
HERMENEUTICS

INTERPRETING AND UNDERSTANDING
THE BIBLE

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GRACE FELLOWSHIP OF CHURCHES

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INTRODUCTION

Christians desire the Word of God. Their love of Christ directs them to search the Scriptures, for they testify of him. Different Christians, however, reading the same Bible, come away with some very diverse ideas about what it teaches. This has been perplexing to many.

Many books have been written on the subject of understanding the Bible. In most books on interpreting the Bible, certain rules and principles are brought to the text in order to understand the precise meaning of the original authors of Scripture. Though many different rules and principles may make a great deal of ‘sense’ and seem very logical when approaching the task of understanding ancient writing, yet we must never forget that the Bible is a unique book. Truly, its author is God. These words have proceeded from the very mouth of God (2 Tim. 3:16; Matt. 4:4). The prophecy of Scripture never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were

moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21). This is why Paul wrote to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 2:13:

For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.

Since this is the unique Word of God, we must listen to its truth so that we might know how we are to understand what is written. Our hermeneutics (method or approach of interpreting the Bible) must be established from the Bible. Any other source is fallible. Our logic is fallible and can be mistaken. God's Word alone is truth. Jesus affirmed this in his prayer to his Father, in John 17:17: "*Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.*" We need to look to Scripture to interpret Scripture, for the only infallible rule of interpretation is the Scripture itself.

The cry of the sixteenth century Reformation was *sola scriptura* or "Scripture alone." Most evangelical groups would affirm that the Bible is the sufficient and sole guide for our faith and practice. However, despite this common cry, groups have divided and sub-divided. Problems have occurred when God's people undertake to interpret the Bible. Where do we get our approach for interpreting the Bible?

Our approach needs to come from the Bible itself. If we get particular rules for interpretation from outside the Word of God, regardless how common-sense or rational and logical they seem, then the Bible rests on these 'rules'. Something outside the Bible, called the hermeneutical rules of biblical interpretation, becomes the foundation upon which the Bible rests. You would then interpret the Bible

through those ‘lenses’. These rules become the key to unlock the meaning of the Bible. They are the glasses you must put on in order to ‘see’ the true interpretation of Scripture. But who says those are the right glasses? Who says that that is the key? Who says that is the proper foundation on which to lay the Bible?

What is the only thing that you know that cannot be broken? Jesus tells us, “*The Scripture cannot be broken*” (John 10:35). In Matthew 22:29, he tells the Jewish religious leaders that they are mistaken because they do not know the Scriptures! We need to make sure that any approach we use to interpret Scripture comes clearly from the Scripture itself. We need to let the Word of God produce the key and any lenses through which we will examine the Bible. Our hermeneutics must be solidly rooted in the clear teaching of the Word of God. Indeed, as we would expect, the Word of God does teach us how it is to be interpreted.

My desire in this article is to discern what the Bible itself teaches us about how to interpret its writings. May the reader be unprejudiced by pre-established rules and ideas, for prejudice inhibits judgment. May you be free to examine the Word of God, as one who thirsts for truth, to make sure that your method of reading and understanding the Scripture is indeed based on the instruction of God himself. I am concerned that many rely too much on books written by scholars, as opposed to a humble and prayerful search and study of the Bible itself (see Matt. 11:25-26; Prov. 2:1-5; James 4:6). If there is no humility, there will be no fruitful hermeneutics.

With this said, may you continue in this study and be refreshed and amazed by the wonder and wisdom of our incredible God. May you

be wise. A wise man will listen to the whole matter before drawing conclusions prematurely (See Prov. 18:2, 13).

THE INTERPRETER

I would like to embark on this study by first examining some pertinent passages from the all-sufficient Scriptures.

And the disciples came and said to Him [Jesus], "Why do You speak to them in parables?"

*He answered and said to them, "**Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven**, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says:*

*“Hearing you will hear and shall not understand,
And seeing you will see and not perceive;
For the hearts of this people have grown dull.
Their ears are hard of hearing,
And their eyes they have closed,
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their
ears,
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,
So that I should heal them.”*

*“But **blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear**; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear and did not hear it.” (Matt. 13:10-17 NKJV)*

But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:14 NKJV)

In these and other Scriptures, we learn that the biggest problem in discerning the message of the Bible lies in the nature of the interpreter himself. There is a problem with mankind. Jesus said in John 6:63, “*The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.*” Thus, natural man, though reading the words, cannot know the true and

ultimate message of God. The problem is in the interpreter himself. His mind is blind to the truth of Christ as revealed in the Word of God (see 2 Cor. 3:14-4:6). The first and most essential key in rightly understanding or interpreting the Scriptures is spiritual life. One must be born again. Jesus said, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (John 3:3).

If we are going to correctly perceive the Holy Spirit’s intended meaning, and gain access to the Bible’s vast wealth of spiritual wisdom and knowledge, we need to be spiritually alive, with eyes to see and ears to hear the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, and hearts desirous of God’s Word because we love him. We are totally dependent upon God for such blessing.

When Peter expressed his understanding of who Jesus really was, the Lord told him, “*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven*” (Matt. 16:17). Jesus did not congratulate him for figuring this out through intense study and research, but gave the credit to God, where it belongs.

How did Peter know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God? It was revealed to him by the Heavenly Father. Jesus contrasts “flesh and blood” knowledge with truth that is revealed by God (and of course, Jesus is the truth [John 14:6]).

