

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE

By Chris Lawson

***Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord,
the veil shall be taken away.
Now the Lord is that Spirit:
and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.
But we all, with open face beholding
as in a glass the glory of the Lord,
are changed into the same image from glory to glory,
even as by the Spirit of the Lord.***
(2 Corinthians 3:16-18)

A simple definition of Hermeneutics is “the branch of knowledge that deals with interpretation, especially of the Bible or literary texts.” The following article seeks to explain why a proper understanding of Biblical Hermeneutics is important. We will look at the qualities we should seek and bring to our Scripture reading and what we ought to leave behind. We will also look at some of the hindrances to proper exegesis [interpreting Scripture]. We will then seek to explain Paul the Apostle’s reasoning in 2 Corinthians 3:16-18, and how this passage shapes our hermeneutical goal of reflecting the glory of Christ, by His Spirit, through us. *But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.* (2 Cor. 3:18) When we as believers in Christ manifest the fruit of the Spirit of God (Gal. 5:22-23), we are progressively being transformed (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18) into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This is the goal of the Christian walk (Eph. 4:22-23; Col. 3:10).

WHY IS AN UNDERSTANDING OF HERMENEUTICS IMPORTANT?

A proper understanding of hermeneutics is important for the simple reason that without a clear understanding of Scripture, one cannot understand the message God has given to mankind. We must know the meaning of Scripture before we can know the message of Scripture. We must understand the sense of Scripture before we can understand the significance of Scripture. We must observe what it says, interpret what it means, and apply what it says in a proper way. If we do not have a balanced biblical hermeneutic we will end up twisting Scripture and producing faulty interpretations of what the Bible says. The end result may lead to one joining a cult or involving oneself in the world of the occult. We must accurately handle the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15) as we seek to know the God of truth (Deut. 32:4). *Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth* (2 Tim. 2:15). *He is the Rock, His work is perfect; For all His ways are justice, A God of truth and without injustice; Righteous and upright is He* (Deut. 32:4).

Henry H. Haley once said, “The Bible is the most priceless possession of the human race.” It has also been stated that the Bible is the most abused book in the world. This is true in the sense that countless people use the Bible either ignorantly or in an abusive manner. People either read into the text what is not there or they fail to read the text in context. People end up misapplying the Scriptures or spiritualizing things that should not be spiritualized. The fruit of improper Bible interpretation can be clearly seen in the writings and claims of leaders of Christian cults and many Eastern gurus. Every pseudo-Christian cult leader has misinterpreted Scripture according to *their own private interpretation*. In every case of cultic Scripture twisting, the Person, work and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ is attacked in one way or another. The essential doctrines of the Christian faith are cleverly undermined and even refuted on false premises. The reason is simple; failure to interpret properly and/or failure to apply Scripture properly!

Just as Ezra and Nehemiah read the Scriptures and gave the proper sense (Neh. 8:8-9), so we too must strive to read the text as the original writer intended it to be read. We must be very careful to

interpret the Scriptures without destroying their original meaning. We must also understand the historical context in which they were written, taking into account the writers' original language, viewpoint, theology, culture, religious and political situation, etc. We must also be sure to apply the Scriptures to our lives in a practical and balanced manner. If we fail at these basic things when we interpret Scripture then we will most assuredly fail at understanding the message God has given to us. In our pursuit to know and glorify Christ, we must accurately handle (2 Tim. 2:15) the word of truth (John 17:17) as we compare Scripture with Scripture and allow God to speak to us.

QUALITIES WE OUGHT TO BRING TO OUR SCRIPTURE READING ¹

1. First and foremost, we must be **saved**, or **born-again** (John 3:1-5), if we are to truly glean spiritual truth in our Scripture reading. Mere intellect and human wisdom is not enough to comprehend the spiritual truths of the Word of God. We need the illumination of the Holy Spirit of God upon our minds and hearts as we study the Scriptures. The natural man, the person who is not born-again is spiritually blind (2 Cor. 4:4) and dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). The natural man cannot understand the things of God for they are foolishness to him. "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Only the Spirit of the Living God can illuminate the conscience, heart and mind of an individual. **This means that only the regenerate can truly welcome, believe and receive the word of God in order to know (*ginosko*) God personally and experientially.** "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" (John 20:31).

2. We should seek to have a healthy fear/reverence, of/for God (Matt. 10:28; Eccl. 12:13-14). We ought to sincerely desire to know God through knowing His word (Psalm 1; Prov. 1:7 and Prov. Ch. 2).

3. We ought to approach the Scriptures with a prayerful and humble attitude. We must remember that we too can be guilty of misinterpreting Scripture as others have done in the past and are doing at present (2 Peter 3:16-17; Rev. 22:18-19).

