teach them ... and talk of them ...



May 2011

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The Who, Why, and How of Ministry

The Who, Why, and How of Ministry (based on the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20) is the theme for The 2011 LMS Annual Conference and Convention to be held Saturday, June 25 and Sunday, June 26, 2011. This is the first year that the annual conference will not be held at St. Matthew Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, IN. It will be held rather at Christ Lutheran Church in Chetek, WI. In addition to meetings on Saturday and Sunday, The LMS Ministerium will meet on the afternoon of Friday, June 24.

The Conference/Convention will open with a service of Holy Communion at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday morning. Presentations and discussions on the weekend's theme will follow the service and continue into the afternoon. The Convention business meeting will convene at 4:00 in the afternoon.

Sunday is a very special day. The morning worship service which is scheduled for 10:00 a.m. will include the ordination of seminarian Tylan Dalrymple into the office of the ministry. Rev. Dr. John Erickson is retiring from full time ministry effective July 17th, and Mr. Dalrymple has accepted the call of the Chetek congregation and will begin his ministry there in the middle of July. To facilitate matters, Mr. Dalrymple will also be installed as the new pastor of Christ Lutheran at the morning service. A catered dinner is planned following the worship service which will provide ample time and opportunity for good fellowship.

If interested in attending the Conference/Convention, contact Christ Lutheran Church - 715-924-2552 or email at revjse2@chibardun.net. Housing can be arranged and transportation from and back to the Minneapolis/St. Paul airport will be provided.

In connection with the ordination at this year's gathering of the LMS, it might be well to think of the Pastoral Call and of what is central to what a pastor is called to do in the ministry of Word and Sacrament. The articles included in this issue of Table Talk address that subject.

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The Call to Holy Ministry

Martin Chemnitz (November 9, 1522 - April 8, 1586) was an eminent second-generation Lutheran theologian, reformer, churchman, and confessor. In what follows he shares reasons as to why it is so very important that a minister of the church have a legitimate call.

One must not think that this is done by human arrangement or only for the sake of order; but there are many weighty reasons, consideration of which teaches many things and is very necessary for every minister of the church.

I. Because God Himself deals with us in the church through the ministry as through the ordinary means and instrument. For it is He Himself that speaks, exhorts, absolves, baptizes, etc. in the ministry and through the ministry. Lk 1:70; Heb 1:1; Jn 1:23 (God crying through the Baptist); 2 Cor 2:10,17; 5:20; 13:3. It is therefore absolutely necessary that the minister as well as the church have sure proofs that God wants to use this very person for this His ordinary means and instrument, namely the ministry.

Now, a legitimate or regular call provides these proofs; for in this way every minister of the Word can apply to Himself the statements of Scripture [in] 2 Cor 5:19; Isa 59:21; Mt 10:20; Lk 10:16; I Th 4:8

- II. Very many and necessary gifts are required for the ministry, 2 Cor 2:16. But one who has been brought to the ministry by a legitimate call can apply the divine promises to himself, ask God for faithfulness in them, and expect both, the gifts that are necessary for him rightly to administer the ministry (I Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6; 2 Cor 3:5-6) and governance and protection in the office entrusted to him (Isa 49:2; 51:16).
- III. The chief thing of the ministry is that God wants to be present in it with His Spirit, grace and gifts to work effectively through it. But Paul says, Rom 10:15: "How shall they who are not sent preach"



(namely in such a way that faith is engendered by hearing)? But God wants to give increase to the planting and watering of those who have been legitimately called to the ministry and set forth doctrine without guile and faithfully administer whatever belongs to the ministry (I Cor 3:6; 15:58), that both they themselves and others might be saved. I Tim 4:16.

