

# UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE ALIKE

A question which keeps coming up is "Why can't we all see the Bible alike?" and it is a good question I suppose. When the lawyer (in Luke 10:26) tempted Jesus by asking, "**What shall I do to inherit eternal life?**", Jesus said, "**What is written in the law. How readest thou?**"? Obviously Jesus wanted to gauge the extent and accuracy of the lawyer's understanding of scripture: i.e. did he have a correct or faulty understanding of the law. The point is, that if the lawyer could have faulty understanding of scripture **then**, people **today** might similarly be misunderstanding scripture. Again (in Acts 8:30) when Philip encountered the eunuch (in his chariot and reading Isaiah 53) he asked "**Understandest thou, what thou readest?**"? Perhaps Philip had good reasons for supposing that the eunuch might not understand Isaiah 53. In the event the eunuch replied, "**How can I except some man should guide me?**" (a verse which J.W.'s use to justify their calls and booklets). Clearly "**How readest thou?**" is everlastingly a very pertinent question for everybody, and Robert Haldane (of the Haldane Brothers) used to say that he certainly much preferred "**How readest thou?**" to "**What thinkest thou?**". But why can't all men see the Bible in a similar light? The Bible never changes and so it obviously must really depend upon **the reader**. I suppose the first question to ask is "Can we understand the Bible?" and if the answer is in the affirmative then, logically there seems to be no good reason why we can't all understand it alike.

In the first place, we might think it strange that God did not ensure that the Bible would be incapable of misconstruction. Critics express surprise that the omniscient God would not foresee the problems in the religious world due to the many divergent interpretations of His word, and would have so constructed it that more than one interpretation would have been impossible. God can only communicate with man through **language**, words written or oral, and language is always capable of more than one meaning. Also, some human beings are better at understanding words than others. God could certainly have skirted around this difficulty by making everybody exactly the same: a world of mechanical robots: but he made us all unique in ourselves, each with a distinctive personality: no mean feat when we consider the teeming millions of men and women, now and in previous generations. Even if we think we understand all the various words in the Bible some of the obscure subject-matter, themes and prophecies might prove too deep for us, and we might well end up with different opinions on these. The Jews certainly did not all see the O.T. alike, and even had difficulty with very small and ordinary words like "work" and "rest". During six days, work was to be done, but "**Whosoever doeth work (on the sabbath) shall be put to death**" (so says Ex. 35:2). The definition of "work" would become an extremely vital definition if a man's life was at stake, and we can imagine the

convoluted arguments advanced by friends of the accused. Thus, even in respect of one little ordinary word, we can see how all men would not see the Bible alike. I am sure we would all quickly grasp the problem if we (personally) were forced to provide not only a complete definition of "work": but one which would perfectly coincide with everyone else's.

#### A BOOK OF WORDS

As the Bible is essentially a book of words, we must all come to grips with these words, for God does not send a representative to each successive generation to explain them. His representatives were the apostles who, through the Holy Spirit, provided the words nearly 2,000 years ago, and even at that time had difficulty in getting men to see their words in the same light. An added difficulty for us English speakers is, of course, the fact that, originally the words were given in the Greek language and have to endure the shock of translation into English. To minimise any loss that may have occurred in the translation, we are required to scurry back and forth to Greek Grammars and Lexicons. Like the Jews, we too, have difficulties with prophecy and I doubt if anyone has the audacity to claim, for instance, he, or she, entirely and accurately understands the Book of Revelation, or that there is the slightest possibility of everyone seeing it in a similar light.

It is true, however, that the GOSPEL MESSAGE is crystal clear, and no one will ever be able to say that they could not understand what was required of them. In almost one verse alone (Acts 2:38) the gospel terms are almost entirely encapsulated in the statement of Peter (on being asked what men must do to be saved): viz. **"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."** I know, of course, that even that short instruction can be sabotaged by false teachers and penitents can be sidetracked on the question of what 'baptism' means, but it must be generally true that any honest and ardent student of the N.T. can not fail to learn from the N.T. that baptism requires immersion.

Most of what Jesus said could easily be understood, even by the simple minded: although He had to help sometimes with the application of his words; and this is where we often do not see eye to eye: on the application of God's word. Christ had, for example, to explain the application of the parables to the disciples. Later, when the apostles got embroiled in debate and disputation with false teachers (like the Gnostics, Nicolaitans, Stoics, etc.) and Judaizers, Paul in his rebuttal, engaged in some deep argumentation in his epistle to the Romans, Corinthians and Hebrews, etc. which require sincere and lengthy study, and which even Peter described as, **"some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction."** (2 Peter 3:16). Here Peter obviously acknowledges that not all might see Paul's writings alike, and that the unlearned and unstable would wrest, or twist them, to their undoing.

