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The Moral and Spiritual Qualifications of the Biblical Interpreter

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By Raymond F. Surburg

The existence of many different Christian sects and denominations, although all purport to base their theological tenets on the Bible, has been a source of great perplexity to Christian and non-Christian students of the religious life of the past and present. While a number of reasons have been advanced for this situation, one of the underlying causes has been correctly stated by Burrows when he wrote: "Wrong methods of interpretation and use have prevented Christians hitherto from arriving at any unity in their understanding of the Scriptures."[1]

There is no error of the human mind which has not claimed support for itself in some Scripture passage. Polygamy, slavery, racial discrimination, and a host of abnormal and absurd religious developments have all used the Bible as a basis for their contention.[2] The conclusions which religionists have deduced from Holy Writ have been determined by the manner in which they have handled Scripture.[3] Even such anti-Christian cults as Christian Science, Mormonism, Spiritualism, and Millennial Dawnism adduce Scriptural warrant for their religious systems.

It goes beyond question that the Bible was not given to have multifarious and variegated meanings or to cause confusion in the minds of its readers.[4] As sane men, the writers of the Scriptures must have had a single, definite, and clear-cut meaning in mind at the time when they penned their books. It is, therefore, unreasonable to assume that a Biblical writer did not understand his own words or meant them to be construed in a double sense. Thus it can be asserted, on the basis of the Bible's self-testimony concerning its perspicuity, that there can be but one system of related and interdependent revelation in God's Word.[5] Although Calvinism, Arminianism, Romanism, Lutheranism, and various forms of mil-

lennialism build their respective theological systems on the Scriptures, they certainly cannot all be correct in the doctrines in which they differ and in which they sometimes are even diametrically opposed to each other. These widely divergent and contradictory systems of dogmatical formulations emphasize the fallibility even of sincere men when handling the Bible and clearly show that there is no unity on the principles underlying sound interpretation. The assertion of Preus is true when he said: "The urgent need of Protestantism is agreement, not so much in polity or practice, nor even in the doctrine, but in principle of interpretation." [6]

If a common set of rules is to be found which is to govern the interpretation of the Bible, it is necessary to determine the reasons for the existence of different schools of interpretation,[7] and consequently, of wrong, faulty, incomplete, and superficial expositions of Biblical thought. All incorrect explanations, as well as partial ones, may be traced to two major causes: 1. Failure to apprehend accurately what the author wrote; 2. The mistake of attributing to him something he never intended to write or did not write.[8] Binns listed the following as the most common sources responsible for wrong interpretations: 1. Ignorance of the original languages of the Bible; 2. Failure to use the original languages of the Bible; 3. Prejudice, i. e., attempting to use the Scriptures to support some dogma or some theological position when it is not justified; 4. The use of allegory; 5. Individual eccentricity, i. e., when preachers select a text as a kind of peg upon which to hang a variety of interpretations, completely irrelevant to the text; and 6. The desire to find everything in the Bible.[9] A study of the history of Biblical interpretation in the Christian Church, past and present, will support Binn's enumeration, although his classification by no means exhausts the possible reasons for wrong exegesis.[10]

Failure adequately to grasp the thought of a Biblical author or to attribute to his writing an incorrect or incomplete meaning may, furthermore, be said to be due to two specific factors: 1. A defective knowledge of Biblical hermeneutics; and 2. The failure by the exegete to meet certain requisite conditions before the art of exegesis can be practiced.

A defective knowledge of the science of Biblical hermeneutics,

defined by Franzmann as the theological discipline "which sets forth the principles that are to guide us in the interpretation of the Scriptures," [11] or failure to apply its principles when known, has been one of the chief contributing causes to the welter of confusion existing on practically every vital Christian doctrine. All pastors, missionaries, theological professors, religious teachers, or individuals intent upon communicating to others the message of the Bible, need a thorough knowledge of the science of Biblical hermeneutics. The general neglect and scant attention given to it in the modern theological curriculum are to be deplored.[12] The whole science of Biblical exegesis depends upon its mastery.[13] Biblical hermeneutics is the central department of Bible study and provides all other branches with their materials.[14] Accurate and penetrating exegesis, interesting and effective homiletics, vital and sound dogmatics, correct and faith-building catechetics, edifying and faith-sustaining liturgics, and true and helpful pastoral practice are all dependent upon a correct understanding of Holy Writ. Speaking of the importance of interpretation in the life of a pastor, Lewis Sperry Chafer asserted: "It is properly required of the theologian that he both understand and expound the Scriptures. This is the distinctive field in which he serves." [15]

