

THE BIBLE:

ITS ILLUMINATION, INTERPRETATION, APPLICATION 2 Peter 1: 20, 21

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

I. INSPIRATION

In Part I of this two-part address on the Holy Scriptures we were thinking about inspiration, and although I didn't make the five points that I was making absolutely clear so as not to interrupt the flow of what I wanted to say, I now enumerate them so that you get them all.

Firstly, we considered the means of inspiration. Many people are making a great meal of this, since inspiration is attacked not because it is theoretically impossible but because it is thought by some to be practically unreasonable

Secondly, we looked at what the New Testament makes of the Old Testament. We found that the New Testament consistently regards the Old Testament as Scripture, using things like 'God says', 'Scripture says', and 'the Prophet says', in an interchangeable way. Thus, if you tried to pull the threads of the Old Testament out of the New, you would be left with something unfit to be a blanket or a garment: the warp and the weft of the threads of the New Testament – Christian writing and Old Testament interpretation - are of one weave.

Thirdly, we thought about the Canon. That is, which books we recognise as being the Holy Scriptures. The 39 books of the Old Testament that we use were accepted by the Jews, by Jesus and by the Apostles. The New Testament books, in the fullness of time, demanded to stand alongside them. At no time did the early Church gather together and have a committee to decide which books were 'in' and which books were 'out'. These books were sent from the early Christians to the early Churches and they were read alongside the Old Testament Scriptures. They were the self-authenticating Word of God.

Fourthly, we thought about textual reliability. Is the Bible that we have now authentic to the Bible that they were using in New Testament times? The answer to that is: yes, 99.9% of it is. Some very learned people in Universities and Colleges are worrying about the other 0.1% and we are grateful to them for that, but it is better for *us* to worry about the 99.9% and allow the textual critics to do the 0.1% that you find in the footnotes of your Bibles,.

Fifthly, we thought about the internal harmony of Scripture. The amazing thing about the Bible is not the few difficult points that are difficult to reconcile (though we are wise to pay attention to those), but rather the amazing internal harmony of the Bible - despite its diversity. We have a book written over a period of 1600 years, by over 40 different authors, in three different Continents, in three different languages, touching hundreds of controversial subjects. The miracle is not the few the things that we find difficult to reconcile, but the amazing consistency

of the Word of God, particularly in the doctrines of grace and salvation through Christ. In effect, over many centuries then and in our own experience, the Bible proves itself to be God's Word.

II. INTERPRETATION

Well, that was 'inspiration'; now we are thinking about 'interpretation'. The whole purpose of Scripture is to point to Christ. If someone asks us, "what is the Bible all about?", we can say, "the Bible is all about Jesus Christ and how he is the one who meets God's plan of salvation for sinful humankind."

When I lived in Surrey, we had many visitors joining us in our household from Germany and Switzerland and other European countries. Sometimes, even now, I go to meet people who are coming on the train. If I were going to the railway station or the airport to meet a stranger, I could say, "wear a pink carnation and carry a copy of 'The Times' ", but I generally have a description of them. I know whether they are young or old, male or female; I may know whether they are black or white, have black hair or blonde and whether they wear glasses. , I would be expecting a European style of dress, perhaps a young woman with one of those scarves around her neck and clothes that don't look as if they came from Marks and Spencer. I always recognised them on the station, amongst all the strangers; I thought "ah, there's my visitor." When I arrived at Frankfurt Railway Station, having travelled to Frankfurt from Switzerland, I was there meeting a man I'd never met him before; he was there on the station and he recognised me. I don't know how he recognised me but he did.

How would Jesus have been recognised without Scripture prophecy? How would the disciples have known that the Messiah had come if they hadn't had their Scriptures? The Scriptures enabled people at the time of Jesus to recognise him as the one who was to come. Prophecy needs to be subjected to scrutiny but it is proved especially in Christ.

