

BELIEVING AND UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORD

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When God speaks, how should man listen? If a book claims to be an inspired revelation from God — the very words of Him who cannot lie or be deceived — what is the correct and appropriate use of reason in dealing with it?

THE PROPER USE OF HUMAN INTELLIGENCE IN RECEIVING AND USING A DIVINE REVELATION

First: *We must use reason and intelligence to decide whether it is from God.* If God presents to us a message to be regarded as having absolute authority, to enlighten and to rule our lives, He obviously appeals to our judgment to discriminate between this and other messages. In fact, both in the Bible and in the manner of its origin God gives us reasonable evidences and testimonies

that enable men to decide intelligently concerning its authority.

The basis of our faith in the Bible is not a matter of proving all Bible statements to be true, but a matter of recognizing the divine mind from which they come. Miracles, prophecies, claims, scope, unity amid diversity, candor of judgment and unique character of the Bible all plainly indicate that it is from God and not from man unaided. We need to study more and to preach more of these sure foundations of the faith. We need to produce in our hearers the conviction that the Bible is indeed a message from God; hence its precepts are binding, its histories are true, its judgments are inexorable, and its doctrines are powerful to transform the hearts and lives of men.

Second: *We must use our intelligence to understand what God said.* It is certainly reasonable, as well as respectful toward God, for us to make every effort to determine what His words were intended to signify. God has spoken to the minds of men in the language of men calling upon men to hear and to heed the plain import of His words.

His word is given to unbelievers to bring them to faith. (Rom. 10:17; John 20:30,31), and to believers to direct their obedience and "to build [them] up and give [them] the inheritance among all them that are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). All men owe it to God and owe it to themselves to understand and to use God's Word as He intended.

Third: *We must accept it and follow it with all confidence and submission.* When God reveals, by special enlightenment through His Spirit, things which eye has not seen, ear has not heard, which never entered into the heart of men (I Cor. 2:6-16), it is folly and irreverence to try to prove whether God told the truth. It is unreasonable to expect the scope of human experience and reason to provide the proof of things reaching so far beyond both reason and experience. No method of science or of philosophy can prove some statements which are of central importance in the Bible: for example, that the death of Christ atones for my sin; or that Jesus will come again and receive us unto

Himself; or that the baptism of a penitent believer in Christ secures the forgiveness of the believer's sins.

These and others must be accepted upon the authority or reliability of the One who says it is so. It would be thoroughly irreverent and unbelieving for us to question the truth of the message after we have assurance that it is from God.

The demand that all Bible statements must be discovered by scientific method, proved by rational processes, or confirmed by results in practice, before they can be regarded as authoritative or established truth, is simply a demand that God must not be greater than man and must not reveal anything man could not find out for himself with his own closely limited, earth-bound senses.

If a message is really from God we may be sure that it is unfailingly true in the sense that He meant it. It will give us knowledge that sends a shaft of light into the dark, unknown future, and will show up most fully at all times life's highest possibilities and responsibilities. A revelation of authoritative and infallible truth gives us a degree and kind of certainty which could never be approached by the incomplete inductions and the fallacy-ridden experimentation of scientific methods. The fact that such a revelation has been made is established by the best combination of many independent evidences, including sure facts of experience and sound reasonings.

CHRIST ASSURED US THAT GOD HAS SPOKEN

When we accept Christ as Savior and Lord we commit ourselves to believe and obey His Word, the Bible. Jesus was the author of Scripture and He assured us that the Bible is the Word of the Living God.

The Spirit of Christ was in the prophets, including all the Old Testament writers (I Pet. 1:10,11). Jesus spoke His approval of the Old Testament history; He testified of its divine authorship;

He affirmed its inerrancy (Matt. 22:31,32; 4:4; 12:40-42; 19:4-6; Mark 12:36; Luke 16:17; 24:44; John 10:35). Jesus fulfilled so many prophecies and typical patterns of the Old Testament that His life and work furnish a demonstration of the divine origin of the Old Testament.

Jesus gave the apostles and prophets of the New Testament their message (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7-15; Gal. 1:11,12; Eph. 3:2-6; 4:18-11; I Cor. 2:6-13; I Thess. 2:13). Our New Testament scriptures fulfilled Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into all truth.

Therefore, the whole Bible has authority — that is, the right to speak for God and be believed, the right to command and be obeyed. Christ wants His followers to know and understand His word. Whatever it says is to be taken as true in the sense that it was intended. Whatever command it gives is binding upon all to whom that command was given. Whatever it promises can be relied upon by all to whom the promise was given.

The whole Bible is a revelation of things divine, supernatural, even yet to come; and its message is to be accepted, not because it agrees with our experience, but because God has revealed it. Its message must be understood from the language used, even if we cannot see how it is true in our own experience or reasoning.

The Bible is a covenant from God for us to receive and to live by, for us to reply upon for our future inheritance.

