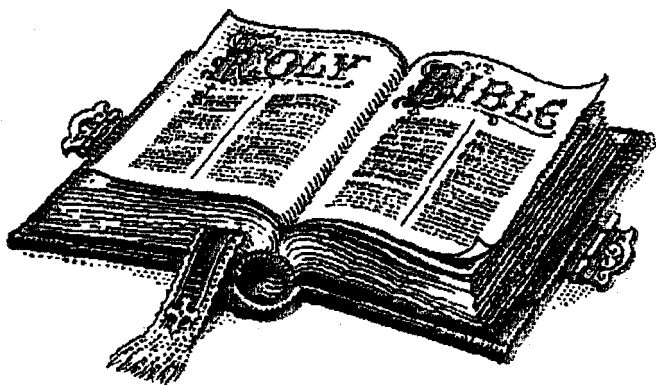


# BIBLE INTERPRETATION



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The Bible is readily understood. It needs no special interpretation. The Bible interprets itself. We have no council or other human authority to whose interpretation we must bow. On the other hand, we dare not follow our private interpretation. We are held only to the Bible. The Bible itself has laid down certain rules for its own interpretation. Fundamental to all the specific rules is the general axiom:

## I

**The principles of Bible interpretation rest upon the Bible itself.**

**Our rules for Bible interpretation are lifted from Scripture itself.**

Christians are warned not to believe every spirit but to try the spirits whether they be of God. (I John 4:1) This warning is important, because proponents of false doctrines generally like to operate with the Bible and would have us believe that their teachings are found in the Bible. To safeguard us against their aberrations the Lord charges us to try the spirits whether they be of God, whether their teaching is really God's Word or merely the idea of man couched in Biblical language. To guide us in the correct use of the Bible, the Lord Himself has laid down certain rules in Scripture which must be followed if we are to interpret the Scripture correctly.

These rules for Bible interpretation are clearly enunciated in Scripture, and we merely lift them from Scripture. Though the work of gathering is comparatively simple, the understanding of these rules and following them is extremely important. Whenever we would explain any portion of Scripture we must carefully abide by these God-given rules, and if we are to deal with any teaching which is brought to us by others, we must again follow these rules in examining that doctrine, to be sure it teaches what God's Word says.

These rules are to be carefully distinguished from those not based on Scripture. Since the proper rules for Bible interpretation are stated in the Bible, they are from God Himself, and as such of an entirely different nature from those not based on Scripture. Many types of man-made principles of interpretation sprang up in the course of time. In the early Eastern Church the attempt was made to superimpose a system of philosophy on the Bible. Others attempted to interpret the Bible in the light of tradition. From Alexandria sprang the allegorising method. Later the Pope in Rome usurped the right of Bible interpretation and claimed it as a prerogative for himself. The founders of the Reformed churches made reason the norm of interpretation. At the present time the "general sense of Scripture" or the "totality of Scripture" is used as a basis for interpretation. Over against all these human systems of Bible interpretation the Bible presents the principles established by God. All systems of Bible interpretation not based on Scripture have the serious defect that they elevate themselves over the Bible, and thereby usurp the place of the Bible. The Lord wants the Bible to be free, untrammelled by all human restraint. Luther rightly remarks that the Bible, which is the source of all liberty, dare not itself be bound.

It must be clearly understood that the Christian Church never evolved a set of rules for Bible interpretation. Those which the Lord established are all-sufficient and of such a perfect nature that all human attempts lead only to confusion. But while the Church does not possess the duty, nor even the privilege, of decreeing rules of Bible interpretation, the Church and all its members are charged most definitely to learn from Scripture how to recognise and use the Biblical rules for proper interpretation of the Scripture. We are to observe most carefully how the Prophets and Apostles, and especially Jesus Himself, explained and interpreted the Bible. The observance of these principles removes all doubt; it presents to us a firm foundation for our faith.

Some of these Biblical rules are self-evident according to the light of human reason, but this is not why we accept them. Certain rules are innate to our human nature, and a person cannot disregard them without becoming unreasonable.

Such rules are:

1. That 2 plus 2 equal 4.

2. That it is impossible for something to be and not to be at the same time.

3. That every action has its motivating cause.

Similarly there are some fundamental rules of interpretation:

1. Every writing must be understood according to the common usage of human language.

2. The purpose and context of every passage must be observed.

3. The writer is the best interpreter of his own words.

Now, the Scripture itself substantiates these rules. Accordingly we accept them as Scriptural rules for Bible interpretation. It is important for us to realise that our Bible interpretation rests on principles of Scripture itself. Only thus can we base our faith and trust upon the Word of God. Were we to accept principles because they are self-evident according to the light of human reason, we should always have a weak link in our religion. There could be no certainty nor confidence, no faith to stand up in the face of doubt.

The charge that the Biblical principles of interpretation are *contrary* to human reason is untrue. It has been argued that taking the doctrine of the Trinity in its literal meaning is illogical, for 3 cannot equal 1, and 1 is not 3. The charge is incorrect, for Scripture does not say that 3 times 1 equals 1; but rather that God is one Being, and that in this one Being there are three Persons. While it is true that Scripture is not contrary to human reason, it is also true that in matters of faith it transcends reason.

