

## How We Know About God

Lesson 1: Knowing the Truth

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## Lesson 1 : Knowing the Truth

- The Possibility of Real Human Knowledge
  - Systematic Truth
  - The Value of Written Confessions
  - Both Doctrinal and Devotional
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### The Possibility of Real Human Knowledge

We humans are made in the image of God. Of course that does not mean we look like him, or that he has limitations like the ones we have. It means that there are things in our nature that reflect the influence of our Creator. We are his handiwork designed to show the imprint of his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

Since truth is one of the attributes of God which we are designed to appreciate and model, there must be some absolute standard against which all things can be compared and tested. The possibility of having some knowledge of such a standard is one of the amazing acts of God's mercy. It is the goal of our study in Prolegomena (foundational studies) to establish the basis for knowing what is true about God and about the things he requires of us.

Since the Creator has determined the characteristics of everything outside of himself, truth is the way things are in God's mind. He can be the only absolute gauge for measuring the truth and rightness of ideas or relationships in his universe.

In man's fallen condition, God's truth is not perceived accurately. In his attempt to live in God's world, while denying his moral relationship with it, he will either deny the possibility of knowing truth at all, or he will try to create a substitute, and therefore false, standard for truth. Such an invention will force everything to be interpreted in such a way as to support fallen man's own imagination of what is true and right. But the Bible shows us that there is real truth, and that it is bound to the person of the Creator.

Psalm 25:10 "All the paths of the Lord are lovingkindness and truth"

Psalm 117:2 "the truth of the Lord is everlasting"

John 14:6 "I am the way, and the truth, and the life"

Everything God has revealed is true because it is first rooted in his own mind. What he makes known to us is put into a form that we can understand. He made us to be able to know all that we need to know as his children.

In this sense, all the truth we know is *analogical*: That is, It agrees with, corresponds with, but is not completely identical with what is in the perfect mind of God. There is an "analogy" between what God speaks to his creatures and what God knows infinitely and perfectly.

Deuteronomy 18 shows that it is required of prophets that their message be consistent with everything else God reveals, and agrees with what God actually does or permits. In Acts 17:11 the Bereans are called "more noble" because they searched the Scriptures daily to test what they heard from the Apostle Paul. They tested it against the only objective authority available to them as a standard, the Scriptures.

The possibility of knowing truth rests in the consistency of God's mind. Therefore there can be no

real contradictions about anything in our world. If we imagine that contradictions can exist, we violate the possibility of knowing anything! If a thing might both be and not be, at the same time and in the same way, then everything may be considered to be nonsense and unknowable! When we perceive something to be in contradiction with something else, then we have structured our ideas in such a way that they no longer correspond with the way things are in God's mind.

If there is to be help and guidance for ourselves and all those we care about, it must be grounded in the truth of God. To build our lives on a lie, is tragic. It denies the basis for the happiness our Creator intended us to enjoy within the promises of his gracious covenant.

**A system of truth should be rooted in the nature of God.**

God does not know things in the same way we organize them. We understand things by giving names to individual things and ideas. Then we learn to associate these basic ideas into groups which then earn a group label, or name. This enables us to think in terms of groups of ideas. The structures of our thinking quickly get complicated. The larger ideas we are linking and relating as we think are themselves linked ideas made up of groups of linked ideas.

But in the mind of God there are no isolated ideas that need to be linked by logical association and which may then yield higher order ideas. Systematic thinking is unique to us as creatures. The Creator has a unified absolute mind which we attempt to understand through his revelation. As Creator, he designed us to be able to know exactly what he wants us to know. He used holy men to produce an inspired, objective and infallible record of revelation sufficient to teach us all he intends. Included in that word are rules for studying the word itself. To the degree that we use God's methods consistently, our study will yield ideas consistent with truth as it exists absolutely in the mind of God.

For a study of God's truth to yield benefits to us, it is required that we be spiritually alive through the work of the Savior. In our fallen, spiritually dead condition we will distort and reinterpret what God makes known. No one is able to determine who has been truly regenerated by God's grace. But as a church we are given certain standards which its elders are to use in admitting people to the sacraments. To ensure the blessing of this study it is needful of all students ...

1. that they acknowledge themselves to be sinners in the sight of God, justly deserving his displeasure, without hope save in his sovereign mercy and provision.
2. that they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God, and Savior of sinners and that they humbly rest in him alone for salvation as offered in the Gospel.
3. that they present a credible profession such that their lives do not contradict what they say they believe.
4. that they submit to the authority of Christ as revealed in his Word, and willingly study and submit to that authority as given to his church and in the sacraments and laws of his covenant.

But God expects even more of us when we presume to teach the truths of the Scriptures. Leaders in the home, church and community must be able to communicate the teachings of the Bible accurately and effectively. But even more importantly, they must understand how the Scriptures are the sole ground of all they teach.

Paul wrote about this to two men in the first century of the church. To Titus he said that the teacher must be, "holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). He wrote to young Timothy saying that all Elders must be "able to teach..." (1 Timothy 3:2).

It is the duty of leaders in the home, in the church, and in the community, that they understand these things to the best of their ability, and that they lead those they are responsible for to appreciate, to the best of their ability, the truths God has made known. This is a hard responsibility. But God also provides his word and sends his Spirit to make us able to teach and lead in a godly manner.

### **The advantage of having a written confession.**

Some say we should have no creed or confession but the Scriptures. This idea may seem to be very noble, but it misunderstands what creeds and confessions are. They are not drafted to be another source of truth. A good written statement of faith is an attempt to spell out the basic teachings of the Bible on different topics. Having a carefully worded creed acts as both a teaching tool and as a set of boundaries to warn us when we drift off into ideas or practices that are contrary to what God has said.

It is naive to think that anyone can study or teach the content of Scripture without developing ideas about topics such as the nature of God, the origin of the Bible, the way of salvation, and other similar concepts. We call these "doctrines" or "teachings."

If the beliefs, or creeds, that govern our understanding are not written down then they exist only in our minds and momentarily spoken words. That makes it hard for our doctrines to be examined against the standard of God's word.

Even a simple translation of Scripture involves some interpretation. When the New Testament used the Hebrew Scriptures, they were translated into the common Greek of the day, not simply quoted in their original language. When we decide how to put an idea into another language, the translator must first understand what it means.

There is biblical precedent for explaining the texts of Scripture beyond simply reading them. In Nehemiah 8:8 Ezra read the Scriptures assisted by helpers: "they read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading." Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 4:2 "...reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction..." The Bible assumes and commands that the Bible will be interpreted by its teachers. The beliefs, or "creeds," of the interpreters will govern what they teach.

If no interpretation or explanation of Scripture is allowed beyond simply quoting its texts, it would make God's revelation unavailable to most people. Only linguistic scholars could read or understand the Bible in its original languages. No comments could be made about what the Bible says aside from simply reading the Scripture texts. Remember, even the selection of specific texts of the Bible to show what we believe involves a certain amount of interpretation. If formulating creeds was wrong, then our behavior and doctrine could not be examined and corrected by the objective standard of God's revelation. We could not be helped by the advice and encouragement of other believers.

All men have creeds, written or not. If not written, then it is difficult to examine beliefs for agreement with the Bible. Unwritten creeds tend to contribute to confusion and heresy. By setting

clear boundaries written creeds and confessions help identify denials of Biblical authority and protect against elevating human ideas to equal standing with the Creator's truth as revealed.

Good biblical statements unify the voice of the church and its teachers. Creeds and confessions should present a careful and sound summary of biblical ideas by which teachings and ideas can be examined.

Officially adopted statements of the church's beliefs are Biblical. In Acts 15:23-29 the Jerusalem council of elders issued decisions that were sent to the churches for correction and instruction. The published statement of the elders and apostles made it possible for believers to communicate accurately the advice of the council.

Heresies arise as a result of our imperfections. Since the earliest days of the church there have been those who have misused the Bible and attached their own meanings to it. For example; Arianism denied the deity of Jesus. This error was corrected and the biblical position explained in the Nicene Creed of 325 AD. This creed explains what the Bible teaches about the nature of man as a finite, changeable creature, and his corruption due to his fall into sin. It confirms that errors will arise unavoidably. Creeds help identify departures from the clear teachings set forth in Scripture.

Good creeds point to the authority of the Bible alone. The first article in the Westminster Confession is titled, "Of the Holy Scriptures." That chapter contains 10 sections (see particularly sections 9 and 10). The confession immediately lays down the Bible as its own foundation.

#### **The genius of the Westminster Confession of Faith:**

A good confession is scripturally worded. The Westminster Assembly carefully maintained a cautious reliance upon biblical language and expressions as doctrines were explained.

It forbids all human speculation in stating what is true. The Westminster standards would rather say less about God and our duties than to speculate in areas of less clarity or where faithful, believing, students of the Bible admit a need for continuing study.

The Westminster Confession and its Catechisms cover the fundamentals faithfully and soundly. Speaking from its unique position in history the Westminster standards drew upon the wisdom of the early creeds and councils, the sound understanding of the past work of scholars, previous conflicts in Christ's church, and a good knowledge of the Scriptures themselves as originally given.

#### **We must study both Doctrinally and Devotionally.**

**Doctrinally:** What we believe must honor God for what he really is, has done and has promised. We need to properly understand the principles by which he commands us to live. What we believe as truth must bear an accurate relationship with what exists perfectly in the Creator's mind.

**Devotionally:** Another goal of theological study is that our lives should conform to what pleases God, so that the blessings of his covenant will be ours. We must think on his blessings and thankfully appreciate God's goodness toward us personally in Christ.

Our dominant goal should be that we might "guard through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to" us. (2 Timothy 1:14)

### **Questions for Review and Thought**

1. Why are we naturally concerned with knowing what is true?
2. How does the way God knows things differ from the way we know them?
3. What biblical reasons justify men explaining the Scriptures to others?
4. What text in the Book of Acts lays a foundation for church leaders writing statements of faith and practice to guide and help the church?
5. If the Bible is our only way of knowing what is true, then why is it helpful to have a confession or a catechism?
6. What is the danger of a church not having a written creed or confession?
7. What makes the Westminster Confession and Catechisms good statements of faith?
8. Why is it important that every family have and use a copy of the Bible?
9. Why is it helpful for every home to have a copy of the Westminster Standards?