A perusal of theological literature in recent years gives the student of Biblical hermeneutics the impression that a normative science of Biblical interpretation is non-existent.[16] Easton claimed that in contemporary Biblical study the attempt to construct a formal discipline of hermeneutics has been abandoned."[16a] The current field of Protestant Biblical interpretation presents a number of all-important and acute problems. The following are some of the questions that have disturbed the minds of Protestant exegetes: Does Biblical interpretation have a principle all its own in which it differs from all other types of interpretation? [17] Are the principles formulated at the Ecumenical Study Conference, held in Oxford from June 29 to July 5, 1949, valid? [17a] What is the relation of historical and exegetical exegesis? [18] *Are* the Scriptures the Word of God, or do they merely *contain* the Word of God? [19] Is the Bible infalliby inspired merely in its thought or in its words also? [20] Does Scripture contain errors, contradictions, mistaken notions, and outdated concepts? [21] Are the principles of Biblical hermeneutics to

be determined by the Scriptures themselves or by human reason? [22] Is reason to be used as the means for receiving what God offers, or is it the seat of authority? Is the inspiration of the Bible to be understood as static or as dynamic? [23] Is Von Hofman's *Heilsgeschichte* idea (holy history), represented now by Piper at Princeton in America, to be made the organizing principle of Biblical interpretation? [24] Must the pre-literary stage of the Gospels be examined before the narratives and sayings of the Gospels can be interpreted? [25] Is the Word of God synonymous with the Bible? Can they be considered interchangeable concepts? [26] Are the deepest penetrations concerned with life and death, love and hate, sin and grace, good and evil, the view of the existentialists? [27] The answers given to these significant questions will in one way or another influence the formulations of one's principles of interpretation.

Greatly in need of clarification is also the purpose or meaning of interpretation.[28] While hermeneutics gives the theory of practice, exegesis may be said to be putting the theory into practice. According to some, interpretation consists in ascertaining why a passage was given, or what the original purpose was in the mind of the writer.[29] It is claimed by some that the interpretation of a passage is to be kept strictly apart from its application to the life of the individual or to that of a group.[30] On the other hand, for others the practice of exegesis implies translation and criticism of a passage.[31] Piper said interpretation consists of "two different though closely related processes — exegesis and appropriation." [32] For Rowley, an exposition that stops after determining the original meaning of a text is insufficient; its abiding means must also be offered.[33] Quanbeck averred that "effective interpretation of Scripture must be a vital synthesis created by the living message of the Bible, experienced in the life of the exegete, confronted and tested by the experience of the church." [34] According to Wilder, interpretation involves a critical reinterpretation of the Biblical passages that an exegete handles.[35] Until there is unanimity of opinion among scholars as to the meaning of interpretation there will be diverse and wrong systems of interpretation.

Before the principles of interpretation, however, can even be applied by the Biblical expositor, there are certain presuppositions that must be met. When these conditions are not fulfilled, the

result is another factor contributing to misinterpretation and faulty exposition. Otto Piper listed the following presuppositions to correct interpretation:

> Exegesis proper presupposes textual and literary criticism of the document. The exegete of the New Testament has to know, for instance, whether the text upon which he works represents the original text of the autographs, or the textual form of the fourth century. His work also presupposes knowledge of the historical background of the author, the document, and its subject matter. It is one of the great lessons of modern historical research to teach us that we are apt to miss completely the understanding of the original meaning of a document when we disregard the differences between its age and ours. Finally, the interpretation of a document written in a foreign language requires not only a good lexicon, but also an extensive knowledge of the history of that language, its idioms, and, above all, the specific terminology of the document under study.[36]

As studies preliminary to exegesis, Burton listed textual criticism, grammar, lexicography, and knowledge of the times and movement out of which the Scriptures came.[37] To these Hebert would also add as necessary prerequisites the exact study of the philology of Hebrew, Biblical Aramaic, and *Koine* Greek, the archaeological discoveries made in Bible lands, the comparative study of religion, and a fuller knowledge of rabbinic writings.[38] Because of a lack of knowledge *about* the Bible, patristic and medieval expositors were guilty of faulty exegesis.[39]

An exegete may have met all these prerequisites and be able correctly to apply the rules of hermeneutics, and yet fail to do satisfactory exegetical work. A factor, frequently overlooked as being part of the prolegomena for sound interpretation, is the personality of the expositor. The problem of correctly presenting an author's thought comes under the purview of epistemology. All knowledge can be said to result from the meeting of a subject and an object. The origin of all epistemological problems is to be found in the reciprocal relations of these two factors, and because of the unpredictable manner in which they interact upon each other, there develops of necessity the relativity of human knowledge.[40]

Torm has reminded New Testament students that the individual

psychological constitution of the subject is bound to influence the object of interpretation.[41] Cellérier, in the middle of the last century, asserted concerning the importance of psychological hermeneutics: "Psychological Hermeneutics is the investigation of the moral and intellectual conditions, devoid of which the interpreter is incapable of accomplishing his task."[42] Evans claimed that before endeavoring to apply the principles of interpretation to Scripture, it is necessary to consider the spiritual qualities of the expositor.[43] According to Torrey, Bible interpretation will only then be successful when certain fundamental conditions have been met. Foremost among them he considered the moral and spiritual qualifications of the exegete.[44] With this judgment Terry agreed some sixty years ago, when he wrote: "In order to be a capable and correct interpreter of the Holy Scriptures, one needs a variety of qualifications, both natural and acquired."[45] Norlie placed mood before mode in Bible study, asserting that the older interpreters of God's Word emphasized the proper mood when approaching the Scriptures.[46] For Griffith Thomas, the spiritual qualifications of the exegete were the most important consideration in the field of Biblical exposition.[47]

