

***Fishing Tips****Acts 17:10-12**Jimmy Snowden**Sovereign Grace Fellowship: Sunday; January 10, 2010****Introduction***

This morning I am actually going to be preaching a topical sermon. Surprisingly, I am pleased with the fact that this morning is a topical message. I am pleased with this fact considering my closing comments regarding SGF's commitment to expositional preaching last week. This affords me an excellent opportunity to illustrate the fact that topical sermons are not always bad. In fact, topical sermons are necessary. My point last week was that expositional preaching will predominate. And why? To aid us in the task of both 1. being transformed by the entire counsel of God's word and 2. avoiding the temptation to pick and choose which parts of God's word we want to emphasize to the neglect of other important truths and duties contained in the word.

Last week I laid forth a vision for SGF; which went as follows:

SGF will be a body of believers which functions with the express purpose of producing lovers of Jesus who live, believe, and obey the entire Word of God (*with a view to the progressive nature of God's revelation*).

In a few weeks I am going to be devoting a week to discussing some different ways in which this vision will be implemented in the life of the church. This will be an important message. After all, what good is writing up a vision statement without developing strategies to bring the vision to fruition? This morning I am going to be discussing something that relates to the fulfillment of the vision I presented last week. It has everything to do with SGF becoming a Berean church. The Berean's were a discerning people. They took it upon themselves to examine the Gospel that Paul preached with the Scriptures. They were not the sort of people who just simply followed any and every new teaching because it was new or exciting or logical. They were a discerning folk and they used the word of God as their standard of discerning truth from error. Notice that even when the Apostle Paul came preaching and teaching they examined the Gospel he preached with the word of God.

***Ancient Chinese Proverb***

I want to introduce you to a *real* 'ancient Chinese proverb.' It isn't even a fake ancient Chinese proverb; it is the real deal. I have heard it many times throughout my life, but I was reminded of it just the other day. It goes as such;

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

The obvious point of the proverb is that if you focus your energy on the right things you will get better results. If you give a man a fish and yet do not teach him how to fish, he will be dependent upon your fishing abilities for his own livelihood. The optimal benefit for the man giving and for the man receiving is to get the needy man in a place where he is not in a state of complete dependence. Now, as Christians we ought always to stay in a place of complete dependence upon the Spirit for all things. However, when it comes to our relationships with each other in the body of Christ, this proverb can be quite useful.

Is this not one of the chief marks of the cults? The leader(s) want to dictate to his/her followers what to believe. They have no interest in teaching people *how to think*; rather, their purpose is to tell people *what to think*. There is a world of difference between the two approaches. They want their

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<sup>1</sup> This proverb is usually credited to the father of Taoism, Lao Tzu.

followers to mindlessly put their brains in their pockets and just embrace whatever they say. Now, as a pastor I am not going to pretend that I am never going to tell you what to think. No, I will tell you what to think. I will implore you to ‘think God’s thoughts after Him’ as they are revealed in His word. The Apostles did tell people what to think, and yet they encouraged biblical discernment. They were not coercive in their dispensing of truth, but they carried their message with a warning of repentance (in regard to both thought and deed). However, what does Paul say in Galatians 1:8?

But even if **WE** or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel other than what we have preached to you, a curse be on him!

Here we see Paul encouraging the saints in Galatia to test even what he and the other apostles were saying with the truth of the Gospel they received from Christ. Notice the bold, italicized, and capitalized “**WE**” in the quotation. But the goal of the cults is to keep people in a place of utter dependence. The leader claims some access to elevated knowledge that no one else can attain. This leaves the leader in an touchable state. If no one can attain to the level of inspiration claimed by the leader, then no one can call into question his/her assertions. The people are then left in a place where they are dependent upon the leader’s ‘fishing ability’ for their very livelihood. The leader never teaches his/her followers how to fish. He doesn’t want to teach them to fish! He wants to spout off his wild imagination without contestation. And as soon as anyone questions his outlandish claims or beliefs, he calls their submissive spirit into question. If you keep the people ignorant and claim untouchable access to knowledge, you leave them in a place of childish (as opposed to child-like) dependence.

