

Principles Of Biblical Interpretation

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Dear Members of the Endtime Issues Forum:

The preparation of each newsletter poses a new challenge for two major reasons. First, I need to decide what significant story about the rediscovery of Biblical truths by church leaders of other faiths, should be included in the new issue. Second, I have to make a choice between limiting my Bible study to the theme of the Sabbath School lesson, or including also an essay on significant endtime signs.

If the Sabbath School comments are rather extensive, like the ones of this issue, then it becomes necessary to eliminate the Bible study on endtime issues. Many of our members cannot receive lengthy documents. Their server reject them. Furthermore, some of our members have encouraged me to keep my newsletter shorter because they do not have much time to read.

UPDATE ON PASTOR DAVID HILL

This week I was hoping to post Pastor David Hill's personal testimony, which, he told me yesterday, was mailed five days ago. Unfortunately I have not yet received the six page document. I will be sure to post next time, which will be after July 6 when I come back from my lecture tour in Zurich-Switzerland, Hamburg-Germany, and Rome-Italy.

During the telephone conversation Pastor Hill shared with me how the Lord is using his ministry to reach several bishops of his former Church of the Living God, leading them to accept the Adventist message. Five of them met last Sunday at the New Jersey Conference office for a study of our SDA beliefs. Similar Bible study sessions will continue in the coming months.

What is impressive about Pastor Hill is his eagerness to share his new found faith. He told that he used up immediately the complete case of books I mailed him complimentary (THE SABBATH UNDER CROSSFIRE and IMMORTALITY OR RESURRECTION?). He sent copies even to the President and Prime Minister of British Guyana, whom he knows personally. The response has been marvelous. Both the President and Prime Minister have extended an invitation for me to go to Guyana to share the Sabbath truth with all the members of the Council of Churches who will be invited for a special presentation. My 1999 calendar is heavily booked with 35 commitments in North America and two overseas lecture tours in Europe and New Zealand/Australia. I will do my best to open up a week late in November.

TWO CHURCHES THAT RECENTLY REDISCOVERED THE SABBATH

A paradox of our time is that while some former Sabbatarians are rejecting and attacking the Sabbath, a significant number of Sunday-keeping churches are rediscovering this Biblical truth. For the sake of brevity I will briefly report on two of them. In future issues I plan to mention other churches.

Sabbatarian Methodists.

A Reformed Methodist movement, known as Wesley Synod, rediscovered the Sabbath in 1996. Bishop Steven Sanchez, S. T. D., told me in a telephone conversation that he presides over 68 congregations scattered throughout North America. The concern

of the Wesley Synod is to return to the Hebraic roots of Christianity. They believe in the observance of God's law, in general, and the Sabbath, in particular.

Bishop Sanchez explained to me that, though their denomination was organized only recently, they stand fully in the Wesleyan tradition because at one time John Wesley was a seventh-day Sabbath keeper and believed in keeping the dietary laws. He claims that this information is not found in later biographies of Wesley's life but can be found in earlier books. He promised to mail me some of this documentation. The Wesley Synod views itself as the resurrection of true Methodism. Obviously this has created some problems with the Methodist Church to which they are still committed.

The Wesley Synod observes the Sabbath from sunset Friday till sunset Saturday not only by going to church on Saturday morning, but also by abstaining from ordinary work in order to give priority to the Lord in their thinking and living. It is encouraging to see how the Holy Spirit is moving upon the hearts of Christians in mainline denominations to recover the Hebrew heritage of the Christian faith, especially by returning to the principle and practice of Sabbathkeeping.

The Church of Israel

At the "Friends of the Sabbath Conference" held in Sydney, Australia, June 1996, I was delighted to hear Pastor Dan Gayman relate in a most gripping way how the Lord led his Open Bible Church, near Schell City, Missouri, to rediscover and accept the Sabbath. As a result of the rediscovery of new biblical truths, the name of the church was changed to "The Church of Israel." Gayman's presentation was so inspiring that he was invited to repeat it in several Adventist churches in Sydney after the Sabbath Conference.

Pastor Gayman graciously faxed me a nutshell summary of the providential way the Lord led his congregation to rediscover the Sabbath. He explains that his congregation, being an Open Bible Church, was interested in following Biblical truths wherever they might lead them. "Beginning in the year 1985 the Church of Israel [of approximately 200 members] made a conscious effort to study the question of the Sabbath. . . . The congregation studied the issue of the Sabbath for a period of two years and carefully researched every word to be found in Scripture on the subject, along with voluminous books on the subject. The goal was to bring the church into the truth of the Sabbath without loss of a single family." Incidentally, Guyman ordered my Sabbath books on numerous occasions during the time his congregation was involved in the study of the Sabbath.