## Lesson 2-Revelation: Divine Self-Disclosure

- Stages of God Communicating To Us
  - General Revelation
  - Special Revelation
  - Review Questions
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### **There are several stages by which God's truth comes to us:**

1. Since God's truth begins in his own mind, its communication must begin by his making things known to his creatures in ways understandable to them. This process is called REVELATION.

2. Once God has revealed something that he wants his people to learn and study, it must be committed to writing if it is to continue to be helpful beyond the immediate moment of revelation. By overseeing this process supernaturally, God ensures that the Scriptures form an accurate and infallible written record of what he makes known. We call this process INSPIRATION.

3. Once God's truth was recorded in the books of Scripture, God has maintained the integrity of the texts through many generations as they were distributed throughout the churches. The original writings were not preserved. New Testament believers knew the Old Testament only through copies preserved by God's grace. Today we only know the Bible through copies. We call this process of maintaining the text of Scripture PRESERVATION.

4. Since today few know the original languages in which the Bible was written (Hebrew, Aramaic and Koine Greek), God's word must be translated so that it will be understood by the common people in each age, nation and culture. God did not intend for his word to come only to linguistic scholars and students of ancient history. It must be made available to act as the standard by which all believers judge what they are taught to believe and do. We call this process TRANSLATION.

5. The final step is when we attempt to understand God's truth as we read the texts of Scripture. In Scripture God has revealed rules by which the Bible must be studied and interpreted. We need to know these rules and use them consistently if we are to properly understand what God has said in his Bible. We call this process INTERPRETATION.

Each step in transmitting God's truth, from his mind to our understanding, must be directed by and grounded in methods confirmed by the Scriptures alone.



If there was no REVELATION, there would be no foundation for knowing that anything we believe about God is true. If there was no INSPIRATION by which God's revealed truth was put into written form, then God's truth would have been lost to the moments beyond when the prophets originally received and spoke God's truth. If there was no PRESERVATION, then the Bible would have been lost when events and natural processes eliminated the original documents. If there was no TRANSLATING of the Bible, its words would be limited to only a few scholars. If there were no clear rules to govern the INTERPRETATION of the Bible, then its words would remain disconnected and its teachings uncertain. God's promises would be unknowable and his comforts would be meaningless.

These five steps cross a series of gaps between man's understanding and God's truth. The only way for redeemed people to be confident that what they know is reliable is if the gaps are crossed by principles grounded in the clear statements of the Bible, God's word. When we understand that these problems are all addressed in the Bible, we will better appreciate the Scriptures as a standard we can use in testing the truth of everything we hear.

**REVELATION: the first step in knowing truth.**

We can know God because he has made himself known in ways understandable to us. As our Creator, he made us so that we would be physically able to receive all the means of revelation he intended to use. His revelation comes in two basic types: we call them General and Special.

**General Revelation**

In General Revelation, God declares his wonders and tells us something about his basic nature. He does this by means available generally to all humans, which is why we call it "general." This type of revelation comes to humans both externally and internally. Among the things made known generally are God's glory, power, nature, and goodness, and man's own spiritual dependence upon, and duty toward, his Creator.

External general revelation comes to us through the senses. It includes the works of creation and the rule of God over all things through his acts of providence. Sometimes this is called "natural

revelation" because nature itself is the means by which God makes himself known. But this should not be confused with "natural theology" where truths about such things as morality, man's nature and worship are presumed to be drawn from a study of nature detached from the use of Scripture.

The Bible is clear about what we can know from God's revelation in nature. Below are a few verses that directly state this truth.

Psalms 19:1-2 "The Heavens are telling of the glory of God; and the firmament is declaring the work of his hands."

Romans 1:20 "His invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."

The Bible also demonstrates that creation and God's works show that he is a spirit and a person. He is the source of all life and being (Acts 17:24-30).

Internal general revelation is the voice of inner moral testimony which we call conscience. This testifies to our spiritual nature concerning our duty as creatures.

Romans 1:18-19 "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them."

Romans 2:14-16 "For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus."

God does not leave us without an ample witness to the basic truths he wants us to know about himself. By General revelation God declares that he really exists, that he made us and that we owe all to him. When we observe what God has made and done we find so much for which to thank him! As Dr. Francis Schaeffer said, "God is there and he is not silent."

### **Special Revelation**

As powerful as General Revelation is, it doesn't communicate to lost humans their need for salvation and the means provided for their restoration by grace through a promised redeemer.

Something is seriously wrong with all humans since the fall of Adam into sin. They tend to deny or redefine the things their senses tell them concerning their Creator. They tend to disobey what their consciences tell them about their moral obligations to God. Man's problem in knowing God and in being faithful to his duties, is not due to any defect in General Revelation. Fallen man is in rebellion! He suppresses God's truth. This makes him destined to frustration in his attempt to know who he is and how he fits into God's world.

The spiritual corruption that is inherent in every human born by ordinary generation since the fall of mankind makes his understanding of spiritual things impossible. No one in that condition seeks to really know God as he reveals himself.

1 Corinthians 2:14 "a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are

foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised."

God was not content to leave all of fallen mankind in its corrupted condition of spiritual blindness. He not only promised to send a Savior. He also added a kind of revelation beyond that which was generally available to all humans naturally. This special revelation is supernatural, and was directed to individuals chosen by God's grace alone. It tells about man's fall into sin, the covenant God established to redeem his people, and it clarifies the moral laws obscured by man's fallen conscience. In Special Revelation God makes his redemptive plans and works known through supernatural means for the benefit of those who are his people.

God has revealed himself specially in a variety of ways. He has disclosed truth about his nature and work by direct appearances, through visions, dreams, voices, and miracles, through the urim and thumim, the purim, prophecies, and in the Messiah. These means were used only in specific periods of history and if left to themselves their message would have remained limited to the time when the revelation was made. For the message to be of lasting effect, it needed to be passed on by words either verbally or in writing.

While some specially revealed truth was passed on by God's prophets and elders orally, some Special Revelation was committed to writing. God specially preserved the essential part of his message by causing it to become "inscripturated." This supernaturally written record forms our Bible. It is an objective standard against which all ideas can be compared and tested. Scripture is an infallible and error free product of special revelation.

By committing God's word to writing his truth is preserved for his church. It provides an objective record by which our attempts to organize what we believe can be tested. When written down his message is easier to study and communicate to others; both to those outside of Christ's church, and to his own people.

A written word establishes a more sure foundation and comfort for the church (2 Peter 1:19-21). It warns us and directs us as we work to preserve our Lord's church against the opposition of fallen hearts, Satan and the world. Written objective promises can be appealed to in times of temptation, discouragement, trouble, and when we sin.

God's former ways of revealing himself have ceased. The Scriptures provide a complete word of prophesy eliminating the need for continuing special revelation today. Once the apostolic foundation was laid (Ephesians 2:20), the prophetic apostolic office and the need for additional special revelation ceased.

The New Testament writers attach special meaning to the term "Scripture." They used it to refer to a limited body of truth that was growing, and approaching completion, in their time. Clearly it constituted a specific and objective body of written material that could be studied by the church and used as its final authority. Revelation 22:18 reminds us that it is morally wrong to add any human thoughts to the body of God's special revelation.

Biblically all revelation must be consistent with itself. This gives us a helpful test to guide us in recognizing ideas that have not come from God. God cannot deny himself. What he says must always agree with what he has already made known. All revelation that truly comes from him must be consistent with all other statements in Scripture, with all the principles previously revealed by God, and with his revealed character.

The Bible gives us a final, authoritative, objective standard for testing ideas and recognizing

truth. The Westminster Confession affirms that the Bible, not the confession, forms such a standard. It is often those who deny the use of confessions who introduce strange and aberrant ideas. The Bible must remain our only rule in matters of faith and practice. The Confession is designed to preserve and promote the supremacy of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice.

**Questions for Review and Thought**

1. What are the five processes by which the truth in God's mind comes to be known to the church.
2. In what ways do General and Special Revelation differ?
3. What are the two types of General Revelation?
  - a. how does the way they are received by us differ?
  - b. how does the kind of information each communicates differ?
4. Why is Special Revelation necessary if we are to know God?
5. Why is the written word of God the most important form of Special Revelation today?
6. What would be the danger of using principles for interpreting the Bible that were not themselves derived from Scripture?
7. How does Ephesians 2:20 show that the process of special revelation God used in the time of the Apostles should not be expected to continue after their time of ministry was over?

### Lesson 3 - The Canon of Scripture

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- The Books of the Bible form a Canon
  - Summary of the Problem of Canon
  - The Old Testament Canon
  - The Apocryphal Books
  - The New Testament Canon
  - Why do we Accept the Bible as Canon?
  - Review Questions
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Obviously what God speaks must be received without question and without compromise. Therefore it's extremely important that we know what God has spoken, and where we can find an accurate and reliable record of what he has said.

One of the great cries of the Reformation was "Sola Scriptura" which means "Scripture alone." The reformers saw the Bible as the one unquestioned standard by which all matters of faith and practice must be examined.

Since the direct means of Special Revelation have ceased, the Bible is the only way we have of knowing what God has revealed about morality and redemption. We must know with confidence that all of the Bible and only the Bible is the authoritative Word of God.

#### **The Books of the Bible form a Canon**

Before we can discuss the Bible as a whole we need to be assured that the books it contains all belong there. We call the inspired books of the Bible "canon." The word comes from a Greek word "kanon" which means "a measure", "a rule for judgment", or "an authoritative standard." This word is brought over into English by a slight change in spelling, "canon."

The way Paul uses this word in one of his letters illustrates its meaning: 2 Corinthians 10:13-16 "but we will not boast as to unmeasurable things, but according to the thing measurable by the canon which God apportioned to us as a measure." [this is my own translation]

Here the word "canon" is used as a metaphor taken from the athletic contests at Corinth (the Isthmian Games). The running lanes were marked out by a line that kept each runner in his assigned lane. The line was called a "kanon".