A lot has been made in the past of the apparent conflict between science and the Bible. One seeks to find a natural or scientific explanation; the other a supernatural or Biblical explanation. Yet both science and Biblical systematic theology are attempts to make sense of what we know about the world around us. I suggest that often these are complementary rather than competing schemes. For example, some people say that the first three chapters of Genesis and the findings of modern science are difficult to reconcile. Of course they are difficult to reconcile: was science ever supposed to be asking theological questions and was Genesis ever supposed to be answering scientific ones? The perspectives are complementary and consistent with one another. The Bible adopts what we call a phenomenological approach - it describes things as they appear to be, for example sunrise and sunset. That is not at all scientific, for we know that the sun neither literally rises nor sets; rather, but the earth rotates on its axis and we perceive the location of the sun according to the pattern of the celestial ecliptic. But if you study science and you go to scientific textbooks, what do they say? 'Sunrise' and 'sunset'. It's totally unscientific. The Bible isn't seeking to be a scientific textbook but it describes things as ordinary people see them. The big question is - how are we to interpret the Bible? God has not given us a Bible which is perfectly clear to understand in every point. Professor Howard Marshall says this:

“God has not given us a Bible which is perfectly clear to understand in every point but the message of salvation is clear to all who will hear. The message of salvation in the Bible is crystal clear to any who will read it with open hearts and open minds.”

What about other parts of the Bible? How do we best hear the message of the Bible? John Wesley says that,

“The general rule of interpreting Scripture is this: the literal sense of every text is to be taken, if it be not contrary to some other texts; but in that case the obscure text is to be interpreted by those which speak more plainly.”

“Do you accept the Bible literally?” is an awkward question. I literally accept the story of Jonah and the fish, but I think Ezekiel, Chapter 37 and the Valley of Dry Bones is a vision. This word ‘literal’ is a familiar Aunt Sally. In Isaiah 55:12, the trees clap their hands. Are we to interpret that literally? In Psalm 114:4, the mountains skip like rams. Are we to interpret that literally? We need to look at the context. The Bible says, “There is no God.” The Bible says, “There is no God”, and it says, “The fool has said it” - Psalm 14:1. If you are to be a literal interpreter then you need to be careful; if you are going to take the text without the context, which as everybody knows is the pretext; you’d better have a quick look and see. “The fool in his heart has said there is no God.” You need to allow for different times and circumstances.

In Part I, I we saw how the Bible is revelation - it is God’s way of telling us what he wants us to know about his nature and about his work. Revelation equals event plus interpretation. Event plus interpretation equals revelation. If there is event, if something happens but no-one is there to interpret it, what does it mean? If there is comment but no event, is it revelation? We used to concern ourselves in the life of the Church and in theological debate, debating things like the historicity of Jonah. That is, is Jonah an historical figure swallowed by a great fish, or is it an allegorical story to teach us some kind of spiritual truth? Well, you know which I think, but that’s not really the important thing right now. However, some people are now calling the incarnation and the resurrection ‘myth’. Some theologians are allowing themselves the fantastic leap of saying that something can be historically false but religiously true. Would any other discipline allow itself that liberty? How can it be possible to say that something is both historically false and theologically true all in the same breath? Could science say that something is empirically false but scientifically true? It would never allow itself that luxury. Science would never say that you can go into the laboratory and measure something and prove it to be false but then come away and write a textbook and say that it is scientifically true. But the theologian is going to the historic events of our faith and saying ‘they’re historically false, but because I want to stay within the Church I am still maintaining that it is theologically true’. I cannot accept that.

If the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ is not an event from history, is any interpretation of it revelation? No. If the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is not historically true, is any interpretation of the resurrection, revelation? I cannot see that it is. I cannot see how the resurrection of Jesus can be both historically false and theologically true. I cannot align myself with those people who say that the Christ of faith is somehow divorced from the Jesus of history. The literal meaning is the foundation on which the spiritual meaning is built.

Some people talk about isolated proof-texts. You can prove most things from the Bible: you can prove that there is no God from the Bible because the Bible says so, and if you don't add that it is the fool who said it, you can be really stuck.

