

Reflections on

# Understanding the Bible:

On Our Own  
vs.  
With the Help of Others

1. It is our premise that a person *doesn't* have to be a theological scholar to understand the Word of God. Scripture was written for the "average" person. It was written for the "nobodies" of the world, for the outcasts and homeless people, for those trapped in the inner city ghetto, for children, for poor people, for High School dropouts, for natives somewhere out in the jungle, who will never know the world beyond their grass hut village. The wise, the scholar, the influential person - these are also welcome. But they tend to find it more difficult to humble themselves and to become like little children - a necessary requirement for entering God's kingdom (Matthew 18:3; 1 Corinthians 1:26-30, etc.).
2. The Bible was written in such a manner, that, to whatever degree a person has the ability to comprehend language, he will be capable of understanding it - provided that he accepts it as it is written, taking into consideration the context, the meanings of the words, and how the words connect in sentences. New converts can understand it (if they accept it "as is"), just as old converts can. (The total amount of what is understood will increase, as the new convert grows in his spiritual life.) Even an unsaved person would be able to understand it, if he were willing to accept it as it is written. (If he did this, he would soon want to become a saved person.)
3. Of course, one's comprehension of the Word will be influenced by his natural abilities and gifts. For some people, understanding the Word may take more time and effort - though it can still be done. Children might understand less, simply because their language comprehension is not fully developed. Also, those who are mentally impaired cannot be expected to comprehend it to the same extent as someone who has no such difficulties.
4. The Bible (or parts of it) has been translated into thousands of languages. In nearly every instance, the translation is sufficiently accurate, that one's faith will not be endangered. (There is a "less-than-acceptable" translation, which will be mentioned later, in Section 7.) The only requirement is that the person must be willing to read the Word and accept what it says. He must not change or "adjust" the Word, to make it more acceptable; but he must accept the message "as is" - keeping verses within *their own* contexts, taking into consideration figures of speech, not adding to or subtracting from what the verses say, etc.
5. Differences between translations can be expected, for there are often many ways to say the same thing. Some translations may emphasize word-for-word translating, while others will emphasize meaning-for-meaning translating. In addition, there will be occasional disagreements between

copies of the original manuscripts, which will result in variations in the way something is translated. (These textual differences, however, are relatively minor, and have *no significant impact* on *any* major teaching found in the Word! The overall message remains the same, regardless of textual variations.)

6. A good translation will attempt to minimize misunderstandings that could be caused by the translation process. Admittedly, there is always the potential for a translator's personal opinion to influence the translation - and this is a good reason for checking a few different translations, when possible. It must be emphasized, however, that this problem will rarely affect the major issues. One's salvation will *not* be endangered, for the *overall* message of the Word will minimize the effects of a mistranslation that might occur in some specific verse.
7. [I have seen only one translation that contains deliberate mistranslations, the "New World Translation," published by the Jehovah's Witnesses. I have heard comments about one other cult that may have also done this - though I have not seen it personally. Since these one or two faulty translations are written in English, there are many other translations - much better ones - that can be used, to confirm what Scripture *actually* says. Furthermore, even in a faulty translation, inherent contradictions caused by such mistranslations would alert anyone who carefully examined them. (Most of the adherents, however, blindly accept whatever the leaders tell them to believe. They are convinced that whatever they get told is "what the Bible says.")]
8. We don't want to forget that there *is* a value to education and intelligence - as will be seen later. But our emphasis here is the fact that God gave his Word to *all of us*. He didn't give it to us in some obscure manner that forces us to be at the mercy of some elite group of theological scholars.
9. God gives each of his people gifts. The theologian is but one of many - and he is no more (or less) important than the rest of God's people. But just as with all the rest, the value of his contribution to the body of Christ is directly proportional to his willingness to place himself - *and his theological perspectives* - in humble submission to the Word. Without this, he is no better than the religious leaders of Jesus' day - against whom Jesus pronounced the severest of judgments (Matthew 23).
10. Someone may raise the question as to why there are so many different views about what the Bible says. Even among theologians, the so-called "experts" about the Bible, there is often a great diversity of opinions. The problem *isn't* that Scripture cannot be understood. Rather, people have difficulty leaving Scripture the way it is written. They tend to either add to it or subtract from it. When this happens, the distinction between God's Word and people's opinions becomes blurred, and the potential for error increases.
11. When different people add or subtract different things, this results in different conclusions and increasing amounts of disagreement. When the distinction between what God says and what people say has not been diligently maintained, we find ourselves with escalating error. People with opposing views will *each* be claiming to hold to "the truth." (Each side will even quote Scripture to "prove" that they are right.) Others will claim that *nobody* can really know for sure, and still others will simply stop caring about the entire issue.
12. There are different ways that error can be introduced into the Word. A person may introduce error by superimposing *his own* opinions into the Word. This may be the result of adding to and subtracting from what the Word says. It may be the result of attempting to "reconcile" truth with already-believed error or false assumptions. It could even be done inadvertently, through carelessness and a lazy attitude toward the preciseness of language. (In a world where people want

