

# LESSON 3 Principles of Interpretation

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You were introduced to some foundational guides for understanding Scripture in a section of Lesson 1. In Lesson 2 you discovered that *interpretation* is the second step of six basic steps in Bible study. After you have observed, you have a body of information; then, you interpret your information.

Lesson 3 will focus on some of the important aspects of interpretation. Much of the body of Christian belief and doctrine has been established through interpretation. What is doctrine? Why is it so important? Why is interpretation such a crucial step in learning? Let's look at detailed answers to these questions.

## ***lesson outline***

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The Importance of Doctrine

Literal Interpretation

The Related Whole

    New Testament Reveals Old Testament

    Scripture in Context: Caution in Using “Proof” Texts

    Divine Disclosure Only in Scripture

Determining Doctrinal Truth

    Only From Passages That Proclaim God’s Will for All Men

    Only Scriptural Teaching Directly Binds Conscience

The Practical Nature of Scripture

Responsibility for Light

## ***lesson objectives***

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When you finish this lesson you should be able to:

1. Define “doctrine” and “theology” according to our usage of these terms.
2. Explain the meaning and importance of literal interpretation.
3. Describe three principles involved in using the Bible as a related whole.
4. Explain two general principles: one for identifying doctrinal truth in Scripture and the other for guiding Christian behavior.
5. Recognize two aspects of the practical nature of Scripture.
6. Explain the importance of accurate sharing of the message of the Bible.

## ***learning activities***

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1. Read the opening section, outline, and objectives.
2. Be sure you understand the meanings of the key words. Look up in the glossary those that you do not understand.
3. Answer in writing every question in the lesson development. Always remember to check your answers.

4. You will not be asked to use your notebook in this lesson. However, if you have time it would be valuable to try to use on a new passage of Scripture the question-answer technique which you studied in Lesson 2. The more you use the techniques and methods you are studying, the more they will become yours. Select a paragraph, a chapter, or a whole book for your study.
5. Take the self-test at the end of the lesson.

### **key words**

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assumption	encyclopedia	secondary
communication	mystical	theology
doctrine	primary	

### **lesson development**

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## **THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCTRINE**

**Objective 1.** *Define “doctrine” and “theology” according to our usage of these terms.*

In this lesson we use the word “doctrine” in reference to *Bible doctrine*. It is “the substance and content of the Christian faith.” *Theology* is closely related to it. For our purposes it will be defined as “the study of God and His relation to man and to the world.” Doctrine and theology include all the teachings of the Christian faith.

People spend lifetimes dealing with these subjects, so it is not the main purpose of this lesson to teach doctrine, but to tell you *what it is* and to give you an idea of the importance of it. Jesus affirmed that His doctrine came from God. “What I teach is not my own teaching,” He said, “but it comes from God, who sent me. Whoever is willing to do what God wants will know whether what I teach comes from God or whether I speak on my own authority” (John 7:16-17).

In writing to Timothy, Paul speaks of the uses of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The very first item on his list is that it is

useful for *teaching the truth*. And that, of course, is the key to the importance of doctrine. Truth is sound doctrine because truth is divine (John 14:6). You need to believe only “truth” and share only “truth.”

## Application

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**1** Match each term (right) with a definition of it (left).

- |              |  |                       |
|--------------|--|-----------------------|
| ... <b>a</b> | The substance and content of the Christian faith.          | 1) Theology           |
| ... <b>b</b> | The study of God and His relation to man and to the world. | 2) A use of Scripture |
| ... <b>c</b> | Teaching the truth.  | 3) Doctrine           |

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Doctrine and theology are important because what you come to believe about God and His program determines your behavior, your decisions, your relationships; in short, the whole of your life. Paul commended obedience to truth in the Roman Christians: “For though at one time you were slaves to sin, you have obeyed with all your heart the truths found in the teaching you received” (Romans 6:17).

When you come to the Bible, you bring *your assets*: your mind, your will, and your heart. God brings *His assets* to you. He has given you the Holy Spirit to help you understand the words He has already inspired.

Why then are there so many false doctrines in the world? There are many reasons. People are perverse when it comes to obeying God. They use the Bible in strange ways. I once knew a man who said, “I believe Jesus was a great teacher and I live by the Sermon on the Mount.” But this man was not a born-again Christian. He did not believe in Jesus as the Savior of the world. He evidently did not consider the fact that Jesus testified that He is the Savior, God’s beloved Son. If Jesus was not telling the truth about that, you could not trust the other things

He said. It is possible to live by the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) only if Jesus lives in your heart.