Here at SGF, on the other hand, it is our goal to teach the people of God how to fish. We will tell you what to believe in regard to the essentials of the faith. However, because we believe that the Scriptures are clear in matters of all essential doctrine, we encourage you, the people, to discern with the word of God what is being taught even from the pulpit. It is not our desire that you sit out in your pew skeptically looking over every word waiting for an opportunity to pounce. But it is our desire that you be like the good Bereans who

“welcomed the message with eagerness **and examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.**”

The Bereans were not hard hearted skeptics who wanted to trip Paul up. They were a group of people who wanted to be faithful to God’s word and knew that the word of God was the supreme test of truth and error.

When I preach it is my goal to not simply tell you what the passage means and how it applies to your life, but to also demonstrate for you how I came to the conclusions I reached. In other words, one of the major goals I have in preaching is to teach you how to ‘fish’. I do not merely want to get up here and give you a few nuggets to chew on for the week. My aim is much larger than a simple communication and application of truth. One of the primary goals of my preaching is to teach and equip you to read the Bible with accuracy on your own. My goal is not to get you dependent upon me and my superior abilities with the word of God (as if my abilities were superior), but to get you to a place where you are able to converse yourself with God through His word.

This leads me to the purpose of this morning’s sermon. My aim and purpose this morning is to lay forth for you a few basic rules or principles of biblical interpretation. The purpose of this morning’s sermon is to give you some ‘fishing tips.’

### ***The Relevance of a Message on Biblical Interpretation***

I know that some of you are probably out there thinking something like this; “But Jimmy, why don’t you preach on a topic that is a bit more applicable? What about a sermon on parenting or prayer or marriage?” If you are thinking something along those lines let me suggest to you that your questioning reveals something extremely troubling about the priorities of your life. *Your skepticism regarding the*

*relevance of a message centering on principles of biblical interpretation reveals one of two things about you; it either points the fact that you 1. have no concern for an accurate understanding of the truth of God's word, or that 2. you read the bible so little that a sermon on biblical interpretation really won't be all that applicable to your life.* Neither of the two prospects is laudable. Let me take a look at each of these dispositions.

First, I would suggest that the majority of professing Christians would consider a two-part sermon series on the basic principles of biblical interpretation to be irrelevant because they really do have no concern for an accurate understanding of the truth. However, we must remember that *God's truth is found in God's word. If we have a passion for God's truth we will have a passion for accurate interpretation and understanding of God's word.* We live in a culture where no one really has a concern for accuracy. But how does Satan generally fight against the church? By reformulating biblical truth so that the eye which cares not about accuracy will embrace it hook, line, and sinker. Do you remember the rebuke that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews leveled against the Hebrew believers? Turn with me to Hebrews 5:11-12.

We have a great deal to say about this, and it's difficult to explain, since you have become slow to understand. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of God's revelation. You need milk, not solid food.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is here chastising the Hebrew believers for their inability to assimilate and handle the deep truths of God's word. They had no concern for accuracy, and it left them in a place where they were no longer able to discern.

Second, if the word of God does not play a large role in your life, of course a message centering on biblical interpretation will be irrelevant. Imagine if I were to teach the elementary aged kids an eighteen week series on the responsibilities of husbands to their wives and vice versa. To be honest, such a detailed series on the topic of the responsibilities of husbands and wives in the context of marriage would be irrelevant to fourth graders. Why? Because none of them are married. Now, such a series may be helpful in building something of a foundation for their future, but I think you get the point. And what is my point? *You will only see something as being relevant to your everyday life if it is something that touches your everyday life.* If I were to teach a fourteen-week series on the traffic citation laws of Turkmenistan, it wouldn't be all that relevant to your life. Why? Because you don't live in Turkmenistan and you probably have no intention on doing so. So what would be the benefit of teaching the minutia of the laws of transportation in Turkmenistan? It would be irrelevant.

Well, if you see a sermon on the principles of biblical interpretation as being irrelevant, it may be a good indication that the word of God does not play as large of a role in your life as it ought. If you read the Bible on a daily basis (or even on an every-other daily basis) this message ought to be highly applicable to your everyday life. If you are reading the word on a daily basis (or every-other daily basis) you will be able to apply this message to your *everyday life*. Of course a message on biblical interpretation will not be all that applicable or relevant if you never open the book. But if you open the book on a regular basis, you will be able to apply this message on a regular basis.