"instant results," this last method happens more often than most people would like to admit. Few are willing to take the time that would be required, for carefully examining the Word.)

13. A person may also add to or subtract from the Word, when he relies on *another person's* opinion, and fails to make a distinction between that opinion and the Word. This happens quite often, when a person relies on a commentary (or a sermon, etc.) to "define" truth. Often the reader, or listener, will fail to make the distinction between the human opinion and God's Word - *even though the author of that opinion may, at times, make such a distinction.*
14. Pride and creativity have no place in determining what the Word says. Though few would ever claim to study the Word in this manner, at times this is essentially what happens. The creativity is present, when the person comes up with his own ideas, and acts as though they were the Word itself. The pride is present, when he fails to place his views in humble submission to the Word - when he goes beyond it, adding to it or subtracting from it.
15. We have been stressing ways in which a person can fall into error. To "balance" this, we must remind ourselves that most error is *not* deliberate falsification of the Word. People who disagree with us will often be just as sincere as we are! Even when a person attempts to rely *totally* on the Word, there is a potential for some degree of error - since nobody in this present world is totally perfect. Even though the intensity of one's focus on the Word will keep that error to a minimum, this "accidental error" has the potential of getting compounded, when the others unquestioningly accept what the person says, and do not go back to the Word, to find out if what he said is correct. This shows the *necessity* for each generation to freshly examine the Word, and to not blindly rely on others. In such a situation, the greater blame probably goes to the hearer, than to the speaker (or writer).
16. Many people have a tendency to rely on commentaries and theologians for getting their view of what the Word says, rather than getting their views from the Word itself. When they add their own "accidental error" to whatever errors may be present in the commentaries, sermons or lectures they rely on, the cumulative amount of error increases. Then, if they teach others, the problem can become even more compounded. When generation after generation relies on the teachings of previous generations (rather than on the Word itself), and fails to make a *radical distinction* between those teachings and Scripture, it results in a downward spiral, in which error tends to increase - error which can be removed *only* by a renewed focus on the Word itself.
17. Most people follow the views of people they consider to be "experts." They get their views, not by focusing on the Bible, but from reading books, or hearing sermons and lectures. Unfortunately, most "experts" get *their* views the same way. The way most theological training is set up, there is plenty of time for studying the views of previous "experts" - including the instructor's notes. But even when the student *wants* to double-check what he hears or reads, he often discovers that there is very little "free time" built into the schedule, to allow him to independently examine the Word, and to evaluate what those "experts" are saying.
18. Some people ignore what is written, because of laziness or disinterest. Others spend so much time studying what *people* have to say about the Word, that they don't even realize the difference between those opinions and the Word itself. They can't even read the Word without those opinions "interpreting" the Word. For some, if they would have devoted as much time and energy to the Word, as they do to people's writings and lectures *about* the Word, they would have truly gained more than all the experts in the world could ever offer. They may be able to approach the level of their teacher's "theological acumen" - after all, Jesus does talk about the student being *like* his

teacher (Luke 6:40). But they should have spent the same energy focused on the Word itself, going over it again and again, learning it, and reflecting on its significance (the meaning of the word "meditation," found in some translations of the Old Testament). Then they would have been able to say, like the psalmist, that they had *more* understanding than many religious leaders have, simply because they accepted and obeyed God's Word (Psalm 119:100).