After two years of Bible study, "in the late Fall of 1987 the ministers and the congregation made their decision to transfer their church services from Sunday to the biblical Sabbath." The official change occurred on December 17, 1987, "without the loss of a single family." Since that time "the church has never failed to observe a full scale worship service on the biblical Sabbath."

Pastor Guyman concludes his summary report with these words: "The transfer from Sunday to the biblical Sabbath has been one of the most important spiritual events in the life of the church. It has wrought powerful transformation in the lives of all the church members. The church has doubled in size and increased its evangelistic outreach to every state in the United States. The church has shared its testimony on the Sabbath with untold numbers of people and upwards of one thousand people have joined the church in the celebration of the Holy Sabbath around the United States."

The experience of Pastor Guyman and his congregation stands in stark contrast to that of Pastor Dale Ratzlaff and his congregation. Ratzlaff, a former Seventh-day Adventist Bible teacher and minister, claims in his book SABBATH IN CRISIS that seven months of a weekly study of the Sabbath with a group of his members led him to the conclusion that the Sabbath is an Old Covenant institution, fulfilled by Christ and no longer binding about "New Covenant" Christians. The outcome was that Pastor Ratzlaff

left the Seventh-day Adventist Church and established a congregation that meets on Sunday in Phoenix, Arizona.

By contrast, Pastor Guyman, a Sundaykeeper, affirms that two years of study of the Sabbath with his congregation convinced every single family of his 200-member congregation to accept the biblical validity and value of the Sabbath. These two contrasting experiences illustrate the point that one can study the Bible to accept or to reject its truths. The difference largely lies in what one seeks to find in the Bible.

COMMENTS ON THE SABBATH SCHOOL LESSON: "Scripture Twisting" - June 12-18

Throughout its history the Christian Church has been attacked externally through persecutions, and internally through the propagation of heresies. Most heresies derive from "twisting" Scriptures to support preconceived teachings. This problem is affecting today all Christian churches, including the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It is amazing how many independent ministries have been started by people who claim to have the right interpretation of certain Biblical teachings.

Last Sabbath afternoon I read an article in an independent magazine written by someone who maintains that the Gospel has a self-propagating power, when defined according to the 1888 Minneapolis General Conference. Such definitions entails emphasizing that at the Cross Christ gained salvation for every human being. Thus, our responsibility is simply to let people know that they have already been saved. The author argues that such Good News has a self-propagating force that converted thousands on the day of Pentecost and will bring about a second Pentecost.

The author ignores that that the Gospel preached on the day of Pentecost was simply the proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth was the expected Messiah. The 3000 who believed were not converted from Judaism to Christianity, they simply became believing Jews. The response was amazing, not because of "a clearer view of what happened o the Cross," but simply because the people were eagerly expecting the Messiah and the events surrounding the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus gave them reason to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed their expected Messiah.

Note that when the Gospel eventually reached the pagans, the conversions were few and far between. The church had to establish baptismal classes, known as Cathetical schools, to indoctrinate the pagans for at least a year before submitting the candidates for baptism. Paul who claims to have "fully preached the Gospel" from Jerusalem to Illiricum (Yugoslavia) (Rom 15:19), could only accounts for few hundred converts (at most a couple of thousands), in a population of about 100 million people. Surely the limited response was not because Paul did not have "a clear view of what happened at the Cross."

What distressed me most in reading the article is the arbitrary way of using the Bible in a cafeteria style, picking up few texts that supports such a "passive view" of the Gospel, ignoring a host of other texts which emphasize how the Gospel must be accepted in order for salvation to become a dynamic reality. In a future installment of ENDTIME ISSUES I may take time to expose the major fallacies of such teaching that is gaining some acceptance in some Adventist circles.

I have cited this example simply to illustrate how desperate is the need to learn the correct principles of Biblical interpretation. In view of the importance of this subject, which happens to be the focus of this week Sabbath school lesson, I decided to post the outline on THE PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION which I use in my college Bible class. The outline has been expanded by providing some examples on how to apply the major principles. The Bible study on THE ENDTIME SIGNS OF OPPOSITION TO GOD will be completed next time.

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

PART I: THE NEED FOR GOOD BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

1. The Nature of the Bible

The Bible was written in a different culture, in languages other than our own, and with literary imageries and symbols unfamiliar to most people today. The different translations compound the need for correct principles of Biblical interpretation.

2. A Maze of Interpretations

The Bible is possibly the most misinterpreted book in the world. No other book has given rise to over 300 religious organizations, each claiming to have the right interpretation of the Bible. You heard it said: "Everyone has his own interpretation of the Bible". "Two things people can never agree on are religion and politics."

