

## On Biblical Interpretation

II Peter 1:20-21 states: *But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*

This statement of Scripture begins with the phrase “*know this first of all.*” What follows then must be not only be of vital importance, but should be considered first; in the sense of being upfront, as a beginning or starting point. And truly the foundational principle undergirding the entire Word of God regards the fact “*that no prophecy of Scripture is of one's own interpretation.*”

I Corinthians 2:9-13 describes how the Scriptures came to man.

*“...but just as it is written  
'THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND  
EAR HAS NOT HEARD,  
AND HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN,  
ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE  
HIM.'*

*For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.”*

This passage describes the Holy Spirit as searching “*even the depths of God,*” and having the thoughts of God, the Spirit taught men spiritual words which encapsulate the thoughts of God. In this way the Holy Spirit inspired, or “*moved,*” men to write down the Word of God verbatim; that is, word for word.

Those prophets charged with writing God's word down for mankind did so not of their "*own interpretation*" or "*by an act of human will,*" but received the wording directly "*from God*" as they were "*moved by the Holy Spirit.*" This truth comes solidly through II Peter 1:20-21. But this passage may also be understood to apply to the reader and teacher of God's Word today as well. This becomes especially pertinent when people excuse differing biblical positions, especially regarding salvation issues, with glib comments like: "Well everyone has their own interpretation of Scripture." Often one hears: "It's just a matter of interpretation," as if God will accept anything anyone thinks the Scriptures might mean as binding and true!

In a real sense these two verses could be viewed as constituting a double-edged sword. On one side the Scripture "*is not a matter of one's own interpretation*" (v.20) applies to the reader or receiver of Word after it was initially given. And the other edge being that the Scripture was given initially through men who were "*moved by the Holy Spirit,*" speaking directly from God, rather than being "*an act of human will*" (v.21). Therefore the following conclusion may be rendered; the Bible is not a product of man's interpretation or will, nor does God want us to interpret His Word for ourselves or others.

The word "interpretation" translated from the Greek literally means "a loosening, unloosing,"<sup>1</sup> or "a release."<sup>2</sup> Metaphorically it can mean "to solve, explain, denotes a solution, explanation."<sup>3</sup> W. E. Vine says this of II Peter: 20-21, "(of private) interpretation;" i.e., the writers of the Scripture did not put their own construction upon the 'God-breathed' words they wrote."<sup>4</sup>

Interpretation can, and often does, become a subjective filtering and analysis of any given subject matter. The reader who interprets asks the question "What does the text mean to me?" or possibly "What do I think this means?" As such, interpretation can be (at best) a somewhat accurate paraphrase, or (at worse) the stuff of mere opinion or speculation. Often times the question is asked: "What do you think this Scripture means?" Actually it doesn't really matter what you, I, or anybody else thinks!

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, 1977), p.240.

<sup>2</sup> W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Old Tappan, 1966), II, 268.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

What matters is what God deliberately means in what He has had written! The Scripture is not a matter of one's own interpretation!

Instead of our own interpretation, God wants His Word to be handled accurately. In giving instruction to a young evangelist, the Scripture gives this direction: “*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, **accurately handling the word of truth***” (II Timothy 2:15). In light of this, the appropriate question becomes “What does God mean?” Here the focus is on trying to understand God's intended meaning, as He communicates to us through the written word. This especially applies to those who teach the Word of God to others. To those who are called to teach within the body of Christ, the following warning is given: “*Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment*” (James 3:1).

In Proverbs 3:5 God gives the following directive: “*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.*” Evidently God expects that His word will communicate His desired message without our relying on our own understanding; in and of ourselves. In many cases God goes to great lengths in His Word to define the terms He uses. An example would be the New Testament(NT) usage of the term “faith,” which God repeatedly defines in such passages as Hebrews chapter 11, James 2:14-26, Romans chapters 3-5, and Galatians chapter 3. Another prominent example comes in the word “gospel.” The Greek word translates to the English “good news.” But God further defines this good news as specifically the death, burial, resurrection, and appearance of Jesus in I Corinthians 15:1-8. Without such explicit definitions, a person would be forced to subjectively interpret God's meaning in His Word, and often miss the truth.

In II Peter 3:16 God warns that some will twist and “*distort the Scriptures to their own destruction.*” With regard to the end times, those who do not have a “*love of the truth*” will “*believe what is false*” and fall prey to “*a deluding influence*” (II Thessalonians 2:10-11). Rather than using the Bible to justify one's own actions and/or preconceived beliefs, God desires everyone to seek His message and will as “*the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart*” (Luke 8:15).

So let the reader strive, not to interpret God's Word, nor proclaim one's own perspectives as truth; but to trust and obey the Scriptures as God meant them to be understood, in a careful and accurate manner.

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April 2012.