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GETTING TO GRIPS WITH THE BIBLE

By George Curry

Most church people still think the Bible important. But human nature is fickle. Christians must be alert to the tendency to backslide and compromise. It is essential, therefore, that we own a right understanding of the Bible. Is it, as liberals say, a random collection of religious musings from a disparate group of individuals who had some sort of experience of the numinous? Or is it, as Article 20 says, 'God's Word written'? We need to know in order to interpret it correctly.

THE BIBLE: WHAT IS IT?

The testimony of many is clear. It is a special book. It is unique. The Bible is God's self-appointed record of what He has said and done. It is His gift to mankind. It is the one book that He wants all people to hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest.

This is the view of Cranmer, Calvin, Jewel and Murray. It is the conviction of countless others. But it is often attacked. Some think it puts too much stress on the divine nature of Scripture. They feel it undermines its humanness.

Those who hold a high view of Scripture do so for three reasons.

First, they know what the Bible says about itself. As you read it you become aware that it claims to be nothing less than the word of God. Consider first the testimony of Old Testament saints. The Psalmist speaks of God's statutes, precepts, decrees, commands, laws and word. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob refer to the promises of God. Moses was careful to communicate all that God said and commanded at Mt. Sinai. And the prophets urge us to turn 'to the law and the testimony.' Each knew that God has spoken. And each made known what God has said. Consider secondly, the testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ. His use of the Old Testament reveals that He believed it to be God-given and, therefore, God's word. And consider thirdly, the testimony of the Apostles. They believed the words of Jesus to be 'spirit and . . . life' (*John 6.63*). And knew they were indwelt by the Spirit of truth. It was He who led them into all truth and equipped them to function as the authoritative teachers and leaders of the infant Christian church. That is why the apostle Peter calls the writings of Paul Scripture (*2 Peter 3.16*).

Secondly, they know the testimony of the Holy Spirit within their hearts. In the last analysis this is the only proof that the Bible is God's Word. The Spirit, promised and given to the apostles, is given to all believers (*Acts 2.38ff.*). It is He who leads God's people to both know and own God's truth. As a believer hears the Scriptures read, expounded and taught the realization dawns on him that the Bible is nothing less than the written word of God. And he becomes convinced that it is the vehicle that God uses to bring people to faith (*1 Peter 1.23*) and to build up believers in the faith (*2 Timothy 3.16f.*).

Thirdly, they know the testimony of God's people. Until the eighteenth century the consistent testimony of the church was that the Bible is God's word. The Old Testament was accepted as such primarily because of Jesus' use of it. And the New Testament was given the same status because the early church was convinced that its writers were 'carried along by the Holy Spirit' (*2 Peter 1.21*). This is still the *official* view of all mainline denominations although this fact is often obscured and apparently, if not actually, contradicted by the utterances of some.

THE BIBLE: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT IT?

There are four things to note. Each is a logical development from what has already been said.

First, the Bible is a *necessary* revelation. By that we mean mankind needs the Bible. Without it he would be utterly lost in a sea of confusion and error. By nature man is unable to know God or arrive at a correct assessment of himself or creation.

Secondly, the Bible is a *sufficient* revelation. A striking feature of the church today is its reluctance to be regulated by Scripture. The regulative principle of the Reformation has, it seems, been abandoned. Yet Article 20 is clear: 'it is not lawful for the Church to ordain anything that is contrary to God's Word written, neither may it so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another.'

Thirdly, the Bible is a *clear* revelation. The perspicuity of Scripture is something else that has been lost sight of today. Many appear to behave as though the Bible can only become an 'open book' with the aid and help of scholars. We are not saying that scholarship is not important. It is. But we must be careful not to say that the Bible can only make sense as long as you have the church's or the scholars' interpretation of it. The one thing needed is faith. For as Calvin says, 'The gospel can only be understood by faith alone.' The humblest man of faith is by God's grace able to grasp, at least in general terms, the truth as set out in Scripture.

And fourthly, the Bible is an *authoritative* revelation. We can do little better than to quote Murray to illustrate the point: 'Our dependence upon Scripture is total. Without it we are bereft of revelatory Word from God' (*Collected Writings Vol. 1 p.20*). This in part explains why 1600 years earlier Augustine of Hippo declared: 'therefore we yield to and agree to the authority of the Holy Scripture which can neither be deceived nor deceive.'