Cliff Bjork wisely comments, “The interpretation of God’s word, therefore, does not depend on outside sources for verification, nor upon the excellence of any particular translation, nor upon the natural insight of those who seek to explain it, nor upon the human perceptive powers of those who read it. Any potential obstacles to understanding

that these communication components might otherwise present, the Holy Spirit is able to overcome. If it pleases Him, He has the power to enable the simplest of men to comprehend the most profound spiritual truths, or to prevent the wisest of men from discerning the simplest spiritual truths” [“Searching Together” Vol. 22:1-4; 1994].

External evidences such as historical, political, or cultural settings can be helpful when it comes to providing background for any given passage, but they are not necessary when interpreting any essential matters of faith and practice.

In 2 Peter 1:2-4, we read:

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

We can be assured that the Bible itself sets forth all that is necessary for its own interpretation. First and foremost, as we have seen, it is essential to be born of God, so that as partakers of the divine nature, we can know God, who is spirit, in the face of Jesus Christ.

The Bible unfolds the historical self-revelation of God to mankind. Because the Fall radically impaired man’s ability to think properly, God’s self-revelation is designed to restore man’s thoughts to be in line

with his. For this to occur, man needs his mind to be renewed by the Spirit of God.

Consider the Jews of the first century. I don't think you will find more diligent students of the Scripture. In fact, the study of Moses and the Prophets formed the foundation of their entire educational system. Scripture was the primer from which they first learned to read. It was the source of their musical expression. Their family life, society, and government were based on the Scripture. All their expectations were built upon the writings of the prophets. Yet, when all that had been prophesied in these familiar writings about the coming of the promised Messiah finally came true in the person of Jesus Christ, they did not recognize him! *"He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him"* (John 1:11). In fact, *"... the Jews persecuted Jesus, and sought to kill Him"* (John 5:16). Jesus told these men (John 5:39) who searched the Scriptures, *"For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me"* (John 5:46). If mere knowledge of Scripture was all that had been needed, they would have recognized the promised Redeemer at once. Instead, many of them groped about in the blindness of unbelief, because *"unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

How is it that such diligent students of the Scripture could have been so far off the mark when it came to understanding God's redemptive purposes in his Son? Paul tells us that despite their intelligence and study, *"... their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart"* (2 Cor. 3:14-15). Just because someone has

a great intellect, or considerable seminary training does not guarantee that they have a correct interpretation. Nor does majority rule when it comes to rightly understanding the Scripture. Peter and John were untrained and uneducated men, but Jesus, through his Spirit, opened their minds and revealed to them the truth of the kingdom of heaven. By the grace of God, they saw and understood when “... *many prophets and righteous men desired to see what [they] saw, and did not see it, and to hear what [they] heard and did not hear it*” (Matt. 13:17). This should cause all of us to receive truth in great humility, as a gift of God’s grace, rather than possessing it in pride, as if our understanding is our own accomplishment.

When it comes to natural man, whether Jew or Gentile, there is a total inability to comprehend spiritual truth, for all are under sin. The problem is not just one of ‘focus’, but of a total inability to perceive the ‘light’ of God’s word (2 Cor. 4:4). There is only one cure for spiritual blindness, and that is something that the unregenerate cannot do for themselves. God alone can remedy the situation and cause the dead to live and the blind to see. The solution is a creative act of “...*God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*” (2 Cor. 4:6). The finest glasses or contact lenses that money can buy will not give a blind man the ability to see or read. In like manner, until the Holy Spirit makes it possible for the ‘light’ of the gospel to enter the sinner’s spiritual ‘eyes’, no other hermeneutical aid to clearer vision will be of any use. Not until the scales of unbelief are removed will the sinner be able to perceive “*the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*”

Spiritual birth, therefore, is absolutely essential to accurately understand the Spirit-intended meaning of the Bible. Once spiritual sight is given, other hermeneutical aids designed to bring biblically revealed truth into sharper focus may indeed prove very helpful.

We have learned from Scripture itself that when it comes to truly understanding God's message in his written word, the problem is not inherent in the words themselves. The language of Scripture is plain enough. The words and syntax used by the Holy Spirit are the same as might be used in any literature. However, unlike all other human writings, there is also a deeper, spiritual content beneath the surface. It is this spiritual message that is incomprehensible to those who are not born-again. While unbelievers may understand the ordinary sense of the words used in the Bible, the reality of the spiritual truth is beyond their grasp. This inability to comprehend spiritual truth has nothing to do with the ordinary vocabulary, grammar, or syntax of Scripture. To the one who has not yet been born again, the Bible will remain a spiritually closed book.

Have you seen the light of the gospel of the glory of Jesus Christ? If you do, blessed are you, for flesh and blood have not caused you to grasp the truth of Jesus Christ. All the glory must go to God who has freely revealed the light of truth to us by his Spirit. As the undeserving recipient of such an incredible blessing, the child of God can only exclaim, "*Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!*" When God sends his Spirit to regenerate his elect, he does so in order that "*they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*" (Col. 2:2-3; NIV).

One note of caution needs to be given. While the new birth enables believers to understand biblical truth, it does not—by itself—guarantee error-free insight into the meaning of every passage. All spiritual knowledge is not infused into our minds the moment we are regenerated and believe. On the contrary, God has ordained that such knowledge should be progressively obtained as we live and prayerfully study the Scriptures with reliance upon the Spirit (Ps. 119:18, 34, 73, 125). The newborn child of God must “... *grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2 Pet. 3:18).