False doctrines arise from a deliberate twisting of Scripture. In the Old Testament book of Malachi, God denounces the priests who are deliberately teaching false doctrine to the people (Malachi 2:8). In the New Testament, Paul continually warns Timothy to guard his doctrine with great care.

## Application

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**2** Read 1 Timothy 6:3-5 in your Bible. Find the answers to the following questions from examining this passage.

**a** What three things can be said about the person who teaches false doctrine and does not agree with the words of Jesus?

.....

**b** What does this type of person think that religion is?

.....

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The fact that false doctrine may also arise in the church itself is even more disturbing. The Holy Spirit is present to help our understanding, but many of God's children are lazy, careless, and indifferent about Bible study. Those who don't study are easy targets for false teachers who tell them what they like to hear rather than God's truth. A lazy mind and careless attitude put a barrier in the way of the Holy Spirit. After all, He has to work with *your* intelligence. Communication is a two-way operation. God *cannot reveal* unless there is someone to reveal to, someone who is making an effort to receive the communication. Paul said to the Ephesian Christians, "Then we shall no longer be children, carried by the waves and blown about by every shifting wind of the teaching of deceitful men, who lead others into error by the tricks they invent" (Ephesians 4:14).

Christians who are honestly seeking the will of God in the understanding of divine truth must be very concerned about such things as *interpretation, theology, and doctrine*. The

principles presented in Lessons 3 and 4 are to help you do what Paul said to do in 1 Thessalonians 5:21. “Put all things to the test, keep what is good.” As you study, you will have to weigh the ideas which come to you. Are the ideas from God, or are they sometimes the workings of your own mind? Therefore you must test your ideas to see if they stand up. *Principles of interpretation are really just tests to confirm or verify truth and to weed out wrong ideas.* Belief must be tested by an alert, redeemed person who comes to the Word with his best judgment. His judgment is acted upon by the Holy Spirit who then brings understanding of truth (sound doctrine).

## LITERAL INTERPRETATION

**Objective 2.** *Explain the meaning and importance of literal interpretation.*

*Literal interpretation* is meaning that is based on natural or normal usage of language, the ordinary sense of the words. *Figurative language* is the expression of one thing in terms of another. It presents pictures to the mind that illustrate other ideas.

Language is a complex and changing system. Over years of use, words acquire connotations and shades of meaning. To say that the Bible must be understood literally does not mean to put the student in a rigid frame and say, “You can only understand this word in one way.” But there has to be a starting point. This starting point is the *normal* way in which words are used in their natural and ordinary sense. Figurative language is used in the Bible and will be the subject of Lesson 4. But even figurative language depends for its meaning on the literal meaning of what it represents. Jesus often used figurative language in His teaching.

## Application

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- 3** Circle the letter before each TRUE sentence.
- a** *Literal* and *figurative* mean exactly the same thing.
  - b** Figurative language needs the literal meaning of words to convey the idea it represents.
  - c** Literal meaning is the natural, ordinary usage of language.
- 4** Read the parable of the weeds (Matthew 13:24-30) and Jesus' explanation of it (Matthew 13:36-43). Then answer these questions based on it.
- a** What were the words Jesus used to picture Himself?  
.....
  - b** What word did Jesus use to picture the world?  
.....
  - c** What phrase pictures the people who belong to the Kingdom?  
.....
  - d** What word pictures the people who belong to the evil one?  
.....



These questions give you a good example of how figurative language is used. (You may want to ask a few questions of your own on a figurative language passage and record your study in your notebook, just for practice.) Can you see that normal understanding of “seed,” for example, is absolutely necessary to your understanding of what Jesus was illustrating? We do this in all our reading. All communication is based on the assumption that the one who speaks will be understood by the one who listens or reads. This is what God intends. He is not trying to hide His message from you; He is trying to reveal it. Therefore you will not have to look for mystical or hidden meanings in Scripture. Were that true, all would be confusion. People’s imaginations would work overtime and nothing could be known for sure. *Belief must be tested by whether or not you are giving the words their ordinary meanings.*

## Application

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- 5** Complete these sentences with the word *literal* or *figurative*.
- a** The Bible must be interpreted in a ..... sense, otherwise nothing could be known for sure about its meaning.
- b** ..... language was often used by Jesus to illustrate His teaching.
- c** You do not have to look for mystical or hidden meanings in Scripture because God speaks in His Word in a normal or ..... way.
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## THE RELATED WHOLE

**Objective 3.** *Describe three principles involved in using the Bible as a related whole.*

### New Testament Reveals Old Testament

Belief must be tested by *New Testament revelation*. The teachings of the Old Testament laid a foundation in history for teachings in the New Testament. You remember from studying “progressive revelation” in Lesson 1 that because of man’s limited capacity to understand and his sinful, perverse nature, God can reveal truth only a little at a time.

