

## **HOW TO ACCURATELY UNDERSTAND THE WORD**

Toward the close of His earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus had a discussion with some religious leaders (Matt. 22:23-33). The dispute concerned the reality of the resurrection of the dead and Jesus noted that an essential lack in these men was their failure to understand the Scriptures (v.29).

The Apostle Paul exhorted Timothy to be a diligent workman, handling accurately the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15). Handling accurately renders a word that originally meant "to cut straight" (as in road-making, in ploughing a furrow, or in the cutting of stones by a stone mason). Here, it is used in a figurative sense of straight-forward dealing with the Word, handling it in a truthful and accurate manner. (It is instructive to look up Proverbs 3:6; this same word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in that verse.)

### **The Problem: Interpretation**

As disciples, we are aware of the necessity to understand the Word, to accurately handle it. But this brings us face-to-face with a vexing problem-how are we to understand it? It sometimes seems that almost anything can be "proved" from the Bible; there are numerous groups in Christendom, as well as various cults and sects, all of whom appeal to this verse of that text to support their particular doctrines and practices.

We know that Scripture is designed to make us adequate, equipped for every good work. But what are we to believe that Scripture says, in the midst of so many widely differing interpretations? The solution is to employ the proper method of biblical interpretation. (Accurate understanding of the Bible is only possible if we employ proper interpretive principles! This is not to say, however, that understanding the Bible will become effortlessly easy if only we utilize certain methods of interpretation; the application of proper principles involves effort!)

Another term for these principles of interpretation is "hermeneutics" (pronounced hur-me-nu-tiks). Hermeneutics is the science and art of biblical interpretation. It is a science because, as we shall see, there are guidelines which the interpreter needs to observe. But it is also an art because the interpreter must skillfully apply these guidelines!

The differing interpretations of the Bible occur primarily because men either totally or partially utilize erroneous methods of interpreting.

Consider the following very carefully:

"A person has interpreted the thoughts of another when he has in his own mind a correct reproduction or photograph of the thought as it was conceived in the mind of the original writer or speaker. It is accordingly a purely reproductive or photograph of the thought as it was conceived in the mind of the original writer or speaker. It is accordingly a purely reproductive process, involving no originality of thought on the part of the interpreter...The moment the Bible student has in his own mind what was in the mind of the author of authors of the Biblical books when these were written, he has interpreted the thoughts of the Scriptures" (from the International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia, Vol III, p. 1489).

"When a person is familiar with the materials he hears or reads the process of understanding occurs without effort. Interpretation is present but it functions so spontaneously that it is not evident. When a person is confronted with strange materials his process of understanding becomes self-conscious. An effort is made to find rules that will guide the interpreter through such materials. The conscious setting up of rules is hermeneutics." (Bernard Ramm)

### **God's Communication Process**

It will be helpful to our perspective on interpretation to get the "big picture" of the process by which God communicates to man. We can compare this process to a series of links forming a chain.

The process begins with a desire on the part of God to communicate to making certain truth. If we are to know God, He must reveal Himself to us. This has been done in a general way through the natural creation (Romans 1:19,20) and through men's consciences (Romans 2:14,15). However, this general revelation is seen by man in a distorted fashion because of sin.

But God has also communicated to mankind through special revelation in Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14,18) and in the Bible (all Scripture is God-breathed). In fact, virtually all we know of Jesus is found in Scripture. The first link in the chain, then, is **revelation** and **inspiration**. Revelation speaks of God's truth being unveiled and received by men. Inspiration describes the recording of this truth without error.

The second link in the chain is **transmission**. This refers to the process in which the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts (and their copies) were copied as accurately as possible. Of course, human errors can enter at this point, but consider the following words of Jesus - "Until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law; heaven and earth will pass away, but My words shall not pass away (Matthew 5:18 and 24:35)."

A third link is **translation**. If we are to read the Scriptures, someone must translate them from the original Hebrew and Greek into our language. Translation, then, involves seeking the most accurate rendering of the original language manuscripts into our own language. This has been accomplished throughout history at the cost of great personal sacrifice. It is easy for us to forget this fact and the importance of this link in the midst of the wealth of fine English translations of the Bible available to us.

The fourth link in this communication chain has two aspects, **interpretation** and **illumination**. Interpretation has to do with discovering what the Scriptures say. Illumination refers to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in which He enlightens us, enabling us to perceive spiritual truth (1 Corinthians 2:9-12). The following pages focus particularly on this fourth link.

The fifth link is **application**, the bringing of truth to bear on our experience so that transformation results. This step is frequently left out. When it is, the chain is broken, and the communication process is short-circuited! Listen to James -- But prove yourselves doers of the Word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was (James 1:22-24). This final link emphasizes that truth should affect how we think and act.

### **Preparation for Interpretation**

Before we examine the basic principles for interpreting the Bible, we need to note certain characteristics which are prerequisites to effective understanding of Scripture.

1) First, it is imperative that an individual has trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. One of the results of placing one's faith in Jesus is that the Holy Spirit comes to indwell one's life (1 Corinthians 6:19; Romans 8:9). Notice what 1 Corinthians 2:14,15 teaches -- But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. The point of these verses is two-fold: to grasp spiritual truth requires spiritual receptiveness, and, by nature, man does not have this capacity. The unbeliever cannot accurately understand the Scriptures: as to his receptivity, he doesn't welcome the truth, for

it is foolishness to him; as to capacity, he cannot understand because the things of the Spirit are spiritually appraised and he lacks the necessary equipment. By contrast, all believers have the Spirit.

2) Second, the interpreter must come to Scripture reverently, in dependence on the Holy Spirit. His attitude should be that of the Psalmist, Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Thy law. (Psalm 119:18, notice also verses 33,34). The things of God are opened to us by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:11-16). This illumination by the Holy Spirit is essential to enable us to "see" the truth whose recording in written form He previously superintended (2 Peter 1:20,21)..

3) A third necessity is a desire to know God's Word. 1 Peter 2:2 commands us to long for the pure milk of the word. Quoting the Psalmist again, MY eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Thy word (Psalm 119:148; compare verses 20,47,48,97) If this desire is not present, regular intake of the Word will soon cease. God has so designed it that understanding of Scripture only comes through thinking His thoughts after Him. The diligence (2 Tim. 2:15) necessary to that process is the fruit of a passion to know His Word.

Illustration: The famous preacher, Harry Ironside, was once speaking at a Bible conference during which the different speakers described their various approaches to personal devotions. Each man shared what he had read from the Word that morning. When Dr. Ironside's turn came, he hesitated, and then said, "I read the book of Isaiah."