Despite the prime importance of the psychological qualifications of the expositor, an examination of manuals and helps designed to acquaint Biblical students with the art of successfully communicating to others the thought of Biblical writers, will reveal that many have failed to take into consideration the required personal qualifications for the exegete. The following manuals and articles on hermeneutics and exegesis neglected to discuss the necessary personal qualifications of the interpreter: Wilcke,[48] Patrick Fairbairn,[49] Schodde,[50] F. Hilber,[51] Colwell,[52] Hendricksen,[53] and Berkhof.[54] Others have noted only one or at most two requirements needed by the interpreter: J. Ch. von Hofmann,[55] McClelland,[56] Doedes,[57] Immer,[58] Baumgaertel and Luetgert,[59] Volz,[60] Heinrici,[61] Rollin Chafer,[62] and Torm.[63] The following books contain a more complete discussion of the personal qualifications of the exegete: Dunn,[64] Gardiner,[65] Elliott and Harsha,[66] Terry,[67] and Torrey.[68]

Schaff coupled the necessary qualifications of the interpreter into two groups: intellectual and educational, moral and spiritual.[69] Terry grouped them into three classes: educational, intellectual, and

spiritual.[70] Weidner, following Cellérier, wrote of "faculties, tendencies or dispositions, and principles needed by the expositor."[71] The faculties he divided into intellectual and moral, while the dispositions necessary for the expositor, according to him, were love of the truth, the search for clear ideas, faith, and piety.[72]

In this essay the moral and spiritual qualifications of the exegete are to be discussed, while the educational and intellectual will not be considered. Under the designation "qualification" there will be included all needed faculties, tendencies, or dispositions required by the expositor on his moral and spiritual side.

Since there are many passages in the Scriptures that do not merely make their appeal to the intellect and to the requirements of logic, the interpreter must also have a moral faculty. The Bible was written as much for men's hearts as for their intellects. Thus Job (13:15) exclaimed: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him," thus implying on Job's part a willingness to believe God even though it seemed fantastic and unreasonable.

The most important requisite — a psychological one — is a spiritual mind, a result of the new birth. The Scriptures themselves make this demand when they declare: "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). Man by birth is alienated from the life in God, termed by Saint Paul as "enmity against God," and no amount of education and learning can change that condition in an unregenerate expositor. Unless an exegete is born from above, the Bible will remain a sealed book. The following passage from the book of Isaiah sets forth clearly the truth that unless God gives the understanding, the message will remain unintelligible to the unconverted exegete:

> And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which [when] men deliver [it] to one that is learned, saying: Read this, I pray thee; and he saith: I cannot, for it is sealed; and the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying: Read this, I pray thee; and he saith: I am not learned. Wherefore the Lord said: Forasmuch as this people draw near Me with their mouth and with their lips do honor Me, but have removed their heart far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught

> by the precept of men, therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvelous work and a wonder; for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid (Is. 29:11-14).

Saint Paul wrote to Timothy: "Consider what I say, and the Lord give thee understanding in all things" (2 Tim. 2:7). Despite the clearness of Scripture in this matter, Colwell rejected the necessity for the new birth as a condition for adequate exegesis. He unequivocally declared: "The student who uses the historical method of interpreting the Bible relies upon no supernatural aids."[73] Again in the same book he wrote: "The plea for some special endowment as a prerequisite for biblical study seems rather out of place in such areas as textual criticism and the study of biblical languages."[74] Torrey claimed that in colleges, universities, and theological seminaries there are Biblical expositors who are spiritually unprepared for the task they are attempting.[75] It would be just as reasonable to appoint a person to teach art to students because he possesses an accurate knowledge of paints. Every art student knows that art interpretation requires the gift of artistic sense as essential for its teaching. To expect an unconverted individual adequately to interpret the Scriptures or any part thereof is as unreasonable as to suppose a blind person can appreciate a sunset, or someone deaf respond to the music of the great masters.[76] The spiritual mind may be said to be the key that adequately unlocks the treasure house of God's riches contained in the Word.

No mere knowledge of the human languages in which the Bible was written, however extensive and accurate it may be, can alone qualify a person for adequate understanding and interpretation of God's Word.[77] Thus Fuerbringer asserted: "Zur exegetischen Tuechtigkeit des Theologen gehoert aber nicht nur die Kenntnis richtiger hermeneutischer Grundsaetze und Regeln. Vielmehr ist dabei vorausgesetzt . . . wahre Erleuchtung und Herzensfroemmigkeit."[78] One of the tragedies in the history of recent Biblical exegesis has been the existence of unregenerated teachers of the Bible, who, because of their knowledge of Hebrew, Biblical Aramaic, and *Koine* Greek, endeavored to interpret the Scriptures to students. Thus Rowley admitted that in the last decades many essayed to interpret

the Old and New Testaments, being unqualified by virtue of their irreverent approach. To quote his own words:

> Yet it must be recognized that to many Biblical study became a matter of merely scientific investigation, the detached examination of an ancient literature, and the establishment of its text and the meaning that text had for the original writers. To understand the times in which a book was written, to think oneself back into those times, and to feel anew the impact of the words upon their first hearers, was to reach the goal of Biblical study.[79]

The religious man and the irreligious man will not have the same experience as they try to understand the Holy Scriptures. Over fifty years ago Gardiner asserted: "Only a religious man can see the things as they (i. e., as the Biblical authors) saw them, and understand things as they understood them."[80] "But it does follow that, since the Bible is essentially a spiritual book, it is impossible to enter into its deeper and richer meaning until there is a religious harmony between it and the spirit of the interpreter."[81]

It is true that the historical and hortatory portions of the Bible are comprehensible to the unregenerate Bible expositor. Those portions, however, that contain doctrine will be closed to him, despite his education and culture, because he is deficient in inward personal adjustment to God, who alone can assure spiritual understanding. It is as Lewis Sperry Chafer remarked: "There is a limitless yet hidden spiritual content within the Bible which contributes much to its supernatural character. . . . The natural capacities of the human mind do not function in the realm of spiritual things."[82] Saint Paul, in writing about those truths and doctrines revealed by the Holy Spirit, said:

> Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. . . . For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:13, 14, 16.)

Jesus pointed out about the unbelieving Jews of His day that they could not understand His teachings because of the alienation of their hearts from God. (John 8:43-47; Matt. 6:22 f.; 13:11.)

The Apostles emphasized the importance of spiritual enlightenment as a prerequisite for knowing and understanding the revelation made to the Church by the Spirit of God. Thus Saint Paul gave the following as the reason for those being lost: "But if our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost, in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the Image of God, should shine unto them" (2 Cor. 4:3-4). Saint John, in the concluding words of his First Letter, described spiritual understanding as a gift of God: "And we know that the Son of God is come and hath given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 5:20).

Since the Bible is a God-breathed book, the product of the activity of the Holy Spirit on human writers, and conversion, or new birth, in man a result of the Spirit's influence, it consequently follows as a further qualification of the Biblical exegete that he must ever realize his dependence on the Holy Spirit. The disposition must be ever present which seeks the aid and guidance of the Divine Interpreter. Only through the agency of a greater dynamic than the human will and a greater Teacher than the human intellect can the message of the Bible be apprehended. Anyone who has tried to understand and convey the meaning accurately to others has discovered that in certain parts the Bible is a difficult book. This is also true, however, of non-Biblical writings. Aristotle, Bacon, Dante, and Goethe have left literary works which contain passages that have defied commentators. Thus a whole school of interpretation in regard to Aristotle's writings has developed. Many of the problematic passages in this literature could be explained by Aristotle, if he were alive and could be consulted. There is, however, one great difference between the Bible and great secular classics.[83] While the authors of outstanding books of the past are dead and so unavailable for consultation, this does not hold true of the Bible. The Biblical expositor, however, is more fortunate in that he can call upon Him who caused the Scriptures to be written, who is an everliving Person, and One whose function it is to guide Christ's followers into all truth. Spurgeon, speaking of this advantage possessed by the Biblical exegete, said: "Many can bring the Scrip-

tures to the mind, but the Lord alone can prepare the mind to receive the Scriptures." [84] Samuel Taylor Coleridge made the following pronouncement and comparison: "The Bible without the Spirit is a sundial by moonlight." [85] Frank Gaebelein has termed this feeling of dependence upon the Holy Ghost the *sine qua non* of Scriptural exposition.[86]

Aside from all conjecture as to how the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments were inspired, are the facts that it is *theopneustos* (God-breathed) and that it came to the Church through men "who were borne along by the Holy Spirit." [87] This means that the Holy Ghost is still connected with the Bible. The same Spirit who once caused the Bible to come into existence is still breathing through it, and as Saphir so aptly remarked:. "The Spirit makes the Scripture a living word. The Spirit breathes here as in no other book. He makes the writing spirit and life, and man lives by it, because it is word proceeding *even now* out of the mouth of God." [88]

In all exegetical efforts, therefore, it is imperative to depend upon the Holy Spirit to reveal the mind of God. This need for absolute dependence by the expositor upon the Holy Spirit is the same as the anointing spoken of by Saint John when he wrote:

> But the anointing which ye have received of Him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you; but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in Him. (1 John 2:27.)

That the Holy Spirit imparts an understanding to the disciples of Christ is clearly set forth by Saint Paul in 1 Corinthians:

> But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit; for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. For what man knoweth the things of a man save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. (1 Cor. 2:10-13.)

