

# Biblical Interpretation

**God Clearly Speaks  
Through His Word**

**DICKSON**

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Preface – 3

Introduction – 4

1 – *The Necessity For Bible Study* – 6

2 – *Hindrances To Bible Study* – 14

3 – *Understanding The Bible* – 22

4 – *Understanding The Bible Together* – 25

5 – *Authority Of The Bible* – 29

6 – *The Productive Bible Student* – 37

7 – *Right Attitudes For Bible Study* – 41

8 – *Purpose For Bible Study* – 44

9 – *Bible Study Habits* – 46

10 – *Discovering God's Will* – 49

11 – *Understanding Commands* – 55

12 – *Enacting God's Commands* – 59

13 – *Direct Commands* – 66

14 – *Matters Of Opinion* – 71

15 – *Examples Of Obedience* – 75

16 – *The Place Of Examples* – 82

17 – *Necessary Inferences* – 88

18 – *Gospel Motivated Living* – 94

19 – *Practical Christianity* – 102

20 – *Practical Bible Study* – 108

*Epilogue* – 132

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## Preface

We often underestimate the desires of men to impose on themselves their religious beliefs and behavior. When men do such, they go to the Bible with the intention of finding justification for their beliefs and behavior. The result of this principle of biblical interpretation is that one often finds it difficult to objectively study the Bible.

However, such does not have to be the case. God wrote the Bible to common people who were hungering and thirsting after His direction. The Bible was not written only for scholar and scribe. It was written for the common populace of the world, and thus, it can be understood if men and women will come to its pages with an open heart and a desire to seek the will of God.

All that God desires that we do in order to be saved is clearly written in the

Bible. The Bible is thus easily understood in order that we know and obey His will.

All that God has revealed will bring unity among those who seek to serve Him in fellowship with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. All that is necessary to make the man of God complete and furnished unto every good work is in the word of God. It is for this reason that we must be objective students of the Bible in order that we be productive in carrying out God's will in our lives.

The material of this book was originally written as a course textbook. It comes in this format in order to provide a guide for Bible study for those who seek to better understand the word of God. For those who seek a guided study of this book, a study manual is provided on the internet at [www.africainternational.org](http://www.africainternational.org).

## INTRODUCTION

We live in a world that is seeking moral and religious leadership. It is a world that is searching for answers and standards of behavior by which individuals can guide their lives in the moral chaos of the world in which we live. Religionists who fall under the banner of Protestantism have offered temporary but contradictory answers to the questions concerning stable standards for human behavior. To an unbelieving world, the divided voice of the protestant world is both confusing and hypocritical. The unity for which Jesus prayed in John 17:20,21 can never be manifested under the umbrella of present protestant Christianity. A world that promotes and condones religious division cannot claim that the Bible is the word of God that brings unity among believers.

Shackled with the garb of human traditions, the denominational world portrays a religiosity to the non-Christian world that is inconsistent with the Bible they profess to understand. Inability of many to understand the Bible alike has tarnished their plea as a suitable and consistent answer for a world in search of timeless answers. Division has brought reproach upon the Scriptures, and to a great extent, nullified the plea of a unified church. The denominational world proclaims that every man has a right to choose his own direction to heaven, while at the same time those of this religiously confused world claim that the Bible is the word of God. If men have a right to

choose their own way, then God's way means little or nothing. If the Bible is the word of God, then it is the only way through which we must go in order to find eternal life.

The church stands as a beacon for unity that is based upon a united understanding of fundamental truths of the Bible. However, this example of unity has often been tarnished by the legalistic nitpicking of those who would rather quibble over nonessential opinions than maintain a unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The lack of forbearance among some has led to division and a mockery of the unity for which Jesus prayed. We have often left the religious world confused by our hypocritical plea for unity. We plead for unity when we divide over senseless issues. Such is an inconsistent, if not hypocritical, presentation to the world of the unity for which Jesus prayed.

God did not reveal His will to us in a manner that would cause division. Division occurs when fundamental truths of the Bible are questioned or denied. If they are denied, then division must occur between those who refuse to believe and obey fundamental truths. This division is necessary and is what separates the church from a religious world that seems to be more set on propagating tradition than truth. However, division within the ranks of brotherhood that is caused by selfish ambition is sinful. The division of the church through the canonization of traditional opinions and in-

terpretations must be challenged. When the church becomes uselessly fragmented there must arise a challenge among us as to why such is so. When two brothers who agree on fundamental beliefs are divided over matters of opinion, then we must challenge ourselves concerning the reasons for the division.

In Bible study, division is generated from one of two sources. The problem is either with the attitude of the interpreter or with his or her approach to understanding the Scriptures. We must assume that God expects us to interpret the Scriptures in a manner that will cause brotherhood between God-seeking individuals. If there is division, then we must first look to the individuals and to their approach of understanding God's communication. We must consider their attitude toward Scripture and saint alike. We must never assume that God communicated His will to us in a manner that would cause division among His people.

We must firm affirmation that men can understand the Bible in order to bring brotherhood to a religiously divided world. By practising a united church before the unbelieving and religious worlds, we can offer hope to those who are seeking truth. As believers in Christ, therefore, our zeal must lead us to seek for oneness based upon the authority of the Scriptures. We must study in order to discover God's message of unity among believers.

There is no systematic method of Bible study revealed in the Scriptures. Therefore, no methodology of hermeneutics must ever be made doctrine. The

Bible was not written in a manner that needed a special revealed hermeneutic in order to be understood. It was written to common people. Anyone with common abilities of study, therefore, can understand its simple message.

If great scholarship and hermeneutic genius are needed to discover every detail of what is assumed to be essential truths that are necessary for salvation, then we question whether the details of the essential truths are necessary for salvation. Those truths that are essential for salvation are easily understood by the most novice interpreter. God did not cover those things that are necessary for salvation in language that would take years of study in order to discover. God does not play hermeneutical games with man in order to see if we can discover what is necessary for our salvation.

In this book, therefore, we do not set forth a "biblical hermeneutic." We simply desire to present a guide to understand the Bible with the simple rules and suggestions of good scholarship that are used by everyday students. God never intended to make His communication to man difficult. Therefore, those things that are fundamental to one's salvation are easily understood. We seek in this book, therefore, to manifest the simplicity by which the Bible can be understood.

In order to study any subject, we must be motivated to do so. It is the same with studying the Bible. One must be motivated to study God's word by hungering and thirsting after truth. Without sufficient motivation, one's goal to be an effective Bible student will not be reached.

## Chapter 1

# THE NECESSITY FOR BIBLE STUDY

If a person claims to be a Christian in any way, he has placed himself in the position of having to consult the Bible as the major directing force of his or her life. This is true because Christianity originated from Jesus and the Bible tells us who He is. Christianity is sustained by the Bible. For only through God's word can we know the heart of God. Therefore, if one says he or she is a Christian, he or she must deal with the Bible. If one ignores the Bible, then he is forced to base his faith on some other individual, his feelings, or on human religious traditions. All such foundations are constantly changing. They are unstable. After one strays from a Bible-based faith to a tradition-based religion, he or she gives up the right to be referred to as following the faith that is based on the Bible (Jd 3). However, if one eventually becomes frustrated with either feelings or traditions as a religious guide, the Bible is always there for study. Without the word of God, we have nowhere to go for answers to the deepest questions of our existence. Only through His revelation will we find the one true and living God. This is why men are driven to the Bible for answers.

### A. The need for Bible study:

This world would be a better place if there were more people who enjoyed Bible study. The religious world would be less confusing if more people would

want to learn how to study the Bible in a more effective manner. In fact, it would be a less confusing world if men would simply study the Bible in a correct manner.

We live in a morally confused world. Peter called out to a similar generation of people as ours with the plea, "*Be saved from this perverse generation*" (At 2:40). In a society of crime and violence, sincere people seek for answers. In a world of religious confusion and religions based upon fear, guilt and superstition, sincere people seek for answers to religious conflicts and an escape from fear. We can find solutions to life's problems only if we come to the Bible. We must have confidence that it has all the answers to provide "*the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding ...*" (Ph 4:7).

We live in a world where men live in both political and moral conflict with one another. Many often live immoral lives. Drunkenness, immorality, deceit and rebellion are seen everywhere in the world today. Those who see the lost state of men seek answers in order to bring the lost into the fold of God. These truth seekers want answers to questions that will bring peace and contentment to their lives in a world of power struggles and strife. In countries of political unrest and war, men seek solitude and tranquility. The Bible has answers that men and women throughout the world need to know. It can bring peace of mind, soli-

tude and tranquility of soul. This is why men should be motivated to study the word of God.

James 1:21 expresses the greatest reason why we need to study the word of God. James wrote, *“Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.”* Peter expressed the same thought in 1 Peter 1:22. *“Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart”* (See Ps 19:7-11). It is through the Bible that we discover how to save ourselves from physical death. The Bible reveals to us how we can escape this mortal world of death in order to obtain a better world in a new heavens and earth that is yet to come (2 Pt 3:13).

Men find it difficult to live among themselves without some final authority other than man himself. They have failed to establish consistent moral laws. It is not the work of the scientist to establish moral laws. It is not within the scientific method of study to determine if nuclear power is to be produced to supply electricity for hospitals and houses or to supply nuclear bombs to destroy hospitals and houses. Man needs God to give him a final answer on these matters.

Underdeveloped countries often look to developed or industrial countries as a place of personal peace and hope. However, the development of the financial or economical power of a country does not bring inward contentment to its citizens. In fact, one might say that economic de-

velopment produces inward worries that add to the frustrations of the individual. In financially developed countries, citizens eventually understand that money and things are not a guarantee for happiness. A wealthy man without God is just as unhappy as a poor man without God. We must recognize that the true answer to the inward turmoil of man is God. And God communicates to us today through His word. Paul said, *“And now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified”* (At 20:32).

In a world of moral chaos, there is hope only in the revelation of God who delivers unto us the means by which we can have life. Not only can we have eternal life through Jesus, we can also enjoy the abundance of this present life. *“I have come,”* Jesus said, *“that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly”* (Jn 10:10).

## **B. Practical reasons for Bible study:**

The Bible teaches that there are reasons for studying the Bible. The following passages express God’s instructions to us concerning our need to investigate His communication to us through His word of revelation. These reasons are considered practical simply because in the application of Bible principles to one’s living, one will experience the abundant life about which Jesus spoke in John 10:10.

**1. Study in order to rightly divide the word of God.** We must study the Bible in order to understand and correctly apply Bible teachings that were meant for everyone in his or her time to obey. Paul wrote to Timothy, *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”* (2 Tm 2:15). One studies the Bible, therefore, in order to determine what is applicable to his life. Some things in the Bible were written to be applied to the lives of people who lived centuries ago. Other things were written to be applied to the lives of all Christians until Jesus comes again. In order to understand what is applicable to our lives, therefore, we must study the Bible.

**2. Study in order to determine what is truth.** We must study the Bible in order to be considered noble before God and to prove the truthfulness of the teachings of Bible teachers. Luke wrote of the Bereans, *“These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so”* (At 17:11).

When Paul and Silas preached before the Bereans, the Bereans searched the Old Testament Scriptures in order to confirm what was preached. The Holy Spirit affirmed that these people were “fair-minded” because of what they did in their search of the Scriptures. They did not discard what was preached because it disagreed with what they believed. They wanted to know if what was preached was

according to the word of God. In this way, therefore, they were fair-minded and sincere in their desire to know what the Bible taught.

**3. Study in order to determine God’s moral laws.** We must study the Bible because it is not wise to establish and trust in our own moral rules. Solomon wrote, *“He who trusts in his own heart is a fool, but whoever walks wisely will be delivered”* (Pv 28:26; see Pv 3:5).

Since it is impossible for men to establish timeless moral laws that are based on the concept to love one’s neighbor as himself, it is imperative that men seek for authority in moral laws that are above man himself. Since God’s moral laws have existed for centuries, it is reasonable to search the Bible for His moral principles in order to direct our ways.

**4. Study in order not to establish our own moral laws.** We must study the Bible because we often seek to construct our own moral code of living after our own desires. Jeremiah wrote, *“O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps”* (Jr 10:23). Solomon also wrote, *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death”* (Pv 16:25).

If men could establish their own moral codes by which to live, then we would live in a world of peace. However, the fact that societies have forsaken the moral codes of God in order to follow after their own desires manifests the point that men cannot establish moral laws that do not violate the human rights of others. The Bible is perfectly clear on

this point. It is not in man to direct his path. Since God made this statement about man He created, then we accept this principle without question. God did not make man with the ability to establish an unchanging moral code that would apply to all societies of this world. Therefore, He had to reveal to man that which would guide man while on this earth. That direction is in the Bible.

**5. Study in order to establish our assurance.** We must study the Bible because through a knowledge of it we can be assured of God's moral values and our own sonship. John wrote, "*By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments*" (1 Jn 5:2). When we study the Bible, we learn God's commandments, and thus, we know when we walk in His commandments. John also wrote, "*We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one*" (1 Jn 5:19). The only way we can know that we are of God is if we know God's word. Our assurance of knowing that we are God's children is not based on our feelings or on our religious traditions. Our assurance is based on the word of God.

**6. Study in order not to be deceived.** We must study the Bible in order not to be deceived by the lies of false teachers who often promote erroneous moral standards. Paul wrote,

*... and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason*

*God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness* (2 Th 2:10-12).

When one does not know the Bible, then he will construct a religious belief after his own imagination. He will either follow his emotions or his traditions. In ignorance of the word of God, both will lead one away from God. Therefore, we study the word of God in order not to be led astray from the truth (Ep 4:11-16).

**7. Study in order not to sin against God.** We must study the Bible in order to know God's laws. When we know God's law we guard ourselves against sin. John wrote, "*Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness*" (1 Jn 3:4). We study in order to know God's will, and thus guard ourselves against lawlessness.

Men will always seek to lead others astray by the teaching of their own humanly devised religious beliefs. John also warned,

*But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction* (1 Jn 2:1).

We study the Bible, therefore, in order that we know God's will, lest we sin against Him. It is not that the Christian will not sin. The fact is that his knowl-

edge of God's word gives him the opportunity to know when he does sin.

**8. Study in order to train our children in the word of God.** Moses commanded the Israelites that they instruct their children in the law of God. He wrote,

*And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up* (See Dt 6:1-9; 11:18-21).

Paul also wrote, "*And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord*" (Ep 6:4). Solomon said, "*Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it*" (Pv 22:6).

As parents, we must study the Bible in order to know how to train our children in eternal moral principles. We must know the word of God in order to be able to teach these principles to our children. Parents who are ignorant of the Bible, will not be able to instill within their children the word of God, nor the principles of truth that will guide them throughout their lives.

**9. Study in order to receive instruction and correction.** Paul said that the word of God must be preached and heard in order that men receive reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness for everyday living. He wrote, "*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,*

*and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness ...*" (2 Tm 3:16). When one is willing to allow God to direct his life, then the word of God is able to direct his life according to the will of God.

**10. Study in order to understand what is pure religion before God.** We study the Bible in order to understand ourselves in relation to what God demands for righteous living. James wrote of these things in James 1:22-27. He wrote, "*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*" If one does not know the word of God, then certainly he will not know if he is a "doer of the word." James continued, "*But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.*" It is imperative, therefore, that one study the word of God in order to be blessed in what he does. James concluded, "*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*"

We would not know what to do in order to have "pure religion" if James had not revealed such in this statement. We would not know how to keep ourselves unspotted from the world if we were not directed by the word of God. Therefore, the student of God's word is motivated to study the Bible in order to know what God would require of him.

**11. Study in order not to be led astray by traditional religion.** The Jews had created a religion after the religious

traditions of their fathers. Jesus condemned such in His judgment against the religious leaders who bound humanly devised religious traditions on the people. In their zeal to keep their traditions, they rejected the commandments of God. Jesus said,

*Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men ... (Mk 7:6-9).*

We study the Bible, therefore, in order to distinguish between what is Bible and what is tradition. It is not wrong to do things traditionally. However, when the traditional manner of doing something moves us to ignore or reject the word of God, then the traditional way of doing something becomes wrong. The Jews had moved away from the word of God to the point that they were more diligent to keep their traditions than the commandments of God.

We study the Bible, therefore, in order to maintain our honor of the commandments of God. If we become ignorant of the word of God, we will be destroyed in our own religiosity of false worship. Hosea said such of Israel when the nation fell away unto false religions because of their ignorance of the word of God.

*My people are destroyed for lack of*

*knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children (Hs 4:6).*

The above principles for Bible study are very important for the Christian to remember. It must be remembered also that one of the most important reasons why we need more Bible study is because God has commanded us to be diligent students. True nobility in the sight of God comes by searching the Scriptures. In Acts 17:11 Luke recorded that the Bereans did not accept anyone's preaching without first studying the Scriptures for themselves. We learn from this that every individual has a right to study and should study for themselves.

Another imperative for Bible study is based upon the fact that men often think that what they are doing is right when it is actually contrary to the word of God. Many today make the mistake of trusting their own hearts. However, we must continue to remember that our emotions and feelings will lead us astray if such are not guided by the word of God.

Evil in the world today proves that men are unable to direct their own ways. Because men have tried to direct their own ways, the world lies in a wicked and condemned state. This is because the devil has sought out and gained men who have determined to direct their own lives with immoral principles. We must study the Bible, therefore, in order not to be deceived by the lies of Satan.

One of the greatest reasons for the

Christian to study the Bible is that he or she might better teach others. Men are lost in sin. It will take disciples who are qualified and knowledgeable of the word of God in order to teach the lost of the world. We must also be able to teach our children the word of life. If they are to follow God, they must know God.

Most important of all, we must study the Bible because God has revealed Himself to men through it. It is His book and if we want to know God we must study His book. If we want to know how He would have us behave in our relationships with others, then we must allow Him to direct our lives through His word. Men are religious. If we reject God's direction in our beliefs, then religions will be created after our desires and traditions. For this reason, it is most important to be only students of God's word, but also, obedient students to what the Bible teaches. Through obedience of His word, we are driven to know better what God has to say in reference to directing our lives into eternity.

### C. Spiritual reasons for Bible study:

The following are added reasons for Bible study. We would call these spiritual reasons simply because they have a direct application to our spiritual growth and salvation.

**1. Study to know the Father and the Son.** Jesus said, "*And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent*" (Jn 17:3). We can know the Father

by studying the life of the Son. Jesus said, "*But I know Him, for I am from Him, and He sent Me*" (Jn 7:29). Because the Father and the Son are one (Jn 10:30), the Son reveals the Father to man (Lk 10:21,22). If anyone seeks to understand the Father, therefore, he must study the life of the Son. Jesus said, "*He who has seen Me has seen the Father*" (Jn 14:9). We "see" Jesus through the inspired record of His life. Therefore, in order to know the Father through the Son, we must know the record of the Son's life (See 2 Pt 3:18).

**2. Study to know the truth.** Jesus said, "*And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*" (Jn 8:32). He also said, "*Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth*" (Jn 17:17; see 1 Pt 1:22,23). Therefore, in order to know the truth, we must study the word of God.

**3. Study to grow in faith.** The Bible is still our source of faith. "*So faith comes by hearing,*" Paul said, "*and hearing by the word of God*" (Rm 10:17). Concerning his purpose for writing, John stated,

*And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name* (Jn 20:30,31).

Without faith it is impossible to be pleasing to God (Hb 11:6). Therefore, we must study the Bible in order to grow in faith.

**4. Study because we will be judged by the word of Christ.** At the final judgment, men will not be judged by the creed books or rules of man. Jesus said, “*He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day*” (Jn 12:48). For those who live in this dispensation of time, the word of Jesus will be the standard of judgment. When men realize that they will be judged by the word of Jesus, they will be motivated to study it (See Rv 20:11-15).

**5. Study because the Bible will make one wise unto salvation.** Of Timothy, Paul wrote “*that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus*” (2 Tm 3:15). There is no way one can know how to be saved today except through the Bible. The Old Testament prophets wrote concerning this salvation. They diligently searched what they wrote by inspiration because this salvation at the time they wrote was a great mystery. Of them and their writing Peter stated,

*Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when he testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow* (1 Pt 1:10,11).

This salvation has now been revealed

to us today through the New Testament. In order to discover it, one must study the Bible. In other words, we today could never know of the cross of Jesus and His resurrection except through the written word of God.

**6. Study because the word of God is able to save our souls.** The gospel is God’s power unto salvation (Rm 1:16). This gospel is revealed in the New Testament. When we discover the gospel in the word of God, and are obedient to it, we will thus save our souls. This is why James wrote, “*... receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls*” (Js 1:21). Those who meekly submit to the word of God will save their souls by their obedience to the gospel.

The most important reason for studying the Bible is because it is actually the word of God. In realizing this truth, we study the Bible because we seek God’s guidance in our lives. The Bible will guide us to a greater spiritual life when we are obedient to its inspired principles. Through obedience to God’s will, we will save our souls.

The Bible has eternal answers to man’s greatest problems. It has the answer to man’s greatest problem, that is, his condemnation because of his own sins. The greatest answer is the gospel of salvation. We study the Bible in order to prepare ourselves for eternity in heaven with God.

We live in a world where men have fabricated almost every type of religion that can be conceived. When we think that no new religion can be invented, along comes another invention of the

misguided spiritual wanderings of some dreamer or seer. There seems to be no end to the religions that can be generated by the misguided religious yearnings of the human spirit.

The God of heaven would relegate man to the confusion of inventing his own religious beliefs. Will the God who created the universe, and man himself, intentionally allow men to condemn them-

selves through their own religiosity? Those who profess any allegiance to Christ, but ignore the Scriptures as the final authority of truth about God, have condemned themselves to their own religious inventions. We study the Bible in order to promote unity among all who believe in God. The Bible is the answer to division among believers. It is the source of salvation to unbelievers.

## Chapter 2

### HINDRANCES TO BIBLE STUDY

A common fallacy that is believed among those who know little or nothing about the Bible is that the Bible is difficult to understand. One of the principal reasons why this is believed is because most people do not study the Bible. Add to this the fact of the great religious division that prevails today throughout Christendom. Because of the religious division that prevails throughout the world, many have assumed that it must be difficult to understand the Bible in order to be united upon it as a foundation of faith.

The Bible is not difficult to understand. However, it was not written like a Sunday morning newspaper which is to be casually read. One must make his or her study of the Bible a lifetime project. When one falls in love with the Bible, study becomes a pleasurable experience to which one goes for daily guidance. When we understand that the Bible is God speaking to us, then it is not difficult to maintain a life-style of Bible study.

As with all literary books, the more the Bible is studied the easier it is to

understand. Almost without exception, those who complain about not being able to understand the Bible are those who never study it in detail. The Holy Spirit inspired the Bible to be written in a way that would challenge us to study. Because of this, there is no room for pride in our knowledge of the Scriptures. However, we must remember that fundamental truths that are necessary for salvation are easy to understand. God did not make that which is necessary for salvation difficult to discover. One simply needs to open the Bible and read.

The following are some very important things to be learned concerning our personal understanding of the Bible. The purpose in presenting these points is to clarify some misunderstandings concerning our general understanding of the Bible. We live in a world that is basically ignorant of the Bible. Because of this there are many misconceptions floating around concerning how the Bible is to be understood. In this chapter, therefore, we must seriously reconsider some

of the misinformation that is circulated concerning our understanding of the Bible. By sorting out the misinformation, we can begin to understand why people do not interpret the Bible in a manner that creates unity among believers.

The following points indicate some reasons why the Bible is often not understood and why people often do not understand it alike. The objective of these points is to help us guard ourselves against stumbling over any of these problems in our personal relationship with God's word.

### A. People simply do not study the Bible.

This is probably the greatest reason why people do not understand the Bible. After all, how can one understand that which he or she does not know? It is a fact that the better one knows the Bible the better he or she will understand it. This is why Peter wrote, "*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Pt 3:18).

The Bereans could understand the Bible because they searched the Scriptures. Luke wrote of them, "*These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so*" (At 17:11). The first and most basic reason why people do not understand the Scriptures is simply because they do not study. If people would be like the Bereans who daily studied the

Scriptures, then there would be less confusion in the religious world concerning what the Bible says.

### B. People study with an unreceptive mind.

Having a closed mind means that one is not receptive to new ideas or better ideas. Having an open mind means that one will always be seeking for truth. Human religious traditions will not stop an open minded person from searching the Scriptures for truth. Open minded people always want to learn. They seek answers for questions. They are willing to let others and the Bible feed them new information. But if one studies the Bible with an unreceptive mind, he cannot understand the message of the Bible. If he or she is not willing to take the risk of discovering truth that may contradict his or her present life or beliefs, he or she will not objectively study the Bible.

Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, is a good example of the above principle. Jeremiah had written condemning words about the king's wicked life and reign. However, when these words were read before the King, Jehoiakim cut in pieces the scroll on which the words of Jeremiah were written. He then burned the pieces (See Jr 36:20-26). His mind was closed and hardened against God's word.

On the other hand, open minded people humbly seek to learn truth that will better their lives. They seek truth that will give them a better understanding of the nature and existence of God. Such an attitude was portrayed by the

Ethiopian eunuch when asked by Philip if he understood what he read. The eunuch replied, “*How can I, unless someone guides me?*” (At 8:31). Such an attitude should be portrayed by all Bible students. We can always learn from others.

### C. People study in order to defend their religious prejudices.

This is one of the major reasons why people do not understand the Bible. They read the Bible, but twist its meaning to fit their own preconceived ideas or religious traditions. Suppose we learned from our study of the Bible that something we have been religiously practicing or believing for many years, but is actually wrong. Would we be willing to change our religious practice? Or, would we seek to interpret the Bible in a way that would make the Bible agree with what we have traditionally believed for many years?

This point is very important concerning our correct understanding of the Bible. Every Bible student must be willing to submit his or her traditional interpretations and religious behavior to the will of God every time the Bible is opened. God’s word must be respected over any traditional thought or practice.

2 Peter 3:15,16 and Mark 7:9 are important scriptures to study concerning the point of traditional thought (See also Mt 15:1-9). These passages remind us of the tremendous influence the religious traditions have on all religious people. In the 2 Peter 3:15,16 passage, Peter

warned concerning those who sought to maintain their own religious beliefs by twisting the inspired Scriptures of Paul. Peter wrote,

*... and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, **which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.***

After the same manner, the Jews sought to keep their own traditions instead of searching for and applying the word of God. Jesus said of them, “*All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition*” (Mk 7:9).

Bible students must never underestimate the strength of both traditional behavior and traditional interpretations of the Bible. Christians usually assume that all they do and believe is straight from the Bible. This is not always the case. And because this is not always the case, it is important to always go to the Bible in order to continue the refreshing of our minds and lives.

There are many people who are not willing to make a personal commitment during their Bible studies to submit traditional interpretations or behavior to objective Bible revelation. As a result, they do not want to understand the Bible. They read into their Bibles subtle tradi-

tional beliefs that reveals they are not objective. The student who is not objective interprets the Bible from the viewpoint of his or her traditional beliefs. This is the reason why the Jews could not understand that Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. Jesus said to them, *“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life”* (Jn 5:39,40).

The Jewish religious leaders could not see Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy because they had rejected the commandments of God in order to keep their own traditions (Mk 7:1-9). For this reason, many today cannot understand the Bible simply because they are more zealous to keep their traditions than to discover what God has revealed concerning what men should believe and do.

We must not be afraid to reexamine any truth. In fact, **familiar scriptures must always be reexamined**. If this is not one’s policy as a Christian, then one day he or she will wake up and discover that he or she has been depending on the preacher for truth and not on an independent conviction of what the Bible says. More tragically, it might be discovered that as a church we have wandered so far from the truth that we have simply become another religion. Before we question this possibility, we must remember church history and the development of the denominational world. The first leaders of these groups had honorable intentions of restoring or reforming religion

in order to return to the word of God. However, as years passed, their followers developed sectarian attitudes. They formed their own denominational groups that were centered around the teachings of the initial founders who had sought to restore or reform. Therefore, we must always assume that there is a general departure from the truth. Men seek to create religion after their own desires. For this reason, there must always be a reinvestigation of the truth by every generation of Bible students.

Familiar passages must always be reexamined, because as Bible students, we continually gain a broader view of the whole text of the Bible. Our familiar passages, therefore, must be reexamined in light of our greater knowledge of the Scriptures as a whole. One is often surprised as the meaning of scriptures is enhanced as he or she gains a greater understanding of the context and whole text of familiar passages.

#### **D. People read preconceived ideas into the Bible.**

We must never be deceived into thinking that our religious environment does not affect our interpretation of the Bible. Preconceived ideas constantly affect our objectivity in Bible study. Failing to recognize this will most certainly lead us into false interpretations.

There are many examples of this point in the religious world. For example, suppose one has been taught that baptism is by sprinkling. As a result, every time he reads about baptism in the book of

Acts or the epistles, he will be thinking about sprinkling. If one believes that “tongues” refers to an emotional outburst of ecstatic speaking, then every time the word “tongues” is read in the Bible, this understanding is read into the interpretation of the Bible passage. This is true of one’s understanding of miracles, demon possession, the Holy Spirit and a host of other Bible subjects. Our religious environment greatly affects our interpretation of the Scriptures.

This tendency to read into the Bible preconceived ideas is difficult for those who do not regularly study the Bible. This is true concerning all those who would study the Bible from an erroneous religious world view. By this we mean those who maintain an erroneous religious belief that affects the totality of their life. They will often twist scriptures around preconceived beliefs that are erroneous.

Religious world views have been developed in the mind of every person. In other words, everyone has some view of where they originated, why they are here, and where they are going. It is important that the Bible student be aware of this in order not to allow wrong world views to twist the Scriptures. The Bible must be allowed to develop our world views. The more one studies the Bible, the more adjusted his or her world view will be made by God, and not by the religious or secular environment in which we may live.

## **E. People use text of the Bible out of context.**

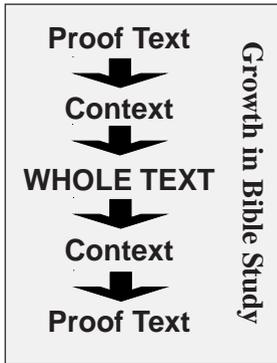
Some study the Bible in order to find “proof texts” that will enable them to win a religious argument they may be having with a friend or neighbor. They try to justify or prove a teaching by taking passages of scripture from the context in which they were originally written. If we study the Bible in order to seek out proof texts, or justify something we are doing or something we believe, we will surely misunderstand the text.

The term “proof text” refers to the using of specific passages of scripture to prove a specific teaching that we maintain as true. For example, John 1:1,14 teaches the incarnation of the Son of God. Acts 2:38 teaches that one must be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. John 3:16 teaches that God gave His only begotten Son for the salvation of the world. Throughout the Bible there are statements of divine truth in only one passage. There is nothing wrong with using a single passage of scripture in order to affirm a fundamental truth.

The problem arises, however, when our knowledge of the Bible is limited to only a few passages. It is not wrong to have proof texts to prove doctrinal positions. However, one must realize the danger of building our beliefs on a simple foundation of favorite passages. The problem with such a foundation is that **scriptures can easily be taken out of their context**. Another problem is that **one usually does not discover a possible deeper meaning of any particular passage by focusing only on the truth of a single passage**. Therefore, one must progress in his or her knowledge of the

Scriptures to a study of the **context** of all scriptures.

The context refers to the grammatical structure, syntax, and general message of the chapter or book in which the proof text rests. In other words, one must understand the general message of the author of the book before he or she can fully



understand the meaning of any particular scripture. Before one can fully understand the context, therefore, the **whole text** must be understood. In other words, we

must understand the broad scope of major Bible subjects in order to fully understand any one book (context) or any one passage (proof text). Our knowledge of the Bible must go from proof text to context, and then, to the whole text. After we understand the whole text, interpretation of any particular scripture can be relatively easy.

Our old understanding of favorite proof texts will often take on a much deeper meaning when we understand the whole text. The deeper meaning will be acquired when the proof text is enhanced by its context. Our understanding of individual passages, therefore, will be greatly enhanced when we study the Bible as a whole, and not in parts and pieces.

## F. People do not love the truth.

Those who do not love the Bible and truth will generally misunderstand the Bible. This is only natural, for if one does not believe that the Bible speaks truth, then certainly he will have difficulty understanding it.

David said, “*Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day*” (Ps 119:97). This is the attitude that must be portrayed by sincere Bible students. On the other hand, Paul spoke of those who had no desire to know the truth. He wrote that they could not find the truth “*because they did not receive the love of the truth*” (2 Th 2:11). “*And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness*” (2 Th 2:10-12).

If one does not love the truth as David, then he or she will not be searching for it. He will thus allow himself to believe any delusion that will come from the world. God will allow Satan to deceive anyone who does not have a love for the truth. If one is satisfied with where he or she is in belief, then there will be no searching. In order for one to search for truth, he or she should first realize that we must seek for that which is above our own selves. We must never consider ourselves as the final authority of truth in all things.

## G. People are blinded to the truth by worldly living.

Some misunderstand the Bible because they do not want to understand it

in a way that conflicts with their unrighteous living. Evil men do not like the light because they love the darkness. And when people love the darkness, they will not accept the light.

To the Corinthians Paul wrote, *“But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them”* (2 Co 4:3,4). The gospel was veiled to some simply because they were not willing to accept its truth.

Some in Achaia were not able to “receive” (understand) the meat of the word of God that Paul could have written to them. They could not understand because some in Corinth were carnal in mind and life. Paul wrote to them, *“I fed you with milk and not with solid food: for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able”* (See 1 Co 3:1-4). Because of their carnal thinking they were not able to understand the message he could have written to them.

In order for one to better understand the Bible, he or she must continue to grow spiritually. The more our lives conform to the word of God, the better we will understand it. For example, the more we learn to love others as ourselves the better we will be able to understand how God loves (See 1 Jn 4:7,8). Our understanding of the Bible is enhanced as the application of the principles of the Bible are incorporated into our lives.

