

Hermeneutics, Part 1 of 5

Michael Hughes

I'd like to extend my Christian Greetings to everyone. Thank you for being in our class on the subject of hermeneutics. I am Michael Hughes, the instructor for the class. And I look forward to this opportunity to discussing this subject with you very much.

In 2 Peter 1 and verse 20, Peter wrote, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of [any] private interpretation." Now, there are various views regarding that passage from the New Testament.

One asserts that the scriptures are not subject to any interpretation whatsoever. That, we should just read the Scripture and let that be that. Another view of this passage suggests that it's not open to individuals to interpret the passage, but we must look to people who are specially equipped, perhaps divinely so, who will guide us in understanding the passages some way or another.

And perhaps it's just a matter of seeking out individuals with high levels of academic learning, who are certified in some fashion by some organization or whatever. And they are the ones qualified to interpret the passages for us. Or, as with Mormons and their view on this text, the church is to recognize certain ones who have from God, a special gift of interpretation. Still, yet another view indicates the passage is merely stating that the scriptures did not come to exist by virtue of the wisdom of men, but that they are indeed the God-breathed messages from on high. And this view believes that the passage refers to the fact that certain ones were chosen by God, equipped with special power of the Holy Spirit, and became the ones through whom the inspired revelation came, that we know as the Bible. And for sure, others have even more divergent views on the passage.

So how do we decide what this scripture means? Well, it becomes evident that the passage has to be interpreted. Even the person who claims that the Bible is not to be interpreted in any way by humans has inadvertently interpreted this passage, in so stating.

The Bible is a logical book. It appeals to human reasoning. It is communication from God to mankind. And as with all communication, there has to be some form of way to understand that communication. And that's what we call interpretation. Everything that involves communication has to be interpreted. But how shall one go about to interpret it? What methodology will be used? Or we might ask, what scientific method will be employed to correctly understand God's Holy Word, the Bible? And thus we come to the title of our course: "Hermeneutics." Hermeneutics, simply defined as "the science of interpretation." And when we talk about interpreting the scriptures, it might be said that we are speaking of sacred hermeneutics, because we are interpreting the sacred writings. Of course, this can be said of the writings of any system, where those writings are considered to be sacred. Therefore, for the sake of our course, we will say that hermeneutics is considered the science of sacred interpretation.

Now, there is a need for careful interpretation. In John 12, in verse 48, Jesus said, "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day." Now that is an extremely powerful motivation, then, to arrive at a correct understanding of what has been taught, because Christ said we will stand in judgment, giving answer relative to these teachings. So certainly the determination of eternal destiny

would be the most important reason to have the ability to correctly understand, that is, to interpret the Bible.

Now, it is presumed that anyone taking a course such as this, indeed wants to stand right before God, on the day of judgment. And we must not think that the Bible, that because the Bible, is divinely given, that it is not subject to interpretation, or worse, that it cannot be understood, especially by the common person. In actuality, that is why we have the Bible.

Paul said of the Old Testament writings, in Romans 15, in verse 4, that, "Whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." And similarly, writing of the New Testament, in Ephesians 3, verses 2 through 5, he wrote these words. He said, "If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words), Whereby, when ye read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)." So it is completely a false notion that the Bible is intended for only certain ones to be able to read and to understand. Paul said, he wrote this letter to the church at Ephesus, for the very purpose that we may read what he wrote, and understand what he wrote, and thereby come to have the same understanding as he did in the mystery of Christ.

Jesus Himself urged people to study the Bible. He said in John 5 and verse 39, "Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me." Jesus emphasized the importance of this by appealing even to the Old Testament. In John 6 and verse 45. He said, "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall be all taught of God.' Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me."

Now sometimes the task is easy. For instance, in Acts chapter 11, and verse 22, after Peter has recounted what all has taken place among the Gentiles, when he went to the house of Cornelius, back Acts chapter 10, to teach him and his family and his friends the gospel of Christ, and then having done so, met with some opposition, by brethren who were of a Jewish background, who felt like that it was inappropriate that Peter should approach the Gentiles. And so Peter reminded them how that God showed him a vision, in encouraging him to go to these Gentiles, and to teach them the gospel of Christ, and to baptize them into the death of Christ. So when word of this was explained, and came to be understood, then we're told that these glad glad tidings in Acts 11 and verse 22, came to the ears of the church. And they were very delighted that God had granted unto the Gentiles repentance unto life. And so, again, one can easily understand that that is to be interpreted figuratively. Because we think of a church, these days, as a building made of stone or wood or some other material. And if you can imagine ears on that church building, then you would think, "Well, that seems funny and strange." So we interpret the passage in Acts 11 and verse 22, when the glad tidings came to the ears of the church, that we're talking about a group of people that are known as the church.