- IV. The assurance of a divine call stirs up ministers of the Word, so that each one, in his station, in the fear of God, performs his function with greater diligence, faith, and eagerness, without weariness. And he does not let himself be drawn or frightened away from his office by fear of any peril or of persecution, since he is sure that he is called by God and that that office has been divinely entrusted to him.
- V. Finally, on this basis the hearers are stirred up to the true reverence and obedience toward the ministry, namely since they are taught from the Word of God that God, present through this means, wants to deal with us in the church and work effectively among us. Ω

That Which Is Central To the Work of a Pastor

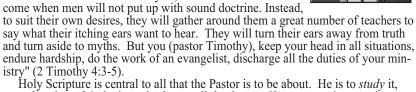
On the day of ordination, the officiating Minister, will address the ordinand with these or similar words:

As you shall give account before the Lord in the great day of his appearing, and that this Congregation here present may know your mind and will in these things, I call upon you now to make answer before Almighty God: Are you ready to take upon you this Holy Ministry, and faithful to serve therein?

Will you preach and teach the Word of God in accordance with the Confessions of the Church, and will you administer the Holy Sacraments after the ordinance of Christ?

Will you be diligent in the study of Holy Scripture, instant in prayer, and faithful in the use of the Means of Grace?

Paul admonished young Timothy, "Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:13). This is no small task, especially in light of what Paul later warned Timothy of, how that "the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead,



Holy Scripture is central to all that the Pastor is to be about. He is to *study* it, *preach* and *teach* it, he is to *discharge all the duties of his ministry* in accordance with it, and he is to *live* it. If he is to do this, then it is imperative that he has some understanding, but even more than that, that he have a *clear* understanding of Scripture. And this doesn't just happen. The first preachers of the Gospel went to "school" with the greatest Teacher this world has ever known - full time - year around - for three years. The apostle Paul had the best education available in his day, but then he was also "straightened out" in his learning through direct confrontation with that same great Teacher.

No less is needed of those who are called to be ministers of the Gospel today. Ideas abound as to what Scripture is as well as to how it should be approached and applied. But we Lutherans have a treasure. We have the Lutheran Confessions. These Confessions speak with regard to many important issues including what the church is, and the place of Holy Scripture in the church, as well as the role of the minister of the Gospel. All this points to the need for pastoral training. Central to that training is an understanding of what the Word of God (the Bible) is, how it should be read, and how it should be applied in preaching and teaching.

The article that follows is a good review for those who have been trained in the interpretation of Scripture, but it also gives some insight into all that is involved in a proper interpretation of Scripture for those who have not thought that much about it, or who have even questioned the need for theological training for pastors.

It is interesting how things have changed. I have in my library a whole series of books that were published in the late 1920's and 30's for Sunday School teacher training. These books covered Bible and church history, important doctrines, the Catechism, the Church, as well as studies on the child and in religious pedagogy. The ELC of that time was aware of the need for theological training not only for the Pastor, but for all who would teach and were in a position to influence the lives of others in the church family. Sadly we don't see much interest or concern in this area in much of the Church today. Ω

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Interpreting Scripture

by A. Berkely Mickelsen

HERMENEUTICS

Most people are aware that "meaningful" communication is difficult even at the ordinary human level. Between two people who speak the same language or even live in the same household, the meaning of what is said can easily be lost or distorted. Language is quite flexible. A single word like *early*, for example, can have a whole range of meanings depending on its context: early supper means at 5:30 instead of 6:30, but early retirement means at age sixty rather than sixty-five; Early American is a style of furniture, and Early Bronze is an archaeological period, with over four thousand years between them. Language is continually changing. In the English of Shakespeare's day, physics meant "laxatives or other medicines"; what is now called *physics* would then, have been known as "natural philosophy."

Such linguistic problems are faced in biblical interpretation, where they have often been formidable. By its nature the Bible stands out from all other literature, so its interpretation affords challenges beyond those of translating from one language to another and from an ancient cultural setting into a modern and rapidly changing one. The Bible is not one book but a whole library of books, written over a span of more than fifteen hundred years by many different writers with a variety of individual styles and immediate purposes. Yet its own claims and its remarkable unity demonstrate to Christians that the Bible is "God's Word in human language." The interpreter, always a finite, fallible hu-



man creature, must try to see things from God's point of view - even though they are expressed from another human perspective.