19. This problem is not new; it has always been this way. In this matter, things are no different from what they were like in Jesus' day. In Jesus' day, it was called, "the traditions of the elders." In Paul's day, it may have started with, "I follow Paul" vs. "I follow Apollos" (1 Corinthians 3:4), and then progressed to the following of all sorts of leaders (the false apostles of 2 Corinthians 11:13+). Today, it could be, "I'm a Calvinist," or "I'm an Arminian," or "I'm Pentecostal" (and so on) - where the person focuses on the books and lectures that promote the view he has chosen to accept. [The theological perspectives mentioned here were randomly chosen. Some may be more accurate than others. But when people start labeling other people, the tendency is to focus on the labels, rather than on the Scriptures. You can insert your own favorite theological viewpoint, if you wish.]
20. Even when a leader's views are correct - as were the views of Paul and presumably Apollos - the issue is the fact that people tend to focus on *people*, rather than on *God*. (This is also one of the reasons why people tend to name church buildings after people.)
21. To avoid the wrong impression, we must balance what we have said, with this: In spite of all the disagreements that may exist among theologians, there will often be many points in which they *do* agree. The disagreements may sometimes involve only one or two issues. And sometimes, the disagreements will be based *not* on what the Bible says, but on conclusions they reach when they go into issues *beyond* what the Word expressly deals with - and act as though their conclusions are as "inspired" as the Word itself.
22. As long as a person (theologian or otherwise) restrains his views, limiting them to what the Word expressly says, it is *impossible* for him to reach a significantly divergent conclusion about what the Word says. The words themselves limit what conclusions a person can reach! If he leaves his added opinions and inferences in the "not-inspired and relatively unimportant" category, and does not get a "this is what God says" attitude about them, there will be very little to argue about!
23. This is not to imply that there will be *no* disagreements. It seems to be a part of our nature to find ways to disagree! But when we strip away all the interpretational schemes... when we keep verses in context, rather than pasting-together verses separated by centuries, so as to come-up with a view that can't be supported by either verse *when each is kept within its own context*... when we don't cling dearly to bits of information from *outside* the Word, using it as our basis for "understanding" the Word... simply put, *when we don't add to or subtract from the Word*, all the disagreements will become minor issues. The more we keep to the Word itself, the closer our views will become. The more we will agree.
24. Merely *claiming* that the Bible is our final authority in all matters is not enough. Some people make such claims, and base their claims on their favorite theologian's writings! Some will tell others to put the Bible first, and then they try to get the people to focus their attention on books, commentaries, preachers and theologians who teach what they consider to be the "correct" views. They also encourage them to *avoid* the teachings of anyone who doesn't hold to these "correct" views. (They may even distort or exaggerate their opponent's views, to make them look less acceptable.) And so, with their mouths, they claim to put the Bible first... but with their actions,

they base their faith on the teachings of people, encourage others to do the same, and call it "putting the Bible first."