The same Spirit of God who caused the Bible to be written must open the eyes of the Christian expositor; He must constantly enlighten the Christian understanding. Herein is to be found the "key to the understanding of the Bible," for without it there can exist only confusion and misunderstanding.[89] The oft-quoted dictum of Jowett that the Bible is to be interpreted like any other book is not entirely true, for the spiritual quality in the Word needs a kindred spiritual qualification in the worker that only the Spirit can give. Griffith Thomas has stated this essential qualification of Christian interpretation, which is more than the scholarly, literary, and historical interpretation of the Bible, in these words:

> It is simply impossible to understand a book which emanated from the Holy Spirit without the Spirit Himself as the Illuminator of our spirit. . . . When the modern reader of Holy Scripture comes to Christianity with a humble, earnest desire to learn from Scripture what the Holy Spirit has there recorded, he will soon discover the reality and blessedness of its unique power.[90]

In this connection, however, a warning must be given against what von Dobschuetz has called "enthusiastische Exegese."[91] This type of interpretation claims to rely upon the direct activity of the Spirit. The guidance and aid of the Spirit are not obtained apart from the Scriptures.[92] Failure to give heed to this truth has led to all manner of religious aberration, as the history of Christianity so amply shows. The danger of postulating a special light not mediated by the Word of God, as Dunn has pointed out, would mean that these new revelations and communications governed the words and teachings given through the Biblical authors.[93]

Many exegetes and Biblical students, past and present, have misunderstood what is involved in the guidance of the Spirit promised to Christians in the New Testament. Thus Bacon contended that the Church must not cast out those, as, for example, the textual and higher critics, who, listening for the movement of God's Spirit across the ages, become "God-intoxicated" and accomplish as much as any of the saints of God in the past.[94] In the middle of the last century, Horace Bushnell in one of his sermons asserted:

> It is a great misfortune, as I view it, that we have brought down the word *inspiration* to a use so narrow and technical: asserting it only of prophecy and other scripture writings, and carefully exclud-

> ing from it all participation, by ourselves, in whatever sense it might be taken. We cut ourselves off, in this manner, from any common terms with the anointed men of scripture and the scripture times. They belong to another tier of existence, with which we can not dare to claim affinity; and so we become a class unprivileged, shut down to a kind of second-hand life, feeding on their words. The result is that we are occupied almost wholly with second-hand relations to God. . . . And so, being shut down to a meaner existence, there is no relief for us but in recoil against inspiration itself, even that of the Holy Scriptures; for, who will believe . . . that men were inspired long ages ago, when now any such thing is incredible? [95]

This attitude was found to dominate the critical movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and resulted in the lording over of the inspired Scriptures by the so-called illuminated critics. The root of this philosophy, which did not hesitate to reject the miraculous and the supernatural elements of the Bible, was premised on the assumption that the Holy Spirit enlightens the mind of man by other means than that of the Word. Thus Briggs placed the Church and human reason on a par with the Scriptures as fountains of divine revelation.[96]

While the Roman Catholic Church claims that the Sacred Scriptures can rightly be interpreted only under the Holy Spirit's guidance, yet it ascribes to itself this prerogative of being the only one qualified to understand and interpret correctly Holy Writ, and denies that the Spirit's guidance has been promised the individual Christian.[97] Thus Seisenberger, on the basis of the encyclical of Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (November 18, 1893) averred: "Nothing more is required than that man shall submit his opinion to the Holy Ghost, who guides the Church." [98] This position contravenes the clear teaching of Scripture, a word spoken by Christ, which guarantees the gift of the Holy Spirit to all asking for it (Luke 11:13).

The conception of Barth, Brunner, and of dialectical theology, which also predicates a guidance of the Holy Spirit in the realm of exegesis not mediated through the Scriptures themselves, must be likewise repudiated.[99] What the dialectical theologians refuse to concede is that the Holy Spirit speaks to men solely through the Scriptures.[100] The guidance and enlightenment of the Holy Spirit

consists in the influence which the Spirit of Truth brings to bear upon the interpreter so that the latter will have a clearer and deeper insight into the Divine Mind and Will as portrayed in the Scriptures. But this guidance goes hand in hand with the Scriptures. Richardson well apprehended this truth when he wrote:

> If God speaks to men through the Church, that is because the Church is the place where the Bible is read, or it is the community which listens to the public reading of the Bible. If God speaks to men through the sacraments, that is because they are the sacraments of the Bible-drama. If God speaks to man in the sermon, that is because the Bible is preached. If God speaks to men in prayer, that is because the prayer is the prayer of the Bible. And if God speaks to men through nature, or through things which are lovely and characters which are noble, that is because they have learnt from the Bible the accents of His voice. The Bible is and remains the appointed means of God's conversation with men.[101]

The need of the Holy Spirit's guidance does not, however, mean that the Biblical exegete is warranted in approaching his task with anything short of the greatest wisdom and understanding attainable by him. He must endeavor to employ the best tools and methods that sound scholarship has made available. Cunliffe-Jones expressed this proviso thus: "The best scholarship and the widest and most careful learning are indeed no substitute for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but the guidance of the Holy Spirit is no substitute for the best scholarship that is available for our use." [102]