3. Vital Importance

If the Bible is what it claims to be, God's word to sinful humanity, then the task of interpreting it must be taken seriously. Erroneous interpretation may be death-dealing for some. The task of interpreting God's word is awesome.

4. A Science and an Art

Biblical interpretation is a science based on clearly defined principles derived from the nature of the Bible itself. It is also an art because the inner being of the interpreter determines the quality of the interpretation.

PART II: FOUNDATIONS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATIONS

1. Uniqueness of the Bible

The Bible contains God's revelation of His will for our faith and practice recorded in human language. The recognition of this fact demands that the Bible be interpreted, not by tradition, philosophy or science, but by its own internal witness. The Bible is self-authenticating.

2. The Canon of the Bible

The 66 books of the Bible are not merely a memorial to the past history of God's people, but also a witness for the present and future life of the church. This means that in interpreting the Bible we seek to understand not only how God communicated to an ancient people, but also how God confront us today through its pages. To accomplish this objective it is important to distinguish between the principles taught in the Bible, which are permanent, and cultural application of such principles that vary from culture to culture.

3. Sola Scriptura

The Protestant principle of Sola Scriptura affirms that the Bible is the only basis for defining our faith and practice. It is based on the recognition of the Bible's inspiration, unity, canonicity, and supreme authority. Jesus exemplified this principle when He explained "the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27) beginning from Moses and continuing through the rest of the OT. Adventists view the Bible, and not Ellen White, as the ultimate authority for defining doctrine.

In practice the principle of Sola Scriptura is largely ignored. Both Catholic and Protestant churches interpret the Bible in the light of the historical teachings of their church leaders or confessional statements. To depart from traditional interpretations is seen by many as rejection of the "truth" hallowed by tradition. To be true to the principle of Sola Scriptura, we must allow the Bible to be its own interpreter.

4. The Bible is its Own Interpreter

This implies that one portion of the Bible interprets another. The fullest meaning of Scripture can be found when all the relevant passages are brought together. This procedure is justified by the recognition of the underlying unity of the Bible.

This fundamental principle is violated by those who use the Bible in a cafeteria style, choosing the texts that support their views, and ignoring the rest. This popular method is a major cause of some many doctrinal conflicts both inside and outside the Seventh-day Adventist church. A fitting example is the so-called "New Covenant theology" which is based on a unilateral interpretation of selected Bible texts, which are used to negate the continuity of the law in general and of the Sabbath in particular. In my latest book THE SABBATH UNDER CROSSFIRE I have spent considerable time exposing the fallacies of the methodology used to construct the "New Covenant Theology."

5. Objectivity

Absolute objectivity is practically impossible. No one approaches the study of the Bible empty-headed. Calvinists, Lutherans, Catholics, Adventists approach the study of the Bible with a mind set already conditioned by traditional interpretations. This makes it very difficult to hear what the Bible actually says. But one must strive for objectivity by controlling one's own presuppositions. The goal should be to seek to understand what the inspired writer is saying, rather than reading into the text one's own presuppositions.

PART III: BASIC PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

1. Read the Text with an Open Mind Willing to Learn What it Says

Our attitude must be that of boy Samuel, when he said: "Speak, Lord, for thy servant is listening"(1 Sam 3:10). Too many people study Bible texts to reinforce their preconceived ideas. This is known as eisegesis, that is, reading one's views into the text, instead of bringing out the meaning of a text. Seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit to discover the meaning of the text and its applicability to our life today. To learn what God has to say to us in the Bible, we must approach its study with the right frame of mind.

Some of the reactions I just received from my interpretation of the "Antichrist" in John's epistles and of the "Evildoer" in 2 Thessalonians, exemplify the common temptation to read into the texts gratuitous assumptions. Let us resist the temptation to corrupt Biblical texts to support subjective views.

2. Ensure a Correct text:

The first step in interpreting a text is to determine what it actually says. Since few people can read the text in its original language, for many it is necessary to rely on translations. The translation that sounds best to you may not necessarily be the most accurate. Compare good translations because they often complement each other. No translation can capture every nuance of the original text.

A prevailing misconception is that the KJV is the most accurate translation. Some churches will allow only the KJV to be used for worship, because they believe that this is the most accurate and trustworthy translation. Unfortunately this is not the case. In researching for my book IMMORTALITY OR RESURRECTION? I was surprised to discover how the KJV has contributed to promote such heresies as the immortality of the soul and the eternal torment of hell. For example, the Hebrew word sheol "grave," which occurs 65 times in the OT, is translated "hell" 31 times in the KJV. Such a mistranslation has contributed to promote the heresy of the eternal torment of hell. Modern translations like the RSV or NIV transliterate Hebrew words like sheol, thus allowing the reader to determine its meaning.

