

How Should We Interpret the Bible?

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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The following sermon transcript does not match the *video* version of the sermon—it matches only the audio version. Here's a brief explanation why.

John MacArthur routinely preaches a sermon more than once on the same date, during different worship services at Grace Community Church. Normally, for a given sermon title, our website features the audio and video that were recorded during the same worship service. Very occasionally, though, we will post the audio from one service and the video from another. Such was the case for the sermon titled “The Dead Will Hear Christ,” the transcript of which follows below. The transcript is of the audio version.

Now over the last several Sunday nights that I've been with you, three out of the last four, we've been sort of anticipating the Strange Fire Conference and taking a look at some of the very foundation issues in the Charismatic Movement. We all understand the issues of healing and the prosperity gospel, and speaking in tongues and signs and wonders and miracles and all of those kinds of things. And certainly those need to be addressed, and through the years we've addressed all of those things and there's plenty of available data in the bookstore and on the website and on the Grace To You website for you to get answers from the Word of God on all those issues. But there are some foundational issues that are more concerning to me than some of those behaviors and they are really the problem. And so we posed three questions that I've tried to answer on these three Sunday nights. The first one is “What is the source of truth? Where do we find divine truth?” Unfortunately the Charismatic Movement is more likely to see truth rising out of their own intuition and their own supposed Christian experience than rising out of Scripture. They seem to think that God speaks to them internally and they are the recipients of divine revelation.

That led to the second question, “Is God still giving revelation?” In answer to the first question, what is the source of truth, we said the Bible and only the Bible. It's all there. That's the once for all delivered to the saints faith, and you don't add to it or take away from it. And is God still giving revelation? And the answer to that question we saw was no. Revelation has ceased and ended, there is no further revelation. There's illumination by the work of the Holy Spirit. There is direction and leading, whoever belongs to Christ is led by the Holy Spirit. So we know there is providential direction that God exercises through His Holy Spirit dwelling in us on our behalf and for the purposes of God that goes on all the time. But no further divine revelation.

The third question, and this is an important one, is the question, “How do we interpret the Bible? How should we interpret the Bible?” If we say that the only source of truth is the Bible, there is no further revelation and this is it, here. Then the compelling thing becomes—how do we get the right message out of this book? Given that we're dealing with an ancient book, in some cases, of course, a very, very ancient book going all the way back to the time of Moses, many, many centuries ago, many millennia ago, and even in the case of the New Testament, a couple thousand years ago, we are dealing with the fact that it's a different time, it's a different people, it's a different culture, it's a

different geographical setting. It's different sociologically, it's different physically, geographically. It's different in terms of language and so we have to kind of close all those gaps to interpret Scripture accurately because whatever the Bible meant when it was originally given is exactly what it means now. And so we have to recreate that scene.

Sometimes you hear people say, "We need to bring the Bible into modern times." That's exactly the wrong thing to do, you need to take the modern reader into ancient times. You need to reconstruct the setting in order that you can get the interpretation at the time it was written.

So let's take a look at the question: How should we interpret the Bible? Now tonight I'm going to give you some of the trade secrets. Maybe you'll know a little more about what you experience me doing on a Sunday with a portion of Scripture because I'm going to essentially tell you the components. This isn't something secret. This isn't secret knowledge. This isn't inside information. But it's not often communicated. And again, like the other two messages on these themes, these are more like seminary lectures than like sermons so a little bit of a change in mode.

The word that we use to describe interpretation of the Bible is hermeneutics...hermeneutics. It is from a Greek word, *hermeneuo* which means to interpret or to translate, to give the meaning. It is giving the sense of what something says. It would be used of anything that needed to be interpreted. And, of course, we're used to this. We communicate with one another and we very often say, "What exactly do you mean by that?" That's a very common expression to something you don't understand. Or "What do you think that person meant? Or What do you think this writer means?" If you go to high school or college, and you take a course in American Literature, or European literature or any other kind of literature, you're going to be dealing with prose or poetry, you're going to be continually asking the question, "What did the writer mean?" What was the message here because it's sometimes not obvious on the surface. Sometimes it is if the writer says the sky is blue, we don't need to study that a long time. But there are a lot more things that aren't nearly that simple. So hermeneutics, which is an English transliteration of this Greek verb, hermeneutics is the science of Bible interpretation. And I want you to identify it as a science because it is a science. That is, it operates under fixed rules. That's very important to establish. It is the crucial science behind all accurate doctrine, all sound doctrine that is faithful to the Word of God. Where you have a deviation from sound doctrine, inevitably you have a failure to stay by the science of hermeneutics. Or you have a flat-out denial of the veracity and authenticity of the text itself.