Now hermeneutics is not without its difficulties. Many different methods of interpretation have been devised and consider throughout the centuries. And knowing how best to go at a passage does involve a lot of thinking and planning. Yet on the other hand, we did not want to over dramatize the matter, either. For the most part, scripture will be understood through ordinary logic and common sense. After all, the Bible was given for the common man to read and understand, as we have already observed from the Bible itself. Admittedly, though, there are some things in Scripture that are some difficult to understand. Even the Apostle Peter referred to the writings of the Apostle Paul, in 2 Peter 3 and verse 16, and said that Paul wrote some things hard to be understood. In fact, in Peter's

statement about that difficulty of some of Paul's teachings, he said that there are unlearned and unstable people, who often wrest these difficult passages to their own destruction.

Now, as impossible as it may seem, there really are people in this world who are so unafraid of the wrath of God, that they will deliberately misinform people as to the teachings of the Bible. But aside from those, there are others who, because of limited interpretive skills, will come up with some pretty wild teachings, which they really suppose to be taught in the Bible. Now we do not dare take the position of God. It is not ours to be the eternal judge of the people of this world. And we know that as all human beings, we are all fallible at best in our understanding of God's word, how imperfect we can be, how misguided we can be, how much error we can believe and practice, and still yet being found faithful to God. Only God can decide and tell such matters is that. Our task here on earth is to do the best we can. We must follow the advice of the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 2 and verse 15, where he instructed the younger evangelist, Timothy, to study to show himself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. And obviously, this will involve giving great diligence and understanding the Bible.

The Jews in Berea, in Acts 17 and in verse 11, were credited as being more noble than the Jews in Thessalonica, because unlike the Jews in Thessalonica, who rejected the teachings of the gospel, when they were exposed to them, the Jews in Berea instead, received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether these things were so. Now they understood, therefore, that they had the ability to read and understand the Bible. And to test what others were saying against that ability to know whether or not those teachers were in fact, from God. And therefore we have the full assurance and confidence of the grace of God, and let us not appear before God ignorant, therefore, when we could have done better, by making sure we apply unnecessary diligence, to study the Scriptures, and to rightly divide the word of truth.

When Jesus gave the Great Commission, in Matthew 28, and verse 19, he told the disciples to go into all the nations, and to teach those people and to baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. And he said, "Teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." And again, thus we get the understanding that these teachings are indeed understandable, and able to be applied by the people of this world. Now we mentioned Paul, and the younger evangelist Timothy earlier, Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2 and verse 2, that the things that he had heard among many witnesses, he should commit to other faithful men, who would be able to teach others also. And so, this is the ongoing process of teaching the Christian religion from one generation to the next. And this is not possible if we are not able to understand the scriptures. And so we do need to be able to know how to interpret the Bible, so that we can give good application of it.

Paul told Timothy, in 1 Timothy 4:7 to avoid wives' fables. While again, proper interpretation will help us to do this. He urged the Galatians, to turn away from the errors that were being taught to them, which were being passed off as the gospel of Christ, and told them in Galatians, 1, verses 8 and 9, that even though it appeared to be a gospel message, it was really not the gospel, though there would be some that would trouble them by claiming that is the gospel. But he told them to reject all of that, and that those guilty of teaching such things would be condemned. And then, of course, Revelation 22, verses 18 and 19, we're warned against adding to or taking away from the Word of God.

And so by having the ability to properly interpret the scriptures, this will equip us to what Paul identified in Titus 2 and verse 1, as sound doctrine.

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Now, stronger efforts in interpretation could minimize or eliminate division among believers in Christ. In First Peter 4:11, Peter instructed that if any man will speak, he should speak as the oracles of God. And Jesus prayed that we should all be one people in Christ, so that the world will believe indeed, that he is sent of God, John 17, verses 20 and 21.

But poor efforts in interpretation will hinder us in these goals that we seek to have in understanding God's word through proper interpretation. "The Word of God is spirit and life," Jesus said, in John 6 in verse 63. He had been teaching his disciples, and some of them became concerned at some of the things that he was teaching. Now they understood what he was teaching, and they viewed them as hard sayings. And they were murmuring against those things. But Jesus reminded them in John 6 and verse 63, he said, "The words that are speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." And so, by coming to an understanding of what the Bible teaches, it illuminates the soul to heaven. And let us make every effort to benefit from it as much as humanly possible, by again, doing what Paul indicated in 2 Timothy 2 and verse 15, to rightly divide the word of truth.

We have a wonderful statement from Psalm 19, about the Word of God that I think is important, beginning in verse 7. "The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward. Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression. Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer." And that is through verse 14.