25. Note what Jesus said to some of the religious leaders who claimed to follow God, but who actually followed other people - people they considered to be the "experts" of the past: In Mark 7:6-8, Jesus called them hypocrites, whose worship had no meaning in God's sight.
26. Understanding the Bible does *not* require the "intervention" of a trained theologian. All people everywhere - to whatever degree they are capable of understanding language - will reach the same general conclusions when they study the Word of God... *if* they are willing to accept the perspective that flows naturally from the text of Scripture. This means that they must be willing to accept it "as is," without adding to it or subtracting from it, all the while paying attention to the words and the way those words fit together in sentences. (Some people use the terms "grammar" and "syntax" to describe this.) It is only when people begin to add and subtract, and when they are negligent in their duty to carefully reflect on what they read (to "meditate" on it), that differences in views come into existence. Once they depart from "what is written," the sky's the limit, for the variety of viewpoints that may arise.
27. A few clarifications need to be made to the above statements. First, accepting the Word "as is" does *not* ignore the existence of figures of speech, idioms, metaphors and similes, the difference between prose and poetry, etc. Accepting all these is a part of accepting the Word "as is."
28. Second, a new disciple of Jesus may have many erroneous views, simply because he hasn't yet had the opportunity to let the Word change his thinking. As he learns to submit to the Word, his views will change.
29. In addition, this does not mean that a person will understand everything in the Word the first time he reads it. Acceptance of what the Word says requires a *change* in perspective, for many of the things it says goes against the views we have learned and *assumed true* since childhood.
30. The perspective we have been taught since childhood, is not the only thing we have to change. Scripture tells us that we were *born* with a distorted perspective on reality. We need to let the Word *rebuild* our minds, so that we will be able to grow in our acceptance of its message. (This is why we are told that we need "renewed" minds - Romans 12:1-2, and that those who have not become Jesus' disciples have a "darkened" understanding of reality - Ephesians 4:17-19. This is also why the concept of "repentance" includes a change in our *minds* - as well as in our actions.)
31. This necessary change can take place only to the extent that we rely on God and his Word for that change. It will take some people longer than others to reach this point. For those who reach it sooner, this will provide an opportunity for them to learn to practice patience and love, as they wait for the change to occur in others. It *will* occur, sooner or later - at the resurrection, if not sooner!
32. Our responsibility is to focus on correcting *our own* thinking first, before we try to change others. We ourselves need to change. We need to remind *ourselves* - not just other people - that *such a change will never occur if we are unwilling to abandon our preconceived opinions and allow the Word to make that change.*

33. Change will often take time. A person may need to read and reread the Word, paying close attention to the way Scripture describes things - especially when it presents a view that is rather "unexpected," or contrary to what the person has always assumed to be true.
34. Some passages in the Word may be difficult to understand. There may be certain details in some passages that remain perplexing, no matter how much we attempt to understand them. However, the overall message of the Word - everything we need to know for life and godliness - remains clear. What we need to know, regarding how to live our present life and how to prepare for our future life, does not rest on some isolated passage, here or there in the Word. Instead, it permeates the Bible from cover to cover. If we are willing to accept (and live by) what we *can* understand, then we won't be in danger because of what we *can't* understand.
35. Perhaps some of those difficult passages will eventually become clear to us, as we continue to make the Word a part of our lives. For those questions that may still remain, we will have all the opportunities we could ever want, in eternity, to ask Jesus about them.
36. It should not surprise us, when we do not understand everything in the Word. God's wisdom and understanding totally eclipses ours. His Word is like an inexhaustible treasure, which yields its blessings to anyone who is willing to submit to it, yet always has more in store, no matter how long a person may search its depths.
37. When we find a difficult passage, it is our duty to *not* read interpretations into it, in an attempt to make it easier to understand. The more we read our interpretations into a passage, the greater the probability of error. It is acceptable to have an opinion as to the meaning of an obscure passage, but we need to maintain a distinction between our opinions and the Word itself. Rather than superimposing our opinions into a passage, and claiming that we know its meaning, we should be willing to admit there are things we don't yet understand. We can express our opinions, if we desire, but we should have the integrity to acknowledge that it is nothing more than opinion. We should also be willing to accept other people who have different opinions on such matters - for compared to God's Word, which is totally authoritative and without error, all of our opinions fade into insignificance.
38. We must emphasize that acceptance of the Word involves more than an expression of mere intellectual activity: It involves *submission* to the Word. The person who does not follow Jesus does not truly accept the Word. Why? *Because genuine acceptance includes a change in one's lifestyle* - a change to a way of life that conforms to the truths found in the Word.
39. Most non-Christians will never be willing to study the Word in a way that enables them to understand its perspective on reality. But even if they learned it to the point that they could be considered "experts" in what it says, it would still be nothing more than a sterile "intellectual exercise," until they *submitted* to what it says. People need to *accept as true* what the Word says, and *repent* of their sins, and trust God, both for salvation and for a change in their lives. This change will result in submission and obedience to God.
40. The idea of accepting Scripture "as is," within its own context, and trusting what God says, the way he says it, is not new. It has existed since the beginning of the human race, when Adam believed what God told him (even though he eventually disobeyed God's command). It is encouraged throughout Scripture. Many people, down through the ages and up to the present time,

have encouraged it - whether or not they succeeded in doing it, themselves. (Whether people succeed or fail, God's Word remains firmly established as true.)

