

First Principles of Bible Study

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INTRODUCTION

The constant concern of the child of God who dearly loves the Lord is to know and to do the will of God. He recognizes that the Bible is the source book of truth. It is the only authority that discloses the will of God for his life, but the Bible is often difficult to understand.

One might ask, “How can I, as a student of the Word, reach into the treasures of truth that comprise the Bible? Many verses seem irrelevant; many seem impossible to understand. Learned theologians frequently have great differences of opinion concerning what the Bible teaches: How can I determine which teacher, preacher, or theologian is leading me correctly? Must I be limited to blindly following a teacher, knowing that he is a fallible human being and therefore subject to error?”

“What about the problems that arise from the different translations of the Bible? How can I know which ones are trustworthy? Do I dare trust paraphrases, which seem to make the Bible easier to understand?”

This booklet was written to answer these questions and present a few basic principles that should be kept in mind as we study the Bible.

May it be that we have a fresh appreciation of the wonderful Word that God has given to us. This Word is the Bible.

BOOKS BY HAROLD CAMPING

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Chapter 1

Biblical Interpretation

Hermeneutics is the science of biblical interpretation. Many learned and scholarly books have been written regarding the principles of hermeneutics. Every believer should be concerned with the subject, because it relates to the process by which we derive spiritual truth from the Scriptures.

It is our desire that by means of this study the earnest student of the Scriptures might clearly understand a few basic principles of proper biblical interpretation. These principles are taken from the Bible; the Bible requires that we keep these in mind. They will be carefully examined as we proceed in our study and are as follows.

1. We must remember that the Bible, in its entirety, is the Holy Word of God. Every word, every phrase, is God-breathed. “Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost (Peter 1:21). It is imperative that we remember that the Old Testament is just as holy and important and uniquely the Word of God as the New Testament.

The Bible is not just any book. It has no peer. God moved holy men of old to write as He guided them. The Bible in its original autographs (that is, in the original documents that were written), is exactly the message that God intended for man. Each book, each paragraph, each sentence, each word, and each letter of each word, is exactly as God intended it to be. The inquisitive student of the Bible who desires to know the truth must, therefore, approach the Bible with holy awe. This is God’s message to man.

Because the Bible is God’s book, only God can open the student’s eyes to see the truths set forth on its pages. Sometimes the truths are very clearly seen, sometimes they are revealed only by diligent search in the Bible, and sometimes they remain hidden, regardless of the student’s desire to know everything God has revealed in the Bible. Because God reveals truth, the student must go humbly to the Scriptures; he must beseech the Lord that truth be revealed to him, for it is God, the Holy Spirit, who leads us into truth, through the Bible.

Furthermore, the student who wishes to know the truth of the Bible must approach the Bible with an earnest desire to be obedient to the precepts and rules in the Scriptures. In matters of doctrine and practice he should be ready to be obedient to anything and everything he reads in the Bible.

2. The Bible is its own interpreter. We compare spiritual things with spiritual (I Corinthians 2). To understand a word or a phrase or a concept in the Bible, we must determine how that same word, phrase, or concept is used everywhere else in the Bible. Thus the Bible becomes its own dictionary; it becomes its own commentary. While such diligent comparison requires much work on the part of the student of the Bible, it is the only way to come to a true understanding of the biblical message. (Young's Analytical Concordance and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance help immeasurably in this respect because they give every word used in the original languages and where the words are found in the English King James Bible.)

Because the Bible is its own interpreter, the student must leave no stone unturned in becoming acquainted with the Bible. There is no short cut. He must spend much time reading the Bible. To try to learn truths in greater and greater detail and not be exposed to all that God has written in the Bible is foolish. The Bible must be read and re-read.

Any conclusion that the student of the Word comes to from reading a particular verse or passage must be tested for its validity by checking that conclusion against everything else the Bible offers concerning the subject. Only when the conclusion is found to be in harmony with all that the Bible teaches can the student know that he is on the path of truth.

3. When we allow God's Word to guide us in formulating principles of Bible interpretation, we find that the Bible has different levels of meaning. As we study a verse in the Bible, we must remember that while it may have only one level of meaning, it may have as many as three.

The first level is historical. When Jesus taught using parables, He was not describing historical events. With few exceptions, such as these parables, the Bible gives us an exquisitely accurate account of events and conversations which actually occurred in history.

The second level of meaning in the Bible concerns moral and spiritual teachings. When a particular historical event is viewed in the light of the commandments of God as they are found throughout the Scriptures, we may look upon the event as an example of an application of God's laws.

The third level of meaning relates to the Gospel of salvation. This is the dominant and most important message of the Bible. The whole Bible is, in fact, the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible reveals God's wonderful message of salvation.

Thus, there are at least three basic principles that must be kept in mind to study the Bible. They are summarized as follows.

1. The Bible alone and in its entirety is the Word of God.
2. The Bible is its own interpreter.
3. The Bible normally displays more than one level of meaning or significance.

The purpose of this study is to look at these three principles in greater detail. A thorough understanding of these principles will prepare the student to receive the rich and wonderful truths that are hidden within the Bible.

The Bible Alone and in its Entirety is the Word of God

The first principle to examine in greater detail is that the Bible alone and in its entirety is the Word of God. In the examination of this principle, let us ask, “What is the true Gospel?” As we answer this question, we will see that the Bible alone and in its entirety is the Word of God. It alone and in its entirety is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What is the true Gospel? No evangelical believer needs to struggle for an answer to this question. The true Gospel has everything to do with the Lord Jesus Christ. If we recognize Him as Lord and Savior, we have the true Gospel. The Bible declares in I John 4:2-3:

Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.

God says through the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 15:1-4:

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.

Does it follow then that anyone who holds these truths must be a follower of the Gospel and is to be accepted as a brother in Christ? Must we recognize as followers of the true Gospel any church or denomination that is ready to make these principles part of its statement of faith?

Unfortunately, the question is not quite that simple. Satan and the demons admit that all these things are true of Christ. For instance, the demon in Mark 1:24 said of Jesus in the flesh: *“I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God.”* In Luke 4:41 God informs us:

And devils also came out of many, crying out, and saying, Thou art Christ the Son of God. And he rebuking them suffered them not to speak: for they knew that he was Christ.

These devils are not saved nor are they to become saved; and yet, in their declaration, they apparently satisfy the criteria of I John 4:2-3 for those who are of the Spirit of God. Jesus speaks of false prophets in Matthew 7:15-23. In verses 22 and 23 He says of them:

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

The false prophets appear to satisfy the criteria set forth in I John 4:2-3. We can see therefore that someone may use the name of Christ, do work in the name of Christ, and thus appear to identify with the Christ of the Bible, but he is not necessarily a follower of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This line of thinking may leave us in shambles. How are we to recognize the true Gospel if we cannot trust those who say they preach Christ and who do their work in the name of Christ? Can we trust no one?

As you can see, the question, “What is the true Gospel?” is not as easy to answer as you may have thought.

We must find the answer to this question! How dreadful it would be if we followed a false prophet who brought a false gospel and we trusted that it was the true Gospel. We could end up in hell - confident that we were saved while believing in something other than the true Gospel. We must find the answer to the question concerning the nature of the true Gospel.

In seeking for the answer to this important question, we might also ask, “How do we know about Christ? Where do we learn of Him?”

Immediately and correctly the answer one gives is, “Of course, we learn about Christ from the Bible. It, as the Word of God, is our source of information concerning Jesus and the salvation He offers.”

How true this answer is! The Bible is the only authority by which we can know what to believe about Christ. This principle is clearly presented in the Bible. We read about the nature of the Gospel in I Corinthians 15:1-4. Verses 3 and 4 say:

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.

In the phrase “according to the scriptures,” God declares that the Bible is the authority of the Gospel.

In Luke 24:13-48 Jesus discusses His resurrection with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Significantly, He indicates to them that the authority for His actions is the Scriptures. In verses 44-46 we read:

And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day.

The principle of the ultimate authority of the Scriptures is seen in the temptation of Christ by Satan. Again and again, when Satan tempts Jesus, our Savior replies, “*it is written*” (Luke 4:4, 8, 10).

Thus, the Bible is the authority that tells us about the Gospel. It is the source book of truth. The knowledge we have concerning Christ or God’s plan of salvation must be firmly based on the Bible.

All of the Bible is the Word of God

Having established the principle that the Bible is the authority of the Gospel of salvation, the next obvious question is: “How much of

the Bible must we trust to know that we are following the true Gospel?” More specifically, we might ask: “Based on I Corinthians 15:1-4 and I John 4:2-3, if we believe Christ has come in the flesh and we trust in His death and resurrection, can we be sure we are following the true Gospel? Can we have the true Gospel regardless of what we believe concerning creation, the end of the world, hell, predestination, etc?”

The answer to these questions is found in II Timothy 3:16. There we read:

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

God indicates by this statement that the whole Bible is the Word of God. Therefore, it gives us, in its entirety, information concerning the Gospel. The whole Bible is the Word of God. The Bible, in its entirety, is the revelation of God’s will for man. Every doctrine taught in it is an essential part of the revelation of the Gospel.

The Old Testament is equal in importance to the New Testament. When Jesus declared in Luke 24:46 and Luke 4:4, “it is written,” He used as His authority that part of the Bible that today we call the Old Testament. God states in II Timothy 3:16 that, “*All scripture is given by inspiration, . . . and is profitable for doctrine, . . .*” He is speaking especially of the Old Testament because it was the only Bible available to the church at that time.

The importance of the relation between the Old Testament and the New Testament church is underscored by the language of I Peter 1:10-12.

Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into.

In this statement, God emphasizes the principle that the Old Testament was written to be as important to us today as it was to Old

Testament Israel. Note in verse 12 the words, “not unto themselves” (meaning the Old Testament believers), “but unto us they did minister” (that is, to believers in this present day). The Old Testament must be read and studied as carefully as the New Testament.

We learned from II Timothy 3:16 and I Peter 1:10-12 that the whole Bible is the Word of God. We must not countenance the idea that we are to follow only the New Testament. Every word in the entire Bible is the Word of God.

Progressive Revelation

The Bible is the complete Revelation of God’s Word to the human race. We are not to add to it. We are not to take away from it. It alone and in its entirety is the Word of God.

However, when we consider how we receive truth from the Bible, we have another matter altogether. God insists that there is a timetable known only to God by which He reveals the truths of the Bible to mankind.

For example, Jesus clearly told his disciples that the time would come when He would be killed and after three days, He would rise again. Mark 8:31 declares:

And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Even though this is a plain, clear statement, it was not understood at all by the disciples. It was only after His resurrection, as the disciples were reminded by the two men in shining garments, who stood outside the empty sepulcher, that they understood. Luke 24:6 - 8 informs us:

He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, saying, the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again. And they remembered his words.

God had given them the revelation that Christ was to be killed and rise again, but it was not a revelation that became a part of their understanding until Christ had risen. Likewise, we read in Ephesians 3:3-5:

How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words; whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit;

God is indicating that a mystery was made known to the Apostle Paul, “*that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel*” (verse 6). However, this truth was repeatedly written about in the Bible, for example, Abram’s name was changed to Abraham because he would be the father of many nations (Genesis 17:5-7).

Many years earlier, Jesus had told the disciples in Matthew 28:19:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

The truth that those whom God would save would include people from all nations of the world is taught in many places in the Bible. But while this truth was included in God’s revelation to mankind, only when Saul of Tarsus had become saved was it truly revealed to the minds of the apostles.

This principle of progressive revelation is especially emphasized in Daniel 12:8, 9:

And I heard, but I understood not: then said I, O my Lord, what shall be the end of these things? And he said, go thy way, Daniel: for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end.

In God’s revelation, which is the Bible, God has a great many things to say about the end of the world and the details that lead up to the end of the world. But God has a timetable for the giving of the understanding of those truths.

God has a timetable for the giving of a fuller understanding of many of His truths.

The true meaning of these statements is not to be revealed to the minds of men until the time determined by God. This is why many devout, God-fearing theologians of the past have endeavored to explain the meaning of Biblical end-time passages, but they have not even come close to the truth. This was not a failure on their part. It

was simply not time for God to reveal the meaning of these end-time passages.

Thus, we can expect that in our day, when the signs are showing that we must be close to the end of time, the meaning of a great many Biblical passages should become revealed to the minds of careful, diligent students of the Bible. The very fact that we can find great harmony in our understanding of Biblical passages that heretofore have been very obscure greatly encourages us that God has placed us on the right track. We can expect, therefore, that many passages of the Bible which in earlier times have been somewhat mysterious, can now be understood.

The Bible the Supreme Law Book

It must also be emphasized that the Bible is a book of law. It is the supreme law book by which God governs all mankind. Even as each political government has written laws by which the rulers govern so, too, God who is King of kings and Lord of lords, has a written law by which He governs. Moreover, rulers of nations are subject to the written law of their land. So, too, God is subject to the written law, the Bible, by which He governs the nations. This principle is set forth in the language of Psalm 138:2:

I will worship toward thy holy temple, and praise thy name for thy lovingkindness and for thy truth: for thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name.

We stand amazed at the idea that the Word of God is above all His Name. But when we understand that the Word of God is a synonym for the law of God we learn that God, too, is subject to all of the laws He has written in the law book, the Bible. When we read the 176 verses of Psalm 119, for example, in each of more than 170 of these verses we find a reference to words such as law, precept, commandment, word, testimony, statute, etc. Each of these words is a synonym for the word law.

The Bible is a law book that God uses to govern the nations, and it also indicates there will be a trial to discover the guilt or innocence of those whom God governs - the whole human race. We read in II Corinthians 5:10:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

God has declared that this trial is to be at the end of the world. Revelation 20:11, 12 describes this trial:

And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

A trial requires a judge, and throughout the Bible God has repeatedly indicated that God in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ is the Judge. We read, for example in Psalm 9:7, 8:

But the LORD shall endure for ever: he hath prepared his throne for judgment. And he shall judge the world in righteousness, he shall minister judgment to the people in uprightness.

The law of God (the Bible) also reveals the penalty that will be required of those who are found guilty. That penalty is eternal damnation. God warns in II Thessalonians 1:8, 9:

In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;

The fact that essentially the Bible is a book of law is normally not apparent to the reader of the Bible. This is because God declares His laws in the context of history, in the context of examples of peoples and nations that disobeyed His laws and suffered the consequence of their sins. God's laws are frequently hidden because God sometimes spoke utilizing metaphors and parables. But in the measure we begin to understand these obscure passages, we always find that the basic truth being brought is the law of God.