THE LIGHT

The Holy Spirit has a magnificent purpose in mind when he regenerates the elect sinner. “He provides spiritual sight in order to present a glorious image. He brings a flood of light into the sin-darkened mind because He has truth to reveal that must be understood and believed. And He touches the heart because He has a new object for the regenerated sinner’s love and devotion” [Cliff Bjork; “Searching Together” Vol. 22:1-4; 1994].

The first message that the Holy Spirit enables the newborn child of God to hear is the promise of forgiveness and life in Jesus Christ. “*In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation*” (Eph. 1:13a). The first image impressed upon the regenerated sinner’s new spiritual sight is “*...the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*” (2 Cor. 4:6b). The truth that Jesus is indeed “*the Christ, the Son of the living God*” (Matt. 16:16), is understood and believed by the newly enlightened mind. The result is that a new object of love and devotion grips the forgiven sinner’s transformed heart. “*...Jesus Christ,*

whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:7b, 8).

The Holy Spirit’s work in hermeneutic activity is to exalt Christ (John 16:13-14). It is not merely an academic exercise, but rather a Christ-centered revelation that humbles us to worship the true and living God in spirit and in truth.

Though no believer would dispute the centrality of Christ when it comes to salvation, not every believer is as clear about the centrality of Christ when it comes to the interpretation of Scripture. In our study of the Scripture, we do not want to lose sight of the fact that this is a revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ (see Heb. 10:7; Luke 24:25-27, 44-45; John 5:39). May our hearts commune with him as we read and study. May he continually thrill us with himself and this salvation that he has gained for us. If we study on an intellectual plane only, we are of all men, the most pitiable. If the truth of the Scripture does not increase our love for our Lord and stir our hearts to worship him, something is wrong and we need to re-think our approach to the Bible. To study intellectually only is to miss the point of the revelation of the holy, only begotten Son of God. Unless there is love towards, and faith in, the author of Scripture, all our study is vanity. *“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him”* (Heb. 11:6). Faith in the sovereign goodness of the author frees us to go where the Bible leads us. The Lord declares, *“... But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word”* (Isa. 66:2). Apart from such faith and humility, we might

learn a lot of facts, but we will miss the point—the glory of God. God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him!

All of God's eternal purposes have their focal point and their circumference in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Eph. 3:11). God's Son is both the subject and the object of all biblical revelation. Jesus himself underscored this when he admonished the "Bible scholars" of his own day, *"You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life"* (John 5:39-40). How did Jesus instruct his own followers to approach Scripture? He said to them, *"... These are the words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me"* (Luke 24:44). Remember how he dealt with Scripture when he talked with the two despondent disciples along the Emmaus road? *"... O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken..." And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself*" (Luke 24:25-27).

This is the perspective of the one who is both the author and the subject of all Scripture. Jesus also proclaimed that when the Spirit of truth comes, *"He will testify of Me"* (John 15:26).

Again I would like to insert a word of caution. The Bible is not a compilation of proof texts. It is the unfolding of redemptive history centered in Jesus Christ. (Our lives, too, are an unfolding story of redemption!) Recognition of the literary character of the Bible has important hermeneutical implications. Every part of the story is understood properly only when it is read within its proper context. Each

part is set against the background of what has gone before and (though the reader may be unconscious of the fact at first reading) is preparing the way for what comes afterward. It is from the vantage point of the story's conclusion that the reader can observe the way in which every part has been directed towards and has contributed to this end. It is clear that the Bible tells one main story and the unity of that story is only perceived from the standpoint of the story's conclusion or goal-Jesus Christ! (John 1:1-5; 14:9; Col. 1:15-20 etc.). Thus all of Scripture finds its focus and true meaning only in the light of Christ (John 1:45; 5:39-40; Luke 24:27, 44; Acts 3:18; 10:43; 2 Cor. 1:20; Heb. 1:1-2). Christ himself is the focus of the Scripture story. This does not mean that every text of Scripture must be made to speak directly of him. Rather, every text is part of the single story which has its focus in him. Thus, we read the Old Testament Scriptures in light of the New Testament and its conclusion in Christ, for he is the fulfillment of it all (Matt. 5:17-18). A veil lies over the eyes if one reads the Old Testament Scriptures apart from Christ (2 Cor. 3:14-18).

The Bible is a message to be proclaimed. It is not an abstract system of doctrine, but a revelation of the redemptive work of God in Christ, in which we are intimately and presently involved. *"For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen"* (Romans 11:36). If we comprehended the truth revealed in the Bible, we could not read it with a yawn, but we would read it with a shout! Chip Brogden writes: "I pray these will not be mere verses of Scripture to us, but will be the very means through which the Father gives us greater illumination and revelation into His Son. We ought to meditate on this daily and ask the Lord to open our eyes to see

the height, depth, width, length, and breadth of this JESUS Whom we say we serve. May God deliver us from our own idea, concept, perception, and illusion of a small Christ and give us revelation into the preeminence of His Son.”[Chip Brogden, “All Things in Christ” an article from website www.watchman.net]

I say, “Amen!”

“Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious” (1 Pet. 2:7a). When Christ is truly beheld in the Scriptures, we begin to grasp something of the preciousness of the Lord. We begin to grasp his infinite worth. Worship is our response to revelation. Ultimately, as his chosen vessels, the Lord himself manifests his glory through us so that we go forth as living epistles (see 2 Cor. 3: 2-3; 4:1-11; Gal. 2:20).