The Ethiopian eunuch of Acts chapter eight, tremendously illustrates the importance of good interpretation. We're told in Acts chapter 8 that he was reading from the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. He was reading about a lamb being led to the slaughter. He understood that it was a figurative reference to a person. Well, in the meantime, the Holy Spirit dispatched Philip the evangelist, to go and join up with the Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot, at which time the Ethiopian eunuch, when asked by Philip, if he understood what he was reading, he said, "Well, how can I except some man guide me?" And he wanted to know, was the prophet speaking about himself? Or was he speaking about somebody else? He did not realize that he was reading about Jesus. And so Philip, we're told, open his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto Him Jesus. Now when he preached unto him Jesus, and help the Eunuch to understand the importance of the passage, then we're told that they came unto a certain body of water. And the Eunuch said, "See here is water. What doth hinder me to be baptized?" Well, he had been taught to observe all things whatsoever Christ had commanded. And he was able to understand that, and he was able to understand that this was applicable to him. And so seeing the opportunity to obey the Word of God, which he is now understanding, he was eager to take advantage of that opportunity. And so they commanded the chariot to stand still. And they went

down both into the water, both Philip and the Eunuch, and he, that is Philip, baptized him, that is the Eunuch. And when they were come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord called away Philip that the Eunuch saw him no more. And he, that is the Eunuch, went on his way rejoicing.

Now the Eunuch may have been totally unfamiliar with interpretation as a science. He undoubtedly may have never heard of a word like hermeneutics, but he absolutely benefited from it to the saving of his soul.

Now in this class, we will be quoting from the King James Version of the Bible. In spite of the proliferation of modern versions in the English language, it is still the common version in the English language for now. Accordingly, many of the misinterpretations that one encounters are based on this same version in the English language also. So along that line, this version also gives us opportunity to show us the difficulties of dealing with a changing language, as we have seen the English language become archaic, almost to the point that for modern readers, it is very similar to trying to understand a foreign language. And so this presents a difficulty. That's not meant as a negative statement about the King James Version of the Bible. Quite the opposite. But this is being stated, just so our course will not generate into a discussion of which version of the Bible is to be preferred above others. Though, that is a valuable matter to deal with, that will not be the point of this class, and thus would be a distraction for us. We well could have relied on one of the other versions of the Bible in the English language. But for these reasons, already stated, we have chosen this one.

Now, when I started, I made a reference to 2 Peter, chapter 1 and verse 20. Where Peter said, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation." And I indicated three main views that different people have regarding this passage. And I would suggest to us that the third of those views is the correct understanding. And that is that the word of God did not come into existence by the will of man, which is in fact, exactly what Peter states in the very next verse. But came into existence, because the Holy Spirit spake to these old men in times past. And it was through this inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that the word of God came into existence.

We had a famous political figure back in 1999, here in the United States, who, when being interviewed regarding a legal matter, he said, "Well, it is depending on what the meaning of 'is' is." And this is really significant in the passage that we're talking about, in 2 Peter chapter 2 and verse 20. Because Peter says that, "No scripture of old time is by the will of man." He says that "no prophecy of the Scripture, IS of any private interpretation." Well, that word "is" in this verse is the Greek word "ginomai," which means "to become," that is, "to come into existence." And thus Peter is telling us that the word of God did not come into existence, because of the efforts of men, but came into existence, because in old time, the prophets spoke as they were moved by God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

And many other comments could be offered about this passage to bring us to the correct understanding of it. But this is just a simple illustration of using two of the many tools of sacred interpretation to help us arrive at a correct understanding of a passage. In other words, we have looked at the original word itself, "ginomai," and we have also looked at the context of the passage. And by doing those two things, we are able to correctly understand what Peter had in mind.

In Isaiah, chapter 66, and verse 2, Isaiah said, "But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word," God speaking through Isaiah. As one might expect with any endeavor, there are those things that help or hinder along the way. And this is certainly true in the field of interpretation. Were it not so we would expect that all would have perfect agreement

on everything the Bible teaches. And we absolutely know that such agreement does not exist. Accordingly, it would be expected that with searching, we might be able to identify some ways that we might be assisted in our ability to interpret and understand, while at the same time, coming upon ways that we can know would serve as hindrances to us. Of course, we benefit more greatly from those things that we find to be helpful. But it is unfortunately necessary, that we also be aware of those things that might hinder us in our correct understanding of the Bible.

Now, there are three terms that I would like for us to think about that you will hear some times in a discussion of interpretation. And throughout our course, we will introduce some terms that are judged to be important to know. We will not just throw out terms willy nilly just to sound impressive or intelligent in some way. As much as possible in this course, we will deal in very simple language. But it is the case that as we read and study that we will come across terms and expressions that will be helpful for us to know.