Human reason is frequently not used correctly. Through sin, man's mental faculties are perverted so that the light which should be his by nature has been darkened and through ignorance becomes an unsafe aid.

Where, however, the light of human reason is properly used, it is confirmed by the rules established by God Himself in the Bible.

By employing these God-revealed principles of Bible interpretation, which we are to consider in detail, we obtain the true and correct meaning of a given Scripture passage.

The first and foremost purpose of Bible interpretation is to give glory to God (I Cor. 10:31). If even our eating and drinking is to be done to the glory of God, then certainly our work dealing with the Bible and its interpretation. A further purpose of Bible interpretation is to instruct man relative to this life and that which is to come. "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scripture might have hope" (Rom. 15:4).

If all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, then our interpretation of Scripture must certainly further those purposes. Conversely we can say that any Bible interpretation which detracts from the glory of God and does not serve the advancement of Christian faith and life is incorrect and without any authority. To be worthy of recognition, Bible interpretation must glorify and extol the divine goodness, wisdom, righteousness, truth, and power and confirm the basis of our faith and increase our zeal in godliness.

## II

**The first and foremost principle of Bible Interpretation is that the Scripture interprets itself.**

Christ and the Apostles explain Scripture by Scripture. When Christ answered Satan at the time of the great temptation He proved the correct meaning of Ps. 91:11-12: "For He shall give His angels charge over thee to keep thee in all thy ways; they shall bear thee up in their hands lest thou dash thy foot against a

stone," by appealing to the words of Deut. 6:16: "Ye shall not tempt the Lord your God." In his great Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:29) Peter showed from the context and attending circumstances that the words of Ps. 16:10 do not apply to David but to Christ. In the same manner the Christian Church still lets Scripture interpret itself.

**Since the Holy Spirit speaks only through the Scripture, the intent of the Holy Spirit is not to be separated from the words of Scripture.** In Bible interpretation we are bound to the very words of Scripture. With these words we are to busy ourselves; with them our task ends. Accordingly all true Bible interpretation resolves itself into merely finding out what the Holy Spirit tells us in the words of Scripture. Our interpretation must be prefaced with the words "It is written." The realisation that the Holy Spirit speaks to us in Scripture and only in Scripture will also give us the proper approach to Bible interpretation. We shall recognise the sacredness of our task and confine ourselves to understanding the words of the text.

**No human being has the right to inject his own views into the Scripture.** The Bible explicitly says: "No prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation" (II Pet. 1:20). Private interpretation is responsible for the deplorable confusion in the visible Church of today. The Bible is not to be regarded as the happy hunting grounds which people can approach with their own preconceived notions and seek to substantiate them with remarks plucked at random out of the Scripture. The attempt to inject private views into Scripture is adulterating the pure Word of God. It is plain forgery and no interpretation.

To be certain that the interpretation is correct, we must accept that interpretation which the Holy Spirit gives us, for **the Holy Spirit is the only safe and true interpreter of the Scripture.** He has inspired the Scripture. Accordingly He is the only one whose interpretation is infallible. At times He gives the interpretation in direct words. In John 2:19 Jesus told the

unbelieving Jews: "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up," and immediately in verse 21 the Holy Spirit gives this interpretation: "But He spake of the temple of His body." In Rev. 5:8 mention is made of "golden vials full of odours, which are the prayers of saints." Here the Holy Spirit at once offers the correct interpretation. In other instances He offers the interpretation in the context, the parallel passages, and through similar helps. In every instance, however, "The Holy Spirit is the best interpreter of His words".

**The interpreter of Scripture is merely to set forth the meaning of the Holy Spirit.** No one has the right to set himself up as a dictator whose interpretations must be accepted because of his position. There is no one person or class of persons whose sole right is to interpret Scripture; nor is it permissible for anyone to interpret the Bible according to his own notion. Members of the clergy as well as the laity must remember that interpreters are but to follow in the footsteps of the Holy Spirit. Scripture can be interpreted only by Scripture. The Church accepts the meaning given by the Holy Spirit and is certain in its faith. Christ made this promise, saying (John 8:1-32) : "If ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." He also keeps this promise. Where Christians accept Scripture as interpreted by Scripture, they are not wavering, or uncertain, in their faith, but can be so certain of this word of grace that if all people should speak otherwise, even if all angels should say no, they could nevertheless stand alone and say, " I know that this word is correct." In matters of faith it is not sufficient to say that a passage might have a certain meaning. We must be so certain that we can say, It *must* be understood this way and not otherwise. No teaching of Scripture can therefore be called an open question, something which the Church must first decide. The Church must merely recognise the teaching of the Holy Spirit as correct.