### ***The Necessity of a Series of Messages on Biblical Interpretation***

Let me tell you why I see a two-part message covering a few of the basic principles of biblical interpretation as being important. First, let me tell you a little bit about myself. When I was in college I spent an inordinate amount of time in the word of God. I had both a morning and evening devotional. I read about ten chapters a day on average, and I took copious notes on everything that I read. I came to a place where I was able to quote and cite verses with ease. I really did come to place where I was beginning to master the content of the Bible. However, as helpful as it was for me to grow in a knowledge of the content of the word of God, I had very little understanding. In other words, I had developed an adequate comprehension of biblical content, but I had a very small understanding of what the Bible meant when it said what it said. I read the Bible all the time, and yet I had very little understanding in regard to

what the Bible meant. I remember being frustrated with my Bible reading because it felt pointless. What good is rote memorization? The point of growing in the knowledge of God's word is understanding. I am not saying that I never got anything out of my devotions, but I will say that I was very very frustrated. The Spirit made up for my weaknesses, but I was frustrated nonetheless. I remember being told that I was in sin if I didn't read my Bible. And I went to the word every morning; again, again, and again and yet seemed to be getting so little out of it.

If you do not know how to read the Scriptures correctly, you will struggle in your ability to correctly interpret and thus understand what you are reading. You may be able to get little here and a little there, and the Spirit will no doubt give you what you need to sustain yourself, but you will be frustrated. The reason why I see a two (to three) part series on the principles of biblical interpretation to be important is because I have a passion for truth. If I am going to tell you to read your Bible, I had better be able to teach you how to read it correctly.

Just think about the Jehovah's Witness or the Mormons. They have the content of the Bible mastered; they know what the Bible says. And they read their Bibles all the time. Yet their Bible reading does them no good. Why? Because they lack understanding. And why do they lack understanding? First of all, they do not have the Spirit to open their understanding; second, because they simply read the Scriptures wrongly—their principles of biblical interpretation are a wreck. The point is that there is a right way and wrong way to read the Scriptures.

### ***Principles of Biblical Interpretation***

I am now going to just lay forth some of the most basic, yet important, principles of biblical interpretation. I am not necessarily going to be giving principles on how to read the Bible as a whole, but how to read the Bible book by book, as it were. So let me teach you the basics of fishing—the basics of how to feed yourself by feasting upon Christ through His word.

#### *1. Practice*

I have read many different books on biblical interpretation and the interesting thing about most books on this topic is that they dig too deep into the super specific and complex principals and skip right over the most foundational, common-sense principles. What I have come to realize is that this is a tragic mistake. I have read numerous books on the subject and have taken two classes on the subject, and each book that I have read and each class that I have taken has skipped over the most basic, common-sense principles of biblical interpretation. And the first principle of biblical interpretation that must always be emphasized is "Practice." It does you no good to learn principles of biblical interpretation if you do not practice reading the Bible.

It is possible to busy yourself so much with learning how to read the Bible that you never actually end up getting around to reading it. What good is a principle of interpretation if you don't read the Bible? There really is a progression when it comes to reading the bible. A child has to learn to walk before he can jog, and he has to learn to jog before he can run. In the same way, there is a progression when it comes to reading the Bible. The Bible is such that the simplest mind can grasp the rudimentary principles and doctrines of the faith, and yet the truth of Scripture is deep enough to confound the most learned bible scholar. And there must be a progression from simple to more complex. The most fundamental and simple principle of biblical interpretation is 'practice.' You will never get good at reading the Bible if you never read it. This really is not rocket science.

#### *2. Getting the Big Picture/Hovering*

This second principle of biblical interpretation is imperative. When most people set out to read a book of the Bible, they dive headlong into the details of chapter one verse one, expecting to be able to understand it with perfect clarity. And many teach that this is the way to begin reading the Bible with accuracy. But digging into the details of the first verse of a book of the Bible is hardly the best way of starting out. It is going from 0 to 100 with no breaks in between. You go from having no knowledge of the book at all to digging into the minute details of the first verse. This is why most Christians do not

have much understanding in their reading of the word; because they get ahead of themselves. It is like a parent teaching her child to knit before he can touch his nose.

