



Forty-One Principles for Understanding Sacred Scripture



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While the author cannot speak for churches of Christ, common among them are unique ways of understanding holy scripture, believed to have been written by the apostles and prophets of the Lord before the destruction of Jerusalem (70 A.D.) and circulated among the early Christian communities (E.g. A letter called First Clement in about 95 A.D., refers to at least ten New Testament books), then collected as a volume by the self-identified Christian community of the second century A.D. or earlier, e.g. the list of Marcion (140 A.D.).

1. A **concept is informed by all scriptures** that speak of the concept.

E.g. “The sum of Your word is truth” in Ps.119:160. All gospel and resurrection accounts are true and can be added together for the whole record available to us.

2. **Personal experience, zeal, or sincerity should never be elevated above God's revealed will** in scripture.

E.g. “For I testify about them that they are zealous for God, but not on the basis of knowledge. Because they were ignorant of God’s righteousness and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness” in Romans 10:2-3.

3. The **number of times a word or concept is mentioned** in scripture does not determine its truth.

E.g. stated only once but the record is significant: "on the first day of the week we came together to break bread" in Acts 20:7. Paul waited seven days at Troas until the first day of the week when the Christians at Troas would meet: “... we rejoined them in Troas, where we stayed seven days. On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Since Paul was ready to leave the next day, he talked to them and kept on speaking until midnight.”

4. A matter of Christian faith and practice is **approved only if it is stated in writings given by the apostles and prophets of the Lord** who were guided “into all truth” by the Holy Spirit, as stated in John 16:13. The only means of knowing what the apostles and prophets taught is by reading what the apostles and prophets wrote.

E.g. “Therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens of the saints and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone” in Ephesians 2:19-20.

5. The writings given by the apostles and prophets of the Lord (the new covenant), take precedence over the **writings of the old covenant which is obsolete**.

E.g. “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear” in Hebrews 8:13.

6. If a teaching seems to **enjoin a crime or vice or an accusation against the innocent, it is figurative**.

E.g. inherited sin from Adam and Eve (commonly called “original sin”), and “unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you” in John 6:53. Augustine opposed the literal understanding.

7. A biblical practice or teaching is only **culturally-related and not universally commanded** if there is no eternal spiritual principle or meaning attached to it.

E.g. “When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body” in Mark 16:1.

8. Aim to **teach only the language of the text without extending the meaning.**

E.g. when David speaks of his personal remorse in Psalm 51 “in sin did my mother conceive me,” we do not extend this to include all humanity from conception.

9. If a **specific kind of a thing is prescribed, all other kinds of that thing are excluded.**

E.g. “sing and make melody in your heart to the Lord” excludes playing a musical instrument to the Lord. This principle is sometimes stated as: “Whatever is not expressly enjoined, is prohibited,” as Paul says, “Do not go beyond what is written” (1 Corinthians 4:6), as opposed to, “Whatever is not expressly forbidden is permitted.” This was also a principle of the Old Testament: “Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you” in Deuteronomy 4:2; see also Revelation 22:18-19.

This is the principle used regarding the circumcision issue in Acts 15:42 “Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘You must be circumcised and keep the law’ —**to whom we gave no such commandment—**”

A negative assertion is not provable because if “everything that is not specifically prohibited is approved” is the guiding principle, scripture would require enormous impractical volume. In our struggle with evil, we are authorized to employ only nonviolent spiritual means rather than worldly or physical means.

10. The **onus is upon the individual** to distinguish truth from error.

E.g. “Whoever knows God listens to us (John and those led into all truth such as the other apostles); whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error” in 1 John 4:6. In Acts 20, we learn that apostasy occurred among those who were taught by the apostles, which means traditions, teachings, and writings presented as the word of God must be compared and agree with writings believed to have been authored by the apostles and prophets of the risen Lord.

11. **Metaphorical language** given by inspiration should not be given meaning unless the inspired writer reveals the meaning.