The Apostle was telling the Corinthian Christians that God marked out such a lane to guide the apostle into truth. Paul was led by God in all his writings. The false teachers that opposed him did not speak for God. They were not divinely called but were self-appointed. Instead of remaining within clearly defined boundaries they wandered without such clear standards of truth. They were like runners who wandered outside the lines into wrong paths.

Paul also used this word when writing to the Galatians; Galatians 6:15-16 "neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule (canon), peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God."

Canon is the authoritative rule by which things must be measured or tested. For us, this standard

is the collection of biblical books we call the inspired Scriptures, or more simply "the Bible".

### **Summary of the Problem of Canon**

What is our rule or absolute standard against which all claims of truth and of practice ought to be measured? What books are inspired by God and intended by Him to be a part of our Bible? The Westminster Standards name the present 66 books as we commonly receive them. They state what Christians have always understood as the written word of God. (see WCF I:2,10)

How then is the biblical canon established? If we base our confidence that these books are the Word of God on the authority of a church council, then that council becomes our ultimate standard for determining truth!

Instead the Bible must be received because God gave it. The present books of the Bible have always been received by the covenant people as God's word. Each book, from the time it was written, was received as Canon. The Holy Spirit guided those born of Christ, and the appointed prophets of God and the Apostles spoke God's own approval because God supernaturally spoke to them and guarded them from error.

Councils did meet at times to form answers to those who doubted God's word. But they did not decide what belongs in our Bible. They merely stated what believers had always known and accepted. There are some legends that came along claiming that official councils met to determine canonicity, but there are no actual records of any such authorized council. All the records we have confirm that they did not take upon themselves to decide what books should be in the Bible.

### **The Old Testament Canon**

All our present books from Genesis through Malachi are included in the Old Testament canon. The order of the books was not inspired. They were originally written on scrolls which have no unique fixed sequential order. Some scrolls came to contain several biblical books selected to be published together by their themes or by their use in worship. They included as many books as would fit together without making the scroll too large to handle. Scrolls were often kept in groups but were not bound together. When they were assembled into book form they were arranged in logical order in groups. The books in the Hebrew Bible are not published in the same order we find in our modern English versions.

The Old Testament books have always been received as canon. There was never any question by the Rabbis or the Jewish people as to which books were considered part of God's standard. Only spurious groups that broke off argued about the place of certain books in the canon.

Talmud tractate Baba-Bathra (2nd to 5th century AD) defends the accepted Hebrew canon against disputes that had been raised. It shows that the Rabbis accepted the same books we have today as always having been the ones received historically by the Hebrew people. They were grouped in three basic divisions:

1. The books of LAW: Torah  
They were later called the Pentateuch (the five).
2. The books of the PROPHETS: Navi'im
3. The books of the WRITINGS: Cetuvim  
These were later called the Hagiographa (holy writings)

These divisions were presented as collections of books which were not disputed among the people of God and the rabbis. They include the same writings the Christian church calls the Old Testament.

Jewish historian Josephus in *Contra-Apion* (66 AD) shows these same three divisions (Moses, Prophets, Songs of praises and counsel). He calls them "books justly believed to be divine." By this he meant that he accepted the rabbinic definition of which writings belonged in each group. Philo (prior to 40 AD) shows the same divisions and groupings as Josephus. This same canon is confirmed in the Qumran finds (Dead Sea Scrolls - the details of the findings there go far beyond the scope of this lesson). While many other writings were read and used by God's people, just as today we read helpful books by believing authors, only these listed were considered as canonical by God's covenant people.

Jesus and the New Testament writers consistently refer to the Hebrew Scriptures as the authoritative and only God-given test for truth. The New Testament books consider the Old Testament to be the Word of God given to and through divinely chosen spokesmen. This is where they found the prophesies of Messiah which are fulfilled in the person of Jesus. It formed the foundation for their beliefs. For example, Jesus quoted Psalm 82:6 as authoritative Scripture that cannot be broken (John 10:31-36). The New Testament directly treats the Old Testament books as a unified body of truth, as the only authoritative canon. It views the Bible, as an inspired whole (2 Timothy 3:14-17, 2 Peter 1:19-21 These texts will be taken up in more detail in a later lesson).

### **What about the Apocryphal Books?**

Some other books, written after the completion of the Hebrew Scriptures, are sometimes included in ancient copies of the Bible. They are: Ecclesiasticus, Wisdom of Solomon, I & II Maccabees, Judith, Tobit, Baruch, and additions to Esther & Daniel. These books contain some good material which is historically helpful and consistent with revealed truth. They also contain some fanciful and questionable material that is in open conflict with the canonical books.

The Apocryphal books are included in the Latin Vulgate which was translated by Jerome. That version adds I & II Esdras, and the Prayer of Menassah. Jerome translated the Vulgate around the year 400 AD, Yet he speaks of a canon identical with ours. He personally rejected the Apocryphal books as authoritative. He translated Tobit and Judith in one day (not much time invested), then refused to do any more. Other apocryphal books were added to the Vulgate at a later time by other translators.

Early copies of the Bible and Septuagint (the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, often abbreviated LXX) often include the Apocrypha. These early versions regarded the Apocryphal books as good writings of value for reading (like Bible notes or appendices) but not as infallible, inspired writings.

St. Augustine (393 - 397 AD) listed the apocryphal writings along with other books he felt were acceptable for Christians to read for edification. He never said that he accepted them as "inspired".

The valuable Leningrad Manuscript of the Hebrew Scriptures (a 9th century copy said to have been based on copies by ancients) contains the same books as our Old Testament canon.

Historic testimony shows that the apocryphal books were never regarded as part of the Christian canon by the church. There is universal testimony to the reception of our present Old Testament canon. It comes to us without serious question or debate. (see the Westminster Confession of

Faith I:3)

### **The New Testament Canon**

All our present New Testament books, Matthew through the Revelation, have been consistently received by the Church as authoritative.

The New Testament has its foundation in the Old Testament Canon. Christianity has always accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as divinely authoritative. The early church understood itself to be an expression of the new covenant in fulfillment of that which God promised in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was always used as a canon by which the truth and the teachings of Jesus and his followers were to be tested.

NOTE: Perhaps the terms "Old Testament" and "New Testament" are not the best choices. These titles are not applied to the parts of Scripture anywhere in the Bible. The books written before the birth of Jesus were written primarily in Hebrew with some portions in the related Aramaic. The books written after Jesus' birth are in a dialect of Greek known as Koine, the common Greek spoken by the average person.

The Hebrew word "berit" and the Greek word "diathakae" were at first commonly translated as "testament." The idea of a last will and testament was assumed to be implied. But that meaning did not come from their use in Scripture, but rather from the common use of the term diathakae in later years. Recent archaeological and linguistic studies confirm what reformed thinkers had long predicted. Berit means "covenant", not "testament." The later idea of a last will and testament was not a known legal form in ancient times.

The concept of covenant was that of a conquering king sovereignly imposing his mercy and protection on subjugated people demanding in exchange for their loyalty and obedience. The treaty was sealed with the shedding of the blood of animals representing the penalty that would come upon covenant breakers. The rituals used to confirm the ancient covenants were like the one used by God in sealing his covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15. O. Palmer Robertson has summarized the biblical meaning of covenant as "a bond in blood, sovereignly administered."

There is one covenant of God through all the ages since the fall of Adam. What is "new" about it after the birth of Christ is that his coming has fulfilled the symbols of its old administration, and has brought about the reality of that which was formerly only promised. The writers of the New Testament used the word diathakae to translate the Hebrew word berit. The Jews commonly used that Greek word to represent God's covenant with His people. Those not familiar with the established use of the idea in the existing Scriptures might make the error of reading the later Greek idea of "testament" into diathakae instead of the meaning the original readers would have assumed.

Alternatives for naming the two major divisions of the Bible are: The Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, The Old and New Covenant, and The Pre-Messianic and Post-Messianic Scriptures. None of these have much of a chance to overthrow the entrenched historic terms. To eliminate unnecessary confusion, we generally continue to use the accepted terms Old and New Testament (commonly abbreviated OT/ NT).

### **Claims of the New Testament**

The New Testament rests its authority upon that of Jesus Christ. It is Christ's authority upon which the teachings of the apostles were based. He chose his apostles, supernaturally enabled them, appointed them, and taught them. It is that Christ-given apostolic authority which guided

the church to know which writings were authoritative.

Paul's testimony:

The Apostle Paul had an awareness of the divine authority of his own inspired writings and those of the other New Testament

1 Thessalonians 5:27 "I adjure you by the Lord to have this letter read to all the brethren"

2 Thessalonians 3:14 "And if anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that man and do not associate with him, so that he may be put to shame."

A particularly helpful text is 1 Timothy 5:18

1 Timothy 5:18 "for the Scripture says, 'you shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,' and 'the laborer is worthy of his wages'"

Here Paul makes two quotations and identifies the source of each as "Scripture." The first Scripture reference Paul made in this text is a quote from Deuteronomy 25:4, the second is from Luke 10:7. Both are equally and clearly referred to as authoritative Scripture.

Peter's testimony:

Peter directly sets the writings of Paul on an equal authoritative plane with the "rest of the Scriptures."

2 Peter 3:15-16 "...our brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction."

The authoritative tone of all the New Testament books speaks boldly and with confidence that its truths were expressed by God Himself. There is an awareness on the part of all the New Testament writers that they wrote with divine authority.

### **Claims of the early church**

The non-biblical book of 1st Clement (95 A.D. written from Rome to Corinth) speaks of the biblical book of 1st Corinthians saying, "with true inspiration he (Paul) charged you concerning himself and Cephas and Apollos..." Clement shows the same high regard for all the New Testament books.

Ignatius of Antioch (120 A.D.) said that the New Testament does not require the attestation of the Old Testament. It is inherently authoritative on its own.

