

CHAPTER ONE

The What and Why of Bible Interpretation

A businessman was on a trip quite a distance from his hometown. A bachelor, he served as a top executive in a leading governmental agency. In fact he was the finance officer in charge of all the funds in that department.

Returning home from Palestine, he was on a desert road southwest of Jerusalem. Another person was driving, which gave him opportunity to read. As he was reading aloud, he looked up and saw a man who had come up beside him and had heard him reading. The man asked the vacationer if he understood what was being read.

The reader was an Ethiopian, a court official of Candace, Queen of Ethiopia (Acts 8:27). On his way back to Ethiopia, he was joined by Philip, whom God told to meet the official (vv. 26-29). Philip struck up a conversation with the man by asking him a question—a question of Bible interpretation. "Do you understand what you are reading?" (v. 30) The finance officer responded, "How can I... unless someone explains it to me?" (v. 31) Inviting Philip to join him in the chariot, the African asked if the Prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 53:7-8 was speaking about himself or someone else. His question revealed his need for help in interpreting the passage. Philip explained that the passage refers to Jesus. As a result of the conversation the African accepted the Lord as his Saviour.

This desert dialogue points up two things. First, seeing the words on a page of the Bible does not necessarily mean that the reader catches their meaning. Observing what the Bible says is the first of several steps in Bible study. It is important to know what the text actually states. But this may sometimes lead to questions on the meaning of what is read. Many people, on reading portions of the

Bible, come away confused about their meaning or come away with a false understanding.

Second, the evangelist-eunuch incident reveals that proper guidance can help others interpret what they read in the Bible. Philip's question, "Do you understand what you are reading?" implied that the reader probably did not understand but that it was possible to understand. In fact the treasurer's request for someone to explain the passage to him was an admission on his part that he could not properly understand the passage by himself and that he felt the need for help in interpretation.

Several months after Nehemiah completed the rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls and the Israelites had settled in their towns, Ezra the scribe read to them from "the Book of the Law of Moses" (the first five books of the Bible) as the people were assembled before the Water Gate at Jerusalem (Neh. 8:1). Ezra read from the Law from daybreak till noon (v. 3). The Levites also read aloud from the Law, "making it clear and giving the meaning so that people could understand what was being read" (vv. 7-8). As a result the people were joyful "because they now understood the words" (v. 12).

Why Is Bible Interpretation Important?

It Is Essential for Understanding and Teaching the Bible Properly

We must know the meaning of the Bible before we can know its message for today. We must understand its sense for then before we can see its significance for now. Without hermeneutics (the science and art of interpreting the Bible) we are jumping over and missing out on an indispensable step in Bible study. The first step, observation, asks, What does it say? The second step, interpretation, asks the question, What does it mean? The third step, application, raises the question, How does it apply to me?

Interpretation is perhaps the most difficult and time-consuming of these three steps. And yet cutting Bible study short in this area can lead to serious errors and faulty results. Some people knowingly "distort the Word of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). Some even "distort" the Scriptures "to their own destruction" (2 Peter 3:16). Others unknowingly come away from the Bible with faulty interpretations. Why? Because of inadequate attention to the principles involved in understanding the Scriptures. In recent years we have seen a great surge of interest in informal Bible study. Many small groups meet weekly in homes or in churches to discuss the Bible—what it means

and how it applies. Do people in those groups always come away with the same understanding of the passage studied? Not necessarily. Some may say, "To me this verse means this," and another person in the group may respond, "To me the verse doesn't mean that; it means this." Studying the Bible in this way, without proper hermeneutical guidelines, can lead to confusion and interpretations that are even in direct conflict.

Did God intend for the Bible to be treated in this way? If it can be made to mean anything we want, how can it be a reliable guide?

Conflicting interpretations of many passages abound. For example, one person reads John 10:28, "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand," and understands that verse to be teaching eternal security. Others read the same verse and explain that though no one can snatch a Christian out of God's hand, the believer may remove himself from God's hand by persistent sin. Some people suggest that Paul's statement in Colossians 1:15 that Christ is "the Firstborn over all creation" means He was created. Others understand the verse to be saying that like a firstborn son in a family He is the Heir. Some Christians practice so-called speaking in tongues, based on 1 Corinthians 12—14. Others read the same chapters and understand that this practice was only for the Apostolic Age and not for today. Some have read Nahum 2:4, "The chariots storm through the streets, rushing back and forth through the squares," and have concluded that this verse was prophesying heavy automobile traffic in our cities today. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), some have sought to give a "spiritual" meaning to the passage by explaining that the inn to which the Samaritan took the injured man represents the church and that the two silver coins given to the innkeeper represent the two ordinances of the Lord's Supper and water baptism.