An integral part of God's law book is that He declares His purpose and plans to publish the teachings of His law book to all the world. Moreover, a most important part of God's law are the laws that govern God's salvation plan - a plan that is required to maintain the integrity of God's law.

Because God is subject to the laws set forth in the Bible, He cannot have a people for Himself eternally unless their sins (their

violations of the law of God) have been adjudicated (these individuals have stood for trial) and the penalty demanded by the law (eternal damnation) has been paid. Therefore, when God the Father gave to Christ those whom He had elected to salvation (John 6:37) it meant that Christ must somehow first satisfy the requirements of the law of God as it applied to these individuals. That is, the penalty for the sins of these elect individuals had to be paid before they could be forgiven so they could eternally be with Christ.

This is why Jesus had to become sin for them, be brought to trial as their stand-in, as their substitute, on their behalf. This is what the cross is all about. There Christ was found guilty because all of the sins of the elect were laid on Him. It was at that time God poured out His wrath on Him on behalf of those He came to save. Because God is under the same law that mankind is under He had to suffer sufficiently so that His suffering would be perfectly equal to each of these elect persons spending an eternity in Hell. Only because He was God as well as man could God so intensify the punishment on Him that it was equal to a perfect satisfaction of the law's demands.

Once we have learned this tremendously important principle that the Bible is God's Supreme Law Book we should tremble as we read it. God, in the Bible, is constantly declaring the laws by which we are to live. Violation will absolutely bring about the penalty of eternal damnation.

The Bible is to be Obeyed

Because the Bible is God's revelation, it is to be obeyed. God emphasizes this principle in I John 2:3, 4, where we read:

And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

The Bible is the law book or rule book that presents the commandments, which are to be obeyed. This is the reason that the devils can believe and acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ who has come in the flesh and yet they are subject to eternal damnation. They are correct concerning the doctrines of Christ but by no means are they ready to be obedient to anything and everything that is in the Bible.

In I John 4:2 we read: "Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is of God" The key word is "confess." We commonly use this word to mean a simple and open admis-

sion of truth, but the Bible's use implies not only admission of the truth, it also implies identification with that truth. Therefore, only a child of God, a person born of the Holy Spirit, actually confesses the truths of I John 4:2, 3, for only he is ready and willing to be altogether obedient to the Gospel.

When we read about the false prophets in Matthew 7:15-23, we discovered that although they claimed to identify with the Christ of the Bible, they were unsaved. In that context (verse 21), Jesus declares:

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.

The false prophets did not do the will of God, and therefore we know that their gospel could not be trusted. God is teaching that the true Gospel is intimately associated with obedience to the Bible, because the Bible is the record of God's will.

Therefore, two principles can be firmly and safely stated.

1. The whole Bible is the Word of God. It is the ultimate authority and the Word of God.

2. A follower of the true Gospel is ready to be obedient to anything and everything in the Bible. It is the authority to which we are to submit.

God summarizes these principles in Revelation 22:19 where He warns:

And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

The Bible Alone is the Word of God

We must face other questions: "Is the Bible alone the Word of God? Does the Holy Spirit lead men to truth by means other than the Bible? For example, is it possible for God the Holy Spirit to speak to me in a dream or in a vision?"

As we examine these critical questions, we must be guided by the biblical account of the experiences of the early New Testament church. Their Bible was what is now called the Old Testament. Oc-

asionally, people received additional revelations of the will of God by such means as dreams, visions, or angel visitations; for instance, Peter received a vision concerning the proclamation of the Gospel to the Roman centurion, Cornelius. Peter's obedience to this vision added the information given in the vision to the written Word. The vision provided knowledge of the will of God.

The Apostle Paul and the Apostle John also received information through visions. These visions provided help in knowing the will of God.

In the church at Corinth, there were those who received additional information regarding the will of God from a phenomenon called "tongues." Those who received the gift of tongues spoke in an unknown language, "mysteries" in the spirit (I Corinthians 14:2). What they received from God could have been in the form of praise, prayer, or additional revelation. When this happened in the assembly, they were commanded to seek from God interpretation of the message, so that the whole congregation could be edified. They were edified, because this information was a declaration of the will of God and could be considered an addition to the written Word. The combination of the written Word and the Word received in the "tongue" gave them more complete knowledge of the will of God (to which they were to be obedient).

Therefore, the question that faces us is: "Can it be possible today that God is supplying additional revelations of His will by tongues, visions, or dreams?" The answer to this question must be found in the Bible.

While the Bible was being written, additions were made to it as holy men spoke, being moved by the Holy Spirit (cf. II Peter 1:21). Then God completed the written Word, and when He came to the last chapter of the last book of the Bible, He declared (in Revelation 22:18):

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book.

With this declaration, God effectively ended the possibility of any further revelation from Himself. With the completion of the New Testament we were given a more extensive revelation than that enjoyed by the church at Corinth. With the writing of the Book of Revelation, we have the entire New Testament and the Old Testament; and to the Old and the New Testaments, nothing is to be added. Never again would God give divine information by means of a dream, a vision, a

tongue, or an angel visitation. God has given the complete account of His will.

Thus, we have another principle concerning the nature of the true Gospel: The Bible alone is the authority under which the Gospel stands. The true Gospel is circumscribed by the Bible. There is no other source of divinely articulated or verbalized truth.

We may combine the foregoing principles into one statement: **The Bible alone and in its entirety is the Word of God.** The true Gospel is completely identified with and has as its authority the Bible alone and in its entirety.

Some might argue, “But Revelation 22:18 speaks of “this book.” This book must refer to the Book of Revelation. Therefore, this verse does not end further additions to the Bible; rather, it limits further expansion only of the Book of Revelation.”

A bit of reflection will show the failure of this reasoning. If we assume that the phrase “this book” refers only to the Book of Revelation, then in fact it must relate to the whole Bible. The Bible is one cohesive whole. A verse or chapter added to or taken from the Book of Revelation is added to or taken from the Bible - the Book of Revelation is an integral part of the whole Bible. In Revelation 22:7-9 we read:

Behold, I come quickly; blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book. And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God.

In these verses God speaks of those who “keep the sayings of this book.” We cannot keep the sayings of any part of the Bible unless we understand the meaning of those sayings. We cannot understand the meaning of any part of the Bible unless we view the verses in question in the light of the whole Bible. Thus, to “keep the sayings of this book” must mean to become involved with the teachings of the whole Bible. Therefore, “this book” must be the whole Bible.

What about Direct Bible Quotations Coming to Us?

Others will insist, “But the information I received in a vision or tongue was a direct quotation from the Bible. Therefore, it was not an addition to the Bible.”

This argument is also invalid, as can be shown, for example, in Acts 2:17-21, where the Apostle Paul under the guidance of the Holy Spirit quotes from Joel 2:28-32. Can Acts 2:17-21 be removed from the Bible because it is not an addition to the Word of God - it is a duplication of something already in the Bible? Immediately we know that we cannot do this. Acts 2:17-21 is as important a part of the Word of God as Joel 2:28-32. Many verses, phrases, and even chapters are duplicated in the Bible, but each one is an important part of the Word of God.

If someone believes he has received a direct revelation from God in which the Bible is quoted, he would be attempting to add to the Word of God. He would be guilty of violating the command given in Revelation 22:18.

Praying in a Tongue

One observation of those who are interested in tongues is that when they pray in a tongue, they cannot be adding to the Scriptures. They fail to realize that there are many prayers in the Bible, including prayers by David, Solomon, and Ezra. As these men prayed, they were guided by the Holy Spirit to say the words that have been written in the Bible, the Word of God. While they prayed to God, God used them to write the Word of God. Likewise today, if someone claimed to pray in a tongue inspired by the Holy Spirit so that God guided him as to what he prayed, then his prayer would just as certainly be the Word of God as are the prayers recorded in the Bible.

Therefore, anyone who claims to pray in a tongue is adding to the Word of God, and anyone who thinks he receives a revelation from God in a tongue, in a dream, or in a vision, is adding to the Word of God. The principle of Revelation 22:18 will be violated by anyone who attempts to pray in a tongue.

In Revelation 22:18-19 we have a clear statement by which we can know whether or not we follow the true Gospel. The true Gospel is circumscribed by the Bible. If one has a gospel that starts with the Bible and then adds what is believed to be divine truth from other sources, such as dreams or visions, he is following a gospel other than the true Gospel.

The Authority Regarded as Divine Establishes the Gospel

What is the divine authority that structures and determines the nature of the true Gospel? The Bible. We read a verse in the Bible and interpret it by focusing the whole Bible upon it. We are to interpret

Scripture by Scripture, or as I Corinthians 2:13 puts it, by “comparing spiritual things with spiritual.”

If one believes that the Bible is the Word of God, and believes that some other book is also divine revelation, then his authority is a wider authority than the Bible alone. If someone believes the Bible is the Word of God, but also believes that a dream, vision, or tongue is a revelation from God, then his “gospel” is wider than the Bible. He will interpret any Bible verse not according to the rest of the Bible only, but also in light of the information received in the dream or vision.

We can begin to understand why false gospels differ in many points of doctrine from the Gospel based only on the Bible. The doctrines we hold are the products of the authority under which we place ourselves.

A judge who tries a case under the law of the United States will come to a different conclusion than the judge who tries the same case under the law of Canada plus the law of the United States. The second judge has a wider and therefore a different authority than the first.

If I receive a vision that I believe has come from God, and that vision is related to a particular doctrine, it is apparent that I will regard the information of the vision as the latest, clearest, and most important information in regard to that doctrine. I will believe this regardless of what the Bible offers concerning that doctrine. Even if it disagrees to some extent with the Bible, I will consider the vision a truth that modifies what the Bible teaches. I will be following the same principle of interpretation as that which applies to the New Testament modifying truths in the Old Testament. My conclusion concerning the doctrine will be influenced by my vision.

It should now be apparent how important it is to know what our authority is. If it is less than the whole Bible or more than the whole Bible, we will no longer have the true Gospel, which is the Gospel of salvation.

Every Religion Has an Authority

Every religion or gospel is under an authority - an authority its followers believe is the Word of God. The Muslim religion, for example, looks upon the writings of Mohammed as being of divine origin. These writings, therefore, are the final authority in matters of doctrine and practice in that religion. Those who have the Mormon gospel believe that the Bible is the Word of God, but they are convinced that the writings of Joseph Smith, in “The Book of Mormon,”

are also divine. Consequently, the authority that structures and determines this gospel is the combination of the Bible and “The Book of Mormon.”

We live in a day when many people believe that God continues to bring revelations by dreams, visions, voices, or tongues. Those who are interested in these activities have an authority that structures and determines their gospel; their authority is a combination of the Bible and the messages which they believe are from God. This gospel, too, is structured and determined by what is considered to be a divine source of truth.

From these examples, we can see that those who believe that the Bible alone and in its entirety is the Word of God have one Gospel, and those who believe the Bible is the Word of God but who also believe that God brings additional revelations today have a different gospel. The most recent revelation in such a gospel has the greatest impact upon its doctrines. For example, in the true Gospel, we do not dare say that we understand the Old Testament unless we have carefully studied the New Testament. The New Testament interprets the Old Testament. The New Testament shows that the ceremonial laws have been completed in Christ; therefore, we are not to observe the Old Testament Sabbaths or the Old Testament Passover. It shows us that God’s decree that adultery is sin has been strengthened to include thoughts of lust. The later revelation sheds more light on the earlier one, and it is the final word.

Those who believe that God brings revelations today place great importance on the content of the revelations. For them, the later revelations are the last word, and they influence their view of the Bible, which they believe is part of the revelation of God. As a result, their understanding of many biblical passages is different from the understanding of those who believe that the Bible alone and in its entirety is the Word of God.

The true Gospel has as its authority the Bible alone and in its entirety. There is no other divine source of God’s Word. There can be no later additions to the Word of God. The true Gospel, which has as its authority the Bible alone and in its entirety, is different from a gospel which includes in its authority revelations which may have come after the Bible was completed. These other gospels may use ideas, phrases, and words from the true Gospel, but they are false because they have an authority other than the true Gospel. Many different gospels employ such terms as “the blood of Jesus,” “the cross,” “the resurrection,” “heaven,” “hell,” and “Holy Spirit,” etc., but the use of these biblical words does not guarantee that the true Gospel is being taught. Only by following the Gospel that has its

authority circumscribed by the Bible can we know that we have the true Gospel.

Does the Bible Contain the Word of God?

Some theologians declare that the Bible **contains** the Word of God; this implies that parts of the Bible are not the Word of God. Effectively, they make themselves or their churches the ultimate authority: they decide what parts of the Bible are the Word of God. Rather than being subject to the Word of God, they are ruling over the Word of God. They have a narrower authority than the whole Word of God. It is important that we recognize that the whole Bible is the Word of God!

Early in this study, we raised the question, “What is the true Gospel?” We learned that the true Gospel is circumscribed by the Bible. It is based on the principle that the Bible alone and in its entirety is the Word of God. The Bible is the complete written presentation of the Gospel.

This conclusion has ominous implications for many congregations and denominations; it tells of enormous consequences for today’s evangelical community. The importance is stressed in the warning of Revelation 22:18-19, where God declares that anyone who widens the authority by “adding to the words of this book,” is subject to the plagues written in “this book.” The plagues relate to God’s wrath being visited on those who are subject to hell. God is saying that those who add to the words of this book are subject to eternal damnation; they are therefore unsaved. They do not understand the true Gospel of salvation.

By the same token, anyone who has a narrower authority upon which his gospel is based (he believes that only parts of the Bible are the Word of God), is warned by Revelation 22:19 that he, too, is subject to eternal damnation. Specifically, God declares, “God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city . . .” How important it is that we recognize what constitutes the true Gospel.

God states the same warning in slightly different language in Galatians 1:8-9. God declares through the Apostle Paul:

But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.

The double warning indicates the certainty of the curse! It emphasizes the seriousness of being sure that we are following the true Gospel, for to be under the curse of God is to be subject to hell.

One might theoretically accept divine truth as coming from the Bible only, yet in actuality, regard certain doctrines or practices of his church or denomination as inviolate. He insists on holding a doctrine regardless of what the Bible indicates; effectively, he has placed that doctrine on a level of authority equal with the Bible. He has inadvertently widened the authority of the Bible, and for this reason, he could never come to an agreement with those who more carefully practice by the principle that the Bible alone is the ultimate authority.