One of these terms is “exegesis.” Exegesis is the idea of applying the principles of hermeneutics, and bringing out the meaning of any writing, which might otherwise be considered difficult to understand. Now we generally know the prefix “ex,” suggesting “from.” And so it's the idea of looking at the Scripture, trying to seriously consider what it is saying, and to draw that meaning out of that scripture to us so that we can understand it, and apply it in our lives. And when we do that, we are said to “exegete” a passage.

Now, the opposite of this is “eisegesis.” And this is where we might have some idea already, as to what we believe or what we think the Bible teaches. And we might be inclined even inadvertently, to look at certain passages of the Bible, and strive to find ways to put that understanding that we already have into that passage, to therefore make it seem that that passage is teaching that thing. And it might be that we might be correct, and that understanding, and there is no harm. But it might be just as well that we can be incorrect, and that we even unintentionally, might be abusing a passage and making it say something that it really does not say.

Now another term that I think is very important, is “dynamic equivalence.” And this involves the translation of the original writings into versions of the Bible. And this is the opposite of “formal equivalence.” Formal equivalence suggests the idea of looking at the ancient writings and as best as possible, giving a word for word representation of those writings into our common vernacular today. Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, emphasizes the fact that languages are just so different one from another. And that oftentimes it is just not a term possible to give a word for word translation of something and to have it make any sense. And so therefore, those who use this process of translating, they feel at liberty to analyze the passages and hopefully with all best intention, and all good effort, to express those passages in language that is common for the time and common for the language that is being targeted for translating, and to not worry so much about a word for word effort in the matter. Now we're going to discuss that a little bit more as we go on. But that's just to get it out here right now.

Hermeneutics, Part 3 of 5

Michael Hughes

Now there are some things that absolutely help us to understand the scriptures. One of those, for sure, is a desire to be pleasing to God. In Psalm 119, the sweet singer of Israel, David, beginning at verse 161, and going through 169, wrote these words. He says, "Princes have persecuted me without a cause: but my heart standeth in awe of thy word. I rejoice at thy word, as one that findeth great spoil. I hate and abhor lying: but thy law do I love. Seven times a day do I praise thee because of thy righteous judgments. Great peace have they which love thy law: and nothing shall offend them. LORD, I have hoped for thy salvation, and done thy commandments. My soul hath kept thy testimonies; and I love them exceedingly. I have kept thy precepts and thy testimonies: for all my ways are before thee. Let my cry come near before thee, O LORD: give me understanding according to thy word." This passage is suggestive of one who, as described with David, as after God's own heart. David is very much respected as one of the great men of faith in the Old Testament. And surely this love in David's heart for God and for God's word, allowed him to more clearly see the word of God, and to follow it, and to be able to therefore say with confidence, that he had followed the testimonies of God.

When Jesus was asked by a lawyer, tempting him, to find some vault in what he might say, in Matthew 22, and verse 36, by asking him the question, "Master, what is the greatest commandment in the law?" That is, what is the greatest commandment in Old Testament teaching? Well, Christ was not tricked by this. And he responded in verse 37, by quoting from the Old Testament, and he said that, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." And then he offered in addition to that, beyond what the lawyer had asked him, he said, "And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." He said, "On these two commandments, hang all the law and the prophets." Therefore, he was telling this man that, "If you had properly read the Old Testament, if you had properly studied it, if you had properly applied it, then you would understand and already know the answer to your own question, that first and foremost we love God, and then secondarily, we love others, even more than we would love our own selves."

Now we have no doubt in saying that, it is similarly true of the New Testament, that is, one reads the New Testament and correctly understands it and correctly applies it, then one would understand that it is pointing us to love God and to love others, even as we would love ourselves.

Alright, so we could theoretically take a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle of it for the Old Testament or the New Testament, and then just start reading the commands from either one of those testaments, and we would be able to put those commands on one side of that line or the other, one side being loving God, and the other side being loving our fellow man. It doesn't matter which testament that it is, that would still be similar result from such an exercise.

And so when people have a desire to please God, and a desire to do what's right, like David did, then they are able to come to understand these things. And we cannot emphasize too much how important it is that a heart be right when approaching the Word of God and trying to understand it. Many people will read the Bible trying to find some fault with it. And will refer to this and refer to that

and say, "Well, there you have it, the Bible is something terrible." And they are wanting to find meaning in passages, that are just not there, simply because their heart is not right.

In Romans chapter 6, after Paul had discussed the issue of baptism in the beginning verses of that chapter, and how that in baptism, we're baptized into the death of Christ, and subsequently raised in the likeness of His resurrection to walk with him, he then asked, on behalf of Romans, in Romans 6 in verse 16, he says, "Know ye not that to whom ye yield yourselves servants, to whom you obey, whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness." He says, "But God be thanked that you were the servants of sin, but you have obeyed from the heart, from the heart, that form of doctrine which was delivered you," that it is the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, the form of that being, when we are buried with Christ in baptism, dying to sin, and then being raised from that watery grave of baptism to walk in newness of life. He said, "When you obeyed that form, from your heart, you then became the servants of righteousness."