The exegete must further approach the work of Biblical interpretation with a prayerful mental attitude. Prayer and correct exposition go hand in hand. To a first-century Bible interpreter, Saint Paul wrote: "For every creature of God . . . is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer" (1 Tim. 4:4-5). A prayerful disposition is vital to successful Bible study. Every interpreter needs to approach his task with the Psalmist's prayer: "Open Thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy Law" (Ps. 119:18).[103]

A forthright study of Scripture will reveal to men their limited mental potentialities and deficiencies, and prompt them to beseech God for enlightenment and aid. Thus Saint James promises: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men

liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (James 1:5). Solomon encouraged the Bible student to ask: "Yea, if thou criest after knowledge and liftest up thy voice for understanding, if thou seekest her as silver and searchest for her as for hid treasures, then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God" (Prov. 2:3-5). Saint Paul urged the Ephesian Christians to call upon the Father to give them "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened . . ." (Eph. 1:17-18). Saint John admonished the Laodiceans to obtain eyesalve from the Lord, "that thou mayest see" (Rev. 3:18). Christ encouraged His followers to pray for the Spirit: "If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him!" (Luke 11:13.)

Richard Baxter, eminent English theologian, studied his sermon texts on his knees. For the sake of defining to his own mind more clearly the precise object of his prayer, he would place his finger on the word for which he wanted a clearer notion or a deeper sense and would pray: "Lord, reveal even *this* to me; show me Thy meaning."[104] "As a rational expedient for learning God's thought in God's Word," asserted Austin Phelps, "prayer means more than we are apt to think, when in glib phrase we commend, and, perhaps, practice it."[105] When a person has received a letter of great importance and it contains passages difficult to understand, will he not solicit further explanation and more elucidation? This is precisely what the Christian exegete is doing when in his study of the Word he prays for illumination by the Holy Spirit, who ultimately is Author of the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testament canon.

J. Paterson Smyth suggested that Bible students, in their effort prayerfully to realize the Divine Presence, should turn to those passages to be studied and on the basis of the chief thoughts arising from them, formulate a prayer. Of this procedure, Smyth averred:

> This latter, I think, is of the greatest importance. Bible study thus becomes a real communion with God. God and man are opening their hearts to each other. God is speaking to the man in His Word. The man is speaking back of the very things that God has told him.[106]

The following prayers from the Bible are suggested by Smyth:

> Lord, open Thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy Law.
>
> Sanctify me through Thy truth, Thy Word is truth.
>
> Blessed Spirit of truth, guide me into all truth.
>
> Let the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.[107]

Another spiritual qualification the exegete needs is a disposition to know the truth, that is, he must approach the Scriptures with the sole intent of ascertaining what is there. The Bible ought not to be approached with prejudices, or for the purpose of bolstering dogmatic presuppositions, or with a view of interpreting according to a preconceived theory.[108] G. Campbell Morgan claims this quest for truth involves being honest in one's attitude over against the Book. The Bible must be allowed to deliver its own message to the mind and heart of the interpreter.[109] In Burton's estimation there have been two schools of thought in the history of interpretation guilty of bias and prejudice: the traditionalistic or dogmatic method, which "assumes that the results must conform to the dogmas of an accepted body of doctrine or system of thought," and the rationalistic, which approaches the Scriptures with the supposition that only what conforms to man's reason is true and acceptable.[110]

An example of a dogmatic approach in interpretation may be cited from the translation by Charles Williams, recently reissued after being out of print for a number of years. An examination of all passages treating of the institution of the Lord's Supper, in the Evangelists' and Saint Paul's account in 1 Corinthians, reveals that Williams, influenced by his theological pre-suppositions with regard to the Sacraments, translated the *esti* of the Greek text with the word *represents*.[111] Thus he rendered Matt. 26:6-7 as follows:

> While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf and blessed it; then He broke it in pieces and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take this and eat it; it represents my body." He also took the cup of wine and gave thanks; then He gave it to them, saying, "All of you drink some of it, for this represents my blood which ratifies the covenant, the blood which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of their sins."[112]

An example of the rationalistic approach is the treatment accorded the books of the Bible containing miraculous accounts. Thus the book of Jonah is considered a piece of fiction,[113] or symbolical literature,[114] and not the record of an historical event that transpired in the days of Jeroboam II, even though Christ referred to the incidents in the book of Jonah as historical. Edgar Goodspeed's *A Life of Christ* is an example of a renowned New Testament scholar approaching the Four Gospels with rationalistic presuppositions, completely out of sympathy with their teachings.[115] The result has been, to quote a recent critic, that Goodspeed's book "yields a radically different portrait of Jesus from that presented by the Gospel writers, who believed passionately that with God all things are possible." [116]

Another spiritual qualification essential for adequate interpretation is that of love. The person with an appetite for his food will derive more benefit from a meal than the individual who only eats of necessity. Even though the Bible is the meeting ground for many different interests, intellectual, scientific, historical, literary, emotional, or artistic, yet its main and dominant interest is religious. While the Book of Books touches on many phases of life, it is primarily a religious book. As such it can be properly appreciated only by the person who loves the things of God. The Biblical expositor should esteem the Scriptures as a series of love letters written by God to men.[119] Jeremiah of old experienced this enthusiasm and exclaimed: "Thy Words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy Word was unto me the rejoicing of mine heart" (Jer. 15:16). Job also gave expression to this love: "Neither have I gone back from the commandment of His lips; I have esteemed the Words of His mouth more than my necessary food" (Job 23:12).