But in the case where somebody affirms the text, heresy happens because while affirming the text, you misinterpret the text. You are very well aware of the fact that there are a lot of interpretations that are thrown around about Bible verses and sometimes young students ask me the question, "Why do so many good men disagree on a given passage? Why do so many good men have a differing view of a certain text of Scripture?"

My initial answer to that is because none of us is perfect, all accuracy doesn't reside with any of us. Because we are prone to presuppositions, because we may be ignorant of certain facts that have been outside our previous and our education, we could come to a wrong conclusion. Or we could just decide that we want something to mean a certain thing and read it in.

But, agree with this. Every text of Scripture has one true interpretation. We might not get them all right, we might disagree, but all texts of Scripture have one interpretation, one only. That is the essence of communication. God is saying something, not anything you want Him to say, and not

everything.

So the distinctive science of Bible interpretation is called hermeneutics and it is behind all sound doctrine, all understanding of Scripture. And consequently, anything that is wrong is a deviation for the most part, anything certainly that is heretical is a deviation from the principles of sound interpretation.

Now having said that, let me hasten to say this. Pentecostals and Charismatics do not operate on sound hermeneutics. They do not. Poor principles of hermeneutics show up in this Movement everywhere, as they do in other Movements. Let me quote from a very astute writer by the name of Gordon Fee(?). Gordon Fee is a seminary professor with a terminal degree. He's a very brilliant man and interestingly enough, Gordon Fee is a Pentecostal. And listen to what he says about the Pentecostals and Charismatics with regard to Bible interpretation. I quote, "Pentecostals, in spite of some of their excesses, are frequently praised for recapturing for the church her joyful radiance, missionary enthusiasm and life in the Spirit. But they are at the same time noted for bad hermeneutics. First, their attitude toward Scripture regularly has included a general disregard for scientific exegesis and carefully thought out hermeneutics. In fact, hermeneutics has simply not been a Pentecostal thing. Scripture is the Word of God and is to be obeyed. In place of scientific hermeneutics there developed a kind of pragmatic hermeneutics. Obey what is taken literally because it's obvious, spiritualize, or allegorize, or devotionalize the rest."

And then he says, secondly, "It is probably fair and important to note that in general the Pentecostals' experience has preceded their hermeneutics. In a sense, the Pentecostal tends to exegete his experience," end quote.

This is a Pentecostal making an open confession because he has no choice. That is absolutely true. What do we mean by the word "exegete," means to draw out. eisegesis is reading into from *eis*, the word "into," reading into the text, putting into the text your own ideas. Exegesis is drawing out from the text. When we talk about exegesis in seminary, that means we're teaching students how to let the text speak for itself. Rather than reading into it, you let the text speak for itself. Pentecostals—says Gordon Fee—tend to exegete their experience.

Now he has come to this conclusion simply by observing the Movement, because it's absolutely true. I could take time to give you some of the crazy illustrations of this, a few of them might give you some insight.

Watching a typical television program, you will see evidences of this abound virtually every night on every Charismatic television channel. They say they bastings on the Bible and then they come up with things like this. Here's one. "The gentleman says, 'My ministry is based entirely on my life verse, Matthew 19:26. With God all things are possible. God gave me that verse because I was born in 1926.'"

Obviously, intrigued by that method of obtaining a life verse, the host of the program grabbed a Bible and began thumbing through excitedly, "I was born in 1934," he said. My life verse must be Matthew 1934. What does it say?" Then he discovered that Matthew 19 has only 30 verses. Undeterred he flipped to Luke and Luke 19:34 says, "And they said, 'The Lord has need of him.'" That's Luke 19:34. Thrilled, he explained, "O that's the verse the Lord has need of me." To which

the host's wife responded, "You can't use this, the verse is talking about a donkey." What a wonderful life verse.

Now you say, "That's extreme." No, that's not extreme, that's pretty ordinary. That incident says much about the willy-nilly way some Charismatics approach Scripture, looking for a word from the Lord, they often play Bible roulette, you know, they spin the Bible, as it were, and flip it open somewhere and whatever it says, that's the Lord's verse for them for that moment. And, of course, you know the classic illustration of that, flipping through the Bible somebody came across Matthew 27:5, "Judas went out and hanged himself," that won't work. Flip to another page, Luke 10:37, "Jesus said, 'Go thou and do likewise.'" That's not going to work. Flip to another passage, John 13:27, "And what you do, do quickly." All of that is in the Bible, it just doesn't go together. That's not the message that you should commit suicide.