And we mentioned the Ethiopian eunuch earlier in Acts chapter eight, when Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture in Isaiah chapter 53, and preached unto Him Jesus, Acts 8 and verse 35. And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water. And the Eunuch said, "See here is water, what doth hinder me to be baptized." And Philip said, "If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest." And the Eunuch answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." And they commanded the chariot to stand still, and they went down both into the water both Philip and the Eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they were come up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord called away Philip that the Eunuch saw him no more. And the Eunuch went on his way rejoicing. Why was he rejoicing? Because he from his heart, had obeyed that form of doctrine that had been delivered unto him and he thus knew that he had been made clean from his sins by the blood of Christ, when he imitated the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, in the action of being lowered into that body of water and raised to walk in the likeness of Christ's resurrection. And so having done that, from the heart, having that desire to please God, he was able to understand those instructions that had been given him, and thus he went on his way, rejoicing. The desire from the heart, to please God will release us from prejudices and preconceived notions towards scripture.

Before I obeyed the gospel, I had been part of another religious organization. And I began having Bible studies with the late Garland Elkins, a very famous preacher here in the United States of America. But yet, actually, even though I had agreed to those studies, I was in reality, reluctant to the things that he was teaching. And on one occasion, I invited several preachers of various religious groups to come over for the Bible study that he was to have with me. And my desire in that was for those preachers to sort of put him in his place. Well, he was not fazed by this unexpected arrangement of preachers. And he said, "We're going to be studying the authority of the Bible." And I remember he asked the lady preacher that I had invited to read a passage that he had asked her to be prepared to read from Jude, verse 3, "Contending earnestly for the faith once delivered to the saints." As he had given a passage to each of the various preachers to read. Well, when he I asked her to read that passage, she picked up her Bible as if she were going to read it. But then, surprisingly to me, she said, "Mr. Elkins, I see your doctrine, and I will have nothing to do with it, and closed her Bible and got up and left the room. Her closing her Bible, opened my heart. Because she said, when looking at that passage, she said, looking at the passage, I see your doctrine. Well, that doctrine that she was seeing was what the passage was teaching, which had obvious meaning, which she was very able to discern, but what she was unwilling to accept, and therefore closed the Bible, and left the discussion.

Well, that encouraged me to be more open then, to what was being taught to me, because I really did, underneath my opposition, have a desire in my heart, to know God's word, and to obey it, and to be pleasing to God.

So having such a desire is going to result in spiritual purity, which is also so necessary to a successful understanding of God's Word. And likewise, this desire to please God will assist us in having a proper respect for the Word of God. So that we might say, like David in the passage from Psalm 119, that we read earlier, that we stand in awe of the Word of God, and that we tremble at his word.

It is so sad to witness many of the modern attacks upon the Word of God, even by those who profess themselves to be teachers of it. They deny its authenticity. They reject its authority. They perhaps deny the miracles that are recorded in it. They want to replace what it says with the doctrines and commandments of men. And this is certainly no new problem. But it is a problem that here in America we are seeing to be increasing in nature. And I think it is increasing in nature throughout the world, also.

Many of the Protestant churches here in America are having major battles going on within them regarding the authenticity, integrity and authority of the Bible. And we have even witnessed sometimes on occasion, within the churches of Christ. But when the Bible is viewed in a suspicious and sinister way, then it is no surprise that men will find it difficult to understand.

The Bible claims for itself in hundreds of places, that it is from God. In 2 Peter 3 and verse 16 [Correction: 2 Timothy 3:16], the apostle Paul, suggesting that what was true of the Old Testament Scriptures, is now true of the New Testament Scriptures as well. And says that, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works." Now, if that is not a true statement, then let it be demonstrated to be untrue, then there will be no need to worry over correct interpretation. We can all just read the Bible for general encouragement and enjoyment, however much we may find from that. But if it is true, that the Bible is inspired of God, and if it is therefore true, that it is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, then it is imperative that it be understood to the very best of our ability, when we have a heart that is designed to desire to please God. Having such a profound respect for the Bible, we will then be spurred on to our best understanding of it.

Now in understanding the Bible, and having that heartfelt desire to understand it, and to obey it, it's obviously necessary to have a good translation of the Bible. It is a fact that most readers of the Bible in any language will ever be uneducated as to the original languages of the Bible. The concerns of canonicity, and anything else that scholarly theologians have debated about throughout the centuries. At best, the common person will have only the Bible to read in his own vernacular, and perhaps we'll have the blessing of hearing faithful teachers of that Bible, in his vernacular, that will help him to understand the Bible better, benefiting from the respect that that faithful teacher has for the Bible.