Since the Holy Spirit gives His message only through Scripture **neither tradition nor the authority of the Church Fathers can be a rule of interpretation.** The Lord has nowhere directed us to the Church Fathers, but only to the Scriptures. Tradition adds; the private views of Church Fathers substitute. But the Lord says (Deut. 4:2): "Ye shall not add to the Word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it." Basing interpretation on the views of the Church Fathers would also add to confusion since they present utterly divergent views.

**Nor may human reason be admitted as a norm of interpretation.** The doctrines of the Scriptures are a stumbling block unto the Jews and foolishness unto the Greeks. (I Cor. 1:23) These things God hid from the wise and prudent and revealed them unto babes (Matt. 11:25) Reason has its proper auxiliary use in Bible interpretation. By its use we perceive intellectually what the words of the Bible say. We, furthermore, understand what the Bible tells us about the realm of nature. But reason has no authoritative place in Bible interpretation. Reason cannot fathom, much less explain, the deep things of God; not even the so-called "enlightened" reason of believers can be a norm of interpretation. How could reason shed light upon Scripture, since it is Scripture that must illumine reason? Holy Scripture, accordingly, describes the believers as "bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (II Cor. 10:5)

**Also the so-called "inner light" dare not be used as a rule in interpreting Scripture.** Ever since Adam and Eve fell into sin people have been tempted to depart from the outward Word of God to spiritualising and self-conceit. Those who boast that they have the Spirit without and before the Word, or who claim to interpret Scripture by their "inner light," which they say they have received over and above the Bible, are either



deceiving themselves, or else are conscious mouthpieces of the devil.

**An interpreter of the Bible must prove the correctness of his interpretation solely by and from Scripture,** for true Bible interpretation is nothing else than Scripture itself. Luther called attention to the fact that when the Church Fathers properly interpreted a passage, they did not do so with their own words or meaning, but interpreted and illuminated Scripture with Scripture and he remarks that the books of the Church Fathers must be read with discretion, that we should not believe *them*, but rather see whether they present clear Scripture. This advice still holds good.

### III

**All Scripture must be interpreted according to the analogy of faith.**

The expression "analogy of faith" is based on Rom. 12:6, where it is translated "proportion of faith." "Faith" is taken as designating the articles of faith. The analogy, or rule, of faith is defined by Gerhard as follows: "By rule of faith we mean the plain passages of Scripture in which the articles of faith are set forth in plain and express terms."

This principle is clearly laid down in the Bible. Writing to Timothy, Paul says: "Hold fast the form of sound words which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (II Tim. 1:13). And again he commands him to nourish the brethren on the words of faith and good doctrine (I Tim. 4:6). And in Tim. 6:3 we read: "If any man teach otherwise and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness." The Apostle Peter admonishes: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth, that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion forever and ever" (I Pet. 4:11). The Saviour Himself operated on this principle. When the

Pharisees (Matt. 19:3 ff.) raised the question of an arbitrary divorce and, to substantiate their error, appealed to an exceptional case mentioned in Deut. 24:1, Jesus refuted this error and based His interpretation on the clear central doctrine of marriage as stated in Gen. 2:24.)

This analogy of faith, therefore, is not something external, outside of and above Scripture. The expression has been much misused. Oral tradition and decrees of Popes have been advanced as the analogy of faith. To the present day the Roman Catholic Church would have the Bible interpreted in the light of oral tradition and be recognised as supreme authority over Scripture, namely, "holy mother church, whose it is to judge the true sense and interpretation of the holy Scripture."

The principle of Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss leader at the time of the Reformation, was in effect that the analogy of faith meant the Scripture as interpreted by reason. Philosophers have understood it to mean the code of moral law. None of these principles, however, can serve as a basis of interpretation, since they are something extraneous to Scripture. Over against more modern assertions we maintain that the analogy of faith is not a human aspect and impression of the Biblical content as a whole. Since the days of the philosopher Schleiermacher it has become a popular practice among the theologians to claim that by reading the Scripture they had absorbed a Biblical aspect and impression and that now they must interpret the Bible according to this human point of view. This attempt is not an analogy of faith but rather an analogy of human pride and self-conceit. It is bound to create endless confusion, for the impressions will not be the same, and the so-called pious attitude will vary with each individual.

Minds are disturbed and faith becomes uncertain through such an unreliable basis of interpretation. "As the Apostle testifies (Rom. 15:4): "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scripture might have hope." But when this consolation and hope are weakened or entirely removed by Scripture, it is certain

that it is understood and explained contrary to the will and meaning of the Holy Spirit." Accordingly we reject the theory that human aspects and impressions of the Biblical content and teaching as a whole be allowed as a basis of Biblical interpretation. Since all Scripture is given for the purpose of engendering hope, every interpretation which destroys our Christian hope must be false.

Viewing this matter from the negative side, we affirm that no passage can have a meaning which is not in agreement with the clear chief doctrines of Scripture, or the analogy of faith. To illustrate this point, we refer to the chiliastic interpretation of certain passages of Scripture. Rev. 20 is said to teach a mundane rule of Christ, a twofold physical resurrection, and that the Day of Judgment may be known in advance. That this attempted interpretation is false is evident from the fact that it is opposed to the clear doctrine of Christ's kingdom, Christ's return to Judgment and the resurrection of the dead.

