

# MEMOIRS of Dr. C. B. HASTINGS

## Chapter II - My View of the Bible

### Thoughts on Bible Interpretation

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#### Introduction

##### 1. Justification of this Chapter

Your "religion"--literally, that which binds back--is that which binds you to the realities of life which control thought and action. The ultimate reality which one acknowledges is his God. But there are "gods many and lords many." How can you know the true God?

We belong to one of the three great monotheistic religions of the world, each believing that the One, True God is creator, providential ruler, savior and judge of all people. Each believes that God reveals himself through his prophets, who have left records of their experiences with God for the light and guidance of others.

The Christian believes that the highest and fullest revelation of God has come to us through Jesus Christ. The simplest definition of a Christian is therefore one who believes in and is a follower of Jesus the Christ. But how do we know Christ? The objective source of this knowledge is the New Testament, taken together with the preparation of the revelation of God made through the "Old Covenant" to the people whom God chose as the vehicle of that revelation. (We will later discuss the subjective source of knowledge of Christ).

The Bible, then, is the key to Christian knowledge and a guide to Christian living. Very soon in one's Christian life we discover that not everyone views the Bible like us. There are those who reject the Bible completely or only as antiquarian religious history. There are peoples of other world religions who ask "How do you know the Bible is true?" There are your fellow Christians who view the Bible differently from you. And now cheap answers will not satisfy even yourself: "Because my parents believed the Bible;" "because all Christians hold it as central to faith;" "because it has stood the test of time" (so has the Koran and the sayings of Confucius).

If you are to have an intelligent faith, if you are to give a convincing witness to that faith, you at some time and to some measure must wrestle with such questions as these: What do you mean by "The Bible is the Word of God" or "The Bible contains the Word of God?" What is the authority of the Bible for you? How did the Bible come down to us? How do you interpret the Bible, for it was written in three different languages and within several cultures over a period of more than a thousand years by some forty authors?

If you are called to teach, as I have, then these questions become crucial. I have been challenged throughout my ministry with several levels of teaching the Bible: Sunday School (teaching and writing lesson materials); adult education on the college level; some seminary teaching. My views on the Bible have been challenged in dialoguing with Christians of other denominations, such as Catholics and Mormons, or differently with Jews and Moslems. I have a deep conviction that those of us who have been privileged to enjoy higher education in religious studies owe to the lay people we teach the obligation to share with them the insights of scripture as fully as they are able to receive. For me there is no privileged status in the Word of God that requires protection. This does not mean that I am going to force feed higher critical views upon new Christians. There is a good educational law that says you adjust teaching to the degree of maturity and comprehension of the students.

But integrity demands that I not dodge critical problems nor withhold truth simply because it is disturbing or unpopular. My view of the Bible, therefore, is crucial to my whole religious life. I accepted it without question during my early years by reason of my rearing and other early influences. I probably would not have understood the terms, but what I was taught was standard Southern Baptist fare: the Bible is the infallible Word of God, received pretty much by direct dictation of God to his writers. I can even remember trying to count the number of times where "And God said..." is found.

In my early education, which was strongly colored by the conservative defense against Modernism of the turn of the century, I thought I should become the white knight who would defend the Bible against all comers. It took years for me to realize that (a) I could never become that highly equipped, and (b) the Bible did not need defending but expounding. So, in higher education I dedicated myself to those disciplines of language and hermeneutics (the study of interpretation) that would develop skill in expounding the Scriptures. As with other aspects of my Christian journey this has resulted in change and

growth that has not always been easy. Even as I write I realize that my views are dynamic and therefore continue to develop--sometimes to the frustration of my students!

## **2. Problems arising from the controversy within our Convention today**

It is impossible to write or speak for those of us who believe deeply in our Baptist heritage without being colored by this controversy. But I hope to keep my deep feelings about the matter from affecting my effort to give you a more positive view. This problem is certainly not new. In one form or another I have had to deal with it all of my teaching days. There is something about the lure of security the dogmatic view provides that appeals to a vast section of our people. To add to the anti-educational strain in our history we now have the cultural linkage with political and economic conservatism that practically guarantees fundamentalism. It is no wonder that those of us who disagree with the current trends feel overwhelmed by the mass media effect of fundamentalism. However, I do not wish to make this a point-by-point refutation of that heresy. Such seldom results in a well-balanced view.

## **3. Methodology**

The preceding outline will set our agenda for discussion. It will certainly not be exhaustive, even of all that I believe and try to practice. I will try to avoid as far as possible technical terms and problems. Though I have reviewed much of my teaching notes and some standard books, I will not often refer to the writings of others. This does not mean that I am not indebted to very many along the way, but it will spare you the tediousness of shifting mental gears to another's thought and style such as an academic effort might require.

As in all good teaching, there ought to be feedback and exchange. I could wish that you would keep a notepad handy as you read to record questions that are raised or insights you have and even of disagreements I provoke. This can be more than my testament and prove to be a real learning experience for all of us, if you share your notes with me so that I can respond and share them with the rest.

### **I. What is the Bible? How has it come down to us?**

There are almost as many ways of answering this first question as there are those who answer. Allow me to try to give an answer that satisfies me. The Bible is the historical record of the People of God whom God used to bring the final revelation of himself and his saving work for all humankind through Jesus Christ. It is "holy history," in that men inspired by God's Spirit wrote history, not as a mere record of events, but with such interpretation as they were divinely led. It is "salvation history," in that it develops God's actions in entering into covenant with a people as the human instrument of bringing salvation to the world through Jesus Christ. He, then, has established the highest form of divine-human relationship. The Bible is a religious treasury of many kinds of literature: history, poetry (including a romantic drama), practical philosophy and moral counsel, missionary and personal letters, Israel's hymnal, prophetic and apocalyptic writings. The amazing variety of human factors reflected in its authors and characters show a progress in the ethical and spiritual understanding of God that climaxes in the witness of the early Church to Jesus Christ.

The Bible records the words of God in the words of men. It becomes the "Word of God" for me when I allow the Spirit of God to use its words to lead me to God's incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. Regardless of

how much I may affirm about the Bible, only that much of the Bible that has come alive to me through his Spirit is "my Bible."