Wesley's Father said, "The best commentary on the Bible is the Bible." That is, we interpret a difficult text by one that speaks more plainly. It is quite clear that the New Testament provides a substantial interpretation for the Old Testament, but I think that we Christians ought also to remember that the Old Testament provides a substantial interpretation for the New. It was the German scholar, Martin Luther, who said, "we should interpret Scripture with Scripture." We should ask ourselves: "what is the plain and obvious meaning of this passage?" That is Reformation Theology.

I am sorry that many contemporary evangelicals seem to have abandoned Reformation Theology and set themselves about the task of spiritualising nearly every text they can find in the Bible - because that is just what the Roman Catholics were doing at about the time of the Reformation, a method that Luther so greatly opposed. Today, I think we are engaged in doing it again. We are finding types of Christ in every Bible story in the whole of the Old Testament; that is, we are spiritualising the texts. There may be the occasional licence to ask the question: "does this teach us something about the Lord Jesus?", but on the whole we should ask ourselves: "what is the plain and obvious meaning of this passage?" What did it mean to the original readers? That is a big question, and asking that question commits you to serious study of the Bible.

I am a little troubled by what some Christians content themselves with reading. Some Christians are contenting themselves with reading 'The Sacred Diary of Adrian Plass'. There is nothing wrong with reading it, but we won't learn a great deal from it. Some Christians are reading such books as 'Does Chocolate kill your Brain Cells'. If it does, I am totally brain dead. I receive chocolate from all over the country. One birthday I had a letter from a person in Exmouth Methodist Church, where I had preached some months earlier, who said, 'we remembered your birthday and we know you'd like a bar of chocolate'. Good idea! My brain is entirely dead if chocolate does indeed kill your brain cells. I encourage you all to read a book that you find a little bit hard - but not so hard that you give up and become discouraged. Read one that you find a little hard, one that teaches you something about the Bible. Many of us could be reading much better books than we are at the moment - and that would be good.

The Bible commits us to serious study. The Bible as the Word of God is made up of many words. It uses words in a variety of ways. It also conveys truth in different ways. It conveys truth in history, where an historical event is clearly important in the scheme of salvation. It teaches some things in allegory, some things in poetry, some things in parables, and some things in sermons. It records human emotions, sometimes without further comment. It sometimes interprets; it sometimes approximates. There are measurements in the Bible which some people make into a big issue because they are not precisely defined. However, all of this is the task to which we are committed in interpreting the Bible, and we need to look at the plain and natural obvious meaning of the text. Think of what it meant to the people to whom it was originally written, for that is consistent with the divine purpose.

III. ILLUMINATION

We move on now from interpretation to illumination, though they are really of one piece. Scripture can only be understood by the same Spirit whereby it was given. I do not want to say that interpretation is merely an academic task. I am separating illumination from interpretation to show that the spiritual dimension is of crucial importance, though the division is in effect very artificial. We cannot really divide illumination from interpretation, but I am doing it for convenience sake. There is no such thing as accurate interpretation without illumination - but on the other hand God didn't give us brains for nothing! A prayerless Church is not going to be blessed with illumination.

I am reminded of two experiences of preaching. The first is when I preached to a company of people, a substantial number of whom were Roman Catholics. They had what I call open hearts and closed Bibles. Then I went to another meeting, and some of the people there had been members of the exclusive wing of the Plymouth Brethren. They had what I felt to be open Bibles but closed hearts. What we need to be is people with open hearts and open Bibles. I think that we in Methodism are largely getting the preachers that we deserve. I meet people who are on holiday, and I sometimes see them from the pulpit and think – and sometimes even say - “there are some Christians joining us from another Church.” How can you spot them? When they come, they bring their Bibles. Occasionally we have Methodists joining us from other Circuits, and we can spot them because they have brought their hymn books. I don't disparage anyone who takes their hymn book away with them on holiday and I certainly don't disparage the person who is so prepared to join in Christian worship that they have brought what they think they most need. But what they most need are their Bibles. We'd have much better preachers in Methodism if each one of us resolved that from today we will take our Bible to every Christian meeting we go to. The preachers would know that they could not get away with any saying many of the things that they are saying any more. They would also know that people were expecting them to say something from the Bible. Many preachers don't think that anyone is expecting them to say much from the Bible. Take your Bible and sit comfortably towards the front!