But even those who go far beyond the average person, it will still usually not be possible in that person's lifetime, to entirely translate the Bible. Now, some have attempted to do this. We have some one-person translations of the Bible. But even if one could do that, one would still have to examine and reexamine every word in every passage in detail, to properly approach this quest to have an accurate rendition of God's Word. And even if he could find the time and wisdom in his lifetime to

translate the Bible entirely, he would therefore still need to go through it word by word and line by line with great care and concentration, to assure himself of an adequate understanding of all of its teachings. So this is beyond what is ordinary, beyond anything that is of the usual ability of the common person. So simply put, even scholars have to rely upon the translation work of others, to avail themselves of the riches of God's Word. And therefore, this would absolutely be the case with the person who has not had the privilege, or opportunity to acquire the ability of translation.

But yet the average person needs to be able to read the Bible, in his own language, in order to be able to understand it. The first recorded sermon that we have after the death of Christ is found in Acts chapter two. And there we're told in the opening verses of that chapter, about the apostles being assembled in an upper room, and there came the sound as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And they were filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. And then we're told that they went throughout the crowd, Peter and the 11, and spoke the gospel message to all of the people that had come in for the Pentecostal feast, who spoke various languages of the world. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, they were able to speak the gospel message to those people in those particular languages. Now, had they not been given that ability to do that, then by no means could the mass of those people who had gathered at that time would have had any chance to understand God's word. But yet, the Word of God was disseminated in this fashion. And we're told that over 3000 of the people who were gathered, gladly received the word and were baptized in the same day and they were added unto the body of saved people.

Hermeneutics, Part 4 of 5

Michael Hughes

I have many Bibles in my library, that are not in the English language. Even with the minor amount of Telugu that I know, for instance, I am unable to gain any appreciable amount of understanding from my copy of the Bible in that language of the Indian subcontinent. And so I rely upon my copy of the Bible in the English language. But in addition to having many foreign language Bibles, in my library, I also have many different English language versions of the Bible, in my library. Literally dozens of them. And most of the preachers that I know have similar amounts of versions, in the English language, also in their Bibles. Some of these are very old, some are new, and then of course, everything in between. Now, it stands to reason that of all of these, there will be those that will be preferred above others, for the goal of understanding what the word of the Lord is.

Our purpose in this class is not to turn it into a history of the English language Bible, or to judge the reliability of the various extant English language versions. But we do want to remark about several issues of importance, though, because the average person who will not approach this on a scholarly level, yet will still yet have to somewhat grapple with it even in an indirect way.

For instance, we know that there are various different manuscripts of the ancient writings, that some judge to be better than the others. But really, this is not the problem that some would make it out to be. There is really only a very small percentage of verses in the Bible that have any significant variation to them. Usually the variations are quite insignificant in their importance. So that is not the most important worry in choosing a translation.

A number of years ago, I was called upon to do a scholarly treatise on this subject. And at that time really came to see just how overstated this problem is. The manuscripts that are judged worthy by most of what we call the standard translations of the Bible, are just fine for well over 90% of the text. But what is more crucial, in my mind, is the methodology employed by the translations. In the past, the respected standard translations were those that followed what we deemed to be a strict method of translating. Basically, that meant that those versions were what we called, for the most part, a word for word translation of the Bible. Of course, due to the differences inherent in the different languages, it was necessary to make some adaptations and accommodations. Now most copies, for instance, of the King James version of the Bible, those copies employ the use of italics to indicate where there was a problem between the original languages and the target language, that is English. And to make it sensible to English readers, something had to be adjusted or accommodated between the two languages, and therefore the translators put those differences in italics, so that you would be made aware that that's really not the exact word for word representation.

Or perhaps, some versions will indicate some matter by use of a footnote. Well, this word for word method is greatly to be desired for interpretation purists, at least in my mind. This is the most literal way of expressing in any other language, the original writings of the inspiring teachers. Now we know that we do not have any true original writings. What we have our transcribed copies, we have translations of old manuscripts, we have quotations and ancient sources that refer to the original writings. And so all this gets studied and is used to determine the canon of the Bible. And we're not going to get into all of that in our course. But what I want to suggest to us is, is that a word for word translation, as best as we understand that expression, gives us the best opportunity to have a bias-

free rendition of God's word, so that we can take it upon ourselves to go from that, and then using tools of interpretation that might be available to us, to then strive to come at a correct understanding of what God intended to tell us through those writings.

Now, the King James version that I have referenced is still referred to as the common version in the English language, even after 400 and about 10 years now. But it is quite evident that it will not remain so over the course of the next 400 years. Several problem passages have been identified, but more than that, English is a changing language. And so the language of the King James Bible has become archaic, not through any fault of its own, but just through the process of the changing of the language, to the point that it almost seems like a foreign language to people. And folks who were, if someone were to pick up a copy of a 1611 King James version of Bible, today, most English readers would not be able to understand that Bible at all. Now, modern research and technology, for example, computers, have resulted in tremendous proliferation of Bibles in the English language. And we're seeing this come to pass in other languages as well.

