

# How to Know the Meaning of a Passage

By Dr. David A. DeWitt

- *How can we be sure we have the right interpretation of a passage?*
- *Should the purpose of a book determine its meaning?*
- *What influence should history or culture have on our understanding of a text?*

In the *Concepts'* brochure called *Interpreting the Bible*, we concluded that the correct meaning of any passage was the author's intended meaning. This meaning was shown to come from the context, understood in a normal way. This brochure is an attempt to expand on that a bit.

## Observe the Words the Author Has Used

Inspiration of Scripture is in words (Matthew 4:4; 5:18; 15:4, 6; 22:32; John 10:35; Galatians 3:16). The understanding of any passage begins by observing or noticing each word. Therefore, it makes sense that we should use a good word-for-word translation (like the KJV, NKJV, or NASB) rather than a thought-for-thought (dynamic equivalent) translation (like the NIV) or a paraphrase (like *The Message*). First observe, then interpret, then apply.

## The Meaning of a Word Is In the Mind of the Author

The Bible is not like abstract art, where everyone determines their own meaning. The correct meaning of the Bible is in the mind of God, communicated through the mind of a human author. Understanding (Matthew 13:23) is what bridges the gap (of James 1:25) between being a hearer of the Word (observation) and a doer of the Word (application). But the correct understanding of a word does not come from the dictionary. It comes from the mind of the author. For example, suppose I said, "I'm going to run to the store and get some coke." A bit later I returned with some Coke, Sprite, Dr. Pepper, and Fanta. You might say I lied or changed my mind, but actually, I just used the word "coke" as a synonym for "soft drink."

## Purpose Should Never Be Used to Determine Meaning

**Meaning** is the answer to the question *what* did the author say, whereas **purpose** is an attempt to figure out *why* it was said. There are several reasons the purpose (the why) should not be used to determine the meaning (the what) of a text (taken from Dr. Norman L. Geisler's, "Impact" cassette, 2000).

### • The Purpose Is Not Necessary to Determine the Meaning

For example, *why* did the Law command Israel to *not breed together two kinds of cattle* (Leviticus 19:19), or not shave their beards (Leviticus 19:27)? Many guesses have been suggested—the pagans were doing it, health reasons, it was part of some idolatrous practice. The reality is, the text never says *why* God commanded these things. So I suggest we just don't know *why*. But it doesn't matter when it comes to understanding the author's intended meaning.

*Why* did Paul say an overseer was to be a *husband* (1 Timothy 3:2)? *Why* not a wife or a single person? I suggest we don't know *why*, but it doesn't matter because we know *what* Paul commanded.

*Since meaning can be known without purpose,  
purpose does not determine meaning*

### • **The Purpose Cannot Always Be Known**

For example, what is the purpose of the Gospel of Matthew? I have read it was to teach the standards of the future Millennial Kingdom, to equip the Apostles to start the church, to declare a lordship salvation, and to present the Messiah to Israel.

I suggest we don't know the purpose of Matthew. Matthew may have had several of these purposes in mind or some other ones. But it doesn't matter because it does not affect the meaning of what he (or Jesus) said.

Even when we know an author's purpose (as in John 20:31), we don't know that it is his only purpose or the one he has in mind when he wrote some particular passage.

### • **Using Purpose to Determine Meaning Affects Application**

For example, some homosexuals claim the purpose of Moses in Leviticus 18 is to forbid idolatrous practices. So the homosexuality forbidden in Leviticus 18:22 is idolatrous homosexuality. Their application is, therefore, that non-idolatrous homosexuality is permitted.

Some feminists claim Paul's purpose in forbidding women to teach men (1 Timothy 2:12) was to combat a cultural situation of dominating women. Their application is "women who are not dominating may teach men."

## **No Historical or Cultural Practice Should Be Used to Determine the Meaning of a Text Unless It Is Stated In the Context**

I recently heard a Christian high school teacher say that what the gospel authors were really trying to tell us is—Jesus was a Jewish rabbi, and Jewish rabbis taught children. Therefore, the disciples were all teenagers. This creates a supposed historical cultural context by which the text is to be understood. But notice what this does:

1. It says the author is incapable of expressing his meaning, even though he was writing to a cross-cultural church (some were eastern in Israel and some were western in Greece and Rome).
2. It says the author's meaning cannot be understood from the context. It says you have to know more than the author told you.
3. It says the uninspired guesses of historians should govern the meaning of the inspired Word of God. For example, in the above mentioned case, the context shows the Apostles to be mature, married adult men (Matthew 4:18; 9:1-10; 1 Corinthians 9:1-10; Acts 2:14-16; and 6:1-6).

## **We Are Not to Keep Biblical Culture, But We Are to Keep Biblical Commands**

For example, how do we know that we should practice head covering (1 Corinthians 11:6), male leadership (1 Timothy 2:12; 3:2), and monogamous heterosexual marriage (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 3:2), but not necessarily wear sandals (Acts 7:33), robes (Acts 7:58), dress and eat like John the Baptist (Matthew 3:4), or wash the feet of house guests (Luke 7:44; John 13:5)? The answer comes through the author's intention, discovered through the context of what he wrote. Is the author simply mentioning it as part of the reality of the situation (Matthew 3:4) or is he making a case for it (1 Corinthians 11:10)?

*If the author commands it or makes a case for it, then we cannot simply discard it as only for his culture*

## **The Meaning of a Text Should Not Be Borrowed from Another Context**

For example, a New Testament author (Matthew 1:23) may use an Old Testament statement (Isaiah 7:14) to make his point. But the Old Testament author's usage in his context only describes his meaning, not that of the New Testament author. Of course, God inspired both authors, so their meanings cannot contradict. God

may have meant more than what the Old Testament author meant, but we only know that from the meaning of the New Testament author. Also, the same author may use the same phrase differently in different contexts (John 19:37 and Revelation 1:17). It may be helpful to see how the same author uses the same word or phrase in other contexts, but in the end, only the immediate context can determine the meaning. (Consider “life” in John 1:4; 3:16; 11:25; and 14:6.)

## **The Theme of a Book Is Developed from the Meaning of Its Passages**

The parts develop the meaning of the whole, and the whole is a development of the meaning of the individual parts. We should ask **how** the part fits the whole, not **why**.

*The meaning of the sentences, paragraphs, chapters, and major sections, taken together, show the theme of the book*

This theme, then, can be stated as a subject (what the author is talking about) and a predicate (what the author is saying about what he is talking about). But notice, unlike a purpose (*why*) statement, the theme is developed from *what* the text says in its context, not from some idea imposed upon the text.

## **Questions and Answers**

**Q:** *How can we be sure we have the right interpretation of a passage?*

**A:** The right interpretation of a passage is the author’s intended meaning, derived from the text in its context.

**Q:** *Should the purpose of a book determine its meaning?*

**A:** No. Purpose is *why* the author wrote the book or letter, and it is often unknown or a guess.

**Q:** *What influence should history or culture have on our understanding of a text?*

**A:** Only the history or culture revealed in the immediate context surrounding the text should be used to influence its meaning. Otherwise uninspired guesses dictate (or ignore) the meaning of the inspired Word of God.