter 3:20-21: “Christ who once were disobedient when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water. And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” Some people have read this or three other verses in the New Testament that speak of baptism and salvation in the same verse, and have concluded baptism is necessary in order to be saved.

But we should let the many interpret the few. There are over 500 verses that speak of salvation by grace through faith, without any mention of works-oriented activity. Are we going to overthrow the input of 500 verses because of a particular understanding with respect to 4 verses on baptism?

And we are to let the clear interpret the cloudy. Those four verses referring to baptism in the context of the mention of salvation are quite cloudy. I Peter 3 is cloudy, for example. (Quote questions that arise from the paragraph of I Peter 3:19-21.)

## **7. The Bible has a literal message that has one interpretation for any given passage of Scripture.**

My first sermon delivered at the age of 16 was on Acts 12. “Herod the king...had Peter seized. He put him in prison delivering him to four squads of soldiers to guard him....So Peter was kept in prison, but prayer for him was being made fervently by the church to God. And on the very night when Herod was about to bring him forward, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains.”

Now, in my sermon I did not preach the literal message of this passage. The literal message was that Peter was in serious peril and securely guarded, but God’s power—enacted through fervent prayer—was able to deliver Peter. Instead, I preached a sermon about the two soldiers and two chains that bind us Christians. I don’t remember what the four binding forces are. Your guess is as good as mine. My guess at 16 is as good as it would be today forty years later. Because, you see, I was reading into Scripture my own message rather than the literal one of the passage. The Bible is not a mystical riddle book. It has a real message, conveyed through real words used in actual sentence structures.

We seek its literal message. What is it saying?

## **8. However, we recognize the function of figures of speech in delivering its literal message.**

Jesus said, “I am the door, if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved.” (John 10:9). Jesus uses a figure of speech to convey a literal message. When he says he is a door, he does not mean he is a 6’ 10” solid core oak door. He means a literal message: I am the entrance to a relationship with God.

Later in the same chapter Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd.” Again he does not mean he made his living by raising livestock. No, he used a figure of speech, and concludes it with this literal message: “the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.” (John 10:11).

Have you responded to the literal message of the Bible? God’s love for you is intense and a relationship with him is available. And, once becoming his child or to change the figure of speech, his Bride, he invites you to read his love letters, his instructions in the Word he has left us until he comes.

I respect the Bible. Personally, I believe the only book I should put on top of the Bible...is another Bible. But I do not worship this book. But I respect it because it is the words of the One who loves me like no other ever will or could.