How did the Bible come down to us? It came through an immense variety of witnesses. We cannot escape the fact that we are shut up to the witness of others for this objective record of God's revelation. We can begin with those who first gave us a Bible and taught us to read and trust what we read. Then we move to those scholars who translated its original languages; to the Reformers and their churches for determining the canon of the Old Testament; to the monks and other scribes who copied and preserved manuscripts before the advent of printing; then to the early Church for the long, half-conscious process of selecting the New Testament writings. Finally, we reach the "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Luke 1.2), who were the primary source for the Gospels, and the apostles who left letters as their contribution to the growing witness to Jesus Christ.

We can acknowledge the Council of Jamnia in 90 A.D., when a group of rabbis chose the 39 books that make up the so-called Palestinian canon, which was adopted by the Reformers. The longer one of the Septuagint was adopted by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The historicity of this "council" has been seriously questioned by contemporary scholarship, but we can safely say that the Jews had no fixed canon until probably the second century A. D.

The formation of the New Testament canon was the result of a century long process the post-apostolic Church carried out without formal effort. In his introduction to the Gospel Luke indicates that by his time many were endeavoring to make collections of the sayings and stories from the life of Jesus. By the end of the first century there is fair evidence that the letters of Paul were collected into one (at least the major works). The missionary churches were encouraged to read and pass on any letters or writings of the apostles and those closely associated with them, such as Luke and Mark. By the end of the second century the attacks upon certain of these well accepted books by the heretic Marcion forced the churches to draw up lists of those writings that had "proved their inspiration" and deserved a place alongside the Hebrew scriptures. The practical acceptance was evidenced by their general use for worship and teaching in the churches in different areas of the Christian world. It was not until the 4th century that certain regional synods began to draw up a formal canon. And it was not until the Council of Trent, 1545-63, that the Catholic Church officially chose the larger canon of the Old Testament and the accepted canon of the New Testament.

This is all given here to underscore the dynamic process of final formation of the Scriptures and reflect the many human and societal factors in the process. By no means do I consider this a weakening of my high view of the authority and authenticity of the Scriptures. On the other hand, the closing of the canon, i.e., the growing consensus that the history of revelation was complete with the apostolic witness, is essential to our faith. Not that I do not believe in the continuing work of the Holy Spirit in guiding us in the present into the ways and will of God, especially as applied to different cultures and changing conditions of the Church. But since the fullest revelation of Jesus Christ as the final Word of God to mankind has been given we now have a standard by which to evaluate and judge all later beliefs and practices. In contrast to this is the Mormon claim that the later revelation to Joseph Smith is to be accepted on a par with the Bible, or that of Islam that the Koran was infallibly dictated to Mohammed as the last and greatest of the prophets of the one God, Allah. Without accepting the extreme claims of literalism and infallibility of the fundamentalists I still feel that the closing of the canon of the Bible ensures that we can have an historical faith that provides us with a sure objective standard of revelation.

Now all of this adds up to two conclusions: I have great confidence in the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the many, diverse authors of the books of the Bible and in the providential care of God in bringing the Word of God through many ages and cultures down to our day. Seeing that God used so many human means to bring this about, I also believe the approach to understanding the Bible demands both a holy seriousness and the full use of critical reasoning. Before I try to spell this out in discussing interpretation, let us take a brief look at the three approaches to the Bible that are dominant today.

### **What are the Chief Approaches to the Bible today?**

It is precarious to categorize people today, for so much prejudice enters the judging, often on the basis of partial and unbalanced evidence. The warfare between conservatives and liberals reaches back at least to the 18th century and has been fought on many grounds by many diverse religious armies. But we will use the contemporary labels that are current in the Southern Baptist Convention's wars.

#### **1. Fundamentalism**

This approach is as old as the conservatism of the mid-19th century that sought to maintain orthodox theology and views of the Bible against the growing influence of modernity in western culture. It had its stronghold then in the Princeton "school" that opposed the newly propounded infallibility of the Pope (Vatican I, 1870) with the infallibility of the Scriptures. It received temporary setbacks in the 20th century when it became identified with a kind of cheap populism that fought against evolution, as in the Scopes Trial. On the other hand, among evangelicals it was greatly helped by the wide distribution of the Scofield Reference Bible (first published in 1905 by the pastor of a Congregational Church in Dallas).

About the same time a group of evangelicals produced a series of booklets which were called "The Fundamentals." These were widely distributed to pastors and laity through the financial support of some affluent laymen. For the most part these were well written, some by leading conservative scholars. The fundamental beliefs they held essential to the Christian faith centered around these five tenets:

- 1) The full or plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, meaning that every word of the Bible is inspired and "without error."
- 2) The Virgin Birth of Jesus and his deity, with special emphasis upon his miracles as historical fact.
- 3) The vicarious atonement of Jesus as the sole basis of salvation. ("Vicarious"--suffering in behalf of others and not for one's own sin).
- 4) The bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead as proof of all claims about Jesus and as guarantee of believers' resurrection.
- 5) The Second Coming of Christ as a literal event that will culminate human history. This is usually interpreted as premillennial, that is, prior to the setting up of Christ's thousand-year reign with his saints over the earth from his throne in Jerusalem.

Now, let it be noted that the last four of these "fundamentals" are accepted as true by most "moderate conservatives." As for the first, the latter would hold such a high view of inspiration and revelation that they feel put upon by fundamentalists who charge them with not believing the Bible as the Word of

God. The moderates simply do not feel that any listing of "fundamentals" can ever be a full and adequate summary of the Gospel. This is what the Catholic Church sought to do early in its struggles against various heresies. The end result is always an overemphasis upon certain truths and a neglect of others. As Jesus said, "You tithe ... and have neglected the weightier matters ... these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others" (Mt. 21.23).

