

Newsletter May 2013

We discussed the origin and preservation of the Bible in our April 2013 Newsletter, which the reader may wish to review before reading this discussion. In this newsletter we shall move on to consider Scriptural interpretation utilizing edited excerpts taken from *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity*, Book I, Chapter 1.2. We find that there are six basic axioms or self-evident premises that we must accept regarding the innate integrity of Scripture before we can ever consider proper interpretation; these axioms are derived from the unique origin of the Bible that we discussed in our previous newsletter. We begin first with *plenary inspiration of Scripture*. The word “plenary” means total, all, or complete. Inspiration means “God-breathed” (2Ti3:16). The implication is that God breathed into the minds of men not only the general text but also each word of Scripture. God directed the writers’ intellect as certain specific revelation was made to the minds of those men by the Holy Spirit through spiritual insight, visions, dreams, and by guided natural observation. Therefore, every word of the original autographs was Holy Spirit-inspired and must be accepted and treated as such.

It follows that since God has inspired all of Scripture, there can be no mistakes made in what it says on any particular point. That leads to the second axiom, which is the *inerrancy of Scripture*. The Bible is not a scientific textbook, such that any attempt to reconcile Scripture to current scientific theory is not practical or rational. Furthermore, any apparent errors relating to historic events and individuals mentioned in Scripture keep melting away with every turn of the archeologist’s spade. Since there are no errors, there can be no contradictions found in the Bible. Many have found what they have falsely considered to be errors and contradictions only because they have not studied Scripture texts sufficiently to resolve them through proper context. In other instances they do not understand the intricate problems associated with language translation that can sometimes give rise to such questions.

The third axiom, the *infallibility of Scripture*, goes beyond the inerrancy of Scripture as related to any statement of fact, by further stating that the Bible is incapable of making any mistake regarding Christian faith or practice. God has told us that His Word will not return to Him void (Is.55:11). For that reason, Scripture cannot fail in its purpose. Scripture presents God’s unbending rule of life clearly established in God’s glory for our personal benefit leading to salvation. God’s Words live within the hearts of his people transforming their lives through continual repentance from sin. Through the teaching of the Holy Spirit living within us believers are kept in the will of God throughout their lifetimes.

The fourth axiom refers to the *absolute authority of Scripture*. This proceeds from the Bible’s inerrancy and infallibility. The Old Testament begins with: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth”(Ge.1:1). There is no philosophical discussion about who God is, nor is there any rise given to the question of his existence. God openly reveals Himself in his Word such that his Word carries the stamp of his authority throughout that revelation. Not only could man not have contrived the Holy God of the Bible, he would not even if he could because of the Bible’s exposition and condemnation of his ignoble and sinful nature. We must either believe that God is, and accept the Scriptures as the authoritative Word of God, or reject both; there is no middle ground on which to stand.

The fifth axiom is the *coherence of Scripture*. The Old Testament without the New Testament is incomplete. The New Testament without the Old Testament hangs in mid-air, because its verity and substance must rest upon the events and teachings of the Old Testament. The Old and New Testaments must therefore stand or fall together. We must consider the whole Bible as the Word of God, embracing all of Scripture with the full realization and knowledge that it is the very Word of the Lord our God toward and for us.

This finally brings us to consider the sixth axiom, which we refer to as the *perspicuity of Scripture*. Although the Bible is a complete and clear revelation of God and his purposes for mankind, it is effectively so only when man receives it in Truth as such. Luther and other reformers considered Scripture clear enough that anyone should be able to understand its basic message such that it would lead them along a path to salvation. It would be incredible indeed to think that God had provided Scripture

only to be understood by the wise and prudent, and denied that understanding to less intellectual believers in Christ (cf. Mt.11:25). For that reason, we must be willing to humbly accept the plain statements of Scripture at face value without subjecting them to needless intellectual gymnastics or amplified allegory. Scripture is not a mathematical problem that needs solving, nor does it require the rational thinking of man to fully establish its meaning. Any attempt to interpret Scripture as an endeavor based upon human reason and knowledge is doomed to failure because it is not being properly discerned spiritually. We must allow the Holy Spirit to take the things of Christ and make them real to our hearts and minds.

After having accepted these axioms that establish the integrity of Scripture we can now proceed to consider six basic guidelines for its interpretation. The first guideline is that we must *set aside all preconceived personal bias*. The Bible is God's book expressing his thoughts, which most often differ greatly from human thought and reason. How an individual believer interprets the Bible can depend upon many things such as one's intellectual capacity, secular education, family upbringing, and social background as well as one's established religious affiliation if any. Many find themselves already locked into a paradigm of secular, traditional, and extra-biblical religious thought and practice that acts as a narrow and blurred lens between them and accurate Bible interpretation. Their minds are already largely made up on what the Bible should say to the extent that the Bible must be bent to conform to that view. In order to interpret the Bible accurately, it is necessary to discard all preconceived notions in order to have a mind that is clear of any misconceptions making it receptive to the plain Truth regardless of where it will lead us. This is not easily done. For that reason, the study of Scripture must be attended with much prayer pleading that the Holy Spirit would guide us in all our efforts. Not only must we sincerely pray for guidance before we begin any study, we must continually be in prayer regarding any difficulties we may encounter with our interpretation of its text lest we be overcome by our fleshly mind.