## H. People study the Bible in a disorganized manner.

This point stresses the fact that many people simply read various passages of the Bible at random without any real organization in their study. Some have read the Bible for years, and yet, they have never come to an understanding of the gospel. It takes more than Bible reading to understand the Bible.

The principal problem is that many never really get involved in a serious and organized study of the Bible. This fact may cause many Bible-believing people to misinterpret the Bible. The reason for this problem may be that people place the security of their salvation in the hands of a preacher or the accepted teaching of an admired teacher. Or, they may be relying on the tradition of their forefathers or parents. But relying on anyone other than one’s personal knowledge of the truth for one’s salvation is both unwise and contrary to what the Bible teaches. **God expects us to personally study His word** (2 Tm 2:15). He expects us to prove all things and hold on to that which is true (2 Co 13:5; 1 Th 5:21). And He expects us to personally *“grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* (2 Pt 3:18).

Paul told Timothy to *“charge some that they teach no other doctrine, nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies ...”* (1 Tm 1:3,4). We live in a world of endless distortions of the Bible. Sincere Bible students must be diligent to *“shun profane and vain babblings, for they will*

increase to more ungodliness” (2 Tm 2:16). Paul warned,

*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables (2 Tm 4:3,4).*

We are certainly in those times. We must, therefore, make every effort to approach the Bible in the most objective manner possible in order to be able to separate truth from error.

### **I. People are satisfied with their knowledge of the Bible.**

There are those who are satisfied with what truth they know. They believe that what they know is sufficient, and thus, they feel no need to learn more. Their Bible study ceases as they depend on their past studies or teachings of past generations. This unfortunate attitude has led some to be arrogant about their knowledge of the Bible. Their Bible study has ceased because they have concluded that no more truth needs to be learned from God’s word.

Sincere Bible students will continually search the Scriptures. They will seek to be continually reminded of those things they have been taught. Peter wrote, *“Therefore I will not be negligent to remind you always of these things, though you know them, and are established in the present truth”* (2 Pt 1:12).

Peter was not negligent to continue to remind his readers of things they already knew. We must guard against being “dull of hearing” as the Hebrew readers lest we cease being reminded (See Hb 5:11). We must continually prove all things and hold to that which is truth (2 Co 13:5). If we do not follow this purpose in biblical studies, then we will stray from the truth.

### **J. People exalt feelings over the Bible.**

Many people do not understand the Bible because they have created a religious behavior that is based on their feelings and emotions. Their religious hysteria has convinced them that if something feels right, then it must be right. Their emotional outbursts are often assigned to the Holy Spirit, and thus, they affirm that the Holy Spirit is directly leading them in their religious behavior regardless of what the Bible says. In such religious groups, the Bible plays a minor role part in directing one’s behavior. In fact, the Bible is often completely rejected as adherents to emotionally oriented religions submit to their emotions and feelings, being deceived thinking that the Holy Spirit would lead them contrary to what He has already revealed through the Bible.

Those who would trust in their emotions as the foundation upon which to establish authority in their faith should be reminded of Proverbs 14:12. *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”* One may feel that the direction to which his emotions are taking him is the right way. How-

ever, God pronounces that what may seem right in our own minds apart from His word will actually lead us to death. Since God made this statement in reference to the nature of man, then every person should take heed not to trust in his

feelings or emotions. The only sure way to determine the way of life is to follow the Bible, since the Bible is from God. And if one would seek God, then he must seek Him through His word.

## Chapter 3

### UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

In John 17:20,21 Jesus prayed that His disciples *“may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.”* It is obvious from this prayer of Jesus that He affirmed that one of the greatest evangelistic evidences to the world concerning the truth of the gospel would be the unity of His disciples.

Jesus’ prayer is answered in the lives of those who know and obey the truth. However, there is a great number of people in the world today who claim Jesus, but have no intention of living in unity with others who also believe in Him. Many of those who claim that He is the Son of God manifest a tremendous example of division before the world. It is only natural, therefore, that the religious world outside those who give some allegiance to Christ and His word, would believe that the message of Christ cannot be understood in a manner that will produce unity among believers.

Contrary to what many have been led to believe, we can understand the Bible. We can interpret the Bible alike. This is true because of what the Bible teaches. The following are some very important

points concerning the Bible’s teaching that it can be understood.

#### A. We are expected to know and understand the truth.

Jesus said that His disciples would know the truth and that the truth would make them free. He stated, *“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”* (Jn 8:32). The Bible is the truth of the gospel and the truth can be known. Since it is the truth that will make us free, then the truth about which Jesus spoke in John 8:32 must be able to be known in order that we be free. Jesus did not give us a futile promise. He knew that the honest truth seekers of the world would be able to know the truth in order to be set free. Therefore, God has revealed the truth of the gospel in order that we be set free.

John wrote in order to produce faith in the hearts of those to whom he wrote. He concluded the book of John by saying, *“And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe ...”* (Jn 20:30,31). The Bible was writ-

ten in order that we might understand that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God. By understanding this, we can believe. Our faith is increased. Therefore, God did not instruct the Bible to be written in a manner that would make it difficult to understand the fundamental truths that one must know and obey in order to be saved. God expects us to understand His word because He did not reveal it to us in a manner that is difficult to understand.

The fact that God will not save all those who believe in the Bible is evidence that God expects us to learn the truth of the gospel from the Bible in order that we obey the gospel (See 2 Th 1:7-9). If God had revealed the message of the gospel in the Bible in a manner that was difficult to understand, then He would be unjust in His condemnation of those who did not understand the Bible.

### **B. We are expected to grow in faith that is based upon God's word.**

God's word is the source and foundation of faith. God meant for it to be such. This is what Paul said in Romans 10:17. "*So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*" This is why every Christian is commanded to "*be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth*" (2 Tm 2:15). Peter added, "*Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Pt 3:18). Therefore, if we could not understand the Bible, how could we grow in faith? How could we

understand Jesus? The Bible promises that if we will read and study it, our faith will grow.

Hebrew 11:6 states, "*But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*" Since faith is a requirement for coming to and pleasing God, then we must assume that God would reveal Himself and His will to us in a manner by which we can grow in faith. For this reason, therefore, we must assume that it is possible for all men to understand the Bible in a manner by which it will produce faith.

### **C. We are expected to rightly divide the word.**

As stated above in 2 Timothy 2:15, Paul expected Timothy to be diligent to "*rightly divide the word of truth.*" In order for one to do this, he or she must first be able to understand the word of truth. How could God expect us to correctly apply the Bible if He had communicated to us in a manner that could not be understood? It would certainly be unjust of God if He expected us to rightly apply the truth to our lives, and yet, have it communicated to us in a manner that was difficult to understand. The fact that God demands that we correctly apply the truth to our lives is evidence that we can understand the Bible in a manner that is pleasing to Him.

### **D. We are expected to understand the mystery.**

Paul wrote,

*For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I wrote before in a few words, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) ... (Ep 3:1-4).*

The mystery Paul discusses in the above statement is the gospel of salvation. This mystery was revealed in the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Paul wrote to the Ephesians and said that they could **understand** this mystery when they read his epistle. Therefore, Paul wrote the letter of Ephesians in order that we might understand the essential nature of the gospel of Christ. In other words, when we read the New Testament we can understand God's message to us. We can understand the mystery, and by understanding it, be grounded in the faith (Ep 3:17). This is why the New Testament was written.

Those who say that we cannot understand the Scriptures are actually saying that God could not communicate His will and the plan of redemption to us in a way that men could understand. This is an accusation against God that attacks the omnipotence of God. What one is actually saying is that it is not possible for God to make known to us today through written revelation what He requires of us

to do in order to be saved.

We must be cautious not to blame God for something that is our own fault. In other words, it is our own fault if we do not understand the plan of salvation that was recorded by Paul and the other New Testament writers. We must not blame God for our personal laziness in studying His word in order to discover the will of God. Neither should we blame the Holy Spirit for inspiring the New Testament writers to write in a manner that we could not understand. We must assume that God will hold every man responsible for his knowledge of the word of revelation as to what one must do to be saved.

### **E. We are expected to search the Scriptures.**

Of the Bereans, Luke wrote, *“These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so” (At 17:11).* The *New International Version* states, *“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”*

The Bereans were noble and fair-minded people because they diligently studied the Scriptures. Paul preached to them, but they did not accept his words alone. They studied their Old Testament Scriptures in order to see if what Paul was saying was true. But why would they

search the Scriptures and be considered noble for doing such if they really could not understand the Bible? The fact is that God, by the Holy Spirit, inspired all the Bible to be written in a manner that would allow it to be understood if men studied it. The Bereans knew this.

We must remember that Jesus said we would know the truth. That truth would make us free. And by knowing it, we can be made free from religious traditions that work contrary to open-minded Bible study. When we study the Bible we grow in faith. God gave us the Bible so that when we study it, our faith will be increased. Because of this purpose, God guided special men as Paul to write letters to Christians in order that they might understand the truth. We can

understand this truth if we will search the Scriptures.

Many people have the mistaken idea that they can understand the Bible by an occasional reading of it. However, understanding the Bible is the result of serious study. Someone once said, "The Bible writers received the truth by inspiration. We must receive it through perspiration." If we desire to understand the Bible, then we must spend many hours in study of it. We must remember that the Bible nowhere promises that the Holy Spirit will guide us to understand the Bible. God will not do for us what He expects us to do for ourselves. And He expects us to search the Scriptures in order to understand Him and to find the way of salvation for our souls.

## Chapter 4

### UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE TOGETHER

One might ask, "Can I understand everything in the Bible?" The answer to this question is that we cannot. Think about this for a moment. Can we really understand everything that God has revealed to man in the Bible? The average person certainly does not have that amount of time to study, nor can he or she have such great insights into the supernatural world of God. There are those things concerning God, eternity and life hereafter that are only partially revealed in the Scriptures. We are given only a hint of things beyond this life. There are also those prophecies concerning the final coming of Jesus.

It is generally true that prophecy is never fully understood until after its fulfillment. This was true of the Jew's understanding of Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming kingdom and Messiah. It is true of our understanding concerning some things that are yet to come. We certainly cannot understand all these things if they are only revealed to us in part. God does not expect us to completely understand those things that He will explain to us after the end of the world. God said through Moses to Israel, "*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our chil-*

*dren forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Dt 29:29).*

Everyone has had difficult times in understanding various portions of the Bible. Even the apostle Peter may have been frustrated with some things that were written by Paul. Notice what he said of some of Paul’s writings in 2 Peter 3:15,16:

*And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, **in which are some things hard to understand**, which those who are untaught and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.*

Verse 16 says that some of Paul’s writings are “*hard to be understood.*” Notice that they were hard even for Peter to understand. Now Peter was an inspired apostle. If they were difficult for Peter, then certainly some concepts of Scripture would be difficult for us to understand.

It is interesting to note here also that Peter did not pray for an understanding of these hard-to-be-understood passages. Neither did he give us a command to pray for inspired interpretation of scriptures. Though Peter was inspired to write Scripture, he was not inspired to understand Scripture (2 Pt 3:15,16).

One must notice also that only “some things” were hard to understand, not all things. Peter did not say that they were

impossible to be understood. Those hard things to be understood can many times be understood through much study. We must always remember this. God expects study, diligent study. In fact, if one is not willing to give himself or herself to diligent study, then he or she will probably not be able to understand many portions of the Bible in a correct manner. One’s understanding of the Bible will always be subjected to the interpretations of other people.

We must be assured, however, that if we are willing to give an hour a day to diligent Bible study we will be a good Bible student and a competent interpreter of the Scriptures. Those who are willing to make this commitment will be able to understand the Bible in a way that will lead them to God.

It is not only possible to understand the Bible, but it is possible to understand it in a way that will cause unity among Bible believers. There will always be those portions of Scripture where we will have differences of opinion. God never expected us to agree on everything. However, on matters of fundamental, or salvational truth, He expects us to have perfect harmony. We must never cause division over interpretations of the Bible that do not involve fundamental teachings. (More on this later.)

The fundamental teachings of Christianity are easily understood. We must firmly believe that all men can be united upon the foundation of simple New Testament teachings. Though there are areas of interpretation where people will disagree, we must firmly believe that we

can stand united upon fundamental teachings of the New Testament. The following are reasons why God expects us to be able to understand alike the fundamental teachings of the New Testament:

### A. God expects unity.

Jesus prayed,

*I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; **that they all may be one**, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; **that they also may be one in Us**, that the world may believe that You sent Me (Jn 17:20,21).*

Jesus prayed for unity among His followers in the above prayer. He would not have prayed for unity in John 17:20,21 if it were not possible. We must assume, therefore, that all men can be united upon His teachings.

The New Testament is the word of Jesus for all men. Therefore, all men can be united into one fellowship by standing firm upon the fundamental teachings of the New Testament. In fact, unity is a fundamental principle of the gospel (See 1 Co 1:10; Ep 4:4-6; Ph 1:27). We must be committed to this teaching in our study of that which should unify us into one body.

### B. Christians must speak the same thing.

In 1 Corinthians 1:10 the apostle Paul wrote a very profound commandment for

all Christians:

*Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.***

In this statement Paul was inspired to write that we and the Corinthians speak the same thing and that we not be divided. He commanded that we be perfectly joined together in the same mind and same judgment. How could God expect Bible believers to be united if they could not understand the Bible alike? The point is that even though we might have differences of opinion on some points of interpretation in the Bible, we must be united together on the essential or fundamental teachings of the New Testament.

### C. Christians have a common faith.

Paul wrote, "*To Titus, my true son in our **common faith** ...*" (Ti 1:4). In this scripture Paul writes to Titus and speaks of the **common faith**. "Common" means one or united faith. In other words, Paul, Titus and all other Christians should have the same faith. They are to be united upon that faith. But if we cannot understand the Bible alike, then we cannot have that common faith. **Because God expects us to have a common faith is evidence that He expects us to understand the Bible alike.** Therefore, we can have that one united faith when we base our

faith solely upon biblical principles. We must lay aside human religious traditions, prejudices and divisive attitudes in order to unite upon the fundamental teachings of the New Testament.

In points of fundamental teaching, therefore, believers can be united. At the same time, in matters of opinion, differences are allowed. In Acts 15:36-41 Paul and Barnabas had a difference of opinion over a personality or method of work, depending upon whose perspective through which you view the disagreement. Nevertheless, though these two faithful workers disagreed over a particular situation, they continued the fundamental purpose for which they were called. Their differences in work did not encourage differences in understanding the message of the gospel. They maintained their unity regardless of their differences.

While in Corinth at different times, Paul, Apollos and Peter expressed different opinions in matters of work. Because of their sectarian attitudes and pride, some Corinthians wanted to follow after the different personalities of either Paul, Apollos and Peter (1 Co 1:12,13). But such thinking and behavior was carnal (1 Co 3:4). In the context in which Paul identified their sectarian attitudes in reference to personalities, he exhorted them to be one (1 Co 1:10).

There were two sisters in the church of Philippi who evidently had a personality clash (Ph 4:2,3). However, they were exhorted to be at peace with one another and continue on with the work. God thus expects us to understand our

fundamental purpose as it is established by His word. Though we may have different personalities that clash, He expects us to continue our unity that is based on the one gospel.

In Titus 3:9-11 Paul exhorted Titus not to become involved in discussions over matters of opinion. Such discussions often lead to debates, which debates cause hard feelings and division. Disciples of Jesus must know the Bible well enough to judge something to be a matter of opinion, and thus something over which debate should never occur.

Disagreements over matters of work, opinions and personalities will occur. God allows disagreements over matters of opinion without the souls of those involved being in danger of condemnation. In other words, Christians can disagree in love without endangering their souls. With the right attitude in matters of opinion, there is allowance for disagreement in the church. However, in matters of disagreement in the area of fundamental New Testament teaching concerning salvation, the condemnation of false teachers is very clear in the Bible.

#### **D. Christians have a common salvation.**

The word “common” is also used in Jude 3 in the same sense as it is used in reference to our “common faith” by Paul in Titus 1:4. In other words, when we have something in common, we agree upon a point of reference. We are united because all of us as a group subscribe to a particular belief. Jude wrote,

*Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our **common** salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for **the faith** which was once for all delivered to the saints (Jd 3).*

The fact that men can have this **common salvation** is proof that we can study our Bibles and be in agreement concerning the essential facts of salvation. God never revealed in the Scriptures any requirement for salvation that was obscure. He never required us to obey any essential commandment that was hard to understand. He did not give us difficult teachings upon which He demanded unity.

Everything that one must do in order to be saved is clearly revealed in the Bible and is clearly understood. If we cannot understand these essential teachings concerning our salvation, then we are probably suffering from one of the hindrances to understanding the Bible that have been listed in the previous chapter.

People often wonder why the Bible is not understood in the same manner by those who believe in it. There are several reasons for this. People do not understand the Bible because they simply do not study. They often go to the Bible with a closed mind or with traditional

religious practices that they do not want to change. Some do not have a love for the truth or they use the Bible simply to prove a point. People should understand the fundamental teachings of the Bible in a manner that will result in unity among all believers. If there is disunity, the problem is not in the Bible. The problem is with Bible interpreters.

God had the Bible written in a manner that made it understandable. If one is searching for truth, he or she will find it. Truth searched for is truth found. Therefore, one of the principle conditions upon which one's understanding of the Bible is based is whether he is hungering and thirsting after truth.

The mystery of the gospel was delivered to man in a simple manner. Fundamental truths of the gospel are easy to understand. God expects all believers to be united upon an understanding of these fundamental truths. However, believers cannot be united unless they can understand the Bible. It is reasonable to believe, therefore, that God would reveal His will to us in a manner that would produce unity among believers. Those who are truly seeking God through His word, therefore, will come to a unity of the faith that is based on their common love of God's word. The word of God is thus their common foundation for unity.

## Chapter 5

### AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

In order for us to fully appreciate Bible study, we must accept the Bible as a sufficient guide for moral living. We must believe that the Bible will supply

our spiritual needs with all things that are necessary for godly living. Because of this belief and attitude, we must approach the Bible with the expectation of finding solutions for life's problems. Discovering the Bible's authority in our lives is the secret to the abundant life.

When we approach a study of the Bible, we must believe that principles will be discovered that will enable us to live a more fulfilling life. By discovering the abundant life of one who believes and obeys God, we have a testimony in our own lives concerning what God has done for us. We must study the Bible in order that we might be able to better teach it to other people in order that they too might experience the abundant life (Jn 10:10). Bible study is not only for our own benefit. We must study in order to reach out to others.

The following are two major points that will greatly affect our approach to Bible study. If these central principles are not believed, then certainly our approach to Bible study will be greatly hindered. These are the two great principles that move us to correctly interpret the Bible.

### A. The Bible is the word of God.

Before anyone can profit from Bible study as God wants him to profit, he must first believe that the Bible is actually the word of God. Bible students must believe that it is not just another book. It is God's book. It is God's revelation to man. Therefore, the Bible was given to man by God for his direction in life.

When one firmly believes that the Bible is the revelation from a Higher Being than man himself, then he will be motivated to investigate this revelation.

**1. The Bible claims to be the inspired revelation of God.** There are actually two areas of study we need to understand at this point. The first has to deal with **revelation**. The second deals with **inspiration**. In a strict definition of these two words, **all the Bible is inspired, but not all the Bible is revelation**.

**a. Revelation:** Revelation is God "uncovering" or revealing His will directly to man which man by no human means could have known. This is what is commonly referred to as **special revelation**. Throughout history, God has revealed Himself in different ways as is explained in Hebrews 1:1,2. "*God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son ....*"

God has revealed His will through (1) **dreams and visions** (Gn 20:3; Is 29:10,11; Ez 1:3,4; 11:24; Dn 2:19), (2) by speaking **mouth to mouth** (Nm 12:8), (3) by putting the **exact words into the mouth of the prophet** (Dt 18:18; Jr 1:9; Ez 3:4), (4) through **angels** (Gn 18:1 - 19:1ff; At 7:38), and (5) through His **Son Jesus** (Jn 14:9; Cl 2:9; Hb 1:1,2).

Another form of revelation refers to the **indirect** revealing of God by means of the **created world**. This is called **natural revelation** and is affirmed in

statements as Psalm 19:1: *“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.”* Paul stated that the created world is a witness to the existence of God. He wrote, *“Nevertheless He [God] did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness”* (At 14:17). Paul reaffirmed this belief in Romans 1:20. *“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead.”*

Revelation is also the revealing to man that certain historical events have referred to his salvation. This point is illustrated by the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. During the ministry of Jesus, the disciples hoped that Jesus would be the Messiah who would deliver Israel from the oppression of Roman occupation. He talked to them concerning salvational matters. However, they did not understand the true nature of His messiahship, nor the significance of the cross.

After the crucifixion, the disciples were disillusioned. Their disillusionment was expressed by the two men on the road to Emmaus who unknowingly talked to the resurrected Jesus. They said of Jesus, *“We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel”* (Lk 24:21). They had no idea what the cross meant. At the time, none of the disciples understood the significance of the cross. They knew the historical event. They saw Jesus die on the cross. They saw Him buried in a tomb. They even experienced

His resurrection. However, they did not understand that this was the gospel of the death of Jesus for our sins and His resurrection for our hope (See 1 Co 15:1-4). **It was only by revelation of God that they understood that the crucifixion and resurrection was for the eternal salvation of all those who obeyed the gospel.**

During his persecution of the church, Saul (Paul) knew of the death of Jesus on the cross. However, he did not accept such as the death of Jesus for the salvation of man. When Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road, all this changed. Jesus personally revealed to him the salvational significance of the cross. He later wrote, *“But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ”* (Gl 1:11,12). By revelation, God made known to Paul that the death of Jesus on the cross was not the execution of just another Jew. It was the death of the Son of God for the sins of the world.

**b. Inspiration:** The word “inspiration” comes from a Greek word, *theopneustos*, which literally means “God breathed.” It is used in 2 Timothy 3:16 where it refers to God’s Scriptures, the Bible. Paul wrote, ***“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof ....”***

In 2 Peter 1:20,21 Peter explained how God inspired men to write Holy Scripture. At the same time, he gives us a brief definition of inspiration: *“Know-*

*ing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”*

Inspired men were **moved** by the Holy Spirit. The Greek word that is used in 2 Peter 1:20,21, *pheromenoi*, means “to carry along.” Therefore, in inspiration, holy men of God were carried along by the Holy Spirit in order to record God’s word in a manner that would be without error or contradiction. This is what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:4-13. Holy men of God were inspired by the Spirit in order “*that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God*” (1 Co 2:12). Paul added, “*These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual*” (1 Co 2:13).

The Holy Spirit allowed Bible writers to use their own vocabularies and grammatical styles of writing. However, He guarded them from making any errors in their writing. His work of inspiration was to carry the writers along in a manner that they would write without making any errors in the production of the original autographs, that is, the original writings.

The difference between revelation and inspiration is apparent. All the Bible is inspired, but not all the Bible is revelation. For example, in Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12 Paul quoted from two ancient writers whose writings he knew. These quotes were not revelation from God. Paul already knew of the writers and their

statements. It was by inspiration that Paul was directed to record these statements of ancient writers. But it was not by revelation that he knew of the existence of these statements.

The times, places, people and personal histories with which the Bible writers were acquainted are not revelations from God. However, when the Bible writers wrote the Bible, the Holy Spirit guided them in order to accurately inscribe historical places, events and other writings without error. The Holy Spirit determined what historical events and other teachings that should be included in the Scriptures. Therefore, all the Bible is inspired, but not all the Bible is the revelation from God.

**2. Evidences for inspiration:** In addition to its claim to be the word of God, there are many evidences that prove the Bible to be from God and not man. Bible students need to thoroughly understand these evidences in order to separate the Bible from all other books. The following points list evidences that uphold the inspiration of the Bible:

**a. Unity of the Bible:** The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books and letters. They were written over a period from about 1,400 B.C. to 70 or 96 A.D. This is about 1,500 years. Approximately forty men were involved in the writing of all the books of the Bible.

Many Bible writers have referred to one another’s writings throughout the history of its writing. The writers did their writing at different times in history. They

lived in different locations. They came from different cultural backgrounds. Regardless of these differences in reference to the writers, the Bible could not have been the invention of man. The one theme of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is the one gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are actually two areas in which the Bible is united in reference to its structure:

**(1) Organic unity of the Bible:**

The Bible is organically united in the following three ways:

(a) All parts of the Bible are necessary to complete its entire theme. All books add to the theme of the entire book.

(b) All the books of the Bible complete one another. For example, the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all give different views of the life and ministry of Jesus.

(c) All books of the Bible center around one life principle. That principle is God's revelation of the gospel for the salvation of man (See Ep 3:3-5; 1 Pt 1:10-12).

**(2) Unity of teaching in the Bible:** From Genesis to Revelation, **the theme of the Bible is God's plan through Jesus Christ to save man from sin.** All teachings to guide men to have a right relationship with God and his fellow man are harmonious throughout the Bible. There are no contradictions. There are no inconsistencies. Those who do not know the Bible claim that it con-

tradicts itself. However, when one studies the Bible, this accusation quickly disappears. Men alone could never have produced a piece of unified literature as the Bible over such a great period of time.

**b. Indestructibility of the Bible:**

In Matthew 24:35 Jesus promised, *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will by no means pass away."* Peter added, *"... the word of the Lord endures forever"* (1 Pt 1:25). The complete text of the Bible (all sixty-six books) have been in the hands of man for about 2,000 years. The Old Testament Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) have been in existence for approximately 3,500 years. It is true that the word of God abides forever.

There are other books of men that have been in existence for centuries. However, not one of these books has been the foundation for religious belief as the Bible. None have been cherished by men as the Bible for thousands of years. How could any book of human origin compare in any way with the indestructible nature of the revelation that has proceeded from an eternal God? Because the Bible has come down through history to us as it has, we must affirm that it is more than a book of mere men.

**c. The social impact of the Bible:**

No work of literature in history has ever influenced societies more than the Bible. Literally billions of people in history have been touched by the Scriptures. Certainly, if the Bible were the invention of men alone, it would have had

no such impact on history. However, because it is the inspired word of God, men have accepted it as such. The Bible has been able to mold societies because men have accepted it as the word of God.

**d. The historical accuracy of the Bible:** No ancient discovery has ever been found that contradicts historical statements that are made in the Bible. This does not prove the Bible to be inspired. Other books can be historically accurate. However, we would expect an inspired book to be historically accurate in every detail. This is what we expect of the Bible. Nevertheless, because the Bible is perfectly accurate in historical events over so many thousands of years, we must admit that mere records of history by men would not have produced such accuracy. Because of this fact, we could use this as an evidence for inspiration.

**e. Prophecy in the Bible:** This is the greatest proof in the inspiration of the Bible. A prophecy is actually a miracle in words. Prophecy is not prediction. Prediction is the forecast of future events that are based upon present occurring events. True biblical prophecy, on the other hand, is the foretelling of future events without the aid of any present hints. In fact, biblical prophecy often included the foretelling of events that were completely contrary to the consensus of existing circumstances.

Some of the great prophecies of the Bible include the prophecy of the three world empires that would exist after the Babylonian Empire. This prophecy is recorded in Daniel 2 and 7. The prophecy

of the destruction of cities as ancient Tyre (Ez 26) and Nineveh (Zp 2:13; Nh 3:7) are also in the Bible. The greatest of all prophecies was made concerning the Messiah. Over three hundred specific prophecies were made concerning the coming of the Messiah of Israel. The fulfillment of all these prophecies by chance and accident would be highly improbable. In fact, the improbability of one individual accidentally fulfilling the approximately three hundred prophecies concerning His life and teaching would be considered impossible.

An example of probability will illustrate the impact of prophecy in proving the inspiration of the Bible. Here are some examples of the over three hundred prophecies concerning the One who would come.

#### PROPHECY OF THE CHRIST

1. He would be a descendant of Abraham through Isaac (Gn 12:3; 22:12,18).
2. He would be born during the days of Roman rule (Dn 2:44; 7:13,14).
3. He would be born of the tribe of Judah (Gn 49:10; 1 Ch 5:2; Mc 5:2).
4. He would be of the seedline of David (2 Sm 7:12-17; Is 11:1).
5. He would be born in Bethlehem (Mc 5:2).
6. There would be a slaughter of babies surrounding His birth (Jr 31:15).
7. He would be a sojourner in Egypt (Hs 11:1).
8. He would live in Galilee (Is 9:1,2).
9. He would have a forerunner (Ml 3:1; 4:5,6).
10. He would teach by parables (Ps 78:2) and perform miracles (Is 35:5,6).

11. He would make a triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Zc 9:9; Ps 118:26; Is 62:11).
12. He would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zc 11:12,13).
13. He would be mocked (Ps 22:6,7), whipped (Is 50:6), crucified with malefactors (Is 53:9-12), pierced (Ps 22:16) and given gall to drink (Ps 69:20,21).

We could list other specifics concerning the One that would come. The Jews called Him the **Messiah**, that is, the “Anointed One.” Now suppose, what would be the probability of one man fulfilling all these Old Testament prophecies by accident? We must not forget that the Old Testament was written **before** the actual fulfillment of these prophecies. Therefore, the Old Testament Scriptures are not a history of what happened. They are a **prophecy** of what would happen. **The probability of one individual accidentally fulfilling these prophecies is so improbable that we would say it would have been impossible for them to be fulfilled by accident.**

For example, consider the fact that millions of people have been born into history who came from the seedline of Abraham through Isaac. This would be the Jewish nation. However, according to prophecy number 2 in the preceding list, how many Jews were born of Abraham through Isaac during the days of the Roman Empire? How many of these were of the tribe of Judah and of the seedline of David? Now we are down to a few thousand candidates. How many

of these who were born of Abraham through Isaac and of the tribe of Judah came through David’s seedline in the days of the Roman Empire and were born in the city of Bethlehem? Of these, which ones experienced a slaughter of babies during the year or two after his birth? Now we are down to a handful of probable candidates. Of these, therefore, how many fled to Egypt and later returned to Nazareth of Galilee? The probability is that **only one** did. That One would have a forerunner. That One would teach in parables and perform miracles. That One would triumphantly enter Jerusalem, be betrayed, and crucified. And according to prophecy, that One would do what we would expect Him to do. He would be resurrected from the dead. This One is **Jesus**.

If we carried the above fulfillment of prophecy throughout the approximately three hundred prophecies concerning the Messiah and His ministry, we would have overwhelming evidence of the Sonship of Jesus and the inspiration of the Bible.

We must remember that our study of the Bible would be greatly hindered if we did not accept the Bible as the inspired word of God. Therefore, we must firmly believe that the Bible is God’s book for mankind. It is God’s direction for our lives. Once we believe this, we will come to a study of the Bible with great conviction and commitment. We will be motivated to search the Scriptures because we believe that the Scriptures have come to us by the God of heaven.

## **B. The Bible is the final authority in matters of faith.**

As a Bible student, it is important to recognize that the Bible is God's word was revealed to man. One must understand and believe this point very firmly. But this is not all. It is extremely important to understand that when we are discussing matters of faith, the Bible must be our **only authority**. By this we mean that it must be the source of all our answers in matters of faith. When it comes to discussions concerning faith, the Bible must be considered the final authority. The Bible student must approach the text of the Bible with this firmly in mind.

**1. The Bible is God's final revelation.** It is imperative that we first believe that the Bible is the actual word of God. It has proven itself to be the only safe rule by which men should guide their lives. And for this reason, God intended that the Bible be a complete guide for godly living. Peter wrote that *"His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue"* (2 Pt 1:3). Jude said that **the faith**, the fullness of our belief, has been *"once for all delivered to the saints"* (Jd 3). Because God has finalized His revelation to man in the Scriptures, we must conclude that it is complete for man's spiritual direction in life. Paul stated this in 2 Timothy 3:16,17:

*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 complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

Therefore, in order for us to do what God requires, we must accept the Bible as the only source of guidance in understanding what God would have us do to serve Him.

**2. The Spirit directs through God's final revelation.** The Holy Spirit directs men through the revelation of inspired words. He does not direct through inner feelings. He does not lead through visions in the night. He sends no angels. Jesus promised the apostles that *"when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth ..."* (Jn 16:13). By inspiration, the apostles received and recorded all truth (2 Tm 3:16,17). They were *"moved by the Holy Spirit"* in order to deliver to man the will of God (2 Pt 1:20,21).

The Holy Spirit never directly worked upon the heart of man in a subjective manner, that is, He never worked against the will of the individual in order to change his moral character. He has always worked through revelation of truth in order to direct the steps of man in the direction of pleasing God. For example, God could have revealed truth directly to the Ethiopian eunuch. However, he told the preacher, Philip, to *"go toward the south"* in order to meet the eunuch (At 8:26). He could have directly revealed truth to Cornelius in Acts 10. However, Cornelius was instructed to *"send men to Joppa, and call for Simon*

whose surname is Peter, **who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved**" (At 11:13,14). The Holy Spirit did not directly save the eunuch or Cornelius. He expected these devout men to respond to the preached word of God. God works today through His inspired word, the Bible.

In order to be directed by God to know what to do to be saved and to worship God in spirit and truth, we have only the Bible. The Holy Spirit has revealed in the Bible all truth that God would have us to possess concerning religious direction. We must be confident that when we come to a study of the Bible, God will direct our lives through His word. The Bible will provide the man of God with all that is necessary for godly living (2 Tm 3:16,17).

The Bible contains God's special revelation to man. All of the Bible is inspired, but not all of the Bible is revelation. God specifically revealed Himself to man through various means during Bible times. Special men were chosen to record by inspiration these special revelations of God. We consider the Bible inspired, therefore, because of its impact on mankind and because of the fulfillment of prophecies that are contained in the Bible. No other book has had the in-

fluence among men as the Bible. For this reason, if one would come to God, he or she must believe that the Bible is God's word for mankind today.