Some of the characteristics of Fundamentalism with regard to the Bible are:

- 1) A repudiation of the historical-critical method of Bible study (more later on this). While rejecting this very complex method they will also use other complex methods of explaining difficult or contradictory passages of scripture. This often involves much use of allegory and typology in interpreting the Old Testament.
- 2) A rationalistic approach to truth, i.e., that truth can be reduced to propositional statements in any language, while holding that only the autographs of the Bible are infallible. (This is very close to medieval Roman Catholic scholasticism that reduced the faith to decrees and dogmas which are unchangeable).
- 3) Literalism, which often is used very selectively, with regard to the history and natural science of the Bible: e.g., the six days of creation; the historicity of Adam and Eve and of a universal flood; of the sun standing still for Joshua's victory; of the story of Jonah and the whale; of the Devil as a person and of demons; and others. This is often accompanied by spiritualizing that which may be offensive to the theology and ethics of the Gospel: e.g., God commanding "holy war" and other divine commands not acceptable today; allegorizing the Song of Solomon and the imprecatory Psalms of David.

The overriding end of Fundamentalism is to protect the orthodox faith from anti-supernaturalism and humanism. It has a strong appeal to laity who do not want to be troubled with working out biblical problems for themselves, who prefer security in what they believe to freedom to pursue truth in all areas of life. To this end the Fundamentalists seek to establish schools that teach only one system of thought. They try to provide books written popularly that appeal to an emotional commitment to the Bible and avoid the hard problems.

## **2. Modernism or Liberalism**

This, too, is a very old approach to the Bible. In brief, it may be described as the effort to adapt the truths of the Bible and the Gospel to the historical, scientific, and rational thought forms of the modern world. George Tyrell was one of the liberal Catholic writer of the turn of the century in England whose system was condemned as 'modernist' by Popes Leo XIII and Pius X who then instituted an 'Oath Against Modernism,' still required at the ordination of all priests of the Church. He said, "By a Modernist I mean a churchman of any sort who believes in the possibility of a synthesis between the essential truth of his religion and the essential truth of modernity."

This approach has roots extending as far back as Philo, Jewish writer of the first century, who sought to interpret Moses by the allegorical method so as to coincide with contemporary Greek philosophy. In this effort to make the Bible agreeable to dominant philosophy he was followed by Origen, Christian

theologian of the Third Century, and by Thomas Aquinas of the 13th Century, the founder of Catholic scholasticism.

With reference to the Bible Marcion was labeled a heretic in 144 A.D. by teaching that the Gospel was wholly a gospel of love as revealed by Jesus and not of law. By that he rejected the Old Testament as revealing a God unworthy of the God of Jesus. He accepted only ten of the Pauline epistles and his own edited form of Luke. In the 18th Century a French physician, Jean Astruc, was the first to discern that the Pentateuch was a composite of several older documents.

The Enlightenment turned the vast majority of intellectuals from the dogmas of the Church toward liberal thought that majored on the free exercise of the human mind. In the 19th Century the rise of historical criticism and a new field of 'the history of religions' developed theories of the composite authorship of the Pentateuch and then of many of the other books of the Bible. All of this was seen by evangelical theologians as a denial of the historicity of the Bible and of the uniqueness of Jesus as divine Savior.

Historically there are differences between 19th Century liberalism and the particular movement in Catholicism that was labeled 'modernist' at the turn of the century. For our purposes, we can generalize both by these characteristics, recognizing that there are varying views (and certainly not all can be branded agnostic or unbelieving):

- 1) The Bible is primarily a human book that can be accounted for by the sociological forces of religions. It is therefore to be exposed to the same historical criticism accorded any other human writing. Evolutionary processes which require time and maturity are seen as the cause of change and development.
- 2) The Bible was written in a pre-scientific world that was dominated by myths and legends that explain the belief of how the gods controlled the course of human events. These elements need to be "demythologized" in order to make them acceptable and understandable to modern thought. As a result, there is a strong anti-supernatural bias that seeks to explain miracles and wonders in natural terms. Failing this, the approach assumes that the stories were invented to illustrate truths which could not be explained rationally.
- 3) The older liberalism was permeated by a thoroughgoing belief in the inevitability of human progress through social evolution. This belief foundered considerably on the shoals of two world wars, the holocaust, and subsequent deteriorations in Western culture. It still fosters a sometimes unrealistic optimism in the ultimate progress of humanity through scientism, technology and social strategies.
- 4) There is a contemporary form of liberal thought that has elements from such theologians as Barth, Bultmann, Holtzmann and the Swedish school that holds that the warfare over the historicity of the Bible, especially of the life of Jesus, is no longer relevant. Whatever can be historically affirmed about Jesus, it is the proclamation of the Gospel (Bultmann) or the Word of God (Barth) that calls forth faith unto salvation. So, proclamation/response should be the chief concern of the Church in the modern world. The critical problems will never finally be solved anyway.

- 5) As in Fundamentalism so in liberalism. There are favorite emphases from the Bible: the demands of the O. T. prophets for justice and genuineness in religion; the ethical teachings of Jesus, especially as seen in the Sermon on the Mount; the primacy of love and of reconciliation among all classes of human beings; corporate responsibility over personal piety in religion; a this-worldly rather than other-worldly hope for all peoples.

Let me emphasize again the wide diversity among the liberals. It ranges all the way from the avowed agnostic and destructive critic to the believing and constructive biblical scholar who claims to be in the mainstream of the Christian faith. Because of this wide range there is much more tolerance and respect for divergent views than in Fundamentalism. From whatever pole they operate the liberal continues to be a necessary challenge to the easy believerism and smug complacency in holding all the truth that characterizes the other extremists.

Is there another approach between these two extremes? Is it possible to be faithful to the truth of the Scriptures and accept the findings of modern science? Can our reason and our spiritual sense cooperate without either despising the other? Is "Truth" to be found only through revelation or only through science and human experience? Is "Truth" a static reality ordained by God and preserved in the heavenlies or is it a dynamic process that comes from the interchange of God and human beings? Can we trust the Spirit of truth to "guide you into all the truth" (John 16.12), or was that promise valid only for the apostles? (If so, then I must perforce accept Catholic authoritarianism!).

### **3. Moderate conservatism**

By this I mean those who hold to the essentials of the Gospel as revealed in the Bible, but who moderate their approach between the two extremes above. All moderate conservatives I know hold to what is called a high view of revelation and inspiration. Since I believe myself to be in the mainstream of this approach, all the rest of this chapter will be an exposition of this view.

