

# Basic Rules of Interpretation - Internal

(Summary based on Herbert E. Douglass)

- 1. Recognize that the Bible and the writings of Ellen White were the product of thought inspiration, not verbal inspiration (thoughts and concepts are inspired, God does not dictate).**
  - a. “The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.  
It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.” (ISM 21)
- 2. Recognize that some word-definitions may change as time passes.**
  - a. “It is the **nicest** work ever assumed by men and women to deal with youthful minds” (CT 73) “This work is the **nicest**, the most **difficult**, ever committed to human beings.” (Ed 292)
  - b. “Love should be revealed in action. It should flow out in all home **intercourse**, showing itself in thoughtful kindness, in gentle, unselfish courtesy.” (PP 144)
- 3. Understand the use of hyperbole – an obvious overstatement to emphasize a point or describe an ideal situation.**
  - a. John used hyperbole when he said that if all the acts of Jesus were written, “the world itself could not contain the books” (John 21:25)
  - b. Ellen White used the ratio 1 in 20 at least five times, and 1 in 100 at least twenty-one times. She did not say 1 in 13 or 1 in 99, etc.
  - c. “**Never** can the proper education be given to the youth in this country, or any other country, unless they are separated a wide distance from the cities” (SpTEd 87) “. . . schools should be established outside the cities. But in the cities there are many children who could not attend schools away from the cities; and for the benefit of these, schools should be opened in the cities as well as in the country” (9T 201)
- 4. Understand the meaning of the phrase in which a word is used.**
  - a. In 1862 Ellen White wrote that Satan works through the channels of phrenology, psychology, and mesmerism. But does this mean that all psychology is evil? Obviously not, because in 1897 she pointed out that “the true principles of psychology are found in the Holy Scriptures.” Similarly, we might note that television can be a channel through which Satan works, but Satan’s use of television does not make television evil.
- 5. Recognize the possibility of imprecise expressions.**
  - a. “**Phrenology and mesmerism** are very much exalted. They are good in their place, but they are seized upon by Satan as his most powerful agents to deceive and destroy souls.” (1T 296)  
In a revised edition 20 years later she changed the first expression to: “**the sciences which treat of the human mind** are very much exalted...” (ST Nov. 5, 1884)
- 6. Look carefully at the immediate context.**
  - a. We “should never be taught to say, or feel, that they are saved.” (COL 155)  
“Each one of you may know for yourself that you have a living Saviour, that He is your helper and your God. You need not stand where you say, 'I do not know whether I am saved.' Do you believe in Christ as your personal Saviour? If you do, then rejoice.” (GCB, April 10, 1901)
- 7. Recognize that the meaning of a word can change when it is used in a new context.**
  - a. **The term “shut door”** meant several things to ex-Millerite Adventists. To Ellen White it meant something different. James White and Joseph Bates redefined their use of the term between 1844 and 1852.
  - b. “**Office**” could be the administrative office of a publishing house but sometimes it referred to the General Conference’s headquarter.
- 8. Recognize that the challenge of semantics resides in all communication: Words mean different things to different people, because of personal differences such as education, age level, spiritual experiences, geographic location, and gender. That’s also the case with Ellen White’s words!**
  - a. “There are many who interpret that which I write in the light of their own preconceived opinions. . . . A division in understanding and diverse opinions is the sure result. How to write in a way to be understood by those to whom I address important matter is a problem I cannot solve. When I see that I am misunderstood by my brethren who know me best, I am assured that I must take more time in carefully expressing my thoughts upon paper, for the Lord gives me light which I dare not do otherwise than communicate; and a great burden is upon me.” (SM 379)

# Basic Rules of Interpretation - External

## (Summary based on Herbert E. Douglass)

“Many men take the testimonies the Lord has given, and apply them as they suppose they should be applied, picking out a sentence here and there, taking it from its proper connection, and applying it according to their idea. Thus poor souls become bewildered, when could they read in order all that has been given, they would see the true application, and would not become confused.” (SM1 44)