Therefore, we affirm that the Bible is the authoritative word of God. This means that God expects it to be the rule of our lives. In matters of faith, it is our only rule of faith. In other words, human religious traditions must never be placed above the Bible. Our faith must be firmly based upon the Bible. The Holy Spirit will direct us by means of His revelation. If human religious traditions are considered to be authoritative in matters of faith, then we would not have a common or unchanging standard of belief. This is true because there are no human religious traditions that could be held in common among all cultures of the world. Also, human religious traditions are constantly changing. Therefore, only Christianity in its most simple form can be held in common for all men in all centuries of history. This is why we must restore primitive Christianity that is not cluttered with the shackles of human tradition. This is why every Bible student must continually sift through his or her beliefs in order to discover what is actually Bible based and what is tradition or matters of opinion.

## Chapter 6

### THE PRODUCTIVE BIBLE STUDENT

For anyone to be a good Bible student, he or she must discover his or her motives for studying the Bible. This may

seem like a trivial point in reference to a study on being a good Bible student. However, one's motives for Bible study

often determine the conclusions he draws from his studies. If our motives are wrong, surely our interpretations will be questionable. If our motives are pure and we maintain a sincere heart and open mind, then surely our interpretations of the Bible will be as accurate as possible according to our ability to study the biblical text.

The productive Bible student is the student who is effective in understanding and applying truth from the Bible to his or her life. Productive students reap the most from their studies because they search the Scriptures from the purest motives possible and with the best interpretive skills. As a result of their motives for study, they grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus (2 Pt 3:18). Their lives are thus enhanced by their studies.

There are basic characteristics that identify the productive Bible student. By **productive Bible student** we are talking about the type of Bible student God wants us to be. This is the student who will get the most from his or her studies. This is also the student who will have the greatest promise of arriving at the most correct understanding of the Bible. Not only will the productive Bible student understand the Bible, he or she will be productive with what is learned. The information this student derives from his or her studies will not stop with simply knowing truth that is learned from the Bible. This student will be motivated by the knowledge of truth to teach others. He will be productive for God. This is the student in whose heart the word of God will build up and spill over into

teaching and preaching. In other words, a Bible student is not a good Bible student until he is motivated to share with others the biblical information he or she learns.

Since the focus of the entire Bible is on the gospel, then the more one learns the prophecies concerning the gospel, and the fulfillment of the gospel in the first century, the more one is stirred to teach the gospel.

### A. The productive Bible student seeks to learn more about the gospel.

Paul personified the word “grace” in the context of Titus 2:11-14: “*For the **grace** of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, **teaching** us ....*” It is the gospel of God’s grace that motivates us to refrain from the ways of the world, so that “*we should live sensibly, righteously and godly in this present age.*” We study the Bible in order to learn what is taught by the Holy Spirit in the Bible, which things we are motivated to learn because of the grace of God in our lives. We study out of gratitude. The motive for living the gospel, is the gospel of God’s grace. We study the Bible, therefore, to learn what God requires of us to live the gospel life.

### B. The productive Bible student believes the Bible is the word of God.

The productive student will accept what is referred to as the **verbal plenary inspiration** of the Bible. In other words, he believes and accepts **every word of**

**all the Bible** to be there as a result of God's guidance of writers through the Holy Spirit. He does not believe the Bible has errors or contradictions. He accepts the Bible as God's inspired resource to understand the gospel. With this attitude, he is driven to diligently seek information about the gospel. He is driven to study the Bible with the understanding that it is God talking "directly" to him through the pages of inspired Scripture. This student, therefore, accepts the Bible as God's revelation and explanation of the gospel. Productive students accept the Holy Scriptures as the revelation of Deity to man.

### **C. The productive Bible student is eager to learn.**

The productive student has an open and spiritual mind that eagerly accepts truth. The productive Bible student is one who is always open to the learning of truth. He approaches the Bible with an attitude to learn. Because of his spiritual attitude, he does not let any sin in his life distort his understanding and teaching of the truth. He does not distort the truth by religious traditions that he may be practicing that contradict Bible teachings. He does not allow acceptable religious tradition to determine his understanding or application of truth.

He approaches the Bible with an eagerness to learn something by which he can better his life and more effectively teach the gospel to others. He is eager to learn new things about Deity and eternity. He thirsts after knowledge of how

God has worked in history in the lives of men. David said in Psalm 119:97, "*Oh, how I love your law. It is my meditation all the day long.*" This is the student who "*hungers and thirsts after righteousness*" (Mt 5:6). "*His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night*" (Ps 1:2). Surely the Bereans were this type of Bible students for they "*received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so*" (At 17:11).

### **D. The productive Bible student seeks to broaden his or her education.**

The quality Bible student will seek every opportunity to receive education. He will study grammar. He will study history. He will study social sciences. He will particularly study any field of education that will help him to better understand the Bible and apply it to his life and teach it to others. Other fields of education will not only help one to be a productive citizen in his or her community, but such studies will also help one to better understand what the Bible says and how to apply its truths to life. Such studies will also help one to reason with other people concerning the truth of the Scriptures in his efforts to communicate the word of God to others. Therefore, if one has the opportunity to take courses of study at a nearby school, college or university, it would certainly be advantageous to his total education as a Bible student. Even if one does not have the opportunity to attend resident

schools, one should seek to read good books that will help one to be a more educated person. Good books on Christian topics should always be sought and read.

The apostle Paul is a good example. While in prison in Rome he told Timothy to bring to him the “*books and parchments*” (2 Tm 4:13). Evidently, Paul was a continual student, not only of the Bible, but also of other studies that would make him a better servant of God. Though we do not know the contents of these books and parchments he wanted Timothy to bring, we do know that Paul studied other materials than the Old Testament Scriptures.

However, one must not assume that he has to know many other fields of study in order to understand the Bible. God had the Bible written in a manner that it could be understood by the anyone who is seeking to know the truth. All fundamental truths that affect one’s salvation can be easily understood in the Bible. On the other hand, studies in other fields of knowledge such as grammar will help us to better understand the Bible, as well as, to apply it to our lives and teach it to others.

### **E. The productive Bible student studies with prayer and fasting.**

The productive student approaches life and the Bible with much prayer and fasting. Good Bible students are people who spend much time in prayer. They

realize that they need God’s wisdom in all things, but especially in their study and application of the word of God. James wrote, “*If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God ...*” (Jas 1:5; see 5:16,17). One can gain much knowledge from the Bible. However, it takes wisdom to apply knowledge. In applying and practicing knowledge, spiritual growth occurs. The more we grow, the better we will understand the Scriptures. Therefore, our biblical studies should be coupled with much prayer and fasting.

### **F. The productive Bible study will be persistent.**

Good students do not become discouraged in their studies. They persistently search their Bibles in order to find and understand God’s will for them. As teachers, they feel the responsibility of knowing God’s word so that they can accurately instruct others. This is a quality one must develop as a student of the Bible. We must not become discouraged. We must not discontinue our studies. We can understand the Bible. We can understand it in an organized manner that will qualify us to be effective teachers. We must remember, however, that the Bible was written to be studied. One will never understand it properly by occasionally reading it. In order for it to be understood properly, one must spend many hours in concentrated study.

## Chapter 7

# RIGHT ATTITUDES FOR BIBLE STUDY

In order to understand the Bible, particularly the more difficult teachings, we must approach a study of the Scriptures with gospel motives in our hearts. One usually cannot correctly interpret God's word if he or she approaches his studies with a prejudiced mind. Concerning correct attitudes, Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

*And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal* (1 Co 3:1-3).

Because the Corinthians were not behaving according to the gospel, but with a carnal mind, they could not understand the greater spiritual teachings of the word of God. They could not understand the love of God because they were acting in an unloving manner with one another. They could not understand the mercy of God because they were unmerciful with one another. They could not understand the oneness of God because they had sectarian attitudes. Therefore, Paul could not write to them as to spiritually minded Christians.

There is a very important principle here that every Bible student must recognize. A worldly person cannot understand spiritual or difficult teachings of

the Bible. This is why it is so important for one to “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2 Pt 3:18). A similar criticism is made of the Hebrew Christians in Hebrews 5:12. “*For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.*”

Every member of the body of Christ must have a knowledge of the Scriptures that would allow him the opportunity to teach others. There are gifted members to whom we refer as teachers simply because of their ability to effectively communicate the word of God to others in a public environment (Ep 4:11,12). However, every member of the body has the responsibility to study his or her Bible as the teacher who prepares for a Bible class. Therefore, God expects us to be of a mind that is conducive to effective Bible study that is characteristic of one who is a public teacher of the Bible.

In view of this, we must make every effort to grow spiritually. For example, we must grow in love in order to better understand the love of God. We must learn to forgive in order that we may understand the depth of God's forgiveness of our sins.

### A. Love the truth.

Bible students must greatly love

God's word in order to correctly understand His word. If one loves the Bible he or she will want to spend time with it. David wrote, "*Oh, how I love Your law*" (Ps 119:97). This is what will keep us studying when others will simply stop. We must love God's word and meditate upon its principles. In fact, one of the greatest reasons why people do not study their Bibles is because they do not love the word of God. Because they do not love the truth, God will allow them to believe lies (See 2 Th 2:10-12).

## B. Have faith.

The Bible is our foundation of faith. Paul said this in Romans 10:17. "*So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*" Our faith, therefore, will increase when we study. We must always remember what Hebrews 11:6 says, "*But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*"

There are many things God has chosen not to reveal to man. Deuteronomy 29:29 states: "***The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.***" We must remember, however, that those things that have been revealed are revealed in order that we know them. We study the Bible in order to know what God wants us to know.

There are subjects in the Bible that are difficult to understand. The Holy

Spirit often inspired men to give only a glimpse of some truths that are beyond the understanding of man. Therefore, we must not be frustrated when we do not understand those portions of the Bible that are only a small indication of Deity beyond this material world. One must exercise his or her faith in this area. We must trust in God that "*all things work together for good to those who love God*" (Rm 8:28).

We would also add that **words** are the means of communication of man. Words are based on ideas, relationships, events and things of this world. Therefore, when God communicates to man, He is limited to the use of man's words of communication. The point to remember is that it is impossible for God to communicate some things of the spiritual world by use of words that are of the physical world.

## C. Use common sense.

We need to approach a study of the Bible with good reasoning. We need to have an attitude of good sense. We must remember that the people in the Bible, and the people to whom the Bible was first written, were everyday people just like we are today. The Bible was written in a way that it could be understood by people of common understanding. Therefore, we must not make the Bible difficult to understand. Admittedly, some portions are difficult. But the fundamental teachings that refers to our salvation are easy to understand. We must read the Bible as if God were writing it di-

rectly to us. The more personal we make the Bible, the more we will take seriously the content of its message. The Bible is God talking to each one of us.

#### **D. Be diligent in study.**

We will not be good Bible students if we are lazy in our studies. Paul said that the man of God must be diligent, not slothful (Rm 12:11). In 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul wrote *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”* Anyone who would be a productive Bible student must be diligent in his studies.

#### **E. Respect the Bible.**

If we do not consider the Bible to be the actual word of God, then we will have a hard time understanding portions of it. A good Bible student will firmly believe that the Bible is God’s inspired word. He will thus study the Bible with respect and seriousness, for he will want to know what God has to say about everything. Therefore, we must always have an attitude of respect for the Bible. The Bible student must consider the Bible as if it had dropped from heaven into his hands alone.

#### **F. Expect to understand the Bible.**

If one does not expect to understand the Bible, then he will probably have some difficulty in understanding its content. Therefore, when we study the Bible, we must expect to understand what God

wants us to know and teach others. Jesus’ promise is still for every Bible student: *“And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”* (Jn 8:32). The truth was revealed to man through inspired words. These words were written in order that we might understand the mystery of the gospel of God. This is what Paul said in Ephesians 3:3-5. God *“... made known the mystery (as I wrote before in few words ....”*

Many people have been led to believe a misunderstanding of what Peter said in 2 Peter 1:20,21. Peter wrote, *“... knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any **private interpretation.**”* Some have wrongly taught that Peter here says that God’s word cannot be interpreted by individuals on an individual basis. But this is not what Peter was saying. Peter’s point is that God’s word did not come to us as a result of man’s working or invention. He explained this in verse 21 when he said that *“prophecy never came by the will of man ....”* Holy men were directed by God through the Holy Spirit to write the Scriptures.

In 2 Peter 1:20,21 Peter is discussing the inspired men who wrote the Scriptures, not the readers who interpret the Scriptures. We must clearly understand this commonly misunderstood passage. What Peter is trying to do here is to reassure us that the Scriptures came to us as a result of God’s working, not man’s. In recognizing this, the individual student grows in confidence of his ability to understand the Bible because he realizes that the Bible is God’s work of communicating the gospel to all men.

## Chapter 8

# PURPOSE FOR BIBLE STUDY

The competent Bible student will be careful about his attitudes when it comes to studying the Bible. He will examine himself and determine his true motives for studying the Bible. Here are some attitudes about which each Bible student must be cautioned.

### A. Study with humility.

We do not study the Bible for personal attention. We must not be guilty of studying the Bible or memorizing scriptures in order to draw attention to ourselves as great Bible students. In 1 Timothy 1:7 Paul discussed some teachers who had a problem with pride. He wrote of them that they desired “*to be teachers of the law.*” However, they understood “*neither what they say nor the things which they affirm.*” There are some who seek to be in the position of publicly teaching the word of God, but they do not know the Bible.

One must study to show himself approved **unto God**, not unto men (2 Tm 2:15). Bible students must guard against an arrogant show of knowledge for the purpose of drawing attention to themselves. Paul said, “*And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God*” (1 Co 2:1). This would be a good example for us today. Though Paul was specifically discussing his communication of the word

of God, we must follow the humility by which he communicated to men. His purpose for preaching and teaching was to communicate the word of God to others, not to draw attention to himself.

### B. Study to know truth, not to win arguments.

This is not only a problem many have in studying the Bible, but also in life itself. We must not be people who enjoy argument for the sake of winning theological debates. Paul told Timothy that the servant of God “*must not quarrel*” (2 Tm 2:24). One must be careful not to argue over the Bible. If one does argue over what the Bible may or may not teach, he will find himself going to the Bible to prove an argument and not to find God’s instructions for his life. Remember, arguments may win fights, but they rarely win friends for Jesus or ourselves. If we run to the Bible to prove our point, we will often come away with wrong conclusions. We will have a tendency to take scriptures out of their contexts in which they were originally written. We will do this because we are seeking to win an argument. Therefore, we need to be very careful in discussions with others concerning the Bible.

### C. Study to know truth.

We do not study the Bible to uphold

false mysticism. Mysticism is the teaching concerning things of the spirit world. Those who concentrate on such teaching generally rely on traditions or human inventions of the mind to conceive of wonders in the spirit world. They believe in voodoo, witches, evil spells, astrology and other false imaginations of those who have given up a knowledge of God. Many times, these very imaginative people go to the Bible to find evidence of their mystified beliefs. They look for answers in the stars, planets, as well as the Bible. The Bible to these dreamers is simply another source of information concerning revelations that they have supposedly received from the terrestrial or celestial worlds.

In reference to our approach to the Bible, we need to be careful in two areas: (1) We must not be carried away with the fanciful beliefs of those who claim to have knowledge of the spirit world that is actually the imagination of their own minds. (2) We must not approach the Bible in order to make it a book of mysticism. The Bible is not a collection of myths and fables about the imaginations of men. It is a book of serious truths for the serious student. We must remember the words of Paul in 2 Timothy 4:3,4.

*For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; **and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.***

## D. Study with a pure heart.

We must not study the Bible with worldly motives. One who is not honest will usually not accept what the Bible says if he learns something that conflicts with what he believes or is practising in life. Think about this. No one likes to discover that he is wrong. The Bible was written to correct our lives. It was written as a guide to life. Therefore, when we read it, we will often discover that we are either believing something wrong or doing something wrong.

In James 1:22-24 James wrote of those who look into the mirror of God's word.

*But he doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was.*

The word of God reflects upon our true character. However, people generally do not like what they see about themselves. Therefore, they turn away. The honest person, on the other hand, will not turn away from what the Bible says about his life. He will strive to correct his life in order that he may live a better life according to the gospel.

The dishonest student will often ignore a passage that conflicts with his previous beliefs or behavior. He will soon forget those truths that condemn as sin something he is doing wrong in his life.

One needs to be careful not to have this wrong attitude when studying the Bible. Such an attitude keeps too many people in error and sin (See 2 Th 2:10-12). If we understand a new truth that we have discovered in our personal Bible study, we must accept it and live by it. We must not let our pride distort our honest study of God's word.

### E. Mature Bible study:

One must not study the Bible with an immature attitude. We must approach the Bible with great sobriety. We must approach Bible study in this manner for the following reasons:

**1. Our salvation depends on our study.** Our eternal destiny depends on our knowledge of and obedience to the word of God. James wrote, *"Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls"* (Jas 1:21). Christians have purified their *"souls in obeying the truth ..."* (1 Pt 1:22). They were *"born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever"* (1 Pt 1:23).

Our knowledge of the Bible is very important when it comes to understand-

ing what is necessary for our salvation. We must worship God in spirit and truth (Jn 4:24). Therefore, our knowledge of the Bible is important in reference to how we worship God. We must approach our studies of the Bible with great seriousness because our salvation depends on how we understand and apply what is revealed in the word of God.

**2. Teachers will receive greater judgment.** The eternal destiny of those we teach will greatly depend upon how and what they teach. For this reason, James wrote, *"My brethren, let not many of you become teachers [leaders], knowing that we shall receive stricter judgment"* (Jas 3:1). James emphasizes the seriousness with which we must approach our Bible studies as leaders. Paul warned Timothy, *"Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you"* (1 Tm 4:16).

What James and Paul are trying to convey to us is that leaders must be very serious about their study and teaching. Leaders will receive strict judgment because they are involved in leading men and women into eternity by their teaching. Therefore, with great seriousness leaders must study their Bibles.

## Chapter 9

### BIBLE STUDY HABITS

Study habits make one a better student of the Bible. Study habits encourage one to continually study the Bible in

a disciplined manner. The following are suggested Bible study habits that will lead one to be a good Bible student:

## **A. Establish a habit of reading the Bible.**

We must read the Bible on a regular basis. It is best to establish a regular schedule for reading the Bible every day. A good practice would be to read the Old Testament through once a year. It would be good for every Christian to read the New Testament through once every two months. Or, one might set a schedule of reading the Bible one hour every day. These are only suggestions that encourage regular Bible reading. What is important in Bible reading is to meditate on what is read. Meaningful metaphors, personifications and similes need much thought before they are fully appreciated.

One might also want to choose a book of the Bible to read through several times. For example, choose one of the records of the gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke or John). After choosing a particular book, read it through several times.

Reading the Bible regularly will increase one's knowledge of the Bible as a whole. It will help to acquire a complete view of the entire Bible. It will also continually refresh one's memory over material that has already been studied. Every good Bible student should have a regular time when he or she reads the Scriptures in a solitary place.

## **B. Establish a regular study time.**

Many people have a desire to study the Bible, but have never disciplined themselves to set aside time to get the job done. In fact, most Christians feel

guilty when they do not study their Bible on any regular basis. Effective Bible students have always disciplined themselves to set aside regular time for Bible reading and study. Some set aside a period of time early in the morning. Others have chosen to study in the evening. What is important is that we determine when we want to study during the day, and then keep that schedule. Regular reading is the key to keeping our minds focused on the word of God.

## **C. Establish a location for study.**

One needs a place where he or she can study without being disturbed. This would be a place where children, radios, animals and other distractions will not interrupt concentration. Generally, the efficiency of one's study time will depend on the number of distractions that are present. In other words, we will get more out of our study periods if we are in a location where we will not be distracted. Whatever location one may determine for study, therefore, he should make sure it is away from all distractions.

## **D. Establish a regular prayer and meditation time.**

Bible study without prayer, meditation and fasting is not as productive as study that is coupled with these three things. We study God's word in order to grow spiritually. We want to increase our faith. We want to be spiritually minded people. We want to better communicate the word of God to others. We must never

make the mistake of studying the Bible simply to acquire knowledge or to have a lesson ready for a Bible class or sermon. We must pray about our studies. We must meditate over our studies. It is best to begin study periods with a prayer and end with a prayer. It is good to fast and pray in order to concentrate on particular points of study.

When reading the Bible, it is best to read for a period of time and then stop. Think about what has been read, then proceed to read more. It has been proven that those students who periodically stop during their reading, and meditate over a small portion of material they have just read before advancing to more material, will retain more than the student who reads without stopping and meditating.

### E. Regularly memorize the Scriptures.

Good Bible students will regularly memorize the Scriptures. This accomplishes several things in molding our lives after the will of God.

1. Memorization of the Scriptures forces us to meditate on the word of God.
2. Memorization of the Scriptures makes us a more capable Bible teacher or preacher.
3. Memorization of the Scriptures makes us stop and consider principal teachings of the Bible.
4. Memorization of the Scriptures gives us the ability to rapidly find numerous key scriptures in the Bible.
5. Memorization of the Scriptures

makes us spend time with the Bible.

6. Memorization of the Scriptures produces the foundation upon which the principles of God's word begin to change our lives.

We need to make it a habit to memorize many passages of the Bible. Some students have memorized entire books of the Bible. If we set ourselves forward as preachers and teachers of the Bible, even the world expects us to be able to quote Bible verses from memory. We should expect no less of ourselves.

### F. Regularly teach and preach the word of God.

One of the best ways to learn the Bible is to be putting into practice that which we are studying. The statement is true that **the teacher always learns more than the student**. This is true because the teacher must thoroughly prepare to teach. In teaching what one has studied, his or her studies are impressed upon the mind. As a preacher/teacher, we study in order to grow spiritually, and that we might be better communicators of the word of God.

We must be teaching others what we are learning. If we do not, we will reach a spiritual dead end in our lives. Generally, if we are not teaching others while we study, our spiritual growth will reach a plateau from where we will grow no more. One may not feel confident about his knowledge of the Bible at a particular time in life. However, he must strive to talk to others about what he does know.

This is what Jesus wanted the apostles and others to do when He stated, "... *teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you ...*" (Mt 28:20). Paul said the same to Timothy when he commanded him to commit his teaching "*to faithful men who will be able to teach others also*" (2 Tm 2:2). In these two verses, Jesus and Paul are saying the same thing.

What we learn must be taught to others. We must not only teach others what we learn, we must teach them to teach others also. In this way, we will be teaching many people by teaching a few. Jesus expects us to be making disciples who will also be making disciples. If we do not accept this responsibility, thousands will not have a chance to hear. Think of the thousands in a hundred years who will not have an opportunity to hear because they will not have been taught by the others we have failed to teach.

Christians stop growing when they stop studying the Bible. In fact, when people stop teaching the lost, they are not encouraged to study their Bibles. The sign of a weak or dying church is manifested by the lack of eagerness of the members to study the Bible. If a church

is not growing, you can almost be certain that there is little or no individual study of the Bible on the part of each member.

When people stop studying the Bible, they often start searching for other sources of communications from God. Some religious people state that "God spoke to them" in a particular manner. This is usually a statement that is made in the context of one's claim that God has spoken to him in a dream or some feeling he experienced. The problem is that when people stop listening to God speak to them through His word, they seek out all sorts of imaginary ways by which they feel God communicates to them. The central problem is that these people who feel that "God has spoken" to them have given up serious Bible study.

But as disciples of Jesus who have obeyed the gospel, it is our desire to know all that we can know about how God, throughout history, brought His only begotten Son to the cross, and then to the throne in heaven. We seek to know all that is revealed in the Bible about this gospel message in order that we can live by the gospel.

## **Chapter 10**

### **DICOVERING GOD'S WILL**

People often find it difficult to determine what portion of the Bible actually applies to their life. Therefore, we must challenge ourselves with studies that will help us better determine what is not actually binding, and that which is neces-

sary for Christians to obey. We must discover those biblical principles of interpretation that will promote unity among disciples and not division. We must come to the Bible with the belief that God was able to communicate His will to man in

a manner that man, through normal mental abilities, would be able to both understand the will of God and come into a unified fellowship that is based on the gospel.

We must not place ourselves in a position of binding laws where God has not bound laws. Also, we must not loose where God has bound law (See Mt 16:18,19). We must take seriously God's warning, "*You shall not add to the word which I command you*" (Dt 4:2; see Rv 22:18,19).

Our problem has not been so much in taking away from the word as it has been in adding laws where God has not spoken. This was the failure of the Jewish leadership at the time of Jesus' ministry (See Mk 7:1-9). In the same way, interpretive opinions today have led to numerous divisions among brethren. For this reason, we must challenge ourselves to investigate these areas that often challenge our unity. Every Bible student must discover in the Bible those concepts that fundamental truths that apply to our lives today. In discovering the will of God for our lives, we must not take away from, nor add to, that which is simple fundamental truth. We must first discover God's will for man, and then, identify those divine commands that men must obey today in order to be pleasing to God.

### **A. Discovering God's will:**

Through the Scriptures, God has given a pattern of conduct to man. To understand this we must first understand that God is the Creator of all things (Gn

1:1,26). Because He is the Creator, He has absolute authority over all things (See Ex 15:18; Ps 29:10; 146:10; Dn 4:34-37; Ep 1:20-22; Ph 2:8-11). His authority extends to the physical world (Hb 1:3). His authority extends to the world of mankind. This authority as the Creator gives God the right to give law. It also gives Him the right to demand conformity (obedience) to these laws.

Because God is the Creator, we must assume that He has communicated moral laws to man in order to direct our relationship with one another. Without such moral direction, we would live in confusion. Jeremiah 10:23 correctly explains that it is not possible for men to determine unchanging moral laws. Jeremiah wrote, "*O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps*" (See Pv 20:24; Is 26:7). In view of this fact, therefore, we must recognize the authority of God to give man moral laws by which to conduct his relationships with his fellow man.

We must also assume that the laws that God gave would be given in a manner that could be understood with common sense. And it must be assumed that God could communicate His law to us in a manner that the obedient, in a spirit of love, could find unity in obeying them. To begin this study, first consider God's communication of His laws to man.

### **B. The authority of God before the ascension:**

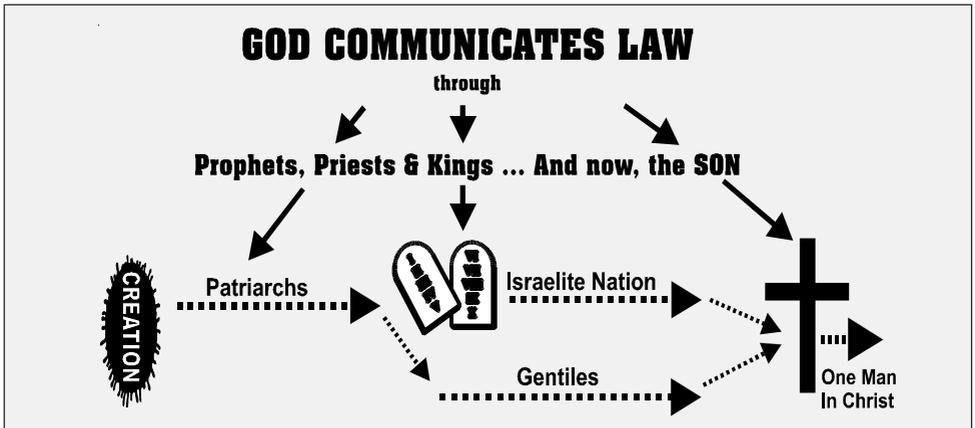
Divine authority originated from and

was exercised by the Father before the ascension. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have communicated law to man throughout history. However, in order to understand what communication is applicable to us today, we must first clearly understand how God has communicated to us in this dispensation. The following are the time periods and people to whom God has communicated divine law to man throughout history.

**1. The Father communicated His will to the ancient fathers.** During the time of man before the ascension of Jesus to the right hand of the Father, all authority and law originated from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and was communicated to man through the Holy Spirit (2 Pt 1:20,21). God, the Father, was King and head over the affairs of all things before the giving of the Sinai law on Mount Sinai. Through His prophets, priests or kings, law was delivered to man through the fathers of family tribes. God spoke directly to heads of families as Noah (Gn 7:1ff), Abraham (Gn 12:1-3),

Melchizedek (See Hb 7:11-17) and Jacob (Gn 28:10-22).

**2. The Father communicated His will to the Israelite nation.** The Father chose the Israelite nation from the nations of the world. He first communicated His law to them at Mount Sinai (Dt 5:1-5). After the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) was given to Israel, God continued to communicate with Israel through inspired prophets, priests and kings. Hebrews 1:1 states, “*God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets*” (See Nm 12:6-8). In the context of Jeremiah 1:7-10, God told Jeremiah, “*Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.*” God told Moses, “*Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say*” (See Ex 4:1-17). By inspiration, God directed these great prophets, for “*no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation [origin], for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*” (2 Pt 1:20,21; see Zc



7:12). Therefore, through the inspired word of the Holy Spirit, God delegated the authority of spoken and written law to the prophets (See Dt 18:18-22; Is 51:16; 59:21).

When the prophets recorded their Holy Spirit inspired message, that record became authoritative in the lives of men as the word of God. The written word was to be read and obeyed just as the inspired spoken word of the prophets (See Dt 31:9-11; Ja 8:34,35; 2 Kg 23:2,3).

**3. *God communicated to the Gentiles through "handed-down" moral laws and prophetic priests.*** God chose the nation of Israel in order to preserve a "segment of humanity" through which He could fulfill the seedline promise, and thus bring His Son into the world. In preserving this segment (the Israelite nation), He communicated to them on many occasions in order to keep them from degenerating into social self-destruction as those who lived before the flood of Noah's day (See Gn 6:5). The Old Testament as we have it came into existence because of this vast amount of divine communication to Israel from the giving of the ten commandments on Mount Sinai to the time of Malachi. The Old Testament, therefore, was first directed to the nation of Israel. Because the nation of Israel was called to Mount Sinai for a special covenant relationship with God, this meant that the rest of the people of the world would be known as Gentiles.

We must not think that because God concentrated on preserving the nation of Israel in order to bring into the world the Savior, that He forgot the rest of the

world. He did not. God worked with the Gentiles through priests as Jethro of Midian (Ex 18). He even worked through the Gentile prophet Balaam who gave his prophetic gift over for hire (Nm 22,23; Ne 13:2). God was even concerned with the entire Gentile city of Nineveh, and thus, He sent a Jewish prophet, Jonah, to them.

After the giving of the ten commandment law on Mount Sinai, God expected men to continue to verbally hand down His moral laws from generation to generation. Though these divinely given moral laws sometimes became distorted through the process of oral communication and tradition, God still expected the Gentiles to live in obedience to their consciences (See Rm 2:13-15).

The Gentiles were a law unto themselves, not that they were left to establish their own moral laws, but that they were left to the "law of their consciences." God expected them to follow what was right according to their conscience. He expected the Gentiles to do as all men did before the giving of written law on Mount Sinai. He expected them to continually communicate to their children God's revealed moral laws. At the final judgment, therefore, Paul affirmed that those Gentiles who lived contemporary with the nation of Israel will be judged by the "law of the conscience."

**4. *Divine authority of the Father has been delegated to the Son.*** God communicates His will to man today through Jesus. Jesus said before His ascension, "**All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth**" (Mt 28:19). The

Father has delegated all authority in these times to the Son. Jesus said, "... *the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me*" (Jn 14:24). The Son's source of authority came from the Father. "*Most assuredly, I say to you,*" Jesus proclaimed, "*The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner*" (Jn 5:19). Therefore, "*I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me*" (Jn 5:30; see 6:38; 8:28). Jesus continued, "*For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak*" (Jn 12:49). Therefore, God "*has in these last days spoken to us by His Son ...*" (Hb 1:2). This Son He raised up "*from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion ...*" (Ep 1:20,21). He did this in order "*that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father*" (Ph 2:10,11). Men today, therefore, must listen to Jesus. Jesus warned, "*He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day*" (Jn 12:48).

**5. Through inspiration of the apostles and prophets, Jesus has spoken with authority through the law of His new covenant.** All authority and kingdom reign originates from the Son

today. He is the head of all things (Ep 1:22). However, Jesus has manifested this authority to all men through the inspired apostles. This manifestation of divine authority through the apostles is seen in the words of Jesus' prayer to the Father in John 17:8. "*For I have given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me.*"

Jesus taught the apostles much during His personal ministry. However, they had much more truth to learn when He left them to return to heaven. He promised them, "*However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority; but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come*" (Jn 16:13). Notice that the truth the Holy Spirit would reveal to the apostles would not originate with Him. He would speak **only that which He heard from the Father**. In this context, the Holy Spirit would accomplish two things with the apostles. Jesus said that "[1] *He will teach you all things, and [2] bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you*" (Jn 14:26).

The apostles, therefore, were the mediums of continued revelation of the truth. Jesus had said to them, "*Truly, I say to you [the apostles], whatever you will bind on earth will have been bound in heaven. And whatever you will loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven*" (Mt 18:18 - IKJV). In Luke 24:49 Jesus told the apostles to wait in

Jerusalem “until **you** [the apostles] are endued with power from on high.” In Acts 2:1-4 the apostles received this endowment of the Holy Spirit. In reference to the benefits of the endowment, the apostle Paul affirmed, “*But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory*” (1 Co 2:7). “**But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit.** For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God” (1 Co 2:10). Paul concluded this marvelous commentary of the inspiration of the apostles in 1 Corinthians 2:11-13. He wrote, “*These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual [words]*” (1 Co 2:13). Those things which God desired that we know have come to us through words that communicate spiritual things.