May Christ be the object of our desires. As we open the pages of our Bibles, may we see not merely loaves and fishes and signs, but may we see the one who the signs reveal. May our time in the Word not be time reading a book, but a time of communion with the living Lord who is life. One can ever be learning ‘truths’ without learning the truth (John 14:6). May we not be fooled into thinking that our acquisition of facts is equivalent to knowing God. Let us pray for a “spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of our understanding being enlightened” (Eph. 1:17, 18) knowing that “in [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Every genuine believer in Christ wants to know this Jesus who has loved him and given himself for him. To this end, the sincere believer will search the Scripture, not caring where he ends up, for he desires to know and live according to the truth.

(1) Context

Since the only infallible source of truth is the Bible, we need to look to Scripture to interpret Scripture (2 Pet. 1:20-21; 1 Cor. 2:13; 14:32). The Bible is an organic whole and its message in one part will not be contradictory to its message in another part. So, to understand the meaning of any verse, we must start by viewing that verse in terms of its immediate context. An examination of context is crucial to the proper interpretation of a particular verse. We must be especially careful when studying by subject or topic that we don't lift proof texts out of their respective contexts.

Secondly, the verse must not only be interpreted in terms of its immediate context, but it must also be synthesized with the total teaching of the book in which it appears. Its meaning must be determined in the light of that book's flow of thought.

Thirdly, the verse must be considered in terms of the message of the Bible as a whole. In fact, I think it is misunderstanding the "whole counsel" of God's Word that causes texts to be taken out of their redemptive-historical context and leads to so many different denominations and interpretations.

Many times, when you first glance at a verse, it can seem to be saying something that God is not saying at all. It is crucial that we do not lift verses out of their context. The Bible is not written as a collection of verses all just sprinkled together (though Proverbs is somewhat like that—a collection of wisdom). Everything has a context. If you rip a verse from its context, you can make it say anything. In fact, the Bible has been used, down through the ages, by many 'crazies' to justify all kinds of things. Even the chapter and verse divisions in our Bibles are humanly devised additions from about six or seven-hundred years ago or so. The original God-given Scripture did not have such divisions. They are helpful for us to locate texts in the Bible, but they can hinder us by causing us to 'section up' our Bibles. The early Christians would study the book of Romans as one whole letter, and they would learn its content in context. Thus they would see the flow of Paul's argument and teaching and how it all fit together. They did not read it as separate chapters or verses.

You will discover that the more you grasp of the whole counsel of God's Word, the more clearly you will see how each detail fits into

the overall scheme of God's unfolding plan. You will see things that you never saw before when you go back over passages, read now in the light of more truth. This is the way it always is for us as believers. We continue to learn and grow and reread the Scriptures with more 'enlightened' eyes. Thus it carries more meaning for us all the time. Consider the word salvation. Does it not hold much further meaning now than it did when you were first saved?

Though we are saved and our minds have been enlightened, the Scripture concludes that we need to "desire the pure milk of the Word that you may grow thereby" (1 Pet. 2:2). We need to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18). Our minds need to be "renewed" through the word of truth (Rom. 12:2). It is the word of truth through which we will be sanctified, Jesus said (John 17:17, 19). So the Scripture concludes that though we are regenerated and thus spiritually alive, our thinking, which was conformed to this world, needs to be renewed. It needs to be sanctified by the reality of God and the truth. We grow in this. As our minds and thinking are more and more corrected and instructed through the Word by the Spirit, our thinking and our perspective is changed.

We have not yet attained. We still err in notion, judgment and sentiment. In fact, 1 Corinthians 13:12 tells us "for now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known."

Therefore, when I teach or write, there are most likely errors in what I say. I am not infallible. In fact, when I look back over my early Bible studies, I see many errors and concepts that I no longer believe (things that contradict the clear teaching of God's Word), because I have now

come to a better understanding of God's Word. I still have a long way to go! We are all a work in progress!

(2) Progressive Revelation

The revelation of the Christ unfolds in the Bible progressively. Therefore we must read earlier sections in light of that which is given later. The interpreter of Scripture needs to be aware of the partial and elementary nature of the Old Testament revelation (Gal. 3-4; Eph. 3:2-11). For example, in Genesis 3:15, we have the first promise of the seed to come. The Scripture then progressively unfolds for us more of the seed to come. In Genesis 22, we learn that the deliverer would be a substitute that would be provided in the mount known as Moriah. As we continue through the Scripture, we are shown the need for a blood sacrifice. By the time we reach Isaiah 53, the description of this deliverer and his atoning sacrifice has become much more explicit.

The saints of all the ages are a people of groaning, looking, and trusting in God-in his promise of a seed. From Adam's first transgression, the promise of God has been echoing among the saints of the true and living God:

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise [literally “crush”] your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” (Gen. 3:15)

Throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, God continues to open up a view of this seed-this promised deliverer to come. For every wanderer, for every pilgrim, for every perplexed soul, for every grieving

sinner, the answer has been the same through the ages-“Look to the promise of Jesus Christ!”

God has one answer for all peoples of all ages-Jesus Christ!

In ages past, God’s answer was-“Wait for the Messiah!”

Now, in our age of fulfillment (Gal. 4:4; 2 Cor. 1:20; Heb. 9:26), his answer is: “Look to Jesus Christ! He is Lord! He has come and is soon returning!” It should be part of our daily experience, as the expectant bride, to be musing and dreaming of our beloved Lord.

The two testaments proclaim the same message, only from differing standpoints: the earlier one points forward in anticipation, and the later declares a completion, an accomplishment.

(3) Presuppositions

Another problem that we face in correctly interpreting the Word of God is that we all bring presuppositions (ideas and thoughts that we presuppose to be facts or truth and then we interpret all we read in light of this). This is not necessarily bad-it is just a fact. Knowing this, then, it is crucial that we make absolutely sure that any of our presuppositions (which become foundational truths upon which we build new learning) are truly biblical.