41. Throughout history, the idea of people accepting God's Word without the intervention of theological "experts" has been one of the impelling reasons for people who desired to translate the Word of God into languages that the "common people" could understand. They knew that Scripture was intended for everyone, rather than for a select group of "experts" who would tell everyone else what to believe... and they were willing to die for this view. One of these people - John Wyclif, who translated the Bible into the English language, over 600 years ago - said it this way (rewritten in modern English, with words in parenthesis added for clarity):

***It Will Greatly Help You, For Understanding Scripture:***

*If you pay attention not only to **WHAT** is spoken or written,*

*But also **OF WHOM** it was spoken or written,*

*And **TO WHOM**,*

*With what **CHOICE OF WORDS**,*

*At what **TIME** (in history),*

***WHERE** (what country or town),*

*For what **PURPOSE**,*

*In what **CIRCUMSTANCES**;*

*Considering also **WHAT IS SAID BEFORE** (previous verses)*

*And **WHAT IS SAID AFTER** (the following verses).*

Again, this view is *not* new!

42. Learning different theological perspectives can be of value - though it is not an absolute necessity. The value, however, will often come *indirectly* - not from the view itself, but from one's understanding of *the reasons for those views*. We may even benefit from theologians who have *wrong* perspectives, if we focus on issues such as: What makes them reach their conclusions? What assumptions are they making? Are their "presuppositions" a mixture of truth, opinion, and supposed "facts" from outside of Scripture? (If so, which parts are a direct expression of God's Word, and which aren't?) Are they over-stressing one fact, to the neglect of another? Our focus isn't on merely claiming that they are "wrong," but on understanding the background issues and assumptions, which caused them to reach those wrong conclusions.
43. If a person's line of reasoning is valid, his conclusions will be influenced by the assumptions he starts with. These original assumptions will have a major impact on the accuracy of his conclusions. When we become aware of the impact of one's "starting point," it will not only help us to distinguish truth from error at its very basic level, but it will also help us to become more consistent in our own views, as we attempt to bring our own perspectives into submission to the Word. As we better understand the assumptions and opinions that others tend to superimpose over what the Word itself says, we will become better equipped for avoiding those same errors in our own thinking. From this perspective, even *false* conclusions can have an indirect value!
44. There are at least two "sides" in most (if not all) issues. If there is someone promoting a specific perspective, based on some particular assumption, then most likely there will be someone else

who holds to the *opposite* set of assumptions. A person who is willing to examine both views (and both sets of assumptions that are behind those views) will often discover that *both* views contain fragments of truth. In such a case, the Scriptures will need to be examined (which is something a person should always do, anyway), to find out which parts of each view cling to the Word, and which parts need something else to prop them up.