Great care must be exercised in interpreting a passage according to the analogy of faith so that we do not attempt to interpret one dark passage by another which is just as dark. Dr. Luther found occasion to speak some very emphatic words on this subject. Debating with Carlstadt on the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, he wrote: "If every passage of Scripture must be interpreted by another passage of Scripture, where will you put an end to this comparison? By employing this method no passage of Scripture would be certain and clear, and this comparing would be unlimited.....The rule that one passage must be interpreted by another is without doubt specific: a doubtful and dark passage must be interpreted by one that is clear and definite."

In this connection the question has been asked, How can we be sure that a certain passage of Scripture is clear? We answer: **The perspicuity of a passage of Scripture is its own proof.** Should we be standing out in the bright sunlight with someone and he insist that we prove to him that the sun is shining, we can only come to the conclusion that either he is joking or else devoid of his senses. The same applies to the clear passages of

Scripture. As the sun proves itself a light, so the clear passages of Scripture prove themselves clear. It would be nothing short of the sophistry and mockery of agnosticism to demand that the clearness of a passage of Scripture be proved by others still more clear. The perspicuity of Scripture is of such a nature that we not only can understand the correct meaning but must understand it as long as our heart and mind is directed exclusively to the Word. The correct meaning forces itself upon us. At the time of the Reformation the Swiss theologians realised just as well as Luther that, according to the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper, Christ's body and blood are truly present in the Holy Communion, but declared this doctrine to be impossible and useless. The words were clear even to them, but they refused to believe them. By their very pleading not to consider these words of institution until they had established their teaching on the Lord's Supper from other passages of Scripture, they proved that the words were so clear they could not oppose them.

Our discussion of the analogy of faith would be incomplete if we should fail to show that **humble faith and complete submission to the Word of God is essential to accepting the analogy of faith in the interpretation of Scripture.** Only those who renounce all claims of their own wisdom and in devout humility, plead with God to give them grace to accept His doctrine in all simplicity will be able to interpret the Bible according to the analogy of faith. We further observe that the clear passages of Scripture are the very means a Christian uses to suppress his self-conceit and to humble himself under the Word. (Luther)

Our own wisdom and cleverness will not prevent us from perverting the Scripture. We need more than the knowledge of language and grammar to keep us from error in Bible interpretation. Whoever is proud of his human erudition and philosophical acumen is unfit to interpret the Bible. The plain, simple doctrines of Scripture must be upheld. In answer to the objection that some of these doctrines do not seem to agree Luther wrote: "Of course, they do not agree; that is why you lose it if you

consider it without the Word. This knowledge is too high. My mind cannot grasp it. Yours even less." "We shall let the Scripture be its own interpreter, and the worry how these matters agree we shall leave to Him in whose hands our salvation rests securely." Only by despairing of our own sagacity and ability and contritely pleading with God to direct our heart and mind to His Word will we be able to remain faithful to the Scripture (analogy of faith) and reject our own thoughts. To keep us from interpreting the Bible according to the analogy of our own wisdom, Dr. Luther gives the sound advice "Kneel down in your own room and in true humility and sincerity pray that He would give you His Holy Spirit through His dear Son to enlighten you, lead you, and give you understanding."

## IV

**Scripture is a Light, and as such it alone can cast light upon those passages which to us seem dark.**

When Scripture says (Ps. 119:105): "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path," it rejects the idea that the Bible is a dark, obscure book, unintelligible without outside help. Being a light, the Bible casts light not only on those things that are outside, but especially upon itself.

**A. The New Testament casts light upon the Old Testament. Accordingly the Old Testament must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament.** The ever-recurring statement "Now, all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the Prophet, saying..." (Matt. 1:22) emphasises the truth that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament. If, however, the New Testament interprets the Old Testament, then these doctrines must be contained even in the Old Testament. The Old Testament in itself is a light unto salvation. When Adam and Eve heard God say (Gen. 3:15): "I will put enmity between thee and the woman and between thy seed and her Seed; It shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise His heel," they had the fundamental facts of the Christian religion: that God does not countenance sin, that a Saviour would be born who would crush Satan and the power of sin, a Redeemer

who Himself must suffer in the act. These facts Adam had and believed.

In rebuking the Jews that sought to kill Him, Jesus said: "Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of Me." Luther says: "The entire Old Testament contains nothing else than Christ just as He is presented in the Gospel. Accordingly we see how the Apostles quote their proof from Scripture." At times the Old Testament speaks as clearly as if the fulfilment had taken place, *e.g.*, Is. 9:1-9. At other times we find the Prophets "searching what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ, which was in them, did signify" (I Pet. 1:11). Passages which to them seemed and to us seem dark the New Testament interprets. Luther confessed: "I would not have been able to perceive that this prophecy of the Prophet Joel must be understood as referring to Jesus of Nazareth..... But the Holy Spirit revealed it to the Apostles that they understood the Scripture." We read that Christ on the way to Emmaus interpreted the Old Testament with the New Testament. "Beginning at Moses and all the Prophets He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." The same method is still to be employed. We must read the Old Testament in the light of the New.