Other ancient church scholars such as Papias, Justin Martyr and others make it clear that they accept the entire body of Scripture as canon on the basis of its being God's revealed truth.

### **Why do we accept the Bible as Canon?**

We do not accept the Bible because of human scholarship or church councils. Such things are fallible and changeable. If these were the ground of our confidence in Scripture, we could not be certain of God's word.

The Romanist's view is that the church authorizes the Canon. This idea makes the church the final authority in all matters. It elevates the tradition of the church to stand along side the Bible. Since they see the church as the authority by which we know which books are canon, that church in

reality sets itself above the Scriptures!

If the Bible is God's Word, then it must alone be authoritative. By the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit at work in regenerate believers, there is full assurance that the authoritative Scriptures are the Word of God.

1 Corinthians 2:14 "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them because they are spiritually appraised."

We are driven to the Bible as a thirsty man is driven to water: not questioning its ability to help us, not awaiting the word of scholars to assure us, not wondering if it is what it appears to be. But grasping at it, clinging to it with all assurance, knowing that we are clinging to the revealed truth of God.

What we find in our study of history about the acceptance of the canon that the record is consistent with what we would expect to find on the basis of what Scripture says about itself. Given the biblical promise of the guidance and testimony of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer, we can understand why the Bible has been received in the true church as the Canon of God.

#### **Questions for Review and Thought**

1. What is the meaning of the word "canon?"
2. How do we know which books of Scripture are canon?
3. Why can there be no church council or group of scholars who are looked to for authenticating which books belong in our Bible.
4. What New Testament passages affirm the full acceptance of the Hebrew Scriptures as canon?
5. Why do protestant Bibles not include the books of the Apochrypha?
6. What New Testament passages cite other New Testament passages as being fully authoritative as the word of God?
7. When Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:15 about the Scriptures he had studied from his youth, to what writings must he have been referring?

## Lesson 4 – Inspiration

- Uses of the term "inspired"
  - Views of the Inspiration of the Bible
  - Scriptural use of the term "inspired"
  - The Results of inspiration
  - Review Questions
- 

The Bible makes it clear that God has specially revealed himself in a manner that is understandable by humans when they are made spiritually alive in Christ. The books of Scripture are such a perfect record of that revelation that they are called canon. But how did they get that way? How perfect are they? The transformation of God's special revelation into written form is a process we call "inspiration."

### Uses of the Term "Inspired"

Words often have many meanings. A finite number of them must be used within any given language to represent the many ideas we humans desire to express to one another. God made our minds rich with thoughts that often require us to coin new words or add new meanings to old ones.

Some confusion occurs because the already defined and common English word "inspiration" was used to express a special biblical idea. This familiar word often brings its ordinary meanings with it when we say the Bible is the inspired word of God.

Commonly people use the word "inspired" to describe a mere heightened sensitivity that leads to a more profound expression or perception. We say writers or artists are inspired when they artfully craft ways to express the most inward and profound human thoughts and experiences.

The *American College Dictionary* includes these among its entries for the verb, "to inspire:"  
"to infuse an animating, quickening or exalting influence into"  
"to produce or arouse a feeling, thought, etc."  
"to affect with a special feeling, thought etc."  
"to influence or impel"  
"to animate as an influence"

In this general sense we say that a poem or other form of human expression is "inspired," or that someone or something is "inspiring" to us. This use is different in quality from what we mean when we talk about the Bible as inspired. Purely human expressions do not involve direct special revelation.

The *American College Dictionary* continues with entries closer to the way we use this term in christian theology ...  
"to communicate or suggest by a divine or supernatural influence",  
"to guide or control by divine influence."

### Views of the Inspiration of the Bible

In an attempt to explain how the biblical books came to be written under God's influence, various systems have been offered.

Some of these constructions do not present a Bible that is free from error. They speak of an inspiration that is no more than a special sensitivity to spiritual things granted by God as the books of Scripture were written. Such views leave us with a Bible likely to include errors of fact and interpretation. Other constructions present an infallible, error-free Bible.

Of those that preserve a fully authoritative and inerrant Bible, one is the DICTATION VIEW. It claims that the Bible was written by a mechanical superintendence of the human writer so that he produced the exact words given by God. This imagines that God totally by-passes the human personalities of the writers making them more machines than authors.

The problem with this mechanical dictation view is that the personal characteristics of the individual writers are often obvious in the Bible. Luke, a physician, used technical medical terms. John used a vocabulary that often reflects his background as a fisherman. The style of each writer varies with his personality, background, the age in which he lived, the circumstances of his writings, the political and cultural setting in which he wrote, etc.

The ORGANIC VIEW says the Bible came into being by a superintendence of the human faculties to the degree that God rendered the writings inerrant yet retained the personalities of the individual writers. This view is the one presented in the Westminster Standards, and in the writings of such reformed scholars as A. A. Hodge, Charles Hodge, L. Berkhof, B. M. Palmer, W. G. T. Shedd, B. B. Warfield, and C. VanTil. It is also found in the works of conservative non-reformed scholars such as L. S. Chafer and H. C. Thiessen.

Dr. Allen MacRae stated it this way in his lectures on prolegomena; "Inspiration is a special act of the Holy Spirit by which he guided the writers of the books of the Scriptures so that their words should convey the thought he wished conveyed, should bear a proper relationship to the thought of the other inspired books, and should be kept free from errors of fact, of doctrine or of judgment."

Only the organic view does justice to the direct claims of Scripture while also accounting for obvious differences of expression and style. The other approaches sacrifice something of the Bible's claims about itself to accommodate human ideas and presumptions. They either endanger the concept of biblical infallibility, inerrancy, and full divine authority, or they deny the idea of a true analogical correspondence to absolute truth in God's revelation.

### **Scriptural use of the term "Inspired"**

The Bible describes the inscripturation of God's truth as a direct supernatural act. It is more than mere supernatural guidance. It works directly upon the human writer. It is a special act of the Holy Spirit. And it involves prior special revelation.

Biblical inspiration suppresses the fallible element in the writers. God kept the writers from engaging in their own speculations and interpretations as they wrote. God guarded them from including the erroneous teachings or beliefs of their day as if they were truth.

This does not rule out that God moved the writers to quote at times from or refer to non-inspired sources to illustrate what he wanted them to say. Such references are not endorsements that the work quoted from is in itself authoritative. What is quoted merely helps the author communicate what God wanted him to convey to his readers. God protected each writer of the Bible from recording anything as fact that was a factual or interpretive error.

Inspiration does not occur in degrees as if it takes place more in one passage and less in another.

All the inspired books are completely God's infallible word. No portions are more inspired than others. Either a given writing is, or is not, inspired. There can be no middle ground. All portions of the inspired books are infallible and error free. No received books of the canon are uninspired. Not one word of any original writing of Scripture is excluded from that supernatural oversight and protection. Inspiration extends to every word chosen. Technically we say the inspiration of the Bible is plenary (complete) and verbal (extending to the words themselves).

Inspiration refers directly to only the autographa (the original manuscripts). The inspired Scriptures are God's pure, perfect, complete, inerrant and therefore fully authoritative word.

The Bible is our only source for data supporting this view. When collecting the facts upon which to build a theological statement of what is true about the inspiration of the Bible, the Scriptures alone must be our source. The theological student must always guard against introducing elements into his constructions that do not come from explicit or necessarily implied statements of the canonical books.

The biblical facts fully support this understanding of Scriptural inspiration which the following texts illustrate.

**2 Timothy 3:15-16** "and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;"

The terms used in 2 Timothy 3:15-16 present the foundation of the biblical teaching concerning inspiration. The term "Scripture" is "graphae". In 3:15 the term "The Sacred Writings" is "ta hiera grammata". These expressions refer to the books of the Old Testament that were known by Timothy as a child. These terms were consistently and commonly used by the Rabbis to refer to the whole Canon of the Hebrew Scriptures much as we use the word "Bible" today.

The word "inspired" ("theopneustos") literally means "God-Breathed". Scripture originated as if it was breathed out of God's mouth! More exactly the word means "to expire", to breathe out. Speech is the result of the expiration of air through the larynx. Scripture is to be viewed as if it was breathed out of the mouth of God as to its authority. For obvious reasons it would have confused the issue if we said that all Scripture is "expired." People would probably not think of the exhaled word. They would be misled into thinking that it had become outdated and was no longer binding or valuable like food in a package where the guarantee of purity had expired by a certain date.

2 Timothy 3:16 has been translated in two different ways. "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable ..." or "Every Scripture which is God inspired and profitable ..."

Technically the difference is whether a particular term is understood as a predicate or attributive adjective. Both are grammatically possible. It doesn't matter which way it is translated. The second rendering cannot mean that there may be some other scripture that is not God inspired and profitable. In either translation the context and terms used clearly refer to the entire Old Testament canon. The debate over the two grammatical possibilities is overrated.

**2 Peter 1:19-21 (particularly 1:21)** "And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a

matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

Peter reminded his readers in this passage that he was among the eye-witnesses of the Gospel, and of the glory of Christ. He heard the words of the Father confirming that Jesus is the Son of God, the promised Messiah. Yet his personal witness of these events, if unaided by the Holy Spirit, would be subject to fallible human interpretation. So he gives us a more solid foundation on which to base our acceptance of Christ as God's Messiah. He says that now we have a more sure prophetic word, preserved in infallible, inerrant Scripture (:19).

Our Bible is not a result of human speculation or interpretation. 2 Peter 1:20 says, "no prophesy of Scripture is of private interpretation." Literally he writes, "that all prophesy of Scripture did not COME TO BE by its own interpretation." The verb used is "ginetai". It primarily means "to come into being", "to become."

The Romanist view of this verse is that the church alone must interpret Scripture. They take it to mean that no prophesy of Scripture is to be privately interpreted by individuals. A Romanist booklet **The Bible is Not our Sole Guide** published by the *Knights of Columbus* (pg. 26) says, "St. Peter gives the reason for ruling out private interpretation and recognizes only the official interpretation as the safe guide." The context of this booklet clarifies that the "official interpretation" is the one endorsed by the "church." This view ignores the impact of the verb Peter uses. It changes the Apostle's description of how the Scriptures "came to be" into a command about what we are to do "with" Scripture. That is obviously not what the apostle is talking about.