The Authority of the Bible is Narrowed by Some Who Claim the Whole Bible is God's Word

There are those who narrow the authority of the Bible by insisting that certain passages of the Bible apply only to the historical situation in which they are originally found. For example, they conclude that we need not obey I Corinthians 14:34, which teaches that women are not to speak in the congregational worship service. They argue that this verse speaks of a problem unique to the culture of that day and, therefore, is not applicable to believers today. They conclude that it is not applicable because we live in a culture which is different from the one that existed at the time of the church of Corinth.

Let us examine this conclusion. If the statement of I Corinthians 14:34 is applicable only to the culture of that day, then Jesus' statement in the conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 does not apply to us today, because Nicodemus was an Old Testament Jew. None of us is an Old Testament Jew. Also, the Old Testament would have no application for us today, because it was addressed to ancient Israel or nations such as Babylon. They were entirely different cultures from the cultures we have today. Moreover, the Book of Romans would have no application for us today, because it was written to the church at Rome almost 2,000 years ago. Philippians, Colossians, and the New Testament epistles would have no application for us. All of Jesus' teachings would also have to be set aside in view of the fact that He was addressing individuals who lived in a culture different from ours.

A conclusion that allows us to set aside certain passages because they seem to be associated with a cultural problem of long ago and therefore is said to have no application for our lives today, effectively, destroys the authority of the Bible. It is a direct violation of II Timothy 3:16:

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

This conclusion narrows the authority of the Bible in that no longer is the whole Bible the Word of God. God, in fact, placed these accounts in the Scriptures so that the principles would be laid down for the church throughout its history. I Corinthians 14:34 is as applicable to churches today as it was in the days of the church at Corinth.

The question at issue is: Are we ready to be obedient to the Bible? If we are not prepared to be obedient, we can destroy the authority of the Bible by such stratagems as the decision that a passage had meaning only for the culture of the day in which it was written. We must never lose sight of the fact that the whole Bible is the Word of God and is therefore to be obeyed.

This principle underscores the importance of constant Bible study for all who teach or preach God's Word. We should know the biblical basis for every doctrine we teach. If we find that a doctrine does not have adequate biblical authority, or that there are passages in the Bible that appear to contradict a doctrine we teach, it is imperative that we resolve these differences before we continue to teach that doctrine. We who believe that we have been called to teach or preach have a grave responsibility to be as accurate as possible in the Word of God. God declares in James 3:1: "My brethren, be not many masters [teachers], knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation."

The seriousness of being a teacher of the Word of God cannot be over-emphasized. Teachers and preachers of the Word of God should search the Word of God unceasingly so that what is said to the class or congregation will be as true and trustworthy as possible. A teacher or a preacher must be ready to correct the doctrine he teaches at any time, if he finds it is contrary to the Word of God.

May our Lord give to all those who love Him and wish to be obedient to Him the wisdom and humility to submit to the authority of the Bible.

Thus far in our study we have discovered that the Bible alone and in its entirety is the verbalized, articulated Word of God. We will study another principle of Bible interpretation, that is, we are to interpret the Bible by the Bible.

Chapter 2 The Bible is its Own Interpreter

The second principle we shall examine is the truth that the Bible is its own interpreter. This truth is of great consequence, for it determines the method by which we examine each verse of the Holy Scriptures.

When Bible teachers disagree on a doctrine, frequently one of them will say, “Well, he has his opinion, his interpretation, and I have mine. Therefore, we don’t see this verse in the same way.”

If this teacher’s statement is correct and conclusive, we can do almost anything we wish with the Bible. We become free to read the Bible and make our own personal judgments as to what God means in every verse. Unfortunately, this is the thinking behind the writing of paraphrased Bibles; this is the thinking that has influenced some of the newer translations of the Bible.

This makes man the ultimate judge and the final authority. It effectively declares that God has written words and phrases that we call the Bible but which depend upon us, as teachers, to decide what God means; thus, the reader has the final say as to what is truth.

This kind of “anything goes” thinking has spawned cults and false gospels which prevail all over the world. A teacher interprets verses according to a preconceived idea and then tries to show that his gospel is Bible-based.

This condition exists in many of our churches and congregations. One of the most puzzling phenomena currently facing the church is that theologians of various denominations are so far apart in their understanding of doctrines supposedly related to or derived from the Bible. A result of this is that Lutherans remain Lutheran from generation to generation, Baptists remain Baptist, Presbyterians remain Presbyterian, Methodists remain Methodist, etc. A basic reason for the existence of different denominations is that each denomination has reached a different conclusion concerning doctrines.

For example, some denominations hold the premillennial view from generation to generation. Other denominations hold the post-millennial view from generation to generation, and others hold the amillennial view through generations.

There can be only one true account of the return of Christ, so at least two of the foregoing views must be wrong and unbiblical. The return of Christ and the end of the world simply cannot take place in three different ways.

The same problem exists with other doctrines. For instance, there are differences between denominations in the teachings of the nature and character of salvation and the meaning of baptism. One would think that as diligent students of the Scriptures, who love the Lord and continue to search the Bible, they would come closer and closer to each other as they grow closer to the fulness of the truth. If this were the condition in each denomination, all denominations would gradually agree more and more. Yet year follows year, and there is no rapprochement of any kind.

This phenomenon is a result of the fact that the Bible is not fully relied upon as the source of absolute truth. The Bible is often regarded as just another of the various disciplines or philosophies of the secular world. One can understand the proliferation of different schools of thought in the secular world, because in the disciplines of music, art, and philosophy there is no absolute truth. Each discipline is allowed to exist independently of the others and is accepted just as it stands.

When we deal with the Bible, however, we are dealing with absolute truth. Anything that is taught, any doctrine that is held, that is not in agreement with truth is false. In short, any doctrine not in agreement with absolute truth is a lie. If a teacher or pastor declares to his congregation, "Thus saith the Lord," when the Lord has not said that, he is mouthing doctrines that are out of man's mind rather than God's. We immediately sense how reprehensible this is.

If well-meaning, learned theologians teach three different answers to the same question, we are forced to conclude that someone is teaching that which is false. This is an exceedingly serious matter - no child of God wants to preach lies. It is a matter that will not go away by itself.

There is evidence that these differences in understanding biblical doctrine exist today. What is the problem? We can both understand the problem and find its solution.

The problem is that theologians and pastors are taught to come to the Bible from the perspective of the already established theological position of the church or denomination to which they belong. A Baptist is taught to come to the Bible with Baptist presuppositions; a Lutheran comes to the Bible with Lutheran presuppositions. One who is Reformed, comes with a Reformed perspective. Theological presuppositions govern the way the Bible student interprets and understands the Bible. Each denomination believes that its presuppositions reflect Bible truth, and the teachers and pastors cling tenaciously to them. They are convinced that perspectives from other denominations are most likely incorrect and are not to be considered or fol-

lowed, although they readily acknowledge that each denomination has a right to exist. They believe their own denominations' presuppositions are the most accurate, and they remain with them. The consequence is that the Baptist remains a Baptist, the Lutheran remains a Lutheran, the Presbyterian a Presbyterian, etc.

Unfortunately, most theologians come to the Bible in much the same way that students come to social science classes - art, music, and philosophy. For example, there are many schools of philosophy: the Eleatic school of philosophy, the Ionian school of philosophy, Byzantine philosophy, Arabic, and Western philosophy, to name a few. Each philosophy has its original thinkers, faithful followers, and **some** truth in it. Ordinarily, followers of one school of philosophy accept the rightful existence of and potential contribution of other schools. No one would conclude that the philosophy he follows has absolute truth. He follows a particular school of philosophy because he believes that it is more acceptable than any other.

Most theologians approach the Bible the same way. They do not regard the Bible as the law book of absolute truth. It is a book to be viewed from their denomination's school of thinking. They contend that there are various schools of thought (denominational presuppositions) that relate to how the Bible is to be interpreted. The school of thought followed will influence conclusions derived from the Bible. They feel they are being honest if they remain faithful to their particular denominational presuppositions. It is believed that theologians of other denominations are faithful to the Word if they remain faithful to their denominational presuppositions. In this way, the study of the Bible is viewed as an activity similar to the study of social sciences.

May the study of the Bible be regarded as a social science? Is it not the book of absolute truth? Only when a student realizes it is absolute truth does he understand what the Bible is. If he has not come to this realization, in essence he is teaching less than the truth - he is teaching falsehoods.

Theologians should recognize that the Bible teaches absolute truth. Is it not true that the conclusion that all men are sinners is absolute truth? This is also the case in regard to conclusions such as: the certainty of death, burial and resurrection of Jesus; God created the world, Christ will come to judge the world, there will be a New Heaven and a New Earth; and salvation is possible only through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

These teachings are absolute truth. They are taken from the Bible, which is the book of absolute truth. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the pastor and the teacher to study the Bible until he has found the absolute truth of every aspect of the Gospel. Only then can he be sure

that he is not teaching a lie.

The Bible is unrelated to the social sciences and cannot be studied in the same manner. It must be approached analytically, as one would approach an engineering book or a law book, even though the engineering book or law book does not begin to have the level of truth that is contained in the Bible - it has no peer. It is absolutely true in all its aspects. We must carefully, prayerfully, and diligently search out the truth. As we do, God Himself will lead us into the truth.

Now we can see what the church has done. Inadvertently, by approaching the Bible as social sciences are approached, the church has placed itself above the Bible. Theologians within these churches would vigorously deny this assertion. They would maintain that the Bible is altogether infallible and inerrant and is the only authority on which they can lean and structure doctrine.

This claim might be made confidently, but the sad fact is that in practice it is altogether negated because too frequently the theologian comes to the Bible with his denomination's presuppositions. With this approach, the Bible is no longer the ultimate authority; the denominational presuppositions are the ultimate authority.

The argument is made that each presupposition is derived from the Bible, and therefore the Bible is actually the ultimate authority. In practice, however, the presupposition is never questioned by most theologians. They treat their presupposition as being inviolate; it belongs to that denomination and must never be tampered with.

The solution to this problem is: we must go to the Bible with no prejudices and no presuppositions whatsoever. If we are to find truth, the presuppositions have to be examined and critiqued as vigorously as any doctrine that we claim to have received from the Bible. We must let the Bible alone guide us into truth. We must recognize that we are human beings with feet of clay; we have sin-tainted minds. Our minds are finite and not like the infinite mind of God. We must hold the position, "let God be true, but every man a liar" (Romans 3:4).

It could be argued that the preliminary statements of solution and principles of Bible interpretation presented in this study are presuppositions. However, the question at issue is: These statements come from where? Are they biblical teachings? Can it be demonstrated that they originate in the pages of Holy Writ, or are they just someone's theory? If they cannot be shown to be derived from the Bible, they should be corrected. No presupposition should be retained if it is not in complete harmony with the Bible.

There is agreement among various denominations that the Bible is true, that the Bible is the infallible Word of God, and that it is the

only rule for doctrine and practice. There is also agreement that we cannot trust our minds, and that we must put every thought under the searchlight of the Word of God. This is what the Bible clearly teaches.

If theologians would come to the Bible with no more than these common presuppositions, and humbly let the Bible lead them into truth, there would be increasingly more agreement between those who are children of God, regardless of denominational background. Truth is truth. An incorrect doctrine does not agree with the Scriptures. Stubbornly holding wrong doctrine in the light of the Scriptures is the most serious problem in the church today.

If we are truly children of God, at the moment of salvation we received our resurrected souls in which we never wish to sin again. Even though our unsaved bodies continue to lust after sin, there is within us a constant and earnest desire to do the will of God. As we read and study the Bible, we learn more and more about how we can live in accord with God's will. Because we have this intense desire to do God's will, we become greatly troubled when we discover that we have been holding wrong doctrine. If we read a Bible verse that appears to contradict a doctrine we hold, we will become concerned. Our new nature (our resurrected soul), has an intense desire to be true to God's Word. This concern will not disappear until we have re-examined this doctrine and we are comfortable with all that the Bible teaches concerning it.

The tragic other-side-of-the-coin is that if we persist in a sinful practice after reading statements in the Bible that show the practice is sinful, we should wonder whether or not we are really saved.

If we continue to hold and teach wrong doctrine after we read Scripture that suggests it is wrong, we must ask the logical and fair question, "How can I be a child of God and blatantly continue holding wrong doctrine?" The seriousness of this question cannot be overestimated.

It may be that as we humbly approach the Bible, and let God lead us into truth, we find that a doctrine or a series of doctrines taught in our church as denominational presuppositions are indeed true to the Word of God. In this case, we are assured that the church fathers who presented these doctrines did their work well. The Holy Spirit enlightened their hearts and minds to truth.

If I may insert a personal note. I was brought up in a church that is Reformed in doctrine. While I had heard about the so-called five points of Calvinism, I had never been taught well enough so that I could go to the Bible to prove any of these five points that concern themselves with the doctrines of grace. The fact is, I can recall reading essays by learned authors on these doctrines in my younger days

in some of our church papers and being very confused by what I read.

However, in my role as host of the “Open Forum” program, people ask me questions concerning the Bible, “live” on the air, and I have had to face with great zeal the whole question of the nature of salvation. When I was finally able to ferret out all the biblical teachings concerning the nature of salvation, to my utter delight I found that the five points of Calvinism were in agreement with everything that I had found in my independent studies of the Scriptures. The Reformers of old had done their work well and accurately.

On the other hand, in my personal experience I have also found that other historical statements of the church are not as biblical. For example, today we have confessions like the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, the Belgic Confession and the Westminster Confession. While I have a very high regard for these confessions of the church (because in many cases they have been hammered out in the crucible of a church facing apostasy or heresy, and because in the main they can be tested and found to be quite accurate insofar as the Scriptures are concerned), nevertheless, there are statements in some of them which I believe can be shown to be incorrect insofar as the Bible is concerned.

Do we dare to disagree with the confessions? We must dare to disagree if we can show from the Scriptures that the confession is incorrect. Otherwise, the confession becomes an authority higher than the Bible.

As long as we are on the subject of confessions, I think it is appropriate to make this statement: The confessions have served the church exceedingly well in that they have provided stability at times when theologians might have become careless in their study of the Scriptures. They can give a church a lot of security. On the other hand, they can also do a great disservice to the church if the confession is looked upon as being inviolate. We must realize that the confession is the work of man, not the work of God. Only the Bible is the work of God. I am tremendously pleased with Article VII of the Belgic Confession, which reads:

THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES TO BE THE ONLY RULE OF FAITH

We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. For since

the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures: **nay, though it were an angel from heaven**, as the apostle Paul says. For since it is forbidden to **add unto or take away anything from the Word of God**, it does thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects.

Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God, since the truth is above all; **for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself**. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule, which the apostles have taught us, saying, **Prove the spirits, whether they are of God. Likewise: If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house.**

This article of the Belgic Confession accurately presents the biblical principle that nothing can stand above the Bible. It reminds us that accurately dealing with the Bible is of phenomenal importance. The importance of the Bible being the ultimate authority cannot be “swept under a rug.” It cannot be said, “That is your opinion. I have my opinion.” The issue is whether we are going to be true prophets of God or false prophets.

The prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel were convinced that they had truth when they cut themselves and cried to their god to burn the sacrifice on the altar. Their zeal, sincerity, and conviction could not change the fact that they were false prophets. The prophets and Pharisees of Jesus’ day, together with Saul of Tarsus, were convinced that they had truth, and they did everything possible to stop the spread of the Gospel, as taught by the Rabbi, Jesus. They could not be faulted for their zeal, sincerity, or conviction, but they were false prophets. The followers of Jesus were the true prophets. To be a true prophet in our day, it is imperative that we humble ourselves and approach the Bible with the recognition that only God is true, and every man is a liar. We all have within us the possibility of self-deception.

Even after we are saved, we have sin-stained minds. No one on this side of the grave can know truth perfectly. The most careful teacher can at times be in error. Every time we teach in error, we are teaching a lie. Every teacher must go humbly before the Lord and ask forgiveness for that which was taught that was untrue. We all see through a glass darkly.

Teaching doctrine is analogous to living our Christian lives. We saw earlier that as we study the Bible, and we find sin in our lives, our earnest desire is to turn away from that sin. We ask the Lord's forgiveness, and we ask Him to strengthen us as we turn away from that sin. The life of the believer is one of constant learning as he discovers how to live an increasingly more holy life before God.

Each teacher and each pastor should continually be learning doctrine. He can never say there is nothing more to learn. If he has stopped learning, he might as well be dead. We repent of sinful practices as we discover them in our lives, and if we discover we have held and taught an unbiblical doctrine as we study the Bible, we should ask the Lord's forgiveness and turn away from that unbiblical teaching.

Obviously, this is easier said than done. When we repent of unbiblical practices, we usually have the approbation of our congregation, and this encourages us to take the new path. However, when we discover that a denominational presupposition is not biblical or we discover that a doctrine we hold is unbiblical, and we turn away from it, we risk bearing the wrath of colleagues and the wrath of the congregation. We may appear to them to be heretics because we no longer adhere to that particular denominational presupposition or doctrine. A consequence may be that we are driven out of the denomination.

This consequence may seem strict and unwarranted, but that is how monolithic denominations are in regards to what they believe. It is only God's grace working in one's life that enables him to courageously face the consequences of coming closer to truth.

I cannot help but comment on the fact that churches, to a high degree, have figured out how to have a comfortable existence, where everything is agreeable and happy. This makes one wonder why Jesus said in Matthew 5:10-12:

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your

reward in heaven; for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Did Jesus mean the kind of persecution that occurs only in Communist countries? Was he speaking of dreadful bloodlettings by political authorities?

The persecution recorded in the Bible, when the prophets were killed and New Testament Christians were taken to Jerusalem and cast into prison, is persecution by church leaders. The Bible anticipates that the church leaders will be the first to denounce those who make a stand for the truth. People do not change. They do not want the truth any more today than they did at any other time in history. We should expect that if we hold to the truth, we will experience persecution. In our land, physical bloodletting is not fashionable, but it is permissible to scandalize, to vilify those who hold to the truth.

The other side of the coin is, if all appears beautiful, complacent, and secure, then we can wonder, "Do we really have the truth?" Remember that Jesus said, "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you!" (Luke 6:26).

This is not to suggest that we seek persecution. It is to remind us of the fact that persecution is reasonably normative for the true believer. When a pastor discovers that a cherished doctrine of his church is not as biblical as it should be, he can expect persecution as he begins to preach more faithfully to the Word of God.

There is a significant agreement developing today between denominations that historically were quite adamant in their "go-it-alone" understanding of cardinal doctrines of the Bible. The growing unity centers around doctrines that can be shown to be unbiblical. Unity is increasingly found in connection with doctrines such as divorce and remarriage after divorce, the right of women to rule and speak within the congregation, birth control, and the responsibility of the church to physically feed and clothe the hungry masses of the world. Doctrines that favor miraculous healing and additional revelation from God are finding greater approval across denominational lines.

This is an amazing phenomenon in view of the fact that this latter-day unity is based on principles that are contrary to the Bible. One cannot help but wonder if this is the end product of a church age in which the churches have become careless with the Bible because of presuppositions. When bringing judgment, God first blinds theologians so that they begin to rewrite the rules of the Bible. As a final judgment on the church prior to Judgment Day, He will allow the churches to be overcome by false gospels - gospels in which it is

taught that there is more to divine revelation than the Bible alone.

We have wandered beyond the scope of our study, and we should now return to the question: How are we to understand the Bible? How are we to interpret the difficult passages of the Bible? God gives us the answer to this question in I Corinthians 2:13:

Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

In this statement God rejects the idea that we can interpret the Scriptures to make them agree with what we have in our minds or our denominational doctrine. Our thinking, our opinion, our ideas, these are of no value. Only the Bible, the source book of spiritual truth, can guide us to a solution, to a true understanding of any verse. God Himself, in the person of the Holy Spirit, will lead us into truth if we humbly look to Him for guidance (John 16:13). The sword of the Spirit, as He leads us into truth, is the Word of God - called the Bible. An understanding of any part of the Bible must be reached by searching the rest of the Scriptures for help to gain this understanding.

Some verses seem to be easily understood, but there are many that are difficult, and yes, even seemingly contrary to other verses. The verses that seem to be easily understood: How can we be sure that we understand them correctly?

For example, in Matthew 25:31 God is surely speaking of a time when all nations will literally stand before Him. At that time, all those who have done good works, such as fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and visited the sick will go into heaven to be eternally with the Lord Jesus Christ. It seems that this passage teaches that our salvation is based on our good works. This passage is a convincing "proof" passage for those who believe that their good works make a contribution towards their salvation.

However, those who have read more widely and more carefully in the Bible immediately become uneasy with the conclusions of the last paragraph. They argue, "But doesn't the Bible say that we are saved by grace and not by works?" Indeed, they are correct. Salvation is by grace alone. Our works are the proof, or evidence, or result, of God's saving power in our lives.

How do we know that salvation is by grace and not by works? How do we know that whatever Matthew 25:31-46 is teaching, it is not teaching that our good works are the basis of, or grounds for, our salvation? We know this because many other verses in the Bible teach and emphasize that salvation is altogether of grace. Ephesians 2:8-10

is one passage that teaches that salvation is altogether of grace. There we read:

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Many theologians today subscribe to the hermeneutical principle that if a verse makes sense as it is read, seek no other sense. In other words, if the verse appears to be straightforward and clear, and if a conclusion as to what it is teaching immediately can be found, then you can be sure that you are on safe ground in teaching this conclusion. However, this hermeneutical principle is biblically invalid.

Every conclusion, regardless of how solid it appears to be, must be tested to determine if it is in harmony with the rest of the Bible.

How Are We to Understand Isaiah 2:4?

Isaiah 2:4 declares:

And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

It certainly seems that this verse is teaching that there will be a time on this earth when universal peace will prevail - when warfare between nations will have come to an end. The believer who holds the premillennial view thinks this will occur during a future 1,000 year reign of Christ, when He is supposed to rule from Jerusalem. The postmillennial believer does not see Christ returning to this earth to reign, rather, he sees a future golden age when the Christian Gospel will pervade the world and nations will cease all warfare. In either case, the conclusion that at a future time war will stop seems to harmonize with some other conclusions concerning future events. Thus, it seems easy to conclude that this verse, which speaks of a cessation of warfare, is clear and understandable.

Is it so easy to understand? In Matthew 24:6-8 God speaks of wars and rumors of wars as the beginning of sorrows, and He describes the final tribulation period as the last event prior to Christ's return and Judgment Day. No possibility is offered in these verses for a time of political peace on this earth.

The heart of man is desperately wicked, as we are informed in Jeremiah 17:9, and we are told in James 4:1-2:

From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not.

The Bible does not allow the conclusion that universal peace will come upon this earth at some future time. World peace is an impossible idea in the face of the corrupt nature of mankind.

What does Isaiah 2:4 teach? The answer is found in the passages of the Bible that speak of peace. For example, we read in Isaiah 40:1-2:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

In this revealing passage, God shows us that the cessation of war that He has in view is not between political nations; it is between the dominion of Satan, to which we belong before we are saved, and the kingdom of God, which we enter into when we become saved. Christ came as the Prince of Peace. Before we were saved we were slaves of Satan; we were at war with God. After we became saved, we were at peace with God. Isaiah 2:4 speaks of the coming of the Messiah to bring spiritual peace to this world. All who believe on Him have come into this peace. Before we were saved, we were a nation at war with the nation which is the kingdom of God. When we become saved, we become part of the kingdom of God, and therefore we are at peace with God. We have become servants of God, who care for the spiritual needs of this world. This is the import of the language which describes believers who use plowshares and pruninghooks.

This understanding of Isaiah 2:4 agrees with all that the Bible teaches. This understanding came only after we realized that the verses, which apparently were quite clear, had to be examined in the light of the entire Bible. Only then could we be satisfied with our understanding of these verses or any verses.

Thus, we can see that the hermeneutical principle that declares, “If the verse in question makes common sense as it is read, then seek no other sense,” violates a fundamental scriptural principle. **Regardless of how clear a verse may appear to be, the doctrinal conclusion we derive from that verse should not be taught as Gospel truth unless it has been checked against anything and everything else in the Bible that might relate to that conclusion.**

Theologians frequently fall into a snare because they violate the principle that conclusions concerning one part of the Bible must be checked with the rest of the Bible. They study a verse or a passage and come to a conclusion but they do not take the time to see if it harmonizes with everything else the Bible teaches on that subject.

The very structure of theological study often fosters unbiblical conclusions. One theologian is an expert in Greek, another is an expert in Hebrew, one in the Old Testament, another in the New Testament. One is considered to have his expertise in the doctrines of Christ, another in the doctrines of the Holy Spirit, and still another in the doctrine of the end times. Theological courses are set up on various subjects so that there is a course in soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), another in christology (the doctrine of Christ), and another in eschatology (the doctrine of the last things), etc.

Structuring theological truth does not necessarily result in wrong conclusions, but it frequently does. For example, it is possible for a theological professor to find many verses that deal with the nature and purpose of the church, and by studying these verses, a theologian may become an expert in ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church). He may come to and teach conclusions that appear biblical as he views them in the light of the verses that speak about the church. He may have an earnest desire to be faithful to the Bible. No one would fault his integrity as he teaches all that he has learned from the Bible.

However, if he has not tested his conclusions to see if they are in harmony with all that the Bible teaches concerning the nature of salvation, the nation of Israel, the end time, the Holy Spirit, and everything else in the Bible, the likelihood is that some of his conclusions concerning the church will be invalid.

He may have done theologically what the designer of a building may do. He designs a building with beams to carry certain stresses and forces but he fails to see that the foundation design is capable of carrying the same stresses and forces. This practice would soon result in the failure of the building. Any designer knows that he must carefully design all parts of the structure to make sure that each beam, and each bolt, etc., will be able to sustain the stresses and forces that will be upon the building. Only then will the building be safe.

Similarly, any conclusion we reach based on our understanding of a particular verse or verses must be tested for scriptural integrity by everything in the Bible that relates to these verses.

We must look to the Bible to interpret Scripture. We cannot look at Matthew 25:31-46 and understand it unless we examine it in the light of everything else the Bible teaches regarding the subject matter in these verses. Only then can we know that these verses are a parable which teach spiritual truth related to salvation.

This is the method of interpretation the Bible tells us to use, as I Corinthians 2:13 declares:

Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

God is spirit, and salvation is God's spiritual program whereby those who are spiritually dead are reconciled to God. They become spiritually alive. God's Word is the sword of the Spirit, and we must realize that to compare spiritual things with spiritual is to compare one part of the Bible with every other part of the Bible. Thus, we are correct in our conclusion that we are to interpret the Bible with the Bible. We are to compare everything in the Bible with everything else in the Bible that may relate to the verse or word being studied. After we have examined the word, phrase, or verse in question in the light of the rest of the Bible (so that we know we are in agreement with the whole Bible), we are ready to teach the meaning of this verse or word.

This means that the student of the Bible must become increasingly expert in the whole Bible. It means that he must unceasingly study every aspect of Bible truth. This is a life-long endeavor, and it requires constant diligence and perseverance. There will be times when it will be necessary to set aside previously held conclusions that do not stand under the scrutiny of the whole Bible. This requires grace and humility, but it is essential if truth is to be served.

The Bible is its Own Dictionary

If we continue to study every aspect of the Bible, we will discover that the Bible is its own dictionary. If we wish to know the meaning of a word in the Bible, we do not go to a dictionary of Greek or Hebrew (the original languages of the Bible). To do so would be useless. The meanings of words have changed during the last two

thousand years to such a degree that it would be a wonder if any of the words used in the Bible had the same meaning today.

We must find all the verses in the Bible in which the word in question is found; then, we see how it is used in these verses. Based on this information, we can begin to discern its meaning and know how it is used in the verse being studied.

To discover the meaning of a verse, it is necessary to do a study of the words and concepts in the verse to see how they are used throughout the Bible. By this means, we can bring the whole Bible to bear on the verse in question.

Occasionally we find a word in the original Hebrew or Greek which is used only once in the entire Bible. In this case, it cannot be compared with its use in other parts of the Bible. However, we can be sure that the content of the word will convey a truth which is found in other places in the Bible. Therefore, it is from the Bible that we can know the parameters that prescribe how we are to understand the word.

The use of biblical words in ancient secular writings may help in finding the meaning of some words, but the secular record must never be considered as trustworthy as the Bible. The Bible's use of the word must be the final authority in determining its meaning.

Only infrequently is it impossible to determine the meaning of a Hebrew or Greek word. It is best to leave it in its original language and trust that at a future date God will open the eyes of a Bible student to learn its meaning.

The Bible is its Own Grammar Book

The Bible is its own grammar book. The careful student may begin to understand tenses, moods, and voices in Hebrew and Greek by studying these languages in the ancient secular accounts. It is conventional for the Bible student to go to Hebrew-English and Greek-English dictionaries for this purpose, but conclusions based on secular evidence cannot stand until they are subjected to the scrutiny of the Bible.