The Mormon leader Brigham Young justified his having more than 30 wives by pointing to the fact that Abraham had more than 1 wife, namely, Sarah and Hagar. The Mormon practice of being baptized for dead relatives and others is based, they argue, on 1 Corinthians 15:29. Some people handle poisonous snakes, based on their reading of Mark 16:18. Whether women should teach men is based on how one interprets 1 Corinthians 11:5; 14:34-35; and 1 Timothy 2:12. Some teach that Christ's present reign in heaven means He will not establish a 1,000-year reign on the earth after His

return. Others, however, say the Bible teaches that Christ, though reigning over the universe now, will manifest His kingdom in a physical way when He rules as the Messiah over the nation Israel on the earth in the Millennium.

All these—and many others—are matters of interpretation. Obviously these various conflicting views point up that not all readers are following the same principles for understanding the Bible.

The lack of proper hermeneutics has also led to the Bible being highly abused and maligned. Even some atheists seek to support their position by referring to Psalm 14:1, "There is no God." Obviously they are overlooking how those words are introduced: "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God.'" "You can make the Bible say anything you want," some argue. And yet how many of the same people say, "You can make Shakespeare say anything you want"? Of course it is true that people can make the Bible say anything they wish so long as they disregard normal approaches for understanding written documents.

Bible Interpretation Is Essential as a Step beyond Observation

When many people approach the Bible, they jump from observation to application, skipping the essential step of interpretation. This is wrong because interpretation logically follows after observation. In observing what the Bible says, you probe; in interpretation, you mull. Observation is discovery; interpreting is digesting. Observation means depicting what is there, and interpretation is deciding what it means. The one is to explore, the other is to explain.

Observation is like a surgeon cutting into a problem area. He sees a growth, or perhaps loose blood, or discolored tissue, or a blockage. Then the question is, What does it mean? How is it to be explained? What kind of growth is it? What caused the diffused blood? Why the discolored tissue? Why is this blockage here?

Observing what we see in the biblical text, we then should correctly handle it (2 Tim. 2:15). The participle "correctly handling" (incorrectly translated in the *King James Version* "rightly dividing") translates the Greek word *orthotonounta*. This combines two words that mean "straight" (*ortho*) and "cut" (*tomeo*). One writer explains the meaning of this as follows:

Because Paul is a tentmaker, he may have been using an expression that tied in with his trade. When Paul made tents, he used certain patterns. In those days tents were made from the skins

of animals in a patchwork sort of design. Every piece would have to be cut and fit together properly. Paul was simply saying, "If one doesn't cut the pieces right, the whole won't fit together properly." It's the same thing with Scripture. If one doesn't interpret correctly the different parts, the whole message won't come through correctly. In Bible study and interpretation the Christian should cut it straight. He should be precise . . . and accurate.¹

Bible Interpretation Is Essential for Applying the Bible Properly

Interpretation should build on observation and then lead into interpretation. It is a means to an end, not an end in itself. The goal of Bible study is not simply to determine what it says and what it means, but rather to apply it to one's life. If we fail to apply the Scriptures, we cut short the entire process and have not finished what God wants us to do.

True, the Bible gives us many facts we need to know about God, ourselves, sin, salvation, and the future. We go to the Bible for information and insight, and this is proper. But the question is, What will we do with that information and insight? Interpretation is the step that moves us from reading and observing the text on to applying and living it out. Bible study is an intellectual pursuit in which we seek understanding of what God says. But Bible study must go beyond that to include spiritual discipline, in which we seek to put into practice what we read and understand.

Heart appropriation, not merely head apprehension, is the true goal of Bible study. Only in this way can believers grow spiritually. Spiritual maturity, in which we become more like Christ, comes not just from knowing more about the Bible. It comes from knowing more about the Bible and applying it to our spiritual needs. This was Paul's goal, that he might encourage and teach others so that they would become mature in Christ (Col. 1:28). And Peter wrote that we should "crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it [we] may grow up in [our] salvation" (1 Peter 2:2). Paul wrote that "knowledge puffs up" (1 Cor. 8:1). Jesus told the Jewish leaders of His day, "You diligently study the Scriptures" (John 5:39). But then He added that their study was of no value because they refused to come to Him to have life (v. 40).