We are engaged in the task of asking three questions. Question One - What does the Bible say? That's what we call exegesis. I believe that our pulpits do not contain enough of it, and congregations are not equipped to deal with it because they have not brought their Bibles.

The second question - What does the Bible mean? This is exposition and it is easy to skip.

The third question - What does the Bible mean to me? This is application, and preachers are shying away from because application is too close to home.

What does the Bible say? Exegesis.

What does the Bible mean? Exposition.

What does the Bible mean to me? Application.

It is important to be as accurate as possible in determining what the purpose and meaning of the Scripture was to the original reader. What does the Bible mean? What did these passages mean to those people who first received them read them? Our enemies here are twofold - ignorance and familiarity. They sound uncomfortable bedfellows. The more common problem of ignorance is simply that we don't know our Bibles well enough, so when we are looking at a passage and trying to understand what it meant to the original readers we don't know enough about the original context and the original readers even to approach answering that question. The other is the danger of familiarity: that is, the Bible loses something because we no longer see the surprise. We no longer see the parable with the surprise in the tail. When we read a parable we need to ask, 'what's the big surprise'? What was the radical nature of the teaching of Jesus? What was so surprising about this? Anyone who has heard it, as I have, since they were three years old, is not surprised by it in the same way that the early listeners were. Neither are they surprised at the wonder of the grace of God in the Bible. So ignorance and familiarity are both enemies to our understanding and interpretation of the Bible.

Everyone comes to the Bible with some ideas in their own mind of what it is. People whose point of view is different from mine say, "ah yes, you John Haley, evangelical, you come to the Bible with a whole load of presuppositions, things that you've made up your mind about before you come to the Bible." I say, "oh yes, that's very true - and so have you!" We all come to the Bible with our presuppositions. We all come to the Bible having in some sense made up our mind about what it is. My own presupposition is that the Bible is the Word of God. I said in Part I that this is a faith statement, but that doesn't make it invalid. It is not a crazy statement because there is a great deal of evidence to support it. There are some things which we must admit, if we are honest, do not sit well with our understanding of the Bible as the Word of God. We live with those because the hypothesis that the Bible is God's Word is the best hypothesis that we have with all the available evidence. However, theory is not enough. Coming to the Bible believing that it is the Word of God is neither here nor there in many ways: it needs to come alive to us. What is more, *we* need to come alive to *it*. We do so by the power of the Holy Spirit, for to Israel God spoke in a book but for us he spoke in person; the witness to that person, inspired by the Holy Spirit, is in the Holy Scriptures.

There is a sense in which preaching has a unique role here, for it takes the inspired word and it relies on the Holy Spirit for illumination, interpretation and application. That is why preaching is so out of fashion in today's church. Preaching relies not on gimmicks but on the Holy Spirit. The failure of preaching in the church of today, and we have to say that most preaching in the today's church is an abject failure, is not because we've got preaching wrong as a form, and it is not because of the mode; the failure of preaching is because of the content and the disregard of the Holy Spirit. Those of you who are not preachers are feeling comfortable and complacent at this point, while those of you who are preachers are feeling desperately guilty, but don't let it be said that preaching is only the responsibility of the preacher. If you have a succession of disappointing preachers in your home Church, don't blame them. If the hearers are Christians the whole transaction is the responsibility of the hearer also.

With regard to the preaching in "Liberal Protestantism", it is scarcely a supernatural exercise to expound a book which has been deemed to be ordinary, representing little more than mankind's religious quest, relying wholly and solely on scholarship and critical methods, with a bit of

imagination thrown in. That seems to be a lot of the preaching that we get these days. Perhaps that is overstating the case a little bit: it's easy to make fun of other people's points of view. It seems to me then that much modern preaching is humanism dressed up in historic vestments. The preaching of contemporary evangelicalism is often far more anecdotal than Biblical. Watch out for the preacher who speaks for an hour and spends 45 minutes of that time telling you how God has been blessing his ministry. Beware the preacher who is relying on doubtful special revelation rather than illumination. The preacher who consistently punctuates his sermon with 'and God said to me', or trading on sensational stories. Perhaps that is also overstating the case a little bit, but we have all heard it: more anecdotal than Biblical, special revelation rather than illumination, sensational stories. A preacher who does all three of those things will get thousands to their meeting. That is emotionalism dressed up.

