

The Four Interpreters

“These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11).

All involved in multi-cultural ministry appreciate interpreters. Without them communication would be lost. Interpreting brings together and unites thought. Four interpreters assist us in understanding God’s original meaning in the words He spoke.

The Bible as Interpreter

The Word of God provides direction to all who read it or listens to it being preached or taught. The Psalmist said, “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Psalms 119:130, *NIV*). “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalms 119:105, *NIV*).

Anyone can find a Bible text to prove just about anything. This is dangerous! The entire Bible needs to be considered before arriving at an interpretation. The whole counsel of Scripture is necessary to reach legitimate conclusions. The principle of every word being established by two or three witnesses can be stretched to apply to interpretation (Matthew 18:16).

Skip Heitzig in *How to Study the Bible and Enjoy It* said, “The ultimate context of any text is the entire Bible.” Someone has said, “Scripture interprets Scripture.” This is especially true and needful when one Scripture seemingly contradicts another. God is the author of the Bible and His word is “consistent, cohesive, and coherent.” Balance of truth is maintained when one verse is compared with the rest of the Bible. When this is not done false teachings creep into the church.

The Holy Spirit as Interpreter

A quick survey of the duties of the Holy Spirit will reveal, among others, that He illuminates, inspires, empowers, witnesses, counsels, reveals, leads, teaches, and guides. A closer look at some of these responsibilities explains how the Holy Spirit is an able Interpreter. As the Spirit of truth (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13) He guides into all truth (John 16:13). He leads us to Jesus Christ, “the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) and to God’s Word of Truth (John 17:17). The Holy Spirit also serves as a Teacher, “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26). His instruction pertains to several areas:

- Instruction in all things (John 14:26);
- Reminding what Jesus has said (John 14:26);

- Guiding into all truth (John 16:13);
- Revelation of the deep things of God (1 Corinthians 2:10). (Zuck, *Spirit-filled Teaching*)

Not only does the Holy Spirit lead us into all truth, directing us to the Word of God, He also interprets or explains truth. Since He is dealing with God's Word of truth, His interpretation will never be in conflict with what the Bible says. The Spirit and the Word always agree. The Spirit is not an independent worker. "He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (John 16:13). One might ask, "What is all truth?" The Spirit guides or leads along the road to "all truth" which is all of the Word of God. "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). The Spirit does not highlight part of the truth and hide another.

Have you ever read a Scripture and thought, "I've never noticed that before?" The Word of God comes alive. It is as if a light comes on. This phenomenon is called "illumination." The Holy Spirit did as Jesus prophesied, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

The Spirit's work as a Truth Guide does not eliminate the need for sound teaching and personal Bible study. If it did there would be no need for Bible study methods or tools. The hermeneutics textbook would never be opened. Bible studies and Bible teachers would be obsolete. The need for Bible colleges and seminaries would be minimized. However, this is not the case. These work hand-in-hand with the Holy Spirit to foster correct interpretation and understanding.

As we study God's Word the Holy Spirit works as our personal interpreter to help us with the meaning of a passage or verse. The Spirit expects us to study. "One should not think of the Spirit's work as an excuse for laziness, a way to avoid hard work in the study of the Scriptures. Discerning the meaning of a Scripture...usually results from intense and even prolonged research and study." (Zuck, 45)

The Pastor/Teacher as Interpreter

The Holy Spirit is an awesome Bible instructor and interpreter. However, God has other spiritual gifts in mind for our benefit. We still need godly, Spirit-filled teachers to "ground" us in God's Word. "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Ephesians 4:11-12, *NIV*).

Remember the men of God mentioned by Nehemiah? "So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (Nehemiah 8:8, *NIV*).

Preachers interpret God's Word for the understanding of His people.

The Christian as Interpreter

The Bible is its own interpreter. The Holy Spirit leads, teaches, and guides us into all truth. The pastors and teachers interpret God's Word and declare it to people. The role of interpretation is not in the hands of a select few. Christians have a responsibility to read, study, and interpret God's Word too. We are advised to, "Study and be eager and do your utmost to present yourself to God approved (tested by trial), a workman who has no cause to be ashamed, correctly analyzing and accurately dividing [rightly handling and skillfully teaching] the Word of Truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, *AMP*). "Analyzing and accurately dividing" are twin brothers in the interpreting process. God reveals His deep things to those who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9). He expects us to be obedient to His commands.

To assist with Bible study and interpretation three tools are needed: a study Bible, a Bible dictionary, and a concordance. Care must be taken not to use commentaries and dictionaries as a crutch. We cannot accept the views of another without hesitation. It is best to pray, study, allow the Holy Spirit to guide, and to look at the whole counsel of Scripture on a subject. Confirm your findings with consulting the work of seasoned teachers and pastors.

Have you ever heard someone say, "That is my interpretation of this passage"? Biblical interpretation, coupled with the role of the Holy Spirit to guide and teach is needed. As we interpret God's Word we endeavor to understand the meaning of Scripture to the original hearers (the then and there) and translate this for hearers and readers today (the here and now). The Interpreter builds a bridge between the ancient and modern worlds.

Ezra provides a role model to follow, "For Ezra had prepared and set his heart to seek the Law of the Lord [to inquire for it and of it, to require and yearn for it], and to do and teach in Israel its statutes and its ordinances" (Ezra 7:10, *AMP*).

Conclusion

One may wonder, "Who or what is the most important Interpreter?" Is it the Holy Spirit? Is it the Word of God? Is it the Bible teacher or pastor? Is it the Christian? The greatest strength is found when all four work together. Balance is needed. It is easy to get off-balance. Private interpretation should be avoided. "[Yet] first [you must] understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is [a matter] of any personal or private or special interpretation (loosening, solving)" (2 Peter 1:20, *AMP*).

Consider Acts 17:11 for the perfect blend. "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). The preacher, Holy Spirit (working in the lives of the preacher and the listeners), Scriptures, and Bereans all worked together to examine, interpret, and understand God's Word.

Study Questions

1. List the four interpreters introduced in this lesson. _____

2. What would happen if a multi-cultural ministry did not have an interpreter? _____

3. Write out Psalms 119:130. _____

4. What principle is mentioned in Matthew 18:16? _____

5. What/who is the best interpreter of Scripture? _____

6. What happens when one verse is compared with the rest of the Bible? _____

7. What happens when one verse is not compared with the rest of the Bible? _____

8. What are some duties of the Holy Spirit? _____

9. How is the Holy Spirit considered to be an able Interpreter? _____

10. The instructions given by the Holy Spirit are in what four areas? _____

11. The Holy Spirit's interpretation will never be in conflict with what the Bible says. Explain.

12. The Spirit's work as a Truth Guide does not eliminate the need for teaching and Bible study. Explain. _____

13. How do we usually discern the meaning of a Scripture? _____

14. What is the primary work of godly, Spirit-filled teachers? _____

15. What three tools assist with Bible study and interpretation? _____

16. How did Ezra provide a role model for us to follow? _____

17. Who or what is the most important interpreter? Explain. _____

18. Write out 2 Peter 1:20. _____

19. How does Acts 17:11 provide the perfect blend (mixture)? _____

20. What did the four interpreters working together (in Acts 17:11) accomplish? _____

Additional Notes