Jesus said, (Matthew 5:17) “Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. I have not come to do away with them, but to make their teachings come true.” The revelation of God the Redeemer in the New Testament is the peak of God’s revelation to man. All the teachings of the Old Testament must be seen in the light of this final and highest revelation, the New Testament.



## Application

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**6** Read from your Bible, Leviticus 11:1-23 and Mark 7:17-19. Explain in your notebook which of those teachings is correct for today and why.

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## Scripture in Context: Caution in Using “Proof” Texts

Belief must be tested by *the meaning of any given passage of Scripture in relation to all its context*: the paragraph, the chapter, the book, and the other books of the Bible.

A “proof” text is a verse that may be quoted to verify a point of view or a point of doctrinal belief. It is all right to do this provided that you have determined the accurate meaning of the verse you are quoting. For example, in Exercise 6, Mark 7:17-19 is cited as a “proof” text for the teaching that it is permissible now to eat all foods. Another text which is related to this principle is Acts 10:9-15. The text in Mark is Jesus’ teaching which is clarified in Mark’s comment that is added in verse 19 in parentheses. The passage in Acts, which tells about Peter’s vision of many unclean animals being let down in a sheet, teaches the same thing *but only as an illustration of its primary message*. If you read the chapter (context) carefully, you find that the main idea is that Peter is to accept the Gentiles and not be afraid to bring them the gospel. Food is the secondary consideration.

Remember the *rational* thought questions from the last lesson: “Why is this said?” and “Why is this said HERE?” When determining doctrine or an eternal principle to which all believers everywhere must conform, these questions become all important. Scripture must be understood in its immediate context and compared with other Scripture.

## Application

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**7** Read 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 carefully. This passage is a paragraph, which means it embodies a complete thought. Note verses 19 and 20.

**a** In 5:19-20 what main topic is being discussed?

.....

**b** In light of the main topic of the paragraph, what is the “kind of evil” being referred to in this passage (verse 22)?

.....

.....



First Thessalonians 5:22 is a verse often quoted to “prove” that something should or should not be done. Other verses in the New Testament speak directly to questions of specific wrongdoing which must be avoided, but I feel that this verse should be understood in the context of judging the ways in which gifts of the Spirit are used in the church. A better text to use for proof that the New Testament teaches a holy and separated life would be Colossians 3:5-6, where a direct and specific command is given.

## Divine Disclosure Only in Scripture

This time, our phrase about belief is changed a little. Belief must *be formulated or extracted ONLY FROM SCRIPTURE*.

The recorded history of man dates back several thousands of years. During that time the intelligence of man has given rise to many noble thoughts. It has also given rise to many mistaken notions, as man has observed his surroundings and tried to make suitable explanations for them. Christian doctrine cannot be based on writings of human inspiration. All Christian doctrine and theology can have only one source, the Bible. You can find the truth of God only by seeking to correctly understand Scripture.

Doctrine cannot come from any source other than the Bible. Neither can it go beyond what the Bible specifically states. There are many questions that are not answered in the Bible. You may have questions, but God has given in Scripture all that He wants you to know. He has given the important things. He expects you to study and find out all that *is* there. But the walk of the believer is a walk of faith too. Romans 8:25 concludes a paragraph that has been talking about the future hope of the believers. It says that “if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” God has reasons of His own for putting some information in Scripture and withholding some. Sound doctrine cannot be built on guesswork.

In all probability you will not be engaged in formulating doctrines for the church. Yet every student of the Scripture is, in a way, engaged in working out beliefs for himself and beliefs he will be sharing. Remember, doctrine can come from no other source but the Bible and can go only as far as the Bible goes.

## ***Application***

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**8** Match each Scripture passage with the principle it illustrates.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| ... <b>a</b> New Testament reveals Old           | 1) “If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8:25).              |
| ... <b>b</b> Scripture in context                | 2) “I have not come to do away with them, but to make their teachings come true” (Matthew 5:17). |
| ... <b>c</b> Divine disclosure only in Scripture | 3) “Nothing that goes into a person from the outside can really make him unclean” (Mark 7:18).   |



## DETERMINING DOCTRINAL TRUTH

**Objective 4.** *Explain two general principles: one for identifying doctrinal truth in Scripture and the other for guiding Christian behavior.*

### Only From Passages That Proclaim God’s Will for All Men

All of the Bible is the Word of God. All of it is truth. All of it is useful to us. But it is not all useful in the same ways. *Determining doctrine* does not imply that some of the Bible is true and some is not. However, doctrinal truth (the passages that declare God’s will *for man now*) is useful to us in a more particular way because it demands something of us.