John Reisinger, when he was teaching here in Grace Fellowship, told of watching his wife button up her housecoat. The garment had about twenty buttons. He saw that she buttoned the first one in the wrong hole. She then continued the rest of the way up the housecoat. Everything “SEEMED” to fit. However, she had made some mistakes. How many mistakes did she make? She made nineteen mistakes.

Despite what it looked like, because her first foundational step was wrong (i.e. similar to what I have called a presupposition), everything that followed was a mistake and had to be undone to be re-buttoned correctly. It appeared to all to be fitting nicely together when compared to the other buttons around it; however, the starting point was wrong. The lesson in this is that we must make sure our foundational beliefs are clearly established on clear biblical teaching-not on 'maybes'. If we go wrong at the starting point, we could be way off when we get to the top-even though it seems to fit together nicely. There are several different 'systems' that people have adopted to understand the Bible. I think we all need to examine our beliefs in light of what is clearly established by God in his Word. God knows what is true. This really tests our hearts to see if, like Nathaniel in John, chapter 1, we really want to know the truth-reality-and bow to it.

We can only be dogmatic on the tenets that are clearly established by God in the Word.

(4) Human Reasoning

We must also be careful to not be dogmatic about anything our reasoning has caused us to conclude. All our conclusions must be those that the Scripture clearly delineates for us, because our reasoning can be faulty. We are still tainted with sin. Our minds have been defiled and corrupted and blinded by sin, and although the Spirit and his Word are renewing us in our thinking, we all know from experience that we still can think incorrectly. The truth that we know for sure is God's Word and what he has clearly revealed for us there (i.e. read John 17:17-19

[see how those chapter and verse divisions can come in handy to help us find truths-we just have to be careful to not pull them out of their context, and end up using them as proof texts]).

We know that God's thoughts are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9). (And it is a good thing, too! I would never have provided any salvation for a rebel like me-let alone adopt such a one to be my own son and make myself his Abba [the Aramaic word for "Da Da" or "Daddy"]). Because of this, we need to be very careful in using and trusting logic in drawing conclusions from the Scriptures.

I want to demonstrate why it is crucial that we make sure any conclusions we reach are established clearly in the Bible itself, and that we have not started with the Bible, and then, using logic, 'spring-boarded' to these conclusions. In fact, we may see no other possible conclusion, but if the Bible does not clearly state it, our logical conclusion could be wrong. Just because we do not see any other possible conclusion, does not mean there is not another possibility. This is where the Jews went wrong in Jesus' day. They could not logically see how he could be the fulfillment of the promises. They could not see how in his suffering and death on the Cross, he actually gained the victory and brought in his kingdom! That was not the conclusion they had reached when they read the Old Testament Scriptures.

As an illustration of the danger of applying human logic to the Bible, without checking to see if the conclusion is clearly stated in the Scriptures themselves, I want to tell you of a woman who read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. She had been recently saved, but her husband was still an unbeliever. When she read this passage, she began to wonder about her marriage. She saw that light and darkness (believers

and unbelievers) have no communion or fellowship with one another. When she read verse 17, she saw that it said, “*Do not touch what is unclean ...*” She had also read in Isaiah and other places that the unbeliever is “unclean.” She concluded (and notice I said, “she concluded,” and not the Bible!!!) that she shouldn’t touch him. Thus, she cut him off from any contact-sexual and other. She also saw the command in verse 17 to “*Come out from among them and be separate...*” She concluded that God wanted her to separate and divorce her husband because he was an unclean unbeliever.

At a first read-through, we can see how she could reach this conclusion. Even though each step on the way to her conclusion is based on Scripture (though out of context as we shall see in a moment), her conclusion is not only **not clearly stated** in the Scripture, it is **contradicted** in the Bible. In fact, Paul had already written to the Corinthians in his first epistle regarding this issue. Read 1 Corinthians 7:13!!! Not only Paul, but Peter also writes in 1 Peter 3:1-2 to women married to unbelievers to not nag their husbands, but to live out the light of Christ to them and before them, that their life might become an attractive aroma that their husbands cannot deny.

This shows the importance of the whole counsel of the Word of God. We must always take into account the context of the entire Bible and that particular verse’s place in it.

In my particular example above, the woman ended up leaving and divorcing her husband. I believe she was wrong to do so. She really seemed to believe that she was doing God’s will-based on her logical conclusions after reading 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. That is why we must be so careful to make sure any conclusions we reach about any doctrine

(teaching) is clearly a conclusion stated by God himself in his revelation to us.

If the woman had carefully checked the context of 2 Corinthians 6, she would have seen that Paul was not talking about marriage in these verses. (That was the presupposition that she brought with her as she read these verses, and it tainted and colored the way she read and interpreted them). In fact, carefully look in 2 Corinthians 6 and skim the context prior to and after these verses, and see if Paul wrote anything about marriage or husbands and wives, etc. (1 Corinthians 7:39 does tell a believer to only marry "*in the Lord*" i.e. another believer, but 2 Corinthians 6 is not talking about marriage.) The context of 2 Corinthians 6 refers to those who preach a false gospel (i.e. adding works to salvation). We have no part with them. How then can we join with them or stay together with them-when they are in opposition to Christ who alone has reconciled us to God?

We must read the Bible in light of the immediate context, and in light of the context of the whole book or letter, and in light of the context of the whole Scripture.