First let us pause to acknowledge some principles from our Protestant and Baptist heritage that are essential presuppositions:

- 1) The great Reformation principle of the priesthood of all believers. This was a revolt against the authority of an ordained priesthood that claimed to have all the truth and the power to enforce its acceptance through giving or withholding the sacraments. This priesthood of believers was particularly seen as operating in the essential relationship between God and the sinner for salvation; in the direct approach to God in prayer; and in the freedom to interpret the Bible through the Spirit available to all believers.
- 2) The peculiar form of this principle in our Baptist heritage has been called the "competency of the soul." Every human being has this competence in dealing directly with God through the Spirit because a) each is made in the image of God and therefore enabled to communicate with God; b) each believer is "reborn" into the likeness of Jesus Christ with unlimited potential for spiritual and moral growth and service; and c) each believer is gifted with the Holy Spirit from the moment of his 'rebirth' and thus can trust His guidance in interpreting and applying the Word of



God.

- 3) While all of us are sinners saved by grace and gifted with these marvelous graces as stated above, yet we are still fallible human beings. We have enough light and enough spiritual sense to arrive at sufficient unanimity to respect each other in our differences and cooperate in our diversities. Yet none of us has a corner on God or on His Truth. We, therefore, must be humble about our views and open to learning from whatever source God chooses to teach us. I cannot trust either the man who tells me "I have a message from God for you" or the man who claims that all who differ from him are wrong. "Did the Word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people to whom it came?" (I Cor. 14.36)

## **II. HOW DO I INTERPRET THE BIBLE?**

### **1. Revelation and Inspiration**

Whatever you think of revelation and inspiration controls your principles of interpretation and your ultimate attitude toward the Bible as the Word of God. By discussing it first I imply that along with most other believers I am coming at this deductively. It is true that most of us have been reared in such a believing environment that we assume the Bible is true before we ever read or study it. Now while this is not the scientific approach, which calls for examining the evidence first inductively, yet it is not altogether wrong. It guarantees that one approaches with a believing mind, a willing heart and a sensitive conscience. Without such there can be no guidance of the Spirit of God in the process. The Bible then becomes no more than an antiquarian history of two world religions.

The conscious formation of one's theory of revelation and inspiration, however, ought to come after one has studied the Bible and observed how it reflects upon this subject. In my case such a study greatly modified my early deductive conclusions.

My heritage is in Protestant scholasticism combined with Pietism. Scholasticism makes a sharp distinction between reason and revelation, between natural theology, which "pagans" can have (Rom. 1.18-23, 2.1215), and revealed theology (through the Bible). Scholasticism is rationalistic, however, in claiming that once a revealed truth is accepted by faith it can then be contained in rational propositions.

Pietism and Romanticism taught me that "the heart has reasons the mind cannot know," that only believers can properly reason concerning the faith; that the Spirit conveys to our spirit realities which cannot be adequately expressed in rational thought.

I was never fully committed, however, to the idea that revelation takes over and supplements where reason fails, nor its corollary, that every advance of reason displaces that amount of revelation. All final Truth is one and self-consistent, whether it comes from nature or revelation, from human consciousness or social history. But I do not believe that any rational expression of truth can do any more than depict its partial understanding to the human intelligence. For this reason, I find that what seems to us as paradox must be taken into account in order to balance seemingly incompatible truths until a synthesis of Truth arrives. Because of this I hold that truths are comprehended on different levels of meaning. Using the German terms which I find helpful, we can observe what actually happened (*historisch*) -- that

is available to anyone. The meaning of the event (historie) --is the contribution of revelation. (Remember these terms, for I will be using them again).

There is a sense of universal religious consciousness, a God consciousness, if you please, that is well-nigh universal. This carries with it a feeling of dependence upon and obligation to such a reality. But it is uncontrollable and inadequate without the light of revelation. The meaning of historical events, of course, can be derived from different sources and is the special aim of the historian as he seeks to explain and relate the various events to the historical developments.

In this context revelation is both the process of conveying the meaning, and its content. Revelation is primarily an interchange between the mind of God and the mind of the one inspired (here I am limiting the operation to the biblical prophets, authors and others with whom the Spirit of God was engaged). The "receiving mind" accepts by faith that the conveying Mind is worthy to be credible. It goes beyond what can be the subject of "objective" scientific research.

For example, the "facts" of creation are generally accepted by most religions, mythologies and even science:

- that there was a time when the universe was not: it had a beginning.
- that its first state was disorder--chaos.
- that it took great power to bring about order (and usually immense time).
- that there is in all order a ranking from the elemental to the more complex, a building or dependence of the higher upon the lower.
- that the present order shows both change and continuity.
- that all life is well-suited to its environment, which is a controlling factor in its existence.
- that effects depend upon causes which may or may not be apparent to the observer. The human mind is incurably curious as to causes and will invent final causes if none are apparent.

On the other hand, revelation interprets creation:

- that the cosmos is the work of an intelligent Mind as Creator.
- that God brought order out of chaos: light from darkness, life out of the inanimate, elemental life for the benefit of higher life; order through change so as to assure continuity; consistency of "nature" making its rational study both possible and profitable.
- that humanity was created to have fellowship with God and has responsibility toward God's handiwork.

Now inspiration is the human response to the revealing process. People, made in the image of God and influenced by the Spirit of God, were inspired, not words. Words as symbols of thought are subject to manipulation in use and translation. A symbol cannot possibly be equated with even physical, much less spiritual realities. There is no getting around this fact of language and therefore no point in a dictation theory and its consequent "infallible words." This revelation-inspiration, then, is a dynamic process of encounter-response that allows full play of both the human and the divine at work. This makes room for the biblical evidence that many authors used secondary sources that were human records in history (II Chron. 20.34) and the life of Jesus (Luke. 1.1-4). It makes room for the compiling of differing traditions (as the Old Testament sources designated "J," "D," "E," and "P," and that of the Gospels: "Q," "Mark,"

"Lucan," and "Johannine.") It also grants that the selection and editing of various materials were the product of the Apostolic and immediate post-apostolic Church working with their contemporary needs.

Now there are various levels of inspiration. The primary level of revelation is that which takes place between God and the one inspired. For example, God asked Jeremiah as he was walking on the road in early spring, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And Jeremiah replies, "I see a shoot of a shakedh (almond) tree." Then God says, "I am awake (shokedh) over my word to perform it." That was the process of the revelation. The content of the revelation is still subject to our interpretation: God is consistent and intent upon carrying out his purpose in calling Jeremiah as a prophet. This end result comes through the "illumination" of the Spirit working with our minds.