**B. Those passages of Scripture which to us seem difficult must be interpreted by means of those that are clear.**

The Bible contains many passages which are so clear that they need no further interpretation and any attempt to interpret them would only tend to make them doubtful and uncertain. The Scripture is very explicit. It says that there is one God (Deut. 6:4; etc.) and that there are three persons (Matt. 28:19; etc.), that Christ is true God and man (Gal. 4:4; Heb. 2:14), and that there is a sin against the Holy Spirit, which will not be forgiven (Matt. 12:31; Mark 3:28, 29). There is nothing dark or obscure in these words. "But how this is possible Scripture does not tell us, nor is it necessary for us to know." (Luther)

"These clear passages of Scripture contain everything that pertains to faith and life." (St. Augustine) A careful examination of Scripture will show that those passages of Scripture which to us seem dark either do not touch upon specific doctrines, but refer to problems of chronology, geography, archaeology, etc., or where they do present doctrines, these are taught clearly and expressly in other passages of the Bible. For this very reason Luther gives the advice: If a passage of Scripture is dark, don't harbour any doubts. It certainly contains the same doctrine which is taught clearly in other places. And then he adds this bit of advice: "Whoever cannot understand the darker portions, let him be satisfied with those that are clear." These clear passages of Scripture may be compared to the sun, from which all planets receive their light.

As a darker passage of Scripture we may quote Luke 14:26: "If any man come unto Me and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple." The Ten Commandments however, insist that we love father and mother and wife, etc. Now the solution. In Matt. 10:37 Christ says: He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me." When the Lord says, "Hate father and mother," He tells us that whoever loves them more than Christ cannot be His disciple; for parents are to be loved less than Christ. He uses the word "hate" because it easily looks like hating them, and unbelievers think that we are hating them when we love them less than Christ. Thus the passage which formerly was dark to us has become clear.

**C. Passages of Scripture in which a doctrine is merely touched upon must be interpreted by those passages where a doctrine is expressly taught.** Each article of faith is expressed clearly and distinctly at least once in the Bible. Thus we find the doctrine of the Lord's Supper clearly and expressly taught in Matt. 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, I Cor. 10 and 11. These are the passages from which the doctrine of the Lord's Supper is to be learned, and other passages must be interpreted in their light.

When the Saviour was discussing the doctrine regarding holy matrimony, He based His argument on the passage in Genesis which deals with the institution of marriage (Gen. 2:24). These words contain no figurative expression and are basic for all else that the Bible says on marriage.

In proving his doctrine of justification, Paul adduces such passages as deal expressly with his teaching. In Gal. 3:8 he wrote: And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the Gospel unto Abraham, saying in thee shall all nations be blessed. Quoting from Gen. 15:6 Paul wrote (Gal. 3:16): "Even as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness."

While the method of basing a teaching on specific prooftexts finds little favour today it is the method approved by Scripture, and it at the same time is the only certain guarantee against false teaching. One cause of false teaching is that someone takes a dark passage of the Bible and interprets it according to his own preconceived notion and then either ignores the clear passages which refute his doctrine, or changes their meaning.

**D. In the interpretation of Scripture both the purpose and the context must be observed.** While it is true that specific words and sentences of the Bible are the material to be interpreted, care must be taken to consider the words preceding and following the passage. We must not take the words out of their connection. The interpretation must agree with the scope of each passage, with its detail, and the order of presentation. "Whoever does not pay attention to that which precedes and follows in Holy Scripture, perverts the words of the living God, said the Hebrews". Since the early days of the Christian Church interpreters have agreed that "the words of the Gospel are correctly understood when they agree with the preceding; for that which precedes must agree with that which follows where the truth is expressed." (St. Augustine)

No interpretation dare contradict the preceding context nor that which follows. To illustrate this axiom, we refer to Gen. 6:2, which reads: "The sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they



were fair, and they took them wives of all which they chose." Now the question: Does "sons of God" refer to men or angels? The answer is apparent from the context, which does not speak about angels, but about the propagation of the human race. Also in other passages the expression "sons of God" is used to designate human beings. Inasmuch as nothing compels us to interpret "sons of God" as angels and all evidence refers to human beings, we equate "sons of God" with men. The apparition in I Samuel 28 was an evil spirit and not the spirit of Samuel, because the words spoken are out of harmony with Samuel's faith. The argument of Julian Apostate that the Christian principle not to avenge evil invalidates civil authority is exposed as untrue because the Bible in the passages forbidding revenge is speaking of the conduct of Christians as individuals and not of the government.