The meaning of the verse is simply this: Scripture originated by means of a special act of God at work on the human writers that made their interpretations correct and error free. The resulting Bible is a more sure prophetic word than even the testimony of fallible human eye-witnesses. The Bible did not come into being by humans interpreting events. God gave the interpretation himself.

The rest of the context shows that this interpretation is sound and that the Romanists are simply wrong. In 2 Peter 1:16 Peter says, "we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Instead of human interpretations, God kept the writers free from incorporating inaccurate human interpretations as they wrote.

In 1:21 Peter wrote, "For prophesy never did come by the will of man."

It came by men "carried" by the Holy Spirit. The word "carried" is "phero" which means "to bear (as one would a burden)" or "to carry along." Uses of this Greek word in other places show its meaning. It is used of a bird "carried" along and supported by the wind, of a ship "borne" along by the waves, and of a ship "borne" along as the wind fills its sails. So also these chosen writers were carried along by the Holy Spirit himself as they authored their inspired books. They "spoke from God." In the inspired Scriptures, God speaks as certainly as if we hear his own voice.

### **The Results of Inspiration**

Having an inspired word of God presents us with many advantages. An inspired, and therefore infallible Bible, is a source of absolute truth. It conveys to us all that God wants us to know.

What we learn from Scripture is free from error and enables us to know what is true. This includes what it says concerning creation, providence, resurrection, the miracles and all other revealed ideas.

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17 Paul wrote about the profitableness of the inspired Scriptures. All Scripture must stand as God's authoritative word. Nothing in it can be ignored, nullified, added to, or eliminated. 1 Corinthians 14:37 presents what Paul wrote as commandments of the Lord, not as ideas of the Apostle himself.

Therefore, since the inspired Bible is the only authoritative standard we have, Scripture alone must interpret Scripture. Seeming problems must be resolved internally by the use of other inspired texts. This topic will be examined more closely in future chapters.

### **Questions for Review and Thought**

1. How does the common use of the word "inspired" differ from the use of the term in connection with the writing of the books of Scripture?
2. What are the problems with the "dictation view" of inspiration?
3. What do we mean by the "organic view" of inspiration?
4. According to 2 Timothy 3:15-16 what writings are inspired?
5. According to 2 Peter 1:20 where do the interpretations of the Bible writers come from?

## Lesson 5 – Preservation

- Overview of the Problem
- The Text of the Hebrew Scriptures
- The Text of the Greek Scriptures
- Some Specially Problematic Texts
- Biblical Foundations for Preservation
- Review Questions

### Overview of the Problem

We do not possess any of the original documents of the books of the Bible commonly called the *autographs*. All we have are copies which we call *apographs*. Since copies are always liable to incorporate errors, there are variations in the copies that have come down to us. A flaw in one document is passed on in all the copies made of it unless someone making the copy saw other apographs and made a correction.

One job of the student of Scripture is to take care to use the text which reflects the original inspired writings to the best of available evidence. The critical editions pastors and scholars use of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures usually include footnotes that indicate the variant readings of individual manuscripts and groups of manuscripts which have been discovered and published.

Since the Bible is the means by which God intended to reveal himself to his people down through the ages, there is more to the issue than mere literary analysis. The first chapter of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* puts it this way in the 8th section:

"The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentic; so as, in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal unto them."

Before we deal with the information about our confidence in what we have today, it helps to have a brief overview of the study of the ancient copies of the texts of Scripture.

### The Text of the Hebrew Scriptures

Transcriptional errors in the Old Testament are extremely rare. The scribes were very meticulous in making copies of what they believed were the holy words of God. They would check their work not only by careful proofreading, but also by counting the individual letters and comparing the result with carefully maintained records. This is similar to the check-sum process used in computer systems today to make sure documents accurately are copied or sent to another computer.

The majority of suggested corrections to the Hebrew text made by Bible critics are merely conjectural and should be discounted for lack of any physical evidence to support them. They are not based on real variations found in actual copies.

Most of the actual copyist errors found in the manuscripts of the Old Testament are due to simple spelling variations, most of which are a variation of the use of the Hebrew "vav" and "yodh" (they sound like our "w" and "y"). In Hebrew they are little hooks over the line. The vav extends it down to the base line and the yodh only extends it part way down. Other spelling

differences are because spelling was not as universally standardized as it is in our own age. Today writers have dictionaries, spell-checkers, and other reference works which did not exist in ancient times. When the extant copies of the books of Scripture are compared and all historic testimony is considered there is an amazing lack of doubt that what we have is essentially the same as the autographs.

Dr. John Skilton of Westminster Seminary in his paper *The Transmission of the Scriptures* summarizes work done by Princeton's Dr. Robert Dick Wilson in an analysis of the Hebrew Bible edited by Kennicott. He says that Kennicott's Bible included readings from over 600 surviving manuscripts. Of the 284,000,000 letters in those manuscripts there are about 900,000 variants. About 750,000 of them are trivial variations between the vav and yodh. The remaining variants only occur in one or a few manuscripts of the 600 or so he compared. He reports that, "there are hardly any variant readings in these manuscripts with the support of more than one out of the 200 to 400 manuscripts in which each book is found."

When we compare the finds of the Qumran fragments and scrolls, the famous Nash Papyrus, and other similar finds we see the same low level of variation in the text. The places where large divergence occurs give evidence that the text was from a clearly corrupted source. For example, some of the Hebrew texts of the Old Testament appear to be translations back into Hebrew from versions in another language. Some may be copied from a single line of corrupt texts upon which loose translations for foreign readers may have been made.

The Septuagint (often referred to as LXX) was a translation of the Hebrew into Greek. The variation in styles of translation show differing degrees of scholarly care in accurately representing the Hebrew text from which it was made. Many of the obvious differences in the LXX were probably more the result of the work of the translator than reflecting a different Hebrew original.

As we will show later, Jesus, the Apostles and the early church were confident in the text of the Old Testament they possessed at that time. Jesus spoke with divine authority. The writers of the New Testament books were rendered infallible as they also make reference to a reliable Old Testament text.

### **The Text of the Greek Scriptures**

There are well over 5,000 apographs of New Testament texts available to us today. Of those containing entire books or groups of books, no two are exactly the same in every part.

Most variations are trivial having to do with spelling. Most significant deviations are isolated to single texts or groups of texts which are easily corrected when compared with the other copies.

There are several causes for transcriptural variations:

Some are accidental errors which occur when a copyist ...

- ... mistakes one letter for a similar one
- ... mistakes one word for a similar one
- ... substitutes a synonym without realizing it
- ... skips a letter, word or portion
- ... puts a left out portion in the margin (later mistaken as a comment)
- ... copies the same letter, word or portion twice
- ... gets letters, words or sections out of order
- ... copies with illegible writing
- ... wrongly interprets a smudge, or illegible word or letter

Some variations are made intentionally when a copyist ...  
... inserts a marginal note thinking it belongs in the text  
... leaves out a portion he believes shouldn't be there  
... tries to harmonize differing manuscripts

Attempts have been made over the decades to divide up the 5000+ New Testament apographs into "text-types," "families," and other groups of various sorts. In recent times computers have sorted through data bases to find patterns for simplifying the problem into categories for sorting out the differences. When reading the attacks of one scholar upon another, it becomes clear even in the most recent papers on the subject, that there is still no simple formula for classifying the many types of text we have today.

Some are classified as "Alexandrian" representing some very old copies based on texts common in early Alexandria in Africa. But many attempts have been made to divide that text type into sub-groups to account for a wide discontinuity in the variant readings found in them. Those called "Byzantine" are much later copies evidently made from quite ancient texts which bear some degree of commonality. These comprise the majority of existing apographs. But even the Byzantine group have been divided by computer analysis into hard to manage sub-groups. Some have suggested text types they call "Western" and "Caesarean" but these groupings have also been discounted by some scholars.

Dr. Fenton John Anthony Hort and Bishop Brooke Foss Wescott published a set of "canons" to act as rules for discovering the original text. Many of their original canons have been modified and a few totally discounted. Their work stands as a helpful foundation though for the continuing work of analysis of the variants. Some have so elevated two of the Alexandrian texts (Sinaiticus and Vaticanus) calling them the "Heavenly Twins" that they rather blindly accept any reading that is found in both of these valuable and ancient texts. However, a reading of those texts shows many marginal corrections and notations making them far from a divine standard.

Some have presumed that there must be a work of God preserving the text by ensuring that the majority possessed by the church must be the perfect text. One of the editions of the New Testament produced by Erasmus in the early 1500's was used by the translators of the King James Version and became known by some as the "Textus Receptus" (Received Text). There are those who consider it to be the divinely preserved text. However some parts of it were translated into Greek from Latin and have absolutely no Greek manuscript supporting them.

Many other editions of the text and suggestions by scholars pull us in one direction or another. It is wise to be cautious about extreme simplifications which have no actual biblical foundation behind them. The work of the textual scholar should not too readily dismiss entire groups of texts, nor elevate particular apographs to divine status without sound biblical reasoning and justification.

In summary, we are very confident in the text of the New Testament we have today. Even arguing critics are quick to remind us that the variations effect no accepted doctrine of our Christian faith. Very little of the text is actually in question. Most of the variations are so trivial they don't even effect the translation of the text. Those that do are mostly isolated to very few supporting groups of texts. A few large portions or more serious variations (while not effecting our doctrines) need to be considered on their own merits by studying how the disputed reading fits the context and how well it is supported by a wide distribution of early witnesses. But even the study of context can be subjective. Someone failing to see the main point being made in a passage may think a

particular reading is out of step with the other verses around it when in fact a good analysis of the author's purpose might make very good sense of its content.

### **Some Specially Problematic Texts**

While detailed analysis goes far beyond the scope of our survey study here, it's helpful to take a brief look at a few of the more lengthy portions of the New Testament where variations occur.