One of the classic passages on the inspiration of the Scriptures is 2 Timothy 3:16. And yet most of that verse, along with the following verse, speaks of the *usefulness* of Scripture. It is to be used

for "teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

It is one thing to read 2 Timothy 1:9, noting that God has "called us to a holy life," and to understand that holiness is a life of purity and godliness, made possible by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. But it is another thing to deal with sin in our lives so that we are in fact leading holy lives. It is one thing to study what the Scriptures say about the return of Christ in passages such as 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-56. But it is another thing to build on and move beyond those facts to the point of loving His appearing (2 Tim. 4:8), that is, longing for and anticipating His coming, and continuing steadfast in serving the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).

Bible interpretation, then, as the second step in Bible study is absolutely essential. Interpretation is foundational to application. If we do not interpret properly, we may end up applying the Bible wrongly. How you interpret many passages has a direct effect on your conduct and the conduct of other people as well. For example, if a pastor interprets certain passages as saying that remarriage is acceptable after divorce, then that influences how he counsels divorcees about remarriage. If a pastor understands 1 Corinthians 11:3-15 to teach that women should wear hats in church, then his interpretation affects what he teaches his congregation.

Whether abortion is right or wrong, how to find God's will, how to lead a meaningful life, how to be an effective husband or wife or parent, how to react to suffering—all these depend on and relate to hermeneutics and how you interpret various passages. As one writer put it, "Interpreting the Bible is one of the most important issues facing Christians today. It lies behind what we believe, how we live, how we get on together, and what we have to offer to the world."²

The Challenge of Bible Interpretation

We are responsible then to seek to know the truth as presented in God's Word. This is essential for our own spiritual lives and for effectiveness in ministering to others. In sharing the Word of God, whether in personal counseling, teaching a Sunday School class or Bible study group, or preaching, the knowledge we impart, based on our understanding of the Scriptures, will definitely affect others. Their lives are in our hands.

Without proper biblical interpretation, the theology of an individual or of an entire church may be misdirected or superficial and its ministry unbalanced.

Understanding the Bible is a lifelong process. As you study the Word, you will be asking yourself, What does this mean? Is this view correct? Why or why not? What about this interpretation? Is it valid? As you hear sermons and listen to teachers, you are continually confronted with the question, Is what he is saying about the Bible correct? As you discuss the Bible with others, you will be faced with the question of which of several possible views is more likely the meaning of the passage being considered. Seeking to determine what a passage really means is an intriguing intellectual and spiritual challenge. And as you share the Word of God, people will be asking you, "What does this verse mean?" "How are we to understand this passage?" Because of the extent of content in the Bible, and the diversity of the kinds of literature in the Bible, hermeneutics is an area of study with numerous problems and issues.

For example how do we know if a passage was intended only for the people to whom it was initially addressed or if it is intended for ensuing generations? Can a passage have more than one meaning, and if so, how are they to be determined? Did some of the Bible authors write more than they understood? Is the Bible more than a human book? If it is also a divine book, how does this affect our interpretation of various passages? How are we to interpret various proverbs in the Bible? Are they universally applicable? If we believe in literal interpretation, how does that affect our understanding of figures of speech? If the Bible includes figures of speech, then is all the Bible to be interpreted in a "spiritual" or mystical sense? How do we understand prophecy? Since there are varying views on how to interpret Bible prophecy, how can we know which view is more likely the accurate one? Why does the New Testament quote the Old Testament in ways that seemingly alter the way the verses read in the Old Testament? How can we move from interpretation to application?

Problems in Bible Interpretation

One of the major reasons the Bible is difficult to understand is that it is an ancient book. The first five Old Testament books were written by Moses around 1400 B.C. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, was written by the Apostle John around A.D. 90. So some of the

books were written about 3,400 years ago and the latest one was written about 1,900 years ago. This suggests that in hermeneutics we must seek to bridge several gaps posed by our having such an ancient book in our hands.

A Time Gap (Chronological)

Because of the extensive time gap between ourselves and the writers and initial readers of the Bible, a huge chasm exists. Since we were not there, we cannot talk with the authors and with the initial hearers and readers to discover firsthand the meaning of what they wrote.

A Space Gap (Geographical)

Most readers of the Bible today live thousands of miles from the countries where Bible events took place. The Middle East, Egypt, and the southern Mediterranean nations of present-day Europe were the places where Bible people lived and traveled. These extend from Babylon in present-day Iraq to Rome (and possibly Spain, if Paul traveled there). This geographical distance puts us at a disadvantage.

The Customs Gap (Cultural)

Great differences exist between the way people in the Western world do things and think and the way people in Bible lands lived and thought. Therefore it is important to know the cultures and customs of peoples in Bible times. Often faulty interpretations stem from an ignorance of those customs. For this reason an entire chapter in this book is being given to that subject.