We must make sure that any conclusions we reach are in themselves clearly biblical and avoid reaching conclusions based on our human reasoning (which can be faulty), no matter how logical it seems. Sometimes we can reach seemingly airtight conclusions (at least as far as we see), based on solid scriptural statements, but that does not mean they are true. There may be other possibilities that have never even entered our minds. We can only be dogmatic where the Scripture is dogmatic. Some things we just leave in the hands of our all-wise God as indeed he has commanded us to do in Deuteronomy 29:29!

I have tried to establish the importance of clear teaching from the Scripture, which alone is the source of truth. Once we get outside the clear teaching of Scripture, we are no longer on absolute dogmatic ground. We want any conclusions we reach to be able to be established clearly in God's own Word, so that we might correctly grasp what God intended for us to know.

1. We do not want to accept any interpretation that rests on mere probability. We want to accept only that which is supported by direct proof from Scripture. It is far better to have no explanation at all for a difficult passage than to accept one that may turn out to be wrong. It is not easy to give up an idea once we have committed ourselves to it.

2. Any 'proof' used to support any interpretation should come from the Scripture itself. Any information essential for the interpretation of every passage of Scripture is to be found somewhere in the Bible itself. We cannot take other historical writings or documents from outside of the Bible and use them as the foundation upon which we set the Bible in order to interpret it. We are not to 'fit' the Bible to outside sources. Rather, all other sources must be looked at and judged by the Scriptures, which is the only reliable source of truth. Jesus said in his prayer to the Father, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your Word is truth" (John 17:17).

Therefore, we are not going to try to 'fit' any passage into history, and then look into the history books and say, "How are we going to read this in light of the record of history given to us by men?" What would that be doing? That would be making the historical writings of men the grid of truth through which we are to interpret the Bible. I believe it is the other way around. The Scripture is the bedrock truth.

It will give us what we need to know. It will explain that which is absolutely true. All that we need to interpret that passage then, for those enlightened by the Holy Spirit, is that which is found within the pages of Scripture itself.

For example, let's say that an archeologist dug up a document with information on a particular king, whom the Scriptures say ruled as sole ruler for sixteen years. Based on the archeological evidence, that king was on the throne as sole ruler for forty years. How long did that king rule? Would you say sixteen years, despite what was discovered by the archeologist? Your answer reveals your ultimate authority. How reliable is any document found in an archeological dig, as far as absolute truth? Is the document genuine? Who is its author? Perhaps it was historical fiction and since the author didn't have all the information, he supplied forty years out of his own imagination-filling in the unknown details as writers sometimes do. Perhaps it was written many years after the fact and the details were inaccurate. Is it possible that even if the document is accurate, it can be misinterpreted? For example, could there be two different kings with the same name?

The one thing that we know for sure is that the Scripture is the God-breathed Word of God and it gives us the truth. Anything else is a 'maybe'. The Word of God must be our foundation in any study.

(5) Word meanings

Let's go now to words. One problem many have fallen into is to give a detailed, narrow, and technical definition to a word, and then use only that definition every time that word is found. Statements of Scripture

are then read in an ‘absolute sense’. There is great danger in that, and many wrong doctrines have developed because of this mistake. (By the way, I have been guilty of this error and also the error of reaching conclusions that are not actually based on the clear conclusions of Scripture. I am likely still guilty in both of these areas in some things, which is why it is so good to interact with brothers who are full of the Spirit and the Word in order to be continually corrected to think rightly about our great God and walk in truth.)

It is this error in regard to word definitions that can lead someone into believing the Bible says something that it really isn’t saying at all.

An example that you may have already dealt with is that kind of a reading of John 3:16. “See it says ‘everybody’—everybody who has ever lived and is living and ever will live,” some people will say. The word John used is “world.” What John (and through him, God) meant when he used the term *kosmos* (Greek word translated “world” in John 3:16) is the real issue. It makes a great study to look up all the references to *kosmos* in the writings of John to see just how it is used. What happens when you try to fit the definition, “everybody who has ever lived and is living and ever will live” into each passage containing *kosmos*?

The truth is that words are very ‘plastic’. They often carry a very broad, general definition and only the context will squeeze the word into a more precise or technical use. We must keep words in their general definition unless the context forces us to a more specific reading. The other key element is to see how the human author uses the word in the context of that particular sentence, in the paragraph, in the book, and in the context of the whole of the Scripture. How God uses that particular word is more important than how I might use it

in conversations with my friends. Just because I might use a word and give it a particular meaning, does not mean that is how the writer of Scripture is using that particular word.

Consider the word *love*. People have very confusing thoughts of the love of God (especially in light of hell and suffering in this world). The issue of the love of God is greatly confused because of the many aspects of love that are referred to in the Bible. You will get into trouble if you do not see the differences in those aspects. If you lock onto one definition and force it upon every occurrence of the word, as if there is but one degree of love and one way of loving, you'll have confusion. You could have a problem with passages like "*God is angry with the wicked every day,*" and "*the wicked one, His soul hates,*" and thus, at least practically, have to 'erase' them using passages like John 3:16. At the other end of the spectrum, you could have some hyper-Calvinists who explain away (erase) a lot of other passages and end up with a God who has absolute and total hate toward the non-elect—a God who desires only the worst for them. We don't want to explain anything away. We want to hold together all the truths that God tells us, even when his ways are higher than our thoughts can take us (as I assure you, they will be!!!).