3. Seek to Understand Each Word Used in the Text

Words are the smallest unit of a sentence. The meaning of a term cannot be defined only on the basis of its etymology but also in the light of the context in which it is used. Individual words cannot be defined in isolation from the total context.

Sometimes a word is used only once in the Bible. This makes it necessary to consult its use in extra-Biblical literature. For example, the term sabbatismos ("Sabbathkeeping") is used only in Hebrews 4:9. Recent studies of the use of sabbatismos in extra-Biblical literature, have shown that the term is consistently used to

denote a literal seventh-day Sabbathkeeping. Thus, the correct translation of Hebrews 4:9 is: "A seventh-day Sabbathkeeping has been left behind for the people of God." A correct translation of this text provides a powerful proof of the continuity of Sabbathkeeping in the NT.

Another example is the term cheirographon ("handwritten record") which occurs only in Colossians 2:14. The term has been historically interpreted to refer either to the ceremonial law or moral law, which allegedly were nailed to the Cross. Recent studies on the usage of the term in apocalyptic and rabbinic literature, have shown that the term was used to denote the "record book of sins" or a "certificate of sin-indebtedness" but not the moral or ceremonial law. This meaning fits well the immediate context where Paul discusses the extent of God's forgiveness (v. 13). It is also supported also by the clause "and this he has removed out of the middle" (Col 2:14). "The middle" was the position occupied at the center of the court or assembly by the accusing witness. In the context of Colossians, the accusing witness is the "record book of sins" which God in Christ has erased and removed out of the court.

By this daring metaphor, Paul affirms the completeness of God's forgiveness. Through Christ, God has "canceled," "set aside," and "nailed to the cross" "the written record of our sins which because of the regulations was against us." The legal basis of the record of sins was "the binding statutes," or "regulations" (tois dogmasin), but what God destroyed on the Cross was not the legal ground (law) for our entanglement into sin, but the written record of our sins.

To alleviate the anxieties of those readers who believe that the "written document" that was nailed to the Cross was the ceremonial law, let me state that there is no question that the ceremonial law was nailed to the Cross, but this is not what Col 2:14 teaches. In fact, the term "law-nomos" does not occur a single time in the whole epistle to the Colossians, because the theological issue addressed by Paul is not the abuse of the Mosaic law like in Galatians, but a gnostic philosophy which taught salvation through the mediation of angels and "elements of the world" (Col 2:8). Paul challenges this heresy by reassuring the Colossian believers that there is no reason for them to seek the help of inferior mediators since Christ has provided complete redemption and forgiveness. Interested readers will find a more extensive analysis of this text on pages 240-249 of THE SABBATH UNDER CROSSFIRE.

4. Determine the Literary Nature of the Word or Phrase

Word in the Bible, like in modern literature, are often used in a non-literal meaning. Their use can be symbolic, metaphorical, typological. For example, the phrase "Horn of Salvation" (2 Sam 22:3; Luke 1:69) is a metaphor used to characterize God as a "Great Savior." The metaphor derives from the horns of animals which were seen as the symbols of strength and power (Ps 132:17; Jer 48:25).

Christ's offer of His "rest" in Matthew 11:28 is a symbolic imagery derived from the typological meaning of the Sabbath rest as symbol of the Messianic rest to come. In Old Testament times the Sabbath rest served to nourish the hope of Messianic redemption. The messianic age was expected to be "wholly Sabbath and rest in the life everlasting." In the light of the existing Messianic understanding of the Sabbath rest, Christ's offer of His rest was intended to substantiate His Messianic claim by offering the people what the Messiah was expected to bring—namely, the peace and rest typified by the Sabbath. (A fascinating study of the Sabbatical typologies of Messianic redemption, is found in chapter 5 of my book DIVINE REST FOR HUMAN RESTLESSNESS).

Another example of symbolic language is found in Revelation 7:15 which literally translated reads: "The One seated upon the throne will erect a booth over them with his presence." The booths were symbols of God's protection in the wilderness when people dwelt in temporary shelters (Lev 23:43). They also served as a reminders of the cloud of God's presence which sheltered them from the sun during the day while sojourning in the wilderness (Ex 13:20; Num 14:14). The image of God sheltering His people in the wilderness with His glory manifested in the cloud and pillar of fire, serves as the

background to the sheltering of the redeemed by God's glorious presence in heaven (Rev 7:15). The key that unites both events is the Exodus experience.

God's sheltering of the Israelites through the wilderness serves to typify His sheltering of His people through the final tribulation. Owing to God's sheltering presence the multitude is protected and nourished just as Israel was fed and led on its way to the Promised land. An understanding of the origin of the "shelter" imagery in the Bible, opens up the richness of the meaning of its frequent use in Revelation.

