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Hermen Who? – Bible Hermeneutics: An Excursion in Fantasy or Exercise in Discipline?

by G. Richard Fisher

“Whatever!” read the caption on a cartoon that pictured a teen-aged girl, hands on hips and eyes rolled back, looking as bored as could be. That one word flawlessly conveys the look and attitude. The picture captures today’s prevalent attitude toward biblical interpretation. Many believe that the meaning of the Scriptures is to be subjectively determined. If the supposed or suggested meaning helps, or makes us feel good, then that’s good. The Bible can mean, “Whatever!”

Subjective interpretation can get so wild, silly, and bizarre that R.A. Coombes “proves” America is Babylon because there is a Babylon, N.Y., (with a large population of Jews) and it is near Amityville, which is purported to be the gateway to hell!¹

The danger of trying to divine truth from feelings and experiences was seen by George Whitefield as he warned in the 19th century:

“I think it is tempting God to require such signs. ... I think it will encourage the French Prophets, take people from the written word, and make them depend on visions, convulsions, etc., more



than on the promises and precepts of the gospel.”²

Toronto Christian Fellowship pastor John Arnott has decided that some

prophecy has to do with people making animal noises. He argues that roaring, clucking, howling, braying, and barking all “act out the prophecy — complete with sound effects — ... I’ve observed that animal sounds are often part of an intense acted-out prophecy.”³

Walter Martin, the late professor of apologetics, often said that cult leaders use biblical words, but write their own dictionary. There is a huge language barrier to scale when people such as Arnott begin inventing meanings for Bible words and terms. Martin said:

“It is therefore possible for the modern theologians to use the terminology of the Bible and historic theology, but in an entirely different sense from that intended by the writers of

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50. "Sin: That *Really Little* Word that Makes Unitarian Universalists *Big Time* Uncomfortable," op. cit., upper case in original.
51. Tom Owen-Toole, "Truth is One, the Wise Call it by Many Names: Our UU Commitment to Religious Pluralism." Document available at: http://www.firstuusandiego.org/public/sermons/sermon_text/2001-01-28-text.htm. This is a sermon delivered by Rev. Owen-Toole at First Unitarian Church of San Diego on Jan. 28, 2001.
52. Forrest Church, "The Cathedral of the World," in *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 87.
53. "Our Beliefs," op. cit., pg. 9.
54. Joan Goodwin, "Our Caring Communities," in *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.
55. Though "spirit" and "spirituality" are current buzzwords in UUism, there is little consensus regarding what the terms mean. Most of the discussions I have read are vague, ambiguous, and unsophisticated. Perhaps this is because they realize that they simply can't smuggle a soul or spirit into a worldview informed by scientific materialism.
56. Forrest Church, Introduction to *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. xxi.
57. James Ishmael Ford, "On Being a Unitarian Universalist: Is it a Religion?" Document available at: <http://www.vuu.org/jford/SS980201.htm>. This sermon was given at Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Chandler, Ariz., on Feb. 1, 1998.
58. Ibid.
59. *The Faith of a Humanist*, op. cit.
60. Ibid.
61. "Affirmation," op. cit., pg. 8.
62. Barbara Stevens, "Many Images of God," *The World*, Vol. 7, no. 6, November-December 1993, pg. 20.
63. John G. MacKinnon, in *Unitarian Universalist Views of Jesus*, ed. Daniel G. Higgins. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, n.d., pamphlet.
64. Khoren Arisian cited by Warren R. Ross in "The Marginalized Majority: UU Humanism in the 1990s," *The World*, Vol. 10, no. 6, November-December 1996, pg. 19. Ellipsis in original.
65. *100 Questions that Non-Members Ask About Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 5.
66. Admittedly, some UUs are agnostic about the prospects of a personal afterlife, and at least leave room for such a possibility, though by no means do they affirm it. But, overall, these responses (especially the first) are the most representative of typical UU thought.
67. *100 Questions that Non-Members Ask About Unitarian Universalism*, op. cit., pg. 6.
68. *The Faith of a Unitarian Universalist Humanist*, op. cit., pamphlet.
69. "Separation," op. cit., pg. 4.
70. "Death as Part of the Journey," op. cit., pg. 12.
71. Although every aspect of the *imago dei* has been defaced in natural man, the spiritual image has been especially ravaged.
72. James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A*

- Basic Worldview Catalog*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997, pg. 72.
73. Ibid., pg. 73.
74. This revelation alone being sufficient for making all people accountable for knowing God exists.
75. I say this is ironic because the UUs pride themselves in being a religion founded on reason. It is they who frequently denounce Christians as irrational and anti-intellectual. Perhaps some Christians do have anti-intellectual leanings and fail to love God with all their mind as well as with all their heart, soul, and strength. But, it simply does not follow that because some (or many) Christians do not have good reasons for their Christian beliefs that such reasons do not exist. Many UUs have mistaken a criticism of certain individuals for a criticism of the belief system itself.
76. Scientific naturalism holds that humans, as mere matter, are simply part of an unbroken chain of cause and effect. It is a closed box because there it allows no room for supernatural intervention or human freedom.
77. Here I tread cautiously because I have ventured into the realm of speculating about the motivations and intentions of other persons. But, I believe biblical teachings concerning the general orientation of the human heart allow me such latitude. I am not "picking on" UUs as such, but including them as equally a part of the fallen human race. This criticism is not peculiar to UUs, but of human waywardness in general. 

