# INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE 6

**Lecture Six**

**Understanding God's Word**

One of the fastest growing sciences this century has been the science of

communication. The technological advances in this field have been both staggering and rapid. In the space of a few short years, we've progressed from wind-up telephones to communications satellites, video-phones and personal computers. And yet communication remains one of our greatest problems.

Much of the political and economic unrest in the world today can be traced to lack of communication. Not a technological lack, but a lack in the art of communicating rather than in the science of it. People all over the world are struggling to understand one another, countries and nations are wary of one another because of misunderstandings and a failure to appreciate each other's views and objectives. Though the television has brought world communications into your lounge, yet the art of communicating within the family, between parents and children and brothers and sisters, appears to be diminishing. More than all the technological advances of the age, we need to start listening to one another, hearing each other and speaking to each other. In brief we need to learn the art of personal communication. What has all this got to do with understanding the Bible? God is also in the communications business. He always has been. Hebrews 1:1-2 says: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the Fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son". God wants to communicate with us, He wants to tell us of His love for us, His plans for the earth, His purpose for the Church. It's not so much a technological communication that God wants with us, but rather a personal dialogue through His Son, through the Holy Spirit and by His Word, the Bible. That is why this subject is so vitally important. God has spoken to us and still does speak to us through His Word, but we need to understand properly what He is saying to us. In the case of the Bible, we are dealing with a book, the more recent portions of which were written nearly 2000 years ago; written also against a social and cultural background entirely different to our own. We therefore need to interpret the Scriptures correctly, so that they will become meaningful to us as modern readers. We need to have a right understanding of what God originally caused to be written, and its application to our situation today.

To "interpret" means to "bring out" or "explain", and therefore in receiving God’s

communication to us today, we need to bring out the meaning of the Scriptures, to explain them, that we may understand them and be able to apply them in our lives. The message of the Bible is vital today, not only for the individual, but for nations as well, indeed for the whole of mankind. That is why it is so important that we know how to read and understand how to interpret Scripture. In this lecture we will be looking at the basic principles, the foundational guidelines which help us to understand the Bible.

**Interpretation**

There is seldom just one interpretation of any passage of Scripture, and different people with different attitudes will always come up with different interpretations. The question is, which one is correct? How are we to be guided, and indeed who is to guide us when it comes to interpreting the Scriptures? Do we rely upon our pastor, upon the church, upon other men's books? Throughout the history of the church, sincere men of God have come up with varying interpretations of the Bible. They have been sincere men of God, yet their conclusions have been different. The important thing to realise is that we must not rely solely upon man and books for our understanding of Scripture. Just as God desires to have a personal, individual relationship with every believer through Jesus Christ, so too He wants to speak to us personally, and lead us individually into an understanding of His Word.

To whom has God entrusted the interpretation of Scripture? (John 14:26, 16:13-15.) The Holy Spirit is the custodian of spiritual truth. The Father has sent the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus His Son, to teach us ALL things. The Bible does not proclaim the church as an infallible interpreter, nor the scholar (Luke 10:21-23). Nowhere in Scripture does it say that the Church has final say in the

interpretation of Scripture and as far as scholars go, the Lord says rather that

the things of God have been hidden from the wise and revealed unto babes!

Neither are inspired preachers or individuals infallible! So the question is, if the

Holy Spirit is the custodian of spiritual truth, how does He impart it to us?

Ephesians 4:11.God has given teachers, apostles, prophets, pastors and evangelists to the Church they are His gift to the Church. In other words God uses human agents in imparting His truth to us, especially teachers and apostles. But this has to be balanced and there are safeguards. 1 John 2:24,27.The Word of God and the anointing of the Holy Spirit are safeguards. John is saying in these Scriptures that we do not need a final human authority because the Holy Spirit will give the necessary understanding and will keep the child of God from straying from essentials. In other words, though God uses men to teach us His truth, He also gives us the Holy Spirit as custodian, who helps us to understand, discern and appreciate what the truth is. Also bear in mind Isaiah 8:20. This verse clearly says that whatever men may say and teach about the Word, it must line up with the Word, it must be in complete accordance with the whole of Scripture, otherwise there is no light (truth) in it. The Holy Spirit helps us to discern the difference. I always pray and ask the Holy Spirit's help whenever I read the Bible.John 7:16-17.

Here Jesus promises very clearly that any person sincerely willing to do God's

will, shall be given an understanding or perception of what is true. If you sincerely want to follow God, the Lord has promised that as you learn and helped by various people (God's agents) the Lord will always make sure you know in your heart what is true, what is genuinely from Him.

John 3:3-5 & 1 Corinthians 2:12-14.

The new birth is essential to a perception of spiritual truth and only those who

have been born again can truly interpret the Bible. Jesus said that unless a man

is born again, he cannot see (perceive) the Kingdom of God. Paul says the

natural or carnal man cannot receive the things of God. But a spiritual man, one

who has been born again of the Spirit of God, has the joy and privilege of the

Spirit of God revealing to him the things of God.