5. Seek to Understand the Whole Sentence

After having established the meaning of the individual words, seek to understand the whole sentence. This is the spiraling principle of Biblical interpretation which goes from the single word, to the sentence, to the unit, to the book, to the whole Bible. This means that individual words, sentences, and books, ultimately must be understood in the light of the witness of the entire Bible.

To interpret a sentence one must consider its grammatical and syntactical construction. Grammatically, one needs to define the subject, the tense of the verb, the object of the sentence. Syntactically, one considers the relationship of words to one another. The syntax of a verb pays attention to the tense, the voice, the stem, and so on. In interpreting poetry it is important to remember the correspondence of thought in successive lines, known as parallelism. The basic thought may be repeated, contrasted (Ps 59:1) or parallel (Ps 55:6). The parallelism may be within lines and between lines.

6. Seek to Understand the Unit

The meaning of a text is often clarified by the theme of the unit which may consist of one or more paragraphs. A study of the unit will serve to establish how the single text relates to the theme of the unit. In the circle of Biblical interpretation, the meaning of the text helps to understand the meaning of the unit and vice versa the theme of the unit clarifies the meaning of the text.

A good example of the need to interpret a text in the light of its larger context, is Romans 6:14. This is perhaps the most frequently quoted Pauline text to prove that Christians have been released from the observance of the Law. The text reads: "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under Law but under grace." The common interpretation of this text is that Christians are no longer under the Mosaic Law as a rule of conduct because their moral values derive from the principle of love revealed by Christ.

The problem with this popular interpretation is that it ignores the immediate and larger context of the text where Paul contrasts the dominion of sin with the power of Christ's grace. The antithesis indicates that "under Law" simply means that Christians are no longer "under the dominion of sin" and, consequently, "under the condemnation of the Law" because the grace of Christ has liberated them from both of them.

To interpret the phrase "under Law" to mean "under the economy of the Mosaic Law" would imply that believers who were under the Mosaic economy were not the recipients of grace. Such an idea is altogether absurd. Relief from the observance of law does not necessarily place a person automatically under a state of grace.

When read in its proper context, Romans 6:14 does not release Christians from the authority of the law. Instead, Paul teaches that believers should not transgress the Law simply because God's grace has "set [them] free from sin" (Rom 6:18). It is only the sinful mind that "does not submit to God's Law" (Rom 8:7). But Christians have the mind of the Spirit who enables them to fulfill "the just requirements of the Law" (Rom 8:4).

Thus, Christians are no longer "under the Law," in the sense that God's grace has released them from the dominion of sin and the condemnation of the Law, but they are still "under Law" in the sense that they are bound to govern their lives by its moral principles. Thanks to God's grace, believers have "become obedient from the heart to the teachings" (Rom 6:17) and moral principles contained in God's Law.

7. Determine if the Unit is Descriptive or Prescriptive

The Bible teaches us principles explicitly through positive commands and implicitly through positive and negative stories. Thus, in interpreting a passage, one must determine if the narrative is descriptive of what people did, or prescriptive of what God wanted them to do.

A good example is the story of Noah becoming drunk (Gen 9:20-24). Many Christians appeal to this story to argue that the Bible does not condemn the use of alcoholic beverages because even Noah drank fermented wine. The problem with this interpretation is the failure to recognize that Noah's story is not a prescriptive example of Biblical endorsement of drinking wine, but a descriptive example of the negative consequences of alcoholic beverages. What the story teaches us is not that even good people can legitimately drink alcoholic beverages, but that drinking weakens the moral sensitivity even of good people.

Another example can be found in Isaiah 3:16-26 which contains the most detailed descriptions of the various articles of jewelry and fine clothing worn by wealthy women in Jerusalem. Some people appeal to this passage to argue that the Bible approves the use of jewelry and ornaments. A study of the passage in its context reveals that narrative is descriptive of the pride reflected by the use of ornaments, and not prescriptive of their use.

Isaiah describes how the daughters of Zion displayed their haughty pride: "The women of Zion are haughty, walking along with outstretched necks, flirting with their eyes, tripping along with mincing steps, with ornaments jingling on their ankles. Therefore the Lord will bring sores on the heads of the women of Zion; the Lord will make their scalps bald" (Is 3:16-17, NIV).

Isaiah places the blame for the apostasy of the nation squarely on the negative influence both of its leaders and of its wealthy women. Regarding the latter, Isaiah says that their provokes the Lord's punishment, which is meted out by humiliating them through the removal of all the symbols of their pride and through their subjection to harsh treatment: "In that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarfs; the headdresses, the armllets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; the signet rings and the nose rings; the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; the garment of gauze, the linen garments, the turbans and the veils. Instead of perfume there will be rotteness; and instead of a girdle, a rope; and instead of well-set hair, baldness; and instead of a rich robe, a girding of sackcloth; instead of beauty, shame. Your men shall fall by the sword and your mighty men in battle. And her gates shall lament and mourn; ravaged she shall sit upon the ground" (Is 3:18-26).