The second guideline is that *Bible text should always be construed in the literal sense in which it was written*. Most often, the authors of Scripture wrote in a straightforward and factual way, but at other times, they used figurative or symbolic language for emphasis or deeper understanding. Jesus at times spoke in parables to more clearly illustrate a spiritual truth (cf. Jn.3:12). The poetic books, especially the Psalms, were written in hyperbolic prose to express underlying truths in such a way as to reach deep into human hearts not merely inform their minds; these texts were often set to music. The Old Testament prophets often wrote using symbolic language to drive home their message of repentance or judgment. The book of Revelation is largely written in symbolic language to aid our understanding of colossal events and perspectives that we could not understand directly. It is important to realize that figurative and symbolic language, when it is used, always points to literal reality such that we cannot discount figurative language as insignificant.

The best approach to understanding a passage of Scripture is to make an initial attempt to interpret the text in a straightforward way until and unless it is made very clear by the sense of the text itself that symbolic language is being used. Since no part of God's Word can be considered nonsense or without meaning and purpose, it often requires us to adjust our thinking from an absolute literal sense to a figurative literal sense in order to obtain an understanding of certain texts. Difficulty in interpretation can sometimes occur when the writer has mixed factual and symbolic language within the same passage. We must carefully determine which is which by enlisting the aid of the Holy Spirit through prayer.

The third guideline is to carefully *keep each passage in its proper context within its chapter and then that chapter in context with the subject of the entire book*. Then, that book must be placed in general context with the other 65 books of the Bible. For that larger context, we must have read and studied the entire Bible from cover-to-cover in order to be familiar with its complete contents. If our understanding of an individual passage appears to contradict large portions of Scripture elsewhere, which are quite clear in meaning, we can assume that we are misinterpreting the text at hand because we do not yet have a complete understanding of the subject being addressed. All Scripture is in harmony with itself since God is not a God of confusion; He cannot lie or err, nor does He change his mind.

We tend to see individual verses rather than the entire text because of the way that many Bibles are constructed. The memorization of individual verses rather than complete passages in full context probably serves to maintain verse isolation as well. Individual verses must never be taken by themselves to construct a narrow meaning that is out of its original context, nor should isolated verses or fragments of verses be carelessly strung together to establish a meaning that was never intended by the book's author. Individual verse divisions are helpful for study and cross-reference, but should not be allowed to affect our interpretation of the text itself. Although it should seem obvious to say so, each verse is most often related to the one found before and after it in the text.

The fourth guideline is that ***we must not develop doctrine based upon added Scripture references, notes or aids***. Verse cross-references, organized in a list of center references, margin references, or sometimes placed at the end of each verse are useful for searching out general topics in the Bible. By using them, we can find various passages in the Bible that address similar subject matter. That often helps us to get a larger view of a topic, and it also helps us put verses and passages in a larger biblical context. It can also help clarify the meaning of an individual verse. However, we must remember that those references are not a part of the inspired text and are therefore subject to human error and bias. We must further understand that chapter divisions were added as aids for organizational purposes only and do not represent divisions to be found in the original text. Quite often, a passage topic can be seen to bridge over chapter divisions. Finally, we must understand that section headings and various notes found in many Bibles are not inspired text and should not be treated as such.

There are many external aids to the Bible available for the study of Scripture. In addition to a reliable study Bible, a student should have at hand a topical reference, a comprehensive concordance of Bible words matching his own Bible version, a good Bible dictionary and a reliable lexicon of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words. These should be used with great caution, however, since none are inspired. While Bible commentaries can be useful for the mature student to hone his own thoughts, they often keep new Christians from reading, studying, and reaching an understanding of the Truth for themselves. Never trust what anyone says about the text more than the precise words found in the Bible itself.

The fifth guideline is to realize that while all of Scripture is set down for our reading and profit, ***not all Scripture is directed to us in this age in which we live***. For example, words that were spoken to Israel as a theocratic nation must be understood to our benefit, but we must not think that God is speaking those very words directly to us or to the church today. We must determine to whom each book and passage is addressed and then seek to understand the exact situation at hand; we must consider the context of time and place as well as substance. We must then ascertain whether the passage addresses an eternal principle that is applicable today or only addresses a situation or practice that existed at that time and place to those addressed and is no longer applicable because it has no relevance to today's world. Nevertheless, we must further ask ourselves whether the passage universally commends or condemns certain thoughts and practices as an eternal precept from God that is applicable in every place and time.

The sixth and final guideline is that ***any application of Scripture must first and foremost be based upon an accurate interpretation***. Considerable error comes about when attempting to take portions of Scripture, especially isolated verses and passages, and applying them directly to the life of the individual in today's world with no respect to its original context. When that is done, the verse inevitably becomes distorted to fit a modern concept for which the verse was never intended. Unfortunately, application is often seen as more relevant than accurate interpretation in many of today's churches. Over the years, erroneous applications can become a major element of church teaching and tradition. While we must always allow the Holy Bible to influence our lives based upon the precepts and principles found in Scripture, we must never allow popular applications to override clear interpretations of the Scripture text lest the true message of the Bible becomes lost. May God keep us firmly in his Word until we all come together in unity of the faith (cf. Ep.4:13-15). © Arthur J. Smith, May 2013