In view of the divine approval and inspiration of the apostles, Jesus said of them to all men, “*Most assuredly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me*” (Jn 13:20; see Mt 10:40). What Jesus is saying, therefore, is that He passed the authority of revelation on to the apostles. If we receive the teachings of the inspired apostles, it is the same as receiving the teachings of Jesus, for the teachings originated from the **same source**. Therefore, Jesus’ warning of John 12:48, that His word will be the standard of judgment in the last day, applies to the apostles very words as much as it applies to Jesus’ per-

sonal statements. We will be judged by the word of the inspired apostles at the final judgment.

The continued revelation of all truth came through the Christ-sent apostles. However, the New Testament prophets preached by inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They wrote inspired books as Jude and James. Nevertheless, these prophets were not the original receivers and proclaimers of “all truth.” The privilege of first receiving and proclaiming all truth was first promised and granted to the apostles. However, the prophets spoke by inspiration to the churches the inspired revelation that was first delivered to the apostles. This is why Paul wrote, “... *you are ... members of the household of God [the church] ... having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone*” (Ep 2:19,20; see 4:11; 1 Co 12:28). We are built upon the foundation of inspired truth that was delivered to the church through the inspired apostles and prophets.

**6. Divine authority of the Father was delegated to the Son who revealed His authoritative written word to man by inspiration of the apostles and prophets.** The apostles are all dead. However, the authority of the truth that was revealed to them continues through the Holy Spirit-inspired writings of the apostles and prophets. The apostles and prophets took the mystery which had been revealed to the apostles and combined it with inspired words that would continue in written form throughout history (1 Co 2:13). Paul affirmed, “*All Scrip-*

ture is given by inspiration of God ..." (2 Tm 3:16). "If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, **let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord**" (1 Co 14:37). The authority was not in the person of the apostle or prophet. It was in their inspired word. In other words, authority was delegated to them only in the sense that the Holy Spirit revealed divine law through them.

All truth which is necessary "*that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work*" has been delivered to man through word of revelation (2 Tm 3:17). The "faith," or that body of revealed truth from the Lord, "*was once for all delivered to the saints*"

(Jd 3). God's "*power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue*" (2 Pt 1:3). Therefore, we must seek this word of revelation in order to find those instructions that are necessary for godly living. We must not add to that which has been given to man (Rv 22:18,19). As students searching for the abundant life, we must search the Scriptures in order to discover the will of God. We must seek for those fundamental truths that give us hope and the assurance that we are obeying God's will. We must seek for those moral principles that will give us a guide to live in harmony with our fellow man, but above all, in harmony with God.

## Chapter 11

### UNDERSTANDING COMMANDS

Though Christians are not under law, but under grace (Rm 6:14), God has given instructions by which they must live according to the gospel. In order to understand God's will to man through word of revelation, there are some key words that must be understood. We must also investigate how God has been specific in His commands. By understanding God's commands, we will understand the liberty of choice that God has allowed us to carrying out His will.

#### A. The specifics of commands:

By "specific" we mean **the definite, concise and exact elements or aspects of the command that is given for one**

**to obey.** For example, suppose we have malaria. The doctor tells us, "I am writing a prescription for **chloroquine** that you are to take in order to that you treat your malaria." There are both specific and general elements to this command. What is specific is the type of medicine and our taking it for the treatment of the malaria. Neither we nor the pharmacist can change this specific prescription of the doctor and still be obeying the doctor's orders.

The specifics of God's commands, therefore, are those things that God wants accomplished. These are the things we cannot change, neither can we ignore them. Those who are seeking to be obedient to God will seek to obey the spe-

cifics of His commands.

## B. The inclusive and exclusive aspects of commands:

By “exclusive” we mean that **the specifics of the command imply the forbidding of anything that would take the place of that which is specified in the command itself.** By “inclusive” we mean anything that is **not mentioned** in the command itself but **is necessary in order to accomplish the command.**

When the doctor specified chloroquine in the preceding example, that **excluded** all other malaria medicines, **though he did not specifically forbid all others by stating specifically in the command not to use them.** What is **inclusive** in the command is that we must go to the pharmacist. We must buy the chloroquine medicine. Though the doctor does not specifically state in the command the actions of going to the pharmacist and making the actual purchase, these actions **are necessary** on our part in order to accomplish the specific command to buy and use chloroquine. There-

fore, **they are inclusive by implication.**

However, the actions of going and purchasing the chloroquine could be accomplished by someone other than ourselves. We would still accomplish the command, but we would have freedom in the area of acquiring the chloroquine. Therefore, in obeying commands, there are always areas of freedom of choice. When we seek to obey God’s commands, therefore, we must always separate that which is inclusive in a command from those actions wherein we have freedom of choice.

## C. The general areas of commands:

By general, or generic, we mean that **one is allowed freedom, or liberty of choice concerning how certain commands can be accomplished because particulars are not mentioned in the commands themselves.** Therefore, we follow the preceding doctor’s orders to go to the pharmacist. We must buy chloroquine. In doing this, we are carrying out the specific of the command to acquire the chloroquine. However, when we go to the pharmacist, we have a choice concerning the manufacturer of the chloroquine. Several companies manufacture this medicine. Since the doctor gave us no orders concerning the manufacturer, we have a **choice** concerning which manufacturer of chloroquine we want. The command, therefore, is generic in reference to who made the chloroquine.

Suppose the doctor had simply asked us to go to the pharmacist and buy a medi-

### THE COMMAND OF GOD

**AREA OF GENERICS**  
*Freedom for Choice*  
*Subordinate Expedients*  
*Incidental Actions and Aids*

**AREA OF SPECIFICS**  
*No Freedom of Choice*  
*No Substitution by Coordinates*

cine which would treat malaria. This would give us more freedom of choice because the medicine would not have been specified. Even if he had **suggested** or given an **example** of chloroquine’s effectiveness in the life of someone else, it is still our choice if he does not specifically command we to use chloroquine. The point is that the specifics of a command add restrictions and the generics give liberty.

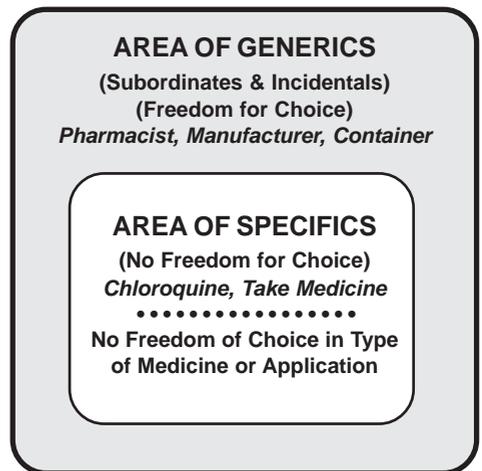
The command is generic in the manner of acquiring the correct medicine even if there is **suggestion** and **example** as to how the command is to be carried out. The example is binding only if the doctor had said, “Here is an example of how someone acquired chloroquine and how I want you to acquire it in this way also.” This example, therefore, would become a binding example though it is only one example of how to accomplish the primary task of purchasing and using the medicine. It is binding only because the doctor specified in the command his wish that the example of another should be the way you should acquire the chloroquine. In other words, the example in this case would have been made a command. If the doctor would have given several examples without specifying any one of them, then we would have a choice as to which example to follow. Or, we may even choose our own approach to fulfilling the command. **An example is binding only if it is said to be binding by the authority that gives the command.**

**D. Coordinates in relation to commands.**

The doctor said that we had malaria. He specifically prescribed chloroquine. However, at the pharmacist there are other medicines which can be used in treatment for malaria such as Quinine and Primaquine. But each of these is a **specific** and a **different type** of medicine in the treatment of malaria. Therefore, they are **coordinate**, that is, **they are of the same class and could accomplish basically the same purpose as that which is stated in the specifics of the command to use chloroquine.** However, we could not use Quinine and still be fulfilling the specifics of the doctor’s original command. The doctor’s authorization to use chloroquine **excludes using any other type or class of medicine.** Therefore, when a specific is given in a command, **the specific excludes substituting the use of any coordinates to take the place of the specifics.**

**E. The subordinates to the command:**

By purchasing the chloroquine we



have fulfilled a specific of the command. However, we have the choice of putting the chloroquine pills in a bottle, a box or a wrapper, whichever we so choose is **incidental** to carrying out the command. In other words, these are things that must be done in carrying out the command, but they are not included in the command itself. They are areas of freedom of choice. Therefore, the bottle, box or wrapper would be **subordinate** to the command. They are simply **expedients** (things of choice) that are used in order to carry out the doctor's specific command to use chloroquine to treat our malaria. These incidentals are necessary expedients. However, because they are subordinate, they do not take the place of anything specified of the command.

Incidentals also must not be confused with the command by being made a part of the command. They are matters of individual choice and must not be bound as command. If they are bound as part of the command, then they have been elevated to that which is necessary. However, incidentals should never be made part of the command. If we have an example of how a command is carried out, we must be careful as to how we follow that example. Unless the example is specified by the authority of the original command as to how the command is to be carried out, then we cannot bind the example as part of the command.

It is not difficult to determine what is required by the doctor in the preceding illustration. The doctor gave specifics in the command; buy chloroquine;

take medicine. However, the manufacturer was not mentioned. The pharmacist was not mentioned in the command. The container was not mentioned. Therefore, the command has generic elements in the sense that we have a choice as to which manufacturer of chloroquine we want, the particular pharmacist from which we want to purchase the medicine, and the particular container we want to use. A subordinate essential to carrying out the command would be a bottle or packet in which the pharmacist places the tablets. The only thing left for us to do in fulfilling the doctor's orders is to take the medicine. Now then, apply these principles of common communication to studying God's word and interpreting what God would have us do to please him.

Most people have little problem in applying the above common sense to everyday statements of command. However, when it comes to religious discussions there seems to be a breakdown of common sense. In studying the Bible there seems to be too many dogmatists who have a hard time in applying common sense to biblical interpretation.

In our scurry to be "biblical" in every aspect of our faith we have hurried to prooftexts to prove our points. When all the dust settled, we ended up binding on ourselves things God never intended to bind in the first place. It is for this reason that we must clearly understand the simple means by which God has communicated to us those things that He desires that we know and do in order to please Him. In our search, we must be

confident that we will discover truth. If one does not want to find truth, he will not discover it.

When we study and apply the word of God to our lives, we are seeking to serve God out of a good conscience. God did not communicate His will to us in a way that would frustrate our efforts.

Neither did He communicate His will in a way that would cause division among those who seek to serve Him. Therefore, when we come to a study of the Bible, we must assume that it is not difficult to determine exactly what God wants us to do in order to please Him.

## Chapter 12

### ENACTING GOD'S COMMANDS

The preceding chapter discussed the simplicity by which commands are commonly understood in our communication with one another. It is not difficult to apply the simple rules of everyday communication to our understanding of what God seeks to communicate to us through His word. Therefore, we must use the rules of common communication that we use everyday in order to understand how God communicates to us through His word.

The following are some biblical examples of how to apply the principles of the preceding chapter to interpreting the Bible. Keep in mind that these are common sense rules that we use in communication with one another every day. God has used these common sense rules in His communication in reference to those things He wants us to know and do.

#### A. Noah and the ark:

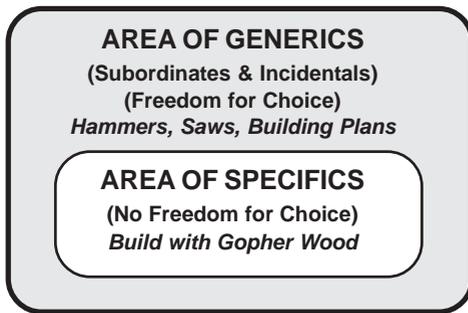
In Genesis 6:14 God commanded Noah, *“Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and outside with pitch.”* God

commanded Noah to construct the ark out of **gopher wood** (Gn 6:14). There are other types of wood that are **coordinate** to gopher wood. However, Noah could not have used a coordinate as pine or oak wood and still be fulfilling the specifics of the command of God to use gopher wood. The command to use gopher wood, therefore, was specific. Since it was specific it excluded the substitution of any coordinates as pine or oak wood. Because gopher wood was specified in the command, all other coordinates were excluded, **even though they were not expressly forbidden in the command itself**. In other words, the specifics of a command **forbid** coordinates. Specifics forbid substituting anything that would take the place of that which is specified in the command.

There are some **expedients**, or **incidentals**, that were within Noah's freedom of choice in order to carry out the specifics of the command. Noah was commanded to **build** with gopher wood. How to carry out the command to build is generic. Hammers, saws and plans for building would be **incidentals** or **expe-**

**dients** that would be necessary in order to carry out the specifics of the command to build and use gopher wood.

The command to build an ark of gopher wood has both generic and specific aspects. God expected Noah to exercise his liberty of choice in doing all that was necessary in order to accomplish both the general and specifics of the command.



At the beginning of the construction, suppose the decision was made to use nails in order to build the ark. However, after many years of construction, suppose Shem came to the “building business meeting” and suggested that wooden pegs be used instead of nails. Neither nails nor pegs are specified in the command. Therefore, there is choice as to whether to use either nails or pegs.

Suppose Shem chooses pegs. However, Ham wants to use nails. Now there is a difference of opinion around which the two must work in unity with one another. Shem and Ham could build different parts of the ark out of nails and some parts out of pegs. The ark would still be built; the command would be obeyed. They could even work at different areas of the ark using their nails and pegs. Unity would still prevail in accom-

plishing that which is specified in the command. In using both nails and pegs there would be areas where they must cooperate, and therefore, they must accommodate one another’s opinions. They must not divide over the “nails-pegs” issue, and thus, start building two different arks, one of nails and the other of pegs.

The point is that in commands there is always room for diversity of opinion, but unity in accomplishing that which is required by the command. However, if Shem started to bind his opinion (method) of using pegs on Ham, or Ham sought to bind nails on Shem, then both would be adding to the specifics of the command. They would be adding to that which is law by binding their opinions on the others. Herein is the seat of much of the problem over division among disciples. The problem is not in sincere people seeking to obey the commands of God. **The problem lies in bringing that which is either tradition or opinion into the realm of specifics, and by doing such, binding as law on the church that which should actually remain in the area of generics.**

Some have used nails for so long in building the ark that they think nails are the only way the building can be carried out. Along comes someone who wants to use pegs. Those who have been using nails do not feel good about the pegs, and thus, division, instead of liberty, results. However, we must understand that the “nails church” has the freedom to use nails. The “pegs church” has a right to use pegs. Both can be in fellowship with

one another in carrying out the command of God to build without binding either their traditions or opinions on one another. If people could simply honor this elementary principle of unity, much divisive conduct could be avoided among brethren. Brethren must learn to bind liberty on one another as they would bind the specifics of a command.

### B. Nadab, Abihu and strange fire:

The two priests of God, Nadab and Abihu, were given specifics in a command concerning the use of fire at the altar of God. However, they used what Moses identified as “strange fire” (Lv 10:1,2). In violation of the specifics of this command of God, they paid the ultimate penalty of death. They paid this penalty because they used fire that God “*had not commanded them.*” Therefore, when God declares specifics in a command, He is serious about those specifics being obeyed as He has so spoken.

It is the task of the biblical interpreter to identify that which is specifically required in a statement of command. Once the specifics are identified, then these specifics must be applied. However, in identifying the specifics we also identify the areas of liberty. God is serious about the application of the specifics. He is also serious about not stealing away His authority of the specifics by our binding of matters of opinion and tradition.

When we seek to make law those things that are not specifics, then we are elevating our opinions and traditions to the level of law, and thus, bringing down

the authority of the word of God to be no greater than the authority of our human traditions and opinions.

Throughout history whole church movements have done this, and thus, assumed that the leadership of the church has a right to pronounce dictates of law that must be obeyed by all members of the body. This is the foundation of authority upon which the Roman Catholic Church rests, and thus, the authority by which it rules over millions of people throughout the world. Any church that seeks to bring into the realm of specifics those things that must remain in the area of generics is on the path that leads to the “church authority,” or “church righteousness,” that characterizes many religious groups today.

### C. Music of praise in the life of Christians:

When discussing the subject of generics and specifics in reference to what God seeks, the subject of music in the church always arises. By way of introduction to this particular subject, we must, as Bible students, determine what God, through His word, seeks from His people. When it comes to singing praises to Him, **it is not what we might personally desire.** It is what God desires. When it comes to worshiping God, too many people are driven by their own feelings and desires more than the word of God. When we live in a world of such people, it is often difficult to mold our own worship of God around His instructions and not the influences of the reli-

gious world in which we live. We must always keep John 4:23 in mind when discussing those things that pertain to what God wants. Jesus said that *“the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him.”* God seeks those who worship Him in spirit and truth. Therefore, **our worship must not be defined by our own desires, but by that which God desires.**

In reference to praise of God in music, we must determine what is stated by God in His word as to what music He seeks from His worshipers. There are **two kinds of music** that are coordinate with one another: **vocal** and **instrumental**. These two kinds of music are coordinate because they can exist separate and apart from one another, and they can be a substitute for one another.

In Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, the Holy Spirit pronounced some specifics in a command concerning music in the life of Christians. When discussing these two contexts, we must keep in mind that the context of Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 is not necessarily discussing the assembly of disciples. The context only says that Christians should “speak to themselves” and “to the Lord” with the required music. The environment where this is to be done, therefore, is not mentioned in the command itself.

Paul wrote, *“... speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord”* (See Ep 5:19; Cl 3:16). Some of the specifics of the command are that Christians sing **to the**

**Lord with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs while making melody in their hearts.** This would exclude singing to the Lord with **nonreligious** music. This command would exclude the use of mechanically produced music because God specified that He wants **the melody of the human heart** and not the melody of the strings of a guitar. One might like to play the guitar. However, Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 are not talking about what we personally like. These passages are discussing what God wants. And in speaking to God in music, God seeks the spirit of our hearts.

There are some subordinate aids, or expedients, that would help us accomplish the specific command of singing. Songbooks and tuning forks would be tools that would not take the place of the vocal music. They would only help to carry out the specifics of the command. Keep in mind also, that the specifics of the command to sing to the Lord with spiritually oriented songs **does not** exclude Christians from singing other types of songs with mechanical music **to themselves**. The command is only specifying **what the Lord wants offered to Him and what He at least wants Christians to do to teach and exhort one another.**

The command is specific concerning music offered in praise to God. It is specific in how the Lord wants Christians to teach and exhort one another with music and spiritual songs. However, we would caution Christians here that whenever they are singing spiritual songs, they are by the nature of the songs and their own hearts, singing praises to the Lord, re-

ardless of the environment or location where they are singing. We must remember that God wants the **vocal music from the heart**.

We must also remember the original illustration concerning the doctor's command to take chloroquine. In making this command, the doctor is not commanding that chloroquine be taken with the addition of what one might prescribe for himself. In other words, if one fulfills the doctor's command, plus his own desires to add quinine, then he is actually adding to the command of the doctor. One may self-prescribe for himself another medicine, but does not have the liberty to neglect that which is specifically prescribed in the instructions. In reference to the music that God has prescribed for Himself, we can be confident that He is listening to the music that He has prescribed in Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, regardless of any surrounding noise that we may prescribe for ourselves. We may have the freedom to self-prescribe, but we do not have the freedom to determine that which God desires. We must forget what the statement of John 4:23 actually states: *"But the hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for the Father seeks such to worship Him."* We study the Bible in order to determine what the Father seeks, not what we seek for ourselves.

#### **D. Priest from the tribe of Levi:**

The context of Hebrews 7:11-14 is an excellent illustration of what we are

discussing concerning the specific and generic nature of God's commands. Under the law of Moses, priests were to be only of the **tribe of Levi**. This was a specific command. However, Jesus is our high priest today. The Hebrew writer affirmed, *"For He [Jesus] of whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe ..."* (Hb 7:13). Jesus was of the tribe of Judah. But Moses **was silent on this exclusion**, for *"of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood"* (Hb 7:14). Moses did not forbid one from being a priest if he were from the tribe of Judah when the command was given that priests be of the tribe of Levi. However, under the law, the specifics of the command **inherently forbid such**. The specific excluded any priest from any other tribe. The Hebrew writer's argument in Hebrews 7:11-14, therefore, is that the **law must be changed**. And it was. However, **it was God who changed the law**, not man. We must be cautioned never to try to change God's commands when He has given specifics. We must do that which is specified.

It is clear that God intends to direct our lives both by giving specifics in His commands, but also by allowing liberty where the commands do not speak. Remember that the specific nature of the command is exclusive. It excludes coordinates in fulfilling that which is specified. However, subordinates, or expedients, are allowed to carry out the specifics of the command. These subordinates are only incidentals that are necessary to accomplish that which is required in the command. The generic nature of com-

mands allows more choice on the part of the obedient. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to allow expedients or methods to become religious rites by which a command has to be carried out. Generic authority allows choices, but we must not make law those choices that are binding on others. Our choices are of human origin, not divine origin. We must be fearful not to bind where God has loosed.

This brings us to the point of honoring the **silence of the Scriptures**. Direct commands infer exclusion where specifics are mentioned. The direct command is usually silent on what is excluded from the statement of the command itself. In other words, when God gives a command **to do something**, He is usually silent in the command concerning what **not to do** in the area of the command. On the other hand, if He gives a command on what **not to do**, He is often silent on reasons why one should not do it.

Depending on the context and nature of the direct command, silence of the Scriptures **may mean freedom of choice** or it **may mean exclusion of any other choice**. For example, in Exodus 25:10 - 28:43 God gave specific commands to Moses concerning the construction of the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle and its furniture. These were commands that contained many specifics defining exactly how God wanted such to be constructed. Therefore, there was **no freedom** of choice allowed in the area where God gave specific directions for construction. In this case, God was not silent concerning many of the specifics of

construction. His instructions, therefore, would be **restrictive**. That is, Moses could not obey the specified instructions of construction by doing something different from the specifics of the commands. However, in those areas of construction that God **did not specify construction procedures**, there was freedom. Moses could make a decision concerning those areas where God did not specify construction.

In the generic areas of a command there is liberty of choice. Jesus said, "A *new commandment I give to you, that you love one another ...*" (Jn 13:34). The command here is specific in the sense that we must love one another. However, it is generic in the sense of how we are to express our love. Therefore, one has liberty as to how he is to express his love to others. The generic nature of a command, however, includes silence. Jesus did not specify how the love was to be expressed in carrying out the command itself. This silence of the Scriptures **frees** one to choose how to carry out or apply the command.

One may resort to other scriptures in order to find examples or even commands that would define how to carry out a particular command (See Js 1:27; Gl 6:1,2). However, the examples or commands of other scriptures usually give instructions on particular areas on how the command to love is to be obeyed. The specific command to love is a broad command. We would not assume that God would give us a list of practices (scriptures) on how this or similar commands should be accomplished. Nevertheless, we do find

many examples in the New Testament of how this command was carried out in the lives of the early Christians.

The Sinai law was a law of specifics. In other words, Israel was given many statutes and precepts of how to accomplish the will of God. However, the New Testament law of Christ speaks more in the order of a law of principles, for it is the perfect law of liberty (Js 1:25). In other words, Jesus pronounced His will in principle, but He allowed the obedient liberty as to how the principle was to be accomplished.

Because of the nature of the "law of liberty," therefore, there must be grace. The obedient, in accomplishing the principle, would always be oppressed with a sense of guilt under a law of principles because he would always feel that he had not done enough. Therefore, he must trust in the grace of God for his salvation and not his ability to keep the principles perfectly or depend upon his ability of law-keeping. It is in this sense that Paul explained that Christians are not under law, but under grace (Rm 6:14).

Under a law of principle, however, there is always the danger of binding on ourselves the opinions of men as to how we must accomplish the principles of the law. If the obedient do not have a clear understanding of the freedom of the law of Christ, then they will seek to bind either opinions or traditions in the areas of freedom. This was the problem Paul addressed in the Galatian letter. Legalistically oriented Jewish Christians, who were previously under the legalistic system of Judaism, brought into the church

a legal system of accomplishing the law of Christ. The source of the legal statutes they sought to bind on the church originated from their past religion. Today, we must be careful not to bind where God has loosed. When God has given freedom, no man has the authority to bind (Gl 5:1,2).

Keep in mind that the specifics of a command exclude all coordinates of that which is specified. However, one is generally allowed freedom of choice surrounding the specifics of commands in the New Testament as long as the command is accomplished and no coordinates are allowed to substitute for the specifics of the command. Those actions that are chosen to complete generics must not add to or subtract from the specifics of the command. And that which is chosen must not become a substitute for what God specifies.

Because God is silent concerning the addition, subtraction and substitution of coordinates, does not mean that one has freedom in this area. One's liberty in carrying out God's specifics does not give us the right to add to, subtract from, or substitute for that which is specifically commanded. Our freedoms must never be allowed to make changes in what the Bible specifically requires of us. However, we do have liberty in those areas that do not contradict the specifics of a command. This is something that needs no explanation. We preach the gospel through gospel meetings, but there are no examples of gospel meetings in the New Testament. We teach children the Bible in group Bible studies, but there are no

examples of children's Bible classes in the New Testament. The point is that the specifics are being fulfilled of the gospel being preached and the children being taught the Bible. Specifics are being fulfilled with freedom to carry out the command.

God has given direct commands in order to direct the lives of His flock. Peter said, "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Pt 4:11). Paul affirmed, "If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him ac-

knowledge that the things which I write to you are **the commandments of the Lord**" (1 Co 14:37). This is a general biblical imperative for all time. God intends that we "speak where the Bible speaks." This principle is also seen in Moses' words of God to Israel. "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take anything from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you" (Dt 4:2).

## Chapter 13

### DIRECT COMMANDS

God instructed the Israelites not add religious laws where He had not spoken. They were not to subtract laws where He had spoken. This same thought was revealed through John in 2 John 9. "Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son."

When we study the Bible, therefore, we must be careful not to take away from God's commands; neither should we add to His commands. God has spoken and expects to be heard. He has commanded and demands to be obeyed. Anyone who would seek to follow Him must listen for His instructions concerning what He demands. If we are to seek God, then we must not invent a religion, and then expect God to be pleased with our religious invention. Since the Bible has come to us as the word of God, then it is imperative that we allow God to speak to us

through His word.

There are two areas of study concerning God's direct commands: (1) We must seek to understand God's communication to man through command. (2) We must seek to understand the place of opinion of interpretation in reference to commands. These areas of study help focus our attention on understanding exactly what God wants us to do in obedience to direct commands. In understanding both of these points, much confusion can be settled concerning those things that cause too much division.

If God demands obedience from His creation, then it logically follows that He has commanded a pattern of life that He expects men to follow. Jesus left "us an **example, that you should follow His steps**" (1 Pt 2:21). He said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4). Paul urged, "Imitate me, just

as I also imitate Christ” (1 Co 11:1). Therefore, Paul commanded that the Corinthians, as us, “*keep the traditions [ordinances] as I delivered them to you*” (1 Co 11:2). He concluded, “*Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern*” (Ph 3:17). It is this pattern of fundamental belief and behavior that Christians must seek to follow. Jesus said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life ...*” (Jn 14:6). Therefore, we must seek that way, that truth and that life, for we understand what He concluded, “*No one comes to the Father except through Me*” (Jn 14:6; see Rm 10:17).

Understanding the gospel way of Jesus depends on our approach to biblical interpretation. It is first necessary, therefore, to be able to discern from the Bible exactly what the commands of God are concerning both fundamental beliefs and moral behavior. When we discover essential teachings of belief and behavior, we have discovered the pattern of belief and moral behavior after which we must pattern our lives.

Application of fundamental principles may be translated into different behavioral patterns of obedience. In other words, we may react to God’s laws and essential teachings in different ways wherein we have freedom of choice. However, as long as we maintain the specifics of the fundamental beliefs and moral principles, we remain in fellowship with God and others who so conduct their lives.

In order to establish what is fundamental and necessary for obedience, God

has established commands that are clearly understood. He has always worked with man with the principle of establishing clear instructions that man must obey in order to be saved. Jesus, and the New Testament writers, clearly followed this principle. Jesus said, “*If you love Me, keep My commandments*” (Jn 14:15). “*You are My friends if you do whatever I command you*” (Jn 15:14). He commissioned the apostles to teach the baptized disciples “*to observe all things that I have commanded you ...*” (Mt 28:20). Paul restated this principle to the Corinthians when he reminded them to “*acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord*” (1 Co 14:37). Peter wanted to remind his readers “*of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles ...*” (2 Pt 3:2). “*These things,*” Paul told Timothy, “*command and teach*” (1 Tm 4:11). We must search for those commandments in the New Testament that we must obey. These commands establish the fundamental pattern that is necessary for obedience.

As sincere disciples who seek to please God, we desire to know exactly what God wants us to do. We want to know what examples or patterns in the Bible are binding on us as the flock of God. Those who are motivated by their obedience to the gospel want to understand how they can live by the gospel.

It is important to understand the specifics of God’s commands that are necessary for one to obey in order to be pleas-

ing to Him. There are truths that we learn from the Bible. However, truths are to be **believed**. There are direct commands that must be believed and **obeyed**. All commands are truth, but not all truth from God is command. It is a truth that God cannot lie (Ti 1:2). But this is not a truth that we are commanded to obey, even though our obedience may be motivated by the truth. It is important to understand the truths. It is necessary to understand and obey the direct commands.

When one “obeys the truth” he actually obeys those true commands of God that are essential to his or her obedience to God, and that identify one as a child of God (See Rm 2:8; Gl 3:1; 1 Pt 1:22; 1 Jn 1:6). However, one’s inexperience in Bible study, or recent conversion, may be the basis for not knowing many truths that are revealed in the Bible. Knowledge of such truth is not necessarily a “condition” for salvation. One may be very ignorant of many Bible teachings, and yet, obey the fundamental requirements for salvation and still be saved. In other words, one’s knowledge of the Bible, other than in the area of knowing what is essential to salvation, is not a condition for salvation. The sixty-year-old Bible scholar is no more saved because of his great Bible knowledge than the recent convert who is still dripping from the waters of baptism.

Truth and command are linked together. If we do not believe the truth of Jesus’ teaching, we are unlikely to obey the commands He gives. This is the meaning behind what Jesus said in John 8:24: “*Therefore I said to you that you*

*will die in your sins; for if you **do not believe that I am He**, you will die in your sins.*” (See Rm 10:17). Therefore, our belief will motivate us to respond in a positive way to Jesus’ commands. Believing what Jesus said is essential to motivate us to do what He commanded us to do.

Grammatically speaking, we must understand the system of communication that God uses to communicate His will to us. If we are to seek His will, we must understand those fundamental principles of grammar by which He has communicated His fundamental truths and commands to us.

God has communicated to us with words and grammar that can be understood by man. It is thus our responsibility to understand normal systematic communication in order to understand God’s communication to us through the Bible.

There are common grammatical statements that are used in every day language of communication. God has used ordinary grammatical structures of language in order to communicate to us. We must assume that the communication is clear enough for the average person to understand that which is essential for salvation. As Bible students, we must understand these linguistic means of communication in order to understand God’s



communication of His will to us. If one does not understand these common methods of communication, he will have a difficult time understanding the Bible. In fact, we would say that understanding the common means of communication is the first step in properly understanding the word of God.

### A. Imperative statements:

Direct commands in the Bible are **imperative** statements. Examples would be, “*Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season*” (2 Tm 4:2), and “*Repent therefore and be converted ...*” (At 3:19). These statements are imperative commands. This is the most common manner by which God communicates to man what He requires of man to do. When God wants man to behave after a certain pattern of conduct, He delivers His will to man through imperative command.

### B. Interrogative statements:

An interrogative is a question that often demands a response. Interrogatives are questions that often have the same force as an imperative command. Ananias asked Paul, “*And now why are you waiting?*” (At 22:16). The implication in the context is, “Be baptized immediately.” Peter asked, “*... what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?*” (1 Pt 4:17). The answer that is demanded in the context is that they will be condemned because they did not obey the gospel. In 1 Corinthians

6:7 Paul asked, “*Why do you not rather accept wrong?*” In other words, Paul is inferring the command that one should not retaliate if he or she is cheated.

### C. Declarative statements:

A declarative statement is not a direct command. It is a statement of fact; a statement of truth. As a statement of truth or fact, the Bible is demanding belief in that truth or fact. Or, as a statement of fact or truth, the Bible is demanding that one conform to that fact or truth in order to be well-pleasing to God. Jesus said, “*I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life*” (Jn 8:12). This is a statement of fact. In order for one to have the “light of life,” therefore, he must follow Jesus. Though this is not a direct command, it is a statement that demands that one follow Jesus in order to have the “light of life.”

Jesus also said, “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned*” (Mk 16:16). This is a simple declarative statement of Jesus which says that if one is not baptized he cannot be saved. This statement is not an imperative statement in this context. **It is a declarative statement of fact.** It carries the same force as a command because **it is a fact of action that one must do in order to be saved.**

Hebrews 11:6 declares, “*But without faith it is impossible to please Him ... for he who comes to God must believe ....*” This declaration is binding, though it

does not come to us as an imperative command in this context. You cannot please God without faith in Him. Therefore, conformity to God's will made in declarative statements is necessary.

#### D. Hortatory statements:

A hortatory statement is a statement giving encouragement or advice. It is a statement of exhortation, inciting one to do that which is advised. Hebrews 6:1 is a good example. The Hebrew writer stated, "... let us go on to perfection ...." In the statement, the Hebrew writer is saying that we must go beyond the first principles of teaching and go on to greater understandings. In the statement, therefore, there is the necessity to grow up in Christ (1 Pt 3:18).

#### E. Optative statements:

An optative statement is the expression of a wish or desire. Paul's statement of 1 Thessalonians 4:13 is a good illustration. "***But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.***" In this desire of Paul, he is requesting that they listen to what he has to say concerning those Christians who have died.