HERMENEUTICS

(continued from page 1)

Scripture. ... the vocabulary of the cults is not the vocabulary of the Bible by definition. ... The cults capitalize on the almost total inability of the average Christian to understand the subtle art of redefinition in the realm of Biblical theology."⁴

If language means anything, it can't mean *just* anything. Misusing the Bible the way Arnott does so radically defines biblical words that it is catastrophic for the Church. Spiritual deconstructionists get pulled into doctrinal quicksand.

A linguistic and contextual study of both the Hebrew and Greek words for prophecy show that Arnott is creating theology from his distorted imagina-

tion. This is another case of "Whatever!"

Prophecy in the Bible always employs intelligible speech. Any rare and peripheral action accompanying it is first, unique; second, commanded by God in direct revelation; and third, explained by that speech.⁵ In defining biblical prophecy we do not have to make up interpretations. The immediate or larger context is always self-evident.

We must remember that the Apostle Paul, under inspiration, informs us that true prophets are never out of control, but speak to edify, exhort, and comfort others (1 Corinthians 14:31-33, 37-40). Edification and exhortation are always intelligible.

It is mind-boggling to see the endorsement of Arnott's book by Four-square pastor Jack Hayford:

"John Arnott clearly is seeking to provide a biblical soundness and a shepherdly care amid the mix of both the familiar and unfamiliar evidences of God's working at Toronto Airport Vineyard."⁶

Arnott's twisted explanation is not biblical. The "unfamiliar" and bizarre is rationalized and smuggled in by hanging a biblical term on it.

At times there is an appeal to and a misuse of John 21:30: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book." These other signs might be contained in the other Gospel records: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. If they are not, there is still no reason to believe that out-of-control people are a sign of Jesus at work. There is no reason to believe the other signs are different in nature and character than those

recorded in the Gospels.

The New Yorker magazine recently ran a cartoon and asked readers to send in captions.⁷ The submissions were creative and funny and the result benign. There are some who seem to think that Scripture can be treated in just the same way as we assign it meaning that comes to mind.

One major problem that goes virtually undetected is the confusion between hermeneutics (the art and science of biblical interpretation) and application. Interpretation is not application. Faulty interpretation will always lead to improper application.

There is a so-called “new hermeneutic” — an outgrowth of the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann — that has tried to make application synonymous with interpretation. Brian Shealy dealt with this issue when he wrote that “failure to isolate application from hermeneutics creates a man-centered rather than a God-centered interpretation of the Bible.”⁸

THINK FIRST ABOUT THE URGENCY

It is said of Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism, that a “Terrible sense of urgency raged in him ... No obstacle could daunt him. He never slackened, never stopped until his life stopped.”⁹ This was all for a political and secular cause. How urgent are we for an eternal cause and the cause of truth?

Jesus said of His words, “He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him — the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day” (John 12:48). Those who miss or misinterpret the words and commands of Christ do so at their eternal peril.

Almost everyone employs Bible interpretation and hermeneutics in one way or another at times. People may do it well or do it poorly, but they do it. Even refusing to do it is a hermeneutic of sorts.

A humorous story is told of an elderly woman who returned home after evening services to find an

intruder. As the burglar was racing out with all her valuables, she began to scream, “Acts 2:38! Acts 2:38!” The burglar stopped in his tracks and held up his hands. The old woman quickly called the police. On arrival the policeman asked the man why he had given up. The thief responded, “She said she had an ax and two 38’s!” Proper understanding of words does make a difference.

DISCERNMENT OR DEATH

In that story it all ends well, but cultic Scripture-twisting often ends in disaster such as that seen at Jonestown, Waco, or in the Heaven’s Gate cult.¹⁰

Author and counselor Paul R. Martin states:

“Compared to other social or medical problems, the havoc created by destructive cultism (a type of ‘brainwashing’) is the most under-studied, neglected and ignored mental health and social problem in the world. (The most conservative estimates based on a number of surveys are that 185,000 Americans alone join a destructive cult each year. Of those 185,000 at least 25% will suffer enduring irreversible harm that will affect their ability to function adequately in the emotional, social, family, and occupational domains.) The rate of numbers of people joining destructive cults in other countries equals or exceeds the rates observed in the United States.”¹¹

Cults and aberrational teachers start with flawed hermeneutics. It matters whether a wife believes her Christian husband has a sin problem with his angry outbursts or if he is possessed by a demon of anger. Sin can be repented of and abandoned, and new ways of responding biblically can be worked on through God’s grace, prayer, and daily discipline. If she believes it is a demon — even though anger is called a sin in the Bible and never a demon — she will fall prey to the wild imaginings and quirky panaceas of some self-proclaimed exorcist.