1 John 5:7-8 contains a portion that has no sound Greek manuscript support. Words traced to the time of Erasmus insert the Trinity into the text. There were debates about including it since it was only found in some late Latin versions. Basically Erasmus lost the argument and reluctantly included it in his third edition of the text in 1522. Since that became the "Textus Receptus" it is included in the King James version (1611). The inserted portion was not used as a foundation for our belief in the Trinity, and presents no necessary detail in establishing the details of that doctrine.

John 7:53-8:11 is about the woman taken in adultery. Several ancient manuscripts differ about this portion. Some omit this section entirely. Those that include it are diverse in world-wide distribution which lends support for the ancient existence of the reading. Those that do not include it are mostly from one region of the world but trace back to very early apographs. Again, those who reject it and those who accept it as original agree that no teaching of Scripture is harmed either way.

Mark 16:9-20 is the longer ending of the Gospel of Mark. This is one of the most debated variations in the New Testament. It is missing from two old Alexandrian texts and a few other early apographs. It is not mentioned in early writings of the church. But it is included in the largest majority of texts of the Byzantine tradition and in Alexandrinus, a 5th century text in the Alexandrian area but which follows more the Byzantine text type. Shorter versions appears in a few others manuscripts.

This passage was the subject of a very detailed analysis of manuscript evidence by one of the most scholarly of the "Textus Receptus" supporters, Dean John Burgon. While many reject some of his assumptions about the Byzantine tradition (which by the way is not identical with what Erasmus printed) still respect many of the well documented arguments he made for the longer reading.

Some have rejected this section because of its content. It mentions casting out demons, not being harmed by deadly snakes or poisons, and miracles of healing. If it is interpreted to mean that extraordinary miracles of power are to be normative for the whole church throughout the ages, it would be in conflict with the other inspired writings, particularly the prophets which gave a very specific purpose for supernatural wonders. But if, as its context demands, it is a promise given to those in the apostolic age just then beginning for the purpose of authenticating their message, it presents no conflicts. The miracles described were simply a part of the laying of the apostolic foundation of the church which was to be built upon by a continuing church through obedience to the gospel mandate and the commonly practiced means of grace later detailed in the Epistles (See Ephesians 2:20).

These are just brief summaries of fascinating studies worthy of the time of good scholars. But no Doctrine of the Christian Faith is presented in these questioned portions that is not clearly taught in other universally accepted portions of the Bible.

**Biblical Foundations for Preservation** On what biblical foundation can we say that the copies

we have can be called the Word of God? The primary New Testament texts that deal with the value of the inspired Scriptures quote from and refer to copies of the text available at that time, not to the originals autographs which had been lost long before then!

2 Timothy 3:15 and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. Paul used the expression "the Holy Scriptures" (ta hiera grammata) which was an established expression used at the time for the Old Testament books. The same is true of his use of the word "Scriptures" (graphae). The only texts of the Holy Scriptures available to Timothy as he grew up were copies, not the originals. Yet they were the ones Paul says in this inspired text that were still authoritative for his correction and instruction in the teachings of God. A quality of "inspiredness" adhered to the copies Timothy had used then. The continuing value of this verse for the church is that what we possess is still fully authoritative and is our infallible guide into God's truths. Our imperfect copies are so superintended by God's providence as to give us this solid foundation.

2 Peter 1:19-21 And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Peter also uses the term "Scripture" (graphae) to describe the Old Testament books and the New Testament writings being inspired at that time by those chosen by God and directed to write authoritatively for the church. Peter calls these Scriptures "word confirmed," more sure even than his own eye witness account as a man. Again, he could only have been referring to the existing copies available to his readers at that time. The confidence he expresses was not limited to the original autographs. The full authority of God is extended to copies then available to the churches.

In John 10:35 Jesus quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures (graphae). He called it "your Law," "the word of God." Yet only copies were available to him, to his followers and to the Jewish scholars he corrected.

These testimonies of Scripture, and many others like them, confirm that there remains a quality of "inspiredness" that adheres to the copies of Scripture. This means they continue to be God's word for us.

### **Questions for Review and Thought**

1. What are some of the human causes for errors in making copies of the Scriptures?
2. How important to Christian Doctrine are the portions of the Bible where the exact text is in dispute?
3. What extremes should be avoided in the study of the Biblical texts?
4. What biblical evidence shows that a quality of inspiredness remains in copies made from the original writings of Scripture?
5. What are some of the larger portions of the Greek New Testament that do not have a certain foundation in the copies that have been preserved for us?

## Lesson 6 - The Translation of Scripture

- What About Translations?
  - Approaches to Translation
  - The Use of Translations
  - Review Questions
- 

### What about the translation of Scripture?

Our next link to the truth of God is the translation of Scripture. When the books of the Bible were written the modern languages we use today did not exist. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew with a few portions in Aramaic (primarily in Daniel 2-7 and Ezra 4,6,7). The New Testament was written in Greek during the Koine period when it was the commonly spoken language.

As long as God's people spoke the languages in which Scripture was inspired, translation was not necessary. As soon as that was no longer the case it became crucial that the word of God be put into the language of the people. In Nehemiah 8:8 we come to such a time when after the long captivity many of the Jews didn't know the Hebrew language. When Ezra read God's word to them, he and others with him explained the sense of what each passage was about.

Nehemiah 8:8 So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.

The New Testament Greek Scriptures often quote the Old Testament but they don't always translate it into Greek in the same way. Sometimes they quoted from the Septuagint, a commonly used Greek version of the Old Testament. At other times they directly translated the Hebrew or Aramaic texts themselves. Regardless of which method was used, the translation was presented as the authoritative word of God.

The authoritative use of translated Scripture by other inspired Scriptures indicates that there remains a "quality of inspiredness" that adheres to translations to the degree that they accurately represent the words and meaning of the original. This means that they may properly be called the *Inspired Scriptures*, and the *Word of God*. But we must keep in mind that they are only authoritative as they convey the meaning of the originals. Only the autographa in their original languages can be considered infallible and inerrant.

Some have questioned why it's important to defend inerrant and infallible autographa if we don't have them or if people primarily use translations. But the question ignores the underlying cause of inerrancy and infallibility. The biblical view of inspiration mandates that the autographa be without errors and perfect. They are God's words as he superintended the writers to convey exactly what he wanted them to say. These inspired writings become the canon by which everything else is tested. We use the human talents and textual data God provides to determine the text and translation to the best of our ability. But all the while we know that underlying them is a perfect original which God himself has preserved and superintended enough so that good versions of the Bible today may be confidently trusted as the *very word of God*.

In God's providence and by his provisions, translations have been used throughout the ages so that the people not speaking Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek would be able to read and know the

inspired word of God.

### **Approaches to Translation**

There are different approaches to the problem of translation. On the one hand some attempt to be very literal. Each word and grammatical form is put into a modern language with as much direct correspondence with the original as possible. The problem is that no perfect correspondence exists between any two languages. Every literal translation will seem a bit stiff in its attempt to transform ancient idioms and cultural references into modern times while remaining as close to the original words as possible. Good translations in one era become confusing in later times because of changes that take place in the development of the modern language used. For example, many of the good words chosen in 1611 for the King James Translation have a very different meaning in the 21st century. Examples of a literal approach include: the King James Version, the New King James Version, the English Standard Version, and the early edition of the New American Standard Bible.

On the other hand there is the approach to translation called "dynamic equivalence." This method attempts to find idiomatic expressions that correspond between the languages. This second method involves more interpretive information and often obscures similarities between passages intended to explain one another. While dynamically equivalent translations read better, they may limit possible interpretations to only those in the mind of the translator. Examples include: the New International Version, the Good News Bible, and the Living Bible which takes paraphrase to the extreme.

Since translation depends upon what the translator believes best communicates today what the original language said, they are influenced by the assumptions of the translator. Arminian Theology is clearly promoted in the Living Bible, a liberal slant is seen in some parts of the Revised Standard Version, and a conservative view of the Bible is evident in the New International Version even though it tends to be less literal.

### **The Use of Translations**

For the purpose of the non-linguist who wants to study the Bible it is best for him to use a variety of translations and compare them to see where differences occur, and more study is needed. Study is best done using one of the more literal translations as a starting point (such as the New King James or the English Standard Version), and then compare with something like the New International Version. It's good to use the more dynamically equivalent versions as you would a commentary on the passage being studied.

There is a wide variety of translations available on the Internet for those wanting to compare more broadly than their bookshelves at home allow. Most search engines will bring up huge libraries of versions that can be studied free of charge.

There is no substitute for knowing the original languages. This is why most conservative denominations still require their pastors to have seminary credit in both Hebrew and Greek. There are also many good inter-linear Bibles and English dictionaries of the biblical languages available. Some computer programs allow you to click on words in an English text to find out what the original words were and meant. Students often use the Strong's Concordance or similar helps to look up the meanings of the original words. We will say more about that in the lesson on interpreting the Scriptures.

God's truth has been revealed specially to chosen men, and inscripturated by the act of infallible and inerrant inspiration to form a canon of truth. The work of determining the best text and

clearest translation requires prayerful and scholarly study by diligent students of the word.

We are told to be like the Bereans. In Acts 17:11 it says of them, "These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so."

Jesus said, "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me;" (John 5:39).

The results of reconstructing the original text, translation, and interpretation are neither infallible, nor inerrant. Among fallible humans there will always be differences which can be positive and helpful if they drive us to work harder and more prayerfully to improve our understanding of God's word. Sadly, in that fallen estate, disagreements and debates can lead to schisms, and divisions. They account for denominational differences. We can settle these differences properly to the degree that we work together to discover the meaning of the original inspired autograph. This is the work of the Bible student which culminates in exegesis and application of the text. This will be the next and last topic in this series of studies in Prolegomena.

### **Questions for Review and Thought**

1. To what degree are the translations of Scripture to be trusted?
2. What evidences do the Scriptures give us that assure us that translations of the Bible remain the authoritative Word of God?
3. What differing principles underlie modern approaches to translation?
4. How can the non-linguist go about a reliable study of the Scriptures?