Ideally, the rules of grammar and the meanings of words should be derived entirely from the Bible, because the Bible alone must stand as the final authority in all matters of which it speaks. This includes concepts, ideas, and truths and the form in which these ideas, concepts, and truths are presented. The Bible would be less than the Word of God if this were not so because the grammar and the words are the means by which Bible truth is presented.

The serious Bible student should be relentless in his study of the Bible. Only as it increasingly becomes part of his life will he be able to draw closer and closer to the rich storehouse of truths which is the Bible.

A peril of the Bible teacher is that he may be impressed with the fact that a great many theologians agree on a particular doctrine. It is easy to simply trust that the judgment of these theologians is accurate. Unfortunately, however, theologians frequently build on what other theologians have said rather than checking the Scriptures to make sure that previous theologians have been accurate. Wonderfully, God has given us His Word so that any belief, regardless of how widely held it may be, can be analyzed and checked against the Scriptures.

When Elijah stood on Mount Carmel, he stood alone against hundreds of other prophets who agreed theologically, but Elijah was right and they were wrong. Consensus is never a basis for truth.

The Bible is the revelation of God's will to man. God is the author. God used human authors - they spoke out of their own experience, training, environment, culture, and personality - but they were used of God to produce the Bible, and what they penned, right down to the word and the letters of each word, was the precise word God desired to use as the revelation of His will. Whether Paul or Jesus or Jeremiah or an unnamed scribe spoke or wrote, what was written was God's Word.

Before we can know the truth of any verse or phrase in the Bible, we must compare the conclusion we have reached concerning that word or phrase against the rest of the Bible. Only when we find that the conclusion is in harmony with everything else the Bible teaches can we be sure that we are on the path of truth.

Red Letter Editions of the Bible

We are currently besieged with Bibles called "Red Letter Editions," in which the words Jesus spoke are printed in red and the rest of the Bible is printed in black letters.

Whatever the purpose of the publishing houses in printing these Red Letter Editions, the impact on the reader is devastating. The reader cannot help but think that the words Jesus spoke are more important than the other words because they are emphasized by red type and consequently set off from the rest of the Bible. Thus, the reader unconsciously adopts the principle that the Bible has two levels of authority: the first and most important being the words that Jesus spoke. The second level of authority would be everything else.

This conclusion is contrary to the Bible and effectively undermines the authority of the Bible. The Bible declares that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God. Therefore, a word spoken by Paul or Isaiah or any of the men of God used to pen the Holy Scriptures has equal authority with the words spoken by the Lord Jesus Christ. It is wise to use Bibles that are printed only in black.

The Bible is One Truth

Because God is the author, there is a marvelous oneness and cohesiveness throughout the Bible that makes it a joy to study and contemplate. Words and phrases used in one book are to be studied in the light of words and phrases used elsewhere in the Bible.

For example, the meaning of the Greek word *kamno* used by the Holy Spirit in James 5:15, is to be interpreted in light of its use in two other New Testament passages, Hebrews 12:3 and Revelation 2:3. In Hebrews 12:3, the word *kamno* is translated “wearied,” and in Revelation 2:3, *kamno* is translated “faint,” so the context clearly indicates that this word is related to spiritual weariness. No suggestion is offered that it relates to physical illness. Thus one can discover the meaning in the obscure passage, as James 5:15, by the use in the clearer passages.

When we carefully read James 5:15, we discover that three blessings were experienced by the one who had been subject to *kamno*, and they all relate to salvation: 1) he has become saved; 2) he has been raised up; 3) his sins have been forgiven. These three phrases relate to salvation. James 5:14 employs the Greek work *astheneo*, which is translated “sick” in our Bible, but we find by the use of the word *astheneo* in other places in the Bible that it can refer to any kind of spiritual or physical illness. Because God used the word *kamno* in verse 15 and not *astheneo*, we know that physical healing is not in view in this passage; the focus is on salvation.

Interpreting Scripture with Scripture Helps Us to Understand Matthew 12:36

The statement in Matthew 12:36 can be easily misunderstood if we do not practice the principle of comparing Scripture with Scripture. In Matthew 12:36 Jesus lays down the principle that “every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.” Does this mean that believers will have to give an account before God? By looking at the word “judgment” in light of everything else the Bible offers, we know that believers do not come into judgment. Let us see why this is so.

The Greek word used in Matthew 12:36 and translated “judgment” in the King James Bible is the word *krisis*. This word is used in John 5:24, where Christ declares, “He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.” The word translated “condemnation” is the word *krisis*, the same word used in Matthew 12. Thus, we are assured that those who place their trust in Christ do not give an account before the judgment throne. To expand the thought, we know that the reason we do not come into judgment is that Christ became sin for those who place their trust in Him, and He has already been judged for those sins. Believers cannot be judged for sins that have been taken care of by our Savior. Effectively, believers have already stood before the judgment throne of God to answer for their sins. They did so in the person of Jesus Christ, who as their substitute, was laden with their sins, was found guilty of those sins, and was punished for those sins. The demands of the law of God recorded in II Corinthians 5:10 have been met by Christ on behalf of all who believe on Him. This verse declares:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.

These are just a few of the great number of examples that could be offered that indicate that we must carefully examine words in the light of their use throughout the Bible to discover their true meaning. Since God is the author of the Bible, we know that every word in the original languages was chosen carefully, regardless of whether Luke, Jeremiah, or Moses was the human author, because we know that God is infallible in all that He does. We can place implicit trust in the Bible.

The Bible is Infallible

One must understand that only the original autographs are to be considered infallible. As originally penned in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, they are the articulation of the perfect will of God.

The scribes who copied the originals for later generations had a deep sensitivity to the holiness and uniqueness of the Word of God. Even after hundreds of years, copies were such faithful reproductions of the original manuscripts that one can consider the copies to be virtually infallible.

Usually, the earlier the original was copied, the more faithful the copy. God has provided access to some ancient copies, some of which, in the case of the Old Testament, were made prior to the appearance of the New Testament writings. As a result, translators have a superbly accurate Bible from which to work.

The task of the translator is to translate as faithfully as possible. It is an exacting and difficult job to be absolutely true to the original because languages are not parallel in structure or in meaning of individual words.

Most words in the Bible have equivalent words in the language into which they are being translated. Most phrases in the original texts lend themselves to rather accurate translation without dropping or adding words. In the King James and American Standard versions, any words added by the translators to help work out the translation were italicized. This warns the reader that the italicized word is not found in the original language.

Bibles are available in most of the major languages of the world. These Bibles are well translated and we may consider them to be almost as infallible as the original texts. Because Hebrew and Greek texts are available for study and comparison, students of the Word can examine the original language to check the translators' faithfulness. Young's Analytical Concordance and Strong's Exhaustive Concordance assist non-Greek and non-Hebrew students to study God's use of individual words as found in the original language. Our Lord has certainly blessed us!

To Paraphrase or Not to Paraphrase

It has been claimed that paraphrased editions of the Bible are valuable tools for effective evangelism. This claim is made by many who testify of its validity because someone became a Christian after reading a paraphrased edition.

Is this conclusion valid? Has God guided men in our day to develop more readable Bibles so that His work of saving people will be assisted in the closing days of the earth's existence? Or, instead of being a blessing, will the paraphrases prove to be sinful and God's wrath will be poured out on the church for its audacious use of such books? These questions must be examined carefully and candidly for we are currently being besieged by paraphrased editions of the Bible.

God is infinitely wise. He could have written the Bible simply, so that no one could misunderstand it. God did not intend to write the Bible to be always easily understood. It is true that some verses give readily understood truth, but many verses which appear to be easily

understandable are actually difficult to grasp in their full meaning. The Bible declares in Proverbs 25:2, "It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter."

In Proverbs 1:5-6 God informs us:

A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels; To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings.

These are warnings that the Bible may not be as clear as we would sometimes like to think. We are being advised in these verses that we have to search out the truth. The Bible tells of such difficulties, as Jesus declares in Mark 4:11-12:

And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them.

He adds in Mark 4:34, "*But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.*"

The difficulty in understanding the Word is highlighted by the different teachings in the evangelical community concerning important subjects, such as God's sovereignty, election and predestination, the total depravity of man, particular atonement versus free will, the security of believers, baptism, the Lord's Supper, the final tribulation, the return of Christ, and rewards. One may begin to wonder: can anyone really find truth in the Bible?

One must realize that the Word of God is to be accepted first by faith and not because one understands it. God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, made no sense whatsoever. Killing his son would contravene every promise God had made to him, but Abraham obeyed in blind faith. The Bible is to be accepted by faith. Only then will it be the living Word that leads to salvation. Then it will be the Sword of the Spirit which He will use to lead into all truth. As we humbly trust the Word of God, the Holy Spirit will slowly lead us to truth by His Word.

In paraphrased editions, one senses the following attitude: A scribe has been given a message by the King. He is mandated to give the

message to the populace. The scribe listens to the King's message and realizes it is difficult to understand. He reasons that a better conveyance of truth would be simpler language. He receives the message, rewrites it in his own words, and gives it to the people. He fails to realize that the King, in his perfect wisdom, gave the message exactly as he did with precise purpose in every word.

The audacity, the temerity, the arrogance of this scribe! He did not deliver the King's message; he made himself more authoritative and wiser than the King.

This is what paraphrase translators and those who use them have done. They are insensitive to the nature and character of the Word they are communicating. They have lost their awareness of the holiness of God's Word. They have forgotten that saving people is God's work. Evangelists do not sell the Gospel; they do not snare people into salvation; they do not save people. The Christian is to faithfully witness from God's Word as He has given it. It is God who applies His Word to the hearts of those who are to be saved. As the witness brings the Word, there is a clear line of demarcation between the Bible and the preaching. The Bible is infallible; the preaching may be open to question.

The fact that someone becomes convicted of sin by reading a paraphrase is no rationale for its use. God spoke truth in the Bible through cursed Balaam (Numbers 23 and 24) and wicked Caiaphas (John 11:49-52). He used a donkey to convey His Word (Numbers 22:28-30), but the sins of these men were not excused or covered. Today, too, God can use a statement that approximates His Word to accomplish salvation, but that does not excuse the sins of those who have lost their sensitivity to the holiness of God's Word and substituted the work of man for God's Word. God's elective decree is that the one who was saved while reading a paraphrase would have been saved while reading the Bible.

One might ask, are paraphrases helpful in any way? For example, do they render a useful service when used as a commentary?

Unfortunately, our minds are not dependable. We may realize that the paraphrase is not the Bible, but subconsciously we accept its statements as we accept the Bible - but it is not the Bible. The paraphraser rewrites a phrase (in his own words) according to what he believes is a logical and proper interpretation. If his understanding of the phrase is biblical, he will isolate one particular truth that God intended to be in the original phrase. However, rewriting sets aside the full depth of meaning that God intended to make available in the phrase. In other words, the Bible is emptied of much of its content. If the paraphraser interprets incorrectly, he presents as biblical truth

that which is a lie. Because it is in a format which purports to be the Bible, the reader accepts a falsehood as truth. He clutters his mind with information which at best is merely part truth and at worst is altogether false. What Christian would dare to become a part of this kind of activity? The faithful and safe way to go is to reject paraphrases without delay.

Rewriting the Bible in simple English (or any other language), will be considered sin by few people. Few read the Bible extensively or intensively. Few are ready to be obedient to what the Word declares. We live in the days prophesied by our Lord in Hosea 4:6:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children.

God's wrath will surely be visited upon us for this sin.

Chapter 3

The Bible has More than One Level of Meaning

Thus far in our study two important principles have been discovered that must be kept in mind as we study the Bible. They are:

1. The Bible alone and in its entirety is the Word of God.
2. We are to interpret Scripture with Scripture.

Keep these principles in mind and truth will be found from the Bible.

The use of words and phrases must be studied in individual sentences, the context in which the sentence is used, and how they are used elsewhere in the Bible. The more familiar the student is with the entire Bible, the more he will be helped in his study.

We must recognize that the Bible is God's Word. The Holy Spirit leads us into truth. If we study diligently and pray that God will open our spiritual eyes to truths hidden within the Word, we will grow in grace.

We will now look at a third principle, which is of great importance. It, too, must be understood to realize the spiritual riches of the Bible. That principle is that the Bible ordinarily has more than one level of meaning. These levels are:

- a. The historical setting.
- b. The moral or spiritual teaching.
- c. The salvation account.

These levels of meaning will now be examined in greater detail.

The Bible is Absolutely Accurate in its Record of Historical Events

Many people have the notion that because the Bible is God's Word concerning salvation, it is not trustworthy in areas of history, science, and other fields of learning. However, the Bible is a revelation from God as He spoke through holy men of old; we know that it must be true and dependable.

A favorite target of attack is the creation of the earth. The Bible declares that God created the universe in six days. When we search the Bible, we find this statement abundantly supported. There is no encouragement for the theory that more than six 24-hour days was required.

Modern science has concluded that the world is billions of years old. Is this conclusion valid? The scientific conclusions about the origin of the universe are based on exceedingly scarce evidence. No present-day scientist lived then, and the written record goes back only about five thousand years. The modern-day scientist views the meager available evidence in the light of assumptions he is forced to make. Obviously, his conclusions are no more accurate than the assumptions, or “educated guesses,” on which he based his view. It is impossible that these scientific conclusions can be a fraction as accurate as the majestic statements of the Bible that tell of God’s creation of the heavens and the earth.

The Bible records a flood that destroyed everything that had the breath of life from off the face of the earth. This flood covered the highest mountain (Genesis 6 to 9). To suggest that this may have been a localized flood is to deny the authority of the Scriptures.

The Bible says that in Peleg’s day the earth was divided (Genesis 10). This historic event is seen in scientific evidence that indicates that the earth once had one continent which broke up into the smaller

Unless the Bible shows that an event or conversation is to be understood as non-historical, it is absolutely dependable that every conversation and every historical incident recorded in the Bible actually took place. Archeological evidence may not prove the existence of a particular nation named in the Bible, and an incident may be unusual, nevertheless, we have no right to suggest that what the Bible has recorded is not authoritative.

When the Bible speaks of the nation of Israel passing through the Red Sea, and the “waters were a wall unto them on their right hand and on their left” (Exodus 14:22), it would deny the truth of God to suggest that anything but a miracle occurred. God altered the physical laws to make the waters stand as a wall. The Bible says a prophet named Jonah was cast into the sea and swallowed by a fish. To suggest that this is not an historical event is to repudiate God. The Bible speaks of the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Be assured that this event actually happened in history.