**E. The foremost help in Bible interpretation is the knowledge that the central thought of Scripture is to present Christ as Saviour of the world.**

Scripture makes much of the fact that Christ is the centre of all Biblical knowledge. Philip introduced the Saviour by saying: "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and the Prophets did write, Jesus of Nazareth" (John 1:45). Preaching in the home of Cornelius, Peter said of Jesus: "To Him give all the Prophets witness" (Acts 10:43). Speaking about his own message, Paul wrote: "I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (I Cor. 2:26). And Jesus emphasised the necessity of the centrality of His person and work in Scripture by saying: "Had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed Me for he wrote of Me. But if ye believed not his writings, how shall ye believe My words?" (John 5:46,47)

Luther continually reminded his readers: "All Prophets preached of the Christ who was to come." "That alone is the true Gospel which presents Christ to us and teaches what good things we should expect from Him....In the Gospel nothing else should count than only this person Jesus Christ. Whoever knows that may thank God." "Thus the entire Holy Scriptures, and especially the

Prophets and Psalms, say that He [Jesus] was sent to take upon Himself the woe of the entire human race."

Taking those passages which clearly tell us of Christ and letting these illumine the rest of the Scripture, we are certain to see and believe all that the Bible tells us about our life on earth and the gaining of life everlasting.

## **V**

**In the interpretation of Scripture the common usage of human language must be observed.**

**A. The Holy Spirit gave the Scripture in human language.** In the Book of Deuteronomy, chap. 30:11-14, Moses taught this truth and gave a practical application. He was answering the charge of such people as said: "You demand obedience to the Word of the Lord; but who knows whether we grasp it, since it is a heavenly Word?" Moses' reply was: "The Word is very nigh unto thee." You need not go up into heaven or cross the uncharted deep to discover the meaning of the Lord. He speaks to you in your own language as you use it in your own home or on the street.

**B. Since the Holy Spirit gave the Scriptures in human language it necessarily follows that the grammatical usage of language must be observed in interpreting words and sentences.**

Attention must be called to the fact that before Scripture can be understood theologically, it must be understood grammatically. Christian doctrine is based on the correct grammatical meaning of the words, *i.e.*, on the common usage of human language. The importance of this practice is shown by the fact that Luther's insistence on the correct grammatical understanding of the Bible re-established purity of doctrine in the Church.

In the Epistle to the Galatians the Apostle Paul stresses the importance of interpreting the Bible according to the common usage of human language. He writes (chap. 3:16): "He saith not, And to

seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy Seed, which is Christ." By the simple application of the rules of human language the Apostle establishes a very important point of interpretation.

Where this common usage of human language is not observed false doctrine is the inevitable consequence. The followers of Swedenborg claimed that the Bible was nothing but a series of parables which only God could explain. At the present time some of the worst offenders are the Christian Scientists, who brazenly impose their false and blasphemous ideas upon the clear words of Scripture. To observe the common usage of human language in Bible interpretation, we must remember that "the sense of Scripture can be found only in the *words* of Scripture". "We should stay with the clear, bare words of Scripture and its natural style and peculiarity, as is customary according to the rules of grammar, the common usage of language, the natural way of speaking; just as God gave language to mankind." (Luther) Whoever would interpret the Bible must be sure that he has the words of Scripture and that he knows their true meaning. The fact is that if we are to understand the Bible, we must learn its language, so that we may be sure that we are understanding what the Biblical writers meant by the words they use. It is essential to learn the precise meaning and relation of the words used by the holy writers. In Bible interpretation we are dealing with words - primarily with their basic meaning, but at the same time we must be careful that we do not attach meanings to them which we have learned from extra-Biblical sources. We call attention to such words as "sin," "forgiveness," "righteousness" and "faith." The form of the word and its combination with other words dare not be overlooked, and thus the entire field of philology is essential in Bible interpretation.

**For the sake of exactness and thoroughness teachers in the Church should base their interpretation of the Scripture on the original text.**

The original text of the Bible is Hebrew, with brief sections Aramaic, in the Old Testament, and Greek in the New Testament. Scholars operate with these languages because **the original text**

contains many shades of meaning which cannot be reproduced in a translation. If it could truthfully be said about Luther's writings, "It is not easy to make the great, rugged, impetuous German speak our language acceptably", this holds all the more true in translating the Bible. The New Testament word which is translated "sin" (*hamartanoō*) means just that. If, however we know that its original connotation is "missing the mark," a world of pictures is opened to us. The word "stumbling block" (*skandalon*) is very correctly so translated, but the picture is unfolded much richer when we realise that the Greek word refers to a stumbling block connected with a snare, which, if touched, will not merely cause you to stumble, but at the same time spring a trap and cause the death-dealing noose to choke you. To unfold such rich pictures, theologians use the original languages of the Bible.

There is another reason why the theologian should know the original language of the Bible. **By using the original text the teacher in the Church is better equipped to disprove false interpretations.** Leaders in the Church are not only to feed the flock of Christ but at the same time also to warn and caution against false doctrine. It is their business not only to interpret the Bible correctly but also to disprove the false interpretations of errorists. These false interpreters can most easily and effectively be exposed by referring to the original text. Luther remarked: "I might have been pious and preached the Gospel in obscurity; but I could not have disturbed the Pope, his adherents, and all the reign of Antichrist....I should have failed in my work if the language had not come to my aid and made me strong and immovable in the Scriptures." Illustrating his remarks by a reference to the Waldenses, who despised the use of the original text of the Bible, he wrote: "I have also been able to accomplish somewhat, while they have remained without influence." Speaking on the basis of personal experience, Luther pleads with the theologians of all times: "In the same measure that the Gospel is dear to us, should we zealously cherish the languages".