Over the years, devoted scholars trained in the discipline called hermeneutics (from Greek for "interpretation") have worked out canons, or rules, for translating and interpreting Scripture. Bible students have access to their work through exegetical commentaries - exegesis (from Greek for "explanation") being yet another word for interpretation. The work of interpretation is never completed, partly because new data from archaeology continue to shed new light on difficult passages, and partly because new questions are asked as human understanding changes. Errors of interpretation from reading into Scripture a meaning not really there (a process called eisegesis) are thus discovered and corrected.

In spite of much agreement about what the Bible means, trained biblical scholars at times disagree in their interpretations of a particular passage. In the church's long history scholars have even disagreed over the basic principles of interpretation. The early church fathers in Alexandria (Egypt), influenced by Greek philosophical thought, began a whole school of biblical interpretation in which the text was largely allegorized - that is, the meaning of the text was sought not in the plain or literal meaning of the words; the words were thought to stand for spiritual ideas in the mind of God. The Alexandrians sought to understand Scripture by imagining what

God would want to communicate. Imaginative interpretations piled on top or each other until they became bizarre of even fantastic, as the Alexandrian influence spread through the Western church in the Middle Ages.

Another school of interpretation, not rejecting allegorizing entirely but generally

paying more attention to actual words of the Bible, grew up among the church fathers in Antioch (Syria). It had less influence than the Alexandrians on the medieval Scholastics, who for almost a thousand years obscured much literal, historical meaning with mystical interpretations.

The Protestant Reformation (sixteenth century) brought the church back to an appreciation of Scripture as a direct, straightforward message from God. The reformers laid emphasis on the study of Hebrew and Greek grammar and of ancient Near Eastern history as the most appropriate tools for understanding the Bible. Yet they also insisted that the Bible is "perspicuous" (from the Latin for "transparent"); that is, the meaning of Scripture is clear to any intelligent reader who reads it the way one would read an ordinary human document - if that person is humble enough to ask the Spirit for understanding of the inspired Word. This is the way Christians should approach the task of biblical interpretation today.

There are two basic steps in interpretation. One must ask: (1) What did the passage mean for the person who first spoke these words or wrote them and for the people who first heard or read them? (2) What should the passage mean to a reader today? The first task is to enter into the circumstances of the person who first wrote or heard or read the passage and then try to understand the meaning in the light of the whole Bible.

The second is to try to make the meaning of the passage clear in the circumstances of the present century. Interpreters in every age have struggled to be faithful in these two steps.

Three basic questions may be asked of any text: What does it say? What does it mean? How does it impact me? - Edward L Hays

Sometimes Christians are so eager to proclaim what the passage means to their contemporaries that

they tend to miss what is meant in its original situation. Others have spent considerable time on the Old Testament situation but lost sight of the radical changes introduced by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection: "We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. . . . Where there is forgiveness of these [sins, lawless deeds], there is no longer any offering [that is, animal offerings] for sin" (Hebrews 10:10, 18 NASB).

The context of the whole Bible shows the finality of Jesus' offering for sin. He brought into existence a "new people of God" (that is, both Jews and Gentiles who acknowledge Jesus as Messiah). Many Old Testament promises to Israel are thus interpreted in the New Testament as applying to God's new people, the church. Because of such developments within the Bible itself, it is important to place equal weight on steps one and two. Making the proper transition from Bible times to the present takes careful study, prayer, and dependence on the Holy Spirit. Christians are responsible not to add to or subtract from the meaning God intends.

ENTERING INTO THE PAST

The fifteen centuries over which the Bible was written spanned great changes in cultural and political situations. Sometimes change came quite rapidly. Paul's situation in

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Athens (Acts 17:15-34), for example, was quite different from the situation he faced in Jerusalem only a few years later (21:17-23:30). Careful attention must be paid to the events of Near Eastern history.

HISTORY AND CULTURE. Historical writings never tell everything that happened; they represent someone's selection of certain events out of all those that took place among a certain group of people over a period of time. That selection helps those who read the record see what made those people different from others around them. History can reveal the strengths and weaknesses of nations and why they have continued or why they have disappeared. But biblical history does not focus upon people alone. İts history is God-centered. Its writers saw God as revealing himself in history by choosing the Israelite people to work with in a special way. He communicated directly with individuals among them, designated as his servants, concerning the basis for his blessings and judgments upon them. Finally, God joined them on earth in the person of Jesus Christ, experiencing firsthand the full agonies of human history.