A Language Gap (Linguistic)

Besides gaps in time, space, and customs, there is also a chasm between our way of speaking and writing and the way people in Bible times spoke and wrote. The languages in which the Bible is written—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—have peculiarities unknown in the English language. For example the Hebrew and Aramaic of the original Old Testament manuscripts included only consonants. Vowels were understood and therefore not written (though they were filled in hundreds of years later around A.D. 900 by the Masoretes). Also Hebrew and Aramaic are read from right to left rather than from left to right. In addition no spaces were inserted between words. The words in all three biblical languages ran together.

An example of this in English would be the following:

DNRTCHTGNRB. Reading these words from right to left the Hebrew reader would automatically sense that it included four words, which in English would be as follows: BRNG TH CT RND. It is not too difficult to sense that the sentence is saying "Bring the cot around." On the other hand the two letters CT could be understood as cat or coat as well as cot. How then would a reader know which word was intended? Usually the context would give the reader a clue to the intended meaning. If earlier or later sentences referred to a cot, then it is most likely that this sentence would also refer to a cot. In some cases, however, the context may give no clue and therefore it becomes a problem in interpretation to know which word was actually intended.

Another reason the language gap is a problem is that the original Bible languages have unusual or obscure expressions, difficult to comprehend in English. Also some words occur only once in the entire Bible, thus making it impossible to compare them with how they are used in some other context to help us understand their meaning.

Another problem contributing to the linguistic gap is the transmission of the original manuscripts down to us today. As manuscripts were copied, scribal errors occasionally crept in. Sometimes one scribe read a manuscript to another scribe. The copyist wrote what sounded like the word pronounced by the reader. The words, "This is led" might be written, "This is lead." Sometimes a copier would mistake one letter for another letter that was very similar to it in shape. The Hebrew letters for *d* and *r* are similar (though not identical), as are the letters *w* and *y*. Sometimes a word was repeated and other times a word was skipped. If a manuscript included some of these accidental scribal mistakes, they might then be copied by the next copyist, thus transmitting the readings for probably several "generations" of manuscripts. Other times, however, a scribe would correct what he thought was an incorrect word or letter. The process of seeking to determine which readings are the original ones is called textual criticism. These variations, however, do not affect major doctrines of Scripture, nor do they affect the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture, which relates to the original manuscripts, not the copies.

A Writing Gap (Literary)

Differences exist between the styles and forms of writing in Bible times and the styles and forms of writing in the Western world today. We seldom speak in proverbs or parables, and yet a good

portion of the Bible is proverbial or parabolic. In addition the fact that there are approximately 40 human authors of the Bible books sometimes poses problems for Bible interpreters. One Gospel writer stated, for example, that one angel was present at Jesus' empty tomb and another referred to two angels. Figurative language, frequently used, sometimes poses problems for our understanding. For instance Jesus said, "I am the door" and "I am the Shepherd." Obviously He did not mean He is literally made of wood with hinges nor that He actually owns sheep which He cares for in a field. It is the business of the interpreter to seek to ascertain what Jesus did mean by those statements.

A Spiritual Gap (Supernatural)

It is also important to note that a gap exists between God's way of doing things and our way. The fact that the Bible was written about God puts the Bible in a unique category. God, being infinite, is not fully comprehensible by the finite. The Bible speaks of God's performing miracles and making predictions about the future. The Bible also speaks of difficult-to-comprehend truths such as the Trinity, the two natures of Christ, God's sovereignty and man's will. All these and others contribute to our difficulty in understanding fully all that is in the Bible.

Since God is the divine Author of the Book, it is totally unique. It is one of a kind. The Bible is not simply a book with man's thoughts about God, though it includes them. It is also God's thoughts about God and man. The Bible reports what God did and communicates what He is and what He desires. The Bible is also unique in that it was written by God and man. Human authors wrote as they were guided by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). This fact of dual authorship poses problems. How could God use people of differing personalities to record the Scriptures and yet have the final product be the work of the Holy Spirit? How does this affect the individual authors' own personalities and writing styles?

These six gaps pose serious problems when a person seeks to understand the Bible. Even the Ethiopian in Acts 8 faced several of these gaps, including the chronological, geographical, linguistic, and supernatural. While much of the Bible is plain and easy to understand, admittedly other parts are more difficult. Even Peter wrote, "Our dear brother Paul also wrote . . . some things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:15-16). Some Bible verses remain a mystery even to the most skilled interpreters.