### ***Application***

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**9** Read 2 John 12, then answer these questions based on it.

**a** Does this verse express truth?

.....

**b** If so, is it truth that has anything personal to do with you or me?

.....

**c** Write in your own words what this verse seems to express.

.....

.....

10 Read 2 John 9.

a Does this verse express truth?

.....

b If so, is it truth that has anything personal to do with you or me?

.....

.....

c If this verse has truth for us, what indicates that it does?

.....

.....



Second John 9 is different from 2 John 12. Second John 9 proclaims an eternal principle that is as it was in the day John wrote this letter: *if you do not stay with the teachings of Christ, but go beyond them, you do not have God.* Second John 12 is true also, but it does not proclaim eternal truth that has personal implications for people today. So, doctrine is determined by passages that proclaim God’s will for man for all time.

### Only Scriptural Teaching Directly Binds Conscience

At the beginning of this lesson we defined doctrine as the substance and content of the Christian faith. A specific part of that content is the group of commands that bear directly on daily Christian behavior. *You and your behavior* are not easy to separate. In Christian circles what you *can do* and *can not do* are usually subjects of interest and discussion. Sometimes the subject is also bound up with cultural practices that are not related to Scriptural commands.

Your personal Christian behavior should be determined on the basis of four guides: direct command, reasonable implication, eternal principle, and conscience.

*Direct command* is the most clear. What is directly condemned in Scripture, we have a right to condemn today. The following exercise presents an example.

## Application

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**11** Read Ephesians 5:3-5. List the things that are directly condemned.

.....  
 .....



*Reasonable implication* is not quite as clear as direct command, but must be considered. For example, drunkenness is condemned in Scripture. (See 1 Corinthians 5:11; 6:10; Ephesians 5:18; Galatians 5:21.) It can be reasonably implied from these Scriptures that the misuse of drugs is to be condemned as well, because it interferes with the normal conscious function.

*Eternal principle* is important though often less clear than direct command. As an example, read Ephesians 5:1-2.

## Application

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**12** State in your own words how two eternal principles in Ephesians 5:1-2 have a direct bearing on your personal behavior.

.....  
 .....



In the discussion of the question of food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8, you can see an example of both *eternal principle* and *conscience*. The difference lies in the way you view it. From Paul's position you see an eternal principle: that of consideration for others. The eating of the meat in question was nothing, as far as he was concerned. But for the sake of those around him who *thought* it to be sin, he did not eat. His

motive was to keep from offending someone who truly thought it to be sinful (1 Corinthians 8:13).

In 1 Corinthians 8:10, conscience is seen operating in the *weak* person: “Suppose a person whose conscience is weak in this matter sees you, who have so-called ‘knowledge,’ eating in the temple of an idol; will not this encourage him to eat food offered to idols?” It is interesting to note that if you truly believe something to be a sin (whether it is or not by the standards we have discussed) and you go against your own conscience to do it, it really becomes sin for you. Not because of the act itself in such cases, but because the spirit of disobedience is its motivation.

## Application

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**13** List four areas where Scripture directly binds conscience.

.....  
 .....

**14** Match each type of Scripture (left) with the item that identifies it best (right).

- |   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| ... <b>a</b> Passages that proclaim God’s will for all men. | 1) Determine personal behavior     |
| ... <b>b</b> Teachings of Scripture that bind conscience.   | 2) Determine doctrine              |
| ... <b>c</b> Personal messages of local importance.         | 3) Are truth with incidental value |

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## THE PRACTICAL NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

**Objective 5.** *Recognize two aspects of the practical nature of Scripture.*

The Bible is not intended to be an encyclopedia of interesting bits of information. It is not a science book. It has one main theme which we have already found to be *redemption*

by faith in Jesus Christ. The content of the Bible is highly selective; it has been specifically chosen to deliver and support this message of redemption. Even concerning the activities of Jesus, John wrote that if all were to be recorded, “the whole world could not hold the books that would be written” (John 21:25). So as you study Scripture, you should keep in mind its practical nature. It contains much incidental information, but its main thrust is very personal and practical: how to be saved, how to live as a Christian believer, how to share the Gospel.

## Application

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**15** Circle the letters before the statements that are TRUE.