And while that story may be apocryphal, it does make an important point, looking for meaning in Scripture beyond its historical intent in what we call authorial intent. That's a little expression that you read a lot when you read about the science of Bible interpretation, authorial intent. What did the author intend? What did the divine author intend that the human author wrote down? What was the intent of the author, God and the writer? That's what we're always after. It's not what you want it to mean, or what I want it to mean, or what anybody else wants it to mean. It's not what it might mean to somebody now, or today, it's what did the author intend, the divine Author and the human instrument that divine Author used? This is critical.

Many Charismatics will, while not be as extreme as that little trilogy I put together, pluck a verse out of its context. And they're not the only ones. There was a joke going around my early days about fundamentalists having all kinds of issues with people's hair. And some preacher supposedly preached that women shouldn't put their hair on the top of their head because the hair of the woman is the glory of a woman, so you don't pile it up on the top of your head, you take it down. And he used the text from the Olivet Discourse in which Jesus said, "Thy head not come down."

Well wait a minute. That actually says, "Let those on the housetop not come down," but those kind of extreme application of a partial verse, I suppose no one would do that it too may be apocryphal, but it's that kind of thing where you just employ the words in a verse with any kind of meaning that you choose to give to them. The importance of careful biblical interpretation couldn't be overstated. It's impossible to overstate it. Misinterpreting the Bible, listen, is essentially no better than not believing it. Okay? Misinterpreting it is essentially no better than not believing it because if you believe something it doesn't say, you have missed what it does say so while believing what it doesn't say, you don't believe what it does say.

What good does it do to agree that the Bible is God's Word, God's revelation if you misinterpret it? You miss the truth. You miss the authorial intent. Interpreting Scripture is absolutely critical.

I've often said, the most important course in seminary is hermeneutics, the science of interpretation. What we do in seminary is teach the students the science of interpretation and then give them the tools to apply the science. It's fine to say that it's a science and you have to apply the science but it's necessary to have the tools. That's why seminary exists. All right? You might be a very effective communicator, you might be very glib and you might be very warm-hearted toward the Bible. You might...you might want to do the very best you can to communicate what you think the Bible means, but this is real serious here. This is so serious that I would compare it to a physician. You don't want

somebody who is untrained in surgery to operate on you. And there's a sense in which we want to be careful who operates on the Word of God. Who cuts into the Word of God to discern its meaning should be prepared.

Seminary isn't the only way to get that preparation because there are some notable and powerful preachers through the years and even in the present day who didn't go to seminary, but they are at least equally educated with any seminary student. They have the necessary tools. If you don't go to seminary where we give them to you in a three-four year period, then you're sort of on your own. Very few do that with the kind of precision and the kind of accuracy that is necessary...is necessary. One of my dear friends that you love to hear, Phil Johnson, went to the Moody Bible Institute, didn't go to seminary, but could teach in any seminary in the world because he has gained the tools on his own, to be able to accurately interpret the Word of God. Seminary isn't the only way, it's the most concise way and it's the most sort of immediately effective way. But the material can be gained in other ways and many have done that. But to go into the Word of God and become an interpreter without those tools is risky business.

There is, by the way, a whole stream of church ministry and pastors and associations and fellowships that kind of pride themselves on non-seminary trained men who are not seminary trained and in many cases haven't gained the tools to accurately handle the Word of God. Some of them will then read the good books and find the good commentators and lean on someone else. And that's fine, as well. And that's what most Christian lay people do. You also are responsible for rightly handling the Word of God and you need to know where those good resources are. But the ones who develop those resources, who prepare those who write the commentators, who are the teachers of the church, need to make sure that they have acquired the necessary skills to do effectively and accurately the science of interpretation. Truth must be rightly understood.

You sometimes hear people say, "Well what does this verse mean to me?" That's a very popular thing. That's kind of the early years of the Bible study movement, people would get together with a Bible...now this happened in the late sixties, people started Bible studies. When I came to Grace Church in '69, it was kind of at the very...very feverish period of what was called the Jesus Movement, and Bible Study was a hot topic and people were gathering in groups and there was really no one who had the tools to interpret Scripture, and so it kind of fell down to what does this mean to You?, what does this mean to me? That has nothing to do with the true meaning. All that matters is what the verse means period...not what it means to you. We can get to what the truth of the verse means in your life, but not until we know what it actually means. Every jot, every tittle, every small element of Scripture carries only the intended meaning of the author and the task of the interpreter is determined what that meaning is.

All right, so that's just kind of a bit of an introduction to the importance of the science of hermeneutics. Second Timothy 2:15, you remember this verse? "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who doesn't need to be ashamed, handling accurately the Word of Truth." That's the mandate of hermeneutics. Second Timothy 2:15, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman that doesn't need to be ashamed." If you don't handle accurately the Word, you stand before God ashamed. This is our responsibility. The Word must be handled with diligence and care and precision and accuracy and those who fail to do that will be ashamed. Boy, I wish we could get that message across to those who play fast and loose with the Bible.