## Lesson 7 - The Interpretation of Scripture

- The Foundation for Biblical Interpretation
  - Apologetics
  - The Process of Hermeneutics
  - A few Latin Expressions
  - Orthotomic Study (three tasks)
  - The Holy Spirit as Illuminator
  - Questions for Review and Thought
- 

### The Foundation for Biblical Interpretation

Hermeneutics is the science of interpreting the text of the canon of Scripture. The word is directly taken from a Greek word *hermaeneuo* which means "to explain, to interpret". (Note: The Greek letter "eta" most closely represents an "ae" diphthong in English. This is why sometimes the word is transliterated as "hermeneutics".) The goal of hermeneutics in general literature is to discover the original intent of the author. In the case of Scripture it means discovering the intent of God as he superintended the human writers so that what they wrote would perfectly communicate what God wanted them to write.

Before we can begin the work of explaining some of the basic principles of interpretation, there are some assumptions that must be identified and clarified.

### Apologetics

In general the word "apologetic" has a broad set of meanings. In the New Testament the word "*apologia*" has to do with giving a defense of innocence, or to explain something. When we use it in Theology or in Philosophy it takes on a more narrow technical meaning closer to the way the word is used by Paul and Peter in their Epistles.

Apologetics is the area of study that deals with what is knowable, and how we can have confidence in the truth of what we know. We all begin with presumptions which, by their nature, are not able to be tested. Any test of our presumptions would assume other, more fundamental presumptions, which then would have to be tested too.

All humans begin with a view of themselves and of the universe of which they are a part. They have some fundamental ideas of these things whether they are aware of them or not. The idea of *neutrality* is a deceptive notion that arises when a person does not admit these first presumptions.

It's interesting to listen to those who argue that it's possible to remain neutral in the study of Scripture. They often deny that they have any presumptions, while at the same time they presume that reasoning can be free from assumptions, and that neutrality is possible in man as he reasons about himself. They stand firmly on these assumptions, the very point they are denying.

Christians bring a set of presumptions with them when they study the Bible and its teachings. However this does not mean that their presuppositions lack a sound foundation. Their certainty rests in the realities they study rather than in the mind that studies them. Their awareness of these first principles is the work of the Holy Spirit who enlivens the soul and makes the student of God's word able to perceive the realities of the Creator who has made himself known both generally and specially.

One of the first presuppositions underlying a biblical hermeneutic is an awareness of God as the one who is self-revealed in the Bible as the only true God and Creator, the one to whom we as creatures are answerable in all things. Another first principle is the possibility of human knowledge since God created us to know him and to promote his glory. This also leads to accepting the reality of the sufficient communication of information. God's use of language in making himself known validates the concept of Scripture as an objective tool for knowing revealed truth. A study of apologetics is essential for the student of the Bible, and is highly recommended. But a thorough examination at this time is far beyond the scope of this survey.

### **The Process of Hermeneutics**

The conclusions we draw from the Bible are determined by two sets of questions:

#### **1. There are the apologetic questions:** our starting point

We need to be aware of the presumptions and expectations we bring with us before we begin our study. If our presumptions are in conflict with the internal teachings of Scripture the meaning of any given text will be distorted by tensions from our conflicting point of view.

Our fallen nature would prejudice us to believe that we have a basic ability to neutrally determine the meaning of God's revelation unaided by anything outside of ourselves. So an unregenerate person will experience tension while he wrestles to make sense of a verse about fallen man's total inability to understand spiritual truth (for example 1 Corinthians 2:14, or John 6:44).

His presumption about himself as neutral and as spiritually competent is at odds with the truth taught in the book he is studying. The Bible tells him that he lacks the ability to determine its meaning on his own. He will either have to change his own presumption (which he cannot do being spiritually dead) or he will have to introduce some non-scriptural idea in an attempt to explain away the tension. In so doing he will give a meaning to the text that changes its original sense.

If we bring strong expectations to any problem, there is a tendency to confirm our assumptions because of the kinds of tests we chose for evaluating our proposed solutions. We generally ask questions that relate to the results we believe we will find. Our investigation is unavoidably colored by what we are looking for.

Fallen man approaches the Bible as a mere piece of human literature recording personal impressions of God and religious experiences. This will demand that some of the data contained in Scripture must not be accepted objectively. The Bible as literature will have a different meaning than the Bible studied as the inspired word of God.

Theological ideas may also be brought to the Bible by the interpreter. These also bend the meanings of texts to fit the scholar's expectations. Some early interpreters approached the Old Testament believing that secret information was hidden mystically in every number, detail and article. They found Christ symbolically in the measurements of Noah's ark, in the layout of the city of Jerusalem, etc. While Christ is the center of the Old Testament Message and is the pattern for God's Covenant of Grace, a forced christological method tends to overlook the original meaning of a passage and to support fanciful ideas about the person and work of Christ. Yet, because some expected to find such things, their imagination is successful in reading such ideas into the text.

#### **2. There are the hermeneutical questions:**

We must identify the methods we employ in analyzing a biblical text. If we insist that the Bible

alone is the infallible rule in matters of faith and practice, then we must also derive our rules of interpretation from Scripture alone. Any rule or principle we bring from our own reason is suspect if not confirmed by exegetical evidences.

For example, some presume as an interpretive rule that since miracles and the supernatural are beyond our own experience and cannot be tested by scientific methods, they must be ignored when trying to find the sense of a passage. An interpreter with that presumption will begin by eliminating all supernatural elements before he even begins to examine the text. Such a method would yield religious ideas that have nothing to do with the God of Scripture.

Some assume that what God required morally in the Old Testament cannot be brought into our interpretation of what is expected by God in the New Testament unless the specific commandment is repeated in Scripture after the time of the birth of Christ. This rule reveals a set of expectations that are usually adopted to protect some doctrine, theological system, or personal practice that otherwise would have to be modified. This principle will effect our interpretations of law, Sabbath, church government, family, the sacraments, ethics, and many other important teachings.

An unsound hermeneutic will produce interpretations that have internal tensions and cannot produce consistent results. Biblically sound principles of hermeneutics yield a fully consistent system of doctrine which produces the same results regardless of who is doing the interpreting.

Chapter one of the Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes the basic principles of reformed hermeneutics in sections six through ten.

### **A few Latin Expressions reflect these First Principles**

#### **1. Sola Scriptura** = "Scripture alone" (WCF I:VIa,IX,X)

The inspired Scriptures are the only way we can examine God and his word objectively today. They provide the only infallible information and perfect rules for Bible study.

Reformed Bible students will not seek independent reason, visions, voices or signs to add information to a biblical text. They will not accept as authoritative the independent testimony of the church, science, archaeology, philosophy, mystical experience or personal anecdotes. While commentaries, dictionaries and diagrams may be helpful in communicating the results of good hermeneutics, they can never be quoted independently as a source of reliable data. Extra-biblical expectations, presumptions, or facts should never be allowed to color our exegesis other than by shedding light on the meaning of the words and references in the inspired text itself.

For example it violates this principle to look up a word in a lexicon or dictionary, then use that information to argue that the word in a given text must always be given just one particular meaning. The way a word is used is the best guide to it's meaning. As we know from our own use of language, words often vary in how they are used in different eras, cultures and contexts. Editors of theological dictionaries and of lexicons of the biblical languages are susceptible to error and prejudice based on their own presumptions like any one else. They must not be used as a final authority. A broad study of how a given word is used is the best test of the scope of its meanings.

Some defend certain doctrines saying that the Holy Spirit spoke to them or led them to their understanding. They quote a few proof texts in support of what they believe they have discovered, but usually are not careful about checking their context. Such mystical claims and backward exegesis discard the principle of sola scriptura.

## 2. **Scriptura Scripturae interpres** = "Scripture interprets Scripture"

The best way to understand a passage is to see how the rest of Scripture fits with it and clarifies it.

A thorough familiarity with the whole of the Bible (both testaments) is a necessary goal toward which every exegete should strive. Cross-references help the exegete to locate other texts that use the same expressions or that may cover the same material.

The student of any text must first answer some basic questions: Does the text being studied quote or allude to other biblical portions? Do the expressions used have well established meanings derived from earlier inspired books? Is the text referred to, or expounded upon, in some later portion of Scripture?

Not all portions of Scripture are equally clear, nor are they all intended for instruction. Passages that directly teach or command are more helpful in learning about God's will than are passages which simply record historic events. Recorded acts of individuals may be either evil or good (WCF I:VII). Passages that deal directly with an issue must be called upon to interpret passages which only indirectly or incidentally refer to the issue. A purely allegorical approach to interpretation may only show the power of an interpreter's imagination, rather than what God intended in a given passage.

## 3. **Omnis intellectus ac expositio Scripturae sit analogia fidei**

= "all understanding and exposition of Scripture is an analogy of faith"

There must be a consistency in all revealed truth because it represents absolute truth in the mind of God. What the Bible says corresponds with, or is analogous to, the larger understanding of it, as the Infinite God sees it. Therefore each passage can have only one certain and simple sense. As the infallibly inspired word of God, the Scriptures are reliable, self-consistent and carry within them all that is needed for clarity. Since all that God makes known fits with what He knows perfectly, it is always proper to assume that no contradictions or dual realities can be attached to what He speaks. If ideas derived from the study of the Bible seem to be in conflict, then we have not yet grasped the meaning of the text. Very likely an unsound assumption or method has been introduced into our reasoning. (WCF I:VI,IX)

### **Orthotomic Study**

Biblical hermeneutics is primarily concerned with rightly determining the original intent of each text of Scripture. As a passage is examined we must proceed according to principles affirmed in the Scriptures themselves. Paul wrote to Timothy about the importance of careful study;

2 Timothy 2:15 "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

The word translated "rightly dividing", or "handling accurately" in the NASB, is "*orthotomounta*". The root is a combination of two basic Greek terms. "Ortho" is a root meaning "straight." We use this prefix in English with medical terms such as: "orthodontist," a doctor who makes teeth straight, or "orthopedic" relating to making feet straight. The term used by Paul is combined with another Greek root "to-me-o". This root means "to cut" or "to slice." In biology a microscopic slice may be made with a micro-tome, a tool that cuts a specimen into microscopically thin slices.