When we interpret the Scriptures, it is important to understand that fundamental doctrine is established by imperative and declarative statements. However, inferences we understand from the Scripture by human deduction and logic do not have the same weight as impera-

tive and declarative statements. These inferences establish truth to be believed. Nevertheless, those teachings that are absolutely fundamental to Christian belief, especially in the area of commands we must obey in order to be saved, come to us in contexts in the Bible in direct statements and direct commands. These truths may not always be stated as a direct command in every context. Nevertheless, because of their essential nature to our salvation, we would expect to find them somewhere in the Bible in the form of a direct command.

From a strictly grammatical standpoint, statements of the imperative mood constitute true direct commands. Nevertheless, statements by any other grammatical mood reveal truth that is to be believed. We certainly would not believe that God would reveal to us fundamental truths solely through figurative language. Neither would it be reasonable to believe that essential teachings for our salvation would be revealed through deductive reasoning on our part.

Fellowship among disciples should be established upon the basis of direct command or declarative statements on **fundamental teachings that have reference to our salvation**. Those teachings, however, that are based exclusively on the ability of human deduction and logic are always subject to the fallibility of human thinking. They are sometimes subject to a novice understanding of the Scriptures by those who are new in the faith or weak in understanding the Bible.

There are many new converts throughout the world. If one obeys the

gospel in order to become a Christian, then he or she is added to the universal body of Christ by God (At 2:47). He or she is a member of the church, though he or she may come into Christ with a limited knowledge of the Bible. New converts have obeyed the gospel and be-

lieved the fundamental concepts of the gospel. They are our brethren, and thus, their little knowledge of the meat of the word of God does not disqualify them from being saved. Only knowledge of and obedience to the gospel are necessary for salvation.

## Chapter 14

### MATTERS OF OPINION

Most differences in discussions concerning Bible matters originate from being unable to distinguish between something that is an opinion and something that is a direct command from the Bible. Too often there are those who do not know the Bible well enough to distinguish between matters of faith that are binding and man's religious traditions.

Opinions must be clearly defined. And when we have defined an interpretation as an opinion, we must not allow it to become a test of fellowship. We also must be able to define our religious traditions, for all people of faith establish behavioral patterns of religious tradition. Those who do not realize that they are following traditional behavioral patterns usually have the greatest difficulty in separating what is essential teaching and moral behavior from what the Bible actually commands. The following are some points that will help determine the place of opinions:

**A. Opinions are derived from human reasoning.**

Opinions from Scripture are often

**derived by human deduction and logic.** They are developed from human reasoning concerning statements that are made in Scripture. Opinions are generally true. However, their correctness may be **limited by culture or education** on the part of the one making them. In other words, one man's opinions may carry more weight because of years of experience and Bible study. On the other hand, another's opinions may be limited by inexperience and lack of Bible knowledge. If the opinions of the strong brother, therefore, are allowed to reign over the weaker brother, the weaker brother can be greatly intimidated. If the stronger, more educated brother is faulty in his attitude, then he may look down on the less educated brother and not consider his opinions. For this reason, we should be careful concerning our opinions. Our opinions must not become the test upon which fellowship among believers is either made or broken.

**B. Opinions cannot become a test of fellowship.**

**Because opinions are derived from**

**human reasoning, and not declarative statements or direct commands, they cannot be made a test for determining fellowship among brethren.** Neither can they be made a test for breaking fellowship. We must not let one man's reasoning ability become the standard to determine truth. This is undoubtedly what Paul referred to in 2 Timothy 3:7 when he said there were those who were "*always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.*" Though one may have studied the Bible for many years, his or her opinions of interpretation in certain areas may be wrong because he or she is in some way prejudiced against the truth. In other words, **many years of Bible study do not guarantee correct interpretation.** One's traditional religiosity always influences objective Bible study.

Every Christian must seek harmony with his or her brother or sister in Christ. This motivation is certainly in the context of Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 10:23,24: "*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful; all things are lawful for me, but all things do not edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.*" An atmosphere free of intimidation must always exist among Bible students who are encouraged to study the Scriptures. The intellect and logic of one individual must not be set against another in the realm of opinion. It would be good for all to remember the words of James in James 4:11,12:

*Do not speak evil of one another, breath-*

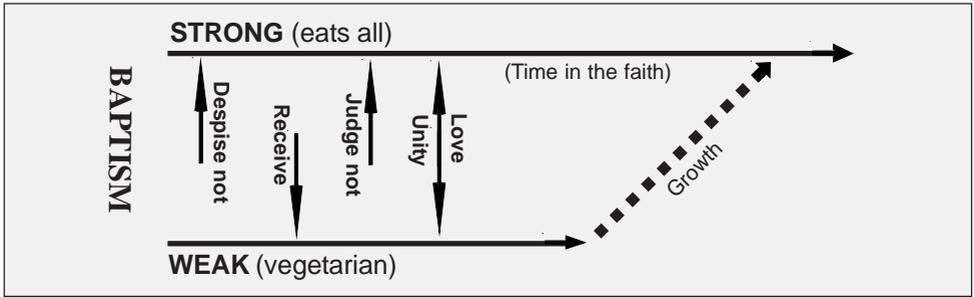
*ren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. **There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?***

### C. Opinions allow freedom.

It is essential here to review the main points of Paul's discussion of **Romans 14**. In this context he reveals some very important points concerning fellowship, especially in the context of opinions and biblical interpretation. These points are important because it is not only our purpose to understand God's communication to man through revealed word, but also to understand it in a way that promotes unity among all those who seek to obediently serve God.

In Romans 14 Paul sets forth some very important fundamental principles in our efforts to carry out the word of God in our relationship with one another. These would be guidelines of interpretation by which we must conduct ourselves with one another in reference to new Christians. Therefore, consider carefully the following concepts Paul teaches us through this key passage:

1. Paul discusses the obligation that Christians have toward one another in the area of opinions.
2. The weaker brother (the new convert) is the one who is too strict or legal concerning what Christians should or should not eat. In the context the weaker brother is a vegetarian (Rm



14:2) and has wrongfully made his vegetarianism a religious matter (See 1 Tm 4:1-5)

3. Patient love on the part of the stronger brother (the one who has been a Christian longer) must be extended to the weak brother for the purpose of keeping the weak brother in fellowship as he grows to a greater knowledge of God's will.
4. The liberty of the stronger brother must not be used in order to encourage the weaker brother to eat meat, and thus cause him to violate his own conscience.

Understanding the relationship that the strong and weak must have with one another solves many problems. The following are key thoughts of Romans 14 we must study and remember in relation to our present discussion:

### ROMANS 14

• **Verse 1:** The vegetarian beliefs of the weaker brother (the new Christian) were wrong because of his ignorance concerning the insignificance of food in Christian matters. Nevertheless, until he grows to accept meats to be from God (1 Tm 4:3,4), his opinion must be respected for the purpose of maintaining fellowship. He must not be intimidated to act against

his conscience, though the strong brother had liberty to eat meat.

• **Verses 2,3:** Though the new Christian has wrongly made his vegetarianism a religious matter, his opinion must be respected until he grows in knowledge of this matter. However, the vegetarian practices of the weak brother are not to be bound on others. Neither is the liberty of the strong brother to be used to intimidate the new Christian to do that which is against his conscience. The weak brother should not judge the stronger brother to be "liberal" in teaching.

• **Verse 4:** In view of the coming final judgment of all, no Christian has a right to set himself up as a judge in these matters of opinion (See Mt 7:1; 2 Co 5:10; Js 4:11,12).

• **Verses 5-9:** Because we belong to the Lord, and He accepts us with our faulty understandings, we must accept one another regardless of our individual likes and dislikes.

• **Verses 10-13:** In view of the coming judgment, Christians should show mercy to one another in order to reap the mercy

of God (Js 2:13). Christians should not judge one another concerning things that are not fundamental to salvation.

• **Verses 14,20:** Because of the weaker brother's lack of knowledge in the area of food, his former religiosity in reference to idol worship continued to have an influence on his conscience. However, his lack of knowledge in this matter did not negate his salvation. He had not yet learned to appreciate his freedom in Christ. Since this was a matter of opinion, then what is under discussion is not a matter of doctrine. Fundamental teaching is not under discussion concerning the vegetarianism of the weak brother. The fundamental teaching that would be violated would be the unity of fellowship and the loving relationship that must be maintained between the strong and weak brother.

• **Verses 15-23:** The knowledge of the strong brother should not be used against the weak brother to do either of the following: (1) Cause division in fellowship between the weak and strong brother. (2) Encourage the weak brother to violate his conscience by doing that which he believes is in any way associated with idolatry. If the stronger brother causes the weaker brother to do either of the above two things, he is not considerate of his brother (1 Co 8:11,12; 1 Jn 3:14). Because he is inconsiderate, he sins against Christ. Brothers must not divide over nonessential matters. They must promote righteousness, peace and joy in order to edify one another and to

be an evangelistic outreach to the world. If we function without consideration for one another's opinions, then we are not living according to the unity of the gospel (See Ph 1:27).

In the context of Romans 14 we must keep in mind that the weaker brother is the new Christian. He is not the brother who argues strongly about his opinion. This is not the brother who has a strong opinion about something that is simply an opinion. The weaker brother is the new Christian who is growing out of his past religious practices and beliefs. He is new to the faith, having come out of some religion that may have promoted vegetarianism. Or, he associates the eating of meat with his past religious experience in idolatrous religions where adherents ate meat sacrificed to idols.

The weaker brother in the context of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 is **the brother who does not resist the influence of others because he is intimidated. This is the brother who is intimidated to act contrary to what his conscience tells him to do.** In this context, therefore, the weaker brother **hurts his own conscience.** In other words, the weak brother does not have his conscience hurt by what others do. **He hurts his own conscience by what he is emboldened to do against what he feels is wrong.** It is very important that we understand this point that is so often misunderstood by those who use these passages to force their opinions on others by being strong-willed or hard headed.

We must assume that the fundamental teachings upon which the unity of believers can be maintained are both clear and easy to be understood. God would not make those things that are necessary for salvation difficult to be understood. He has given us a foundation of fundamentals upon which we can have fellow-

ship. That foundation is not difficult to be understood in His word. Therefore, we must seek for those fundamentals that encourage unity, and then base our fellowship upon these fundamentals. We must strive for unity that is based on the simple fundamentals of the word of God.

## Chapter 15

### EXAMPLES OF OBEDIENCE

Throughout the Bible there are examples of how people of God served God. Examples of service to God have been recorded in order to give understanding and applications of truth. When one studies the Bible, he discovers many examples of how men and women responded to the commandments of God. The example of the early Christians' lives furnishes us with a model to illustrate human response to the will of God.

Too much confusion and division have been caused among the saints concerning the misapplication of examples of the first century Christians. Confusion and division have been caused by giving the same amount of authority to the responses of early Christians to the commands of God as the commands themselves. Because interpreters have been selective concerning what examples should be followed or not followed, unnecessary division has often occurred. In our zeal to be "biblical," some have sought to bind as law casual statements of historical examples of the early disciples. The result of this confusion has often led to division and an attitude of

judging one another concerning non-essential practices.

This division and confusion has been unnecessarily caused because of a misunderstanding of Bible examples. Our understanding of the behavior of the early Christians is very important. However, we must approach this study with caution, realizing that God would not have us cause division among brethren over examples that one brother might consider binding and another would not consider binding. Therefore, it is important to formulate a consistent understanding of how we would apply the examples of the early Christians to the instructions that were given through the apostles.

We must not assume that because the Holy Spirit recorded an example of obedience of the early Christians that He meant that any particular example should be bound as law. If God intended that the record of an example of obedience constituted a statement of law, **then we would be bound to follow every example that is recorded in the New Testament.** As we will discover later, this would lead us to be very inconsistent in

our service to God. In fact, it would make service to God impossible.

The elevation of Bible examples to the level of direct commands has often come out of an environment of heated debate to prove an argument. In order to be “biblical” in attack against false doctrines, sincere students of God’s word have often sifted through the Scriptures for any statement, action, inference or example that might justify one’s position as “biblical.” These “biblical” quotations then became binding truth, and the basis upon which fellowship was often decided. In an effort to “speak where the Bible speaks” in every aspect of religious behavior, the Bible has too often become a source from which to formulate legal systems of proof texts. However, we doubt that this was God’s original intention of how He wanted the Scriptures to be used to guide man to correct beliefs and correct moral behavior.

It is important that we understand the purpose and nature of Bible examples. All of us desire to allow God to direct our beliefs and behavior through His word. We want to be “biblical.” However, we want to “rightly divide the word of truth” in order to produce unity among believers and confidence in our own lives that we are pleasing to God.

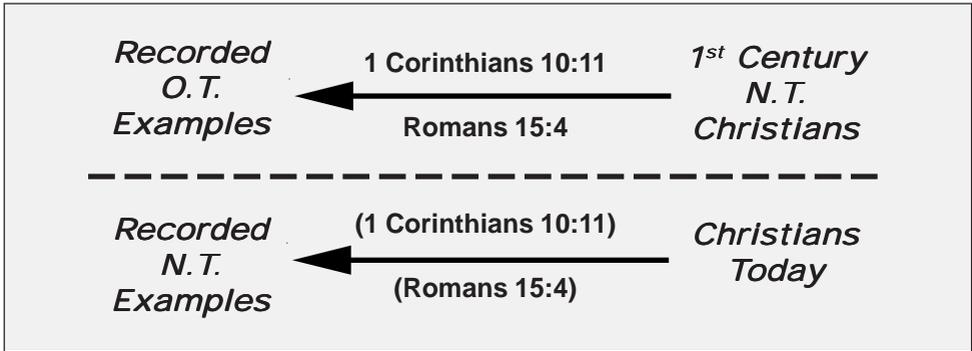
To the Corinthians, Paul wrote, “*Now all these things happened to them as **examples**, and they were written for our admonition ...*” (1 Co 10:11). We are to receive admonition from recorded examples of the lives of those who lived in Old Testament times. Also in reference to Old Testament events, Paul wrote to

the Roman Christians, “*For whatsoever things were written before **were written for our learning** ...*” (Rm 15:4). We are to learn from recorded Old Testament examples. We learn from those who either responded positively or negatively to the will of God.

Paul told the Corinthians, “*Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ*” (1 Co 11:1). Paul did establish himself as a “model” to be followed as he so expressed himself in Philippians 4:9: “*The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, **these do**, and the God of peace will be with you.*” Likewise, he instructed Timothy, “*... **be an example to the believers** ...*” (1 Tm 4:12; see Ti 2:7). He told elders to be “*examples to the flock*” (1 Pt 5:3). He stated that churches were examples to other churches (1 Th 1:6-8; 2:14; 2 Co 9:2).

From the above statements, we must conclude that the recorded examples of the early Christians must play an important part in our lives as Christians today. After all, the Holy Spirit had many of the examples of the early Christians recorded for our learning. However, we would be cautious because those negative responses to the will of God that are recorded would be ways of what not to do. Positive responses as examples would define acceptable examples of how we can respond to the will of God. The following points help us better understand the purpose of these examples as they are recorded in the New Testament.

### **A. Examples are used to give warnings.**



The Old Testament examples were often used to provide warnings for New Testament Christians (See Rm 15:4; 1 Co 10:11). The disobedience of the Old Testament Israelites “*became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted*” (1 Co 10:6). Sodom and Gomorrah “*are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire*” (Jd 7; see 2 Pt 2:6). The Hebrew writer concluded, “*Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall after the same example of disobedience*” (Hb 4:11).

As the Old Testament examples were recorded by inspiration to give New Testament Christians (and us) examples, so the Holy Spirit inspired the recording of examples of the first century Christians in order to provide us today with examples of obedience and disobedience. It would be fair to conclude that we should approach New Testament examples as the Holy Spirit instructed the first Christians to approach Old Testament examples for **admonition** and **learning** (Rm 15:4; 1 Co 10:11).

We have the advantage today of two sources of inspired literature for study-

ing examples. The first century Christians had the record of the Old Testament Scriptures. We have both the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Testament Scriptures.

**B. Examples are used to provide models of obedience.**

There are actually four Greek words that are translated “example” in the English New Testament. *Hupogrammos* is used only once (1 Pt 2:21). It is used in reference to Jesus leaving us a “pattern” or “model” of suffering that we should follow. “... *Christ suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps.*” This does not mean that we should go out and intentionally seek to suffer in the exact manner in which Jesus suffered, and consequently die on a literal cross. We will suffer after Jesus’ pattern of suffering, but our suffering will often be in a different manner. The example of Jesus only expresses a pattern of suffering that Christians must accept if the occasion calls for such.

*Deigma* is also used once in the New Testament (See Jd 7). It refers to some-

thing “standing as a model or example.” The Greek word *hupodeigma* also means an example, model or pattern. It is used several times in the New Testament. It usually refers to a bad model or example that one should not follow (See Hb 4:11).

The most common Greek word used in reference to examples is *tupos*. This, and the other three Greek words, are translated “example” and carry the meaning of “pattern” or “model.” This is the concept of model that is expressed in passages as John 13:15: “*For I [Jesus] have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.*” This statement was made in the context of washing feet. However, Jesus was not saying that we should literally wash feet. The illustration of the example is service to one another. This statement of Jesus should caution us about making a binding practice out of certain examples that were meant to teach a greater lesson than the example itself.

Therefore, examples become a role model for us to imitate. They give us a goal to which to aspire. They illustrate spiritual concepts that we must accept into our behavior. Examples illustrate the extent or manner by which sincere believers responded to the will of God.

In the context of this point, the exhortation Paul made to the Romans and Corinthian Christians concerning the Old Testament characters would reasonably be applied to Christians today looking back to the first century Christians. Paul set forth the Old Testament characters as examples that the early Christians (and us) must seriously consider (Rm 15:4; 1

Co 10:11). However, not all of the examples of the Old Testament characters were good. Nevertheless, in the Old Testament there were many models of faithfulness such as those mentioned in Hebrews 11.

We should apply the same principle of interpretation to the many examples in the New Testament as Paul exhorted first century Christians to look at models of obedience in the Old Testament. There were good examples to follow and bad examples to shun. **Paul did not set these models or examples as law to be elevated to the authority of God’s direct commands.** He only exhorted Christians to look at the examples of Old Testament characters in their response to the will of God. He wanted us to see the spiritual application of the examples of the Old Testament believers in their obedience to the will of God. We should, therefore, approach New Testament examples with this same principle of interpretation. Our relationship to New Testament examples should at least be as the first century Christians’ relationship to the Old Testament examples.

### C. Examples are used to edify.

Paul used the zeal of the Corinthian disciples to stir up many other churches (2 Co 9:2). The example of the Thessalonian church edified all the churches of Macedonia and Achaia (1 Th 1:6-8). The generous spirit of sacrifice and contribution of the Macedonian disciples was used to motivate the Corinthians to contribute (2 Co 8:1-3). Paul’s personal

boldness of preaching while in prison encouraged others to be bold in Rome (Ph 1:12-14). The example of the faithful Old Testament heroes of faith edifies us to become stronger and to press on to the goal of heaven (Hb 12:1-3). We encourage others to glorify God by our examples (Mt 5:16), though our examples can also have a negative effect on others (1 Co 8:10). Therefore, the examples or models of faithfulness of the early Christians give us encouragement. We are edified by their lives of faithfulness (Rv 2:13), zeal (At 8:4), and generosity (At 4:34,35; 2 Co 8:1-5). In this sense, we refer to their responses to God's commands in their lives in order to better our lives today.

The examples of New Testament Christians in the above sense were never recorded for the purpose of our following the exact same procedures of obedience. They were recorded to motivate, stimulate and encourage us to respond to God's principles. We are edified by the early Christians' response to God's will. This edification should motivate us to also respond to God's will.

#### **D. Examples help us to clarify and apply commands.**

When we study how the early believers obeyed the commands of God, we can often better understand what the commands implied. Jesus commanded His disciples immediately before His ascension to make disciples and to teach them "to observe all things that I have commanded you ..." (Mt 28:20). The dis-

ciples' "observance" (obedience) of Jesus' commands gives us an example that spurs us on to obedience. Paul's reminder to the Corinthians concerning his instructions was that they are "*the commandments of the Lord*" (1 Co 14:37).

The New Testament, therefore, is both a record of the commands that the apostles gave to the early Christians and a record of how struggling infant disciples strove to comply with those commands of principle. We must be cautious, therefore, in how we view the inspired record of their example of how they obeyed the commands of the apostles. Certainly, these examples of obedience were not perfect as our obedience would not be perfect. We must view the examples in light of the demands of the actual commands of God.

**Because the first Christians had personal contact with the apostles themselves does not necessitate that their struggling obedience should be elevated to the authority of the commands of the apostles.** This is where we as Bible students must be very careful in studying the subject of examples. Simply because we read of an example of a disciple in the New Testament does not automatically mean that the action of that disciple is a binding law on Christians today. To elevate such an example to a binding law is to misunderstand the whole point of why the Holy Spirit had the examples recorded in the first place.

#### **E. Examples illustrate obedience to the commands of God.**

The examples of obedience by the first Christians give us an indication of how commands can be obeyed. For example, the church baptized repentant believers in rivers, streams, and lakes. These are open bodies of water. These examples give us an indication of how the command to baptize people can be obeyed. However, such examples do not exclude constructed baptisteries in church buildings, though constructed baptisteries are not mentioned in the New Testament.

The early Christians in Jerusalem *“had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need”* (At 2:44,45; see 4:34,35). Here is an example that is not binding on Christians. If it is an example that must be bound as law, then when one becomes a Christian he must sell everything he has.

In Acts 5 it is recorded that Ananias and Sapphira sold some of their possessions. But they lied to the Holy Spirit concerning the amount for which the possessions were sold (At 5:1,2). Nevertheless, Peter said to them that *“while it remained, was it not your own?”* (At 5:4). In other words, they were not under any obligation to keep the example of what other Christians were doing in the matter of selling possessions and giving. Also keep in mind that this was an approved example by the apostles. The apostles approved the selling of the possessions and giving to those in need. But this approved example was not binding on Christians as a law. What the Christians did was only an illustration of how

God’s command to help one another could be carried out.

We must be cautioned, therefore, about binding examples of the first century church on Christians today. **An example without the backing of a clearly stated command cannot be bound upon Christians or made a test of fellowship.** Though there may be a direct command behind the example, the example itself may be **only one way** in which the command can be carried out in the lives of Christians. The context in which the example rests must be thoroughly studied in order to determine its application to us today.

**Though the example may be acceptable as an approved manner of fulfilling a command, it is not required to be obeyed as a direct command.** Here is another illustration. There is no New Testament command for Christians to marry. In fact, Paul used his own celibate (unmarried) life as an example for others to follow in times of persecution (See 1 Co 7:1-9,26). He had a right to marry as the other apostles (1 Co 9:5). Nevertheless, was his example of celibacy binding on Christians? Some religious groups seem to think so. But we think not. Paul’s example of celibacy is not a binding example because all men and women have the right to marry.

The above principle is the same as that exercised by the apostles concerning the distribution of food to the needy in Acts 2 & 4. The selling of the possessions and lands was **approved** by the apostles. However, this approved example of selling one’s house and lands

in order to feed those in need was not binding on Christians, as is illustrated by the case of Ananias and Sapphira.

Another approved example was the meeting of the early Christians in the homes of members (Rm 16:5; Cl 4:15; Pl 2). There is no example of Christians meeting in church buildings as many meet today. Nevertheless, the approved example of the apostles to meet in homes is not binding as the only place where Christians can assemble. If it were binding, then Christians today must at least follow the practice of meeting in homes.

The reason why this subject is so important is because of what Paul said in Romans 4:15. "... **for where there is no law there is no transgression.**" If an example without a foundation command behind it is not a binding law of God, **then if one does not follow the particular example he does not sin.** And if God does not consider something sinful, then certainly Christians have no right to make examples which have no direct command behind them justification for division. We must take heed here lest we be guilty of binding laws where God has not bound laws.

Keep in mind that the Scriptures were originally delivered to individuals to whom they directly applied. Therefore, the commands were given to them in the cultural setting in which they lived. This does not mean that the command is culturally oriented in order not to apply to us today. It simply means that we must study the command as it was responded to in its cultural setting. God's approval of the manner of obedience by the first

recipients of the command is an example to us as to how God desires that the command may be obeyed. At least, the obedient example is one way by which the command can be carried out in its cultural setting. We must remember that the command is from God. **The example of obedience is from man.** The example is to be followed only insofar as it conforms to the divine command.

Acts 20:7 is an example where the Christians partook of the Lord's Supper upon the first day of the week, Sunday. However, there is no direct command in the New Testament concerning **when** Christians must observe the Supper. Jesus' direct command was, "... *do this in remembrance of Me*" (Lk 22:19). We can only **assume** that the instructions concerning the taking of the Lord's Supper every first day of the week was given by the apostle. However, we can only assume this simply because there is no inspired written command that states such in the New Testament. The example of partaking of the Supper on Sunday, therefore, is a clarifying example as to when we can partake of the Supper. However, we must remember that we do not have a command on the matter of when to partake of it. In this area, the command we do have (Lk 22:19) seems to be general according to the statement of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 11:25, "*This do, as often as you drink it ....*"

It would be difficult to prove that Christians must partake of the Lord's Supper on Sunday simply by the context of Acts 20:7. The passage simply states that this is what the Christians in Troas

did. We would, however, assume that the Christians in Troas were partaking of the Supper in obedience to specific apostolic directions that had been given by Paul. The “reasoning” concerning the assembly of the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11, in conjunction with their partaking of the Supper when they came together, must also be taken into consideration with Acts 20:7. From these two contexts, and the records of the second century church writings, we form our belief that the Supper was a regular event of the early Christians on every Sunday. However, this is all deductive conclusions we make from the information we have. There are no commands.

Another illustration of examples being commentaries on how commands are carried out would be Hebrews 11. Jesus said, “*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*” (Rv 2:10). Clear examples of what Jesus meant by “be faithful” are illustrated by those who walked by faith in the Old Testament. Hebrews 11 emphasizes these men of

faith (See Hb 6:12,13). The life of Paul is another example of faithfulness (See 2 Co 11:22-33; 2 Tm 4:7,8). Paul and others also gave examples of laboring (See At 20:35; 2 Th 3:7-9). Therefore, examples are meant to clarify the application of God’s commands. They show us how to apply commands to our everyday living.

Keep in mind that examples concerning men’s disobedience in the Bible were also recorded to warn us what not to do. God expects us to learn from the disobedience of others. On the positive side, however, correct responses to God’s commands in the New Testament give us examples of how to obey a direct command of God. We read and study such examples in order to be encouraged and edified. And we study such in order to determine how to apply God’s will to our lives. We should be cautious, therefore, not to use as an occasion for division a positive example of how the early Christians responded to the gospel.

## Chapter 16

### THE PLACE OF EXAMPLES

Most of the difficulty concerning the subject of examples is centered around the nature of the example. It is for this reason we must understand the relationship of Bible examples to the direct commands of God. Though previously introduced, it is imperative to reemphasize this matter. Since this is the area where most Bible students misunderstand the

inspired record of the recorded behavior of the first century Christians, it is important to establish a consistent manner by which we approach the examples of the New Testament. Because we have often failed to understand the inspired record of examples, we have left ourselves open to some contentions over applications of examples.

## A. Some examples find authority in commands.

**Examples do not have inherent authority.** In other words, it would be difficult to say that an example is binding if there is no command that stands behind it. The recorded example that a particular individual did something in the first century does not necessarily make the example a law. Therefore, **examples are never given the same authority in the Bible as direct commands.** An example receives its authority from the command that may stand behind it. Because of this, the example can never carry the same authority as the command. The authority of any example we would bind on men must have a background command. It is thus the command that is obeyed, not the example as we see it recorded in the Bible.



Now consider the relationship of an example with the **generic** and **specific** aspects of a command or declarative statement. With reference to the specific details of a command, **the example of obedience illustrates a specific way that the command or declarative statement can be carried out.** With reference to the generic aspects of a command, the example illustrates **only one way** the command is fulfilled.

James said, “*Pure and undefiled religion ... is this: to take of ... widows*” (Js

1:27). The specific aspect of this declarative statement is to take care of widows. If one would have “pure religion,” he or she must take care of widows. However, this statement is generic in the sense that no system of caring is defined within the statement itself. It is specific in the sense that widows are to be taken care of if one would have pure religion. Acts 6 is only **one example** of how widows were cared for by the early church. However, the continued revelation of Paul gave specific instructions as to who was to be classified as an eligible widow for the care of the church (1 Tm 5:3-16). In taking care of widows, therefore, there is much that lies within the area of choice as to how the command is to be carried out.

A command often has general elements as to how the specifics are to be carried out. The recorded examples in the New Testament are often illustrations of how those commands were carried out by the early Christians. We would not, therefore, bind the example in Acts 6 of “appointing seven men” concerning the administration to widows. This was a “command” of the apostles to the church in that historical context. What is important is that the specific command to care for widows was being obeyed. The incidentals surrounding the enactment of the command are not binding examples.

With the generics of a command, the New Testament example is usually only one option of how the command is fulfilled. Jesus commanded, “*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature ...*” (Mk 16:15). The command to go into all the world is specific. How-

ever, the manner or means by which one is to go is generic. If one goes by walking, then his example is only one illustration of how the command can be fulfilled. Going by ship, as Paul, is another example. However, neither the going by walking or by ship is binding, though they are New Testament examples of how they went into all the world. Though Paul walked and went by ship, this does not exclude Christians today from going by airplanes and trains. The example, therefore, is not as a direct command that would exclude going by any other means.

The apostles' obedience to Jesus' command of Mark 16:15 to go into all the world was first carried out in a manner that manifested an opinion of work on their part. The church had been in existence at least ten years by the time of the events of Acts 15. However, in Acts 15, all the apostles, except James who was earlier killed by Herod, were still in Jerusalem. Must we assume that the apostles were slow to obey the command of Mark 16:15? Certainly not. The example of how they carried out the command was different from that of Paul. Paul personally went into all nations. However, the apostles had experienced a great conversion of Jews in A.D. 30 as recorded in Acts 2.

The Jewish feasts of Passover and Pentecost occurred every year in Jerusalem when Jews came from all over the world to which they had been scattered throughout their history. The apostles simply stayed in Jerusalem wherein a "Pentecost conversion" happened every

year during the Passover/Pentecost feasts. The converted Jews were taught, and then, returned to all the world from which they had come. The apostles thus went into all the world indirectly through those they had converted, and thus, imparted miraculous gifts for their return to all the world. The apostles' stay in Jerusalem for several years after the establishment of the church was how they carried out the command to go into all the world. How they obeyed the command of Mark 16:15, therefore, is not a binding example. It is only an apostolic example that manifests how the apostles first obeyed the command of Jesus to preach the gospel to the world.

It is unfortunate that many divisions are caused in churches over the point of binding as law that which the Holy Spirit only recorded as an example of how others carried out the commands of Jesus. We must understand that the specifics of the commands are what is important. And it is upon the specifics of the commands, not the example, that the foundation for unity must be built. To do this, we must understand that examples allow liberty by manifesting the liberty by which the New Testament Christians obeyed God. They can be permissive in that they allow freedom of choice. The example gives us permission as to how a command can be obeyed. As the apostles gave an example of how they went into all the world, we must not assume that we should bind their examples as law, knowing that how they obeyed the great commission to go into all the world was only one way it could be accomplished.

## B. Examples allow liberty of choice.

Most of the misunderstanding surrounding examples is centered around this point. In order to determine whether an example is binding, we can use the illustration of what Jesus did during His ministry. We must imitate Jesus or follow in His steps (See Jn 13:15; 1 Pt 2:21). But this does not mean that we do every example of Jesus. As we study through the following list of things that Jesus did during His ministry, we must ask ourselves which example is either binding or not binding for our obedience today:

1. Jesus fasted (Mt 4:2).
2. Jesus taught in synagogues (Mt 9:35).
3. Jesus taught while sitting down (Mt 5:1; 13:2).
4. Jesus taught by parables (Mt 13).
5. Jesus prayed on mountains (Mt 14:23).
6. Jesus taught in the temple of Jerusalem (Mt 26:55).
7. Jesus taught in houses (Mt 8:14; 9:10,23,28; Lk 20:36).
8. Jesus kept the Passover/Pentecost feasts (Jn 2:13).

Must Christians **obey** all of these examples? **If not, then one must establish a consistent method of determining which Bible examples he or she should obey, if they should be obeyed.** That method of applying examples must manifest why one should not obey certain examples. It is necessary, therefore, to determine the purpose of examples. It is necessary that one determine an inter-

pretive principle by which he will either bind or loose examples. Our understanding of the purpose of examples must allow Christians freedom to respond to the principles of God's commands.

Another good illustration that manifests the difficulty that we sometimes have in determining what is binding in reference to examples is the command that Jesus gave concerning the observance of the Lord's Supper. Jesus made the specific command to observe the Supper. However, there are several historical **incidental** events surrounding His partaking of it with His disciples as stated in Luke 22:7-23. We would consider these incidentals as examples of what He did in partaking of the Supper with His disciples.

1. They partook of it in a city.
2. They partook of it in a guest room.
3. They partook of it in an upper room.
4. They partook of it in a reclining position.
5. Only men partook of it.
6. They partook of it using only one cup.
7. They partook of it on the Jewish Passover feast.
8. They partook of the bread before the fruit of the vine, and then, the cup before the bread (Lk 22:17-19).

As Bible students, we do not have the right to determine from the above only that which we so choose to be binding upon Christians because of past tradition. We do not have the right to randomly choose and bind those practices that simply please us. The point that is emphasized from the above list is that the Bible

interpreter must be **consistent** in his approach in the application of Bible examples in his or her studies and application of the word of God. If one is not consistent, then he will find himself not only being contradictory, but also divisive among brethren. If one is dogmatic, division will occur over nonessential matters of opinion.