Additional confusion is created when slogans are thrown into the mix; taking something that is true in some way or situation and making it sound like an absolute truth. For example, you may have heard the slogan "God's love is unconditional." This is indeed a conclusion; however, we must determine if it is a conclusion based on clear Scriptural teaching, or if has it been reached by human reasoning based on *some* statements (key word is *some*) read in the Bible. The decla-

ration that “God’s love is unconditional” contains some truth—but when it is stated as a whole truth it becomes untruth. What the Bible teaches about love is far more varied and complex than the axiom presented in this slogan.

Take the verse, “God loves a cheerful giver.” This is just one instance of usage with a sense of conditional love that comes from God. Additionally, there seem to be conditions established in John 14:21, 23. So there are some uses of the term *love* that seem to be quite conditional with regard to attitudes and actions on the part of the object receiving the love. There are other uses of the term where love is definitely not conditional on the part of the object receiving the love (Rom. 5:8; 9:10-13).

It is also not just as simple as checking out the Greek or Hebrew word originally used. Consider the Greek word *agape* (love). Does it always mean a noble form of love that is less emotional than another form of the word; *phileo*? In 2 Samuel 13, we are told that Amnon loves his half-sister, Tamar, but his love is selfish and sexual and emotional and lasts only until he incestuously rapes her. The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament Scriptures used in Jesus’ day) uses both *agape* and *phileo* to describe Amnon’s love for Tamar. When Paul writes that Demas has deserted him, having *loved* this present evil world, he uses *agape*, which makes no sense at all if you are locked into the definition of a “willed self-denial for the sake of another.” So, though there are distinctions in words and they do carry meaning in themselves, we cannot lock onto a single meaning and definition that is completely rigid. Context is crucial! Words have fluidity and carry various shades of meaning and can be general or specific depending on

usage in context. Even our English word *love* has different and varying degrees and is expressed in varying ways to various people (often based on relationship!) I can love my neighbor, love my wife, love baked beans etc. and it is not the exact same kind of affection in each instance. People refer to making love, and it might just mean sex in the context—or it could truly be an act of love between a man and his wife. There are different kinds of love.

Here are a few more examples:

Grace: It is defined by some as “unmerited favor,” and in many places that definition is true—especially when it comes to us! However, read Luke 2:40 and we will find “unmerited favor” does not fit at all. This is not a “one size fits all” kind of definition. Favor is certainly included in the definition, but it can have various shades and intensities depending upon context.

Hate: We are called to hate sin. In Luke 14:26 we are to hate our parents, wife and children. Is it the same definition? (Better not be!)

Law: We will find as we read the Scriptures that this word is used in many different ways. We read in one place that the law was flawed (Heb. 7:18-19; 8:7). In another we read that the law is perfect and converts the soul (Psalm 19:7). Sometimes the word law is referring to the Word of God, as in the case of Psalm 19, to which I just referred. Sometimes it refers to just the first five books of Moses. Sometimes it refers to the books of the Old Testament Scriptures from Genesis up to, but not including Job (as when Jesus refers to the Scriptures as “the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets.”) Sometimes law refers to the Ten Commandments, and sometimes to the whole Old Covenant.

Sometimes it is simply used generally for any commandments of God, not referring to any specific covenant.

So if someone asks us, “Is the law of God obsolete?” we need to know what they mean by *law*. If they mean God’s Word or even the Old Testament Scriptures, the answer is a resounding no! If they mean God’s commandments, it is still no. If they mean the Old Covenant considered as a covenant to gain acceptance with God, then the answer is yes!—for Christ has come and he has fulfilled the law—its pictures, its requirements, its purpose!

When we read that we are not under law or that the law has been done away in Christ, how do we discover what those passages teach that is in harmony with the whole of Scripture? We can see by looking at Hebrews 8:7-13 that the law covenant established at Sinai is obsolete AS A COVENANT. We must consider all the biblical evidence when we are seeking to establish the meaning of particular verses.

It is essential when we exchange ideas about issues like the law that we are clear about what we are discussing. Since this term refers to many different things and is used in many different ways in the Scripture, we must be careful when comparing one passage with another. Recognizing this principle will help clear up several apparent contradictions that a quick read will sometimes seem to present.

(6) Erasing Scripture with Scripture

Let us be careful in our reading to sincerely seek to understand God’s meaning and intent of any word or passage. We want to examine all that the Scripture has to say on any given topic, taking into consid-

eration the particular contexts (i.e. in redemptive history). Too often errors occur because people use one passage or truth to erase another. We must receive all that the Scripture reveals, whether or not we can mentally reconcile all the truths it presents.

This error has occurred throughout the history of Christianity with regard to the nature of Jesus Christ. Some people have read that Jesus is a man. They then use the texts that specifically present his humanity to ‘erase’ the texts that speak of his deity. In other words, the humanity texts become the lens through which they interpret (or re-interpret) all other verses. We must, however, receive both truths and hold them together—whether our thimble-sized brains can reason it all out or not (and when it comes to God—we are definitely out of our intellectual league!).

Is Jesus God or man? Yes! Is he fifty percent man and fifty percent God? No! He is one-hundred percent man and one-hundred percent God. Doesn’t that make two-hundred percent? Maybe so, but that is what the Scripture reveals to us. It is his complete humanity *and* his complete deity that makes Jesus alone qualified to be the one Mediator between God and men.