There used to be a time when preaching was so important among evangelical Christians that worship was reduced to picking out a few hymns. I used to remember when you could turn up to worship with a Bible and a tuning fork. And that was wrong. But now, it has almost become that worship, and getting the worship and drama and dance right, is the be-all and end-all. Some people make the mistake of thinking, "if only we had better worship songs and if we could take these lovely songs that we've been singing back into our home Churches, everything would just suddenly come alive." It wouldn't come alive: it would just be a new form of deadness. Preaching is the diamond and worship is the ring they need each other, but the preaching of the gospel in the setting of Christian worship is the great attribute of the Church.

Application isn't sticking texts on people, and I find a lot of Christians who are sincerely trying to do it. Offering Christ in the gospel requires a genuine interest in the other person. Jesus listened to people's stories. He listened to what the woman at the well had to say; he listened to what the two disciples on the road to Emmaus had to say. Jesus listened, and then met their need. This is a caricature of open-air evangelism, and I hope that we don't cease to do open-air evangelism because we're frightened or ashamed of doing it, but this is the scenario that we sometimes have in our local shopping centres on a Saturday afternoon: people gathered in the open-air, all facing in one direction, armed with a megaphone and the Authorised Version. They are totally confrontational, yelling at people across the great divide of the expanse that the Saturday shoppers make between themselves and those who are stood there. That is why they need the megaphone, blasting them as hard as they can and sticking as many texts on passers-by as they are able. 'Ye must be born again.'

Then there is the other approach, at which we Methodists are experts. The so-called "modern approach", listening carefully and sensitively and pastorally to what everyone has to say and then when they've finished finding that we've nothing to say in answer because we abandoned our Bibles years ago. Well, Jesus listened very carefully to what people had to say - and then by his Word he met their need. That is what we must do. The Bible is inspired by the Holy Spirit, interpreted by the Holy Spirit, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, proclaimed and applied by the Holy Spirit. The Scriptures are our rule; the Holy Spirit is our guide.

IV. APPLICATION

Words preceding our text say “you do well to pay attention to it.” That is, we need to return to being people of the book. Wesley’s desire was (in Latin) to be *‘Homo unius libri’* (a man of one book). Methodism has always been a religion of the Bible. Indeed with my quotation from the Roman Emperor, you would acknowledge that Christianity has always been a religion of the Bible. Of his personal study, Wesley writes (three o’clock in the morning),

“Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift my heart to the Father of Lights: ‘Lord is it not thy word? ... ‘Thou hast said ‘If any be willing to do thy will he shall know’. I am willing to do, let me know, thy will. I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, ‘comparing spiritual things with spiritual’. I meditate thereon with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable. If any doubt still remains, I consult those who are experienced in the things of God; and then the writings whereby, being dead, they yet speak. And what I thus learn, that I teach.”

He continues in another place,

“We believe that the written Word of God is the only and sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice in our lives.”

We accept the authority of Scripture because we believe it is truth come from God. When we say the Bible is true, what do we mean? We certainly mean that the overall message of salvation is true, but we are all the time wrestling with the need to make sense of the Bible in our time. You may say that the Bible is true, but what do you make of the laws in Leviticus? Dividing them up, for example, between National, Ceremonial and Moral laws is fine, and I think that this is a very helpful way of understanding which laws apply to the Christian and which do not. To say that the laws are from God and are therefore true is, I suppose, in a sense right, but if we interpret them wrongly the truth is distorted, distorted truth is not true any more. Yet we have seen that we cannot just come to the Bible in isolation. That is, we need to bring other things to bear upon it.