Now let me suggest three errors to avoid just to kind of expand this a little bit, three errors to avoid in

Bible interpretation. Refrain from making a point at the price of proper interpretation...refrain from making a point at the price of proper interpretation. In other words, you might have a point to make, you want to make it so you proof text it with a verse taken out of context. It's very easy to do that. It's very tempting to do that for a pastor or a teacher to sneak a foreign meaning into a text to get a desired response. And years ago I saw this, this is very, very old ancient way of handling the Scriptures, it goes back to the rabbis who did this all the time, the ancient Jewish rabbis.

A rabbi was trying to convince his people that the primary issue in life was concern for human beings. And that's a good thing. Our primary concern in life should be for human beings, for some people it's cats, and for some people it's dogs and for some people it's for horses, and for some people it's money and whatever. But we should be able to convince people the primary issue in life is to care for people. This rabbi in a sort of a traditional rabbinic fashion came up with a novel way to do that and it was going to Genesis chapter 11 and the story of the Tower of Babel. He made the story of Babel a story to demonstrate that your concern should be for people.

You say, "How did he do that?" Well he used the stones of the Tower of Babel to support his contention in this way. He said that the builders of the tower were frustrated because they put material things first and people last. How did that work? As the tower grew taller, it took a hod carrier many hours to carry a load of bricks to the brick layers at the top. The Tower of Babel, a ziggurat way up in the sky and they're carrying bricks to the brick layers at the top, said the rabbi.

If a man fell off the Tower on the way down, no one cared because he didn't lose any bricks. But if a man fell off the Tower on the way up, everybody was very sad because the load of bricks was lost too. That, said the teacher, is why God confounded their language because they gave priority to the building and the bricks rather than human beings.

Well look, I agree. You shouldn't give priority to bricks, you should give priority to people. I could pull that off in some place and they'd say, "Boy, that is a powerful point. That's a memorable point. I'll never forget that." You probably won't, unfortunately. But that has nothing to do with the Tower of Babel, nothing whatsoever. In fact, it skews the whole point of Genesis 11, it is true, people are more important than bricks. There isn't anything in Genesis 11 about people mourning if somebody fell off with or without bricks. Genesis 11 says nothing about the importance of people over bricks. The point is, God is more important than idols and God will judge those who make an idol. Babel was God's judgment on proud men who were defying Him. Now it's a good message to consider people more than bricks. But please don't read it I there.

Now that goes on endlessly in rabbinical writing. It's all over their writings. That's just one illustration. Refrain from making a point at the price of a proper interpretation. That would be isogesis(?) reading your point into the text and manipulating it to fix it as opposed to exegesis, letting the text yield its own truth.

Secondly, avoid superficial study. These are three errors to avoid. Avoid superficial study. Good accurate Bible study, I will let you know, is hard work...it is hard work. It can't be done by flipping quickly through the Bible. It can't be done by flipping around in a concordance and trying to piece things together. Understanding the Bible, listen, understanding the bible accurately, listen, is alien to me. It is alien to me if you consider who I am, what language I speak, when I live and where I live...the whole document is alien to me. It is a completely foreign document. Everything about it is foreign. Its language is foreign, its culture is foreign, its geography is foreign, its history is foreign, its

philosophies are foreign, its social customs are foreign, it is a totally alien document to me. And I can never establish the meaning of a text without knowing what it meant to the author and so I have to create then the complete context in which the author wrote. That is alien to me and therein lies the work...therein lies the work. This requires immense diligence. The interpretation of Scripture is hard, hard work.

Now I want to say at the same time that the meaning is clear. It just takes hard work to get to it. But it's amazing how clear it is. And I want to affirm the perspicuity of Scripture, that's a word means clear, the clarity of Scripture. I know there are people who say, "The Bible's not clear, the Bible is an ancient document, we can't know what it means." I've preached on that, the perspicuity of Scripture. It is clear, it is revelation, it is not oblique, it is not opaque, it is not so alien that it cannot be understood, but it takes effort for it to yield its clear meaning. So at one and the same time, it's clear but it's hard work to get to the clarity...it's clear but it's hard work to get to the clarity. When you finally get there, its clarity is stunning.

Now this has been your experience, I hope, here at Grace Church. You sit there and I open up a passage like this morning in John 5, and I read six or seven verses to you and you kind of wonder exactly what is that about. And after many, many, many hours, if not years, of thinking about that text, I tell you what it's about and all of a sudden the light goes on. You probably say to yourself, "That's pretty simple, that's pretty obvious." How many times have you said to yourself, "Why didn't I see that?" Why didn't I see that? It's clear. It's the normal way to understand the text.