In Jon Land’s mystery novel, *A Walk in the Darkness*, set in Israel, Palestin-

ian detective Ben Kamel goes to Jericho to seek assistance from Father Mike, a Roman Catholic priest. The murder of a number of archaeologists has stunned the world and there is suspicion that a missing scroll is the reason for the crime. The scroll may contain information to disprove the resurrection of Christ. Ben questions Father Mike and describes the ramifications for the Church if such a scroll is discovered. At one point the priest says, “The Church *is* Christ. You can’t separate them.” Land, in this novel, is doing hermeneutics, even though he may not realize it or agree with his character’s conclusion. Is the Church Christ? Is Christ the Church? Is the Church then what I need for salvation or is it Christ? What far-ranging implications there are in that statement and in the answers I give.

HERMENEUTICS AND HISTORY

There is a strange and self-constructed, self-serving hermeneutic that allows the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches to practice homosexuality in the name of God. Its doors are opened to the unrepentant, unchanged, “lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered community around the world.” It teaches:

“Homosexuality is regarded as neither a sin nor an illness, but as one part of oneself that one neither can nor should try to change. As God creates some people heterosexual, others are created homosexual. The Bible does not condemn ‘loving, responsible homosexual relationships,’ and therefore these relationships should be encouraged, affirmed, and celebrated.”¹²

Any honest reading of Romans 1 would not leave one with the impression that God tolerates this kind of sin.

The incredible social reforms of Lord Shaftesbury (1801-1885) in England grew out of his moderate Calvinism and premillennial hermeneutics.¹³ The great English political leader Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881) jeopardized his political career push-

ing forward ideas about the world's debt to the Jews based on his understanding of the Hebrew roots of Christianity.¹⁴

The Puritans labored and lobbied all through England and were the driving force and the root movement for the founding of a Jewish state based on their interpretation of Romans 11.¹⁵ Hermeneutics has not only affected individuals and churches, but has changed nations.

Jesuit and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin practiced hermeneutics when he stated that "Evolution is a light illuminating all facts, a curve that all lines must follow."¹⁶

A certain brand of hermeneutics misled many and unleashed horror and death in South Uganda on March 17, 2000, as the members of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments were incinerated in their church by gas-fed flames. Their leaders had lured them into the building with wild claims and prophecies, then nailed the windows and doors shut before fleeing with their wealth. "Afterward, local police guessed that 530 people died in the fire. The dead were hard to count, since ashes were all that was left of many bodies. Within days, police found some four hundred more corpses buried in pits at Kanungu and other sect compounds. The signs were that they'd been stabbed, strangled, or poisoned in the weeks before the fire, though neighbors had heard nothing, no cries of resistance."¹⁷ We could label this the "hermeneutics of horror."

STOP—LOOK—LISTEN!

Observing warning signs and flashing lights at a railroad intersection is good advice. The Bible offers such help. The Apostle Peter warned that "the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, *which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures*" (2 Peter 3:15-16).

Adam Clarke elaborates on Peter's use of the word *twist*:

"the verb ... which the apostle uses here, signifies to *distort*, to *put to the rack*, to *torture*, to *overstretch* and *dislocate the limbs*; and hence the persons here intended are those who proceed according to no fair plan of interpretation, but *force unnatural* and *sophistical meanings* on the word of God."¹⁸

Good hermeneutics could be looked upon as a "fair plan of interpretation."

The Apostle Peter's warning had to do with poor hermeneutics bringing "destruction." Scripture-bending can have devastating and destructive results.

The *Christian News* reported, "Colorado Governor Signs Faith Healing Bill." Governor Bill Owens, in fact, signed a bill into law protecting children from the deadly harm of skewed and faulty hermeneutics. The article stated:

"Colorado Gov. Bill Owens on April 16 signed into law a bill which would make faith healing a crime, under the state's child abuse law, when used in place of medicine for a child in danger of dying, according to The Denver Post. The law was prompted by the illness of Amanda Bates, 13, who died February 5 of complications stemming from untreated diabetes. Her parents, members of General Assembly Church of the First Born, did not believe in medical treatment for their daughter. Since 1974, 13 children of parents who belong to religious sects have died in Colorado from lack of medical care."¹⁹

God only knows the number of Jehovah's Witness children who have suffered neglect and death because of faulty interpretations of Leviticus and the group's erroneous prohibition against blood transfusions. Author Ralph Walter reminds us:

"Even though those who do so may be honest, sincere and have

good intentions, their misuse of the Word is building a faith that is not founded upon the Truth of God's Word. The result is a faith that will fail them when they desperately need the truth to set them free."²⁰

FIZZ, FLUFF, AND FABLES ARE NOT NEW

It is important to know that Scripture-twisting has a long history among heretical groups. David Lindberg informs us:

"This desire to find allegories in Scripture was carried to excess by Origen (185-256) who was likewise associated with Alexandrian thought, and he managed thereby to get rid of anything which could not be harmonized with pagan learning."²¹

It was faulty, subjective, and relativistic hermeneutics that allowed Jane Lead in the 1600s to teach her followers that her church, called the Philadelphia Church, was the last-days remnant Church and would escape the imminent Great Tribulation. This she did by promoting the view that Revelation 3:7-13 applied only to her followers.²²

Sir William Ramsey helped to excavate the Philadelphia region in Asia Minor and shows that Revelation 3:7-13 uniquely applied to the very church Jesus was addressing in the first century. Ramsey observes:

"Philadelphia, therefore, was the keeper of the gateway to the plateau; but the door had now been permanently opened before the Church, and the work of Philadelphia had been to go forth through the door and carry the gospel to the cities of the Phrygian land."²³

People often wonder how the cultist can get so much error out of the same book from which the Orthodox get so much truth. A simple cooking illustration will show us the Apostle Peter's point. If I were to take from the freezer a large batch of frozen breaded shrimp, drop them into a sizzling deep fryer, I could serve a nice meal to the delight of any shrimp

lover. However, if I took the same shrimp and decided to leave them out in the heat for a day and then serve them sprinkled with cockroach powder, I would surely have extremely sick and maybe dead guests.

Same freezer, same shrimp, but different preparation. The cultist takes the same words, the same doctrines, but through neglect, mistreatment, misuse, misinterpretation, and deadly additions, serves an unhealthy brew of error and destructive doctrine. Same book, same words, different preparation. It really is all in the hermeneutics.

AN UNDERSTANDING OF PROPER HERMENEUTICS

Ezra knew the importance of proper biblical interpretation for his fledgling nation as he and others “read distinctly from the book, in the law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them understand the reading” (Nehemiah 8:8).

The Apostle Paul commands us to be “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). It is obvious from those words that we can *wrongly* divide the Word. Charles Ryrie elaborates on Paul’s clear command, saying, “*handling accurately*. I.e., correctly handling the Word of God, in both analysis and presentation — in contrast to the inane interpretations of false teachers.”²⁴

Faith healer Benny Hinn may boast that “The anointing from above is your source of knowledge. That is how it is possible for you to operate in revelation rather than in education.”²⁵ That may have a nice ring to it, but it is more hype than truth. If it only took “revelation,” Hinn would not make so many goofs, gaffes, contradictions, and false prophecies. His misstatements and embellishments could make it to *Funniest Home Videos*. His wife’s “Holy Ghost enema” discourse made it to national television.²⁶

The Church has all the final revelation it needs in the pages of the Bible (2 Peter 1). The Church also has a wonderful history of a “fair plan of interpretation.” There is a history of conservative, orthodox, and evangeli-

cal hermeneutics that comes out of properly handling the “Apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42).

Any honest student of Church history would have to admit that the historical grammatical method, which gives the author’s intent, is the safe and spiritually healthy method of orthodoxy.

DEFINITIONS, NOT DAFFYNITIONS

The practice of handling Scriptures properly and interpreting the Bible in the context of all other Scriptures goes back to Jesus Himself. We do not find our Lord handling the Word of God in a cavalier fashion. Wilbur Smith elaborates on the fact that hermeneutics is a concept derived first of all from the Bible itself:

“St. Luke, in his record of what has been called by some the most beautiful chapter in all the Bible, the account of the walk of the risen Lord with the two disciples on the way to Emmaus, tells us that Jesus, ‘beginning from Moses, and from all the prophets, interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.’ The word here translated *interpreted* is the Greek word *dihermeneuo*. If we take away the first two letters, the prefix, and give a rough breathing to that initial letter ‘e’ we have exactly the word from which our word *hermeneutics* is derived, meaning, then, the science of interpretation. (In the New Testament this word, in its various forms, may be found, e.g., in Matt. 1:23; Mark 5:41; 15:22,34; John 1:8,38; 9:7; Acts 4:36; 9:36; 13:8; I Cor. 12:10; 14:28; Heb. 7:2.)”²⁷

Bernard Ramm defines hermeneutics:

“Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation. It is a science because it is guided by rules within a system; and it is an art because the application of the rules is by skill, and not by mechanical imitation. As such it forms one of the most important

members of the theological sciences.”²⁸

Brian Shealy defines hermeneutics as “a set of principles for biblical interpretation.”²⁹ He further states that “God has communicated by having men write in language that human beings can understand. The natural way for humans to interpret any such communication is through employment of rules of hermeneutics to understand a passage’s meaning.”³⁰ Because God has given us the message in words, it makes sense to use our minds and linguistic tools to get the message right.

