

**Systematic Theology for the Local Church**  
**#2—Interpreting the Bible—Part I<sup>1</sup>**  
**Becoming an Independent Student of Scripture**  
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Being successful in studying systematic theology requires the use of several tools. Ideally you should have some knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, but not everyone does, so the judicious use of translations must suffice. A good general knowledge of the Bible is essential, along with the ability to interpret the Bible in a balanced way. This is the first of several studies designed to help you to refine your ability to handle the Bible in order to arrive at sound theological conclusions and evaluate the theological statements made by others.

To help you see the value of this, here is a theological problem that shows that you have to be able to handle the Bible well in order to work in systematic theology. I recently saw a program on a Christian television station that involved three well known Christians in a discussion about the sovereignty of God, suffering and answered and unanswered prayer. One is a very well known Christian author, another was one of my professors at Dallas Seminary and the third, a woman, was a person I did not know anything about. The woman used Jesus as an example of someone in the Bible who didn't always have his prayers answered. The support she gave for this was Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. According to the panelist, Jesus prayed that he would not have to go to the Cross, but, obviously, the Father did not answer him. This conclusion that Jesus himself did not always receive what he asked for was supposed to be an encouragement to us when we do not get what we pray for, as if to say, "Look! Jesus Himself had to deal with unanswered prayer." Neither of the other two panelists rejected her position.

I was quite surprised by this easy dismissal of the prayer power of our Lord, because it seems that, because he has the nature of God (Phil. 2:6) and always pleases the Father, he would never fail to get what he asks for. If this were not so, then his high-priestly prayer ministry to help us at the point of temptation (Heb. 4:15-16) would be undependable, and the encouragement to go to him when tempted offers us false hope. We may get help or we may not. Lots of luck!

This is a theological problem. We might take the position with the panelist that Jesus' prayers are sometimes not effective or we might conclude that they are always effective. The first conclusion has implications for our view of the omnipotence of Jesus and his relation to the Father. The two positions are diametrically opposed. Which one is right? Is it possible to solve this problem?

There is a simple answer to this. The panelist was careless with the text of Scripture. Jesus never requests that he would not have to go to the cross. In Mt. 26:39 and 42 he asks as the God-Man for information about what he should do while remaining in the will of the Father. Is there a possibility that he can avoid the cross? If not, may the Father's will be done. Asking for information and asking to escape the cross are quite different things. Jesus never prayed to escape the cross. In his humanity he asks for information. In his deity he affirms that he will never step outside the Father's purpose. The panelist's data is wrong, so her conclusion is wrong.

In the last study we introduced the concept of theology as a field of study and saw that it involves making summary statements about what we believe the Bible says. We also looked at where theology stands today in the thinking of evangelicals and saw that it is not something that many Christians are interested in. In addition, we saw that there is a frightening divorce between the way Christians live and theology as a set of

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propositions drawn from the Bible. On a large scale Christians are substituting experience for truth from Scripture in everyday life.

Our Gethsemane exercise is an example of solving a theological problem by being careful with the biblical text. The approach used for this particular solution is only one of many that you should be prepared to use in working theologically. In the next few studies we will look at these topics: 1) lessons from the history of interpretation, 2) interpretation and the nature of the Bible, 3) interpreting language, 4) theology and interpretation, 5) forced interpretation and 6) the place of context.

## **1. The importance of having a system**

Believe it or not, everyone has a method of interpreting the Bible. But not all methods are equally profitable. Some use the magic-finger approach. It consists of acting upon some supposed divine directive, locating a particular verse—usually with the eyes closed—and taking that portion of Scripture as an answer or truth provided by God. We may laugh at that, but often come quite close to that when we ignore contexts. Then there are those who read the Bible a lot, but never seem to get very far in putting it altogether. They can quote at great length but have difficulty seeing what the passage means. Others follow an extreme devotional approach. They read only what “warms” them at the moment, as if the Bible were intended to make them feel good continually. All of these people have systems of interpreting the Bible, and it is not difficult to see why such methods do not lead to spiritual soundness. As a result of these approaches—which are really partly Bible study methods and partly interpreting methods—many are spiritually weak and discouraged about their prospects of getting anything solid from the Bible. Such practices never lead to a mature ability to handle the Bible with power and fruitfulness.

Methods of interpretation can be haphazard or systematic, and even systematic interpretation can be either profitable, or unprofitable, doing violence to the meaning of the Bible. God’s desire is that believers come to the place where they are able to read the Bible with understanding, balance and ease in relating various portions of the Scriptures to each other.

Unfortunately, many people seem to leave this area to others. Can you state why you understand the Bible the way you do? Do you believe it is important to know why you are to understand the Bible in certain ways, or would you rather just accept what someone tells you? What do you do when two Bible teachers are 180 degrees apart on a problem passage? Do you become discouraged or just laugh and forget the whole matter? What do you do when you face a spiritual problem? Do you turn to someone else or perhaps try to find a book to help? The best response to such situations is to open the Bible and begin to find out just what it says.