And we do not know if there will yet be some future common version in the English language or some other language of the world. Or if we will come to a point of understanding we're just going to be living with many different versions of the Bible. We don't know where that is headed yet at this point.

So many of the modern English Bibles have departed from a strict word for word method of translation. And this gets back to that conversation we had a moment ago about dynamic equivalence. And that's just a high-powered way of saying that the translators often feel that their original writings cannot best be rendered in a word for word fashion. And absolutely, there is a problem going from one language to another language. For instance, everybody who studies English very quickly learns in an early study of grammar that the only way to have a proper English sentence is to have a subject and a verb. And it can be something very simple, like, "I go." That is a proper English sentence. Or sentences can be very big and have lots of clauses and phrases and gerunds and participles, and infinitives and nouns and pronouns and prepositional phrases, and things like this. And sometimes sentences can be so complex, though they are technically correct, we suggest to the people, "You need to break that up and make it more simple, so that it can be followed and understood." Well, not every language of the world has this principle of a sentence has to have a subject and a verb.

For instance, in Telugu, a language of the Indian subcontinent that I mentioned earlier, there are many proper sentences in Telugu that have no verbs. Those are called verbless sentences. Well, that is difficult in English. And when we are speaking through Telugu translators, we have to be careful because the structure of the way expressions are given is quite different from one language to the other. For instance, in English, I might would say, "I am going to go to the store." But in Telugu, they would say, "I, to the store, am going." And so they have to be prepared to be able to make that transition of not only word for word, but just the whole structure of the sentence. And thus it becomes problematic. So there is some necessity for translators when coming up with a translation of the Bible to make some adjustments.

But as best as possible, I like to think in terms of those translations that have, for the best part that they were able to do, have used a word for word method, and therefore I have the word that God gave. And then it is up for me to interpret what he meant by that, what the implication of that is for

my life, what I need to do, what I need to believe, what I need to teach other people. Versus somebody else, putting an interpretation of it into a text and calling that a translation itself.

An illustration, I think, would be from the New International Version of the Bible, which relies extensively upon this use of dynamic equivalence. In Romans chapter 8, it repeatedly uses the expression “sinful nature,” rather than the more accepted rendering, “flesh.” And this appears to be an interpretation, however, unintended by the translators, as well as an effort at translation. “Sinful nature” is an expression heavily used in Protestant circles, to refer to the doctrine that children are born sinfully stained by the sin of Adam. Now, “flesh” is a more appropriate rendering, and then it is up to the interpreters to make of that what they will, whether a doctrine of sinful nature, which is very erroneous, in my view, or something else. But at least, with the word “flesh,” all interpreters start with an unbiased translation, and then can come up with the understanding that they think is appropriate.

Now in English, we have what we generally think of as standard translations, which are those that seek this more word for word, or formal equivalence, method, and I prefer those. And then there are those Bibles that just take much more liberty, some even great liberty, using paraphrasing quite liberally, such as in the Living Bible. And then other versions of the Bible, like the New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses, which without warrant or justification, often injects a lot of creedal bias into the text. Now, there are many English versions of the Bible, as I've indicated, and some are quite well done and worthy of study for interpretation of God's Word. But even the best done of those sometimes are relatively unknown by the masses, and thus will have little impact on the English speaking world.

Hermeneutics, Part 5 of 5

Michael Hughes

Now, another thing that can be helpful in understanding the scriptures, is having some good reference tools. Now, I realize that most people who will be listening to this tape will be in settings where perhaps a lot of those materials are not available, such as Bible dictionaries, Bible encyclopedias, language study books, things of this nature. And, though they're not available generally, it is good to know that they do exist, along with such things as commentaries, where if we can select a commentary that has been written by someone that we think gives great respect for the Word of God, then hopefully, we can pick up great assistance in our own understanding of the Word of God. But even if we cannot commonly have those on shelves in our homes, or in our libraries, with computers these days, we can go online and access a lot of this material. And all of that can be very helpful in coming to an understanding of God's Word. Great teachers are an important resource in this. They, we all depend heavily upon people who have knowledge in various fields. And that is true biblically as well. There are those who have studied very intently the passages of the Bible and have spent much time looking through the words, things and doctrines of the Bible, and are thus quite capable of passing along valuable insights to us from their studies. And we've benefited greatly by listening to them.

But, perhaps I think, the greatest tool available to us in hermeneutics is the tool of good, common sense. The great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, during his course of studying the Bible, and encouraging other people to do the same, which caused him to come under the condemnation of a death penalty for this. But he said, upon his studies of the Bible, he said, "It tells me all about myself." He was intent on letting the Word of God simply reach inside of him as a man.