- a) The main theme of the Bible is informational.
  - b) The Bible contains only a record of what Jesus did.
  - c) The main theme of the Bible is redemption through Jesus Christ.
  - d) The practical nature of Scripture shows us how to live and how to serve.
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## RESPONSIBILITY FOR LIGHT

**Objective 6.** *Explain the importance of accurate sharing of the message of the Bible.*

The Bible is truly a book with a message that is a matter of life and death! *Sharing God's Word* is not a matter of tickling ears with interesting facts or showing how much you know. It must be motivated by a heart of love for God and for His growing church. The Bible contains information that is absolutely necessary for every person to know. It speaks of eternal joy or eternal punishment after this brief life is over. The Bible is the only place where accurate information about God and the eternal destiny of human beings can be found. You have it within your power to lead men to God with truth, or to mislead them with false or careless information. God's Word must be proclaimed in *truth!*



***Application***

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**16** Why is it so important that the message of the Bible be proclaimed with great accuracy?

.....

.....



**self-test**

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**1** Circle the letters before the correct answers. Which of the following statements about doctrine and theology are TRUE?

- a)** Doctrine and theology include all the teachings of the Christian faith.
- b)** Theology deals with the study of God and His relation to man and the world.
- c)** All doctrine is acceptable if it is sincere.

**2** What is meant by *literal* interpretation of the Bible?

- a)** That every word can have only one meaning.
- b)** The natural, normal, ordinary use of language.
- c)** The expression of one thing in terms of another.

**3** Circle the letters before the correct statements.

- a)** Belief must be tested by New Testament revelation.
- b)** Belief must be tested by Old Testament Law.
- c)** Belief must be tested by the meaning of the context surrounding the Scripture passage.
- d)** Belief must be tested by how reasonable it sounds to you.
- e)** Belief must be based only on the Bible.
- f)** Belief can be extracted from any moralistic book.

TRUE-FALSE. Write **T** or **F** in front of each statement to indicate whether it is true or false.

- ... **4** Only part of the Bible is true.
- ... **5** All of the Bible is true.
- ... **6** All of the Bible is for your personal direction.
- ... **7** Direct command, reasonable implication, eternal principle, and conscience have a bearing on Christian behavior.
- ... **8** Direct command is the only consideration for Christian conduct.

**9** What are two things that the practical nature of the Bible teaches us to do?

.....  
.....

**10** Why is accuracy extremely important in sharing God’s Word with others? (Answer in your own words.)

.....  
.....

## ***answers to the study questions***

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- 8 a** 2) “I have not come to do away with them, but to make their teachings come true” (Matthew 5:17).  
**b** 3) “Nothing that goes into a person from the outside can really make him unclean” (Mark 7:18).  
**c** 1) “If we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8:25).
- 1 a** 3) Doctrine  
**b** 1) Theology  
**c** 2) A use of Scripture
- 9 a** Yes  
**b** No  
**c** A final, personal message to the people to whom it was written.
- 2 a** He is swollen with pride, knows nothing, and desires to argue and quarrel about words.  
**b** That it is a way to become rich.
- 10 a** Yes  
**b** Yes  
**c** Words of warning and words of comfort for us.
- 3 b** Figurative language needs the literal meaning of words to convey the idea it represents.  
**c** Literal meaning is the natural, ordinary usage of language.
- 11** Sexual immorality, indecency; greed; obscene, profane, or vulgar language.
- 4 a** The man who sowed the good seed.  
**b** Field  
**c** Good seed  
**d** Weeds
- 12 1)** I must find out what God is like, and try to be like Him in every possible way.  
**2)** I must control my action by love in the same way as Christ showed His love. (Wording will vary.)

- 5** **a** Literal  
**b** Figurative  
**c** Literal
- 13** Direct command, reasonable implication, eternal principle, and conscience. (In any order.)
- 6** The teaching of Jesus in the New Testament, that all foods are fit to be eaten, is the one that applies to today. It is correct because the New Testament gives a fuller revelation of God's will for man than the Old Testament. (Answers will vary.)
- 14** **a** 2) Determine doctrine.  
**b** 1) Determine personal behavior.  
**c** 3) Are truth with incidental value.
- 7** **a)** Gifts of the Spirit.  
**b)** Misuse of the gifts of the Spirit.
- 16** Because the eternal destiny in heaven or hell for all people depends on the words of Scripture.
- 15** **c)** The main theme of the Bible is redemption through Jesus Christ.  
**d)** The practical nature of Scripture shows us how to live and how to serve.