The descriptive nature of this passage is designed to teaches us at least two important lessons. First, luxurious clothes and ornaments reveal inner pride and desire for self-exaltation, which can result in idolatry, adultery, and apostasy. There is a close connection between dress and behavior. Immodesty breeds impurity. The seductive look of the daughters of Zion misled the leaders and eventually led the nation into disobedience and divine punishment. Thus, an important reason to avoid ornaments is not simply their cost, but especially their negative influence upon others.

Second, God abhors the pride manifested in wearing ornaments. "When the Lord shall have washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion . . . by a spirit of burning" (Is 4:4). Wealthy Jewish women adorned their bodies from head to foot with expensive ornaments to make themselves beautiful outwardly, but God saw their inner pride. Evidently the beauty that counts in the sight of God is not the one obtained outwardly with ornaments of gold and fine clothing, but the one attained inwardly with the "imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit" (1 Pet 3:4).

8. Discover the Historical and Situational Context of the Passage

Since every book of the Bible originated in a historical context, it can be understood only in the light of the historical situation that occasioned them. The historical context can shed considerable light on the meaning of the passage.

A good example is Jesus' offer of living water made in the context of the drama of the water-drawing ceremony which took place at the Feast of Tabernacles. "On the last day of the feast [of Tabernacles], the great day, Jesus stood up and proclaimed, 'If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water'" (John 7:37-38).

On the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles a special procession was organized for the joyous water-drawing ceremony which was rich of symbolism and high drama. The procession of faithful worshippers began at the Temple, led by a priest who carried a golden pitcher. A band of liturgical flutists enhanced the wonder of the ceremony with their cheerful music. When the Temple-procession reached the pool of Siloam, the priest filled his golden pitcher with water. Journeying back to the Temple, the cortege would pass through the Water Gate, which obtained its name from the ceremony.

The procession was timed to arrive back at the Temple just in time for the morning sacrifice on the altar of burnt-offering. A threefold blast of trumpets welcomed the arrival of the priest who was joined by another priest who carried the wine for the drink-offering. The two priests ascended together to the 'rise' of the altar and placed two magnificent silver basins on the southwest corner of the altar. One of the bowls was used for pouring the water from the pool of Siloam and the other for pouring the wine. Both bowls had a hole which allowed the water and wine to flow to the base of the altar. As soon as the priests began pouring the water and the wine, the Temple music began. The people chanted "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Is 12:3). Then the 'great Hallel,' consisting of Psalms 113 to 118, was chanted antiphonally to the accompaniment of flutes.

Most probably it was right after the symbolic rite of the water-pouring ceremony at the altar, and after the people had chanted some of the verses of Psalm 118, praying for the Lord to send salvation, that the voice of Jesus was heard loud and clear throughout the Temple: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37). Christ's offer of His living water takes on added significance when we realize that His words were uttered most probably when the deeply-stirring rites had just concluded, and the song of praise and the prayers for salvation had scarcely died out.

9. Consider the Theological Meaning

After understanding the passage grammatically and historically, we must understand it theologically, remembering that no part of the Bible was written in a theological vacuum. On the contrary each part of the Bible contributes to the understanding of the progressive revelation God has given. This means that to understand the meaning of a passage we must seek to place it in the context of a developing theology. Not every passage has a major place in the developing theology of the Bible. In seeking to understand the theological context of a text, read carefully the passage, noting any basic theological concept reflected in it.

An example is Christ's inaugural Nazareth address, when He read and commented upon a passage drawn mostly from Isaiah 61:1-2 (also 58:6) which says: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18).

This passage, drawn mostly from Isaiah, describes by means of the imagery of the Sabbath year the liberation from captivity that the Servant of the Lord would bring to His people. By citing this passage Christ presented Himself to the people as the very fulfillment of their Messianic expectations which had been nourished by the vision of the Sabbath years. In fact He affirmed: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your

hearing." In other words, the Messianic redemption promised by Isaiah through the imagery of the Sabbath year is "now" being fulfilled.

The theme of promise and fulfillment recurs in all the Gospels. Many aspects of Christ's life and ministry are presented repeatedly as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. The risen Christ Himself, according to Luke, explained to His disciples that His teaching and mission represented the fulfillment of "everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms" (Luke 24:44; cf. 24:26-27).