The Bible is impeccably accurate in what God gives us concerning historical events - the facts He brings to our attention - and it is certain that the Bible is equally accurate about future events. The return of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory, the rapture of believers on the last day to go to be with Him, the destruction by fire of the present universe, the creation of New Heavens and a New Earth as the eternal dwelling place of born-again believers, and the removal of the unsaved into a place called hell where they will suffer eternally in payment for their sins - all these things are to be understood as future

events. They are just as certain to take place as it is certain that the historical events recorded in the Bible took place.

It must be emphasized that to deny the historical accuracy of the Bible in its record of creation and the flood will lead to questions regarding future events, such as the destruction of the world by fire and the removal of the unsaved into eternal damnation. God gives a warning in II Peter 3:3-7, 10, 13:

Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts. And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: But the heavens and the earth which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved into fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. . . .

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat; the earth also, and the works that are therein, shall be burned up.

Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.

God's purpose for writing the Bible was not to give us a book on history or science. It was to reveal His salvation plan, and God did this in an historical context. His plan comes to fruition in history. When God selects historical incidents or conversations through which the salvation program will shine, it is absolutely certain that the incidents and conversations, as recorded, are accurate and trustworthy.

The Bible is much more than an account of historical events. It has a second level of meaning which is concerned with teaching moral and spiritual values.

The Bible Teaches Moral and Spiritual Values

II Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and

is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: . . .” God gives moral and spiritual principles and guidelines in the Bible by which we are to live and have a more abundant life. In His condescending love and mercy God gave to the human race, which is made in His image, a written revelation of how to live happily and effectively in the world.

The believer in Christ, he who has received his eternal resurrected soul (also called “spirit”), from the moment of his salvation will have an ongoing desire to be obedient to God. He will heed the admonitions and exhortations of the Bible because he loves God, who is doing the admonishing. When he sins, the believer is deeply troubled; within his own personality, he will feel violated. In his body he continues to lust after sin, but in his soul, where he has been born from above, he wants to never sin again. God in the person of the Holy Spirit indwells him. He has become a child of God and the Holy Spirit will bring him under conviction if he does not confess and turn from sin.

This process is sometimes called “growing in grace” or growing in “sanctification.” It is the experience of every child of God. It is the process by which the child of God will do good works; that is, he will do works pleasing to God. These works are neither a cause nor a basis for salvation. They are an expected result of salvation. Ephesians 2:8-10 beautifully expresses this principle:

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

To receive maximum value from the guidelines for life presented in God’s Word, keep three principles in mind.

1. The Bible is the final authority.
2. The Bible must be read with a view to being obedient to what is found therein.
3. The Bible interprets and explains the rules that God has laid down.

Many rules for man’s conduct may be read in the Bible. For example, the Bible says that we should seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness. It declares that we are not to commit adultery. It emphasizes that we are to be holy just as our heavenly Father is holy.

Rules of conduct are found throughout the Bible. The Bible is the standard God established for the well-being of mankind.

The Bible records hundreds of historical situations which can be examined in light of these rules to discover the blessings that come with obedience and the curse that comes with disobedience. This encourages and helps avoid the consequence of living in violation of these rules. It gives the accounts of Joseph and Daniel and the blessings that came to them as they obeyed God, and the accounts of Israel and Judah, who came under God's judgment because of disobedience. God declares in I Corinthians 10:11:

*Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples;
and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the
ends of the world are come.*

This information is valueless unless it is recognized that the Bible is the Word of God. There is no higher authority which abrogates, invalidates, or explains the biblical statement. It is totally trustworthy and dependable.

We must look upon the examples and declarations of the Bible with a view to being obedient to them. We can know that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, but only by surrendering to all that we find in Scripture will we begin to see the implications and ultimate value of its truth. The Bible is more than just a rule book; it is the living Word of God. Humbly and obediently approach the Bible as the Word of God, and it becomes the sword of the Spirit and God applies His Word to our lives. We will never be able to interpret the Bible properly nor see the riches of His Word, unless we come to it with an earnest desire to be obedient to what is found there.

God declares, "Thou shalt not kill," but we cannot know what He means unless we examine everything in the Bible that relates to killing. Then we can be sure that God does not mean do not kill animals. On the contrary, there are times when the Bible insists that even human life must be taken.

It is imperative that the whole Bible be read and investigated to gain understanding of the moral and spiritual laws God has given.

When we, as unsaved sinners, go to the Bible and are ready to be obedient to all that is found there, we discover that we do not measure up to God's standards. This should bring us to our knees and make us cry out for deliverance from our sins, through the Lord Jesus Christ, who is presented as the Redeemer. To the extent that man lives in conformity to the laws of the Bible, he will enjoy the blessings of God, but he will never know the highest blessing and

happiness - eternal life - if he does not become obedient to the command to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

It has been shown that the Bible is impeccably accurate in its record of historical events. Through these events and the direct commands in Scripture, God gives us moral and spiritual values.

The Bible is the Gospel of Grace

The third level of meaning persistently shines through the Scriptures: The Bible is the presentation of the Gospel of grace. Unquestionably, this is the most important purpose of the Bible. It was written that mankind might know of its need of a Savior. God declares in John 20:31, in regard to signs that Jesus performed:

But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God; and that, believing, ye might have life through his name.

God tells mankind about our terrible predicament through His salvation program. He discloses to us that without Christ we are condemned to eternal damnation because of our sins. Wonderfully, God shows us the escape that He provided through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The presentation of the Gospel message is given to us in two basic ways: (1) by means of statements which speak directly to the question of salvation; and (2) by means of historical events and phrases which are types or figures of God's salvation program. These two methods of Gospel presentation will be examined.

God Speaks Directly to the Matter of Salvation

Almost from the beginning of the Bible, statements are made that speak directly to the question of salvation. In Genesis 3:15 God declares that there would be enmity between Satan and the woman, and between his seed and her seed, and that Satan's head would be bruised. This reflects the enmity that exists between the kingdom of Satan and the kingdom of Christ. Christ is the seed of the woman, who vanquished Satan by going to the cross.

God gives additional insight, in Genesis, of His salvation program when He declares that the scepter would not depart from Judah. This biblical language tells us that a King would come from Judah, and that this King would be intimately related to salvation.

God gives more information about His salvation program in Psalm 103, where He speaks of Himself as the Savior who "forgiveth all

thine iniquities” and “redeemeth thy life from destruction.” In Isaiah 53, God is more specific; He describes the coming Savior as One who would become a Man of Sorrows, upon whom God would lay our sins.

In the New Testament the proclamation of the salvation program comes to its most complete revelation. The first four books of the New Testament present the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior. John the Baptist’s introduction of Him was, “Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sin of the world.” John 3:16 contains a beautiful and specific promise: *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*

The revelation of the Gospel program continues in the epistles. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul and others wrote to various churches and in detail revealed the grand declaration of salvation.

The Bible as a whole is a book that presents the glorious Gospel of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. Anyone who reads it with a humble attitude and realizes that it is the Word of God can be convicted of his sin; and by His Word, God will draw him into the kingdom of Christ.

The Gospel of Grace is Frequently Hidden

The Bible makes many statements that bear directly on the message of salvation, but the message is not always immediately apparent - sometimes it is hidden within the biblical language. We must realize that the message of salvation is the most important message of the Bible. We would expect, therefore, that it would shine through every page of the Bible.

Earlier in our study we saw that the Bible can be trusted implicitly, including when it speaks from an historical standpoint. We discovered that the Bible frequently gives moral and spiritual values, which if observed, assure happiness on this earth. We learned that the major presentation of the Bible is the Gospel of God’s grace as revealed through the Lord Jesus Christ, our Savior. It is this level of meaning - salvation - that is frequently seen in clear language.

The message of salvation can be found hidden within historical conversations and incidents in the Bible. The hidden aspects of this third level of meaning must be examined in addition to the first level of meaning (the historical aspects), and the second level of meaning (the moral and spiritual teachings).

Historical events, words, phrases, and concepts in themselves

do not appear to speak of the message of salvation; nevertheless, we know that the Bible is the Word of God. We know that the intent of the Bible is to bring men face to face with their need of a Savior. We realize that God put nothing in the Bible incidentally or coincidentally or casually. It was not God's purpose to write the Bible to give us a history lesson. God did not write the Bible merely to give us moral and spiritual lessons so that mankind might live more comfortably on earth.

The great predicament of mankind is that he is going to hell because of his sins. This is a major facet of the most important message of the Bible. The rest of the message is that by believing in Christ we can escape this terrible predicament.

Much of the Bible superficially appears to have no direct relationship to God's salvation plan; however, as noted, there is ample evidence in the Bible that its central purpose is to bring God's salvation plan to the attention of the human race.

Is it possible that only those statements that speak directly of the message of salvation are considered relevant to the salvation message? Is the balance of the Bible simply the historical framework in which the Gospel message is cast?

The Bible provides answers to these questions. This is what will be developed as the study continues. God teaches us how to handle the words, phrases, and concepts which at first appear to have no direct relationship to His salvation plan.

The Ceremonial Laws Pointed to Aspects of God's Salvation Program

One major way in which God hid the salvation message is in the ceremonial laws. For example, in the Old Testament God instituted the Passover Feast. This was first observed when Israel went out of Egypt, and the angel of death killed the firstborn in homes that did not have the lamb's blood on the doorpost. The blood of that lamb provided salvation from physical death for the firstborn of their homes. The Bible clearly teaches that that historical event is a picture of the salvation provided through the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Passover. He is the Lamb which was slain so that we would not come into eternal damnation.

In addition to the observance of feast days which anticipated the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the ceremonial laws included offerings, sacrifices, food laws, planting laws, and a host of regulations. These are types or figures or representations of spiritual truths which relate to some aspect of salvation. By means of the ceremonial laws

God has hidden the salvation message within the Scriptures. An understanding of the spiritual meaning of each aspect of the ceremonial laws will improve the understanding of the salvation message.

Let us look at another biblical means of understanding the salvation message. When Christ was on earth He declared from time to time that He was about to speak in a parable. He then proceeded to give the parable and concluded His presentation with the spiritual meaning. In these parables Christ presented an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. These parables paralleled the ceremonial observances of the Old Testament, which were earthly observances with a heavenly meaning. The ceremonial laws, therefore, were historical parables; they were earthly experiences of the Israelites that pointed to a spiritual aspect of salvation.

The third method that God uses to teach spiritual lessons is that of historical events on earth. God shows us in the Scriptures that certain historical incidents were recorded in the Bible so that we might, through them, understand spiritual truth that relates to salvation.

In Genesis we read of Abraham bearing Ishmael by Hagar and the subsequent expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from the home of Abraham and Sarah. In Galatians 4, God calls attention to this historical event to teach the spiritual truth that we have either a salvation that leads to spiritual bondage (typified by Hagar and Ishmael), or a salvation that leads to spiritual freedom (typified by Sarah and Isaac). It is not the purpose of this study to develop this particular truth, but you can read about it in Genesis 21:9-14 and Galatians 4:21-31.

In Malachi 4 God speaks of the coming of Elijah, and in Matthew 11:11-14 our Lord shows us that the Elijah He referred to was John the Baptist. Therefore, God is indicating that Elijah typified John the Baptist.

These pertinent biblical illustrations demonstrate that the message of salvation is greatly expanded throughout the Scriptures. It is far beyond the clear declarations of salvation as stated in John 3:16, Isaiah 53, and the epistles.

When God indicates that He is speaking in parables, that an historical event or a person is a type of an aspect of salvation, or that the ceremonial law points to the Lord Jesus Christ, then it is safe to develop spiritual truth from these Scriptural accounts. Do we dare go beyond this and surmise that other historical events, personalities, and concepts might have a spiritual dimension? Are they types and figures of some aspect of the salvation proclamation? The Bible will guide us to the answers.

In Mark 4 God says, "*without a parable spake He not unto them*" The use of parables was a common teaching method of the

Lord Jesus. In the four Gospels, Jesus sometimes made the point that He was speaking in a parable, for example, in the parable of the sower in Luke 8.

On other occasions, He did not emphasize that He spoke in a parable. He would say, “the kingdom of heaven is . . . “ and proceed with a story. This is a parable even though Jesus did not specifically use that word.

Another example is the story He told of the rich young man and Lazarus in Luke 16. The Bible does not say that it is a parable, but when carefully studied, it is discovered that it must be a parable. If it were an historical event, it would be full of contradictions. For example, we are told that the rich man dies and is buried; therefore, his body is in the grave. Yet, in the next few verses we find that in hell he is described as having eyes and a tongue. However, when his body was buried, he was buried with his eyes and tongue. How then did his eyes and tongue get into hell when his body is in the grave?

Other contradictions are seen in this story if it is assumed that it is an actual historical event. When viewed as a parable (an earthly story with a heavenly meaning), then the contradictions disappear, and we realize that Christ is not giving us a chronological outline of what happens when we die. He is pointing out important spiritual concepts concerning what happens when someone dies without Christ.

From these examples it has been shown that God does not necessarily specifically say that a biblical passage is a parable or that it is meant to indicate spiritual truth which relates to salvation.

God has given pertinent examples of the Bible’s teaching methods by specifically indicating that either a parable is in view or that an historical event symbolizes spiritual truth. These examples show us the path we ought to follow. They direct us to God’s teaching method. We must apply the teaching method to our Bible study.

Do we have any additional biblical validation to proceed in this fashion? Can we search for the salvation message in passages that appear to be historical?

We might approach these questions in this way: in John 20 Jesus speaks of the miracles He did, and He declares in verse 31:

But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that, believing, ye might have life through his name.

Jesus specifies that these miracles were done so that through the record of them we might come to salvation. When Jesus actually

performed the miracles, they were in themselves historical events that appeared to be unrelated to the salvation program.

The healing of a sick man in itself has nothing to do with the salvation program; however, based on the principle in John 20:31, Christ insists that He performed this miracle so that we might know about salvation. The Bible declares that without a parable, Jesus did not speak to them (Mark 4:34); these miracles were historical parables. They are earthly stories - actual historical events - with a spiritual meaning, in the same way that the parable of the sower is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. This conclusion agrees with the principle in Mark 4:34, that “*without a parable spake he not unto them . . .*”

A question persists: Jesus performed miracles that can be regarded as historical parables, but what about the Old Testament? Scripture says that Jesus always taught with parables; it was His teaching method, but the Bible is filled with records of historical events, phrases, and concepts.

In I Peter 1:11 we read that the Spirit of Christ spoke through the Old Testament prophets.

Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.