45. Sometimes the two "opposite" sides of a theological disagreement will cling to "opposite" groups of verses. The person who accepts God's Word "as is" can (or rather, he *must*) accept the verses from *both* opposing views - though he may have to reject the *interpretations* that the two groups have given to those verses, along with any errant conclusions they may have reached. Above all, he must *not* allow man-made opinions "redefine" what God has said!
46. It is impossible to overstate this issue: No matter who the theologian (or non-theologian) may be, the Bible - what is written "as is" - *must* be the final authority. Remember what was said about the Bereans, in Acts 17:11: They were praised for examining what they were being taught, and comparing it with what the Bible says, *even though the teacher was the apostle Paul!* And if it was praiseworthy for *them* to do it, when they were being taught by the apostle Paul (someone who was more "inspired," and more accurate, than *any* theologian or teacher alive today), then it is even more imperative that *we* follow their example, today!
47. The apostles and prophets spoke the very words of God. Their words were totally reliable and accurate. But as for the rest of us - and even the best of teachers - there is potential for error. Perhaps we should say that there is a *certainty* of error being present, even if (in the best situations) it is just a small amount. This is one of the reasons that *each person* must turn back to the Scriptures, as the final authority, and re-evaluate what others say about the Word. When we fail to do this, we are in danger of accepting, then transmitting to others, the errors of those who came before us... *compounded by whatever errors we ourselves may have*. After a few generations of not returning to Scripture, even small errors, compounded together, could become fatal!
48. It is our view that God has given us, in his Word, *everything* necessary for life and godliness - either by direct statement, or indirectly. Even if the issue we are exploring isn't directly stated, it may be related to something else that *is* expressly stated. Or it may simply be "not an issue." Or, if it involves moral choices, it may be "a matter of freedom," in which the person can freely choose either way. In any case, we must not "force" something into the Word that is not directly stated. We cannot "improve" on what God has said.
49. Many people use the terms "interpretation" and "application" in a very haphazard manner - and often interchangeably. However, there is a distinct difference between them. When Scripture is accepted "as is," without adding to it or subtracting from it, there will be only one *interpretation* (with only slight variations, when grammar and syntax allows, or if there are textual variations among the early manuscripts - see Section 5). However, once we understand what Scripture says, there will often be many ways we can *apply* it to our own lives.
50. One problem that sometimes occurs when we study the Bible is this: The information we *want* to find in the Bible and what we *need* to find in the Bible, are not the same. The questions we *want* answers to, and the answers we *need* to know, are not always on the same topic. It is only as we conform our thinking to the Word of God, that what we *want* and what we *need* will become the same thing. As Scripture changes our perspective, our opinion of what the "issues" are will also change. And we will become less concerned with the issues that we don't see stressed in the Word.

When our thinking is not conformed to the Word, it is natural for us to define issues wrongly; when our perspectives change, so does our understanding of the issues.

51. It is *not* our job to promote interpretational schemes, or to use "facts" not mentioned in the Word, as the basis for understanding or interpreting the Word. If, to understand the Word of God, we need to add a set of facts *not found in the Word of God*, then God made a mistake by failing to include them in his Word. How can God let *humans* decide which facts are needed, and which facts aren't needed, for understanding his Word? It is *we humans* who have the faulty thinking! Just look at how many different denominations there are... and as already mentioned, even theologians - who are supposed to understand the Bible - can't agree, once they start going beyond what is written!
52. Also, what about those who are "less fortunate" who don't have access to all this so-called "necessary supplementary information"? This would probably include most of the Christians living in the world! If material *not* found in the Bible is necessary for our understanding of the Bible, these people will *never* be able to understand it - and the more they try, the less they will succeed. If outside information were necessary for understanding the Bible, the more a person *accepted* what the Bible says, the more deceived he would become! Adding "outside information" is one of the ways that sects, cults, heresies and false religions come into existence.
53. Some types of supplementary information can be of value. For example, a Bible atlas can help a person understand the relationship between various cities and nations. Archeological discoveries may help a person better understand the reasons for various customs and practices. But this is all *supplemental* to the Bible. It may amplify our understanding of what is written, but it will *not* go against, undo, or become a substitute for what is written. It will not change the message.
54. So what is the significance of all this? First, we *can* benefit from what theologians say - if we "filter" their words through what God says in his Word - the Word we have accepted "as is," with each passage kept within *its own* context, taking into consideration idioms, figures of speech, etc. If the theologians or commentators (the "experts") agree with the Word, then what they say may give us insights into things we didn't previously know. And even if they are wrong, perhaps we can still benefit from them, if we can understand *how* they arrived at their wrong conclusions. Even though we must reject what the errant theologian says, we can benefit *indirectly*, if it helps us understand some of the subtle ways people fall into error, and thus enables *us* to avoid those pitfalls.
55. On the other hand, if we do *not* have access to what these theologians say (even the accurate ones) - *and most people in the world don't* - we can *still* benefit from God's Word. We can *still* grow in the way of truth. And if we maintain a humble stature before our God, submitting both ourselves *and our thoughts* to his Word, we will be *no worse off* for our lack of "theological resources," than if we had all the theological knowledge in the world.