What is the relationship between Scripture, tradition, reason and experience? Some people make the mistake of subjecting Scripture to tradition or to reason or to experience. We must not do that, but we should subject our *interpretation* of Scripture to tradition, reason and experience. In other words, when we are listening to someone interpreting the Bible, or when we are engaged in that task ourselves in our own daily devotions, we ask ourselves, does this interpretation match with reason? Is it a reasonable interpretation? In two thousand years of Christian theology, what kind of track record have we had in this kind of interpretation? It is my contention that we are not going to find anything very much desperately new. How does it fit in with my own Christian experience and the experience of other Christians whom I admire and know are spiritual people? We subject our *interpretation* of Scripture to tradition, reason or experience - not the Scripture itself. We go down a dangerous road when we neglect Scripture, and I think that some modern evangelical and charismatic people are in danger of doing that. We go down a dangerous road when we suspend reason. We are in danger if we ignore the wisdom of the years in the Church

and we are in danger if we limit experience. Faith is never free from risk or from the duties both of self-examination and self-correction.

In conclusion, , I present to you a problem. Young people, new Christians, and even older Christians need the Word of God sealed in their hearts. I am sure that the great majority of you believe that in theory, but are you doing it in practice? We need the Word of God sealed in our hearts. We need to distinguish between emotion and experience. What is the difference?

Methodists have rightly emphasised the need for experience, and that is summed up in the hymn which I like more than most hymns, "Father of everlasting grace/Thy goodness and thy truth we praise,/Thy goodness and thy truth we prove."

The dangerous deception of the devil is always imitation and counterfeit; one thing we know about things that are imitation and counterfeit is that they look alarmingly like the things they are imitating or counterfeiting.

I have emotional moments all the time. I have an emotional moment when Plymouth Argyle score a goal (so perhaps 'all the time' was a bit of an exaggeration!) and I have emotional moments at concerts or listening to music. Christians have emotional moments too. We need to watch out for this. When we sing a rousing hymn or favourite modern song, it is an emotional moment. When we gather in a great crowd rather than the usual handful, it is an emotional moment. A lot of Christians in the modern day Church are having all kinds of emotional moments; they are going to big meetings and experiencing all kinds of emotions, and many people are even seeking out a special kind of meeting where they know that their emotions are going to be stimulated.

But authentic Christianity is the "heart strangely warmed", which is two things. It is based on the exposition of the Scriptures and a personal meeting with the Lord Jesus. I am not knocking emotion. When you come this evening and the band plays and we are led in all the modern songs, I hope you will be emotional about it. And when we sing the great hymns from our hymn book, whether they be the great Welsh hymn that we sang last night or the hymns of the Wesleys or any others, I hope that they will be emotional moments; we should not call that Christian experience, because it isn't - or if it is, it's only rarely so. Don't confuse going to an emotional meeting and being emotionally moved, which is all good and proper, with the real essence of Christian experience. I want to say that Christian experience is emotional, but I don't want to say that all emotions are Christian experience, for authentic Christian experience is the exposition of the Holy Scriptures and a personal meeting with the Lord Jesus by faith applied to our hearts.

We turn to the Bible in order to learn how to live properly. Bible study is most important but it is not an academic pursuit. We believe that the written Word of God is the only sufficient rule both of Christian faith and practice in our lives. Some people are in the trap of saying that the Bible is not specific enough. That's nonsense. If the Bible were too specific it would be bound to time and culture. As it is, it speaks in every age and culture. If the Bible were written scientifically and if God had wanted to write a scientific textbook, he could have done so - but it could not have spoken and still speak, to all people, all cultures and all ages. Does not that hint at

the miraculous origin of the Bible, the self-authenticating Word of God? Some ask, if the will of God were recorded for each of us, individually, specifically, in understandable words of one syllable, for us to do, would we be any more likely to do it? Unless we get serious in our study of the Bible we cannot pretend to be serious in our following of Jesus. We need to be tested by fire, tested by God, in order to be trusted by God. We need to be people who get back to these basic tasks and trust that the Bible is God's Word, that we are set the task of interpreting it, that we are given the help and aid in illumination of the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit, and that by faith the message of the Scriptures is applied to our hearts.

What does the Bible say?

What does the Bible mean?

What does the Bible mean to me?

“And what I thus learn, that I teach.”