Our approach to studying a book of the Bible ought to be from broad to narrow, from general to specific. This is the way we approach everything else in life. We learn the ropes and then we dig into the particulars. Without first knowing where the author is going and how he is going to get there, you really have no grounding to understand particular verses within the book. This is the first task of the reader; to get familiar with the terrain, to completely familiarize yourself with the overall message of the book. Because people skip this vital step, they end up turning the Bible into a complex jumbling of unconnected theological and ethical sayings that have no real cohesion. But if you start big and work your way down from big picture to smaller themes within the big picture, to smaller ideas that make up the themes that make up the big picture, to smaller compartments that when hooked together form the smaller ideas that make up the themes that put together form a big picture, the complex themes, as complex as they may be, are given significance because you see their place in the context of the big picture. If you progress from general to specific, you learn how to read the whole in light of the complex parts and the complex parts in light of the whole.

I have actually coined my own biblical interpretation term. I call it “**hovering**.” I have never really read too much about the importance of going from the Generals to Specifics in terms of interpreting the Bible. But this has really been the key to me in learning how to read the Bible in a way that lifts one out of the complexity of the particulars. *Hovering* has everything to do with floating (or hovering) over the surface of a book of the Bible, reading it through from start to finish without allowing yourself to be taken away with the complexity of it all. Hovering is a discipline. It involves not allowing yourself to anchor yourself down by trying to figure out all of your unanswered questions. When you ‘hover’ you do not allow yourself to dwell too long on any one passage or section. Hovering involves getting a feel for the overall flow and message of the book. It has to do with getting a bird’s eye view, an aerial view of the book. So often we want all of our questions answered right away. When you hover, you don’t allow yourself to go there. You simply read the book over and over and over again. You read the book straight through with a view to following the thought flow of the author. You don’t let yourself get distracted by the particulars until you are thoroughly familiar with the overarching message and thought flow.

This is exactly how I study books of the Bible. I made a rule a few years back that I would not even look at a commentary on a book of the Bible until I had read it through in full at least 30 times first. This is no legalistic rule, but I have found that I have no business getting my dirty little hands on an individual passage until I am able to see it fully in its context. The amazing thing is that once you start reading the Bible this way, about 50% of the questions you first asked of the book on your first read through will be answered after you have hovered over the book 6 or 7 times.

### **Studying the Bible as You Would a Painting**

One of the most helpful ways that I can explain how one ought to begin their study of the book of the Bible is to study the book as a unit in the same way that you study a painting. Observe the big picture of a biblical book in the same way that you observe the big picture of a painting. Look with me at this picture by Grant Wood called *American Gothic*.<sup>2</sup> *American Gothic* is a famous painting done by a man from Iowa (of all places). When you first approach a painting like this you simply get an overall feel for the picture. You look at it for about 5 seconds and say, “Wow, that is a good painting of a serious married couple standing outside of their simple farm home.” You begin with the big picture. Then you begin to zoom in from a wide angled lens to a narrower lens. You begin by observing the big picture and then you may zoom in and focus on one part of the painting. So you begin to analyze *American Gothic* by observing the main theme of the picture, and then you begin to zoom in. As you zoom in you begin to notice the detail that Mr. Wood put into the man’s face. As you survey his face you will notice that he is middle aged, skinny, bald, and that he wears glasses. You will then zoom in with an even finer lens and notice the color of the man’s eyes. The color of his eyes is difficult to determine with any specificity, but

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<sup>2</sup> To view this painting go to [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Gothic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Gothic).

is quite clear that they are dark. You will then zoom in even further and notice the complex shading in the man's glasses.

Now, while you have your lens zoomed in on the man's glasses you will not take this painting to your friend and say, "Hey look at this painting of a pair of glasses!" Your friend will look back at you and say, "That's not a painting of a pair of glasses! That is a painting of a serious looking couple outside of their plain looking farm house." You will then have to rephrase and say, "True, true, but look at glasses on the man's face. Look at the detail that Mr. Wood put into these glasses." Your friend will see the glasses, but he will see that those glasses are no mere glasses suspended in space. No, they are *that* man's glasses. See, the context of the big picture dumps meaning into the particulars. You will find that the glasses make a unique contribution to the overall big picture of the painting.

But whenever we look at a painting we always look at it with both a wide angle lens and a narrow angle lens. We are constantly zooming in too look at the detail and then zooming out to see what unique part the details play in the larger picture. We may zoom out from the man's face and then zoom back in and look at the details in the tip of the house behind the couple. You will notice the detail of the dirt on the siding on the house. You will zoom in and zoom out. You will observe and analyze the details, but always with a view to their unique contribution to the overall picture. This painting is actually made up of many separate parts. You have a man, his clothes, the woman, her clothes, the pitch fork, the house, the barn, a field, trees, sky, and it looks like a steeple in the way back part of the painting. As you look at each one of the details you analyze it with its overall picture in mind.