The Bible's viewpoint is that there is *one* God, *one* people of God, and *one* history. God's servants could not conceive of writing history without seeing in history the sovereign hand of God. Modern secular historians ignore or deny God's role in human history, but to interpret the Bible one must try to view history as the biblical writers did: a time, a place, an event where God disclosed himself to humanity in history.

To understand the writer's meaning, we must also understand that writer's cultural patterns. Culture includes the habits, customs, tools, material things produced, institutions, arts, music, and literary outputs of any people - all the things they cre-

ate and use. The culture of a particular time is a good barometer of what people consider important. The amount of money spent on amusements, liquor, and weapons shows the interests and emphases of any people. What any people do, what they actually produce, generally tells more about them than what they say.

LINGUISTIC STRUCTURE. Language is a crucial part of the life of any people. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew except for a few brief sections in Aramaic (Genesis 31:47: Ezra 4:8-6:18: 7:12-26; Jeremiah 10:11; Daniel 2:4b-7:28). The New Testament was originally written in Greek. Each language has a particular structure, a grammar that must be mastered in order to understand what is written and to translate it accurately. All three languages are rich in vocabulary and nuances of meaning that can easily be lost in translation.

Many sentences in the Bible are long and complex. All translations break up the longer sentences of the original languages (especially the Greek) to make them read more easily in English. Paraphrases go even further in simplifying, with the results that some connections between ideas may be lost. What paraphrases show as independent sentences may in the original have been joined more closely together, revolving around one verb form. Today a student of the Bible can make use of excellent translations that bring out the literal meanings of the original (such as the New American Standard Bible or the Revised Standard Version) and also a variety of carefully done paraphrases (such as *The Living Bible* or Phillips' New Testament in Modern English). Beyond that kind of comparison, commentaries can often help one understand why two translations differ on some passage.

LITERARY CONTEXT. The context of a passage means more than

merely the words or paragraph immediately surrounding it. To interpret a passage correctly one must see what comes immediately before it and what comes after, but one should also think of the whole book as the context of the passage. In a book like Daniel, the broader context includes narration of events, dreams, and visions, plus materials taken from various times in Daniel's life and those of three or four kings. Familiarity with the whole book is necessary to understand a specific part. An obscure phrase can easily be taken out of context and given a meaning that makes sense today, but a careful look at that phrase in the light of all the rest of Daniel may show that such an "up-to-date interpretation" could not possibly be what Daniel meant. To ignore context increases the possibility of "discovering" a meaning that is not really there, that is, of practicing eisegesis. Scholars, teachers, and pastors can be as guilty of eisegesis as any ordinary reader - if they do their work too hastily or have an axe to grind in the form of a strongly held interpretative scheme.

Distinguishing Between Literal and Figurative Language

Although the Bible uses the ordinary language of people, its main theme is not all ordinary. It deals with the hostility of human beings toward God and with how those wandering away from him can come back into fellowship with him. The reality of God, the reality of sin, and the reality of redemption are themes that challenge the capacity of human language.

MEANING OF THE TERMS *LITERAL* AND *FIGURATIVE*. Language is said to be literal when it carries its customary, socially acknowledged meaning. To say, "The farmer

plowed his field" is to use the verb *plow* literally. It means the farmer broke up the ground as one does to prepare a field for planting. But to say, "The student plowed through a difficult course in physics" or "The executive plowed through a pile of paper work" is to use plow figuratively. The farmer, student, and executive all "advanced laboriously through a resistant material.' Whether the word *plow* is used literally or figuratively has nothing to do with the reality of the experience. "Plowing" a field or "plowing" through paper work are both realities. Figurative language takes a common, ordinary meaning and moves it to another realm. An example from the Bible is the ordinary first-century human language of "redeeming" or "buying" a person from slavery to speak of God's "redeeming" his people from sin. Sin is personified: it holds human beings in slavery or bondage. God redeems them from that slavery, that is, he sets people free when by faith they turn their lives over to him.