4. We ought to approach the interpretation of Scripture with a sincere willingness to obey God (Eccl. 12:13-14) and the Scriptures we are studying (Romans 1:5). We must desire and follow through in our attempts to obey God's word, literally living out what we are learning. We must wholeheartedly depend upon the Spirit of God indwelling us; that He might transform our lives according to His word and His mighty power working in and through us (Rom. 12:1-2).

5. We must depend upon the Holy Spirit as we interpret Scripture. This is absolutely essential as He is the Spirit of Truth and He has communicated to us the Word of Truth. The Holy Spirit is the Author of the Bible. Without His leading and guidance in interpreting Scripture we are left to ourselves in our fallen human wisdom. As God leads us by His Spirit we are to apply the proper hermeneutic skills to Scripture. In doing so, He can keep us from strange and unbiblical *private interpretations* that lead to error and confusion. We must also be willing to walk in obedience to the Holy Spirit in our practical appropriation of Scripture (Rom. 1:5).

6. We must approach Scripture interpretation with the sober understanding that "sudden intuitive flashes of insight" in interpretation are not the norm. **Unbiblical** visions and dreams, mystical experiences, and supposed words from God can mislead and damage people. Seeking for hidden and mysterious meanings, spiritualizing texts and unbiblical allegorizing can also lead to heresy and delusion. In contrast, cross referencing, word-studies in Greek or Hebrew and learning tenses and grammar usage bring deeper understanding and are encouraged. Balance is the key word when it comes to interpreting God's Word.

7. We must also have a willingness to "be diligent to present yourself [ourselves] approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). This includes doing in depth research in word studies, Bible backgrounds, culture, language, Bible and church history, theology, etc.

8. A few other qualities we ought to bring to interpreting the Bible are "the use of sound judgment and reason" and a "willingness to learn from others who have gone before us." At the same time we must seek to be objective in our approach to Scripture and not come to it with preconceived ideas of what we *want to find* in Scripture. For instance, do we approach Holy Scripture and let John Calvin speak to us; or do we come to the Scriptures and let the Holy Spirit speak to us? Comparing Scripture with Scripture and not reading into the text what *others have said* about the text is very important. We must never come to Scripture with preconceived *theological grids* which we force unto the Biblical text. To view Scripture through someone else's *theological opinion* is unwise as it can corrupt the Word of God. Vast amounts of

heresy have been contrived throughout church history simply because one person hijacked another's *theology* and then superimposed it upon the Biblical text.

9. Last but not least, we ought to have at least a basic understanding of how cults pervert texts of Scripture to their own demise. Although Paul wrote some things that are hard to understand (2 Peter. 3:15-17), we have the hermeneutical principles and Biblical tools in order to not "twist the Scriptures" to our own destruction.

WHAT SHOULD BE LEFT BEHIND?

1. We must reject the idea that the unregenerate can properly appropriate the truths of Scripture. The unregenerate cannot properly submit to the word of God because they are spiritually blind. The Apostle Paul said that unbelievers are blinded by the god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4) who is Satan. He also said that unbelievers are dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1-2) and they cannot understand the things of God because the things of God are to be spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

2. We must reject a "lackadaisical and cavalier attitude" toward the Bible. To not treat the Scriptures as holy (2 Tim. 3:15) and to approach them without a holy reverence and fear of the God who gave them to us is unsafe. To think less of God's word than God does dishonors God, grieves the Holy Spirit and sets a horrible example for others.

3. More examples of things we can leave behind when we come to the Scriptures are prayerlessness and pride, unwillingness to obey Scripture and lack of dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Trusting in mystical experiences and sudden flashes of insight is unwise as well. We must leave behind any ideas that diligent study, cross referencing and background research is a waste of time; it is not. We must also leave behind the idea that the valid teaching of others is not a valuable asset to us. The Holy Spirit is able to lead others in their interpretation of the Word and we can glean from their learning. Elitist views, unscriptural speculations and imbalanced theological perspectives are to be avoided.

SOME HINDRANCES TO PROPER EXEGESIS (INTERPRETATION)

One of the first major hindrances to proper exegesis is when an individual places his own ideas and opinions above Scripture. This type of attitude stems from pride and ignorance and manifests itself in an unwillingness to learn from the mistakes of Bible interpreters of the past. Many pastors and teachers throughout the ages, as well as **self-appointed** apostles and prophets of today, have made many mistakes because of an improper attitude in interpreting the Scriptures. Sadly, many seek for *new revelations* and oftentimes come up with *vain imaginings of their own mind* (Jer. 23:16-40). These *unbiblical interpretations* are rooted in human pride and arrogance. Scripture says that pride and the love of "self" (2 Tim. 3:2) will characterize false teachers and those who twist Scripture unto their own destruction.