By the way, and listen, this is not an injunction for you because you are way over the top on this one, but 1 Timothy 5:17 says, "Double honor is to be given in the church to those who labor in the Word and doctrine." You give ten-fold, twenty-fold honor to those of us who labor in the Word and doctrine. But why does the church give honor to those who labor in the Word and doctrine? Because the church is the beneficiary of their hard work when the clarity of scripture is brought to bear upon their hearts. God gives teachers to the church to labor in the Word and doctrine so that the people in the church can understand the Word of God clearly...clearly.

One of the real early scholars that affected me in this subject of hermeneutics wrote this, "It is often asserted by devout people that they can know the Bible completely without helps. They preface their interpretations with a remark like this, 'I have read no man's book, I have consulted no manmade commentaries, I have gone right to the Bible to see what it had to say for itself.'"

Now that's a very pious statement. That's a very sort of spiritual sounding statement. And you could say that and people might say, "Amen, brother, amen." But that is not the way of wisdom. You don't want to sit under that. Does any man have the right or the learning innately on his own to bypass all the accumulated illumination of the Holy Spirit through the history of the church? And that is about as proud and unspiritual a statement as any person could make. It's a veiled egotism to say, "I don't read human books, I go right to the Bible." It's a subtle affirmation that you are...you're a greater source of biblical wisdom than say John Calvin, or any other who consulted every available source there was.

We can't confuse inspiration with illumination. We have an inspired text, we need to be illumined by the Holy Spirit, that's 1 Corinthians 2. We need to be taught by the Spirit. The Spirit knows the things of God and He teaches us. The function of the Spirit is not to communicate new truth, and this is where the Charismatics go off. The function of the Spirit is not to teach or to reveal new truth, it is to

bring illumination to the Bible. And instead of them chasing revelations and looking for new truth, if the Holy Spirit was really moving in them, if the Holy Spirit was moving in them the way they think He is, they would be the purest and the noblest and the highest and the best of interpreters of Scripture. Fact: They are not. They are not.

How could you have a Holy Spirit Movement and the Holy Spirit not do His primary work which is the work of illuminating the Word of God for the people of God? You have to believe that the work of the Holy Spirit illuminating the believer who studies the Word faithfully is to yield the truth. What this gentleman was writing was simply describing a lack of respect for Holy Spirit illuminated biblical theologians, expositors and scholars who have spent years studying and interpreting Scripture. I've heard this so many times, "John MacArthur has a great ministry, an influential ministry, think of what it would be like if he had the Holy Spirit." That's what Charismatics say. The evidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in me is not because I rattle off nonsensical gibberish but because I make clear to you the meaning of Scripture. That's the work of the Holy Spirit, illuminating my mind, not apart from the diligence of study, but as a result of the diligence of study.

Charismatics place emphasis on letting people in a congregation say whatever they think the Spirit told them. That's not the Holy Spirit. That's not how the Holy Spirit works.

I heard a radio interview where a Charismatic woman who also was a pastor was asked how she got her sermons up. She replied, "I don't get them up, I get them down. God delivers them to me." Really? How does that work? God delivers them to you? It's sort of unspiritual, if you have to study, if you have to get it up, if you have to dig it out. We should be very, very careful never ever to superficially study the Scripture and then blame it on the Holy Spirit.

So, on the one hand, diligence in the study. On the other hand, a confidence and trust in the leading of the Holy Spirit. And I would promise you this, wherever the soundest doctrine is, wherever the purist and truest understanding of Scripture is, there the Holy Spirit is. So, if you would like, I would say this, there may not be a church in this area that I know of where the Holy Spirit has manifested Himself more powerfully than right here at Grace Church because His work is to illumine the Scripture and make it clear, and do by the clarity of that Scripture a mighty work in the salvation and sanctification of souls. It's not about craziness. It's not about experiences and ecstasies. It's about understanding Scripture.

So, I'm trying to give you some principles, but I keep preaching. The first principle, don't make a point at the price of a proper interpretation. The second, avoid superficial study. Third, don't spiritualize or allegorize a text. This is a popular thing. What do you mean spiritualize or allegorize?

Well, you use Scripture like some kind of story and make it mean whatever you want. This is an extreme example and I'll never forget, I listened to this series...a young couple came to our church, I remember this so well. I remember the pastor who was talking to them and he came to one of our pastors to get counseling about marriage problems and he began talking to them and it was clear they should never gotten married. And this is not a match made in heaven.

So, "Why did you get married?" "Oh," said the husband, "it was the sermon our pastor preached in our church."