In *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Milton Terry elaborates on how sound hermeneutics brings us great safety:

“The Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics are the governing laws and methods of procedure by which the interpreter determines the meaning of the Holy Scriptures. These principles are of the nature of comprehensive and fundamental doctrines. They become to the practical exegete so many maxims, postulates, and settled rules. He is supposed to hold them in the mind as axioms, and to apply them in all his expositions with uniform consistency. ... Many different and often contradictory methods of exposition have been adopted, and some enthusiasts have gone to the extreme of affirming that there are manifold meanings and ‘mountains of sense’ in every line of Scripture. Under the spell of some fascination many have strangely misled, and have set forth as expositions of the Scriptures their own futile fancies. Sound hermeneutical principles are, therefore, elements of safety and satisfaction in the study of God’s written word.”³¹

PART OF THE SPIRIT’S WORK

This in no way disparages or lessens the work and illumination of the Holy Spirit in interpretation and application. The Spirit works more readily through order than He does through chaos. Terry urges that “the expounder of the Holy Scriptures

needs to have living fellowship and communion with the Holy Spirit."³²

The Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Scriptures (2 Peter 1:21). He led them in giving propositional truth in words and sentences. The interpreter must prayerfully and carefully handle those sentences and words with integrity and proper definitions. He must never interpret Scripture unscripturally, but will seek the real and intended sense of each verse in its context.

So we need to look at the interpreter's head and heart. This is not to create a false dichotomy between the two, but for ease of analysis to study each side of the same coin. Head and heart both must be in the process, lest there be imbalance. Intellect and spiritual devotion are both necessary. A good exegete is one who is applying the truth to his own life as he learns. He is sure to be taking the "log out of his own eye first," growing and maturing in sanctification and taking heed to *himself* as well as his doctrine (1 Timothy 4:16).

A seminary professor received a phone call from a recently graduated student who was in a panic. "Prof," he said, "I have my first funeral and I don't know what to do." The professor told him, "You had all that material in class." The quick reply was, "Yeah, I know, but this guy is really dead!"

There is a difference between class academics and application, between information and real life, between study and reality. We must have a head for the Word, as well as a heart for the Word. As Scripture is personally and properly studied, it must be personally applied. There is a biblical middle ground between Pharisee and Gnostic, legalist and mystic.

Knowledge can puff up, but truth applied keeps one humble before God. Hermeneutical rules without a devotional life and sensitivity to God are a great danger. As A.W. Tozer said:

"It is altogether possible to be instructed in the rudiments of the faith and still have no real understanding of the whole thing."³³

Warren Wiersbe asks, "Is God *real* to you? Is your Christian experience a

set of definitions, a list of orthodox doctrines, or a living relationship with God? ... Is your heart hungering and thirsting after personal holiness?"³⁴ The best hermeneutics combine head and heart, they never set one against the other. The whole package is needed. We must be warmly orthodox (Luke 24:32).

THE HEAD OF THE INTERPRETER

This is a golden age of knowledge. Never has more study material been available. We are deluged with good study books and have instant access to libraries by way of the Internet. The availability of mountains of information is unprecedented.

While it is of great help to know the biblical languages — Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek — it is not absolutely necessary today. We have the incredible availability of all kinds of linguistic helps, all in English.

Even Christians who have not had the privilege and advantage of higher education in a seminary have no excuse. Just being able to read English puts the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures at their disposal through writers who have labored to put it all before them from their mother tongue. Johann Keil and Franz Delitzsch, Marvin Vincent, Adolf Deissmann, W.E. Vine, Kenneth Wuest, A.T. Robertson, and Gerhard Kittel are just a few. Good Bible encyclopedias, Bible atlases, and Bible dictionaries have put the Bible world at our fingertips. Wonderful, dependable Bible commentaries are everywhere available. Information on Bible archaeology is readily and easily obtainable through books and periodicals, many of them crammed with photos. Never has there been a day when so much was available to so many.

In spite of the availability of good information, there is a move away from learning and toward feelings and emotions. *Charisma* magazine favorably reported on a Punk church in Portland, Ore., where "Pastor" Deborah Loyd tells her audience: "Jesus is not going to dump on you" as a preface to her 7-½ minute sermon.³⁵ One adult member commented,

"We're trying to help these kids get unstuck from theology and on the right road to relationship."³⁶ Relationship seems to be a code word for physical manifestations.