In regards to other Bible interpreters, "History shows that erroneous principles have often spoiled the exegetical work of fine men, some of whom are great saints. This should be a warning to us against careless interpretation. There is less excuse for us because we can profit by the lessons of the past".² Simply stated, when people cast off the basic principles of a normal, grammatical, literal and historical approach to Bible interpretation confusion, misinterpretation and misapplication are the result. Allegorizing texts when the text does not call for it, spiritualization of texts, and forcing *theological speculations* upon Scripture are all to be avoided at all costs. [Please refer to Authors Note at end of article.]

Furthermore, the bad fruit of allegorizing Scripture can be clearly seen throughout Church history. We must learn from these mistakes ourselves as well as warn others of them. Roy Zuck states in his book *Basic Bible Interpretation*, "It becomes clear from these late church fathers that Jerome, Vincent, and Augustine paved the way for the two emphases that were to endure for more than a thousand years – allegorization and church authority. Cassian, Eucherius, Adrian, and Junilius built on Augustine's allegorical approach to Scripture, thus entrenching this approach to the Bible throughout the coming centuries of the Middle Ages".³ This allegorical approach to Scripture was never completely rejected during the hermeneutic based Protestant reformation. The result has been the proliferation and acceptance of unbiblical doctrines for hundreds of years.

Today in the 21st century, a hybrid Christianity has emerged across the world. This global counterfeit Christianity has emerged from allegorizing Scripture and has produced Amillennialism and false Church authority. This global ecumenical church entity has a spiritualized view of Christ's Second Advent and the

Millennium and is being absorbed into Romanism in the name of *separated brethren*. This false global Christianity is open to all except those who take the Bible literally. Allegorizing and spiritualizing Scripture, unbiblical church authority and replacement theology have cemented this error in place across the globe. The bottom line is this; the allegorizing of Scripture has been the inception point through the centuries for Biblical perversion, false teaching and subtle as well as blatant anti-Semitism (Replacement theology). Truly this is one of Satan's masterpieces.

Another major area that hinders proper exegesis is *experienced based* Christianity. When individual subjective experiences and unbiblical manifestations are forced upon Biblical texts, people make Scripture say anything they want it to. This is justified in the name of *eisegesis* and *a word from the Lord*. A perfect example of this was the Toronto movement which can be categorically paralleled in the world of entertainment and the world of the cults and the occult. In actuality this is abusing the Bible and misleading people. This type of *showmanship* has nothing to do with Bible interpretation and exegesis at all. Countless churches today do this very thing and say that *God is leading them* and that they have *revelation knowledge*.

Basic Bible Interpretation lists some of the hindrances to proper exegesis including, but not be limited to:

Main Hindrances to Proper Exegesis⁴

Allegorical Method – This largely neglects the literal.

Traditional Method – This largely neglects the individual.

Rationalistic Method – This largely neglects the supernatural.

Subjective Method – This largely neglects the objective.

Other Hindrances to Proper Exegesis⁵

Neo-Orthodox Method – Denies propositional truth, the inerrancy of Scripture and the infallibility of the Bible. The Bible *becomes* the Word of God in man's existential encounter experience. Truth exists *existentially* in that a person *experiences* it; not in written form.

The New Hermeneutic – Denies propositional truth. The Biblical text can mean whatever the reader wants it to mean, i.e. "That's your interpretation, but I have mine". The goal is to have an existential *experience* in order to get to the *religious-experience core of the Bible*. This movement imposes meanings upon Scripture, will not submit to Scripture, and tries to rule over Scripture.

Mythological – Denies literal, grammatical, historical interpretation as well as miracles.

Structuralism – This approach ignores the historical background of Biblical texts. It also views the Bible as having the same fundamental structural elements inherent in fictional narratives of all cultures and ages.

Liberation Theology – Seeks to interpret much of the Bible from the vantage point of people who are politically and economically oppressed.

Feminist Theology – Seeks to analyze and interpret Scripture from the viewpoint of those oppressed by sexism.

Ethno-hermeneutics – Looks for supra-cultural meanings encoded in Scripture.

Mysticism/Mystical Hermeneutics – Man can have direct knowledge of and communion with God by his or her *subjective* experience apart from the Scriptures. The focus is on experiences, not Bible interpretation.

Pietism – Focus is on *inner spirituality*.

Liberalism – Takes a rationalistic and higher critical approach to Scripture and views the Bible as a *human book*, not given by divine inspiration. Liberalism teaches that supernatural elements in the Bible can be explained rationally. Sin, depravity, and hell are to be rejected for these *offend people*. Darwin’s theory of evolution is applied to Israel’s religion, in which Israel is seen as having evolved from polytheism to monotheism. The **Liberal** view of Jesus is that Jesus is not the savior from sin, but only a moral and ethical teacher.