An example, therefore, in and of itself is not binding. A command must stand behind the example in order to give it authoritative power. An example can be **permissive** in the sense that it allows options. In 1 Corinthians 9:5 Paul used the example of the apostles who were married as authority for him to marry. He used their **example of marriage** as authority for giving him the **permission to marry**. However, he did not choose to follow the example by exercising the right to marry. He remained unmarried. This is a case where an example was used as permission, and yet, the choice was still allowed for one to exercise his right to do that which was permitted. The lesson from this illustration is to show that examples can illustrate what is permitted. However, one is still allowed the choice of doing that which is permitted. If one does not follow the example, he does not sin.

The primary concern here is to determine if we today are to be subject to the examples of the first century church in the same manner as they are to be subject to the direct commands of God. We must emphasize that it is a good practice to follow what the early Christians did in their obedience to God's law of lib-

erty. However, we must affirm that their response to the will of God was not always perfect. It was certainly not infallible. The disciples in Troas met in an upper room where there were many lights (Acts 20:8). Other Christians prayed at the ninth hour, had daily assemblies, sold all their possessions and goods, knelt while praying, fasted and laid hands on evangelists. These examples in response to the law of liberty show approval for things that can be done. Nevertheless, these examples do not carry the weight of being bound on us today as divine law.

One should also consider the negative side of the examples of some New Testament Christians. The Corinthians had many problems. Among these problems, they were involved in lawsuits between brethren (1 Co 6), immorality (1 Co 5) and denominationalism (1 Co 1). This is why **there is no New Testament command that churches should today follow all the examples of New Testament churches as if their examples were binding as law.**

### C. Examples establish Divine truth.

There are times when an example teaches a divine truth. A good illustration of this is the laying on of the Christ-apostles' hands in order to impart the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit to others. There is no specific command stated in the New Testament that the gifts would be imparted by such an action on the part of the apostles. However, this is what took place.

Acts 8:18 reads, "*Simon saw that*

***through the laying on of the apostles' hands the Holy Spirit was given ....***"

Paul wrote to Timothy, "... *stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands*" (2 Tm 1:6; see Rm 1:11). In the absence of a specific command for this action of the apostles in order to impart the gifts, we discover divine truth by noticing the examples of how the apostles accomplished this work.

It is established by example that it was only by the laying on of the apostles' hands that the Holy Spirit was given. Here is an example which is also exclusive. In other words, this example teaches against any who would claim to impart the miraculous gifts today by the laying on of hands. From the New Testament examples, we infer that only the apostles had this power. In other words, only the apostles are seen as having this authority in the New Testament. Because there are no Christ-apostles today, therefore, we correctly believe that the impartation of miraculous gifts does not exist today.

A New Testament example, therefore, can reveal truth. Teachings must not be constructed that contradict truth that is established by the inspired writers. Men must always strive to follow the New Testament today. They must do such while realizing that the study and application of examples are many times still open for discussion.

Though truths are often established by examples, their application as far as obedience to the truth is concerned must be demanded only insofar as there is a

command that stands behind the example. Truths are to be believed. Our values and lives are motivated by the truths we believe. However, when it comes to obedience demanded by God, Christians must submit in behavior to that which is directly commanded by God. In other words, biblical commandments that demand our obedience for salvation must be derived from direct statements and commands of the Bible. Individual actions and historical events in the Bible do not demand this type of authority in relation to the salvation of the individual. We must affirm that direct commands concerning unity have greater weight in Christian fellowship than the examples of the early Christians who sought in their own lives to obey the will of God. We must always exalt direct commands above examples. In doing this, we will establish a greater foundation for unity.

In Philippians 4:9 Paul said, "*The things which you learned and received and heard and saw in me, these do, ....*" However, this statement must be understood in the light of 1 Corinthians 11:1. "*Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.*" Paul certainly would not have us follow all of his examples. He circumcised a fellow preacher (At 16:3). He remained unmarried (1 Co 9:5). He kept a vow in the temple (At 21:26ff). Therefore, his command to imitate his examples cannot mean that we should do everything he did as if we were obeying a direct command of God.

Peter's inspiration by the Holy Spirit in writing Scripture did not guarantee infallibility in his living. Such is illustrated

by his state of condemnation in Antioch when he submitted to the intimidation of legalistic brothers who came up from Jerusalem (Gl 2:11-14). Some of Paul's actions were guided by the Holy Spirit (At 16:6,7). However, he did not always heed the Spirit's warnings concerning events in his life (At 21:4,13-15). In other contexts, Paul commands that the example of Timothy be followed (2 Th 3:7,9; 1 Tm 4:12). Peter likewise commanded that the example of elders be followed (1 Pt 5:3). Again, the following of examples must be understood in the light of 1 Corinthians 11:1.

We are to follow examples only insofar as the one giving the example **follows Jesus**. We are authorized to follow

the example of a New Testament character only as we judge that that person is following Jesus. The New Testament Christians were not perfect. We do not follow their imperfections. We look to those examples of their obedience where we see the gospel being followed in their lives. If we followed their bad examples, we would be led astray as some of them were being led astray. Therefore, when it comes to binding examples, we must be careful what examples we would follow, lest we bind where God never intended that we bind. We must keep in mind that examples are examples of how the early Christians responded to the gospel.

## Chapter 17

### NECESSARY INFERENCES

What is meant by "inference" are those deductions that we conclude from information or facts that are actually given in the text. God intended that men use their reasoning power in searching the Scriptures (See Rm 12:2) as Paul reasoned with the Jews (At 17:2; see 24:25). Truth is understood in the Scriptures by a diligent application of one's mental processes in study of the word of God (2 Tm 2:15). We would assume that the more one studies, the better he or she will understand the Bible. The more one studies the more truth one will learn. This is true because the more one studies, the more he or she can infer from the text the background of activity that was going on when a particular letter or book of the Bible was written.

The very foundation upon which "necessary inferences" are derived, therefore, makes them subject to the intellectual abilities of the student. Such should make us cautious concerning the application of necessary inferences in determining that which would be considered a test of fellowship among brethren.

However, there is a danger here. One's intellectual abilities should not be made the judge and lawgiver of truth among disciples. We must remember that what one learns from the Scriptures through a process of logic and deduction must not be used to determine fellowship. This is true because the deductions of different individuals can be different. Nevertheless, God expects us to use our

intellect to discover truth. People reason every day of their lives. Therefore, God expects us to be challenged with our reasoning abilities in order to discover the richness of His revelation.

**It is a general rule of literary justice not to make an author say something that the author has not expressly stated in clear phrases.** We may not infer an author is saying something by his use of words or phrases that have various shades of meaning that may have been entirely foreign to the author's understanding or intentions when he first used them. We must first judge a document from what it clearly states in the context of the historical environment in which it was originally written. We must interpret any document from the viewpoint of the author who wrote it. It is unfair, if not dishonest, to interpret a document from the perspective of our personal agenda or bias. It is not honest scholarship to make an author say something he never intended to say.

We must recognize that God has revealed fundamental and necessary truth to man through clear statements in His word. God also knew that men have a tendency to "read between the lines," or to look beyond what is clearly stated in order to discover facts that were in the background when a document was written. Therefore, God not only inspired clear statements in the Scriptures, He also revealed the teaching of such statements in a way that would challenge our reasoning ability to discover truth. This is why the Bible has an appeal as a study book both to the novice Bible student, as

well as to the aged scribe. However, when one studies those things that are inferred from what is actually stated, he must be cautioned that his reasoning is subject to his own fallibility.

A problem often arises when men read too much between the lines. We are often guilty of reading our own preconceived ideas into the text. Too often, we go one step further. **We often make what we have read between the lines a test of fellowship.** Though the Bible was written to challenge our thinking, we must allow it to speak for itself. We must never make it say something that it does not clearly state. We must not bind on others those concepts we deduct through human reasoning simply because human reasoning is fallible.

We must be careful not to construct a systematic theology that can be deciphered only by those in computer sanctuaries. Those things that are necessary for salvation can easily be understood by novice students of the Bible. Fundamental truths that are necessary for belief and salvation are often first determined by the novice Bible student sitting in his hut in India and not by the rabbi in a postgraduate institution.

God meant for us to understand His word in a way that men normally understand all literature. The deduction of necessary inference in the study of literature is a common practice in all fields of interpretation. Everyone infers something from things that are stated. We approach the Bible in a way to infer from the text those things that are necessarily deducted from given facts and statements.

## A. Definition of terms:

Though the term “necessary inference” is not a biblical term or even a biblically taught hermeneutic, it is assumed that one studies all literature by inferring thoughts from what is stated. It is superfluous to discount the necessity of learning truth through necessary inferences simply because the Bible does not mention such as a system of study. God simply communicated His word to us in a way that would challenge us to learn by inference. The Bible was not written as a grammar book on language, nor as a guide to systematic hermeneutics. It was written in the common manner by which men communicate to one another. In the original autographs, it was written with precision in grammar, but we do not study it as a grammar book or a textbook by which to develop a system of literary interpretation.

**1. Inferences:** One discovers truth by inference when he or she logically **deducts conclusions** from the facts and circumstances that are given in the text. An inference is not a mere guess or hunch. It is a logical mental process to discover facts or truth of circumstances that are implied by the statement of particulars in any given text.

**2. Necessary:** **A necessary inference is an undeniable conclusion that must be made from the facts and circumstances that are given in the text.** This is not simply a mere inference that would be one’s deductive opinion of what the facts and circumstances imply. A nec-

essary inference is clearly and indisputably implied from the stated facts of the text. In other words, when objectively studied, the necessary inference is the only logical deduction that one can make from the facts or circumstances that are stated.

It is clear that inferences demand deductions and deductions call for the ability of an individual to exercise logic. Therefore, this system of study is inherently dependent on the ability of any particular individual to logically deduct truth from clearly given facts. Because of this, **we would caution ourselves not to make a truth that is solely derived from necessary inference a test of fellowship among those who have obeyed the gospel.** This is necessary else we digress to fellowshiping only those “learned” brethren who have the education to deduct truths upon which fellowship is based. Or beyond this, our fellowship becomes dependent upon a selected few “scholars” who have deduced certain “doctrines” that have been dogmatized as “church doctrine.”

## B. Examples of inferences:

Because of the differences in individual intellect, maturity and motives, different people will infer different conclusions. Different people may derive different inferences from the same passage. In other words, an inference may not be a **necessary** inference. Depending on the background of the students, their deductions will often vary. Nevertheless, God expects us to use our rea-

soning in order to study His word. He expects us to come to the same conclusion of truth concerning those things that are **necessarily** inferred from the text. This may not always be possible, but we would assume that honest and sincere students of God's word would come to the same conclusions almost every time. Here are some examples of both correct and incorrect inferences.

### 1. *Correct necessary inferences:*

When studying the Bible, students must be cautious about making inferences. The following cases are illustrations of necessary inferences:

#### a. **Jesus healed a blind man.**

In John 9 Jesus brought sight to a man who had been blind from birth. When the blind man was asked concerning who Jesus was, He replied, "*He is a prophet*" (Jn 9:17). The man correctly and necessarily inferred that Jesus was a prophet from God because of what **Jesus was able to do**. He said, "*Since the world began it has been unheard of that anyone opened the eyes of one who was born blind. If this Man were not from God, He could do nothing*" (Jn 9:32,33). Nicodemus made this same necessary inference when he approached Jesus with the statement, "*Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him*" (Jn 3:2; see also Jn 4:17-19,39-42).

**b. Jesus infers the resurrection.** The Sadducees denied the bodily resurrection. They came to Jesus with

inquiries to test His teaching on this matter. Jesus taught that there will be a resurrection, because when one physically dies he does not cease to exist. He said, "*I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*' *God is not the God of the dead, but of the living*" (See Mt 22:29-32; Mk 12:24-27). Jesus expected them to **infer** from this statement the fact that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had not ceased to exist. Nevertheless, their traditional doctrinal belief would not allow them to see the truth that He was trying to convey. Jesus said to them, "*You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God*" (Mt 22:29). In other words, Jesus expected them to know Him through their deductions, both from the Scriptures and from His ability to work miracles. Because of their prejudice against Him, however, they rejected Him as the Messiah of Israel. They failed to make the necessary deduction that He was sent from God.

**2. *Incorrect inferences:*** There are also inferences that are not correct. In the preceding example, the Sadducees did not correctly infer what Jesus wanted them to understand from the statement that God is the God of the living. A case in the life of Paul also illustrates that sometimes men will not make the correct inferences because of ignorance of the facts or wrong motives.

When Paul finished his discourse to King Agrippa, Festus, who was standing by Agrippa, said, "*Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad*" (At 26:24). It may be true that much learning could drive one mad, as

Festus believed. However, because Paul discussed a resurrection of the dead which Festus surely judged as simply philosophical talk, he accused Paul of becoming mad. Nevertheless, because of his wrong motives or ignorance, Festus' inference was wrong.

As Festus, some have unjustly made wrong inferences from the Scriptures **because of past doctrinal positions**. For example, some have inferred that there were infants in the **household baptisms** of Acts (See At 16:14,15,33). However, this is not a correct inference and certainly not a necessary inference. In fact, from studies of other scriptures we learn that prerequisites to baptism are faith and repentance (Mk 16:16; At 2:38). Therefore, the inference that there were infants in the household baptisms of the book of Acts stands against the teaching of other scriptures, and thus, is a wrong inference.

Any inference that makes the Bible contradict itself must be considered a wrong inference. A correct inference, therefore, must be based on clearly understood truths that are clearly stated in other scriptures. **Any inferred teaching that is based solely on the text from which the inference was taken should never be used to establish a doctrine upon which fellowship is either made or broken**. One has a right to formulate his or her speculations concerning what a particular statement in Scripture may infer. However, one does not have the right to bind this inference on others.

**Any inference that is not supported by clear statements in other biblical texts must not become a doctrine upon**

**which fellowship rests**. The necessity of this belief is obvious. Different people have different reasoning capabilities. More significant than this is the fact that everyone has a different level of Bible knowledge. One's amount of Bible study often determines his ability to infer knowledge from any particular biblical text. The novice Christian in the Brazilian jungle tribe may have recently obeyed the gospel. He can have fellowship with his fellow obedient tribesmen who have also obeyed the gospel. Such fellowship is based on their simple understanding of fundamental truths and obedience to the gospel. All of them can go to heaven upon their knowledge of and obedience to the simple gospel. If this is true, then inferences that are determined by years of Bible study and great reasoning ability must not be made tests of fellowship between brethren. Neither should they be made conditions of salvation. We must affirm this lest we make the interpretations of Bible scholars the "authoritative" catechism of the church. If we make authoritative the inferences of the scholars among us, then we make each man's salvation dependent upon the interpretations of someone else.

The negative side of making someone else's interpretations the authority in matters of doctrine is the destruction of individual Bible study. When members of the church give their responsibility for studying the word of God over to the scholars of the church, then we have given ourselves over to the first steps toward apostasy. God never inspired the Bible to be written as a direction for His

people that only the scholars could understand and interpret. If He had, then we would make icons out of our scholars, and thus pit one scholar against another in our efforts to discover what God would have us do.

### C. Limitations of inferences:

We must be cautioned by the mistake that the Jewish religious leaders made concerning their inferred interpretations of Scripture. Jesus said of them, *“For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders ...”* (Mt 23:4). Jesus attacked some of these inferred interpretations in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. For example, He said, *“You have **heard that it was said**, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy’”* (Mt 5:43). However, the Sinai law never made the statement to hate one’s enemies. This was a distorted Jewish inference from what God had actually said (Compare Lv 19:18 with Dt 23:3-6). Because God had commanded them to love their neighbors, they wrongly inferred that they could hate their enemies.

Jesus said to these Jewish leaders, *“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me”* (Jn 5:39). They could not find Jesus in the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah because they did not want to. They had preconceived ideas of what the Messiah should be. Their preconceived ideas biased their understanding of the prophecies, and thus, they could not accept Jesus

as the fulfillment of Messianic prophecies.

Our past doctrinal beliefs can hinder us from finding truth through inference, even though an inference may be necessary. If we are dogmatic and unobjective in approaching the Bible, we will not be able to find truth through necessary inferences. If we do infer thoughts from a particular text, and at the same time, harbor prejudices, our inferences will often be distorted by our preconceived ideas.

We must also remember that **intellectual inabilities and inexperience will hinder our search for truth through reason**. For this reason, we must be cautioned not to place the authority of necessary inferences above the clear and direct statements of Scripture. Direct statements and commands must always be the **primary** foundation for our beliefs and obedience. Examples and necessary inferences “fine tune” our knowledge of and obedience to God. However, the principles of “fine tuning” must be submissive to direct statements. Therefore, this infers that our deductions from inferences must not be used to divide the believers. We must seek for unity based upon fundamental teachings that are determined from clear statements.

**Inferences must have the backing of clear statements or direct commands in other texts before they can be considered fundamental.** Our knowledge of the clearly stated truths in the Bible actually open the door to seeing the inferences of any particular text. This is especially true concerning prophecy. A prophecy is usually never clearly understood in its full-

est until its fulfillment. We understand the Old Testament prophecies because we have a clear record of their fulfillment in the New Testament. This principle would also be applicable concerning end-of-time prophecies in the New Testament. We would caution ourselves about dividing the disciples over New Testament prophecies concerning the end of time since we have no clearly recorded definitions of those prophecies in the Bible. Only when one's interpretation of New Testament prophecy **contradicts clearly stated biblical truths** do we question the interpretation. Therefore, we must always base our interpretation of prophecy on clear statements in other Bible texts that are outside the immediate context of the inference.

Fundamental doctrine that is necessary for belief and obedience must first be substantiated by declarative or imperative statements. When fundamental teaching is firmly established in our

minds by such statements, then correct necessary inferences will result. However, if we seek to establish fundamental teaching first by necessary inference, we will have no foundation for the doctrine except the intellectual ability of "scholars" to determine for the church that which establishes fellowship. For this reason, it is necessary that we do not reverse the process of first finding clear statements of doctrine, and then, going to other texts for inferences.

The fundamental teachings from clearly stated texts must always be the guide to inferences. When deductions leave the foundation of clearly stated fundamentals, then we must caution ourselves because we will be venturing into the area where understanding of the Bible is based on human reasoning. Though our reasoning and inferences may be correct, we still must be cautious about binding our deductions that have been derived solely from our own reasoning.

## Chapter 18

# GOSPEL MOTIVATED LIVING

For those who have obeyed the gospel, living in harmony as the universal body of Christ is natural. The gospel motivates each member of the body to live in harmony with all other members. And because it is the nature of the gospel to bring people together into fellowship with God, each member of the body seeks to function in unity with the body of Christ worldwide. This was the message John conveyed in the following

statement:

*That which we have seen and heard we declare to you so that you also may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:3).*

As a part of the universal fellowship of God, it is the responsibility of each member to continually work to keep the

body unified. The gospel is our motivation to enact in our lives the following mandate from the Holy Spirit: “... *with all humility and gentleness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*” (Ep 4:2,3).

In our study of the Bible, we must first understand the basic fundamental teachings of the gospel that promote unity. We must also investigate the practical nature of the gospel that produces unity. It is impossible to understand the text of the Bible unless one first establishes in his mind the fundamental truths of gospel. Understanding fundamental truths guides one to interpret biblical texts in a manner that will not make the Bible contradict itself. When we interpret all texts in the light of fundamental truths, then the Bible comes alive. It is easy to understand.

A vital principle that must direct our lives are God’s **direct commands concerning love and unity among believers**. Believers are one as a result of the blessing of God. Therefore, we must remind ourselves as we that those who profess to be of Christ must first seek to answer the following prayer request of Jesus:

*I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me* (Jn 17:20,21).

Unity of believers is a fundamental teaching of the Bible. Unity does not assume compromise with false teaching. Neither does this fundamental teaching assume that Christians compromise with immoral behavior. However, it does assume that we must approach the text of Scriptures with an attitude of love and unity in order to seek oneness with all those who have obeyed the gospel.

In view of the above prayer request of Jesus, we can better understand why Paul told the Corinthians,

*Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment* (1 Co 1:10).

Paul exhorted the Philippians, “... *stand fast in one spirit with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel*” (Ph 1:27). Paul continued, “... *fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind*” (Ph 2:2). John reminds us, “*And this is His commandment: that we should ... love one another, as He gave us commandment*” (1 Jn 3:23).

It is obvious from the above scriptures that God intends that His people be united upon the foundation of mutual love. Since the New Testament clearly establishes unity as a fundamental teaching, then it is imperative that throughout one’s efforts to interpret and apply the

principles of the Scriptures, he must strive for unity among those who have obeyed the gospel.

But we must also remember that God intends that we interpret the Bible in a way that promotes unity. Much disunity is caused by those who do not know how to interpret the Bible in this manner. We must correctly assume that the Bible was not given to man in a manner that would cause division among believers. Therefore, we must seek to understand the Bible in a way that promotes unity among all those who have obeyed the gospel.

The following scriptures emphasize the “one another” nature of Christianity. Reading them together reminds us of the general nature of what God expects of us in our relationship to our brothers or sisters in Christ. In interpreting the Bible, we must always keep in mind the fundamental teaching of gospel unity. This does not mean that truth is to be sacrificed for the sake of unity. It does mean, however, that opinions must be sacrificed for the sake of unity. The spirit of the interpreter plays a great part in how he or she applies that truth that is learned. We must always apply truth in a manner that does not violate fundamental truth. One may have the right truth, but the manner by which he or she teaches or maintains it may be wrong if the fundamental truth of unity is violated.

#### TEACHINGS ON ONENESS IN CHRIST

**Romans 12:4-16; 14:13; 15:7**  
**1 Thessalonians 3:12; 4:9**  
**1 Corinthians 7:5; 10:16,17; 12:12-32**  
**Hebrews 3:13; 10:24,25**

**Galatians 3:28; 5:13; 6:2**  
**James 4:11; 5:9,16**  
**Ephesians 4:2,32; 5:21**  
**1 Peter 1:22; 5:9**  
**Philippians 1:27; 2:1-4**  
**Colossians 3:9-16**  
**1 John 3:11,23; 4:7-12**

#### **Christians must be united upon the fundamental teachings of the Bible.**

Determining what is fundamental teaching is generally an easy task. Those who turn to the Bible to seek fundamental teachings upon which to build Christian brotherhood must be moved by love of the truth. Only by this motivation can one’s search be realized. In being motivated by love, **we must not make anything a test of fellowship that God does not make a condition for salvation.** That which is a condition for salvation would be a fundamental teaching.

**It must be understood that fundamental teachings would be those teachings that influence one’s salvation.** It may be a teaching that **deals directly with God’s plan of salvation for man.** This would be a fundamental teaching because one’s eternal destiny would depend upon believing and practicing such a teaching. Or, the teaching may be related to **one’s motivation in response to God’s will.** In other words, our belief concerning the final judgment would be considered fundamental because of our realization of having to answer for our sins in such a judgment is a strong motivating factor in obedience to God’s commands.

Fundamental doctrine would include those things that have reference to holy

living. Immoral people will lose their souls (Rv 21:8). Therefore, holy practices that are specifically stated either by declarative statement or direct command must be considered fundamental to holiness, and ultimately, our salvation.

One must also recognize that some brethren sometimes find it difficult to establish what we would call fundamental teaching. That is, one brother may consider something to be fundamental that another brother does not. Here is where an attitude of love and forbearance must play a part in our Christianity. Paul said, “*Let your forbearance be known unto all men*” (Ph 4:5, ASV). We must keep in mind that it is not difficult to determine what is fundamental. God did not conceal in figurative language that which is important to believe and obey. With this in mind we want to set forth the following two points in order to help determine how to identify fundamental teaching:

### A. Discovering what is fundamental:

It is easy to determine a direct command that is an imperative statement. It is also easy to understand truth that is revealed through declarative statements. However, it may be more difficult to determine the generic application of those commands. It may also be challenging to determine the exact interpretation of some specific commands. The following diagram will illustrate what factors influence our interpretation or understanding of God’s commands. When interpreting the Bible one must always rec-

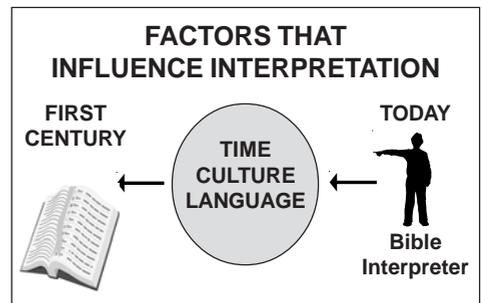
ognize these factors that influence our correct understanding of the Scriptures.

(chart)

As Bible interpreters we are faced with at least three factors that influence our understanding of Bible commands. Every student of the Bible must deal with these factors when studying the Bible.

**1. The time factor:** We must remember that we are removed over two thousand years from the time when the New Testament was written. We are even further removed from the writing of the Old Testament. Because we did not live in the particular time period in which the Scriptures were written, we may be unaware of numerous **historical events** that surrounded the reasons for the writing of particular biblical documents.

For example, we are almost two thousand years removed from the writing of the book of Revelation. The primary reason for the writing of this book was to comfort Christians who were undergoing, or about to undergo severe persecution. Some interpreters believe the great persecution about which John wrote re-



ferred to Judaism, whereas others believe that the persecutor of the church in Revelation was the Roman Empire. Therefore, **we as the interpreters are challenged to place ourselves in the audience to whom any particular portion of Scripture was first written in order to determine a correct understanding of the text.**

**2. The culture factor:** Each of the books and letters of the Bible was written to people who were usually of different cultures. They were certainly of a different culture than ours today. Therefore, the Bible interpreter is faced with the challenge of understanding scriptures while trying to determine the cultural background of the original recipients of the Scriptures. We are challenged today to extract the cultural aspects of the Scriptures from those principles that God actually means for us to apply to our lives in this century. The cultural traits that are used in the text are not binding. It is the truth that is illustrated by a cultural trait that is important to understand.

However, one of the serious mistakes some biblical students make is relegating some principles of Christian conduct and activity to the culture of the New Testament times. They misunderstand the principle of interpreting passages in their historical context. In other words, because the New Testament documents were written to audiences many years ago, it is believed that many principles that actually have “all-time application” should be relegated to Bible times only. This unfortunate understanding has led some to neglect some of the New

Testament’s principles that are for people of all history.

As modern sociological philosophies become prominent in society, the greater the influences such philosophies have on Christianity today. This is true of any sociological influence outside the church upon the church. We must always make the Bible the final authority for determining what is moral or socially acceptable.

We must be careful not to go from studying the Bible in its cultural setting to making the Bible a cultural book directed only to the people of the time it was written. It is important to understand the culture of the people to whom the Scriptures were first written. However, if we relegate truths concerning behavior to the first century by saying that these truths had reference only to the people to whom they were first written, then we are in danger of neglecting divinely ordained principles of conduct that should direct our lives today.

**3. The language factor:** The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament was written in Greek. Our present Bible is a translation from these two languages. The fact that we may not understand either Hebrew or Greek leaves us at a disadvantage. We must trust the translators of the particular version we use.

Sometimes in understanding various portions of Scripture, it is of great benefit to be able to study the text of the Bible in the original language. However, a knowledge of either Hebrew or Greek is not needed in order to understand any fundamental teaching concerning one’s

salvation. All translations clearly translate those teachings that one must know and obey in order to be saved. Knowledge of the original language in which the Scriptures were first written enhances one's understanding of the Scriptures. However, as will be discussed later, we live in a time when one can acquire several different versions of the original text. Through a comparative study of different translations, we have a tremendous advantage in understanding the original text.

**4. Opportunities for unity:** As we study the Bible, we are challenged with time, culture and language that have a tendency to hinder our desired understanding of the Scriptures. These factors often cause brethren to arrive at different interpretations of particular scriptures. Unfortunately, these different interpretations are often used as grounds for unnecessary division. The following illustrate some of the difficulties that are involved in interpreting various commands:

**a. Romans 16:16:** Paul stated, *“Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you”* (See 1 Co 16:20; 2 Co 13:12; 1 Th 5:26; 1 Pt 5:14). *“Greet one another with a holy kiss”* is a direct command that is made to the church. Is this command fundamental and applicable to Christians today? If we answer, yes, then we must start greeting one another with a “holy kiss.” We cannot ignore this text by saying that we “shake hands,” and this “replaces” the holy kiss.

In the culture of the early church, one greeted another by a kiss. We are not told exactly how the kiss was made. This cultural practice was brought into the greetings of the church (1 Co 16:20; 1 Th 5:26; 1 Pt 5:4). It was then called the “holy kiss.” If we say that this holy kiss is not binding today, **then we are forced to seriously examine the nature of New Testament commands and their applicability today.** In the same passage Paul makes a declarative statement. “The churches of Christ greet you.” **The command in reference to the holy kiss is an imperative command, whereas the greeting of the churches is declarative.** What has often occurred is the fact that some make the declarative statement of the passage an imperative and the imperative an optional declarative. Such inconsistency on the part of some biblical interpreters should alert us to the fact that we must develop some principles of hermeneutics that will spare us of our contradictions in applying other similar statements that are made in the Bible.

We cannot simply resort to our “church traditions,” or by saying, “Well, that’s not the way we have or have not done it.” Understanding the biblical commands in their historical and cultural context is very important. As Bible students, we must determine a biblical study principle by which we can separate cultural religious practices of the Old and New Testament times from our times today. We must develop a **consistent** method of interpretation and application of biblical truths.

**b. 2 Corinthians 6:14:** This

scripture is also an imperative command. *“Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers.”* What exactly does Paul mean by this statement? Does he mean that Christians should not be in business with unbelievers? Does he mean that Christians should not associate with unbelievers in pagan temples? Does he mean that Christians should not marry unbelievers? Since we are separated by time, culture and language from the original context of the command, there is some difficulty in understanding exactly what interpretation we should make of this imperative command. The specifics of the command are not clear, at least they are not clear in how we should apply them to our lives. Therefore, in the absence of certain textual clarifications, this would be one of those commands over which division should not be caused.

**c. Ephesians 5:18:** Paul states, *“... be filled with the Spirit.”* Here is another imperative command. However, the interpreter is again left without some details. Exactly what does “filled with the Spirit” mean? Is Paul commanding that the Ephesian Christians be filled with the Spirit-inspired word of God? Is he commanding that the Ephesians be filled with the miraculous gifts of the Spirit in the sense that they should stir up their miraculous gifts? Is he commanding that the Ephesians lead a life guided by the Spirit? Again, because of our removal from the context of this command as it referred to the Ephesian disciples, we are left to differences of opinion concerning how to obey what Paul is commanding.

The above points briefly illustrate a dilemma the Bible interpreter sometimes encounters. In 2 Peter 3:14-16 Peter expressed that even he as a Christ-sent apostle had some difficulty in understanding the words of Paul. However, there is a very important practical lesson here. Those who were **unstable** and **untaught** twist those things that they **do not understand**. Therefore, when it comes to a passage we do not clearly understand, it would be wise that we not place an interpretation on the passage that becomes a law, lest our divisive attitude and practice be our own downfall. In the area of passages that are difficult to understand, the true motives of the Bible interpreter are often discovered.

**The Bible does allow freedom of interpretation of some direct commands.** Because of our ignorance of some historical circumstances that surround some commands, we are left to individual interpretations and applications of the commands. Those missing details can hinder a complete understanding of what the inspired writer wanted to convey. It would certainly be judgmental, therefore, to bind our opinion of interpretation as law, and thus, twist the Scriptures to our own destruction. And we would certainly assume that any fundamental doctrine that refers to our salvation **would not** be revealed in a manner that would allow questionable interpretation. Though God is patient with our interpretation of some commands, **He has not clouded the revelation of those teachings that are central to the core of Christianity.**

We must remember that oneness of

the body is a fundamental doctrine. It is a serious matter to cause division by applying interpretations that are the result of our personal deductions. We must be very cautious not to violate the fundamental principle of unity by binding on others something that is our interpretive opinion of the Scriptures. **We must have just as much fear in binding where God has not bound as we do in not binding where God has bound.**

## **B. Discovering fundamental gospel truths:**

It is not the purpose of this book to establish a list of fundamental teachings that are essential in maintaining one's identity as a disciple of Christ. However, we do want to give some suggestions as to what would constitute fundamental teachings.

**Fundamental teachings would be matters of Christian faith that pertain to our salvation.** These would be truths and commands upon which fellowship between disciples is based. These would be truths and commands upon which Christian fellowship is severed if the truths are denied or disobeyed. These are truths and commands that are established in the New Testament by direct command and clear declarative statements. These are truths and commands that are relevant and applicable to our salvation today as they were to the salvation of those to whom they were first delivered.

When we use the term "truths" we are referring to beliefs concerning that

which is true according to Scripture **and that which is true moral behavior according to Scripture.** Commands are truths and refer to that which must be believed and obeyed. Too often we have those who believe the right things, but behave the wrong way. Doctrine in moral conduct is just as important as doctrine in theology. One who believes the right things can lose his soul because of his unholy attitudes and living. Therefore, fundamental truths concerning holiness are essential teachings of the New Testament. They are things that must be believed. They are things that must be obeyed.

With the above in mind, we can at least suggest the fundamental teachings that Paul listed in Ephesians 4:4-6. All of these teachings are based on the fundamental teaching of unity. Therefore, we must thoroughly understand the fundamental principle of unity in order to understand the nature of the fundamentals that Paul teaches in Ephesians 4. These truths give us an idea of what the inspired writers considered to be fundamental to gospel belief and living.

## **FUNDAMENTAL GOSPEL TRUTHS**

1. There is **one body**, that is, one universal body of believers who have been purchased by the sacrificial blood of the incarnate Son of God on the cross (At 20:28; 1 Co 12:12-27; Ep 5:23-27; Cl 1:18).
2. There is **one Holy Spirit** who has inspired and confirmed both the spoken and written word of God through

which the universal church receives authoritative instruction and guidance for moral living (1 Co 12:4-7; 2 Tm 3:16,17).