What theological contribution does this passage make to understand how the Sabbath fits into this theme of promise and fulfillment? What did Christ mean when He announced His mission to be the fulfillment of the sabbatical promises of liberation? Did Christ intend to explain, as the so-called "New Covenant Theology" claims, that the institution of the Sabbath was a type which had found its fulfillment in Himself, the Antitype, and therefore its obligations had ceased? In such a case, Christ would have paved the way for the replacement of the Sabbath with a new day of worship, as many Christians believe. Or did Christ through His redemptive mission fulfill the promised sabbatical rest and release in order to make the day a fitting channel through which to experience His blessings of salvation?

The answer to these questions is found in the Sabbath teaching and ministry of Christ reported in the Gospels. A careful study of the Gospel's Sabbath material reveals, as I have shown in chapter 4 of *THE SABBATH UNDER CROSSFIRE*, that Christ intensified His redemptive ministry on the Sabbath by bringing physical and spiritual restoration to chronically sick people, in order to make the day a fitting memorial of God's creative and redemptive love.

10. Compare Scripture with Scripture

After examining the text in its immediate and larger context, the next step is to compare it with the entire testimony of the Scripture on that particular topic. Remember that Biblical doctrines cannot be developed out of isolated statements. A doctrine to be Biblical must be reflective of the total teaching of the Scripture.

God's revelation is progressive. For example, in the OT we find only hints of the doctrine of the trinity. This means that any OT text suggesting plurality or unity of the Godhead must be interpreted in the light of the fuller revelation of the NT. Any text of the Bible must be interpreted in the light of the total witness of the Scripture.

A good example of the failure to compare Scripture with Scripture can be found in the newly released symposium *WOMEN IN MINISTRY*, written by a group of pro-ordination teachers from the SDA theological seminary. The author of a pivotal chapter of the book argues that before the Fall there was perfect equality with no functional distinctions the man and the woman. The role distinctions of husband-headship and wife-submission originated as a result of the Fall (Gen 3:16), and that apply exclusively to the home. In the church women can serve even in "headship positions over men."

How does the author reach this conclusion? Largely by adopting the Dispensational method of Biblical interpretation which consists in reading the Old Testament in isolation, as though the New Testament had never been written. In the case in question the author interprets the critical passages of Genesis 1:26-27, 2:20-22, and 3:16 in isolation, ignoring Paul's interpretation of these texts in his discussion of the role of women in the church (see 1 Cor 11:7; 1 Tim 2:13; 1 Cor 11:8; 1 Tim 2:14). Responsible Biblical scholarship must compare Scripture with Scripture. Paul's use of the Genesis passages provides us with an inspired interpretation of such passages. Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture, and not by imaginative subjective interpretations.

My study of all the relevant Biblical texts show that both male-female equality and role distinctions, properly defined, are part of God's creational design for the harmonious functioning of humanity. God created the man and the woman perfectly equal in their moral worth and spiritual status, but clearly distinct in their biological and functional roles. Simply

stated, in the partnership of two spiritually equal human beings, man and woman, God created man to function in the servant headship role of husband/father, and women in the submissive role of wife/mother. These distinctive roles apply equally to the home and to the church, because from a biblical perspective the church is an extended spiritual family, often, referred to as "the household of God" (Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 4:17; Gal 6:10).

Those who are interested in my extensive analysis of the pivotal chapter "Headship, Submission and Equality in Scripture," are welcomed to request my 30 page paper. I am in the process of editing it and should be ready before I leave for a lecture tour of Europe on June 23, 1999.

11. Seek to Harmonize Apparent Contradictions

The Bible contains numerous apparent contradictions. The proper method of Biblical interpretation requires that one seeks to harmonize apparent contradictions, not by fabricating artificial resolutions, but looking for rational explanations. Remember that God is a God of sense, and not of nonsense.

An example of apparent contradiction is the Biblical teaching regarding the use of wine. On the one hand, the Bible strongly condemns the use of wine as "treacherous" (Hab 2:5), "a mocker" which "at the last . . . bites like a serpent, and stings like an adder" (Prov 20:1; 23:32), and the cause of debauchery (Eph 5:18; cf. Lev 10:8-11; Judg 13:3, 4; Prov 31:4,5). But on the other hand it wholeheartedly approves of its use as a divine blessing for people to enjoy (Gen 27:28; 49:10-12; Ps 104:14, 15; Is 55:1; Amos 9:13; John 2:10, 11).

The solution to the apparent contradiction is to be found in the dual meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words for wine (yayin and oinos) which have been historically used to designate either fermented or unfermented wine. Consequently the "wine" God approves of is unfermented grape juice and the "wine" He disapproves is fermented and intoxicating. This means that alcoholic beverages are consistently prohibited in Scripture as unfit for human consumption.