#### THE HUMAN ELEMENT

NO WRITTEN DOCUMENT, the Bible or otherwise, can possibly be free from the risk of misunderstanding, misconception or misuse by the ignorant or unscrupulous. The meaning of the words is of little consequence if we are reading a light novel, but is extremely important if we are dealing with instruments of a legally binding nature such as an Insurance Policy or Last Will and Testament. The N.T. is, after all, Christ's Last Will and Testament, and some might also see it as a great Spiritual Insurance Policy. Words make sentences and sentences make paragraphs, and we will not all see the Bible alike if we differ in our understanding of words: and of course words vary with context, and often have more than one meaning in any case. In my office days it was quite common to emerge from a meeting, where a dozen fairly intelligent people had all been listening to the same speaker, or the reading of the same document, and to discover that none of those present understood

the matter alike. In short, no document, whether the Bible or an Act of Parliament, is proof against misquotation, misconception or distortion, and, let's face it, no book is oftener misquoted than the Bible.

It is also a character of the human animal that he is moved by emotions as well as intellect (heart as well as head) and is not always consistent or rational in what he believes. Man often believes **what he wants to believe**: and this certainly applies to the Bible. This being so, **nothing** is likely to be seen in the same light, by human beings. Some would describe a bottle as half empty while others would say it was half full. Man is a fairly perverse creature ('Stiff-necked and impudent' as God described His people, the Jews) and in most fields of human endeavour there is usually a contingency plan for 'Disputes', for within five minutes of human concourse, disputes will surely arise; especially over the meaning of words. Even a tennis match was held up, the other day, until the umpire gave a decision on the wording of the rules. It would certainly be most difficult for anyone to maintain, after looking at Church history over the last 2,000 years, that **any** generation of men have seen the Bible alike, and there is a school of thought around today, that we can not expect it.

### SOME COMMON REASONS

And so the question is not "DO people see the Bible alike"? for clearly they don't (not even the Churches of Christ), but **WHY** do they not? Some of the most obvious reasons might include:- **IGNORANCE** Sadly, in the world at large, there is a high degree of ignorance concerning the Good Book. In lands previously in the grip of Communism, where the Bible was actively suppressed, ignorance is understandable, but even in this country where the Bible is not so much suppressed as ignored, in most homes the occupants may not even possess a copy. Often, our knowledge of the Bible is confined to what we may have been taught at school, often by teachers who were not only sceptical but downright cynical. Many have avoided the Bible believing it to be boring, difficult to understand and full of contradictions. Some, trying to understand it, have mistakenly got bogged down in the O.T. and given up in despair.

The apostle Peter, speaking of Christ's final coming, refers to the latter-day scoffers who rejected the fact, and were "**willingly ignorant**" that the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished (2 Peter 3:5) and such ignorance was self induced: i.e. *willing ignorance*.

**OBSTINATE REFUSAL.** Isaiah's prediction of the spiritual state of Israel in Christ's own generation came true, (and it is just as true today): viz. "**For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed: lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted and I should heal them**" (Matt. 13:15). And just before being stoned to death Stephen described his assailants thus "**Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit, as your fathers did, so do ye**" (Acts 7:51). "Understanding the Bible alike" in such company and in such a climate would seem most unlikely.

**BACKGROUND.** Many are biased in their perception of the Bible by virtue of their religious background. Any child brought up in the R.C. faith will, for instance, have a very different conception of the word of God from a child brought up elsewhere. Religious denominations are largely self-perpetuating and have their own distinctive application of the Scriptures which is passed from generation to generation. Because each denomination protects, defends and promotes its own particular brand of teaching or doctrine; it follows that all men are most unlikely to see the Bible alike.

**TRADITION.** This is similar to the previous heading and results in God's word having

superimposed upon it the traditions of men to a point where the latter smothers the former. Jesus encountered the same thing in His day and told the Jews that "**the commandments of God are made of none effect by your traditions.**" (Matt. 15:6). 'Church Traditions' abound today, and God's word is set at naught by man-made Creeds, Confessions and Traditions, supported by a fiction that the great age of a Tradition gives validity, and God's approval. This factor also influences our inability to see the Scriptures alike.

**MISINTERPRETATION.** Obviously much depends upon our approach to the Bible, and **the respect and value** we accord to it. There are some among the trendy clergy who cast doubt upon the veracity of the Book and question the miracles, virgin birth, resurrection, Garden of Eden etc. and these have a very adverse effect upon the general public. Also in our interpretation, if we isolate a verse from its context we are never likely to understand it as others do. If we isolate not just a word but a whole verse, and build a meaning of doctrine upon it we shall never understand it as others do. For instance, Paul and Silas said to the jailer, "**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved . . .**" and if we isolate that verse and build upon it a 'faith only' doctrine, and ignore the rest of the N.T., we are never all likely to see the Bible with the same eyes.