This verse says that the Old Testament is as much the Word of Christ as the New Testament. This is not surprising because John 1 declares that Christ is the Word. Jesus spoke directly when He was on earth; He spoke directly throughout the Bible because He is the Word of God. The declaration of Mark 4:34, “*without a parable spake he not unto them*” applies to the whole Bible.

God reinforces this, for example, in Psalm 78:1-3:

Give ear, O my people, to my law: incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old; Which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us.

In Proverbs 1:5-6 God informs us:

A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels; To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings.

These sayings parallel what we have read concerning Jesus' teaching method (the use of parables), and this helps us to understand how God has presented truth in the Bible.

God declares the Gospel of salvation on every page of the Bible. At times the presentation of the salvation message is clear. At other times, God has hidden the salvation message within the record of historical incidents and concepts. God teaches through the use of parables. Historical events are, in effect, historical parables.

God had literally millions of historical events and concepts from which to choose and to record. Of all that He could have written, particular events were recorded in order that we might know that Jesus is the Christ and through Him we have salvation.

To assist us in understanding God's teaching method, the Bible gives examples. For instance, at times Jesus said, "This is a parable." The Bible might declare that a particular historical event has deeper spiritual meaning, but it must be remembered that these are examples. God is intimating that in similar fashion we are to attempt to find the salvation message in all the Scriptures.

It is taught in many seminaries and elsewhere that one should not look for deeper spiritual meaning unless the Bible expressly indicates that we are to do so. However, these teachers inevitably find, to some degree, that God's teaching method employs the use of parables far beyond what He has declared to be parables.

Many of these teachers do not hesitate to acknowledge that a New Testament statement such as "the kingdom of heaven is . . ." is a parabolic statement even though the Bible does not say it is a parable. They do not hesitate to look at Boaz in the Book of Ruth as a figure of Christ, the Redeemer, but nowhere in the Bible is there a declaration that Boaz is to be considered a figure of Christ.

They may consider Joseph, who became prime minister of Egypt, a type of the Lord Jesus Christ. Nowhere in the Bible is Joseph said to be a type or figure of our Savior. They may see the leprosy of Naaman the Syrian as a figure or type of sin, etc. Without realizing it, these people are moving in the direction of correct biblical interpretation.

If Boaz is a representation of Christ, it must be decided who Ruth and Naomi represent, and who or what is represented by the other kinsmen, the cities, and the other historical elements in the written account. If Joseph is a figure of the Lord Jesus Christ, what do the other elements represent that are interwoven in the historical account of Joseph in the Old Testament? The answers must be pursued by each believer as he attempts to unravel the salvation story from these historical events.

When a statement in the Bible appears to have no direct bearing on salvation, we must look for a deeper spiritual meaning of that statement that relates to salvation. We may not discover what the salvation teaching is, but that does not mean that it is not there, hidden within the historical account.

Numerous conversations, events, and personalities are recorded in the Bible that point to the Lord Jesus Christ or to some other aspect of salvation. These historical personalities and events are like parables. Millions of conversations and events that could have been incorporated into the Bible were not. God specifically chose those that are written down because they relate to and teach some aspect of His salvation program.

Many passages do not easily reveal the wealth of truth hidden within them. The diligent Bible student may spend hours with one verse or passage, but not discover the deeper spiritual meaning which he suspects is hidden there. This is God's way of keeping us humble as we study the Bible. Often we will have to admit that we do not know the full teaching of a particular passage. Another student at another time may receive the insights we sought in that passage. Like the Bereans, the child of God will continue to search the Scriptures to find the nuggets of truth that God in His grace might reveal to him.

The Bible is God's message of salvation to the human race. The golden thread that runs through the Bible is the declaration that there is a way to escape damnation. God selected each conversation and historical incident in the Bible to present an aspect of His marvelous redemption plan. The message of salvation may be hidden deep within the biblical language, but it is the task and joy of the believer to search out this passage.

Generally, if a Bible statement relates directly to an aspect of the message of salvation, there is no deeper spiritual meaning. For example, when the Bible speaks directly of salvation, spiritual rule in the church, obedience of believers to Christ, the return of Christ, or Judgment Day, we are not to look for deeper meaning. These subjects are in themselves the basic message of the Bible.

When the Bible tells us about Abraham seeking a wife for Isaac, David fleeing from Saul, Jesus healing the sick, and the shipwreck of the Apostle Paul, it is certain that these messages are included to teach us about salvation. We discover this by regarding these accounts as historical parables.

The more diligently we study the Bible to understand the fundamental doctrines of God's salvation plan, the better equipped we will be to search out the deeper spiritual meanings hidden within the historical events.

We will find that a beautiful harmony exists between the spiritual meaning and the message of salvation of a passage. This will appear in the measure that our interpretation harmonizes with the truth of the Gospel message.

Unfortunately, many theologians and pastors have inadequate knowledge of the message of salvation. As a result, they have extreme difficulty in finding the heavenly meaning hidden within the earthly stories. They ridicule the principle that God has hidden the salvation message within historical statements. This criticism does not invalidate the principle that the salvation message is found in the deeper spiritual meaning of an event.

Is it dangerous to attempt to discover spiritual meaning within the Bible? Will this lead to fanciful interpretations? Would it be better to leave this idea and cease from any attempt to find the Gospel declaration on every page of Scripture?

These are serious questions. We never want to read anything into the Scriptures that God never put there. As we seek out this third level of meaning within the biblical account, it is important to remember these three rules:

1. The spiritual meaning must relate to the Gospel of salvation. Salvation is the message of the Bible. It will not do to look at an historical account and try to identify it with certain political nations or a contemporary phenomenon. The spiritual meaning always relates to the Gospel program. This is seen in the parables of Jesus and in the Old Testament presentation of the ceremonial law.

Many theologians realize that the ten horns of the dragon of Revelation 13 and Revelation 17 represent something, but they have decided that they represent the ten nations of the European Common Market.

We can know that their conclusion is erroneous. Political nations of Europe and economic factors in our world have nothing to do with salvation. If nations are involved in God's salvation plan, only two nations can be in view: the nation that is called the kingdom of God and the nation that is called the kingdom of Satan, which includes all the political nations of the world.

The ten horns of the dragon in Revelation 13 and Revelation 17 cannot refer to the kingdom of Christ; they must refer to the dominion of Satan. The number ten spiritually signifies completeness. In this instance, it signifies the completeness of Satan's rule in the world prior to Judgment Day.

When this is understood, all the biblical passages which concern the ten horns are harmonized.

2. **Within an historical situation, to identify words or concepts with spiritual truth, we must have biblical validation.** For example, we frequently find the words “stone” and “rock” in the Bible. Due to the fact that in many verses a stone or a rock is identified with the Lord Jesus Christ, we can attempt to make this application in an historical situation. We have seen that a “sower” can be identified with one who brings the Gospel, and “seed” can be identified with the Word of God.

3. If we have reason to believe that the third level of meaning is within a particular historical statement - that it can apply spiritually to the Gospel - **the conclusions we derive from our analysis of that historical situation must be in agreement with everything else the Bible teaches concerning the nature of salvation.** If we reach a conclusion that is contrary to the teaching of the rest of the Bible concerning salvation, we immediately know that we have not correctly understood the spiritual meaning of the passage.

If these three rules are carefully observed, we will be on safe ground as we study the Bible to discover its deeper spiritual meaning.

Do we run grave risks in attempting to spiritualize statements of the Bible? Some have done this and they ended up with wrong teachings concerning the message of salvation. We must be exceedingly careful in how we deal with the Holy Scriptures. The Word of God is never to be considered a mere plaything of men.

Many have expressed the fear that “spiritualizing” the Bible will lead people away from the true Gospel. This can happen only when we violate the three rules outlined above. If these rules are strictly followed, the understanding of the Gospel of salvation can be nothing but what the Bible teaches.

Every theologian, Bible teacher, and preacher living today looks for the deeper spiritual meaning whenever he is able to do so. Anyone who analyzes the ceremonial laws in order to understand the character of the coming Messiah and His salvation program is looking for deeper spiritual meaning. Anyone who suggests that Joseph (who was sold into Egypt by his brothers, eventually became the prime minister of that country, and saved his family from starvation), was a great type of Christ, has begun to find the deeper spiritual meaning within the historical context. No one can biblically fault the idea that we are to look for the deeper spiritual meaning within the historical context.

Those who say that they accept the Bible literally and would not dare spiritualize (that is, look for a deeper spiritual meaning relating to

salvation), actually do spiritualize when it is convenient; for example, what theologian would dare teach that the beast that comes from the sea and has seven heads and ten horns is a literal physical beast? Even though the Bible does not say that the beast is to be considered a picture or figure of some aspect of God's salvation plan, theologians correctly see it as a representative of Satan or of his dominion.

We have no other choice than to examine every passage of the Bible to discover deeper spiritual truth. This requires hours of exceedingly diligent work; God wrote the Bible in such a way that we are encouraged to search the Scriptures. We receive our reward when we find that a particular historical account unfolds into a dramatic and beautiful picture of salvation.

The spiritual meaning may be obvious, as it is in Isaiah 53, the Gospel of John, and the epistles. It may be hidden in parables, as it is in Matthew 13. It may be hidden in the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament; it may be buried more deeply in the historical events and conversations of the Bible. These historical events were chosen by God for inclusion in the Bible because of the deeper spiritual truths of salvation which are hidden within them.

The dominant message of the Bible is salvation, but the biblical writing of the earthly story may appear awkward. Through this awkwardness, God provides the message of salvation. This particular language is necessary in order to reveal the beautiful truth of the parables.

The Bible's historical events were chosen by God to hide within them deeper spiritual truths concerning salvation; as a result, they have heavenly meaning. For example, in Deuteronomy 34 we read that God buried Moses and no one ever found his sepulcher. No one else in the Bible was treated in this peculiar fashion. We may be puzzled because Moses struck the rock when God had commanded him to speak to it, and he was not permitted to enter the land of Canaan. This seems like cruel punishment for a faithful leader like Moses. These two events can be understood when we grasp the fact that in these passages God presents Moses as a figure or representative of the law, and the land of Canaan is a picture of salvation. Joshua, who led the children of Israel into the land of Canaan, is presented as a figure of the Lord Jesus Christ, who brings us into salvation. The law ends when salvation begins. Moses, who typified the law in this context, died without entering into the Promised Land; keeping the law cannot bring us into salvation. When God subjected Christ to hell for our sins, the demands of the law that the penalty be paid for sins was fulfilled. God's action in punishing Christ ended the law's demands. Thus, the believer does not enter into salvation by keeping the law. In

that sense, the law (typified by Moses) is dead to the believer. Instead, he enters into heaven by the grace of God (typified by Joshua).

The account of Moses when he struck the rock (and water came forth to satisfy the thirst of the Israelites), can be understood if we see Moses as a figure of the law. The rock is a figure of Christ. The water is the Gospel that flows from Christ. Moses (the law) struck the rock (that is, the law brought judgment on Christ), therefore, water (the Gospel of salvation) could flow from the rock (from Christ) to satisfy the thirst (the spiritual thirst) of those who drank the water.

Another example of what may appear to be awkward language is found in the Book of Ruth. Ruth and Orpah, daughters-in-law of Naomi, said to Naomi in Ruth 1:10, "*Surely we will return with thee unto thy people.*" In the historical context they would not have used the word "return" - it implies that they had been there previously. However, God chose this word because these two women are a picture of the human race. The human race began with God in the Garden of Eden and through the Lord Jesus Christ they return to God.

Awareness of the principle that within the historical record God has hidden deep spiritual truths which concern the nature of salvation should cause a Bible translator to be exceedingly careful about the words he uses. He should never substitute an original word with another word that appears to him to be more convenient or salutary. For example, in the original languages God frequently used the word "blood" in phrases such as "the shedding of blood." Some translators have actually substituted the word "death" for the phrase "shedding of blood." The shedding of blood does emphasize death; nevertheless, the word "blood" has implications beyond the word "death," and this kind of substitution should not be made.

Throughout the Bible, numerous historical conversations, events, and personalities are types or figures which point to the Lord Jesus Christ or an aspect of the salvation program. These historical personalities and events are to be looked upon as parables.

Historical events are types or shadows of God's salvation program; thus, these historical events are in effect historical parables.

The study will continue with an examination of a few historical personalities and events that have hidden within them the third level of meaning, which relates to the Gospel of salvation.

Historical Personalities and Events and the Gospel of Salvation

Some events and personalities which point to Christ and the salvation message are obvious. Moses, who is sometimes presented as a figure of the law ("Moses and the prophets"), is also presented as a

figure of our Savior. When he led the children of Israel out of Egypt, he was shown to be a type of Christ, who leads us out of the bondage of sin and into the security of salvation. In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, declared: "*The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet, from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken.*" That Prophet was the Lord Jesus Christ, who was "like unto" or typified by Moses.

David is another type of Christ. As shepherd and as king, he was a figure of Christ, who is the Good Shepherd and the King who rules over the kingdom we enter when we are saved. When David penned the words of Psalm 69, he was speaking of his personal experiences, but by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he was anticipating the sufferings of Christ, who spiritually, and to a much greater degree, would go through the same experiences.

Joshua, who led the children of Israel out of the wilderness and into the land of Canaan, is another type of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is shown particularly in Hebrews 4. Canaan was the land of physical rest for those in the nation of Israel who followed Joshua. Citizenship in heaven (salvation), is the land of spiritual rest for those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ. The name Joshua (Hebrew) is identical to the name Jesus (Greek) in the New Testament.

The nation of Israel is frequently presented to us in the Bible as a type of those who are to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. This is seen in the language of Galatians 3 where God declares in verse 7, "*Know ye therefore, that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham,*" and in verse 29, "*And if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.*" Israel in the flesh, also called national Israel, is the physical seed of Abraham, but in Galatians 3 God says that eternal Israel consists of those who are in Christ, regardless of nationality.

The list of types and shadows which is displayed in the Old Testament is a long one. Egypt, for example, is presented as a figure of being in bondage to sin, the way we are before we are saved. The passage of Israel through the Red Sea under the leadership of Moses is a beautiful picture of the redemption provided for us through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The wilderness sojourn of Israel is a dramatic picture of the sojourn of believers in the wilderness of this world while they travel towards the completion of salvation - the return of Christ on the last day. The entrance of Israel into the land of Canaan is a picture of our entrance into the fulness of salvation when we receive our resurrected bodies on the last day.

In the New Testament, God continues to provide numerous types and figures that appeared throughout history and pointed to aspects of the salvation program. The Bible declares in John 20:30-31:

And many other signs truly did Jesus, in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; . . .