A thorough understanding of the original languages of the Bible equips the theologian to guard against misinterpretation of Bible translations. The Biblical languages are at times, in a derogatory sense, called dead languages, but we are thankful that they are "dead" for, being dead they are static, and the meaning of their words does not grow or change. In our modern languages the meaning of words continually changes. The translation of I Thess. 4:15 is: "We...shall not prevent them which are asleep." Three hundred years ago, when our English translation was made "prevent" meant precede, get ahead of. That is what the original text says. Today the word "prevent" has an entirely different meaning. By a knowledge of the original text the theologian avoids misinterpretations which might otherwise occur.

While the competent use of the original languages is of great importance to the theologian, we must guard against the idea that the theologians thereby discover new doctrines. **No new doctrines are found by the use of the original text.** Regardless of whether the Bible is studied in Hebrew or Greek, in English or German, in Chinese or Swahili, the truths remain the same. "Baptism doth also now save us" (I Pet. 3:21), "God is Love" (I John 4:16) present no other doctrine in English than in Greek. Doctrines do not change with language. Nor is it possible to find new doctrines in one language which are not contained in another.

**Also those who have merely a correct translation of the Bible can be certain that they have the correct doctrines of the Bible.** The saving truths of Scripture are expressed in such clear and unmistakable terms that also a preacher who is not able to read the Bible in its original text can immediately recognise them. The same holds true of everyone who carefully reads his Bible translation. We should be very grateful for these translations. Up to the days of Luther and Tyndale the Bible had been published throughout the Middle Ages chiefly in those same languages in which Pilate had put his superscription on the Cross of Jesus. Then, of course, it was difficult for most laymen to know that they had the correct doctrine; but now, with the Bible or at

least parts of it translated into about 1,100 languages, we all can read "in our tongues the wonderful works of God" and be certain of the correctness of our doctrine.

## VI

**Each passage of Scripture has only one Spirit-intended meaning.**

Every passage of the Bible is to be understood only in that sense which the Holy Spirit intended to convey when He inspired it. Only this sense is the true, the real, the actual sense. "No sentence or form of words can have more than one true sense, and this is the only one we have to inquire for. This is the very basis of all interpretation. Interpretation without it has no meaning. Every man or body of persons making use of words does so in order to convey a certain meaning, and to find this precise meaning is the object of all interpretation. To have two meanings is equivalent to having no meaning. The interpretation of two meanings implies absurdity."

Only a deceiver intentionally writes so that his words have more than one meaning, and only a deceiver imputes more than one meaning to a passage of Scripture. It is generally agreed that the Bible directs us to heaven, but directions which are ambiguous are no directions at all. Since the Holy Spirit does not speak to deceive but to teach and instruct us, we must all agree that each passage has but one actual, one intended, sense and that this is the only meaning it has.

During the Middle Ages it was customary to interpret the Bible in a fourfold sense. This attempt caused confusion and uncertainty in doctrine. To guard against such misuse Luther warns: "The Holy Spirit is the most simple Writer - in heaven and earth; accordingly His words cannot have more than a single meaning." "We should not say that Scripture, or God's Word, has more than one sense."

**The so-called "spiritual, or allegorical, or typical, meaning" is not another meaning besides the real**

sense, but it is the true meaning as recorded by the Holy Spirit. To illustrate this point, we may refer to the statement in Gal. 4:22 that "Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman." When the Holy Spirit caused Moses to write the story about Hagar He intended to use this story as an allegory later. This is evident from Gal. 4:24, where the Apostle, speaking by the same Holy Spirit, calls this story an allegory. Only in the New Testament does the Holy Spirit open up to us the full sense of this story, His own intended sense. Thus the passage has a "spiritual meaning" but this is and remains nothing else than the originally intended sense.

The "spiritual interpretation" by the Holy Spirit is to be carefully distinguished from that attempted by human interpreters. Peter declares the flood of Noah to be a type of Baptism (I Pet. 3:20-21). This interpretation is correct, for it is given by the Holy Spirit Himself. But when human interpreters would continue the picture and say that the ark represents the Church, the door stands for the Word of God through which the people enter the Church, this interpretation may be according to the analogy of faith; yet it cannot be proved, and no one should build his faith upon such interpretations or demand Scriptural authority for it. "Whatever interpretations would present an article of faith must be so well grounded and so certain that you must be ready to die for it," Luther fittingly remarks. Only when the Holy Spirit Himself has interpreted a passage as an allegory, may such interpretations be used as proof. If human interpreters could interpret allegorically, they could prove anything from anything.