Another area where this ‘erasing’ (my own coined term) takes place is in the area of salvation. People read of human responsibility and “whosoever will”. They then put on lenses that virtually fade-out the verses dealing with election and predestination, etc. Those verses are (at least practically) erased through being reinterpreted by the “whosoever” verses. Some hyper-Calvinists erase the “whosoever will” verses and teach that the elect are saved (even if they don’t ever come to faith and thus know it) and kill evangelism. But the whole coun-

sel of God's Word must be received and believed. God has elected a people and that is who will come. The God who has ordained their salvation has also ordained the means of their salvation. The means is the preaching of the gospel, and justification through faith in Jesus Christ. The sinner must believe in Christ to be saved (i.e. John 3:36). Men are responsible for their sin and will be judged accordingly. God is responsible for the new birth that gives us spiritual life so we can see the truth and thus, repent and believe (which we do, not God—however, apart from God, we would never have believed!). Thus God gets all the glory for our salvation!

We must let all that the Scripture declares stand together, whether or not we can fully reconcile it in our minds.

CLOSING WORDS

In our study of the Scripture, we must not lose sight of the fact that this is a revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ (see Heb. 10:7; Luke 24:25-27, 44-45; John 5:39). There is no greater place to fix our attention than on the Lord Jesus Christ. People cry out for so many things. God says, “I give you Jesus! Look unto him! He is the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End!” There is nothing so suited to our growth in grace as an ever-increasing acquaintance with Jesus Christ. Sanctification does not occur when we read just the words of the Bible—the historical facts; we are then like those who still have a veil over their minds.

Read the context of 2 Corinthians 3, which concludes with these words:

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

The means of our reflection of his image is to behold the glory of the Lord in the Scriptures. The Spirit of the Lord frees us to see and live in a genuine love relationship with the Lord. The Spirit of the Lord uncovers the glory of Christ and his kingdom—his everlasting covenant. While we behold the glory of the Lord, the Spirit of the Lord transforms us to reflect his image in our lives. Our “faces” and lives manifest the life of this glorious Lord of lords as we are gloriously being transformed into his likeness. Oh, that Christ might be manifest in my mortal flesh!

The one whose mind is unveiled reads the Scriptures very differently from the one whose mind is veiled. The former delights in the law of Lord far beyond the one who reads mere history.

When you read that Abraham is going to take “*his only begotten son*” (Heb. 11:17 NKJV), Isaac, and sacrifice him on Mount Moriah, do you rejoice in seeing a dedicated father and an obedient son? Or do you have exceeding joy in the picture that it portrays of another Father and Son? Is not your joy found in seeing that to which Abraham points: God the Father who gave his only begotten Son on Golgotha, a portion of Mount Moriah? This time God did not stay the knife, and provide a ram to die in place of the Son. No, Jesus was the substitute. He was the acceptable sacrifice; the ram who died in the place of the seed of Abraham.

It is worth forsaking the entire world to gain a portion in this kingdom in which there is the forgiveness of sins. Our Sovereign Lord will once more shake heaven and earth and it will all pass away, but we who believe are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken! All that is in the

world cannot be compared with what is ours to enjoy in the kingdom of God's dear Son.

Too often we struggle against specific sins, wishing all the while that we knew how to gain victory over them. The answer for us is the same as for those searching for salvation in the first place—Christ! Read the Scriptures. Think. Meditate on the lovely picture of Christ displayed there. Behold him! Behold the man! Behold the Lamb of God! We must fill our minds with thoughts of him. Meditate on these things and commune with him—decrease that he may increase. God's goal is that Christ will be the preeminent one in all things. May that begin to be realized in our own lives, where Christ manifests his life and preeminence in and through us as his vessels. He owns us—having redeemed us with his own precious blood. His Spirit has been poured out to the end that the very life of Christ—the Word of God—might be the fruit revealed and diffused in and through us. This is the fellowship into which we have been brought. Eternal life is not merely everlasting existence, but an eternity of union with CHRIST OUR LIFE. We have been united into his death and resurrection. We have been united to Christ himself, our Beloved! As his bride, may our desire be only for him, and may we submit ourselves wholly to our Lord and Master. He is our life. If we will yield to that life, it will transform and overwhelm us, eclipsing our selfishness and molding and shaping us into the very image of him who has called us!

When we lose sight of Christ, our love for him begins to dwindle and we begin to fail. When we are faced with some “besetting sin,” the best way for us to overcome is not to concentrate on it, but to concentrate upon him! (Heb. 12:1-3). Our thoughts and affections

must be set on his loveliness and glory and desirability. Victory lives within us; victory has a personality. Dear brothers and sisters, have you met the man named Victory, or are you still looking for it as an experience? Stop searching, for victory is Christ, and he is already present within you as life. Victory is bound up in Christ, and not in yourselves.

“I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20)

For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (Phil. 2:13)

For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed—always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus

also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. (2 Cor. 4:6-11)

The Bible gives us such a wonderful presentation of Christ throughout the volume of the Book. Why? So that as we look to him, we will be saved, and so that continuing to look, we will grow to be like him. This is why Peter closes his second epistle with,

“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

After thirty years of following Christ, Paul's chief aim in life was still, *“that I may know Him...”* (Phil. 3:10). I echo his prayer.

When we study the Scriptures, may our hearts burn within us as we hear our Shepherd's voice and as the Lord gives us encouraging glimpses of himself in all his splendor.

Then He [Jesus] said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (Luke 24:25-27)

Then their eyes were opened and they knew Him ... and they said to one another, “Did not our hearts burn within

us while He talked with us on the road and while He opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:31-32)

Then He [Jesus] said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. (Luke 24:44-45)

Oh, Jesus, may you have the preeminence henceforth and forever!
May we continually abide in you, for you are the life. You are the vine.
Apart from you, we can do nothing.