- 1. Include *all* that the prophet has said on the subject under discussion before coming to a conclusion.**
  - “The testimonies themselves will be the key that will explain the messages given, as scripture is explained by scripture.”
  - “Eggs should not be placed upon your table” (2T 399) “While warnings have been given regarding the dangers of disease through butter, and the evil of the free use of eggs by small children, yet we should not consider it a violation of principle to use eggs from hens that are well cared for and suitably fed.” (Cch 237)
- 2. Every statement must be understood within its historical context. Time, place, and circumstances under which that statement was made must be studied in order to understand its meaning.**
  - “Regarding the testimonies, nothing is ignored; nothing is cast aside; but time and place must be considered.” (SM3 217)
  - That “which may be said in truth of individuals at one time may not correctly be said of them at another time.” (3T 471) Ellen was being criticized for her endorsement of certain leaders who later fell from grace or apostatized.
  - “When the judgment of the General Conference, which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and **private judgment must not be maintained**, but be surrendered.” (3T 492) vs. “The voice from Battle Creek [the General Conference], which has been regarded as authority in counselling how the work should be done, is **no longer the voice of God.**” (Letter 4, 1896)
- 3. The principle underlying each statement of counsel or instruction must be recognized in order to understand its relevance for those in different times or places.**
  - “If girls . . . could learn to harness and drive a horse, and to use the saw and the hammer, as well as the rake and the hoe, they would be better fitted to meet the emergencies of life.” (Ed 216, 217) **Principle:** Girls must be: “fitted to meet the emergencies of life”, whatever that means in your generation and circumstances.
- 4. We must use common sense and sanctified reason as we analyze the difference between principles and policies.**
  - “We have found in our experience that if Satan cannot keep souls bound in the ice of indifference, he will try to push them into the fire of **fanaticism.**” (CD 211)
  - “two meals [daily] are better than three.” (CD 141, 173; 4T 416, 417)  
“If, after dispensing with the third meal in the sanitarium, you see by the results that this is keeping people away from the institution, your duty is plain. We must remember that while there are some who are better for eating only two meals, there are others who eat lightly at each meal, and who feel that they need something in the evening. . . . [Eliminating the third meal may] do more harm than good.” (CD 283)
- 5. We must be certain that supposed quotations are indeed written by the author to whom they are attributed.**
  - Live “as though you had 1,000 years to live, and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow,” (Mother Ann Lee of the Shakers, not Ellen White)
  - “the day is coming, and is not far off, when every Seventh-day Adventist will wish . . . that he were out of the United States,” (A. T. Jones not Ellen White)
  - “Entire churches and conferences will apostatize” (Unknown, not Ellen White)
  - Reports that Ellen G. White named France as the last haven of religious liberty cannot be supported.
  - More examples: <http://www.whiteestate.org/issues/faq-mist.html>
- 6. Though not contradicting themselves, we must allow for the maturing experience of authors, even prophets, in that truth is unfolded to them only as fast as they are able to understand it.**
  - “And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52).
  - “For sixty years I have been in communication with heavenly messengers, and I have been **constantly learning** in reference to divine things, and in reference to the way in which God is constantly working to bring souls from the error of their ways to the light in God's light.” (TDG 76)
- 7. In some instances, a person must understand the experience of an event, either directly or vicariously, before understanding the truth of the event.**
  - Ellen’s answer to someone who embraced futurism: “The Lord will not lead minds now to set aside the truth that the Holy Spirit has moved upon His servants in the past to proclaim. . . .The Lord does not lay upon those who have not had an experience in His work the burden of making a new exposition of those prophecies which He has, by His Holy Spirit, moved upon His chosen servants to explain.” (SM2 110, 112)  
**Be careful to come with new theories that contradict what God has led others to previously. Maybe you have not yet understood/experienced what God has shown others.**
- 8. Not everything in the Bible or in the writings of Ellen White can be understood at first glance, or even after years of study.**
  - We are not “to doubt His Word because we cannot understand all the mysteries of His providence.” (5T 699)