Yet the real, the actual sense is not always to be found in the literal, but frequently in the figurative meaning of the words. Scripture speaks of God's arm (Ps. 77:15, *et al.*), His hand (Heb. 1:10), His ear (Dan. 9:18). How absurd to insist that these words are to be taken in their proper sense. To understand the opening words of the Lord's Prayer in this sense would mean that God were locked up in heaven. To guard against such absurdity, we must carefully note that the real sense of

a passage is at times found in the figurative meaning of the words. When Christ says, "I am the Vine" (John 15:1), these words do not mean that He is a woody growth. To understand these words in their literal sense would make only nonsense. Again, when Christ says of the false prophets, "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matt. 7:20) it is evident that He is not speaking of fruits like apples or pears but of their doctrine. Or when Jesus speaks of Herod as a fox ( Luke 13:32), He uses this word in a figurative meaning. He says Herod is a sly and cunning person who possesses these characteristics of a fox. In instances like those cited, only the figurative meaning gives us the true sense of the text.

**It is not human fancy but God's Word that determines whether a passage is to be understood in the literal or the figurative sense. Therefore we dare not depart from the literal sense of any word or sentence unless Scripture itself compels us to do so. Such compelling reasons are: circumstances of the text itself, parallel passages, and the analogy of faith.**

If human interpreters were free to determine whether a passage is to be understood in the literal or the figurative sense, we could never have any certainty of the meaning of the text and its language. "For if everyone be allowed, according to his own lust, to invent conclusions and tropes in the Scriptures, what will the whole Scripture together be but a reed shaken with the wind, or a kind of Vertumnus? Then, in truth nothing could to a certainty, be determined on or proved concerning any one article of faith, which you might not subject to cavillation by means of some trope. But every trope which is not absolutely required by Scripture itself ought to be avoided as the most deadly poison." (Luther)

The danger of permitting interpreters to depart from the literal sense of a Scripture passage according to their own inclination is pointed out by Luther in his reply to Erasmus: "All heresies and errors have not arisen from the simplicity of the words in the Scriptures,..... but from men not attending to the simplicity of



the words and hatching tropes and conclusions out of their own brain."

There need be no confusion as to when a word is to be taken in a figurative sense. Scripture itself clearly indicates in what sense a word is to be understood. If a passage contains a figurative expression, the same teaching will be stated clearly in direct words, somewhere else in Scripture.

Unless the circumstances of the text itself, or some parallel passage, or an article of faith force us to understand a passage of Scripture in a figurative meaning we must understand it in its literal sense. (Luther)

**All proof passages must be taken in their literal sense.** Stressing this axiom of interpretation, we say: "Now, surely there is no interpreter of the words of Jesus Christ as faithful and sure as the Lord Christ Himself, who understands best His words and His heart and opinion, and who is the wisest and most knowing for expounding them; and here, as in the making of His last will and testament and of His ever-abiding covenant and union, as elsewhere in [presenting and confirming] all articles of faith, and in the institution of all other signs of the covenant and of grace or sacraments, as [for example] circumcision. the various offerings in the Old Testament and Holy Baptism, He uses not allegorical, but entirely proper, simple, indubitable, and clear words.

Where Scripture teaches doctrines of faith, it does not employ figurative language. The old exegete Lyra compares the basing of doctrine on figurative language to removing a house from its foundations, so that it crashes. Luther would not even let an angel from heaven base any doctrine on a figurative explanation Scripture. The great dogmatician of the Lutheran Church John Gerhard says: "In articles of faith we dare not depart from proper, exact, literal meaning of the words."

**Proof that a passage must be understood in a figurative sense must be both apparent and sufficient.** "There is a great difference whether I say, This *may* be the meaning, or whether I say, This and nothing else *must* be the meaning. By the former conscience cannot be bound; on the latter it

rests securely," says Luther. By taking clear passages of Scripture and interpreting them in a figurative sense much modern unbelief has arisen. Chiliasm, old and new, has been propagated on the principle that certain passages of Scripture may be interpreted allegorically. Such argumentation has no place in the Christian Church. If a passage is to be interpreted figuratively, the proof must be obvious and sufficient. A Christian is to accept only such doctrines as are so certain that he is willing to live and die for them. Each passage of Scripture has of necessity only one intended meaning.

One more thought should be stressed regarding Bible interpretation. It should not be a mere pastime or academic exercise. The linguist, the philosopher, the jurist, will all find the work of interpreting the Scripture fascinating, but its real objective is greater. The chief purpose of the laymen as well as the theologian in searching the Scripture should be to find therein eternal life. Every Christian should busy himself with Bible interpretation, *i.e.*, aim to read the Bible with understanding, for his own blessing and salvation. "Especially should the theological exegete endeavour to serve his hearers or readers by opening to them the Scriptures and thereby making their hearts burn within them, chiefly by expounding unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Christ" and in sound Scriptural theology present unto them "the abundance of gold, silver, and precious stones which he has lifted from the inexhaustible mines of Scripture." (V E Mennicke. Reprinted from *The Abiding Word*, Vol. 2, 1947, pp 35-58.)