3. There is **one hope**, that is, one eternal destiny that has been made possible by God's predetermined plan of redeeming grace for man that was revealed through the cross (Ti 1:2; Hb 6:18,19; 1 Pt 1:3-12).
4. There is **one Lord**, that is, there is one incarnate Son of God who died on the cross and was resurrected in order to reign supreme in heaven as Lord over all things and to which all men must submit (At 2:36; Ep 1:20-23; Ph 2:5-11; 1 Pt 3:22).
5. There is **one faith**, that is, there is only one gospel of belief upon which disciples base and direct their lives (Rm 10:8; Cl 2:6,7; Jd 3).
6. There is **one baptism** (immersion), that is, there is only one initial obedience to the gospel that is a manifestation of one's belief that the gospel of grace is the death, burial and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God on the cross (Acts 2:38; 1 Co 15:1-4; Rm 6:3-6).
7. There is **one God**, that is, there is only one eternal supreme Godhead who is the Creator of all things and to whom all men must give total obedience in

response to His grace of the cross (Dt 6:4; Mt 2:10).

**Other essential teachings we would add to this list must be clearly stated in the Bible by either direct command or clear declarative statement.** The above fundamentals give us a clear understanding of the central beliefs that one must hold in order to be in fellowship with God and the church of God. These points give us an idea of what Paul considered to be fundamental doctrine. Therefore, in establishing that which is fundamental to believe for salvation, we would start with what Paul has stated in the context of Ephesians 4. Those who would claim to be of Christ cannot in any way deny these gospel teachings. These are gospel truths upon which Christianity is established. If any one is denied, then the foundation upon which the church is built is denied.

The preceding gospel truths give us reason for moral conduct. They give purpose for living the holy life, for if these fundamentals are true—and they are—then there is every reason for living after the holy principles of Christianity. In other words, we conduct ourselves in holy living because of the truth of these fundamental beliefs.

## Chapter 19

# PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

Belief and obedience to the fundamental teachings of the Bible bring one closer to Jesus, and thus closer to one's

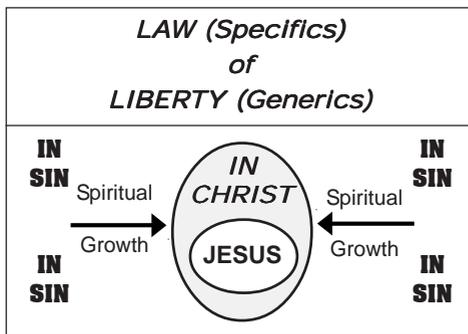
fellow brother. The goal of the Christian is to bring his life into conformity with the holiness of the life of Jesus. We must

continually be “looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Hb 12:2). We must “follow His steps” (1 Pt 2:21). We must ...

*... come to the **unity of the faith** and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a **perfect man**, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ ... speaking the truth in love, may **grow up** in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body ... **causes growth** of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Ep 4:13-16).*

Concerning the law of Christ, James wrote, “But he who looks into the perfect **law of liberty** and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a **doer of the work**, this one will be blessed in what he does” (Js 1:25). He continued, “So speak and so do as those who will be judged by the **law of liberty**” (Js 2:12). When one comes out of sin and into the law of Christ, he comes to a **law of liberty**. From the time of one’s new birth (baptism), his or her life is pointed toward Jesus because he or she has accepted the lordship of Jesus.

The term “law of liberty” seems to



be a paradox if we try to understand the law of Christ from a legal standpoint or by comparing it to the Sinai law. The word “law” refers to legal statutes to which one must conform perfectly in order to be legally just before the one who gave the law. The law refers to “specifics” that must be obeyed. The Sinai law was of this nature. It was a law of “precept upon precept” to which one had to perfectly conform in order to stand justified before God. However, the problem with law is that “all have sinned” (Rm 3:23). The problem with law is not law itself, but with those to whom it is given. Man cannot keep law perfectly in order to be saved. Therefore, law restricts one when it comes to applying its use in and of itself for the purpose of salvation.

The word “liberty” indicates freedom. This is the area of generics of God’s law where we have freedom of choice. But how can there be both **law** and **liberty**? The answer is in the nature of what Jesus brought. **Christians are set free from the necessity of perfectly keeping legal statutes of law in order to be justified before God.** They were set free by being brought under a law of grace and faith.

The Sinai law directed by statute. **The New Testament law motivates by the gospel of grace.** Because the law of Christ guides by the principle of grace, it thus gives freedom from statutory justification because one is saved by grace, not by how well he performs a legal system of law. Under the law of Christ, one is motivated to trust in God’s grace, not his own ability to keep law. Paul stated,

*“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast”* (Ep 2:8,9). When one understands that he is saved by the gospel that was revealed on the cross, he is motivated to seek God’s guidance in his life (See 2 Co 4:15). In this way, law is established in one’s life by faith (Rm 3:31). Understanding this principle is very important in interpreting any law that God would give to man.

When one becomes a Christian, he willingly submits to the law of Christ because he recognizes the grace of God. There are direct commands in this law. There are specifics to be obeyed. However, there are also **generic applications** of the commands of the law in order for one to use his self-initiative to draw closer to Jesus in his response to the gospel. For example, in Hebrews 10:25 the Hebrew writer stated, *“... not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together ...”* When one becomes a Christian, **he or she accepts the responsibility to care for other Christians**. The **specific** of the principle of Hebrews 10:25 is not to forsake the opportunity of being with other Christian workers. This specific does not say **when** to assemble or **how many times** to assemble. Neither does it say **where** to assemble, or with how many to assemble. It simply says that saints must not forsake the opportunity to assemble together. Theoretically, one could assemble with the saints only **once a year** and still fulfill this specific command to assemble. But then, one would not be motivated by the gospel to be with

fellow disciples.

However, when one’s life is pointed toward Jesus, and motivated by the gospel, **spiritual growth** continues. We must *“grow in the grace [gospel] and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* (2 Pt 3:18). The closer one moves toward the mind of Jesus in submission to His lordship, **the closer he or she will move toward brothers and sisters who also have their lives pointed toward and are spiritually moving in the direction of Jesus**. Therefore, in the absence of **specific commands** in the New Testament concerning **when** to meet and **how many times** to meet, Christians are under the generic principle of Hebrews 10:25. The principle is to assemble with fellow disciples who have all obeyed the gospel. However, we have liberty as to how often we must assemble, where we must assemble, and how many of us must assemble at any one time. With the principle of law comes the liberty by which we can be motivated by the gospel.

Here is the beautiful principle of the law of liberty. **The closer we move toward the lordship of Jesus in our lives, the greater our desire is to be with those who are also moving closer to Jesus**. This is what was happening in Acts 2. These believers submitted to the lordship of Jesus, and thus, obeyed the gospel together in one day (At 2:36-41). They began their move toward Jesus, and thus, *“they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship ...”* (At 2:42). *“Now all who believed were together ...”* (At 2:44). *“So continuing*

*daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart*" (At 2:46). Because of their love of Jesus and one another, their understanding of the principle of Hebrews 10:25 was to meet together on a daily basis. The closer they drew to Jesus, the closer they drew to one another.

Legally speaking, **some have moved away from the daily assembly of the early Christians** (See At 5:42). Some have promoted a legal system that "faithfulness" is established by assembling three times a week at designated times. We "open" our assembly with an "opening prayer." We "close" it with a "closing prayer," and then, we go on our way having convinced ourselves that we have "served" God until the next "hour of worship." However, the early Christians, at least immediately after Pentecost, seemed to assemble in some way on a daily basis because of their closeness to Jesus and one another. Though all of the Christians in Jerusalem did not assemble at the same place, they at least sought to be in assembly in small groups through the city.

This helps us to understand what was happening among the early Christians. The point is that the closer we move to Jesus, the closer we move toward one another. And the closer we move toward one another in Christ, the more we want to be with one another. In other words, **the brother or sister who forsakes assembling with other disciples has a serious problem with loving Jesus first, and secondly, with loving his or her**

**brothers and sisters in Christ.** He or she is not submitting to the fundamental principle of Jesus' new commandment, "*that you love one another*" (Jn 13:34).

When the church began in Acts 2, those first members were so Christ-centered in their lives that they sought to be with one another in some way every day of the week. Their closeness as a body of believers helps us to understand their sacrificial contribution that was recorded in Acts 4:32-37. The law of Christ deals directly with the heart of man, whereas, the Sinai law dealt more with legal performances. One could do the legalities of the law without his heart being in it. **However, one certainly cannot "do the heart" of the gospel without the actions.**

The above is precisely what James was revealed in the context of James 2:14-26. Faith without expression is useless. He said, "*Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead*" (Js 2:17). True faith must be expressed. James continued, "*But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works*" (Js 2:18). In other words, the closer one moves toward Jesus, the greater his or her faith, and consequently, the greater his or her works. One's works, therefore, do measure one's closeness to Jesus.

This is why John said of the one who loves God, "*His [God's] commandments are not burdensome*" (1 Jn 5:3). It is a pleasure to serve God when we are close to Jesus. It is a pleasure to work for God because of what He has done for us

through the gospel, as opposed to working in order to accumulate merits upon which our entrance into heaven would supposedly be determined. This is why Paul said that when he realized the truth of the gospel, he responded more abundantly (1 Co 15:10; see 2 Co 4:15).

Because the law of Christ is a law of principles means that there must be a great appreciation of the grace of God. God often did not give the specifics under the general principles of law. One is moved by the principles, but cannot check off his accomplishments on a list of specifics. Therefore, one is driven to trust in the grace of God and not boast of his works in the area of specifics (Ep 2:9).

In His law, therefore, Jesus gives generics such as, "... love one another ..." (Jn 13:34,35). This is the second commandment upon which both the Old and New laws hang (Mt 22:36-40). But how is one to love his or her brother and sister in Christ? The law says love. The generic aspects of the law leave the **how** to us. We have liberty to choose how. However, God knows that when we point our lives toward Jesus through the gospel, we will respond to those who are pointed in the same direction. As we draw closer to Jesus we will draw closer to others. This is why the law of Christ is a "law of liberty," not a legalistic set of codes by which one must check every movement of Christian growth by a list of religious rites. Unless one understands this most vital concept of Christianity, he or she will not be able to understand the grace of God under which we live at this time. He will not be able to correctly

interpret the law of Christ as it is revealed in the New Testament. One will not be able to rejoice with Paul in the context of what he meant when he wrote, "... *through whom [Jesus] also we have access by faith into this **grace in which we stand and rejoice** in hope of the glory of God*" (Rm 5:2).

God did not deliver essential teachings to man in order to confuse man. Those essential teachings that are necessary in order to please God and save one's soul are clearly revealed in the Bible. We refer to these as gospel fundamentals. Because they are fundamental, and thus necessary to believe, the Holy Spirit did not cloud such teachings in figurative speech. Neither did the Spirit communicate such teachings to man in a manner that would take great scholarship to understand. In fact, we would be cautious with any teaching that is derived from a system of deductions. God simply communicated that which was necessary for salvation in words that the simple and objective could understand upon reading the Bible.

If something is so complicated that the average newborn Christian living in the bush of Africa cannot understand if he comes to the Bible unhindered by preconceived ideas and prejudices, then it is probably not fundamental. God simply did not reveal that which was necessary for salvation in a way that only the scribe and scholar could interpret.

If one has a hard time understanding what is fundamental truth, he should give a Bible to a man who can read in the delta

country of the Amazon. What that man understands to be essential to salvation would probably be fundamental gospel. Maybe we should be asking common men and women for their understanding of fundamental truth and not the scholarship in the high castles of theological logic. One can go straight to being with Jesus after obeying the simple good news of the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord, without a knowledge of all the things over which we often bite and devour one another.

There is one thing we must always keep in mind when dealing with what is necessary for salvation. Why did the Holy Spirit not inspire men to write New Testament Scripture until many years after the establishment of the church? How did the early Christians maintain their faithfulness without having a copy of the New Testament in their hands? How did the early evangelists preach the gospel to the world without a New Testament from which to quote book, chapter and verse? We understand that the early inspired prophets in the church, who had hands laid on them by the apostles, continued to feed the flock. However, there were no inspired prophets among all the disciples for many decades after the establishment of the church. Nevertheless, the gospel went into all the world and believers remained faithful to the gospel.

The answer to this historical challenge is in the fact of what God intended should happen concerning the preaching of the gospel to the world. **He intended that the emphasis of world evangelism and salvation was on the proclamation**

**of Jesus and the message of the gospel, and obedience to it, not on the distribution of the written word.** The power was in the gospel (Rm 1:16), not in an outline of doctrine.

Why did God allow fallible men to make copies of the inspired original autographs, knowing that under candle light in the middle of the night some mistakes would be made by sincere scribes? Their copies would not be perfect. Again, the answer is in the fact that with Christianity, the emphasis is on the gospel, not on the exactness of the written word as it has come to us today. God knew that the written word would go throughout the world with the variant readings of faithful scribes who would make copies of copies that had some variant readings. However, He also knew that the man Jesus and the message of the gospel would never be corrupted by the slip of a copyist's pen.

Religions as Islam focus on a book of words for the accuracy and existence of their belief. However, with Christianity it is different. The Christian's emphasis is first on Jesus and the gospel. The Christian relies on the written word in order to know that Jesus is not a fable. Any copied manuscript of Scripture will accurately communicate this message.

The gospel went out from faithful evangelists in the first century who had no copies of the Scriptures in their hands, not even a copy of the Old Testament. They could preach the message of the gospel because it was a message, not a written formula where every dot had to be made on every letter "i." It was the

message of the gospel that changed lives then. It will do the same today. Because we have copies today of the historical event of the gospel, we can study the historical effect that the gospel had on the lives of people in the first century. The written word is a great blessing. But we must remember that the power unto salvation is in the gospel message, and that message has never been corrupted by any copied manuscript of the original autographs or any translation into another language from the original autographs. The point is not finding the best translation in order to have a more accurate record of the gospel. The point is that any translation will inform one of the gospel of

God's love on the cross and resurrection from the tomb.

But does the preceding negate the necessity of the Scriptures? Absolutely not! How could we today, or anyone throughout the world, ever understand who Jesus is without the Scriptures? By the time Luke wrote to Theophilus, stories of Jesus were being corrupted (Lk 1:1-4). It was necessary for Luke to write, therefore, in order to give Theophilus an accurate account of the life and message of Jesus. The word is necessary to keep the story straight. But the message is still the gospel story, and on that story we must focus in order to preach the gospel to the world.

## Chapter 20

### PRACTICAL BIBLE STUDY

In this final chapter we introduce some basic steps to follow that will aid one in developing a systematic method of Bible study. These are practical suggestions that will help to select a particular book, or letter of the Bible, and then develop a systematic means by which to understand the text.

We must remember that the New Testament was written to common people. It was written in a common language (*koiné* Greek) in order to communicate God's most simple message of the gospel to the common people of its day. For this reason one should not make Bible study difficult. Because of the tremendous confusion in the religious world concerning what is considered fundamental teaching upon which we can be united,

the average member has been intimidated into thinking that the Bible is difficult to understand. He figures that if those who are supposed to know the Bible, cannot come to a unity of the faith, then why should he try.

The steps of Bible study listed on the following pages will help give a practical approach to the Scriptures. These are principal studies one must do in order to come to a consistent understanding of the whole text of any particular book. After one understands the whole text, then he or she will be able to understand particular scriptures within a context.

It is always a good principle to re-study familiar passages. This is true because the more we study the Bible the better we understand contexts in which

our favorite texts lie. Therefore, the following system of Bible study is set forth to aid in understanding the whole text in order to restudy familiar texts. And in restudying familiar texts, we can better make an application of God's word to our lives.

## SYSTEMATIC

### BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLES

1. Discover the general view of gospel history.
2. Discover the historical and cultural setting.
3. Discover the literary structure.
4. Discover the sentence structure.
5. Discover the key words.
6. Discover the figures of speech.
7. Discover the comparative contexts.
8. Discover the system of organized notes.

The general principle around which all biblical studies is centered is to first approach the Bible with the goal of understanding concepts. Concepts or principles are those general thoughts that function as guides to the interpretation of specific details of a book or letter. In other words, a student must approach the Bible with the goal of discovering principal concepts that will aid him in interpreting difficult passages.

The most important fundamental truth to understand about the Bible, and the foundation upon which all Bible books rest, is the **gospel**. The Bible is not primarily about us. It is about God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit sending the incarnate Son of God into the world for the salvation of those who would re-

spond to this gospel revelation. Once one understands this central theme that extends throughout the sixty-six books of the Bible, then he has a guiding rule by which to understand all contexts of the Bible.

Therefore, one must discover that the gospel is the historical event of the incarnation, death of Jesus for our sins, His resurrection for our hope and ascension to the right hand of God (Jn 1:1-14; 1 Co 15:1-4). When one obeys the historical event of the gospel through one's personal event of immersion in water in order to be buried with Jesus and resurrected from water in order to be resurrected with Jesus, then he is prepared to use the Bible as his road map to eternal glory (Rm 6:3-6). When one understands this principal concept in reference to the gospel, then he can understand all passages that refer to any particular response to the gospel such as faith and repentance. When salvation from sin is discussed in the New Testament, then one's understanding of the concept of obedience to the gospel of Jesus through immersion is always the guiding principle by which one interprets passages that discuss our salvation.

Therefore, the interpreter's goal is to discover principal concepts of Scripture in order to aid one's investigation of the past, present and future implications of the gospel message. We must come to a knowledge of the whole text (concepts) in order to interpret the proof texts (particulars) in reference to the gospel message and the impact of the gospel on those of the first century. Throughout the fol-

lowing systematic study, therefore, we must not lose sight of the fact that our first task is to develop a system of study that will lead us to understand the general purpose of a particular letter or book. We must do this in order that we better understand the gospel of grace that was revealed through the incarnation, cross, resurrection and ascension of the Son of God.

### A. Discovering the general view of gospel history:

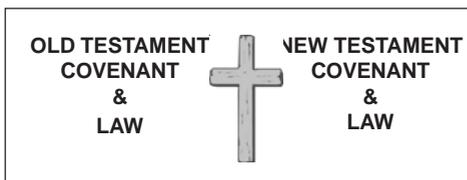
This first area of Bible study will apply to the study of all books of the Bible. One must make a “Bible calendar” or historical outline of all Bible books and major Bible events. We must learn when major Bible characters lived in relation to one another. Here are some things to do:

**1. Divide the two covenants and laws.** One of the first things to learn about the Bible is the covenants and laws which God gave to man. Having a clear understanding of the two covenants is vital in rightly dividing the word of God.

The Sinai covenant and law was established with the Jewish nation (Dt 5:1-5). It was both a civil and moral law that was meant to guide Israel in specific areas of conduct. However, the New Tes-

tament covenant was established with all who submit to the kingdom reign of Jesus. The thirty-nine Old Testament books were written to the nation of Israel, whereas the twenty-seven New Testament books were written for the benefit of those who come into a covenant relationship with Jesus through obedience to the gospel. Therefore, when we study the Bible we must determine the audience to whom the message of a particular context is directed. For example, Colossians is in the New Testament. The letter is directed to those who are mentioned in Colossians 1:2. *“To the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are in Colosse.”* Therefore, this letter is directed to Christians who are under the New Testament covenant and law.

**2. Develop a chronology of Bible events.** One should make an outline of Bible characters and events. In order to do this, begin by reading the entire Bible. As you read, list the major events that occur as they are recorded in the Bible. Write in the major Bible characters who are associated with those events. This simple practice will help to visualize the pattern of Bible history. It will also help to place in an orderly chronological system all those Bible stories and people that we have heard about throughout our lives, but have never organized in order to understand their chronological order in relation to one another. Most people know of the story of David and Goliath. However, many do not know when this historical event took place in relation to the reign of King Saul or other Bible characters and events. If one makes a chart



of Bible characters and events, then he or she will be able to place all Bible stories in a correct chronological order.

We would make one suggestion here concerning the kings of the Old Testament. Beginning with King Saul, **make a chart of the kings of the nation of Israel.** After the death of King Solomon, be sure to divide the list of kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel from the kings of the Southern Kingdom. After making this chart, place the major Bible events, characters and books of the Old Testament in the time periods of these kings. The purpose of this chart is to give a visual outline of the history of Israel. In doing this, familiar stories of the Bible that we have been taught from childhood can be chronologically placed in order.

**3. Determine the approximate date of each book.** It is difficult to establish the exact date of writing for most books of the Bible. This is particularly true of the Old Testament books. The dates of the New Testament books are much easier to determine. Nevertheless, this is where Bible students usually have to consult a good Bible dictionary or encyclopedia. These books will establish a fairly reliable date of writing for each Bible book.

We would also suggest that one try to determine the period in which Paul wrote his letters during his ministry as it is recorded in Acts. In other words, read the document of Acts and make a chart of historical events and characters of the book. Read the book of Thessalonians and see if you can fit this letter in with the events of Acts. If not, try to establish

when the book was written in relation to other letters of the New Testament.

Understanding when each book or letter was written will enhance one's knowledge of the historical context of the original autographs. However, not knowing the date of writing will not hinder one's understanding of fundamental principles. We must always keep in mind that one does not have to be a Bible scholar in order to be saved. However, because one is saved, he or she should seek to learn all that is possible about the inspired word of God.

One of the exciting things that is learned by understanding the date a particular New Testament letter was written is to discover what God expects of us in our spiritual growth in Christ. For example, the 1 Corinthian letter was written five to six years after the establishment of the church in Corinth in Acts 18. Therefore, when one studies the letter of 1 Corinthians, he must keep in mind that this letter was written to Christians who had been in the faith no more than five or six years. This helps us understand the spiritual maturity that God expects of us by the time we are five to six years old in the faith.

Another example would be the letter to the Thessalonians. The letter of 1 Thessalonians was written less than a year after the establishment of the church in Thessalonica (At 17). By the time the letter was written, the Thessalonians had evangelized all the area around Thessalonica (1 Th 1:6-10). Therefore, by understanding the date the letter was written, we can better appreciate the evange-

listic zeal of the Thessalonian Christians.

## B. Discovering the historical and cultural settings:

Here are two things one must determine for every event and scripture in the Bible. By **historical** setting we mean that one should try to determine when and to whom a particular text was written. By **cultural** setting we mean that as a biblical interpreter one should also try to understand any text through the culture of those who were the first recipients of that text. In order to accomplish this, first go through the following steps as outlined below:

**1. Read the book.** If you are planning to study a particular book, you should initially read it through **at least ten times**. This will help you to be familiar with the whole context of the book. While reading, write down the answers to the following questions:

1. **Who** wrote the book?
2. **When** was the book written?
3. **Why** was the book written?
4. **To whom** was the book written?
5. **What** initiated the book to be written?
6. **Where** was the book sent?
7. **From where** was the book sent?

In relation to the letter to the Colossians, ask yourself and answer the above questions. (1) **Who** wrote the book? (See Cl 1:1). (2) **When** was it written? Compare the individuals of chapter 4 with your historical chart of Paul's life as out-

lined from Acts. (3) **Why** was the book written? (Read Cl 1:9ff). (4) **To whom** was the book written? (See Cl 1:2). (5) **What** problems initiated the book to be written? (See Cl 2:1,2,18). (6) **Where** was the book sent? (See Cl 1:2; 4:16). (7) **From where** was the book sent? (See 4:18).

**2. Read parallel books.** One must also read other Bible books that were written at the same time as the book that is being studied. This will aid in finding details for the questions listed under the above point. In other words, when studying Colossians, it would also be good to read Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon which were written by Paul from prison in Rome at approximately the same time. Also, read other books that were written to people in a similar historical time, geological location or cultural background.

One must read the **historical books** of the Bible in order to orient oneself concerning Bible history. It is easier to understand the Bible if one has a general outline of Bible history in his or her mind. The general history books of the Bible are the following:

<b>BIBLE HISTORY BOOKS</b>	
OLD TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT
<i>Genesis, Exodus Joshua, Judges 1 &amp; 2 Kings 1 &amp; 2 Chronicles Ezra, Nehemiah Esther</i>	 <i>Matthew Mark Luke John Acts</i>

**3. Determine the historical context of quotations.** There are many Old Testament quotations found in the New Tes-

tament. At times, the New Testament writer used a particular quotation that revealed thoughts in the Old Testament that were different from the context of the Old Testament passage. These new thoughts, however, are **inspired interpretations** of these Old Testament Scriptures. As students, we must first understand the Old Testament quotation in the context of its original setting. In other words, **we must understand the passage as the one to whom it was originally written would understand it.** This is a very important principle in Bible study. The New Testament application is usually the secondary meaning or prophetic interpretation of the passage. In other words, the passage often has two meanings, one in reference to the local setting when the statements were first made, and the other in reference to the prophetic setting in the New Testament.

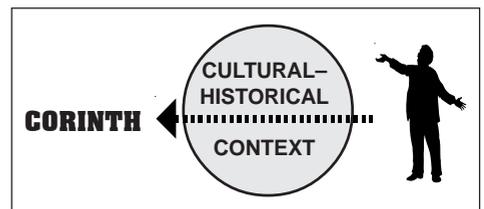
We cannot overemphasize the importance of understanding any particular text of Scripture in its **historical and cultural setting.** If one does not do this, he or she may bind cultural practices on Christians today that were never intended to be bound by God. Consider the following examples:

**a. Foot washing:** This was a cultural practice of the Jews of Jesus' day to show hospitality by washing the feet of one's guests. In John 13 Jesus used this meek cultural practice to illustrate the principle of humble service to one's brother. Jesus concluded the event by saying, *"I have given you an example that you should do as I have done to you"*

(Jn 13:15). **The example of humble service was the truth Jesus wanted to teach.** In the context Jesus asked the disciples, *"Do you know what I have done to you?"* (Jn 13:12). The fact that Jesus asked them a question as this concerning a common Jewish custom indicated that Jesus was not talking about the practice of washing feet. They knew the custom of washing feet. They did not understand the principle of gospel leadership that was being revealed. What Jesus wanted them to understand was the servitude by which they as leaders must serve others as He, through the cross, served them. This servitude was to be practiced by His disciples. The lesson is stated by Jesus in Mark 10:44. *"And whoever of you desires to be first will be slave of all."*

**b. Head coverings:** In the culture of Corinth, the women wore a veil or head covering in order to show their place of subjection to their husbands in society. However, there were some sisters among the Corinthian disciples who took off their symbol of subjection. Paul addressed this problem in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. He instructed the women to put the covering back on, or wear their hair long as a covering.

In most societies today the head covering is not a symbol of subjection. Add to this the fact that women in many coun-



tries of the world today naturally have very short hair. This is especially true in the tropics. We must not interpret Paul's reference to a cultural practice as binding upon cultures of other lands and times. His instructions would apply only in those cultures where the head covering has the same social meaning as it did in Corinth in the first century.

**c. Miraculous work of the Holy Spirit:** This study has led to much confusion in the religious world today because Bible interpreters fail to understand the biblical definition of a confirming miracle. And because they fail to make this distinction, they fail to place the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit in the **historical context** of the early church. The primary confusion is caused when interpreters do not understand passages concerning the Holy Spirit in the historical context of the church in which they were first written.

It is very important to understand the concept that God poured out the Holy Spirit in the first century on the apostles in order that they receive all truth, and subsequently, impart miraculous gifts to the first members of the church for the initial establishment of the church in the first century (At 4:1-4). The miraculous gifts were given to the church through the laying on of the apostles' hands (At 8:18). We must assume that the apostles freely gave these gifts as they had been freely given to them. Jesus commanded this in Matthew 10:8. Every member of the church that came into contact with a Christ-sent apostle, therefore, had the opportunity to receive the gifts of the Holy

Spirit that were promised in Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:38,39. Even Simon the sorcerer had a right to receive a miraculous gift of the Spirit in Acts 8. However, he wanted more than what God had promised, and thus, he reaped the stern rebuke of Peter and John (At 8:19,20).

When a Christ-apostle visited any area and found disciples, he inquired if those disciples had had the miraculous gifts imparted to them (See At 19:2,6). We must assume, therefore, **that every disciple with whom an apostle of Christ encountered, the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit were freely given through the laying on of the apostles' hands** (Rm 1:11). This was a work of the Christ-apostles, and we must assume that they accomplished this commission that was given to them by Jesus.

In view of the above, therefore, we must understand passages concerning the Holy Spirit in the context of those who lived in the miraculous environment of the first century. In other words, when Paul wrote concerning the gifts of the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 12-14, we must set ourselves among the Corinthian disciples who were directed by many who exercised the miraculous gifts of the Spirit. Only when we do this will we be able to understand what Paul, or any other New Testament writer, is saying when reference is made to the Spirit. By doing this, we can rightly divide the word of God. We can apply what God considers principles that carry throughout the centuries from events that He meant to only occur during the early establishment of the church.

A good illustration of this principle is the fact of house church assemblies of the early church. Throughout the history of Israel, extended family worship was the norm for Jewish families. At the time of the establishment of the church, the Jews were accustomed to meeting in their homes. The synagogues were not a part of the Sinai law. When their existence came into the religious culture of the Jews, they were never constructed as assembly halls for worship. The focus of the Jewish family was on the home. When the church was established, the home became the natural setting for the assembly of the saints. This custom continued for over three hundred years after the establishment of the church. The first record of a purpose-built building for assembly and worship came from Constantine in 323 A.D.

What effect does this have on understanding the New Testament? It has a great effect. When we study passages concerning the fellowship of the saints in any city, we must understand that the saints were assembling in several houses throughout the cities. We must not understand that the existence of the church in any particular city existed because of the ability of all the members to meet together at the same place on Sunday morning, especially since there was no such thing as a Sunday's day off in the slave culture of Roman economics. The saints met in several houses that were scattered throughout any particular region. Understanding this fact, helps us understand those passages of scripture that refer to the mutual edification of all members in

any particular region.

One must study every Bible book through the historical and cultural context in which the books were originally written. In reference to the Old Testament Scriptures, Paul told Timothy to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tm 2:15). **Rightly dividing the Scriptures has more meaning than dividing the Old Testament from the New Testament.** It refers specifically to determining what scripture commands, statements and examples do or do not apply to the interpreter. It is essential, therefore, that one correctly understand the historical and cultural background of Bible texts in order to rightly divide the word of truth. We must not find ourselves guilty of applying or binding cultural practices or "historical truths" that were not meant to be bound on the church today.

**Understanding Scripture in its cultural setting does not infer relegating Scripture to its cultural setting.** Simply because a passage was written to cultures two thousand years ago does not mean that the principles of the Bible are out-of-date. Because the law of Christ is more of a law of principles, its principles can be applied to all cultures throughout the world in all history. The uniqueness of Christianity that sets it apart from the religions of the world that have been invented after the desires of men is the fact that the church can be established in any culture of the world. The gospel is not culturally linked. It changes cultures to conform to the will of God, but its message never changes.

Pure Old Testament theocratic law

was confined to the Jews while living in Palestine between the conquest of the land and the first coming of Jesus. However, the **principle** and **nature** of the law of Christ allows it to be applicable for all history in all locations and all cultures. **Our task as interpreters is to separate the cultural aspects of the New Testament, that are historical in the first century scene, from the principles that have application until Jesus comes again.** This task of rightly dividing the word of truth can be quite challenging. However, because we love the truth, we seek to apply God's commandments. We seek to bind only that which is bound and loose that which is loosed. We also seek to **not bind** where God has not bound and to **not loose** where God has not loosed.

### C. Discovering thought and literary structure:

At this stage in one's study of the text of a book, he or she must discover the actual **structure** of the book according to major thoughts. In other words, the biblical interpreter must understand how the original author followed a particular outline of thought in order to accomplish his purpose for writing. For example, John wrote the book of John for the purpose of proving that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God (Jn 20:30,31). There is a definite organization to the book of John that he uses in order to communicate this purpose to his readers.

The following are some things we must do in order to correctly discover the

organization of the material of any Bible book, and thus, understand the central thoughts or concepts the writer is trying to convey:

**1. Read the book through in one sitting.** It was previously suggested that we must read the particular book under study through at least ten times. However, it would be good for one to read the book that is under study completely through once or twice in **one sitting**. That is, read the book through without stopping. One could at least read the book through in one day. This will help to determine the literary flow and thought organization of the book. Remember, we must first understand a particular book of the Bible from its **whole text** setting. We must understand the general meaning of an entire book before we can understand the individual verses.

**2. Divide the book into major thought divisions.** As one reads the book through, divide the contents into divisions according to the major thoughts. These divisions can be based on the following areas: (1) **historical** material, (2) **doctrinal** or **teaching** material, and (3) **literary** or **composition** style. For example, Colossians could be divided into the following divisions:

#### MAJOR DIVISIONS OF COLOSSIANS

1. The preeminence of Jesus (1:15-23)
2. Paul's apostolic ministry (1:24 - 2:5)
3. Warnings against Judaeo-gnosticism (2:6 - 3:4)
4. Exhorting Christians to maintain Christian principles (3:5 - 4:6)
5. Paul's personal closing (4:7-18)

Every book of the Bible can usually be divided into major divisions based on either history, teaching or composition. One will need to thoroughly read the text of a particular book several times in order to make divisions that are based on these categories.

Chapter divisions in the text have been added by men. They were first added in the 1500s and represent the opinion in textual division by a few men. Therefore, one's major divisions of the text **need not** coincide with the actual chapter and verse divisions that are presently in the Bible. Remember, when Paul wrote Colossians, he did not use chapter and verse divisions. Colossians was an inspired letter that Paul wrote to a church that needed teaching in the areas he discussed in the book. The letters of the New Testament were not written in view of giving a point by point catechism of doctrine. They were written to convey truth and values to correct, and thus, guide Christians in moral living and truth who lived in a corrupt and immoral society.