The divine revelation must be kept distinct from the human reception. Jeremiah reports this primary revelation to Baruch, and he writes it (Jer. 36.4). Baruch, like many other writers of the biblical books, was not the primary one inspired. Another example is Luke. He reported what his research had gained from the eyewitnesses, who were the recipients of the revelation.

There is a middle ground of inspiration which is less obvious, but most important. For example, the Book of Job records a dialogue between Job and his friends. I believe the drama is based upon a true story of an unjustly afflicted man, but by someone much later (Jeremiah could have easily written such! Cf. Jer. 20.14-18 with Job 3). The author was certainly disillusioned by the current theology, based very accurately upon the Law and much of the Prophets that prosperity is a sign of God's favor and man's righteousness and that suffering comes from his sins. Even though the truths of the Law might be valid for that time and for God's People, the God they revealed was inadequate for dealing with Job's case. Under the inspiration of the Spirit of God he cries out for a nobler conception of God, for a divine justifier of those who suffer injustice, for an assurance of immortality. None of these are revealed to him, but he is given the courage and boldness to cry against the current "revealed religion!"

Or take the Book of Ecclesiastes. Even the most diehard fundamentalists have trouble with this fatalistic and pessimistic book. Refuge is taken, for example, by The Amplified Bible in a footnote that says in effect, this does not mean that God said "Man is no better than the beast;" only that what "The Preacher" said is accurately reported. If so, then revelation/inspiration is no better than what every historian, even daily news reporter aspires to!

Now why do I accept Ecclesiastes into "my canon?" I see a different level of inspiration at work here. This author, like that of Job, was thoroughly disillusioned with the current theology and its ethical conclusions. Only he takes a different tack. He takes Solomon, as the reputed wisest and richest of the People of God, obeying the Law of God, and shows how empty such a life is when it pursues the standard goals to their conclusions. Surely no one not under the influence of God's Spirit would have dared such a radical judgment upon all that Israel held dear! It is no wonder that the Jews even to this day discourage their youth from reading this book.

All of this is but examples of what the author of Hebrews says:

"God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners..."--that is, partially and in completely (Heb. 1.1). We will discuss progressive revelation later.

The divine revelation must be kept distinct from the human reception. On the one hand we know that the divine revelation could only be partial and incomplete, though fitted to the needs of the times and the immaturity of God's People. On the other hand, the human reception was always subject to the inadequacies and misinterpretations of the recipient. His record of the revelation, therefore, was subject to the same weaknesses of human fallibility as in others. This is especially true at our end of the line, where under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we are "illuminated" to discern the truth. (I reserve "inspiration" for the impact of the Spirit upon the prophets and authors of scripture and "illumination" for the guidance of the Spirit in our interpretation).

The crux of the matter, then, is this. Did the inspiring of the Spirit guarantee the infallibility of the revelation? If so, then we have an infallible truth valid for everywhere, at all times. The human factor is reduced to nil. But the word of Jesus countermanded Moses with regard to divorce, the Sabbath, and others. Even Paul, who recognizes a difference between his own views and that of Christ (I Cor. 7.25), will conclude with the modest "I think that I also have the Spirit of God" (7.40).

The cultural factor in revelation must also be taken into account. For the authors to be able to communicate to their own generation they must do so in the language and thought forms of the people they seek to reach. Now cultures change, even throughout biblical times, and even more when the Bible moves out of the Judaic culture of its origin.

That culture was not concerned with philosophies and sciences which were many centuries later in developing. The authors and their constituencies saw the world and nature from a pre-scientific, non-philosophical point of view. Their view was "phenomenal"--that is, they looked upon nature as all others saw it in simple, practical understanding. The sun moved around the earth, not vice versa. The earth had "four corners," north, east, south and west. The moon had a "lesser light."

Furthermore, the immediate cultural situation of the people addressed must be taken into account. When Paul gave practical instructions to the church at Corinth, he was speaking to a people barely removed from the idolatries and superstitions of a very corrupt city. His counsel to women was designed to protect the reputation of the Church from immoral accusations by outsiders who would consider any public display by women as equivalent to the prostitute-priestesses of the pagan cults. In other contexts, he encouraged women in their leadership roles in the Christian community.

All those who translate into a language not in our Western culture especially appreciate the difficulty in making understandable the thought-forms of the Judaic culture of the Bible. Since our Western culture draws so extensively upon the Bible, we are not so keenly aware of the great differences. However, even so, it is very difficult for us to think in Judaic terms. Their language relied heavily upon concrete images, since they had so few words to express mental, even spiritual, concepts. Theirs was much more picturesque and relied heavily upon poetic images and analogies from nature and human life. Also there was no such thing as scientific historical writing. The biblical authors would not have used such if it were available, for they were more concerned with interpreting events from the standpoint of the Covenant relation of God and his People.

While allowing for all these human and cultural factors I am convinced that the end product was under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, not to ensure infallibility, but to provide a true witness to the revelation as it had come to the inspired authors. My dynamic view of revelation/inspiration gives me full

confidence that the Word of God has come down to us through the words of men so that we have no doubt about the revelation. It is rather a mark of the grace of God and the trust he placed in his people that he was able to use such fallible human beings to convey his truth. This should lead us to the highest revelation, that of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God and Savior of all. No summary of Gospel truths, however accurate and extensive, can substitute for this final revelation. We do not accept the Catholic summary of the "Rule of Faith" and the necessity of the Magisterium to authenticate it. We have more direct means to the truth in him who said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

## **2. Interpretation controlled by Distinctions in the Covenants.**

First, there is a fundamental principle of interpretation which is based on the biblical witness to the Two Covenants. The Old Covenant began with the call of Abraham and his posterity to be the People of God who would be the divine instrument of blessing to all the peoples of the earth (Gen. 12). Under the leadership of Moses God covenanted with them to obey the Law which he was revealing and make them a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19.1-6). With David the Covenant became a theocracy--a God-ruled kingdom under God's ideal king (II Sam. 7. 8-17). This Covenant proved faulty by reason of the weakness and rebellion of the People. Jeremiah foretold its setting aside in favor of a New Covenant which would be effective to realize all God's original purposes in covenanting (Jer. 31.31-36). This Covenant was inaugurated by Jesus at the Last Supper (Lk. 22.14-20). It is fully expounded in Hebrews (Chaps. 8-10). I Peter identifies the People of the New Covenant as the believing Jews and Gentiles who in the New Humanity realize all the divine purpose of the Old (I Pet. 2.9-10).