THE BIBLE: HOW DOES IT SPEAK TO US?

The essential point to assert is that the '*literal sense*' is the sense that the Holy Spirit intends us to hear, receive and obey. This is a cardinal principle of biblical interpretation. But it has not always been given its proper place. In Patristic times the Alexandrian school (*e.g. Clement*) interpreted Scripture *allegorically*. The literal, or obvious, sense was lost and its historical character obscured. However, at the same time the Antiochene school (*e.g. Chrysostom*) stressed the importance of the literal meaning and sense of the text. Mediaeval scholasticism used allegorical, tropological and analogical models of interpretation, while modern times have centred on the theoretical analysis of sources. The focus has not been on what the text says, but on how it came into its present state. Where this has happened the literal or proper sense of the text has been lost sight of, as has the historical character of Scripture.

We need to recover the traditional view of biblical interpretation. But for this to happen two things are essential. One is that we must recognize the Bible for what it is. It is not just, as Barth taught, a means that God uses to communicate truth. It is truth. It is God's word written; the product of his creative breath. Inspiration therefore involves verbal inspiration. The words used matter. We need to understand their grammatical and syntactical use in both their immediate and biblical context.

The second is that we must strive to avoid certain pitfalls. Three come to mind. First, there is the constant danger that we will fail to find out what a text (or passage) means in the context. Secondly, we must not pour into a text our own theological presuppositions or convictions. The text must be allowed to speak for itself. And thirdly, we must seek to understand a particular text in the context of the whole of the Bible. For the Bible is an organic unit. It is not, to quote Murray again, 'a compilation of isolated and unrelated oracles' (*op. cit. p.5*).

This, then, is our goal. How are we to attain it? By using an appropriate hermeneutical, or interpretative, tool. There is only one. It is called the *grammatico-historico-theological method* of interpretation. Do not let the name put you off. There are three elements to it.

This method teaches us to interpret the Bible:

(a) *grammatically*. We are to discover the true meaning of each word. Lexicons and dictionaries will help. Take note of the grammar of the original language and also the word order. In Hebrew the order is usually predicate, subject, object. What comes first is important. Variations usually indicate the author wishes to stress something. Attention needs to be given to the logical connexion of clauses and sentences. Note carefully the conjunctions and prepositions used. And be aware of the type of literature in question. Is it poetry or prose; narrative or history; literal or figurative, simile or hyperbole? Seek to discover the principal idea of the text and the prevailing thought of the wider context in which it is set.

(b) *historically*. History is stamped on each book of the Bible. It is essential therefore to unearth, from the Bible first and foremost, all that one can about the author: his personality, temperament, experiences and frame of mind. Try to find out about his circumstances: the geography, religion, politics and culture of the time; and about his audience: the people to whom and the situation about which he writes. And we need to discover his purpose: does he seek to correct, comfort, exhort, inform or instruct?

(c) *theologically*. We must recognize the unity of Scripture. It is one book with one message. Its main purpose is to reveal the character, ways and will of God. The main subject of it is the two comings of Christ. The Old Testament is preparatory and prophetic principally, but not exclusively, of his first coming. The New Testament is revelatory, explanatory, applicatory and anticipatory. As God is a God of order and truth He would not allow the authors to contradict each other. And, as they spoke and wrote as moved by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the purpose of God is more important than the conscious purpose of the writer. So we must compare scripture with scripture. And approach the obscure in the light of the clear, and the partial in the light of the complete.

The grammatico-historico-theological model of interpretation has another benefit. It does not only enable us to get at the message of the Bible. It also keeps us in our place. Other models tend to subjectivism. They fail to keep the hunches, feelings and prejudices of the interpreter in check. The new hermeneutic lays too much stress on the cultural background and not enough on the words themselves. God has spoken. But he speaks today. He does so by his written word.

THE BIBLE: WHY HAS GOD GIVEN US IT?

This question can be answered in one sentence. It is so that God may be glorified. The Spirit uses the written word of God to achieve two goals: first, the growth of God's church (*1 Peter 1.23*); and secondly, the growth of God's people in holiness and service (*2 Timothy 3.14*). As both goals are achieved God the Father is glorified in and through Jesus Christ his Son.

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