When Jesus preached, he said in Mark 12, and verse 37. Well, it is said of him when he taught in Mark 12, and verse 37, that "the common people heard him gladly." The religion of God is a taught religion. When Jesus gave the great commission, in Matthew chapter 28, he said, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," and notice this: "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." In Mark 16, and verse 15, he is quoted as having said, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." Now noticed in verse 16, he said, "He that believeth," that is, believes that gospel that has been preached. "And is baptized." Why? Because that is what the gospel that is preached, teaches him to do. And we saw in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, in Acts chapter 8, that when Christ is preached unto a person, that person learns about baptism for salvation, and if his heart is right before God, desires to be baptized according to the teachings of Jesus himself. And so, "he that believeth," that is, believes that gospel, "and is baptized," because that is what the gospel has taught him to do, "shall be saved." But then Jesus also added, "He that believeth not," that is, does not believe that gospel that is preached, "shall be damned." And why is that the case? It's not the case, because he didn't come to believe in Jesus just in and of itself. But it is because of his unbelief and rejection of the gospel, that He therefore chooses not to be baptized, and thus is not brought into Christ, through this imitation, this form of the doctrine, of the death, the burial and the resurrection of Christ. And so this rejection of the gospel results in his failure to obey the gospel, and thus he is outside of Christ, and is lost.

In 2 Timothy 4 and verse 2, Paul told Timothy to, "Preach the word; be instant in season, and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and doctrine." Christianity being a taught religion, it is therefore imperative that there be the ability to understand what is taught. In Luke 24 and verse 45, Jesus opened the scriptures to the disciples, by teaching them. And that's what we do today we open the hearts and minds of the people to the Scriptures, by teaching them. Well without the ability to understand, the scriptures have no appeal, the scriptures have no worth. The Bible employs the everyday experiences of life to get across God's will for man.

According to Paul in 2 Timothy 1, and verse 10, that the gospel is designed to bring life and immortality to light through the gospel. We have already noted that he said it is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good works." It is intended to bring comfort to troubled hearts. Jesus said in John 14, and verse 1, "Let not your heart be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in the Me." Then he talks about that place in heaven that he is preparing for us, and that he is "the way, the truth and the life," and that "no man will come unto the Father," but by him.

And Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 4, and verse 18, he talks about the second coming of Christ, and even the great hope of resurrection that gives to the people who will have died before Christ returns again. And so at funerals, at times of grief when we despair over loved ones leaving us from this life. We bring out those words. And Paul said in 1 Thessalonians 4, in verse 18, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words." But we can understand those words, and we can find comfort in those words.

The Bible explores where we came from, why we are here, and where we're going. It instructs us not only to our relationship with God, but also with our fellow man, and even our own selves. It satisfies those who are hungry and thirsting for righteousness. In every way, it is the book of mankind, for all ages, it was never intended for just the privileged few. It has always been, as Christ indicated, in Mark 16 and verse 15, for every creature, that is for everybody upon the face of the earth, whatever language they speak, whatever culture they are in, whatever dress they wear, whatever food they eat. No matter what it is, the gospel is for that person. And as such, it was necessary then that the Bible be written in ordinary fashion. It is not the language nor style of the scholars. But just in doing research, for this study, I have been so impressed, or maybe I should say unimpressed, with all of the terms and fancy ways of discussing and the giving of the suggestion, maybe unintendedly, but yet nonetheless, of the fact that only the elite can truly understand the Bible. And that is just simply not the case.

The Bible uses simple words to convey simple thoughts to simple people. Paul did not use fancy terms and fancy words to get across the doctrine of Christ. When he wrote the Corinthians, he reminded them in 1 Corinthians 2, that when he came among them, he "came not with excellency of speech or words of wisdom, declaring unto them the testimony of God." He said, "For I determined to know nothing among you, saying Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." A simple message, for simple people that can be understood by every person upon the face of this globe. His was the clear, understandable message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

So the vast majority of Scripture will be interpreted properly, by just applying good common sense in the effort to understand the meaning. We will look at the words used by the writer and understand the point from the usual and customary meanings of those words. We will examine the

situations behind those words, and come to understand the implication of those words to our own lives.

We may not always know all the fancy rules of logic and interpretation. We may never be linguistic scholars, we may never be even aware of what all theologians have said about any passage or point. But for the most part, we will be able to read a passage of the Bible and to automatically think logically upon it, and use the senses of common ability to understand and thus grasp the meaning of it. And even in dealing with those passages that don't seem immediately discernible by casual reading, thus requiring our use of some rules of interpretation, we will be helped along greatly by our simple, common sense. And therefore we would absolutely say that common sense is one of the great rules of interpretation and probably the greatest one of all.