FOLLOW THE RULES

We will consider some hermeneutical principles by using the acrostic CULL. We want to cull out of the Bible as much of the proper meaning as we can. The word *cull* is defined as: "to select and gather. ... to examine carefully so as to select or reject."³⁷

The C is *Context*. The word context is from the Latin and means literally, woven together. It has to do with connections of words with their setting. We must observe the context, or setting, of words to determine their true meaning. If I say, "Sometimes I wake up grumpy..." you will think a certain thing about me. Suppose though I finished the sentence and add, "...but other times I let her sleep!" Now we have an entirely different meaning and message because of the fuller context. The setting has changed the entire communication.

If I used the word *ray*, one would not know by the word alone what I meant. It could be something out of science fiction or have to do with laser surgery. I could be talking about the sun, or a fish, or even a person. Without a context you would be lost. If I added two words and said, "My friend Ray," one begins to understand. Without an even larger context one still would not know if Ray is male or female, a child or adult, short or tall, dead or alive, related or unrelated, white or black, young or old, near or far.

C.W. Slemming states the importance of context:

"To understand a text we must know the context, otherwise our interpretation may be a pretext. We must ask ourselves such questions as: 'Who is speaking — God or man? Is it the Old Testament or the New Testament? Is it a historical statement or is it of doctrinal intent?' By doing this we shall be better able

to 'correctly handle the word of truth.'"38

Every cult going thrives on out-of-context proof texts. How important it is then to observe context, since many Greek and Hebrew words can only be understood in their contextual setting and not by etymology or word derivation alone. D.A. Carson reminds us:

"One of the most enduring of errors, the root fallacy presupposes that every word actually *has* a meaning bound up with its shape or its components."³⁹

The Hebrew word *olam* when used of persons or institutions, though translated "forever" in English translations, only means age-long or an undetermined amount of time. It can also mean a foreshadowing of the eternal. However, when used of God and the work of God in salvation, it always means forever and ever.⁴⁰

We must also familiarize ourselves with the historical and literary context, as Daniel Doriani points up:

"The world of the Bible includes its politics, geography, agriculture, economics, social customs, methods of warfare, family structures, and gender roles. Just a little knowledge of daily life — how people ate and dressed, worked and slept — illumines hundreds of passages."⁴¹

Understanding the religious context can bring the Bible alive in a new way to the reader. In John 7:37, Jesus announces that He is the "water" and that the thirsty can come and drink. Verse 37 also informs us of an important fact with the pregnant phrase, "on the last day, that great day of the feast." So what? Most would read right over that statement.

In his Bible study, Alfred Edersheim informs us that on that last day of the feast, a colorful and festive procession of bands of priests — with trumpets, palms, myrtle and willow branches, and great fanfare — slowly walked down to the Siloam Pool to assist the High Priest in gathering water in a golden pitcher. As the Temple procession returned through the Water Gate,

the anticipation of the people built to a crescendo:

"The two Priests ascended 'the rise' of the altar, and turned to the left. There were two silver funnels here, with narrow openings, leading down to the base of the altar. Into that at the east, which was somewhat wider, the wine was poured, and, at the same time, the water into the western and narrower opening, the people shouting to the Priest to raise his hand, so as to make sure that he poured the water into the funnel."⁴²

Edersheim continues his narration:

"Immediately after 'the pouring of the water,' the great 'Hallel,' consisting of Psalms cxiii. to cxviii. (inclusive), was chanted antiphonally, or rather, with responses, to the accompaniment of the flute. ... We can have little difficulty in determining at what part of the services of 'the last, the Great Day of the Feast,' Jesus stood and cried, 'If any one thirst, let Him come unto Me and drink!' It must have been with special reference to the ceremony of the outpouring of the water, which, as we have seen, was considered the central part of the service."⁴³

After nearly 30 trips to Israel, this writer can say that even one trip would give a person a geographical context that would make the Bible read like a new book. It is another way to enter the context of the Bible. The sights, sounds, and smells of the Holy Land are incredible. The green rolling hills of Galilee and the carpets of flowers on the hillsides, as well as the rocky soil give the parables of Jesus a more immediate reality. Seeing just one storm on the Sea of Galilee, with white capped waves on a normally tranquil lake, as the wind whistles and barrels over the Golan Heights, gives a new appreciation of the cry of the Apostles, "Carest thou not that we perish!"

Walking westerly down the steep incline of the Mount of Olives toward the Kidron Valley and feeling the legs straining, gives a new appreciation for

the manhood and stamina of Jesus. Experiencing the distance from the little port of Jaffa to the coastal city of Caesarea gives an new appreciation of the hard 2-3 day walk of Peter just to share the Gospel. Standing on Tel Megiddo and looking at the vast expanse of the Valley of Armageddon brings Solomon, Ahab, and Josiah nearer. At that place, thoughts of Revelation's forecasted last days battle crackles in the imagination.