Many disagreements over biblical interpretation boil down to a question of the degree of literalness intended in a passage. When John described the Holy Spirit at Jesus' baptism descending "from heaven as a dove" (John 1:32), did he mean simply that the Spirit "came down," like a flying dove would come down from the sky? Or did he mean that the Spirit took on the form of a literal bird that physically alighted on Jesus? Or did he mean something else entirely? Often the context provides enough clues to enable the reader to distinguish clearly; at other times the clues are missing or are themselves open to different interpretations.

SHORT FIGURES OF SPEECH. Most of the literary devices recognized as figures of speech in ordinary literature are also found in the Bible. *Simile*, for example, is a comparison

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in which words such as *like* or *as* are used. A *metaphor* is a direct comparison: "He's a good sport," or (of Jesus) "Behold, the Lamb of God" (John 1:29). Both simile and metaphor are used in a familiar passage in Isaiah (40:6-7 NASB; see also James 1:10-11; 1 Peter 1:24-25 NASB):

All flesh is like grass, and all its glory is like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls off. . . .

The metaphorical statement that "the grass withers, and the flower falls off" shows the power of figures of speech. "Flesh" is the Hebrew way of referring to ordinary, human life. No matter how vibrant and beautiful a person may be ("like a flower"), he or she will eventually show the effects of aging and finally die. No abstract statements about aging could have the penetrating, memorable quality of that combination of metaphor and simile.

Frequently the Bible pictures God with bodily members and physical movements (anthropomorphism) or with human emotions, feelings, and responses (anthropopathism). Metaphors used about God may refer to his "ear," "mouth," "arm," or "fingers" (Psalm 8:3; Isaiah 55:11; 59:1). God is described as "angry" (Deuteronomy 1:37; 4:21) and in the Ten Commandments as "jealous" (Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9). Such metaphors do not imply that God's "anger" and "jealousy" are felt or expressed like human anger or jealousy. Human emotions are affected by human sinfulness, ignorance, and inability to maintain emotional balance.

God is free both from the physical limitations of human ears, arms, mouths, and fingers, and from the weaknesses of human emotions. Yet God can "speak," "hear," and "act." The Bible states that he loves sin-

ners, but also that he is angry with sin and sinners. God feels it keenly when his creatures turn away from him to idolatry and to self-destruction. Anthropomorphic metaphors seem essential for human understanding of God, but one must be careful not to literalize them. God does not literally breathe in and out. When he becomes angry, he does not lose emotional control.

When Jesus spoke of "blind guides" straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel (Matthew 23:24), he was clearly using hyperbole, an intentional, conscious exaggeration. Jesus wanted to show that the Pharisees and scribes were careful about trivial details but couldn't see important spiritual matters. Was Jesus using hyperbole when he said, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (19:24)? Many wealthy Christians devoutly hope so! Was Jesus hyperbolically showing that those who have wealth usually trust in wealth rather than in God, in order to emphasize that genuine trust in God is necessary to enter into his kingdom? Or was he saying that it is literally impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God? The context shows that his disciples were so astonished at the literal meaning of his words that he softened them by adding, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (vv. 23, 25-26).

EXTENDED FIGURES OF SPEECH. A parable is actually an extended simile; an allegory is an extended metaphor. In Luke 15:1-7 Jesus told a parable (about lost sheep) to Pharisees and scribes who were enraged because Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them (v. 2). The joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, Jesus said, is like the joy of a shepherd who recovers a lost sheep. The good-shepherd figure of speech was also used in an allegory, the meaning

of which Jesus had to explain (John 10:1-18). Unlike a parable, which in its pure form has only one main point, an allegory has several points of comparison. In the good-shepherd allegory, Jesus indicated at least four points of comparison: (1) the shepherd is Christ; (2) the door is Christ; (3) the sheep are those for whom Jesus lays down his life; (4) the flock represents the union of all believers under one shepherd.