Correlated to that of love, another disposition of the mind is sympathy.[120] E. von Dobschuetz denominated it as "the principle of congeniality." [121] This type of mental attitude requires the interpreter to place himself in the circumstances of the author, thereby enabling the exegete to read the books to a greater degree with the eyes of the men who were inspired to write them.[122] No exegete can appreciate the excellencies and truths of any Biblical book who approaches it in the spirit of carping criticism. There can be no real comprehension if the student fails to surrender himself to the mood

of the writer, which involves a sympathetic attempt to see with the author's eyes and to experience his feelings.[123] Concerning this matter, Sweet asserted:

> Literary appreciation is, of course, not the same as spiritual sympathy, but the two are akin, and in a great passage which is at once literary and spiritual they coalesce and work together.[124]

When an interpreter approaches the Book in a harsh and alien mood, he immediately disqualifies himself to apprehend its inner quality. Much higher criticism has been guilty of an unsympathetic approach to the Scriptures.[125] Clifford, in his article on how to read the Bible, underscored the importance of sympathy when he averred: "Let me add in a brief closing word the eternal law that a definite spiritual aim and a strong sympathy with spiritual ideals are supremely necessary for the successful study of the Word of God." [126]

A student may be able to parse and analyze the sentences of Milton's epics or admire the literary beauty of Wordsworth's lays, but if he is destitute of the poetical spirit, these productions will fail in their deepest ministry to his spirit. Just as it does not follow that a specialist in geology or botany will benefit aesthetically more from an afternoon's mountain climb than one whose nature is attuned to beauty, simplicity, purity, and God. When men treat the Bible as a mere literary production and come without adjusting the temper of their minds spiritually, or if they approach it in a selfish, worldly, unforgiving, or proud spirit, they will be like blind men who, with binoculars in hand, will stand unmoved before the landscape which lies spread beneath the summer sun.[127]

The well-known Bible expositor F. B. Meyer, describing the need for sympathetic understanding, stated the case in this way:

> Souls which love deeply best understand love. Pure eyes carry with them the flames of fire by which they see. Spirit recognizes and reads Spirit. . . . As the landscape expands before the view of the mountain climber, so does Scripture open up and unfold in precise proportion to our elevation in spirituality of character and our fellowship with God.[128]

Germane to the two tempers of mind just discussed and requisite for adequate interpretation is that of expectancy. As a lover, re-

ceiving a letter from his beloved, opens it with feverish anticipation, so an exegete, planning to convey to others the message of God's love letters, must also approach his task "in a mood of tingling expectancy, knowing that God has some precious words for him, meeting the deepest need of that day. . . ." [129] Those who come to the Scriptures in that frame of mind will have new insights into the Word. "Open Thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy Law" (Ps. 119:18) implies that *thrilling discoveries* can be made by those regarding the Bible as a gold mine, many of whose precious veins remain to be explored.

Another disposition required by the Word of God, and, therefore, an important requisite for the exegete, is the spirit of awe with which the Bible interpreter must undertake his work. Thus the Psalmist said: "My heart standeth in awe of the Word." [130] What is meant by "awe"? The Oxford Dictionary defines it as "dread, mingled with veneration, reverence or respectful fear; the attitude of the man subdued to profound reverence in the presence of supreme authority, moral greatness or sublimity, or mysterious sacredness." [131] How different the results of modern Biblical study and interpretation would have been if teachers, pastors, Bible commentators, and all who in any way endeavored to convey accurately the meaning of the facts and truths of the Bible, had stood in awe of God's Word! Acknowledging that the Bible possesses "supreme authority," "moral greatness," and "sublimity," they would have found the Scriptures surrounded by a halo of a "mysterious sacredness."

Closely allied to this spirit of awe is that of reverence, also demanded by the Scriptures of those endeavoring to interpret their meaning. "Reverence for the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." [132] It is with a trembling spirit that the God-fearing interpreter essays the explanation of the sacred text, because Isaiah says: "But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at My Word" (Is. 66:2). If the interpreter realizes that God is speaking through the Bible, like Moses at the burning bush, he will take off his shoes from his feet and bow his head in subdued reverence for a proper understanding of the message it brings. Wright claims that the reverential frame of

mind is "one of the first duties imposed upon man in the presence of a divine revelation." [133]

Akin to the spirit of reverence is that of meekness, which also has been set forth in the Scriptures as essential for correct exegesis. James exhorts his readers to "receive with meekness the engrafted Word, which is able to save your souls" (James 1:21). Archbishop Trench claims that the word "meekness" means "that temper of spirit in which we accept God's dealings with us as good and therefore without disputing or resisting. The meek and humble heart does not fight against God." [134] When a Bible exegete has this spirit, he will also say, as did Samuel: "Speak Lord; for Thy servant heareth" (1 Sam. 3:9). If the Word should reveal a spiritually cancerous condition in the life of him who is trying to impart the meaning and message to others, he will not argue with the Lord, but will submit himself to the verdict and rebuke of the Bible.