**3. Divide the book into thought-paragraphs.** At this point one must divide into paragraphs the major thoughts he or she has written down. Many translations have already done this. However, we must remember that these are the paragraph divisions of some other interpreter. Every Bible interpreter has a right to make his or her own paragraph divisions because the original writers usually did not construct the text into paragraph divisions. Nevertheless, we must remember also that each paragraph must con-

tain basically one central thought as the author so constructed the text. We could divide the first chapter of Colossians into the following thought-paragraphs:

#### PARAGRAPHS OF COLOSSIANS 1

1. Salutation (vss 1,2)
2. Thanksgiving for the Colossians' faith (vss 3-8)
3. The preeminence of Christ (vss 9-18)
4. Reconciliation to God in Christ (vss 19-23)
5. Sacrificial service to Christ (vss 24-29)

#### 4. Write the purpose of the book.

Each book basically has one central purpose. Matthew wrote in order to confirm the messiahship of Jesus (See Mt 16:13-19). John wrote to prove the deity of Jesus (See Jn 20:30,31). On the other hand, the letters of Paul often have several secondary purposes. Therefore, one must **find the key verses that explain the purpose or purposes of each book.** We must know why a book or particular section of a book was written before we can fully understand the particulars of the book. (As a general rule, one will discover the purpose of a particular book or letter after completing the work of points A - C.)

#### 5. Find the key verses of the book.

This exercise is related to the above. What one must do is list the key verses of the book that represent the principal message or messages of the book. These verses can be found anywhere in the book. One of the key verses in Colossians is 1:18. This one verse expresses one of the major themes of the book. We would suggest that you find a key verse

or statement that expresses the central thought of every major division.

### 6. Write a summary of the book.

After completing the above steps, the biblical interpreter has come to a very important stage of biblical interpretation. The book has now been divided into **major divisions**. The divisions have been divided into **paragraphs**. The **key verses** have been listed. The **purposes** for the writing of the book or letter have also been stated. One needs now to **write a general one-sentence statement about each division and each paragraph**. In doing this we can add the thoughts of the key verses. Bring all of these statements and thoughts together into a **one-paragraph summary of the entire book**. This is an introduction to the book that can be read in a Bible class.

The following is an example of how we would follow the above steps of interpretation with the letter to the Colossians.

#### MAJOR DIVISIONS AND PURPOSES OF COLOSSIANS

1. Paul wrote to exalt the preeminence of Jesus (1:15-23).
2. Paul wrote to explain his apostolic work of preaching the gospel (1:24 - 2:5).
3. Paul wrote to warn against the Judaeo-gnosticism of some who were promoting behavior that was contrary to the gospel (2:6 - 3:4).
4. Paul wrote to exhort the Colossians to continue to live according to the principles of the gospel (3:5 - 4:6).
5. Paul wrote a personal closing (4:7-18).

#### PARAGRAPH AND THOUGHT DIVISIONS

1. Greetings to the Colossians (1:1,2)
2. Thanksgiving for the Colossians' faithfulness (1:3-8)
3. The preeminence of Christ (1:9-18)
4. Gospel reconciliation of man to God in Christ (1:19-23)
5. The Christian's sacrificial service to Christ in gospel living (1:24 - 2:5)
6. The true world view of those who live the gospel (2:6-15)
7. Gospel freedom in Christ from meritorious legalistic religiosity (2:16-23)
8. Behavioral principles for gospel living (3:1-17)
9. Behavioral principles for the Christian home (3:18 - 4:1)
10. Behavioral principles for the gospel walk of life (4:2-6)
11. Final greetings to the Colossians (4:7-18)

#### KEY VERSES

1:18; 2:8; 3:1-3

#### SUMMARY

**Paul sends his personal greetings to the disciples in Colosse in order to thank them for their faithfulness. In exalting the preeminence of Jesus (CI 1:18), he exhorts them to understand that one can be reconciled to God only through Jesus Christ. Because of the deity of Jesus, the Colossians must sacrificially serve Jesus and not be drawn away from Him by the vain philosophies of men (CI 2:8) which will rob them of their freedom in Christ. Since they have obeyed the gospel, they must give themselves to living the sanctified life (CI 3:1-3). They must conduct their lives according to the gospel they obeyed.**

## D. Discovering sentence structure:

The New Testaments we have are translations from various Greek texts. The Old Testament is a translation from a Hebrew text. Good translations always use good grammar and sentence structure in order to translate the biblical text into another language. Therefore, depending on the style of translation that was used by those who translated the particular version we have, we can generally trust the grammatical structure of the language of our particular version. Therefore, if we study the grammatical structure of our particular version, this study will help us to understand the finer points of the Scriptures.

**1. Compare translations.** Most Bible students do not know either Greek or Hebrew. However, a knowledge of either language is not necessary in order for one to be a good Bible student. Translations are generally produced by reliable Greek and Hebrew scholars who make every effort to bring God's word to us in our native language. If there is more than one translation in our personal language,

we have the opportunity of **comparing the readings of different versions**. By doing this, it will help us better understand a particular verse.

**2. Study grammatical structure of sentences.** It is always good to obtain a good grammar book of the language of the translation one uses. Knowing good grammar will help to understand how the translators have communicated to us their understanding of the original languages. We must at least understand what the Scriptures say before we can understand what they mean. We can understand what they mean by understanding the structure of the sentences of the language from which the Hebrew and Greek texts have been translated. We must always keep in mind that we focus on the gospel message of Jesus. Every translator accurately translates this message.

## E. Discovering the key words:

In order to understand any text of scripture, one must know the meaning of **every word** that is used in the text. Follow the suggestions below in order to understand how each word is used:

**1. Research the meaning of words in a dictionary.** One of the first steps in understanding the meaning of words of a text is to use a good dictionary. This will help to understand the meaning the translator understood in using any particular word to translate either a Hebrew or Greek word. For example, the translators used the word "preeminence" in reference to a Greek word that Paul used

### COMPARATIVE BIBLE STUDY

**King  
James  
Version**

"God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets..." (Hb 1:1).



**New  
International  
Version**

"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways ..." (Hb 1:1).

in Colossians 1:18. In order to understand the English definition of this word, one may need to use a dictionary.

**2. Research the meaning of words by the context.** Words often vary in their meaning or definition. The meaning of any given word can change slightly from one context to another. However, in understanding a particularly difficult word, one must first try to understand it in the sentence in which it is used. If this is not sufficient, search the paragraph for the meaning. We must never take a word out of the context in which it is used. **The context must be the final source to define a word.** For example, the meaning of the word “baptize” is “burial” in Colossians 2:12 (See Rm 6:3-5). The context defines this word to mean such. However, some have taken the word completely out of the biblical context and defined it to mean “sprinkle.” This is unjust and certainly not according to good Bible study principles.

One must be cautioned, therefore, not to add a meaning to a word that was not in the original author’s mind when he wrote the book. One must understand Colossians by Paul’s contextual definition of words that were contemporary with his time.

**3. Research the meaning of words in other contexts.** This is where a Bible concordance, or online access to the Internet, can greatly aid one’s studies. A **concordance** is simply a book that has a listing of Bible words and their scripture location in the Bible. Studying how a particular word is used in another context can enhance the meaning of a word.

Because a word is used in another context does not mean that its definition changes. However, knowing how a specific word is used in different contexts enhances the meaning of the word. Though we may not have a dictionary, we may be able to understand a Bible word by studying it as it is used in numerous scriptures throughout the Bible.

Most Bible students do not have a Bible concordance, nor access to the Internet. Nevertheless, as we read a particular book that is being studied we can write down the scripture location of key words that need special study. Write out a brief definition of how the words are used in various contexts of the book that is under study. These definitions will begin our understanding of the text. Therefore, one must concentrate on those words that bring meaning to the text that is under investigation. Emphasize those key words in preaching and teaching the text.

When the Bible discusses things that are beyond this world, we must be careful not to understand what the Spirit seeks to communicate by a literal understanding of the words as they are used in our world. There are no earthly words that would define the nature of heaven or what exists beyond the grave. For this reason, the Holy Spirit used many metaphors when describing things that were beyond our experience. When studying the Bible one must be careful not to literalize the metaphors, lest he fail to understand the text wherein a metaphor is used to express a vital point.

## F. Discovering the figures of speech:

All languages use figures of speech and idiomatic expressions of communication. Translators are usually able to bring the figures of speech of Hebrew and Greek into the new language. However, idiomatic expressions are sometimes a little more difficult. Nevertheless, we must understand the uses of figures of speech that are commonly used in all languages including the languages of the Bible. This understanding will solve many interpretation problems that people often have in understanding the Bible.

**1. Common figures of speech:** Before one can properly understand the Bible, he or she must clearly understand the use of figurative language. One of the great errors of biblical interpretation is the literalization of figures speech that are commonly used by the inspired writers. This error of interpretation usually results from failing to understand that the Holy Spirit in inspiration **had to use man's dictionary of words that are defined by human experiences, relationships and emotions.**

Our dictionary is a list of words that we use to define our relationships with one another and the material world. Every definition in this dictionary originates from our human behavioral experiences. The Holy Spirit's task in revelation and inspiration, therefore, was to use man-defined words in order to explain that which is above and beyond this world. In order to do this, the Holy Spirit had to use many figures of speech.

Since man is confined to the physical world, it is difficult for him to understand that which is beyond this world. We cannot fully understand heaven simply because there are no earthly-defined words that can convey this realm that is beyond this world. We cannot fully understand the nature and character of God simply because God is beyond this world.

The mistake we commonly make is to **create a god after our own image.** In other words, because we struggle to understand God who is beyond this world, we conceive a god in our minds who has earthly characteristics. This god has a literal nose, mouth, arms, and other human characteristics. What one is actually doing by this manner of interpretation, is making the true God who is spirit (Jn 4:24), into a god with which he can identify after man's own physical behavior and characteristics. When the process of creating a god after our own image completes its final end, we end up with a form of idolatry. This idolatry is the desire to handle a god we have created after our own image and who agrees with our human behavior.

The Holy Spirit seeks to communicate God and the realm of the supernatural to us. However, He must use our words of communication. In order to do this, therefore, He must use figures of speech. In order to take the reader's mind beyond this world, the Holy Spirit used metaphors. **Personifications** and **similes** are specific types of metaphors. In using such figures of speech, the Holy Spirit expects us to **look beyond the figures.** The figures are taken from our life

experiences. However, we must not literalize the Bible by seeing only a literal use of the figures. We must stand back from the rich figures of speech in the Bible and appreciate the sublime of the supernatural that the Spirit seeks to reveal.

**a. Personification:** Personification is a type of metaphor that gives human qualities and experiences to places, things and ideas. In other words, the emotional actions of man and his human capabilities are applied to places, things and ideas. The places, things and ideas are viewed as living entities which carry out the actions of man. Jesus said, “... *tomorrow will worry about its own things*” (Mt 6:34). Jesus here uses a period of time (“tomorrow”) as having a human ability (“worry”). However, days are not living entities that can literally worry.

Paul wrote, “*But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire*” (Rm 7:8; see vs 17-20). Paul personifies sin by making it an entity that would seem to exist apart from man. Actually, sin is one’s free-moral reaction either for or against God’s law. Sin does not exist apart from the existence of man. However, Paul personifies the word “sin” in Romans 7 to portray an entity that acts upon him.

In interpretation, one must be careful not to literalize the meaning of words and phrases that are personifications. Keep in mind that places, things and ideas are not entities as man. That which is

personified only expresses the human actions which are assigned to it. Places, things and ideas do not worry, love, hate, and express emotions as man. If we do not recognize the personification we will be making the Bible teach impossible things.

**b. Simile:** A simile is an actual comparison by using the words **like** or **as**. By using a simile, the inspired writer is trying to help us understand that which is beyond our experience by comparing it to something of our experience. Again, the interpreter must look beyond the simile in order to understand that which is being signified.

In Revelation 14:2 John seeks to describe a heavenly picture that is beyond our earthly experience. He does this by using actions of our earthly experience. He wrote that he “... *heard a voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters ... as the voice of harpers harping with their harps*” (ASV). John is not saying that there are literal harps in heaven. He is simply saying that **the voice** sounded **like** harpers playing on their harps. We must not make heaven an earthly place by misunderstanding the simile used to express the nature of it. Harpers harping on literal harps is an action of this world. It is not an action of the world (heaven) that is beyond this physical existence.

During Jesus’ resurrection, the guards at the tomb “*became like dead men*” (Mt 28:4). This does not mean that they literally died. They simply became physically inactive as dead men. Though we do not understand what actually happened, we do understand that the guards

were in a state where they could not interact with the situation.

In one of the messianic psalms of triumph over the nations it is stated, “*You shall dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel*” (Ps 2:9). Taken literally, one would certainly confuse what the inspired writer was here trying to state. However, if one envisions the human experience of breaking a clay pot, he can understand that the psalmist is trying to say that the Messiah would exercise power over the nations. This does not mean that the nations are literal clay pots or that Jesus would literally break them into literal pieces as a clay pot is smashed. There is a meaning here that is **beyond the literal and actual**. When simile is used, one must always look for the meaning that is beyond that which is literally expressed by the simile.

**c. Metaphor:** Both personifications and similes are a form of metaphorical language. A metaphor is a figure of speech that suggests or implies a comparison. One thing is compared to another thing by speaking of it as if it were that other thing. In other words, the writer seeks to explain the nature of “A” by likening it to the characteristics of “B”, which is earthly.

This is the most important figure of speech that is used in the Bible and one that is commonly used. This is especially true in the efforts of inspired writers to explain that which is beyond this world. We would say that it is impossible to understand many key concepts of the Bible without understanding the Spirit’s use of metaphor. Therefore, metaphors

are most significant because **the Holy Spirit seeks to explain that which is beyond the metaphor**.

Through metaphor, the Spirit seeks to explain God, heaven and eternal actions through the metaphorical use of things and experiences of our life. **This necessitates, therefore, that the biblical metaphors must be seated in their historical setting in order for us to understand the rich meaning that the Spirit is trying to convey.** We must first understand the literal and actual of the metaphor as the first biblical audiences understood them. In doing this, we can appreciate the message the Spirit is trying to convey through the metaphor.

We must also keep in mind that the metaphor, as other figures of speech, **does not represent itself**. In other words, we must not understand the metaphor to refer to itself. We must look beyond the metaphor. We must stand back and grasp the overall picture of what the inspired writer is trying to convey. Too often, interpreters stumble in interpretation by literalizing metaphors. Some cannot get past the historical seat from which the metaphor was taken in order to understand that to which the inspired writer is trying to signify. This is especially true when interpreting metaphors that refer to God. If we are not careful, we will create a god after the form of the literal and actual metaphor.

We must remind ourselves that the Holy Spirit could not fully communicate the nature and character of God by use of words that express characteristics and activities of man. In order to give us a

glimpse of the supernatural, the Spirit communicated through metaphors. In doing this, therefore, we must look beyond the metaphors. We must understand that when metaphors are being used, **something greater than the metaphor is being indicated.** The following are some examples of the Spirit's use of metaphors:

(1) **The Lord is a "rock."** One of the most beautiful metaphors in reference to God's relationship to the believer is Psalm 18:2. David said, "*The Lord is my rock and my fortress ....*" This passage is not stating that God is literally and actually a rock and fortress. The words "rock" and "fortress" are literal and actual things of this world that we physically experience. By using them as metaphors, **we must look beyond their literal and actual meaning in order to capture the spiritual significance of their use.** David is saying that the Lord is stable as a rock is stable. He is a protector as a fortress protects from the enemy.

(2) **Herod was a "fox."** Jesus said to His disciples concerning Herod, "*Go, tell that fox*" (Lk 13:32). This is not to say that Herod was a literal fox. He was only crafty as a fox is crafty.

There are metaphors in describing heaven that we commonly literalize. Consider John's description of the New Jerusalem. "*And the twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass*" (Rv 21:21).

In interpreting this passage, Bible students have made one of the most common mistakes in understanding metaphors. Pearls and gold are things **of this world.** They are literal and actual substances of this world. However, the Bible teaches that the earth and the elements thereof, including gold and pearls, will be burned up when Jesus comes again (2 Pt 3:10,11). In some way, therefore, elements of this world will have no significance in the new heavens and earth that is to come (2 Pt 3:13)? As Christians, we seek to control our greed by concentrating on those things that are above (Cl 3:1). And yet, if we seek a literal gold mine in heaven, then our desire for material things has not yet been controlled. It would certainly be inconsistent on the part of God to direct us through the Scriptures to not "*love the world or the things of the world,*" and yet, make a promise to us that we will receive worldly things as a blessing of heaven to come. Why would God seek to guide Christians not to be materialistic in this life, while at the same time, promising them an environment of material things to come?

Christians seek a place that is not of material possessions or material prosperity. In literalizing the metaphors of the book of Revelation, we often **create a heaven after our own materialistic desires.** We seek those pearls, gold and precious gems that are only of this world. Are we not missing the beauty of John's metaphors? We must remember, that in metaphor something beyond the metaphor is being pictured. Something **greater** than the metaphor is being un-

veiled. Heaven is **beyond the metaphors. Heaven is beyond and better than pearls and streets of gold.** In literalizing John's metaphors in his description of heaven, we unfortunately bring heaven down to earth.

We must also be careful that we do not create a god who behaves after our own human experiences and being. The following are two types of metaphors that are used in reference to God:

**(a) Anthropopathisms:** With anthropopathism, God is described with human emotions, passions and desires. In Genesis 6:6 it is stated, "*And the Lord was **sorry** that He had made man on the earth, and He was **grieved** in His heart.*" Our immediate inclination is to interpret these anthropopathisms after their human sense. However, we caution ourselves against doing this lest we create a god who is not above the simple emotions of man. Consider also Deuteronomy 13:17. "*So none of the accursed things shall remain in your hand, that the Lord may turn from the **fierceness of His anger** ....*" Consider Ephesians 4:30, "*Do not **grieve** the Holy Spirit of God ....*" If we understand these human emotions when used in reference to God, **exactly as we would understand them in reference to man,** then we have created a god that is not above human emotions. This god emotionally responds as a man would respond. This is what the Greeks did in the creation of all the gods of their mythology.

It is important that we not miss the metaphorical use of words that are used

in the Bible to explain the emotion of God. Our God is above human emotions. He certainly created man after His image, which is to say that our human emotional makeup came from Him. However, in order for Him to create us emotional beings, He had to first be greater than our simple human emotions. In other words, that which creates must be bigger and greater than that which is created. Therefore, God is greater than our human emotions.

**(b) Anthropomorphisms:** This is the assigning of human **physical** characteristics to God. God said to Israel, "*I am the Lord; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians ... I will redeem you with an outstretched **arm** ...*" (Ex 6:6; see 15:16). The Psalmist wrote, "*The **eyes** of the Lord are on the righteous ... the **face** of the Lord is against those who do evil ...*" (Ps 34:15,16). Does God have a literal face and eyes?

Jesus said, "*God is **spirit**, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth*" (Jn 4:24). A spirit does not have physical features. We create a god after our own likeness when we miss the meaning of the metaphors that explain God with the use of human characteristics. We envision a god with a literal face, nose, eyes and hands. Somehow we feel that we can relate to this physical god. The idolater simply takes this practice one step further. He carves out of wood or forms with clay his image of his created god.

The Bible is full of precious and rich metaphors. Metaphors as "sacrifice,"

“redemption” and “justification” are used in reference to our salvation. Jesus was a **sacrifice** for our sins (2 Co 5:21). The literal and actual origin of the metaphor finds its historical seat in the sacrificial lamb that was literally and actually burned on an altar in the Old Testament. However, Jesus’ sacrifice was greater than the Old Testament sacrifices (Hb 9:23). We have been **redeemed** by the blood of Jesus (Ep 1:7). One of the historical seats of this metaphor is taken from God’s literal “redeeming” of Israel out of Egyptian captivity (Ex 6:6). However, our redemption from sin is greater than Israel’s national redemption from Egyptian captivity. Christians have been **justified** (Rm 3:20-26). The literal and actual origin of the metaphor justification finds its seat in the legal court system of Paul’s day when one was shown mercy and cleared of his crime in a court of law. However, our justification is greater than this. Our justification is by the precious blood of the Son of God and involves eternal consequences. **The metaphor points us to something greater than the historical meaning from which it was taken.**

Paul was once caught up to the “third heaven” (2 Co 12:1-4). He “*heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.*” He saw things that were not to be revealed nor could be revealed. He evidently saw and experienced the heavenly. He could not have explained these things to us simply because there were no earthly words that would explain the realm of the “third heaven.” This is not only true of heaven, it is also true of

God. **That which is beyond this world cannot be explained with words of this world.** Therefore, the Holy Spirit used metaphors to explain those mysteries that we are yet to experience. We must not literalize the metaphors of the Bible, and thus miss the splendor and mystery of God and the supernatural. Our minds are captivated by the metaphor to wonder concerning those things that are above our human experience. Therefore, with great anticipation we “*look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells*” (2 Pt 3:13). Christians seek the coming of Jesus.

**d. Synecdoche:** In a synecdoche **a part is used to refer to the whole, or vice versa.** In Mark 16:16 the words “believe” and “baptize” stand for all that is necessary to be saved. Peter said, “*There is also an antitype which now saves, namely baptism ...*” (1 Pt 3:21). The action of baptism is here used to stand for all that is necessary in order for one to be saved. This would include faith and repentance. Jesus used the word “believe” in John 3:16 in the same manner. “Believe” stands for everything that is necessary in order to have eternal life.

Too many Bible interpreters have taken one or two verses and constructed a doctrine out of the statement of those one or two verses. They have made that doctrine contradict clear statements made in other passages where more information is given. This is not good Bible study and should be avoided. Our beliefs must be based on an understanding of the whole text of the Bible. All texts of the Bible must work in harmony with one

another in developing teaching on which we base our faith.

**e. Metonymy:** A metonymy is **the use of one word for another word that it suggests**. In the story of Luke 16:19-31 it is stated that Abraham said to the Rich Man, “*They have Moses and the Prophets.*” Jesus did not mean that they literally had the presence of Moses and other prophets. What is actually meant is that they have the **writings** of Moses and the Prophets. The figure of the “key” of David, that is used many times in the Bible, is not a literal key, but simply a metonymy referring to the heavenly authority expressed on earth through the reign of David (Is 22:22; Rv 3:7; see examples of metonymy in Rm 12:1; Ph 1:20).

**f. Hyperbole:** A hyperbole is **an exaggeration to express a truth**. Jesus used a hyperbole in Matthew 19:24. “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.*” Another example is Luke 14:26. “*If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother ... he cannot be My disciple.*” (See further examples in Gn 22:17; Dt 1:28; 2 Ch 28:4; Mt 6:3.) The figure of a hyperbole must not be taken literally. One must search for the truth that is being expressed by the exaggeration. Because of the use of hyperbole, we must of necessity take the truth that is stated very seriously. The purpose of a hyperbole is to express a serious truth.

**g. Irony:** This is often referred to as a **sarcasm**. It is **an expression in which the meaning is clearly opposite to what the words say**. Consider Paul’s

statement in 1 Corinthians 4:8 in the background of those in Corinth who were puffed up and thought they knew all truth. “*You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you.*” Also consider the irony of the context of 1 Corinthians 6:3 in view of the same group of arrogant false apostles in Corinth who probably claimed the right of judging angels. “*Do you not know that we shall judge angels?*” (See also the examples of Jb 12:2; Mk 15:32.) Again, the irony is not to be taken literally. It is used to teach truth by being sarcastic about the false beliefs surrounding the one being taught.

**h. Euphemism:** This is the literary practice of **substituting a less offensive word for another**. Paul used such in 1 Thessalonians 4:13. “*But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep*” (See also At 7:60). “Asleep” here is an euphemism for death. It is a more gentle word than the word death.

**i. Parable:** A parable is **an earthly story that is used to reveal a spiritual truth**. It is a comparative story. We might refer to a parable as a metaphorical story that is used to tell a spiritual truth. Several are recorded in the New Testament (See Mt 13). The fault into which many Bible interpreters fall when studying parables is assigning a spiritual truth to everything stated in the parable. One must be careful not to make the parable mean more than it was meant to say. Also, one must not become so

involved in the story of the parable that he forgets the spiritual truths the parable was meant to convey. It is generally true that parables are not as complex or hard to understand as many are led to believe. We must simply look for the principle thought of the parable and apply that thought to life.

We must remember that a parable is a metaphorical story that is meant to convey a truth that is greater than the story itself. Details must be given in order to tell a story. However, every detail that is given in order to tell the story is not necessarily meant to be understood to signify some truth. We must seek the general truth of the metaphorical story, not become encumbered over the details that were necessary in order to tell the story.

**j. Apocalyptic & cryptic:** The books of Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation are in many places written with a literary style of writing called **apocalyptic writing**. In apocalyptic writing it is the purpose of the writer to **conceal the truth from the enemies of God**. On the other hand, it is also the goal of the writer to **reveal truth to those who are often under the oppression of the enemies of God**.

**Cryptic** symbols are often used in this type of literature. A cryptic symbol is **an unreal and horrifying word picture that conveys a message to the reader through the construction of a graphic portrayal of the victory of good over evil**. When one studies books that were written in the style of apocalyptic literature, he or she must be very careful not to make literal the actual cryp-

tic symbols and figurative language.

**k. Other figures of speech:** There are several other figures of speech with which one must become acquainted when studying the Bible. These are also used in the New Testament. An **allegory** is an extended metaphor. It gives a spiritual meaning to an historical event (See Ps 80:8-15; Jn 10:1-18; Gl 4:21-31). A **litotes** is an understatement to give emphasis or a different meaning (See Ps 51:17; Is 42:3). A **meiosis** is a statement where less is said than what is meant (See 1 Th 2:15; Hb 13:17). An **ellipsis**, or **brachylogy**, is a concise or abridged statement that omits words or phrases (See Gn 3:22; Ex 32:32; Jn 6:27; 1 Co 6:13; 2 Co 5:13; 1 Jn 5:9). A **zeugma** is the use of two nouns that are grammatically constructed to one verb (See Lk 1:64; 1 Co 3:2). In an **apophysis** the author emphasizes what he wants to say by implying it in what is actually said (See Pl 19). A **paronomasia** is a pun statement (See Mt 8:22). An **oxymoron** combines words or ideas which are opposite (See Mt 6:23).

To be an effective Bible student one must be able to recognize figures of speech. Too many people come to the Bible with an inability to separate the figurative from the literal. Such has led to much confusion in biblical interpretation and literalization of key Bible texts where figurative language is used. We must remember that God communicated His will to us in language that we use in our everyday speech. Therefore, we would assume that much of the Bible uses

figurative language. Much of the Bible is a record of the conversations of people with one another. Therefore, we would assume that these conversations would be recorded as they were given, and thus, they would include the common figures of speech that people use in everyday speech.

## G. Discover the comparative contexts:

**The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself.** In other words, a good Bible student will seek to learn the Bible in a manner that will give him the ability to cross-reference words and passages. We must learn well the text of the Bible. In doing so we will be able to compare the words in one context with how those same words are used in other contexts. We will be able to compare the thoughts of one passage with the same parallel thoughts as they are used in other passages. This is what is called comparative study.

**1. Compare words in different contexts.** In order to discover the meaning of a particular word in a passage, it is wise to see how that word is used in other contexts. As we compile a notebook throughout our years of study, we must be sure to make a list of key Bible words that are used often in the Bible. For example, consider a word study of the word “fellowship” (Greek, *koinonia*). *Koinonia* is used in passages as 1 Corinthians 1:9; Galatians 2:9; Philippians 1:5; and 1 John 1:3. One must study how this word is used in each of these contexts.

In each context, it refers to different concepts. These different contexts help us understand different shades of meaning of the same word.

**2. Compare thoughts in different contexts.** In order to understand the thought of a particular scripture, one must study the thought of the scripture in other scriptures. Here are two suggestions on how to accomplish this:

**a. Use a “center reference” Bible:** Many Bibles have what is commonly called a **center reference** or cross reference. This is a notation in a particular verse of other passages that use a word, phrase or thought of that verse in different contexts. These parallel references may be listed at the bottom of the page, in a center column, or in a side column. For example, in some Bibles we can turn to Acts 2:38 and see a notation and scripture of the phrase “gift of the Holy Spirit.” The notation directs us to refer to the passages of Acts 8:20 and Acts 10:45. We turn to these passages and we find other notations of scriptures as John 4:10 which may refer the student to yet other scriptures. In this manner we can study through several passages in order to study a particular thought as it is used in many different contexts.

**b. Use a concordance:** A good tool in Bible study that allows one to accomplish the above in a more brief manner is a Bible concordance. A concordance simply lists words that are used in different passages throughout the Bible. Abridged, or condensed concordances are often printed in the back of Bibles. A

concordance is a good tool to have. However, one can accomplish the same thing as a concordance by simply reading and taking notes on where principal scriptures and words are located.

Every Bible student must master the skill of allowing the Bible to be its own commentary. One must learn the text of the Bible well enough to be able to find parallel passages of key words and thoughts. Before one seeks the knowledge of other Bible interpreters, he must allow the Bible the opportunity to speak for itself by as many different contexts as possible. When one studies a scripture, therefore, always seek out commentary passages that will help to understand the passage that is under investigation.

The Bible was written in a manner that would challenge the thinking of everyone who loves the truth. To understand it, however, one must develop a systematic approach to Bible study. Too often people are disappointed with their Bible studies because they have not developed those Bible study skills that are so important for understanding the Bible.

## **H. Discover the system for writing a “lifetime commentary”:**

In order for one to be a lifetime student of the Bible, he or she must have a lifetime plan of Bible study and keeping of notes. All good Bible students have notes and outlines that they have taken and kept on their studies of the Bible. In reference to an organized system of keeping notes on one’s study of the text of

the Bible, we set forth the following system. If one will keep this system of notes on his studies of the text of the Bible, he will have an organized system of studies that will continue to grow throughout his or her life.

**1. System of organization:** The final goal of the Bible student’s work is to produce a commentary of information on the Bible. In other words, throughout your life, make it your goal to develop a lifetime commentary of information on the entire Bible. The information for making this commentary will come from different sources. However, all the information will be accumulated into a systematic file according to book, chapter and verse of the Bible.

Since the making of a commentary of information on the entire Bible is based on the text of the Bible, then the book, chapter and verse divisions of the Bible naturally dictate the filing system one should use. In other words, when you listen to a lecture, class or sermon on a particular book, chapter or verse, your notes that you take will be added to the book, chapter and verse file of your “lifetime commentary.”

**2. Tools for filing:** In order to begin and maintain a lifetime systematic study of the Bible, there are some basic decisions one must make in reference to “tools” for the maintenance of a good study program. We would first suggest that you use a **loose leaf notebook**. By this we mean a notebook system by which individual pages can be added or subtracted as you accumulate information

and revise your notes.

As you progress in your systematic program of biblical studies, you will continually make notes from your resources of study. As you make notes, these will need to be added at the appropriate book, chapter and verse location in your notebook. As you make revisions or additions throughout the years, you will need to be able to easily revise, add and subtract from the individual pages of notes.

In order to make room on each page, transcribe your permanent notes on either the right hand or left hand half of the page. By doing this you will have space for adding notes later that refer to the same book, chapter or verse.

The “permanent notes” side of your record will be your originally written or rewritten record of notes from which you will preach or teach. The “added notes” side of your record will be the notes that you add from notes you take when listening to a lecture, sermon or class on a particular book, chapter or verse of the Bible. You can easily add notes to your lifetime commentary file, and then, occasionally rewrite the permanent record in order to bring it up-to-date. By doing this, you are constantly adding to your file information that you receive from every opportunity of studying the Bible.

**3. Resources:** Information that you add to your lifetime commentary will come from several sources. Information will first come from your personal stud-

ies. As you study the Bible, continually make notes on the Bible according to book, chapter and verse. Add these notes to your commentary on a regular basis.

The second source of information will be occasions when you have the opportunity of listening to others who give their interpretations of different books, chapters and verses of the Bible. When listening to someone else preaching or teaching on a particular subject, take notes. Once you take notes on ideas and explanations of verses or contexts of the Bible, recopy your notes on the appropriate page of your commentary file. It is important to transcribe your notes as soon as possible after hearing a particular sermon or lecture. In this way you will remember more of what was said in the sermon or lecture.

Throughout the development of your lifetime commentary, you can add the temporary notes to your permanent notes by rewriting or retyping the page. In this way the commentary will grow throughout the years.

The advantage of setting a goal to produce a lifetime commentary is that it will challenge you to take notes during every sermon or class in which you sit and participate. The challenge will encourage you to be a Bible student. At the end of your life, you will have a great amount of biblical studies to give to your children and grandchildren. Bible study should be your legacy.

## Epilogue

### FOCUS ON THE GOSPEL OF JESUS

There is a fundamental difference between Christianity and Islam in reference to sacred writings. This fundamental difference is in reference to how those of each group view the written authority of their faith. The Quran of the Muslim is an idol, as well as the authority for his faith. He idolizes the actual book, and thus, takes great care that the book itself is not violated in any way. However, the focus of the Christian is on the message of the book, the gospel message of Jesus. This message is communicated to the Christian through ink and paper in the form of a scroll or book. Enemies of the Christian's faith can burn the book, but they cannot destroy the gospel message of the book. There have been hundreds of translations made of the Bible, but no translation corrupts the message. Christians, therefore, seek to make many translations of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, understanding that any one translation does not distort the message of Jesus and the cross. The Muslim, however, feels that the Quran can never be properly translated into any other language, simply because the original words in Arabic can never be translated acceptably. But the Christian seeks translations of the original manuscript languages of Hebrew and Greek in order to better understand the message of the Bible, as well as to make the message known to as many people as possible. His willingness to translate the Bible into many languages has made it possible for the message of the gospel to go forth into all the world.