An allegory is a story told so that certain elements can represent specific things. To allegorize illegitimately is to take a straight historical incident or narrative and make it something else. The tabernacle in the Old Testament has been a favorite subject for allegorizers. For example, a seven-branched candlestick attached to a lampstand of pure gold stood in the Holy Place (Exodus 25:31-40), providing light for the priest as he carried on his work. In the hands of a modern allegorizer, the seven burning lamps have been taken to represent the Holy Spirit and the shaft to represent Jesus Christ. The interpreter's motive was to point to Christ's work as the basis of the Spirit's manifestation in the church. Without stretching any meanings, however, one could simply say what each item of furniture was meant to do in the tabernacle and then point out how different and how effective Christ's finished work was under the new covenant. New Testament passages often make use of Old Testament imagery (including the tabernacle), but rarely by allegorizing it. Any allegorizing that ignores the Old Testament meanings does not do justice to the message of God in the Old Testament.

TYPOLOGY. New Testament *typology* draws attention to one point of similarity between a person, event, or thing in the Old Testament and a person, event, or thing in the New Testament. Occasionally one may find two points of similarity in a

single example of typology. God told King David that his unborn offspring (Solomon) would build a house or temple for God (2 Samuel 7:12-13). God said of Solomon: "I will be his father, and he will be my son" (v. 14). By typology the writer of Hebrews later applied those words to Jesus, pointing out that God never spoke such words to any angel (1:5). Sonship is the point of emphasis in the typology. Solomon was a son called by God to occupy his father David's throne; Jesus was God's Son in a unique sense - yet both were designated "son."

Typology is a kind of figurative language of comparison. A careful interpreter notes that the one point of comparison had historical reality both in the past and in the later time of application. Yet differences are also evident. God said of Solomon, "If he commits iniquity, I will chasten him" (2 Samuel 7:14 NKJV). In contrast Jesus Christ "committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips" (1 Peter 2:22 RSV).

Symbols, Symbolic Actions, APOCALYPTIC DESCRIPTION. Entire books such as Daniel and Revelation, plus many Old Testament passages, particularly in the prophets, are rich in symbolism. A symbol is a "visual metaphor," an object or happening that suggests a certain meaning but does not explicitly state that meaning. Daniel described a vivid dream of King Nebuchadnezzar - an image with head, arms, belly, thighs, legs, and feet all made of different metals. The symbol made sense when Daniel interpreted the meaning of each part (chapter 2).

In Revelation, a beast comes out of the sea and another beast comes out of the earth (chapter 13). A harlot (prostitute) stands for the capital city of a world empire (Rome, in John's day; see 17:1-18, especially v. 18). The beast on which she rides stands both for rulers of a world em-

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pire and that empire itself. To use the Scriptures themselves to tell what symbols mean (as in Revelation 17) is spoken of as decoding. The symbolism may seem strange, but the fact that human governments can become beastly is certainly clear in the light of twentieth-century experience.

Revelation is also known as the "Apocalypse of John." Apocalyptic writing was a form of literature produced by Jewish and early Christian writers between about 200 BC and AD 300, depicting symbolically the power of evil, the dark chaos that evil brings, and the splendor of God's power ultimately to overcome evil.

PROPHECY. The term *prophecy* has two meanings in the Bible. To prophesy means (1) to call people to a holy life - by leaving their idols and self-centeredness and returning to obedience to God and fellowship with him; and (2) to predict blessing or judgment - blessing for those who obey God and calamity for those who disobey. Today many "experts" on prophecy seem to specialize in foretelling the future, neglecting the equally important prophetic role of forthtelling God's call to righteousness.

The first chapter of Isaiah begins with the prophet pleading with the people of Israel to depart from their sin and return to God. The passage also predicts judgment and promises blessing. "Prophecy" basically refers to that kind of prophetic preaching, often in quite figurative language. Nowhere in the Bible does prophecy take the form of satisfying people's natural curiosity about the future. Generally it does not give detailed predictions about the future. Just before Jesus' ascension the disciples asked him about a single detail: Would God now restore the kingdom to Israel? Jesus replied, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1:7 RSV). Predictive prophecy has revealed enough to show that God is in control of all that happens in the future. He knows clearly where history is going because he is guiding and directing. But the rest is to remain hidden; the blueprint of future history belongs only to God.