These rough headings merely scratch the surface and readers will be able to think of other factors bearing on this question, ranging from vested interest to casual indifference. Certainly on the matter of indifference it must be said that Bible Studies are not always well attended: and although we are "babes in Christ" at baptism surely we should not still be babes twenty years later. Also under the heading of 'indifference' we might include those who are such nice people that they agree with everything and everybody.

#### CONCLUSIONS

What rough conclusions, then, can we draw? The evidence of our eyes and ears is that the world, in general, does not see the Bible alike, and there are great variations in its interpretations. Some things in the N.T. are, of course, simple: some are extremely profound. Everybody can understand alike the words, "**Jesus wept**" (shortest verse in the Bible) but might differ in their understanding of "**The Word was with God and the Word was God.**" Indeed Paul called it a mystery, viz. "**Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness; God was manifest in the flesh.**" (1 Tim. 3:16). We don't all share the same I.Q. and some of us have difficulty in grasping the import of Income Tax Returns, let alone Divine Mysteries. Bible Study is an ongoing process requiring time and effort and we might, in a few years time, understand something we don't rightly understand now. Some understand the N.T. better than others because they spend more time trying. Surely there are a host of reasons why we might not all have a common understanding of the N.T. Jesus knew of this propensity in man, and having witnessed His own disciples in dispute as to who should be the greatest, prayed that His disciples might all "be one" and that no divisions would separate them. Nor was Paul naive in the matter, for even when he was busy raising congregations some were busy preaching 'another gospel' and perverting the gospel of Christ (Gal. 1) and Paul himself predicted that, after his departure, grievous wolves would not spare the flock but draw away disciples after themselves. Paul recommended "sound doctrine" that would "convict the gainsayer" thus acknowledging that there were gainsayers and un-sound doctrine, and that even in N.T. times men were not in unison in their interpretations.

It is, of course possible to exaggerate in all of this. False teaching and interpretations can, after all, be identified as such, by comparison with God's word. No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation, and the Bible is self-interpreting. We might not all visualize God alike, but we can still believe in God; we might not all agree on what heaven will be like, but we can still believe in heaven; we might not all agree on what will transpire

at "The Second Coming" but we all believe that Christ will certainly return in due time (and, of course, the events attending His coming will occur whether we fully understand them or not). Where the N.T. speaks plainly and categorically (which is most of the time) we must accept it and obey: but where the N.T. leaves room for opinion or speculation we can hold an opinion **provided we do not foist it upon others, or teach it as fact.** We must always approach God's word honestly, humbly and with an open mind. Paul said we must "Study (or agonise) to show ourselves approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth . . ." (2 Tim. 2:15) for it is possible to **"handle the word of God deceitfully"** (2 Cor. 4:2). **"If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God,"** says Peter. Our interpretation of the Bible carries a responsibility (James 3:1) and although we may all belong to various congregations we are, in the final analysis, **personally responsible** for what we believe, practise, accept or teach. Jesus said to the Lawyer, **"How readest thou?"** THOU! I am sure that that means YOU, and me: the buck stops with us.

EDITOR.

## GLEANINGS

*"Let her glean even among the sheaves."* (Ruth 2:15)

### LAMPLIGHTERS

**"But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps."** Matthew 25:4

### THE BIBLE SPEAKS

AND FIVE WERE FOOLISH	Matthew 25:2
WATCH YE THEREFORE	Mark 13:35
THE DAY OF THE LORD WILL COME	2 Peter 3:10
THEREFORE BE YE ALSO READY	Matthew 24:44
AND YOUR LIGHTS BURNING	Luke 12:35
PUT ON THE ARMOUR OF LIGHT	Romans 13:12
LET YOUR LIGHT SO SHINE	Matthew 5:16

### WE QUOTE CAMPBELL MORGAN

There are similarities between the five foolish and five wise virgins, and they are remarkable similarities. They all expected Him. Apparent expectation on the part of the foolish, apparent expectation also on the part of the wise. Of both the foolish and the wise it is said, **"They went forth to meet the bridegroom."** But of the foolish it is said, **"They took no oil."** There had been evident carelessness. Of the wise it is said, **"they took oil."** There had been *reality* in their attitudes . . .

What then are we to do? To see to it our lamps are burning, to see to it that we have the supply of that oil apart from which there is no shining of light, no flaming.

### A CHORUS

"Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning  
Give me oil in my lamp I pray;  
Give me oil in my lamp, keep me burning  
Keep me burning till the break of day."

### SOMEONE HAS SAID

**"The candle burned none the worse, for every candle that was lighted from it."**

### LIGHT TODAY

Light today the lamp of **Sacrifice**