In concluding this section, let it be said that although Scripture says the Holy Spirit will teach us all things and lead us into all truth, yet that does not mean that a believer should isolate himself or cut himself off and "wait" for the Spirit to do all that. Scripture also says that God has given gifts to us, men whom he has appointed and anointed, so that they may go and equip and prepare the rest of the believers for the work of the ministry (Eph 4:12). We therefore need to be in close contact at all times with the rest of the Body of Christ, we need to expose ourselves to the five-fold ministry of the offices of the Holy Spirit, because it is through our spiritual leaders, though the men over us in the Lord, and the Word of God, that the Holy Spirit will teach us and lead us. Because we are born again, the Spirit of God can help us to understand the Word and can help us to discern what is true, what is genuinely of God. That is how the Holy Spirit will lead and

guide us into all truth.

**Principles of Interpretation**

Although it is extremely difficult to tell someone exactly how they should interpret

Scripture, it is however possible to give advice on basic principles or guidelines for correct interpretation. We follow the method used by the Reformers, known as

"Grammatico-Historic Exegesis". The theory of this method is as follows:

Exegesis:

This means "reading out of" the passage of Scripture the meaning intended, as

opposed to "eisegesis" which would be "reading into" the passage an unintended

meaning arising from one's own pre-suppositions. Exegesis is concerned with

discovering, from every facet of the passage, the meaning intended by the

author - "lifting" out its true meaning, rather than starting with a theory and looking into the passage for backing, in other words, letting the Bible speak.

Historical:

This refers to the importance of the "context". Ideally, each verse must be

considered in its context in the passage.....in the book.....in the Bible.....in history.

The question we ought to ask is "What did this mean to them?" From there we

can begin to apply it to our situation, "What does it mean to me? What can I

learn from it?"

One of the great problems with interpretation today is that all too often we study

and consider a verse in isolation, without taking proper note of who it was written

to, who it was written by, what did it mean to the first readers and so on.

Considering context also involves reading a verse in relation to what has gone

before and what comes after it. A classic example of this is the person who quoted the Bible as saying "There is no God". In context, the correct quote is "The fool has said in his heart, "there is no God" (Psalm 14:1). Another example where context is critical concerns the friends of Job. The Bible's record of what they said is true - they did make those remarks. But in the whole context of the book, we discover that their advice was wrong. That is what they said, but God did not approve of it. Their remarks illustrate how people can make false assumptions, but it would be dangerous to build doctrine on their words. Even some of Satan's comments are recorded in the Bible, but we know he is a liar and all he says is distorted!

Historical context is particularly important when considering the interpretation of

prophetic passages. Take for example the prophecies of Daniel 2 and 7 - their

interpretation hinges upon the correct understanding of 2:38. No matter where in

history you try to slot these passages, Scripture itself gives us the correct historical setting. The same applies to the Book of Revelation. So many people

speculate on much of the book awaiting fulfilment, but have missed the simple

statement of the book itself in 1:1,3; 22:10 (cf. Dan 12:4). Historically one must

take into account the fact the book was written 2000 years ago! Even geographic context is important. If the Scripture says something like "the enemy shall come from the north" - it's no good Christians in America looking for trouble from Canada or Alaska. You have to ask where the writer was located when given that revelation.

Grammatical:

This refers to reaching for the exact meaning by a study of the words and

constructions used. We must never forget that the Bible was originally written in

languages other than English, and when translating from one language to

another, it is not always possible to convey exactly the same meaning by a

simple word for word translation. This particular problem is more acute in older

translations such as the King James, because over the past three centuries,

certain of its words have passed into disuse mean little or nothing to the modern reader. And so in our study of the Word, if we are to interpret correctly, we must always seek to discover the exact meaning of words and also of constructions used.

Two other forms of interpretation are worth mentioning here: Typology

That is, using the Old Testament's institutions, structures and people for

example and analogy. A good illustration of this is found in 1 Corinthians 10:1,11

where Paul uses the wanderings of Israel as a "type" to indicate a spiritual

principle. Examples of typology are numerous. Israel's whole system of

sacrifices and offerings and even the tabernacle itself together with all the

ceremonies, feasts, and rituals are alone grand "type" foreshadowing the Lord

Jesus Christ and His church. New Testament confirmation for this comes

mainly from Hebrews 9 and 10. Even people can be "types" - such as Joseph

being a type of Christ. A type is simply an illustration, using someone or

something historical to illuminate our understanding of spiritual truth or principle.

Allegory

Paul uses this method in Galatians 4:21-31. Some see Song of Solomon as an

allegory of Christ's love for His Church. Both these methods must be used with caution, and only to bring out more clearly the already established true and original teaching of Scripture.