There is one important truth that makes it crucial that every believer pay careful attention to how Scripture is handled. It’s this: God intends the Bible to be understood. You may say that this is self-evident. In a sense it is. It is also a ground-level assumption about how we relate to God. If He has not made it possible to understand certain things about Him that He has revealed, then we have been left to struggle on our own. But if He really wants us to know Him (and that is a teaching that runs throughout the Bible) and has given us a readable book, then He must intend for us to comprehend it. Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, linguists and Bible translators, have put it this way:

Writing to be understood might seem to be a truism, but for some persons it is a startling revelation, for many individuals have assumed that the Bible is not a book to be understood. One person, for example, who began to read Today’s English Version remarked, “This must not be the Bible; I can understand it.”

The writers of the Bible were addressing themselves to concrete historical situations and were speaking to living people confronted with pressing issues. It is not always possible for us to

understand precisely what the writers meant, but we do injustice to them to assume that they were intentionally trying to be obscure.<sup>2</sup>

This basic assumption gives us hope that we *can* know the things of God but it also puts an obligation upon every individual who knows Christ as Savior to dig into the Book in a meaningful way. God has not made His Word obscure. It is difficult in some places, to be sure, but understanding it is not impossible.

God has given us only one book. There are tough spots in it. But there is no accompanying handbook that was given along with the Bible to tell us how to interpret it. We are on our own (of course we have the ministry of the Holy Spirit) and we need to make the most of what we have. We will see later in our studies that the fact the Bible does not have a divinely given instruction book along with it determines our basic approach to the Bible itself.

Every Christian should be a balanced interpreter of the Bible. An interpreter can be defined as one who attempts to understand the content the author or speaker has put in a communication, whether oral or written. The best Bible interpreter is one who takes from the Scriptures the most information, as the authors intended it, in such a way as to be able to apply it to life (the ability to apply it as intended by the speaker/author is simply the intended outcome of communication, which has the goal of changing something in relation to the hearer/reader). Technically, it is advantageous to speak of assimilating *information*, rather than understanding “meaning.” Meaning is the relation of message units to items that are being talked about (e.g., the word tree is somehow to be connected with a woody plant). When people communicate, they are involved in the business of imparting new information to others. Determining meaning is only part of the larger process.

## **2. The value of independence**

There are many important reasons why every believer should strive to be an independent, capable interpreter of the Bible:

1. We are dealing with the revealed and inspired Word of God. It exhorts us to pay attention to its message, even to its smallest features. 2 Tim. 2:15 reminds us that we are to be diligent, accurate and comprehensive in our approach: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” In this passage the figure Paul uses is that of a stone mason who cuts blocks of stone straight to fit together correctly. Our handling of the Bible is to be carried out with equal care and precision.
2. Although everyone has a system of interpretation, it is vital to have one that derives the most from Scripture and is consistent with the Bible’s own statements about itself.
3. We are removed from the biblical world by over nineteen centuries and many cultural gaps. We must be able to take this into account and overcome it where possible.
4. We are separated from the biblical documents by a language barrier. Any time there is *translation* of a document, there must be added effort to gain proper understanding of the actual message as the writer gave it.
5. Our overall system of theology is shaped by our system of interpretation. If the system is not proper, the theology will not be biblical.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), 7.

6. In every age there are opponents of the Word of God, and this is no less true today. This makes it all the more imperative that the Word of God be understood and proclaimed accurately.

7. Often we fall into the error of *applying* the words of Scripture to life before we *understand* them. In doing so we put into practice something other than what is intended by God, unless we accidentally do what He intended. Interpretation must always precede application.

8. Down through the ages subtle theological errors have often been based on improper systems of interpretation. In order to be equipped to combat error, the student of Scripture must know why he understands the Bible to say what he believes it does. This is why in Tit. 1:9 we are told the elder must be able to safeguard the truth in the local assembly by handling the Word of God with power.

### **3. The personal requirements**

It is a simple teaching of Scripture that only those who know the Author of the Book can understand spiritual truths and apply them to life. This is enunciated in 1 Cor. 2:11-12, where Paul explains that the Spirit of God communicates with the spirit of the child of God, the one who possesses His Spirit, to teach him those things that can be understood in no other way. Others can certainly comprehend facts about the Bible and see important biblical principles for life. But the veil imposed by sin prevents a person from taking the Bible and relating it successfully to life without the specific ministry of the third Person of the Godhead, the divine Author of Scripture. Furthermore, the believer who is consistently controlled by the Spirit (Eph. 5:18) will be better able to appropriate God's revelation than one who is not (see 1 Cor. 2:13).

The words in 2 Tim. 2:15 quoted above are sometimes applied to the process of formulating correct systems of theology, especially in regard to dispensations. But it applies equally to the attitude we should have in approaching the Bible. It contains a command that is well known, often repeated, but too little heeded: handle the Bible carefully! Mark well what it says, but be careful not to go beyond what it says. And, just as important, be sure to see *all* it says. Do not assume anything. Do not take anything for granted. Lay aside any preconceived notions. Do not be bound by tradition, because no system of theology, no matter how old or how highly respected, can ever be a substitute for the Word of God. At every point the question every one of us must ask ourselves is, "What does the Scripture say?" (Rom 4:3). Then we must be ready to do what it says. Be willing even to be startled by what you discover and be bold to put it into practice.

## Study questions

1. The three panelists I referred to continued their discussion assuming that Jesus did not always have his prayers answered. What reasons might they have had for doing this? What implications do the possible reasons have for our studies?
2. What does the way I approached the Gethsemane/prayer question suggest about how we should do theology?
3. Describe some approaches to Bible study and interpretation that you have seen (or done) that fail to help us get the most from the Bible.