God is saying that certain miracles were recorded in the Bible so that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The records provide us with insights into the nature of salvation. Jesus' healing of the blind is a good example: Jesus brought physical sight to the physically blind, and He brought spiritual sight to the spiritually blind.

The Gospel in the Raising of Lazarus

One of the most significant miracles that Jesus did was raise Lazarus from the dead. In this miracle, recorded for us in John 11, the Bible tells us that Jesus stood outside the tomb of Lazarus and "*cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth*" (verse 43). Lazarus, who had been dead for four days, whose body had no will or life of its own, mysteriously, marvelously, incomprehensibly responded to the command to come to physical life.

In like manner, Jesus commands us to be saved, to come into spiritual, eternal life. When we are unsaved, we are as spiritually dead as Lazarus was physically dead. Lazarus had no will or capacity of his own to respond to the command of Jesus, and we have no desire or will within our lost souls to respond to His command to be saved.

The Bible teaches in Romans 3:11, "*. . . there is none that seeketh after God.*" Ephesians 2:1 indicates that we "*. . . were dead in trespasses and sins.*" How can a spiritual corpse respond to the Gospel call?

Incomprehensibly, there are those who hear the Gospel, respond, and believe. As Lazarus was raised from physical death, we are "*risen with Christ*" (Colossians 3:1). In Christ we are raised from spiritual death into spiritual life.

The Gospel in the Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth gives an accurate record of events of history; however, the book was written in the genre of a parable in which God

gives us insights into the marvelous salvation provided through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The cursed Moabite woman, Ruth, represents all who by nature are under the curse of sin but who respond to the Gospel. Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer who bought and married Ruth, is a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ, who purchased us so that we might become His bride. Orpah, Ruth's sister-in-law, who decided to stay in Moab, typifies those who hear the Gospel and are attracted to it, but who decide to stay in their old lives rather than follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Naomi represents national Israel. During a famine, she and her family left Bethlehem and went to live in the land of Moab. As a result, her husband and sons died, and she was left a widow. In similar fashion, national Israel repeatedly turned away from God and as a result was cut off from being the wife of God. A seed was raised up for the family of Naomi through the marriage of Boaz and Ruth; and Christ, our Redeemer, came from Israel. The son born to Boaz and Ruth was also called a kinsman-redeemer (Ruth 4:14. He, too, was a figure of Christ.

Nehemiah, the Cupbearer of the King

Another Old Testament historical parable that teaches the Gospel is the record of Nehemiah. Nehemiah, who was the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes, went to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall. He is a dramatic picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. The cupbearer would die if the king's drink was poisoned. Christ died as the result of drinking the cup of God's wrath, which He did to save the sinners who were to become children of the King. Nehemiah's work was to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Christ's work on the cross built the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, which includes all who believe in Him as Savior.

Abram, a Figure of Christ

In Genesis 12 is the account of Abram when he went to Egypt because there was a famine in his land. While he was in Egypt, Pharaoh thought that Sarai was Abram's sister, and he took her into his house. This historical event is a picture of the marriage between Christ (typified by Abram), and His people (typified by Sarai). Sarai was not only the half sister of Abram, she was also his wife. Similarly, we who believe in Christ are called His brothers and His bride. The world of sin, represented by Egypt, desires to have the bride of Christ (Sarai). Abram was afraid that Pharaoh would kill him to obtain Sarai; Satan wanted Christ killed because he thought that as a result he could have the bride of Christ.

God presents the Gospel in the Old Testament in numerous ways, including the use of the historical parable. God meant it when He declared in Hebrews 4:2 that the Gospel was preached to Old Testament Israel as well as to us.

We and the Thieves on the Cross

God also uses historical parables in the New Testament. For example, the two thieves who were crucified with Christ - at first, they both reviled Christ but one of them came to believe in Him. The other thief continued to revile Him until he died.

This is a picture of the Gospel as it is preached to all mankind. We are like the two thieves in that, by nature, we are in rebellion against God. Left to ourselves, we revile Him and refuse to turn to Christ. Most of the human race lives and dies in this rebellion, just as did the thief who died in unbelief.

There are those who hear the Word and respond to it. They become born-again believers. They are represented by the thief who submitted to the authority of Christ, and pleaded, "remember me when thou comest into thy Kingdom." In gracious compassion, Christ declared, "*Today shalt thou be with me in paradise*" (Luke 23:42-43).

The thief who responded to Christ brought the Gospel to the other thief. He said, in Luke 23:40-41:

. . . Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss.

This is a picture of believers who, immediately upon becoming born again, have an earnest desire to share the Gospel.

These Signs Will Follow the Believers

Two verses of Mark 16 are dramatic proof of the principles set forth in this study. In verses 17 and 18 God declares:

And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

Some theologians see the fulfillment of these verses in the fact that the apostles were empowered by God to heal the sick and cast out devils. In II Corinthians 12:12 we read:

Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

Additionally, when Paul was shipwrecked on the Island of Melita, while he gathered sticks for a fire, a viper fastened on his hands. He shook it into the fire and was not harmed. This is looked upon as a fulfillment of Mark 16:18, that they shall pick up serpents.

The problem with the conclusion of these theologians is that it does not agree with the prophecy of Mark 16:17, which declares that **these signs shall follow them that believe**. The Bible does not declare that these signs will follow the apostles. Rather, it says these signs will follow those who believe. That is, they will be in evidence wherever believers are found.

However, unless we understand the principle set forth in this study that is derived from Mark 4, that Christ spoke in parables, and without a parable He did not speak with them, we have no way of understanding these verses. The fact is, many doubt that a good part of Mark 16 even belongs in the Holy Canon. It is easy to sympathize with them if we expect verses 17 and 18 to be understood as physical truth. There is no possibility of making sense of these verses if they are to be understood physically as they stand.

However, when we look upon these five signs that follow believers to discover the spiritual meaning hidden within them, we not only find harmony with the rest of the Bible, but we can also know that only God could have written these verses. Indeed, we can be certain that without question these verses are an integral part of the Holy Canon.

The first sign that will follow those who believe is that in Christ's "name shall they cast out devils." This is a figure that points to those who will become saved when the Gospel is sent forth by believers. Those who are not saved are in Satan's dominion. When they become saved, it is as if devils have been cast out of them. That is, they are no longer under the power of Satan. They have been translated into the kingdom of Christ. The miracle that people are saved from Satan's power takes place wherever the Gospel is proclaimed by believers. Indeed this sign always follows those who believe.

The second sign that follows believers is that they shall speak with new tongues. The spiritual meaning of this figure is found in the fact that each nation has its own language. The language spoken by

the unsaved (regardless of political language), is that of the dominion of Satan. The language of the believer is that of the kingdom of God. Even if the same English or German or French words are used in both kingdoms, the language used by the believer is different from that of the unbeliever. The words may be the same, but their meanings and applications to the speaker will be quite different. We are reminded of the Old Testament prophecy of Psalm 40:3: “*He hath put a new song in my mouth,*” and Psalm 98:1: “*O sing unto the LORD a new song.*” Indeed, wherever believers are found, we find them speaking with new tongues.

The third sign that will follow those who believe is that they will take up serpents. In the Bible the serpent typifies Satan (Rev. 12:9). Before we are saved, we are under Satan’s power. He rules over us; but when we become saved, we rule over him. To use the figure of Mark 16:18, we are like the snake handler who takes up the snake. Wherever believers are found, there will be those who rule over Satan as they plunder his house of those who are being saved.

The fourth sign that follows those who believe is “if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them.” When we become saved, we drank the pure water of the Gospel. To listen to a false gospel is to drink poison. For example, in Deuteronomy 32:32, 33, God faults ancient Israel for their idol worship by declaring:

For their vine is of the vine of Sodom, and of the fields of Gomorrah: their grapes are grapes of gall, their clusters are bitter: Their wine is the poison of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps.

However, because believers can never lose their salvation, if they should drink poison by listening to a false gospel, they cannot lose their salvation. This principle is true wherever believers are found.

The fifth sign that follows those who believe is “they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.” Spiritually, when believers share the Gospel with others, they are ministering to those who are spiritually ill. The Gospel applied by the Holy Spirit by means of the witnessing of believers brings spiritual healing, for God says in I Peter 2:24b, 25a, “*by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray.*” This principle is also true and will be in evidence wherever there are believers.

Thus we see that these five signs literally follow all who believe, but we must understand them in their spiritual dimension. Because we can come to such a beautiful understanding of these verses once we apply the biblical principle that Christ spoke in parables, we have

certain vindication that this principle must be seriously considered wherever the Bible gives historical information that in itself does not relate to the Gospel message.

1. The deeper, spiritual meaning must relate to some aspect of the Gospel of salvation.

2. The spiritual identification of elements within the parable of the historical account must be found in the Bible and must have biblical validation.

3. The spiritual conclusion must be in total agreement with everything in the Bible that relates to the nature of salvation.

Put Coals of Fire on Your Enemies

The last illustration is in Romans 12:20, where we read:

Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

The Bible consistently teaches that there are two kingdoms in this world, and they are at enmity with each other. One is the kingdom of Satan; the other is the kingdom of God, and the Lord Jesus Christ is the head. In the biblical sense, every unsaved person is an enemy of every born-again believer, but God admonishes us to love our enemies.

In Romans 12:20 God says that we are to feed our enemies and give him drink. The food we are to give is the wonderful Word of God, the bread of life. The water is the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who hunger and thirst after righteousness shall be filled.

In the Old Testament, if anyone touched the altar where the coals were, he became ceremoniously cleansed. In Isaiah 6, Isaiah became cleansed when the coals of fire from the altar touched his lips. When we present the Gospel to someone who becomes saved, we effectively have touched that individual with coals of fire from the altar and made him or her spiritually clean. The phrase “on his head” signifies that this cleansing encompasses the whole being of the person.

Do Not Plow with an Ox and an Ass Together

An example of a biblical passage with three levels of meaning will now be examined. The procedure for a long passage is the same as

will be done here for a short passage, Deuteronomy 22:10: “*Thou shalt not plow with an ox and ass together.*”

First, this was a command to ancient Israel and it required obedience. They literally were not to plow land with an ox and a donkey yoked together. If anyone did this, he was in rebellion against God. Whether or not they could see the rationale of the command was irrelevant; they were to be obedient. It was a command that had an historical level of meaning.

Second, it teaches moral and spiritual truth, perhaps in the sense that it would be cruel to harness a small donkey to a large ox. However, the command prohibits harnessing an ass with an ox; they were not to harness a large donkey and a small ox, even if they were of more equal size.

On a deeper level - In the Old Testament an ox was a clean animal, and the ass or the donkey was an unclean animal. Clean animals typified the people who were to become clean through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. The unclean animals typified those who were of the world and would remain in rebellion against God. In II Corinthians 6:14 God commands, “*Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers*” In Luke 16:13 Jesus laid down the same principle with the words:

No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

In Galatians 6:14 the Bible declares:

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.

This is an integral part of the Bible’s message. It is a moral principle that applies to the entire human race and to which every believer will attempt to adhere as he grows in sanctification. It is the same principle that is presented in Deuteronomy 22:10, when the Israelites were not to plow with an ox and an ass together. Thus, this verse has the first level of meaning, historical, and the second level of meaning, moral or spiritual.

It also has the third level of meaning; that is, it relates to the Gospel of salvation; it relates to the essential nature of salvation.

In the Bible, oxen were frequently offered as burnt offerings or as blood sacrifices. Therefore, oxen, like sheep, often typified and pointed to the Lord Jesus Christ, who represented a burnt offering by shedding His blood for our sins. Could the ox in Deuteronomy 22:10 be a reference to our Lord?

If so, what about the ass? It was never offered as a burnt offering. Nothing in the Bible suggests that it represents our Lord. It is found, however, that the ass does typify someone. It typifies people who need salvation. In Exodus 34:20 we read:

But the firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb: and if thou redeem him not, then shalt thou break his neck. All the firstborn of thy sons thou shalt redeem. And none shall appear before me empty.

In this passage, the ass was to be redeemed by a lamb. A lamb represents Christ as well as the believer who is redeemed by Christ. Therefore, the ass can be seen to represent the unbeliever. The ass that was not redeemed was to have its neck broken; that is, it was to be killed. This is a picture of everyone who is unsaved. If we are not redeemed by the Lamb of God, Jesus, we must face death - eternal death in hell.

We have scriptural validation to believe that the ox represents Christ, and the ass represents the one who needs salvation. Why are they not to be yoked together? After all, in one sense we are yoked to Christ, as Matthew 11:29-30 teaches:

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

We are yoked to Him in that we are “in Christ.” We have become spiritually identified with Him, who is our substitute; He made payment for our sins.

We are not yoked to Him as though we were working with Him to accomplish our salvation. Christ, and Christ alone, has done all the work. We can contribute nothing to our salvation. We cannot say that God has done all that He could do and the rest is up to us. We are saved by grace and grace alone. The spiritual meaning of the command that prohibits yoking an ox and an ass together is an historic parable that points to the truth that we are saved by Christ’s work alone and not by our own.

This cryptic verse, Deuteronomy 22:10, opens us a wealth of information when examined for the three levels of meaning. The Bible is a rich mine when carefully studied verse by verse.

Conclusion

The Bible alone and in its entirety is the Word of God. It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Anyone who does not follow this principle follows another gospel. He will be under a different authority than that related to the true Gospel. His doctrinal conclusions will be in error, and he will not relate to the salvation that leads to eternal life.

The Bible is its own interpreter. In the measure that we are able to view a particular verse of Scripture or a particular doctrine in the light of the entire Bible, is the measure we will be on the path to accurate interpretation.

The Bible frequently has three levels of meaning. The first is historical; the second is moral or spiritual; and the third is that which relates to the essence of the Gospel of salvation. For these reasons, a Bible translator must be exceedingly careful that, in his desire to make plain the historical or moral teaching of a verse, he does not obscure or remove the spiritual or Gospel meaning.

In relation to the third level, any spiritual meaning found within a passage must be in agreement with these three principles:

1. The deeper, spiritual meaning must relate to the Gospel of salvation.
2. The spiritual identification of elements within the parable or historical account must have biblical validation.
3. The spiritual conclusion must be in total agreement with everything in the Bible that clearly relates to the nature of salvation.

Finally, the Bible is the ultimate authority. It is to be obeyed. Read it with a view to being obedient to everything found within its pages.

When the nature of biblical writings is understood, rich and wonderful truth is found hidden within the pages of the Bible. May it be the experience of each of us to learn from the Bible, which is the repository of truth.

