

Herman . . . Who?

The Importance of Sound Interpretation

It is said that if one hundred people read a Bible verse they will undoubtedly offer one hundred different interpretations. But is this what was intended? Should the Bible mean anything anyone wants it to mean? Is the interpretation that arbitrary?

If not, then how should one go about discovering its meaning? Moreover, how do *you* go about interpreting the Bible? Have you ever thought about your own mental process?

Such questions pertain to the subject of *hermeneutics*. Simply defined, hermeneutics is the science and art of interpreting the Bible—of getting the message in what one reads.¹ It is a science because it adheres to the regular rules of language and grammar. But it is also an art because communication is flexible, and a mere mechanical application of rules will sometimes distort the true meaning. To be a good interpreter, therefore, one must not only learn the rules, but also the art of knowing when and how to apply those rules.

Ever since the Reformation, the average person has enjoyed unprecedented access to the Scriptures. The Bible's accessibility has brought both blessing and curse. The blessing is that anyone may now read and study the Bible for himself. A person is no longer dependent on ecclesiastical authorities to interpret the Scriptures and dictate beliefs. He is free to search things out for himself. But such privilege requires responsibility.

Unfortunately, the Bible's accessibility has also increased its exposure to the curse of misuse. Before the Reformation, there was essentially but one church in town—for better or worse. Today, however, the pendulum has swung to the opposite extreme. Denominations abound, and Christianity finds itself plagued by a plethora of beliefs, practices, and divisions. While all groups claim their interpretations are the true and proper ones, the great irony is that many of their distinctive beliefs result from the sloppy hermeneutics first employed by founders and leaders to support their foregone conclusions.

In the last two hundred years in this country alone, numerous sects and cults have come into existence because of some "unique" reading of Scripture. The fault lies not with the Bible, but with leaders and followers who have not taken the time to study the nature and composition of ancient literature—the very form in which the Bible was written and handed down to us.

Failure to recognize the Bible as literature has created a piecemeal approach to interpretation. A verse here and a verse there are taken "to prove" whatever one wants. The end result has been the proliferation of every wind of doctrine.

This piecemeal approach has become so ingrained in people's thinking that they assume this is the way the Bible was intended to be understood. Consequently, many people have unwittingly substituted their own preconceived ideas, limited knowledge, and cultural values for the original meaning of the text.

In the course of everyday communication, one usually understands what one reads and hears without consciously thinking about the rules of communication. For example, in the following statements, "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse," and "The men of the stranded expedition were so hungry they ate a horse," one easily recognizes the former as a non-literal figure of speech and the latter as a literal declaration. The rules by which one interprets these two statements occur spontaneously—almost subconsciously—in the mind. These kinds of statements are so much a part of everyday speech that one hardly has to give them any thought.

One usually does not become aware of this spontaneous process, however, until something blocks his understanding—until he encounters an unfamiliar form of communication. This brings one to the need for hermeneutics. The science and art of hermeneutics is simply the conscious application of common sense principles—those that normally function spontaneously—to any communication that may otherwise be difficult to understand. The more blocks to spontaneous understanding that one encounters, the greater the need for conscious hermeneutics.

This is especially true when reading the Bible. People often lament, "The Bible is so hard to understand. After I read it, I'm not sure I can make sense of what I just read." Whenever one voices this complaint, he is encountering blocks to his understanding of the original meaning of the text.

For example, because the modern reader is separated by place and time from the original writers, readers, and events of the Bible, he may encounter a *historical block* to his understanding of the biblical text. There are also significant differences between the life settings of the peoples of the Bible and today, thus producing a *cultural block*. The Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—three ancient languages with very different structures and idioms from English. So one may also encounter a *linguistic block*. Finally, since the contemporary worldview is different from how the ancients reasoned about life, their circumstances, and the nature of the cosmos—one also faces a *philosophical block*.

However, one can overcome these blocks to understanding by placing oneself in the author's world as much as possible—by carefully reading a text with the mindset of the author in view. And the methodology and principles of hermeneutics help one do just that. This is one reason hermeneutics is such an important discipline.

It is also important because it acts as a safety valve, a check and balance, against improper and fanciful interpretations. The method used to arrive at an interpretation, as well as the interpretation itself, must be based on sound principles. If the method is faulty, the interpretation generally will be faulty as well. But even if by accident one's conclusion should happen to be right, the use of faulty methods may prevent others from accepting its validity. If people detect a fallacy in one's methods and reasoning, then it's hard to criticize them for rejecting one's conclusion as well. Some Christians spend a lot of time debating each other over doctrinal conclusions, but their time would be better spent, and more disagreements would be solved, if they objectively examined the hermeneutics each used instead.

Finally, sound hermeneutics is even more imperative for those who believe God has spoken through the Scriptures. They, above all others, should take seriously the admonition to handle the text correctly—to not add to or take away from its original meaning. They must use *exegesis*, the task of bringing out what was said, not *eisegesis*, the act of reading into the Bible their own ideas. After all, what is the point of reading a book if one misses what the author had to say?

¹In general, the principles of hermeneutics apply to any written or spoken communication, but, as a specialized discipline, they particularly apply to the Bible because of its demanding literary characteristics.