

GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING DOCTRINE (from Norton Sterrett)

1. Base doctrine on the literal statements of the Bible rather than on the figurative portions. Figurative portions. Figurative passages (such as parables) teach a main lesson. We should be careful not to doctrine from details. Use figurative passages to support doctrine rather than establish it.
2. Base doctrine on plain statements rather than obscure ones. Another way of saying this is: Never base a doctrine on an unclear or obscure passage of Scripture. An example of this is I Corinthians 13:10 which states, "When that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away." There are at least seven major views on this passage, and those views are held by sound Bible teachers. Any passage that is so unclear should not be used to establish doctrine. The best one can do is offer an opinion, and not make a doctrine from a passage like this.
3. Base doctrine on plain statements rather than obscure ones. A good portion of the prophetic books, and practically all of the discourses of Christ, and the epistles are didactic. They are given for the purpose of teaching. Historical portions may imply doctrines, but they don't usually teach them as such. We should never base a doctrine on the implications of historical events.
4. Base doctrine on all the relevant passages, not on just a few. It is wrong to form a doctrine from a small number of passages and then try to force that meaning on other passages. Make sure, however, that the "relevant" passages are truly relevant. For instance, don't confuse Israel and the Church, because they are two different entities with two different programs. Not to make that distinction leads to great confusion.
5. Do a word study to learn some doctrines. Use a concordance or a New Testament dictionary when this is required. Remember these points: (a) There are doctrines which have no single word in the Bible to describe them. You cannot do a word study in such cases. For example the word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible, but a comparison of many passages of Scripture confirm the doctrine. (b) There are passages in which a doctrine is presented, but the actual word does not occur. The word "rapture" is not found in the English Bible (It is found in the Latin Bible), but its teaching is found in I Thessalonians 4:13-17; I Corinthians 15:51-52). Those passages are the source of the doctrine. (c) Some doctrines have more than one word to express them. Be sure not to study one word and ignore the others. For instance, sanctification, holiness, and purification describe the same doctrine.
6. Be sure each passage is understood through the general principles of interpretation. As an example, in studying sanctification the tense of the verb is important in passages such as I John 3:6, 9).
7. Be cautious in formulating doctrine by inference. An inference is something that is not clearly stated. If a truth is taught in one passage we might conclude other things would be true which are not directly stated. Some take the teaching of election to teach that God has elected some to damnation. This an inference. The Bible does not say that. Never go beyond the direct teachings of Scripture.
8. Beware of doctrinal speculation (guessing). The Bible does not say what we will be in Heaven, whether there will be babies as well as adults. One well-known evangelist stated that Adam and Eve could fly. The Bible does not say this, and it is wrong to make a doctrine of it.
9. Emphasize what Scripture emphasizes. All truth is important, but some truths are more important than others. Don't major on minors. Give the same emphasis as the Scriptures do. If we teach the Bible all the way through, we will give the same emphasis that the Bible gives. It keeps us from emphasizing pet doctrines.
10. Seek the practical importance of the doctrine. In other words, seek to find the practical point of any doctrine, so it can be lived.