

SPECIAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION (PART I)

Besides general principles that are used for interpreting general use of language, there are special types of language which require special principles.

FIGURES OF SPEECH

The Bible contains hundreds of figures of speech. E.W. Bullinger grouped the Bible's figures of speech into more than 200 categories. We will look at only a few here. A figure of speech is a word or phrase that is used to communicate something that is not a literal meaning. Figures of speech allow people to express themselves in a more colorful way. The Bible uses figures of speech in the same way other books do. When we say, "It is very hot," we are making a plain statement. If we say, "It is as hot as a firecracker," we are using a figure of speech. Both sentences mean the same thing, but the second sentence says it in a more colorful way. When Jesus is referred to as a lamb and a lion, figures of speech are being used. Obviously Jesus is not a real animal, but he possess certain qualities of these animals. The lamb is an animal of sacrifice. The lion is the king of beasts. Figures of speech are used for many reasons: They add color or vividness. They attract attention. They help us remember. They make ideas more concrete.

GUIDELINES FOR INTERPRETING FIGURES OF SPEECH

1. Always take a passage in its literal sense unless there is a good reason for doing otherwise. For example, when John wrote that 144,000 would be sealed with 12,000 from each tribe of Israel, there is no reason not to take those numbers literally (Revelation 7:4-8). Yet in the following verse "the Lamb" obviously refers to Jesus and is to be taken in a figurative sense as a sacrificial offering.
2. The figurative sense is intended if it is impossible to take something literally. For instance, the Lord does not have wings (Psalm 57:1).
3. A figurative interpretation is intended if the literal meaning is an absurdity, as the trees clapping their hands (Isaiah 55:12).
4. If a literal translation demands an immoral action take it figuratively. It would be cannibalistic to eat the flesh of Jesus and to drink His blood (John 6:53-56), so this should be taken figuratively. Looking at the context, verse 63 states that Jesus was speaking spiritually, not literally.
5. Sometimes a figurative expression is followed by an explanatory literal statement. Those who "fall asleep" (I Thessalonians 4:13-14) are spoken of as those who have died in verse 16.
6. Sometimes a figure of speech is marked by a qualifying adjective such as "the true Bread" (John 6:32) or "living stone" (I Peter 2:4). The "Sword of the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:17) is obviously used in a figurative sense since the words "of the spirit" qualify the meaning.

Next time we will look at figures of comparison, figures of relation, and other figures of speech.