ORIGIN AND NATURE OF THE PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION

Hermeneutics is the study of the principles of correct interpretation. The rules and principles of the science of hermeneutics are *not arbitrary laws* decreed by popes or councils, enacted by congresses, or even invented by scholars. They are truly scientific in that they are descriptive, discovered, inductive, and without any authority, except the accuracy with which they fit further ex-

perience. They are carefully stated descriptions of the way men regularly think and read when they get the meaning intended in any writing. They were not invented, but discovered by observation of many experiences and derived from analysis of many instances until a general statement could be made of what was regularly or always observed in cases of correct interpretation.

A rule or principle comes into being in the attempt to express what is found uniformly in some phase of the thinking habits and reading experiences of normal people. They are accepted widely, not because of any authority from which they come, but because they appeal to the common sense and fit the experiences of most people. When many rules, descriptive of many particular factors of successful reading, are analytically compared and related to each other, the science of hermeneutics arises out of the compilation of them into an orderly whole.

One can interpret well without formal study of any set of rules, but cannot interpret accurately at all without following (perhaps unconsciously) those principles which are based upon the nature of the mind and of truth, and are inherent in the very structure and function of language. When the effect of emotional bias, or the influence of bad examples, or the fog of superstition, or other circumstance interferes with our normal thought processes or hinders our usual intellectual honesty, then we need to give heed to principles and methods which have been universally found to lead to true interpretations, that we may be guided by them back to sanity.

Sometimes rules are made and urged by ax-grinders with the intent to support certain doctrines or doubtful kinds of exegesis; therefore all rules should be logically analyzed and tested by use in matter as free from bias as possible. Such rules, of course, have no authority. No one is bound to accept any rule of hermeneutics unless it is found to be true to facts and productive of correct results. Always remember that no result of reading is correct except discovery of the thought the author intended to express.

Some may think as follows: If all people naturally practice in-

terpretation with fair success much of the time, why do we need to be concerned with teaching and studying Biblical Hermeneutics? Others will say: If true interpretation is so accessible to all readers, then why do we have so many different ideas of what the Bible teaches? The second question helps answer the first; and both questions need some of the same answers. It is unpleasant to say it, but it seems obviously true, that people are not as sensible and honest in reading the Bible as in other matters. Our minds are not as free from preconceptions and desire as to what it must mean. Reading any other book we are more ready to let it say anything it wants to say.

Moreover, a great many express opinions about Bible teaching when they have heard, or decide in their own minds what ought to be true. Too often even teachers and preachers are uninformed and misinformed about what the Bible says, about the meaning of Bible words, about important related historical facts. They follow and depend upon false authorities or faulty sources of information. We too often and too easily are swayed by bias, or bound by tradition, or misled by what we hear about the Bible.

For better Bible interpretation we do not need to make new rules of language or new ways of thinking. That very thing has caused much of the present confusion of misinterpretations. We do need to apply the intelligence God gave us according to the old universal principles of all language and thought. We need to become thoroughly acquainted with the facts of the language and historical circumstances which were familiar to those to whom it was originally written, so that its words will bring to our minds the ideas they were intended to suggest to the original readers.

A good method of interpretation is one which lets the book or passage speak for itself — one which enables us to perceive and accept the significance of the words and grammar used by the author. A method is bad which gets a meaning anywhere else and brings it in to foist it upon the passage.

Because man is made in the image of God, man is capable of

receiving whatever revelation of truth God wants to give to man. It is important for us to understand the truth God has revealed to us. It is important that we do not waste time in idle speculation about the things God did not reveal to us (Deut. 29:29).

God did not choose to inform us about many topics about which we may be curious, for example how Jesus entertained himself as a teenager. Discussion on such issues is human speculation and is not a study of God's revealed word. Each Christian should seek to understand God's revealed word but he should not make matters of human opinion a matter of priority nor a test of faith.

Study Questions

1. What are three ways a person should use his reason in receiving and using a divine revelation?
2. Can all statements in the Bible be proved true by experience? Explain.
3. Show how trust in Jesus leads to trust in the Bible as the inspired word of God.
4. Why should we accept the message of the Bible?
5. How did rules of hermeneutics come into being?
6. Why do some readers of a text of scripture not understand the true meaning?
7. Why are human beings capable of receiving a revelation from God?
8. What kind of questions should remain unanswered?

9. What kind of interpretation is good interpretation of the Bible? And what kind of "interpretation" is bad?

Project

Take a survey of five people asking the following questions:

1. Do you believe the Bible is a book revealed from God to man?
2. Why or why not do you believe this?
3. What is your highest authority in religion?
4. Do you believe everyone can understand the Bible?
5. What does this statement in the Bible mean, "Lay hands suddenly on no man" (I Tim. 5:22)?

After your survey summarize the answers you received. What observations can you make after this research? Discuss your results with others. Did your observations agree with theirs?