Language of Creation and CLIMAX. What we know about the creation of the world is only what God has chosen to disclose. Not only in Genesis 1-3 but throughout the Old Testament and New Testament, the fact that God created all that exists is firmly stated. Yet the passages do not answer the "how" questions typical of modern scientific thinking. To think biblically about either the creation or climax of history is to limit oneself to what the passages say. Although figurative language (as well as literal) is used to describe both the beginning and the ending of history, the narratives describe real events. With so little detail given no one should pretend to have a full picture. One should avoid trying to make an artist's conception of how it really was or how it will really be; yet one can thank God for the faithful (though partial) picture he has provided in Scripture.

POETRY. Large portions of the Old Testament are in poetry, a patterned, rhythmical form of literature characterized by a focused, figurative, and generally beautiful or powerful use of language. English poetry is usually recognizable by the pattern of its sound; sometimes it has lines that rhyme. Hebrew poetry does not depend on a pattern of sound but rather on a balanced pattern of thought. Poetry is particularly difficult to translate from one language to another, for patterns must be conveyed along with the meanings of the words. Here is a Hebrew stanza (Isaiah 1:3 RSV) translated into English:

The ox/knows/ its owner, and the ass/its master's crib; but Israel/does not know, my people/does not understand.

The parallelism easily seen in those four lines is the major characteristic of Hebrew poetry. Of the two pairs of lines, the second line has the same idea as the first, called synonymous parallelism. An idea is presented, then repeated in different words. In the first pair, the verb is not repeated. With three stressed units in the first line and two stressed units in the second line, the meter is said to be 3/2. In the second pair of lines, the two stressed units in each line form a 2/2 meter. The third and fourth lines are also synonymous parallelism.

To a casual reader such detail may seem irrelevant to meaning, but it is part of the writer's poetic stance. The form itself conveys meaning and also alerts the reader to expect word pictures, rhythmic balance, and artistic imagery. Consequently there is an advantage in using a translation that prints poetry as poetry in a typographical format that makes it easy to recognize. That format helps the reader make the needed shift from prose to a poetic framework.

It is good to read poetry aloud, trying to feel the balance of ideas and stressed units. By doing so, a reader gets more in touch with the style of the original writer - who was carefully framing ideas in beautiful poetic language. This is part of the important first step of interpretation: finding out what a passage meant to the original writer and reader.

Conclusion

The task of interpreting the Bible is never finished. Christians must continually strive to understand its meaning correctly and to rephrase it

for today's world.

Theology endeavors to state in a condensed fashion what is taught on one subject in all parts of the Bible. Many Christians naively accept the doctrines taught by their churches. Those who begin to study the Bible for themselves, carefully applying the two steps of sound interpretation, may come to a better understanding of Christianity's basic beliefs. If Bible study leads one to question some things one hears about the Bible, that is also a sign of healthy growth. No conscientious Christian should ever stop studying the Word of God; new ideas must be checked against its teachings. Weak or inaccurate statements of what God is saying today are revised on the basis of new insights into what God said to the people of biblical times.

A Christian's devotional interpretation can always be improved because personal needs keep changing. Suddenly one may see important things that were missed before, even in favorite passages studied many times. The two basic steps of interpretation are important even in devotional Bible study. Suppose one faces doubts; one can turn to the account of Thomas and his experience (John 20:24-29). The first step is to see how Thomas overcame his doubts; the second is creatively to apply the narrative to one's own situation. Recognition that people in the Bible had the same kinds of problems can in itself be encouraging.

The two-step approach to interpretation can also keep a group Bible study from declining into mere opinion-sharing without a true biblical basis. A person with skill in that approach can help others make their own contribution to the group's understanding of any particular passage.

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President/Pastor, LMS-USA 2837 East New York St. Indianapolis, IN 46201

RevralphS@juno.com Internet Contact:

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