“Really, what sermon was it?”

“Well, he preached on the walls of Jericho.”

Walls of Jericho, what does that have to do with marriage?

“Well,” he said, “that God’s people claimed the city, marched around it seven times and the walls fell down.” He said, “If a young man believed God had given him a certain young girl, he could claim her, march around her seven times, the walls of her heart would fall down. So that’s what I did and we got married.” To which our pastor said, “That can’t be true, you’re kidding me, right?”

“No, no, that’s true. And there were many other couples who got married because of the same sermon.”

Can you imagine people circling girls? I mean, that’s enough to scare you, ladies. Talk about stalking, about the third time around you’ve got to get out of there. Some people think marriages are made in heaven and some are, but that’s a marriage made in an allegory.

A well-known...a well-known...you’d know who he was... pastor preached the series on the book of Nehemiah and he said... Nehemiah’s writing about Jerusalem’s walls were in ruin. That speaks of a broken-down walls of human personality. Nehemiah represents the Holy Spirit who comes to rebuild the walls of human personality that are broken down. When he got to the king’s pool in chapter 2, he said this meant the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the mortar between the bricks rebuilding the wall was speaking in tongues. So the message was, Nehemiah is teaching us that the Holy Spirit wants to rebuild the broken walls of your personality through the baptism of the Spirit and speaking in tongues.

Nehemiah? It has nothing to do with human personality, the baptism of the Spirit or speaking in tongues. But, you know, people sit and say, “That’s deep. That is deep. Wow, I never saw that.”

Of course you never saw that. I remember Patricia and I were in Lake Geneva with a very well-known, well, well known pastor who used to be the pastor of the largest church in the valley and he preached on the Rapture of the church one night from John 11. John 11 is about Lazarus and his resurrection. And he preached on the Rapture of the church from John 11 and essentially he said, “Lazarus allegorically refers to the church and Jesus saying “Lazarus, come forth,” was a picture of the resurrection of the church.” You know, and I’m looking for a way out as I’m sitting there listening to this. So afterwards there was this little ice cream shop and he said, “John, John, were you there tonight?” I said, “Yeah, I was there.”

He said, “Have you ever seen that in John 11?”

I said, “No one has ever seen that in John 11. You are the first.” And he took it as a compliment. He said to somebody, “John says no one’s ever seen that but me...” and oh boy.

You know, I used to say this is like...you don’t even need the Bible for this. You know, if you’re going to make something up, you could use little Bo Peep, right? You could say, “Little Bo Peep, she was

little, she was alienated by her name. She was sad. And to make her sadder, she lost her sheep. Everywhere in the world people are lost.” I mean, you could preach that stuff from anything. “Ah, but they’ll come home. Yes, if you’re faithful. Yes, those lost people, they’ll come home.” And I never knew what to do with wagging their tails behind them, actually. But I think you get the point.

This is the Bible being used and abused, so you don’t do those things. Okay? Are we clear on that? Okay, you don’t make a point at the price of a proper interpretation. You don’t do something superficial and you don’t use the Bible for spiritualizing, allegorizing and devotionalizing. You use faithful hermeneutics.

All right, what are those hermeneutics? I’ve got five minutes to give you five principles. That would sort of leave you uneducated but I’m going to do the best at it because you need to know about these. Let me just give them to you and you can think them through, the literal principle...the literal principle.

These are the five principles, scientific principles that I work with that all Bible interpreters have always worked with...the literal principle. What does that mean? You interpret the Scripture according to normal language, real people, real history, normal language.

If somebody comes up to you and says, “It’s certainly a beautiful day today.” You say, “Oh, what’s the secret meaning of that?” There’s no secret meaning, it’s just a beautiful day, I thought I’d say that. Why would you do that with the Bible? If the Bible says something that matter of fact, why would you assume there’s some secret hidden meaning? There isn’t. So this is real people, real history, normal language...its real meaning. The words of Scripture are words that are to be understood in ordinary ways in the course of any daily use of normal language. Whatever the most obvious meaning, the simplest meaning, the clearest meaning, the most normal meaning—that’s the meaning.

You say, “Well what about figurative language?” Well, you know, we use figurative language. “You know, I’m as worn out as a dog. I’m...” You don’t mean you’re a dog. We understand metaphoric language, we understand analogies, we speak in analogies all the time. That’s normal language. Figures of speech are normal language. Symbolism is normal language. But allegory is secret, hidden meaning that is not contained in the normal language. There are no allegories in the Bible. There are no allegories in the Bible, it is normal language, it means exactly what it appears to me. There is no deeper meaning, there’s no hidden meaning, there’s no secret meaning, there’s no spiritualized meaning. Yes, they’re prophetic passages where there are analogies, there are illustrations. You read Zechariah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Isaiah, in the book of Revelation you see images...those images are conveying a reality. They are conveying a reality in a symbolic way. And, you know, we use those kinds of things all the time, so did Jesus in parables, right? Parables were fictional stories conveying actual truth.

