

THE PRIVILEGE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF  
INDIVIDUAL INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

ACTS 8:26-35

## INTRODUCTION:

I. The average adult Christian believer is competent to interpret the Bible for himself or herself.

A. We have great confidence in the competency of the individual.

1. To understand the plan of salvation.
2. To know right from wrong, good from evil, and sin from righteousness.
3. To repent or turn away from sin.
4. To understand who Jesus is.
5. To believe and trust in Jesus as Savior.
6. To discover the will of God for his or her life.

B. ~~If new immigrants to our country can study and understand the Constitution well enough to become a naturalized citizen, then adult Christian believers can study, understand, and interpret the Scriptures for themselves.~~

C. If 16 yr. old young people can study the state laws about driving, and can pass a rather challenging driver's test to get a license, and if they can pass today's high school courses, then with the church's help they can grow to sufficient spiritual maturity and understanding to study and interpret the Bible for themselves.

D. The old Westminster Confession states:

"Those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them."

II. The Christian believer should be free to use the very best tools and methods for Bible study and interpretation.

A. Learning from history & archaeology

- B. Learning from literary & language arts
- C. Christians should not be condemned or labeled as "liberals" simply because their eyes and minds are open to sources of truth and enlightenment from other sciences, disciplines, and sources of knowledge besides one extreme wing of theology.
- D. Christians should be free to learn from all good Bible scholars, professors, and theologians around the world from many denominations besides Baptists. *their own.* We can benefit from those who have solid academic and spiritual credentials, whose works have been openly reviewed and analyzed by their peers, who have defended their facts, arguments, and conclusions against all opponents and challengers.  
We recognize that no one church or denomination has a monopoly on the truth, and no single wing of any church or denomination has sole possession of the one "correct" interpretation of Bible doctrine.  
Many sick churches and pastors could be instantly cured by a good dose of Christian humility!

- III. Answer to those who say, But isn't this an awesome responsibility — this freedom of individual interpretation of Scripture?"
  - A. Yes, indeed, it IS an awesome responsibility. It includes:
    1. Responsibility to be very careful; not too rash or hasty.
    2. Responsibility to be HUMBLE enough to check out your conclusions with others, and to be willing to revise or correct your conclusions or interpretation.
    3. Responsibility to discipline yourself in study, prayer, faith, and readiness to be led by the Holy Spirit.
      - Read the best commentaries & check out their positions with other Bible scholars.
      - Read and try to understand the historical & cultural background of the scriptural situation.

— Read & try to understand the language, grammar, style, and vocabulary of the text and context.

— Pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance

— Keep an attitude of faith.

Augustine wrote, "unless you believe, you will not understand." Faith comes before understanding, not the other way around.

B. This IS an enormous responsibility, but it is not unlike some other awesome responsibilities in life.

1. Responsibility of parents

2. Responsibility of professional persons to study and work hard to keep current in their professions.

3. Responsibility of military commanders for their units.

C. This is one of the greatest privileges of being a Baptist.

1. Baptists have always resisted the idea that one particular interpretation of the bible could be imposed or forced on any believer from any person or any other denominational organization or body.

2. Cecil Sherman has written:

"The right of private interpretation of the Bible is so basic to 'being Baptist' until any diminishing of this right, any erosion of the principle is straying from 'being Baptist.'"

3. Many of us are convinced that the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC since 1979, with the insistence on conformity to The Baptist Faith and Message (1963), and the one-sided spirit and conclusions of the SBC Peace Committee of 1987, provide evidence of a denominational coercion in matters of faith and doctrine which amounts to a denial of individual interpretation of Scripture. The denomination decides what the official creed will be, and a denominational committee decides how the creed will be interpreted and applied. No denominational loyalty, they say,

no job in any agency, institution, or committee of the denomination. We have sacrificed individual interpretation on the altar of denominational loyalty.

D. But this freedom of interpretation is also one of the greatest blessings and privileges of the individual Christian believer.

1. To know that you can turn to God's word for guidance whenever you need it.
2. To know that your fellow believers trust you to "rightly handle the Word of God." We can learn from each other. You can be a competent teacher of the Bible if you prepare yourself properly. Others can learn from you; you have much to offer them.
3. You can inform yourself adequately on issues in the church, so you can vote intelligently and participate in the decision-making process.
4. You can be intelligent and mature enough to defend yourself from unbelievers' attacks or from the deceptive approaches of false cults and religious extremists.
5. You can have that Blessed Christian Assurance in your heart that you are indeed a part of the loving family of God, and that you are following him according to his precious will as revealed in his inspired Word.

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