The compound word means "straight-cutting." When the Scriptures are dissected by analysis they must be cut in a straight manner to avoid deriving crooked or perverted meanings. Our study

ought to yield the straight truth of the text. A proper study of the Bible must be "orthotomic," an attempt to cut it in a straight manner.

Calvin wrote, "the first business of an interpreter is to let his author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say."

To accomplish this careful analysis the faithful exegete must complete three basic tasks: the Grammatical task, the Historical task, and the Theological task.

### **1. The Grammatical Task**

Like any piece of literature, each text of Scripture has a grammatical structure. Its words and the way they are put together in sentences and paragraphs convey the information God intends for us to learn. It is vital that the student of Scripture determines all the possible ways a given expression can be construed grammatically. From these options he proceeds to the other tasks of interpretation. The grammatical task involves three areas of work: lexicography, accident and syntax.

**Lexicography** is the study of the meaning of words. One of the first goals in the study of any particular text is to determine the meanings of the words used. But definitions are dynamic. Meanings change with time. They usually have spheres of meaning including many special uses which culture and history impose on the words. Though they have a particular derivation from a specific root word, they almost always have several definitions after being used for a period of time. The exegete of Scripture should consider all the possible meanings of the words in the text he is studying.

The study of synonyms is important. Words often share areas of meaning, but they each usually have a unique nuance depending on the purpose, historical period, and culture of the writer. The implications of words and groups of words become limited as they take on idiomatic meanings unique to a particular topic, place and time. Words also may become attached to figurative images that can be helpful in conveying much more than the word itself provides.

The interpreter must keep all possible meanings and uses of a word before him until he eliminates the meanings that are inconsistent with the context. This way he discovers the meaning that best fits with the text.

There are several tools that help the interpreter with this task: Concordances show all the occasions where words are found in Scripture. Since the primary indicator of the meaning of a word is the way it is used, the concordance is the primary tool of the lexicographer. English concordances of particular versions of the Bible are of limited help because the same English word is not always used when translating a particular Greek or Hebrew word. Sometimes words take on different shades of meaning by their grammatical form which is not always reflected in an English concordance. The best concordance is one that is based on the original language rather than a translation. The well known Englishman's Concordances are based on Hebrew and Greek words but show the verses in English. A student does not need to know the original languages to use these reference tools. The Strong's Concordance has also become a favorite since it indexes the original words by a simple numbering system.

Lexicons and dictionaries list the various meanings and uses of a word. The student of Scripture must keep in mind that lexicons and dictionaries are not inspired by God. They are the product of fallible human scholarship, not the infallible Holy Spirit. The definitions found in these books are only a summary of a sampling of uses of a particular word selected by the editor. Good lexicons

will catalogue a full range of the meanings of a word. They also give examples showing each meaning of a word in a sample context. Some show not only biblical uses of words but also include their use in other literature contemporary with the era and culture of the biblical writers.

Word study books collect articles about the meanings of words. They are very likely to be strongly influenced by the theology of the editors, but can be extremely helpful, particularly if contexts are given where you can see how the word was actually used in other places.

Synonym studies are helpful to aid us in comparing similar words so that we can identify their uniqueness, areas of overlap and individual flavors. Idiom studies analyze special localized meanings unique to specific places and times.

**Accidence** is the study of the grammatical forms of words. Words often take on different spellings, endings and prefixes that show how they relate with the other words in a sentence. It may help us to determine if a noun is the subject or the object of the thought. It is important to know if a word is singular or plural, masculine, feminine or neuter. Words need to be recognized as verbs, substantives, particles, adjectives, adverbs, and so on. Verbs have a particular tense or mood attached to them by their grammatical form.

The tools that help with this task are a bit more technical. They include grammar books that show word forms and their meanings. They explain the way various kinds of words are changed to indicate their place in the sentence. It is basic that the interpreter know his own language well, and the general rules of linguistics that apply generally to other languages. He should also understand the fundamental differences that distinguish the various groups of languages. It is hard to benefit from Greek or Hebrew grammars without some formal training. There are helps that enable those who only know the languages casually to make significant progress. But there is no substitute for a thorough knowledge of the languages themselves. Grammars for beginners will explain the basic forms. Advanced grammars will analyze the forms in more detail and show the less generalized uses of the forms. The best ones will also help you understand the cultural thought behind such things as verb tense, which has a very different implication in Hebrew, Greek and English.

Analytical lexicons are books that identify the forms of each word found in Scripture. They should be used with caution because they often are not complete as to the possible meanings of each form. They can also become a substitute for students of a language learning to recognize the forms. It can hinder them from gaining real proficiency.

**Syntax** is the study of the relationships between the words as they are used in phrases, sentences and paragraphs. Knowing the grammatical forms is only the beginning. Once the forms are all identified the information must be put together to determine the meaning of the sentence. Word order and the combination of the various grammatical forms limit the possible meanings of a text. It can be useful to diagram a sentence using the symbols and forms familiar to students of English grammar.

The tools used in the study of syntax include the grammars and idiom books described before.

## **2. The Historical Task**

To understand a text properly the interpreter must know where it fits into the unfolding of God's plan in the context of history. It helps us to know the writer, the ones to whom he is writing, the situation each was in at the time, the problems that were important at that time, and the contemporary setting. The contemporary setting includes the current customs, problems, events

and expressions used that color the meaning of the text.

It is crucial to know what information had already been made known to those to whom the writing was originally intended. It is also important to know where the hearer stands in time with reference to the unfolding of the work of redemption. Is the passage referring to a time before the details of the Levitical system had been revealed to Moses? Was it written for the time of the Levitical Priesthood? Was it referring to the period when the Levitical sacrifices had been fulfilled in the coming of Messiah?

For example, references to the rebuilding of the Temple can be confusing. During the period of the captivity, God promised to provide for its rebuilding after His people were returned to the land. This occurred during the time of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. If that promise is carelessly read it may give the impression that some of these texts describe a yet future physical temple which will be rebuilt at Jerusalem reverting to the now fulfilled levitical forms.

### **3. The Theological Task**

The interpreter also must know the overall biblical context. Since God's word in its entirety is an unfolding of God's unchanging truth, we must know how the various facts fit together topically as larger concepts God makes known to his children.

Context expands outwardly from a text. The immediate context shows its purpose and place in the flow of thought in the sentence, paragraph and portion of the book. The book context is a broader look at the primary purpose and concern of the entire work in which a specific text is found. We should know how it fits with the author's purpose and development of thought. The overall context of Scripture is important because every revealed truth must bear a consistent relationship with every other revealed truth. No contradictions are possible considering the principle of "analogy of faith". If tensions arise they must be explained by considering God's direct revelation, not by theological ideas imposed upon the text.

A careless "proof-text" approach violates this principle. Instead of allowing theology to emerge out of the whole context of Scripture, isolated quotes are selected and massed to support a theological idea without first making a careful study of the context of each citation.

These three basic tasks of hermeneutics are not exclusive of one another: For example; the historical question must be considered theologically. God has not revealed himself all at once. He did not provide the work of the Messiah as soon as man first fell into sin. It is crucial that the interpreter determine how a text fits into the unfolding of God's redemptive plan.

When a text is studied theologically we must ask the historical questions; What had God already made known about this and related matters? Have previous portions of Scripture established meanings that are assumed by the author? and How does this text fit with what God says about His overall redemptive work?

The grammatical question must be considered historically. We need to find out what grammatical forms, idioms and word meanings were current when the specific book was written.

Each task must be taken up with full consideration of the impact of the other tasks.

### **The Holy Spirit as Illuminator**

Man is a fallen creature. Even redeemed man remains imperfect in this life. His moral imperfections will color his outlook on a text. Therefore the work of the Holy Spirit on the

regenerate heart is an essential element in reformed hermeneutics. (WCF I:VIb)

Jesus promised that the Spirit would lead his people into truth (John 14:17,26 16:7-14). But the Holy Spirit is not a direct source of new information to individuals now that the canon of Scripture is complete and the Apostolic foundation has been laid (Ephesians 2:20). The Spirit testifies to what God has already spoken. The Spirit's work for the interpreter is illumination, not revelation.

There must be a union between the work of the Spirit and the study of the revealed word. If we look to the word without the aid of the Spirit we will likely construe it in a distorted manner. If we look to the Spirit without the aid of the word we have no objective standard by which we may distinguish the Spirit of God from spirits of error. The Holy Spirit ministers truth to us by means of the revealed word, not independently from it.

### **Conclusion**

The information presented in this brief survey lays a foundation for the theological student. Each area covered in the prolegomena to theology involves many more intriguing questions which should challenge the serious inquirer to an ever widening study that never exhausts but continuously moves closer to an understanding of God's revealed truth.

Prolegomena lays the foundation for all further studies of Scripture. To the degree that these first principles are based upon what the Creator has made known, the studies will approach a sound system that essentially corresponds with absolute truth. This has been the task known historically as Reformed Theology. The ideas it has produced are carefully laid out in the standards of Westminster, Dort, Belgium and Heidleberg.

May the Lord bless the work of those in whose heart he has placed a burning desire to discover, love, and obey the truths God revealed.

### **Questions for Review and Thought**

1. What does the field of hermeneutics cover?
2. What does the field of apologetics cover?
3. Where should a Christian's assumptions come from?
4. What does the Latin expression "Sola Scriptura" mean?
5. What does the Latin expression "Scriptura Scripturae interpres" mean?
6. What does the Latin expression "Omnis intellectus ac expositio Scripturae sit analogia fidei" mean?
7. What do we mean by "orthotomic" study?
8. What are the primary areas of the Grammatical task?
9. What is the primary work of the Historical task?
10. What is the primary work of the Theological task?
11. How does the work of the Holy Spirit enter into the work of the interpreter of Scripture?