E.g. Peter is “rock” and given “keys to the kingdom of Heaven” in Matthew 16:16. If it means Peter was made head of the church, it must at least be stated in one subsequent passage. The reader should also consider principle #12 below: If Peter was appointed to be the head of the church on earth, there must be at least a single reference thereafter to confirm this understanding. If there is no such confirmation, one should consider another meaning that has confirmation in subsequent scripture.

12. **Test your understanding of a text, against the faith and practice of Christians who lived soon after the text was written.**

E.g. If Jesus cleansing the temple or telling his apostles to buy swords, means followers of Jesus can make a violent defense, one should be able to see this understanding believed or practiced by early Christians during the earliest period after the apostles and prophets of the Lord.

13. When trying to understand the meaning of scripture intended by the writer, **consider the full context and parallel passages.**

E.g. “made alive with Christ” in Ephesians 2:5, is a promise associated with baptism in Colossians 2:12-13.

14. **Some teachings are more important than others**, and the Lord requires **obedience to all** His teaching.

E.g. “You give a tenth of your spices--mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former” in Matthew 23:23. Beware the tendency toward legalism that majors on minors.

15. Although full obedience is required of servants, **full obedience does not make the servants worthy.**

E.g. “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’ ” in Luke 17:10.

16. **Legalism occurs** when one adds to God’s word or substitutes traditions, rules, and teachings of men for the word of God.

E.g. “Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition....They worship me in vain; their

teachings are merely human rules" in Matthew 15:9. Otherwise the term "legalism" appears to be absent from sacred scripture.

17. To get the meaning, **consider the context of a verse or phrase or book**, and ask yourself, "What is the intent of the writer?"

18. The will of God can be understood through **direct command, apostolic example (e.g. "follow me as I follow Christ" – Paul), and necessary inference**, e.g. assembling together necessarily includes a place to meet.

19. A **concept may be expressed in more than one word or phrase**.

E.g. "baptized into Christ were baptized into His death" in Romans 6:3 is also described as "crucified with him" in Romans 6:6.

20. The ability to **perform signs and wonders was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands**.

E.g. "When the apostles in Jerusalem heard....., they sent Peter and John," and "When Simon saw that the Spirit was given when the apostles laid their hands on people, he offered them money to buy this power" in Acts 8:14,18.

21. **Baptism is necessary to and part of believing the gospel message**.

E.g. "...preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" in Mark 16:15-16.

22. **Calling on the name of the Lord for salvation is fulfilled in biblical baptism**.

E.g. "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" in Acts 2:21 is "repent and be baptized" in Acts 2:38.

23. **Biblical healing miracles were always visible, immediate, and complete**.

E.g. "Then He said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand!' He stretched it out, and it was restored to normal, like the other" in Matthew 12:13 and "Paul entered in, and prayed, and laid his hands on him, and healed him" in Acts 28:8.

24. An **apostle of Christ must have been a witness of the resurrected Christ and also demonstrate the signs of an apostle**.

E.g. "Therefore, it is necessary to select one of the men who have accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism until the day Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection" in Acts 1:21-22 and "I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles" in 2 Corinthians 12:12.

25. The concept of **saving faith includes the idea of baptism**.

E.g. "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" in Galatians 3:26-27, and "having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" in Colossians 2:12.

26. **Baptism requires the conscious personal faith formed within the one who is baptized**.

E.g. "But thanks be to God that, though you once were slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were committed. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness" in Roman 6:17-18, and "having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead" in Colossians 2:12, and "this water (of the flood) symbolizes the baptism that now saves you — not the removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of (to keep) a clear conscience toward God. It saves you through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" in 1 Peter 3:21. Total immersion baptism was designed only for those old enough to survive it. Numerous infant deaths due to aspiration or terminal respiratory illness, attest to this fact. In early

centuries infants were immersed three times which [Tertullian](#) (155-240 A.D.) states was “*making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel.*”

27. The **terms elders or presbyters, bishops, and pastors are synonymous and interchangeable** in scripture, referring to the same position, always a plurality of supervising men, served by a plurality of deacons in local Christian communities.

E.g. “Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.....Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops. Be pastors of the church of God...” in Acts 20:17,28.