Several reasons are given in the Scriptures for its prohibition of alcoholic beverages. They distort the perception of reality (Is 28:7; Prov 23:33); they impair the capacity to make responsible decisions (Lev 10:9-11); they weaken moral sensitivities and inhibitions (Gen 9:21; 19:32; Hab 2:15; Is 5:11-12); they cause physical sickness (Prov 23:20-21; Hos 7:5; Is 19:14; Ps 60:3); and they disqualify for both civil and religious service (Prov 31:4-5; Lev 10:9-11; Ezek 44:23; 1 Tim 3:2-3; Titus 1:7-8).

Another example of apparent contradictions is Paul's statements about the law. Sometimes the Apostle says that the law is good and has been fulfilled in Christ and sometimes that it is bad and has been abolished in Christ. In Ephesians 2:15, Paul speaks of the law as having been "abolished" by Christ, while in Romans 3:31 he explains that justification by faith in Jesus Christ does not overthrow the law but "establishes" it. In Romans 7:6, he states that "now we are discharged from the law" while a few verses later he writes that "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (7:12). In Romans 3:28, he maintains that "a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law," yet in 1 Corinthians 7:19 he states that "neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God."

How can Paul view the law both as "abolished" (Eph 2:15) and "established" (Rom 3:31), unnecessary (Rom 3:28) and necessary (1 Cor 7:19; Eph 6:2, 3; 1 Tim 1:8-10)? The resolution to this apparent contradiction is to be found in the different contexts in which Paul speaks of the law. When he speaks of the law in the context of salvation (justification-right standing before God), he clearly affirms that law-keeping is of no avail (Rom 3:20).

On the other hand, when Paul speaks of the law in the context of Christian conduct (sanctification-right living before God), then he maintains the value and validity of God's law (Rom 7:12; 13:8-10; 1 Cor 7:19). For example, when Paul speaks of the

various forms of human wickedness in 1 Timothy 1:8-10, he explicitly affirms "now we know that the law is good" (v. 8).

12. Distinguish between the Underlying Principle and its Cultural Application

Principles are permanent while the cultural application can vary in different cultures. A good example is the Sabbath commandment which contain both a principle and a cultural application. The principle is: "Every human being has the right to rest on the Sabbath." In Bible times the cultural application of such principle required that servants, strangers, and even the cattle were to be permitted to rest on the Sabbath.

In our times the cultural application of such principle requires that we do not engage the services of others on the Sabbath, for example, by going out to eat on the Sabbath. The fact that such people chooses to work on the Sabbath does not sanction our paying for their services. The failure to distinguish between the principle of Sabbath rest for all and its cultural application, has led some to mistakenly argue that the Sabbath is cultural institution needed for the social needs of the ancient Jews, and not a permanent institution for mankind.

Another good example is Paul's discussion of headship and headcovering in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. In this passage the apostle teaches that respect for the headship/submission principle, required that women covered their heads according to the custom of the day. Many reject the headship/submission principle articulated by Paul (1 Cor 11:3) because it is cast in the headcovering custom of the times. These people fail to distinguish between the permanent principle of headship/submission which Paul ground in creation, and its cultural application that varies in time and places.

13. Allow Competent and Responsible Bible Scholars to Evaluate your Interpretation

Far too many Christians believe that they have found new truths in the Bible which they promote before allowing competent scholars to evaluate their conclusions. We must remember that the task of Biblical interpretation belongs not only to the individual but to the church at large. This corporate principle of Biblical interpretation demands that we be sensitive to what competent fellow believers may have to say about our interpretation of Scripture.

Like many other churches, our Adventist church today is plagued by self-proclaimed "spiritual leaders" who claim to have new understanding of the Bible. They publish and distribute their papers, magazines, and books. In many cases what they teach is a plain misunderstanding of the teaching of the Bible based on their preconceived ideas. If they would only allow responsible scholars to evaluate their interpretation, they would spare themselves and the church much embarrassment.

14. Do not Expect the Task of Interpreting the Bible to be Easy and Simple

The task of interpreting the Bible is not easy. If it were, there would not be so many conflicting interpretations espoused by hundreds of denominations. It requires an open mind, receptiveness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, self-discipline, and willingness to master history, archeology, culture, grammar and language skills. But the effort is rewarding. It enable us to come to a fuller understanding and experience of Biblical truths.

The Bible is God's revelation of His will to us. We dare not abuse this gift by forcing our preconceived ideas into the Bible. We must remember that our task is to let God speak to us through the Bible and to let the message of the Bible flow into our lives.

Learning to interpret the Bible is a skill we develop by doing. Practice may not make us perfect, but it will make us better and more confident interpreters.

A PERSONAL NOTE: If you find more mistakes than usual, have mercy upon me. It is already past midnight, and I need to post this newsletter tonight to enable our fellow believers down under to receive it in time for the Sabbath.

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