These things listed above are the fruit of a disregard for Scripture and the God of the Bible. When man’s wisdom, rationalism and human experience (subjectivism) are placed above God’s revelation, “God is robbed of His supernatural character, and the Bible is robbed of its authority”.⁶

2 COR 3:16-18 AND SHAPING OUR HERMENEUTICAL GOAL

The goal of Paul’s reasoning in 2 Corinthians 3:16-18 is to communicate to believers the truth about the life transforming, *progressive sanctification* that we have as believers. This glorious transformation occurs in the lives of believers and is rooted in and through our relationship with Jesus Christ. It is by the Word of the Lord and the Spirit of the Lord that we are transformed “from glory to glory” into His image (2 Cor. 3:18).

In the text here Paul is speaking about being “transformed from glory to glory” – from one stage of sanctification to the next, or from one stage of Christ-likeness to the next. He also contrasts the glory of the New Covenant with the glory of the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant was glorious in that it revealed God’s holiness as well as the standard by which men *ought* to live. The Old Covenant could never give life, it could only condemn when the standards of holiness were not met. Even so, this Old Covenant was holy and glorious. Paul then talks about the new life giving covenant through Christ which is much more glorious.

Paul makes mention that the Law was and still is glorious. However, the Law does not have the power to transform the life of a believer. Only the Spirit of the Lord can do this. Paul says in verse 16 that as a new believer turns to the LORD (Yahweh), the “veil” (of spiritual blindness) is taken away. When this occurs a person is set free by the Spirit of the Lord. Upon believing, a person is immediately set free from sin and the futile attempts at keeping the demands of the Law as a means of attaining righteousness. The believer in Christ thus becomes totally freed from the Law’s condemnation as well as the kingdom and power of Satan. Spiritual blindness therefore is supernaturally removed, not by attempting to live up to the glorious Old Covenant Law, but by the much more glorious Spirit of the Lord.

As the Holy Spirit liberates one from the bondage of sin and the condemnation of the Law, the believer is transformed “from glory to glory” through a continual, progressive sanctification, into the image of Christ. Again, this is not an attempt at gaining righteousness before God, for the believer is already justified and declared blameless in Christ. This *sanctification* is a glorious working of the Spirit of the Living God within an individual’s inner most being. The purpose of this day-by-day transformation is to be made into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

In summary then, in contrast to the glory of the Old Covenant, the Spirit of God has given us the New Covenant through Christ, which far surpasses the glory of the Old. The Old Covenant slew men, the New Covenant sets them free from the condemnation of the Law. This far surpassing glory of the New Covenant is able to transform us ‘from glory to glory’ as by the Spirit of the Lord. The goal therefore in the Christian’s life is to be transformed into the image of Christ. This occurs “from glory to glory”, from one level of sanctification to the next, until we are transformed into the image of Christ.

This then, ought to be our primary motivation and goal in studying the Scriptures - to be made into the image of Christ and in doing so glorify Him. Our Biblical hermeneutic ought to lead us down a lifelong journey of being transformed into His image by the renewing of our minds. Working together, the Word of God and the Person of the Holy Spirit are able to transform us “from glory to glory” into the image of Christ – this and this alone ought to be the ultimate end of our hermeneutical goal. - *SRN*

HOW CAN YOUNG MAN CLEANSE HIS WAY?

How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Praise be to you, O LORD; teach me your decrees. With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth. I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word. (Psalm 119:1-16)

BE A GOOD EXAMPLE

Of these things put them in remembrance, charging them before the Lord that they strive not about words to no profit, but to the subverting of the hearers. Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some. Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. (2 Timothy 2:14-19)

DESCRIPTION OF FALSE TEACHERS AND INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE TRUE TEACHER

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils [demons]; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained. But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance. (1 Timothy 4:1-10)

“DO NOT NEGLECT THE GIFT”

For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe. These things command and teach. Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee. (1 Timothy 4:11-16)

Authors Note: This article was originally published in Edinburgh, Scotland in 2007. This Second edition contains a number of grammatical corrections, slight variations of text for better readability, and more Scripture references for Biblical clarity. The reference book *Basic Bible Interpretation* is a starting point for understanding the history and methods of Biblical interpretation. It also includes numerous errors to avoid. SRN also recommends Jacob Prasch's (MORIEL Ministries) excellent article ***Midrash: The Way The New Testament Writers Handled The Old Testament***, as a basic overview of Midrashic (Hebraic) interpretation of Scripture. Jacob Prasch's article can be viewed here at: <http://www.moriel.org/articles/sermons/midrash.htm>

Notes:

1. Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Cook Communications Ministries, 1991), 23-26.
2. A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), 20.
3. Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Cook Communications Ministries, 1991), 41.
4. Ibid, 55.
5. Ibid, 55-57.
6. Ibid, 56-58.