28. To understand scripture, first try to **identify the genre of literature it fits into**: law, history, wisdom, poetry, narrative, epistles, prophecy and apocalyptic literature.

29. **By reading, one will understand.**

E.g. “In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets” in Ephesians 3:4-5.

30. The **reader must use the word of truth correctly.**

E.g. “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” in 2 Timothy 2:15.

31. **In ancient Israel, government was a theocracy** in which God commanded the nation through prophets and gave power to carry out genocide and defeat idolatrous peoples. In the new Israel (the Christian community), forgiveness and grace have been made possible by the cross, and **the rule is nonviolence, gentleness, and love.** Divine vengeance will be carried out at the final judgment of all humanity.

E.g. “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” in Romans 12:19-21.

32. One’s **love for God, and love for one’s neighbor** (the two greatest commandments), are fulfilled in obedience to the teachings of Jesus.

E.g. “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching” in John 14:33.

33. The **Christian community has only one head, Jesus Christ, and there is no headquarters on earth.** The head and headquarters are in heaven. Jesus does not share his authority.

E.g. “And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy” in Colossians 1:18.

34. **If two understandings of a verse are possible, choose the one reflected in other scripture.**

E.g. If ‘rock’ and ‘keys’ in Matthew 16:18 mean: 1) Simon Peter was made head of the church or 2) Simon was named Peter to commemorate the centrality of the revelation that “Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the living God.” The correct understanding is number 2 because it is the confession given by those seeking baptism for the forgiveness of their sins in Acts 8, and the keys are understood spiritually when Peter opened the kingdom first to Jews in Acts 2 and to Gentiles first in Acts 10. In 1 Corinthians 10:4, Paul identifies “that rock was Christ.”

35. **To confirm an understanding of a concept or practice, look for important reasons associated with it.**

E.g. Baptism occurred in the earliest church as soon as possible after hearing and believing the gospel, because baptism was commanded in the gospel message and was associated with the forgiveness of sins, new life, and receiving the Holy Spirit as a gift. For more on the timing of baptism see this [document](#).

36. Consider **the use of synecdoche** in which the text contains an element pointing to a larger picture or collection of ideas.

E.g. “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” in Acts 16:30, includes accepting the facts of the good news, repentance, baptism, and faithfully following the teachings of Jesus and His apostles and prophets.

37. Consider whether a **teaching pertains only to the apostles of Christ or to all**, such as the washing of feet in John 13:1-17.

E.g. “And Peter said to him, Lord, are these words said to us only, or to all?” in Luke 12:41.

38. In **our struggle with evil**, we are taught to employ spiritual means rather than worldly or carnal means. In the New Testament, Christians are only victims of violence and never perpetrators of violence. E.g. “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world” in 2 Corinthians 10:3 and “Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief” in 1 Timothy 1:13.

39. Whether or not one **cares for those in trouble, will be a condition** for the “inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”

E.g. “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me’ ” in Matthew 25:34-36.

40. If a thing is **not taught or confirmed after the day of Pentecost in Acts 2**, it is not the apostles’ doctrine that Christians must follow.

E.g. Tithing is not taught after the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, therefore it is not the apostles’ doctrine that Christians must follow. The apostles were guided into all truth, and we must listen to them as per 1 John 4:6. The apostles are lawyers implementing a new covenant, effected by the death of Christ as per Hebrews 9:16-17. Tithing is not included. Even Irenaeus had a partial understanding of this in the second century: “And instead of the tithes which the law commanded, the Lord said to divide everything we have with the poor.” – Irenaeus, 130-200 AD (*Against Heresies*, Book IV, Chapter XIII, paragraph 3)

Jesus commanded the apostles to teach all nations “whatsoever I have commanded you” and this became “the apostles’ doctrine” in [Acts 2:42](#).

41. When thinking about **disfellowshipping someone**, remember the words of our Lord: “No, he said, ‘if you pull the weeds now, you might uproot the wheat with them. **Let both grow together until the harvest.** At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat into my barn.’ ” and our Lord’s exhortation: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

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