

INTERPRETING WORDS

Introduction – When we listen to someone or read a text, we must try to interpret it correctly. The goal is to understand the intent of the speaker’s / writer’s words in context.

2 Timothy 2:14-15

A. You must interpret words in their original historical and cultural context.

1. The Old Testament was written for a Jewish audience in the context of the Ancient Middle East.

Leviticus 19:28

“The prohibition against marking the skin involved either tattooing or painting the body as part of a religious ‘ritual.’ Such markings may have been designed to protect a person from the spirits of the dead or to demonstrate membership in a group. Some evidence for this has been found in the examination of human remains in Scythian tombs dating to the Sixth Century B.C. The Israelite law may prohibit this practice since it involves a self-imposed alteration of God’s creation, unlike “circumcision” which is commanded by God.” (The IVP Bible Background Commentary - Old Testament, Walton, Matthews, and Chavalas; p. 134)

2. The New Testament was written for a Christian audience in the context of a First Century Greco-Roman society.

1 Corinthians 11:4-5

“Women’s hair was a common object of lust in antiquity, and in much of the eastern Mediterranean women were expected to cover their hair. To fail to cover their hair was thought to provoke male lust as a bathing suit is thought to provoke it in some cultures today. Head covering prevailed in Jewish Palestine (where it extended even to a face veil) and elsewhere, but upper class women eager to show off their fashionable hairstyles did not practice it. Thus, Paul must address a clash of cultures in the church between upper class fashion and lower class concern that sexual propriety was being violated.” (The IVP Bible Background Commentary - New Testament, Keener; p. 475)

3. In all relationships, you must interpret the other person’s words in light of their background, rather than assume they think exactly like you do. Couples should seek to know their partner’s family of origin, personality type, life experience, etc.

- B. You must not take words out of their context if you want to understand the meaning of any communication.

Do not use proof texting when using the Bible.

1. Some try to prove we are all born in sin by quoting a poetic verse in the Psalms.

Psalms 51:5-6

2. Some seek to justify infant baptism by alluding to household baptisms in the book of Acts, which assumes they must include some children.

Acts 10:44-48

Acts 16:13-15

Acts 16:31-33

3. In all our relationships we must seek to keep others' communication to us in context. Do not practice selective listening. Always ask clarifying questions before drawing any conclusion. Give others a synopsis of what you understand them to be saying before replying.

Conclusion – It is easy to misunderstand the Word of God or other people's words if we do not interpret them contextually.

James 1:19-21