So you do not ever abandon literal interpretation in favor of some mystical, hidden allegorical interpretation which discards accuracy, coherence, intelligence and reason. Then you have a free-for-all...free-for-all. This also was the way the rabbis did it. The rabbis said Abraham had 318 students because letters and...letters had a numerical equivalent and the consonants in Abraham’s name added up to 318, so the fact that the consonants in Abraham’s name added up to 318 meant that Abraham had 318 servants. That’s just not true, that’s irrelevant. It has nothing to do with the truth that’s being conveyed with the name Abraham. But that kind of esoteric, quasi, Gnostic sort of

elevated insight was very common among rabbis and we find a lot of it today in...it appears in numerology, sometimes you read about numbers in the Bible...sometimes you read about certain historical events appearing in the text of the bible if you go across the letters at an angle, or a diagonal or up or down or across and it gives all the events of history. You can throw those things in a computer. Somebody did that. Somebody said this is the secret meaning of the Bible, there are books that have been written on this. Somebody else put the same stuff together, threw it in a computer and accomplished exactly the same thing with Herman Melville's Moby Dick. And he wasn't divine, and he didn't write secret meanings in the letters on different rows and at different angles. So these kinds of things are crazy misguiding treatments of Scripture. So literal...literal.

Number two, the historical principles, the historical context is everything...culture, geography, politics, religion, the thinking of the people, the perspectives, the world view, what's going on at the time, how the people think...all of that is informing you on the historical context. So I start out with the literal principle, I go to a text, I say, "Okay, it means exactly what it appears to mean. If there's a figure of speech, then the figure of speech will become clear as to what it illustrates, at what it refers to.

Then the second thing is the historical principle. What are the characteristics of the city? What were the cultural conditions? What were the politics? What were the social pressures? What were the tensions? What were the problems? What were the crises? What were the customs of the people? What informs all of this?

Now here's where you can get some help. If you want to know the secret of John MacArthur's preaching, here it is. I have a really good library. You don't think I know all that on my own. As I said earlier, that's all alien to me. I have to go find all that. I have to go back and find that in Bible dictionaries, Bible handbooks, commentaries, books on history, books on Bible customs, books on everything I can get to reconstruct the times.

I remember very early in my Christian life I devoured Alfred Edersheim's Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, two massive volumes which reconstruct the Jewish history around the life of Christ. And Conybeare and Howson's massive volume biography on the history of the world around the time of the Apostle Paul because I needed to have all that information, even as a student in seminary I knew that authorial intent was everything and I had to reconstruct the history. It is absolutely critical and it's what makes the Bible come alive. It's why you feel you're there. You don't feel the Bible is all of a sudden been dropped out of heaven into your world, you feel you've been dropped into its world, right? That's because of the historical context.

There's a third principle and that's the grammatical principle. This is to take a look at the language and the syntax and lexicography of a passage...the words, the way they're arranged, the prepositions, the pronouns, the antecedents. And you can do that in your English Bible. You do it as a matter of course anything. You interpret, you do that as a matter of course. What do the words mean? What does the antecedent of this? What is the preposition telling me? To what does this pronoun refer? To whom does it refer? So it's a grammatical thing. We break that into word studies, studies of actual words, syntax which is how the words are connected with each other.

The word studies is lexicography, what is the lexicon definition. Syntax is how the words are constructed and that is part of the science. So you have to get into the grammar. This is where knowing the original language is really critical. And if you don't know Greek and Hebrew, you

can...and you want to really study the Bible, you can get books that will give you the English. You can access the Greek from the English. You can access even the Hebrew from the English and find those original meanings. One of the reason through the years that I've written so many commentaries is to help people do that. I've written a Bible handbook which Carmella was telling me was very helpful to her and we're going to feature that coming up so you can have a Bible handbook that would just do a ton to help you with all of this material. There are other books like that that are available in the bookstore. Instead of just buying the end product of somebody else's study, get in on the front end of it, get these kind of books and go at it yourself.

It's necessary to do grammar to find out what the meaning is and just to give you kind of a maybe a step deeper into it, when I'm interpreting a passage, I look for the main verbs because verbs always carry the action and that's what you're always looking for, the flow of action is always around the main verbs. And if you can find a main verb supported by a lot of participles, you know the participle always modifies the main verb and you can work your outline around the main verb and the participles. So you're digging down on verbs, nouns, phrases, modifiers, adverbs, adjectives, all of that is in the course of doing grammatical study. And I would just tell you, this is alien and foreign to the Charismatic Movement.