Second, this principle of interpreting scripture through the difference in the two Covenants involves what has been called "progressive revelation." God, like any good teacher, starts with his People where they are, adapts his revelation to their needs and capabilities, and seeks to move them to ever higher plains of understanding of his nature and his will. The principle is clearly stated in the first verses of Hebrews: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, ..."

This, then, sets Jesus as the final criterion by which we judge the interpretation and application of the teachings of the Old Covenant (or "Old Testament") and the acme of interpretation of the New.

A good example of this principle at work is seen in the imprecatory prayers of David, where he calls down the vengeance of God upon his enemies. For one who lived under the Law and had no light upon a hereafter when the injustices of this life might be redressed in the life to come David can be excused for not rising to the level of Jesus who taught us to love our enemies and do good to them that hate us. So also Jesus set his authority above that of the law of Moses and made it possible for us to change the laws of blood sacrifice, the Sabbath, the concept of sin, and many other things.

From this I have taught that the Old Testament is never to be interpreted and applied directly into our present human and social condition. All of it must be brought under the light of the revelation of Jesus as "filled full" in the Gospel. To neglect this is to justify "holy war," slavery and even polygamy, as some are still seeking to do. Furthermore, it easily leads to a common trouble of many Christians, who are truly "saved by grace," but by reason of their immaturity and literal acceptance of every word of the Bible as "absolutely true" they fall back into trying to live by the old Law. This leads them to a

miserable and powerless Christian life. They need to move on to the higher ground and the surer powers and motivations of the New Covenant!

### **3. Principles and methods of Interpretation**

Basic to all other approaches is the mastery of the biblical languages. Very early in my education I developed an appreciation for the contribution of Latin to an understanding of our English usage. Then in seminary I was introduced to the wealth of the Greek New Testament. I determined then that if I were to fulfill my sense of calling to preach and teach the Bible, I would have to master the field on which all other studies depend. Otherwise, I would forever be dependent upon the judgments and the translations of others. Hence, it was a foregone conclusion that I would major in "New Testament--the Greek route" when I entered graduate study at Southern Seminary.

The majority of some 75 graduate students in the New Testament chose the "English route." Only two or three chose the third or "Textual route," which was the most painstaking of all. Some of my peers in Greek went on to be international consultants of the United Bible Societies, some became teachers of Greek and New Testament in seminaries or universities. Though my realization of teaching on such levels was achieved only in a limited fashion, I have never regretted the route taken. It has enriched a life-long ministry with its discipline of careful study, intensive probing, and enlarged vision. Also, it has had its negative influence, for I have often found myself impatient with speakers and writers who, failing to do their homework in the basics, play fast and loose with the text. They show little restraint in imposing upon the scriptures their own dogmatic theories.

Now this leads to the first important principle of interpretation: what did the author intend to say and how did his first readers (or hearers) understand him? Before any spiritual or moral dimension of the matter can be discerned, the question of the communication of original meaning must be answered. In the process of revelation, the Holy Spirit may have used many "diverse" methods and means: dreams, visions, inner voice, historical events, drama, etc. We were not privileged to be in on the original revelation. All we have is the record couched in language that is controlled by its own culture. So we have to start with the language used.

Though I may have implied that I sought a full independence in arriving at the truth of language, I must qualify and indicate again how much we depend upon other scholars. This is especially true in what is called "lower criticism"--the determination of the original text. Since none of the autographs of any biblical book has survived, we are dependent upon the tedious labors of textual scholars of most generations since New Testament times for the accuracy of the text with which we work. The scope of textual resources is immense, far more and closer to the original than any Greek or Roman classic. My Greek N. T. text, which lists only the ones cited in the foot-notes, indicates that for manuscripts available, in whole or in part, there are on papyrus of the Second and Third centuries, 76; "uncial," or capital letter manuscripts, from the Third through the Ninth centuries, 250; and "minuscules," or cursive writing, 2,768. Added to these in Greek were early translations into practically every language of the Mediterranean world. The final text will never be compiled, but we have the assurance that no textual problem that remains disturbs any of the essential teachings of the Gospel.

In every exegesis we follow certain steps to arrive at the primary meaning. Lexical study involves the meaning of words, both as to their root meaning and the history of their usage. This can change greatly

over several generations, as in all languages. In the past century the discovery of remains of papyrus, clay tablets and parchment fragments give us remarkable insight into the way words were used by the common people in New Testament times. Since the Old Testament was translated into Greek around the second century B.C., it was the Bible available to most of the New Testament authors. They quote from this Septuagint ("LXX") much more often than they make their own translation. So it is valuable to study the usage of the Greek word in the LXX.

Let us take just one example of the significance of the study of the meaning of words. In Rom. 3.25, Paul is talking about "the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as an expiation by his blood." The word, transliterated hilasterion, was used of the "mercy seat," the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, upon which the high priest once a year sprinkled the blood in behalf of the sins of the people. It originally meant a covering of sins so as to remove the guilt of the sinner, an "expiation." However, the Latin translation, influenced by a faulty theology, used the word propitiationem, which was used in pagan religion to describe the ways that were devised to "propitiate" or "appease" an angry god. This Latin word was transliterated into English and used by the King James Version. A better theology based upon "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...", understands the word in its original meaning of removing the guilt and so "expiation," as the RSV. When you do not have the facility to use the biblical languages, you can draw upon many resource books that will give insight into the meanings and use of the words. There are dictionaries of Bible words, monographs on separate words, like "love" and "grace," or Barclay's Daily Study Bible, commentaries on individual books.

The next step is the grammatical study, for Greek has a very highly developed grammar that makes for much greater precision than Latin and certainly than English. The Greek is superior in its ability to describe the action of verbs by its uses of tenses and by the nuances that are shown in prepositions and conjunctions.