The video series, *That the World May Know*, is a visual feast and a tool that will give the viewer information on Bible geography and the cultural background of Scripture in a compelling and interesting venue. With aerial views, maps, charts, and on-site teaching, historian and teacher Ray Vander Laan opens vistas of the Bible that are compelling and informative.⁴⁴

We need to do all that we can to get a proper understanding of the context of Scripture: its cultural, religious, and geographical context.

Two urgent questions that one *must always* put to the context: 1) *Does the context or prior or subsequent revelation limit the application?* and 2) *Is the teaching normative for today?*

NEW? NOT TRUE

False teachers and Charismatic extremists often lead people astray telling them that the fleshly nonsense going on in their meetings is the "new thing" prophesied by Jeremiah. No one thinks to check the context. In Jeremiah 31 the "new thing" is clearly spelled out as "the New Covenant." By twisting and distorting the Word, people are conned and robbed. Real violence is done to the Word of God. Zephaniah's words ring true: "Her princes in her midst are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave not a bone till morning. Her prophets are insolent, treacherous people; Her priests have polluted the sanctuary. They have done violence to the law" (Zephaniah 3:3-4).

How often selfishness and greed is hidden under the words "ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." What is the "whatever" in John 15? David Roper explains it beauti-

fully and simply, based on the context that Jesus Himself gave:

“We should understand that God’s resources are granted not for random shows of strength, or to be prostituted on selfish ambition. God has a greater thing in mind for us than earthly good: Most of His giving is to make us good. Jesus put it this way: ‘I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ... *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.* This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples’ (John 15:5-8).”⁴⁵

The context and key to Jesus’ promise is “fruit.” Roper, true to the context, goes on to explain:

“His unequivocal promise: ‘Ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you,’ is conditioned by the context and controlled by the concept of fruit. The ‘fruit’ is the fruit of the Spirit: ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control’ (Galatians 5:22). We can ask anything that involves acquiring the characteristics of God. When we ask for His character He begins to give it, working through time and circumstance to conform us more closely to His will. This is the use to which He puts His power.”⁴⁶

So the context of fruit governs the meaning of “whatever.” This corresponds to Colossians 1:11: “Strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, *for all patience and long suffering with joy.*” It also parallels Philippians 4:13: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” The “all things” is not anything that I want to do, but rather “all things” in the will of God. I can do whatever God commands me to do as a believer since I have the empowerment of grace and God’s Spirit. It is the “all things” of His Word and ways. Regarding pleading with God for fruit in our lives, whether it is the fruit of character, or the fruit of converts, God

invites us to keep on asking. He welcomes prayers like this and we will never be sent away disappointed.

These wise words of Dr. Jay Adams sum up the above:

“...whenever the heavenly Father requires anything of His children, He always provides instruction and power to meet those requirements.”⁴⁷

At times the context of the entire book must be taken into account. The book of Ecclesiastes is an example. The writer is working through the first 11 chapters to describe what life on earth without God is like. His conclusions in many places are true, as far as they go, in terms of what life is without any reference to a Creator. Therefore we would not try to establish major doctrines about the afterlife on those chapters because the context is “under the sun,” that is, life on earth. Rather, we would go to chapter 12 where he introduces God and an eternal perspective into the picture and then over to the fulness of the New Testament, knowing that Christ “brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10). We must always look at Scripture in its full context.

The statements of Job’s friends, at points, are deficient. It is true they made the statements, but they may be as untrue as the statements of Satan. We must observe the intended thrust of passages in their intended setting. “There is no God,” we are told by the Psalmist (Psalm 14:1). There is a big difference when we read it in context and add, “The fool has said in his heart...”

The U is *Usus Loquendi*. Milton Terry explains:

“Hence the importance of attending to what is commonly called the *usus loquendi*, or current usage of words as employed by a particular writer, or prevalent in a particular age. It often happens, also, that a writer uses a common word in some special and peculiar sense, and then his own definitions must be taken, or the context and scope must be consulted, in order to determine the precise meaning intended. There

are many ways by which the *usus loquendi* of a writer may be ascertained. The first and simplest is when he himself defines the terms he uses.”⁴⁸

So, it is asking how the writer defined and used the word or term. Examples of *usus loquendi* can be seen all through Hebrew poetry where the writer uses parallelisms. The second phrase explains, amplifies, and completes the first, as in Psalm 1:1. To “walk in the counsel of the ungodly” is to “begin to associate with ‘the way of sinners;’ finally, he would settle down permanently in ‘the seat of the scornful.’”⁴⁹

SINLESS AND PERFECT?

How are we to understand the English word *perfect* in 2 Timothy 3:17 (KJV)? Is it absolute perfection or a state of being completely like God? Somehow experience as well as Scripture makes us uncomfortable with thinking we can be absolutely perfect in every way, short of glorification.