For some reason we do not do this with the books of the Bible. We jump in and try to rip passages apart, digging as deep as we can, without first getting a view of the larger picture. ***The goal is to not get so caught up in the details and complexity of the painting that you lose sight of the overall picture. And yet the deeper you dig into the details of the painting, the more the picture means.*** And when we study a book of the Bible we ought to have this sort of a zooming in and zooming out, zooming in and zooming out. Looking at the bigger picture and then zooming in to see how one particular part of the bigger picture uniquely contributes to the overall message. You know that you are reading the Bible correctly when you start to feel dizzy—when you are both understanding the intricate parts in light of the whole and understanding the whole in light of the parts. The individual parts have no meaning apart from their placement in the bigger picture, and yet the bigger picture would not be what it is if it was not comprised of all of its parts.

The difference between a painting and a book of the Bible, however, is that when you look at a painting, the entire thing is sitting right before you. You don't have to look at a painting one snap shot at a time. Paintings are generally just the right size so that you can see all the parts in general and how they contribute to the whole. When you read a book of the Bible, on the other hand, you do have to start in chapter one verse one and read to the end of the book before you can see the whole picture.

But this is what we mean when we talk about context. Many people when they talk about context only have in mind the immediate context of a passage, the few verses just before and the few verses just after. However, we need to understand that there is more than one 'context' that needs to be taken into consideration. After all, the immediate context of a passage itself is found within a context larger than itself.

But you cannot read a passage in context if you just jump right on in to chapter one verse one. You have to start with a wide angle and work your way down from generals to specifics. You go from the big picture of the entire book (the entire painting) to supporting sections within the book (a couple, a house, a barn, a landscape, and the sky), to individual themes that make up each section (the color of the man's face, his age, his balding head) to individual sentences that make up each theme (the lines that make up the man's nose and mouth and eyes and ears and glasses) to individual clauses and words (the scrutinizing detail in the shading on the man's glasses).

Or you can go in reverse and say; This is the painting of 1 Corinthians. The couple standing in front is the main section of the book (Chapters 1-4), the house behind them is a supporting theme (Chapters 5-6), the landscape is another section within the book (Chapters 7-15), and the barn is another section (Chapter 16). You then dive into the particulars of the painting. You take the couple standing in

front (Chapters 1-4) and you begin to look at the woman (chapter 1). You begin to take a closer look at her dress (Chapter 1:10-20) and then you see the individual threads that make up the dress (the clause “For Christ did not send me to baptize”).

### ***Why Does This Matter?***

So why does this matter? Because truth matters. The more able you are at interpreting God’s word with precision the more clearly you will see God, His ways, and His will. And it is my contention that many do not see God, His ways, and His will very clearly because they have a sloppy ability to read the word of God (where God reveals Himself, His ways, and His will) with accuracy.

I believe that many people make the Bible much more complex than what it actually is. Without a doubt, the Bible is full of complex theology. If suspended in mid-air that theology can create headaches and everything else, but when that theology is seen as a part of a much larger picture, the complexity of it takes on meaning. Although you may be dealing with complex theology, if you are reading it in light of the larger picture of which it is a part, its purpose and meaning becomes much clearer. The reason why so many of us feel so overwhelmed with complexity when we go to the Bible is not because we aren’t smart enough to get it, but rather because we are putting the cart before the horse—we are diving headlong into particulars before first wrapping our minds around the big picture. Let context do your job for you.

Ultimately, these are merely fishing tips to help you get to a place where you can feast upon Christ through His word on your own with greater depths of understanding and accuracy. Next week we will be considering a few more simple principles of biblical interpretation. Bottom line: practice, practice, practice, and go from generals to specifics. This takes much more work, but it is the only way to really come to a place where you understand what the author intended to say. Here at SGF we do not want mindless drones who are dependent upon us for their every spiritual decision and thought. It is our desire to train the people of God to feast upon Christ as He has revealed Himself in His word on their own. There will always be a place for preachers and teachers in the body of Christ, but the people of God ought to learn to read and understand the content of the Scriptures on their own so that they are not dangerously dependent upon others for their every Spiritual decision and breath.