Let us take just one example of how grammar and "progressive revelation" both enter into a key doctrine, that of justification by faith. In Romans 1.17, where Paul is introducing this great doctrine, he is quoting from Habbakuk 2.4, which in the Hebrew reads, "The righteous shall live by his faithfulness," which is the perfect Old Covenant expression for being justified under obedience to the Law of God. Now the LXX changes the possessive from "his" to "my," that is, God's faithfulness, which is a remarkable anticipation of the Gospel. But Paul, who regularly quotes the LXX verbatim, drops any possessive adjective. This enables him to change the phrase "by faith" from modifying "shall live," where it has been translated, "The just shall live by faith." So we still have a perfectly legitimate statement of law righteousness. But when you make "by faith" modify "The just," - "He who is just by faith shall live"--then you have the essence of the Gospel. No longer do I have to prove my standing with God through my own righteousness or faithfulness, but now God accepts my faith--my trust in Christ's faithfulness. This is good news to us weak-willed sinners and enables us to enter into the fullness of life. We begin now to really "live."

Grammatical insight into the scripture for the lay student is perhaps best arrived at through comparing different modern translations. I have found that those of C. B. Williams and Helen Barrett Montgomery (The Centenary Translation) are the best for such. Of course, a detailed exegetical commentary, as distinct from the popular kind, will discuss any pertinent grammatical feature. Be prepared for them to be somewhat detailed, even tedious. They are worth it in the long run, for they enable you to come to your own conclusions better than the popular ones that usually are wholly dogmatic.

The next step we have called the comparative method. II Peter 1.20 says that "no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation." It can be just as properly translated, "of its own interpretation." Now whichever of these meanings "Peter" intended, it is very true that any passage of scripture needs to be interpreted in its context. And that context begins with its place in the argument of the author at that point, extends further to the overall purpose and teaching of the book as a whole, moves on out to include the author's other writings, and finally to the context of the Gospel itself. This comparative study enables us to approach as nearly as possible to the way the author meant for the words to be understood by his first readers. It also keeps us from isolating any one text of scripture and trying to build a whole theological position on it, as many have sought to do. Best of all, this method can give us a sense of the historical development, whether of continuity or of change. It takes into account the cultural situation that is always changing and modifying old familiar concepts.

A good illustration of the comparative method has to do with the issue of women in ministry. Paul's great principle of equality in Christ is found in his earliest letter to the Galatians (3.28): "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Later when Paul came to Corinth, he was confronted with a cultural situation that called for some immediate pastoral advice. Corinth had long been noted as the most depraved city of the Empire. Its women flaunted their lewdness by wearing long, flowing hair and making other public displays. Even the Christians in the Corinthian Church were having much difficulty in taking moral stands against sexual looseness. So when Paul says in I Cor. 14.34 "the women should keep silence in the churches, but should be subordinate, as even the law says," he is giving practical counsel to this particular situation for the protection of the good name of the community of believers. He certainly did not intend for such to be applied indiscriminately to all generations. In the same book he recognizes that women both pray and prophesy in the meetings (11.5). And in Romans 16.1 he plainly calls Phoebe a "deacon" of the church at Cenchraea (the word diakonos is both masculine and feminine, and primarily means "servant").

Comparative study then is essential to interpretation. It is especially useful in comparing and contrasting the commands of God under the Old Covenant and under the New. For example, under the Old Covenant God used the "promised land" as the means of disciplining his People. If they were obedient, he prospered the land and protected them from their enemies. If they were disobedient, they were called to prayer and repentance so that they would again prosper (II Chron. 7.14). However, there is nothing in the New Testament that refers to any "promised land" and no promises that obedience would bring material and national prosperity. On the contrary Jesus warned of persecution and Paul described many hardships, but neither referred to any sanctions of "the Land." Every "land" is now God's promised land for his Kingdom is now universal and not limited to any "Holy Land." Sanctions under the New Covenant are moral and spiritual and not material and national.

The last method of exegetical interpretation is kin to the comparative. It is the theological. This has two phases. First, we must take the passage under study into the context of the full teaching of the author on that subject. The second carries the subject into the parallel teachings of the rest of the scriptures, even of the Gospel as a whole. We have done this above with reference to the distinctions between the Old and the New Testament.



An example of the importance of the theological method has to do with the difference between Paul and James with regard to the role of faith. At the risk of oversimplifying a very involved doctrine I have taught that Paul is concerned with the role of faith in justifying the sinner before God and so bringing all the fruits of redemption. James on the other hand is concerned with justifying one's faith in the eyes of those before whom we make the claim of faith. Paul says no one is justified before God by the works of law; James says no one's faith is justified before others except by the works of love in practical service. Writing at least a couple of decades later than Paul, James may have been warning against too easy presumption of Christians to genuine faith. His book is very practical and didactic, setting the tone of much of the Second Century Christian writings.

In most of the above I have been concerned with the exegetical approach to an individual passage. This seeks to interpret as fully as possible the way the author intended its meaning and the hearers understood it. Exposition builds upon exegesis in interpreting the permanent values and applications of the passage. That is the work of the teacher or the preacher, but individual students also do it when they take the message to heart and act upon it.

One aspect of the broader contextual approach we have not mentioned is very important, especially in these controversies over the Bible today. It is that of literary criticism. Now we use criticism in its very general sense of "making judgments." It can be constructive or destructive, depending upon the philosophical and theological presuppositions of the critic. Literary criticism is divided into two areas: "lower," which has to do with establishing the text as near the original as possible, and "higher," which has to do with the who, when, where and why any book was written. Everybody does this to one extent or another. If you take a very conservative stance, for example, you might say, "The Apostle John wrote Revelation from the Isle of Patmos about 90 A.D. to the seven churches of Asia Minor in order to strengthen their faith in the victory of the Lord when he returns to establish his kingdom at the end of the world." You have made a judgment that will control much of your interpretation of the book.

Now, this is not the place to go into a detailed analysis of the many types of literary criticism: source, redaction, form and many others. A few observations will have to suffice. It has been known for almost two centuries that linguistic students of the Old Testament Hebrew have discerned at least two and probably four different accounts of the Pentateuch. These were later combined, often with no effort to avoid duplication, by later editors. Often these editors were so concerned with the application to their present religious and national situations that they exercised a good bit of liberty in quoting their sources. Now this gives immature students of the Bible much concern that these editors, or "redactors," were falsifying the scriptures.