The fourth is a synthesis principle and you see me do this all the time. The synthesis...the Reformers used the expression *Scriptural Scriptorium Interpretur*. What does that mean? Scripture interprets Scripture. Scripture interprets Scripture. If you want to be able to do this, you...this is a skill you can buy probably for about ten bucks. Get Treasury of Scripture Knowledge...T.S.K. Treasury of Scripture Knowledge. You can look up every verse and find every other verse in the Bible that refers to the same idea and the same truth. It's not a concordance. It's not the same word, it's the same idea. It's the Scripture interpreting the Scripture.

I started using that my first year of seminary. It was recommended to me by Ralph Kyper, and Patricia will remember really well. Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse's little almost blind secretary gentleman who loved the Word of God and is one of my favorite people. And he put into my hand a Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, and I began early in the ministry here to let that guide me so that I could interpret the Scripture by the Scripture and follow the Reformers' expression, *Scriptura Scriptorium Interpretur*, let the Scripture interpret the Scripture. So that's the synthesis principle. So when you hear me ask a question like this morning, you don't recognize the glory that is from the one true God and I said the glory from the one true God is Jesus Christ. Why would I say that? Because that's how He's spoken of in John 1:14, that's how He's referred to in 2 Corinthians 4, that's the synthesis principle.

So after you've done the grammatical work in the text, you compare it with other related texts and that's how you come to a full understanding. One writer says, "The Bible appears like a symphony orchestra with the Holy Spirit as its Toscanini, each instrumentalist has been brought willingly, spontaneously creatively to play his notes just as the great conductor desired, though none of them could ever hear the music as a whole. The point of each part only becomes fully clear when seen in relation to all the rest." That's a brilliant statement. The Bible is a symphony and when you study one theme, you're just putting all the instruments together and then it becomes a symphonic presentation of that one truth.

One more principle, the practical principle...the practical principle. The final thing you want to ask is what are the implications of this? Now when I talk about this, I don't talk about application, talk about

implication. There's a difference. Application means do this...and I've been criticized through the years and maybe justifiably, of not giving application, not applying what I teach, not spending time at the end of a discourse, the end of a sermon, making direct application. And my answer to that is I'm much more concerned about implication than specific application. And what I mean by that is this. I want you to be processing in your mind the implications of this text. It's the Holy Spirit's work to make the application. I could say, "Go home and do this, go home and do that, go over there and do this." I could give you specific application but it might not apply to all of you. I would rather give an implication that hits all of you. Like this morning, I said, "Here are three things that will give you assurance of your salvation." That's the implication of this message. You understood that. Everybody understood that. That was the delivered truth at the end. That was the practical principle.

As to specifically making application of that new understanding of your assurance, that's going to work out, flesh out as the Holy Spirit directs your thinking, your experience, and your life.

Well, there are the five principles. Now you know the secret of what I try to do. And what we all do as we teach the Word of God. Having said all of that, we have to go back to a final text, this is 1 Corinthians second chapter. "Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is of God that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. The natural man receives not the Spirit of God, they are foolishness to him. Neither can he know them because they're spiritually discerned. The natural man can't do this, can't interpret Scripture. Nor can those who don't submit themselves to the principles and the science of hermeneutics. But at the end of the day is the Holy Spirit's illumination that guides that intense process to the end that comes up with the right and a clear interpretation to the glory of God.

All right, that's your lesson. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You for our time tonight to talk about these things and to consider how urgent and important it is for us to handle Your Word accurately. We want to be faithful at that in every sense. We thank You that You've allowed us to have the Master's College and the Master's Seminary and there to be training many who will handle Your Word in the future effectively. We thank You for the privilege we have of investing in their lives and teaching them. We thank you especially for the men who are in the seminary who are being taught the tools to function in the science of hermeneutics to handle Your Word, to yield its clear and powerful and life-transforming meaning. Bless them as they begin a new semester and many students begin for the very first year. Lord, produce from the efforts of all of our precious faculty and staff what we could never have expected or even hoped, far beyond what we could ask or think. And we thank You for all those who through the years have been faithful in interpreting Your Word and who have seen the marvelous outworking of the illuminating Holy Spirit. This is an immense joy and privilege. This is the greatest blessing that any preacher would ever know to come to clarity in the Word knowing that it was not apart from His effort but not solely by His effort but rather a Spirit-empowered, a Spirit illuminated effort that led where the natural man could never go, to the truth understood clearly. The truth then becomes our life and our joy and for it, we give You glory and we thank You in Christ's name. Amen.

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