An additional qualification for the true exegete is the willingness to believe the Word. This requirement is condemned by many interpreters as unscientific, for in their opinion the expositor ought to approach the Bible without any presuppositions whatever. It is dishonest in their view to seek an interpretation with anything but an open mind. Thus over a half century ago the president of Buchtel College claimed that the grammatical and historical method of Biblical interpretation must be carried out without presumption. He asserted:

> In like manner the Biblical interpreter, setting to work as an expert and according to a scientific method, must not allow any ancient tradition, modern belief, or personal interest to *govern* his procedure and predetermine his conclusion.[135]

Many modern exegetes have suggested that the expositor's faith is a distorting factor in honest interpretation.[136] But as Filson has pointed out, such a predisposition is not erroneous, because a Christian does everything in life, and that includes the work of Biblical exposition, motivated by his religious beliefs.[137]

The Bible presupposes the existence of faith on the part of the interpreter. "Through faith we understand," says the author of Hebrews (Heb. 11:3). "Reliance upon the authoritativeness of God's recorded Word is the bedrock requirement of one who would become a Biblically correct interpreter of the significance of that

selfsame Word."[138] The Bible exegete approaches with the firm conviction that the Bible has self-interpreting power. In trying to understand the meaning of the sixty-six books of the canon, other writings, however, have much value. Nevertheless, the Bible is to be accepted on its own authority. A Christian expositor is not dependent upon the explanation that the Church in the course of its history has given to a passage or to a book, as Piper contends.[139] Basil King's view that the Bible gets its authority from the individual must likewise be repudiated.[140] The failure to approach the Bible with a believing attitude has been responsible for so many false and soul-destroying explanations. The words of Christ come to mind in this connection: "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them unto babes" (Matt. 11:25). Many scholars and interpreters spend much time in the study of the Scriptures, but the hours devoted to the Book are spent in the interest of gratifying their curiosity. The higher critical spirit with which so many approach Scripture results in its becoming a closed book instead of an open volume.[141] The interpreter who goes to the Bible with preconceived theories of its development,[142] or discounts the possibility of miracles, or denies the existence of the supernatural, or selects only those facts and statements which solely appeal to human reason, is guilty of approaching the Bible in an unbelieving spirit. He consequently will find seeming errors and contradictions, and considering it fallible, will not derive from the Fountain of Living Waters the refreshment that God intended for him and those for whom he is interpreting the Scriptures.

In Torrey's estimation, based on years of Biblical interpretation, the childlike mind is an essential condition for exegesis. To quote his own words:

> It is a great point gained in Bible study when we are brought to realize that an infinite God knows more than we, that indeed our highest wisdom is less than the knowledge of the most ignorant babe compared with His, and when we come to Him as babes, just to be taught by Him, and not to argue with Him.[143]

Finney listed among nineteen qualifications for Bible study, "a sense of ignorance and dependence on divine teaching," and "such humility as to be willing to expose your ignorance."[144]

Closely akin to the foregoing disposition of faith is the willingness on the part of the exegete to obey the teachings of the Scriptures. It is only when a person has "cast down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and brought into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5) that he can find Christ and His salvation in the Bible. A surrendered will gives that clearness of spiritual vision which is absolutely necessary to an understanding of God's book. Saint Augustine, in *De Doctrina Christiana,* made the following suggestion to Bible interpreters:

> Fear God, and seek to know His will, do not run in the face of Scripture when it strikes at your sins; be guided by the truth that God is love for His own sake, and man for God's sake; pray for strength and resolution that your heart may be fixed on things eternal; devote yourself to good works; and die to the world.[145]

Insight into Bible truths is never independent of the obedient frame of mind, but always conditioned by conformity to its precepts, for as Christ said: "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God or whether I speak of Myself" (John 7:17). From this utterance of the Lord it becomes clear that obedience, as Pierson terms it, is an "organ of spiritual revelation."[146] Herein is thus found a unique requisite for Scriptural exegesis, one which many interpreters do not possess. Minear asserts that only those obeying the Word of God will understand it.[147] What Pierson wrote many years ago is still true today:

> Spiritual vision, like physical vision, is binocular: it depends on both reason and conscience. If the intellectual faculties are beclouded, the moral sense is apt to err in its decision and, if the conscience be seared, the reason is blinded.[148]

Those who fail to abide by the precepts of the Bible eventually lose their power to see and understand its teachings.

The Bible exegete who has the moral and spiritual qualifications outlined in this paper will fulfill the requirements of the golden law, as set forth by Bengel, that prince among commentators: "An expositor should be like a well who brings no water into his source, but allows the water he finds there to flow without stoppage, diversion, or defilement."[149]

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