Two things need to be said in response to this concern. First, the Hebrews handed on the vast majority of their religious teaching by oral transmission. In fact, they trusted oral tradition more than the written records to a great extent. This gives us assurance that what these editors drew from oral sources was much more reliable than that which we credit today. The second observation is that we have to trust this transmission as being guided by the Holy Spirit who was responsible for the inspiration in the initial revelation. If you cannot do this, then you will have to do without the Gospel of Luke, for Luke makes it plain in his introduction that he only did research into the records of others and the eye-witnesses of Jesus.

The fundamentalists denounce all use of "higher criticism" as being done by destructive critics. But they will not allow that higher criticism can also be constructive and very profitable even to the lay student. Even the destructive critics render a service by making conservatives face up to problems they would otherwise ignore or explain away with sweeping statements. Long before this present controversy I have never trusted those who try to explain all problems of the Bible with "God said it, and I believe it," or "I believe the whole Bible is literally true from cover to cover."

In the first place their claim is meaningless until they tell us how they understand what they so confidently affirm. And that involves them in all the complexities of interpretation. When they do give us interpretations, they often avoid the hard issues by "spiritualizing" the text or by explaining it away. The dynamic power of the scriptures is lost in the desperate effort to maintain their own prior theories of its infallibility. Such theories often fall by reason of a "thousand qualifications" of what one is saying. They are guilty of what Paul described as "handling the word of God deceitfully" (II Cor. 4.2).

#### **4. Influence of Other Interpreters**

One of our most cherished Baptist principles is that of the "priesthood of all believers." Since each of us has also experienced the Holy Spirit living within us as our guide into all truth, we hold that every believer must finally interpret the Bible as the Word of God individually. But this does not mean that we do it alone, only that we are responsible for the final decisions of interpretation. Indeed, we are deeply indebted to teachers, preachers, friends, and especially books that give us access to the wisdom of the ages.

Very early in my education I became convinced that the best help in interpretation from books comes from the commentaries that have stood the test of time. So I have tried to buy the best for each individual book of the Bible, rather than buying sets of commentaries. If the set is by only one scholar, you soon learn his mind and his method. Nor is it good to give yourself to one "authority" so much that you lose the value of the insights of others. I also prefer those who major on exegesis rather than exposition, for exposition should be fresh and original, reflecting the immediate needs that you and your generation are facing.

Now, of the making of commentaries and systems of interpretation there is no end, to paraphrase Ecclesiastes. All are limited because we are all fallible. In dealing with words to express truth we are victims of language and culture limitations. At best they can only lead us to Him, who alone is Truth. I do not agree that Truth is relative, but it is relational. It is to be apprehended in relation to one's experience of God in Christ, the human situation with its complex interconnections, and the world as it impinges upon us.

So do not be put off in your search for Truth through the words of The Word of God simply because finality is beyond our human potential. There are treasures innumerable to be had for the digging if we honestly and zealously pursue the search.

Beyond the commentaries I have profited greatly by monographs on individual themes and doctrines, such as grace, love, faith, the Holy Spirit. I have found that biblical theologies of the Old and New Testaments enlarge one's view of the whole. In recent years I have turned more to the wider issues of life: the meaning of history, the philosophies that wrestle with ultimate reality, the sociological forces

that direct contemporary Christian movements. I still enjoy detailed linguistic study and have spent much time in the past three years refreshing my school Hebrew. It is not as beautiful and expressive as Greek, but it has a fascination all its own, mainly because Hebrew is so rich in concrete analogies and figures of speech. As such it is poorer than Greek in abstract concepts and ability to express profound spiritual truths. Whatever will be the language of heaven it certainly will not be English, for ours is too ambiguous for that realm of ultimate reality!

My debt to my teachers I have already acknowledged in my Spiritual Journey. Each crossed my pathway at the most appropriate time to influence my developing understanding of the Bible. Another important influence has been that of my students, in Baylor Extension Division, Park Cities, and Northwest Center. They helped uncover my blind spots and discover areas I tended to take for granted. Even their disagreements have contributed to the further clarification of my thought. Above all, their enthusiastic response to teaching has been the main source of satisfaction in the effort and an incentive to prepare to the fullest.

#### **IV. THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE IN MY LIFE AND THOUGHT**

It should be apparent from the preceding long section that the Bible has played a major role in all that I am or have tried to do. From my earliest memories of learning to read by stumbling through the King James at family prayers the Bible has played a foundational role in all the rest of my development.

My approach through most of my education was pretty naive until my seminary study and graduate school. But it controlled my theology and my growth in Christian life. Early I memorized much scripture, but regrettably, I did not keep it up. Memory has the great value of furnishing the raw material the Holy Spirit uses to speak to us in times of stress when we have no leisure to search the Scriptures for answers. Also, I never mastered the art of using the Bible devotionally to any great extent. But the Bible has spoken to me through my study and teaching in ways too profound to describe.

All of us have favorite books of the Bible. Most of you know that the ones that have meant most to me have been Jeremiah and Hebrews. Close to them have been Romans, Philippians, Ephesians, Job and Hosea. I never felt like I could get a handle on the Gospels as I could the Epistles, but individual stories in the Gospels have meant a great deal to me: the Temptation of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, the parables of the Prodigal Son (and his elder brother), the Laborers in the Vineyard and the Last Judgment. The Gospel of John has meant much to my spiritual life. I treasure its stories of Jesus in his dealings with all kinds of people.

I have very little patience with those theologies which are not rooted in biblical theology. Those which try to build upon some philosophical or sociological system which denies or relegates the Bible to ancient religious history are not for me. History has proved how often such rise and flare like rockets only to burn themselves out and fall of their own deadness.

I still marvel at the power of the Word to come alive in the mind and heart of the sincere searcher for truth. In my teaching I would often have students whose personal lives were for the most part unknown to me, for I was not their pastor. But often, without trying to make any "applications" I would find they would respond with remarkable relevance as their insights came. Such experiences have been worth more to me than all of the labored proofs of the inspiration of the Scriptures. Truly, it is "living and

active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4.12).

*Ed Note: This was complete in June 1998*