The apostle Paul in his Second Letter to Timothy admonishes him about “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2:15, NKJV). Rightly dividing the Word includes adopting the right presuppositions and attitudes toward the Word and using a method of interpretation that is in harmony with the Word itself.

The fact that Paul admonishes Timothy to interpret correctly the Word of truth, i.e., the Bible (John 17:17), implies that it can be interpreted incorrectly, and indeed many instances can be cited to prove this point. For example, the pastor of a large church preached on television on Acts 26:2, where Paul says, “I think myself happy, King Agrippa, because today I shall answer for myself before you concerning all the things of which I am accused by the Jews” (NKJV).

The pastor took the phrase “I think myself happy” and preached a sermon on the importance of positive thinking in the midst of adversity! But Paul was not telling Agrippa anything about positive thinking; he was saying, “I consider myself fortunate” (NASB, emphasis supplied) to be able to make a defense. This preacher had corrupted the intent of Paul’s words because he was using a phrase in a text out of context.

Another preacher delivered a sermon on Mark 2:4, which tells about some men who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus: “They could not come nigh unto him for the press” (KJV).

This pastor took that phrase and preached for half an hour about how the press—the news media—is still keeping people from Jesus even to this day! The text, however, has nothing to do with the news media. “The press” refers to the crowd around Jesus. The whole sermon was based on a false understanding of the text.

Though it is true that the Bible is written for the common person, it is incorrect to say that the Bible does not need to be interpreted, it just needs to be obeyed. It certainly needs to be obeyed, but before we can obey Scripture, we need to know what it actually says.

Whether we are conscious of it or not, we all interpret the Bible. Some texts we take literally; others we recognize to have symbolic meaning. For example, when we read in Exodus 20:15, “You shall not steal,” most of us take this literally. It means just what it says: “You shall not steal.” We do not say, “But sometimes it is all right to steal.” We know it means “Do not steal at any time.”

However, when we read Matthew 5:29, “‘If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell’” (NKJV), we know this is not to be taken literally. At least, we don’t see many one-eyed Christians! Jesus is not really talking about the gouging out of eyes. He is referring to our sinful thoughts. He is not asking us to mutilate our bodies but to control our thoughts.

Thus, to understand what Scripture actually teaches, we need to interpret it. The Pharisees studied the Old Testament and knew what it said, but they did not understand it. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus knew the Scripture, yet they failed to understand it.

Therefore, when Jesus joined them, “He interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27, RSV). The word translated “interpreted” comes from the Greek word hermeneuo, from which we derive the English word “hermeneutics.” Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. It provides rules for the interpretation or explanation of Scripture.

Incorrect interpretations of the Bible have sometimes had terrible consequences. False interpretations have supported false doctrines and false views of the world and the universe. In the seventeenth century, for example, the great Italian mathematician Galileo was tried and condemned by his church because he believed that the earth revolves around the sun. The church, on the other hand, based on a faulty interpretation of Scripture, believed that the earth was the center of the universe and that the
sun revolved around the earth. Such misunderstandings can be avoided if we use correct principles of interpretation. —Gerhard Pfandl