It is hard to believe that religious groups have taught forms of absolute perfection. Anne Hutchinson of Massachusetts taught her followers in the 1600s that salvation made one a “perfected being.” It no longer mattered how one lived since the behavior of a perfected being could not be called sin.⁵⁰

Shadrach Ireland, during the same period, taught that he was so perfect that he was immortal and would not die. He shared that information until the day he died.⁵¹ His body then was kept around for months hoping for resurrection before it finally was buried.

In our day, popular Bible teachers, steeped in mysticism, express this same false concept. Consider the words of Charismatic prima donna Joyce Meyer:

“I’m going to tell you something, folks: I didn’t stop sinning until I finally got it through my thick head I wasn’t a sinner anymore. And the religious world thinks that’s heresy and they want to hang you for it. But the Bible says that I’m righteous and I can’t be righteous and be a sin-

ner at the same time ... All I was ever taught to say was, 'I'm a poor, miserable sinner.' I am not poor, I am not miserable and I am not a sinner. That is a lie from the pit of hell. That is what I was and if I still am then Jesus died in vain. Amen?"⁵²

The Apostle Paul actually defines and amplifies the word, which is translated "perfect" by what immediately follows in the initial phrase ("that the man of God may be perfect") of 2 Timothy 3:17: "*thoroughly furnished* [or completely equipped] *for every good work.*" So it is experience, maturity, living out the Word in ministry, and service which Paul has in mind; being grown up as a Christian and not a babe. W.E. Vine has this to say of the English word *perfect* (Greek: *teleios*):

"It is used (I) of persons, (a) primarily of physical development, then, with ethical import, 'fully grown, mature.'"⁵³

An immediate example would be a 2-year-old in a restaurant compared to a well-mannered adult.

Imagine the cultic impact if a false teacher insisted on some kind of absolute perfection and then started to determine the requirements for that perfection. Paul encountered a problem with man-made rules and asceticism in Colossians 2:20-23. The potential for mischief, deception, and hurt is realized very quickly in perfectionistic cults.

COMPARE, COMPARE, COMPARE

Usus loquendi also can be helped along by what is called the analogy of faith. This simply means comparing Scripture with Scripture. Ascertaining the *usus loquendi* can often be done by a meticulous comparison of other Scriptures through cross-referencing. A good topical Bible and a harmony of the Gospels are helpful. A subject may just be touched on in one verse, but treated more fully and extensively in another place. This also means that we always interpret passages that are unclear, obscure, doubtful, or difficult by those that are plain and simple. We cannot overturn clear, well estab-

lished doctrines on the basis of one difficult verse. "Baptism for the dead" mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:29 must be brought to other clearer Scriptures, lest we create and involve ourselves in a false spiritistic, unbiblical practice such as that of the Latter-day Saints.

Why does Zephaniah declare judgment on Ethiopia (2:12)? There is no reason given in the verse. Joined with Isaiah 18:1-7 and Ezekiel 30:4-6, we learn that they had created alliances with pagan Egypt and other nations that were the enemies of God. Comparison of Scriptures is a great hermeneutical tool and a way to better understand the intended meaning of the author.

Good hermeneutics are surely a protection against exploitation of cults and their propensity for ripping verses out of context to use in a self-serving way.

The first L is *Literal*. There are allegorical, as well as mystical and rationalistic, approaches to Scripture. The literal method also is called the grammatical-historical method. This means that the Bible is not looked at in a wooden literal sense, but interpreted as are other books and writings, recognizing grammar, syntax, and normal word definitions.

Since the Scripture writers used words and wrote in sentences, we assume they wanted to be understood and did not want to mystify or bewilder us. They wanted us to comprehend their words as we would any communication. The Apostle John said: "These things I write to you" and "These things have I written" (John 1:4; 5:13). He then unfolds what it is he would have us know and understand. The difference is that this is communication from God even though conveyed in human words. All the more reason to handle God's Word properly, carefully, and honestly. R.C. Sproul reminds us that "Written statements come to us within a grammatical structure of some sort."⁵⁴

David Larsen wisely says:

"Like much literature, the Bible has both literal and symbolic

passages. It is generally prudent to heed A.B. Davidson's rule with respect to interpreting biblical prophecy: 'Read it literally — assume the literal meaning is his meaning.' However, wooden literalism that fails to see the figurative is as unsound as excessive spiritualizing that avoids the historical. The most advisable approach to interpretation is to seek the plain, natural and normal meaning of a text in its content. Let us be like Luther who said, 'I have based my preaching on the literal Word.'"⁵⁵

This is to recognize that the Bible writers gave us metaphors, similes, idioms, irony, parables, figures of speech, symbols, poetry, prophecy, anthropomorphisms, and types. We interpret them in the normal way that these figures are interpreted, recognizing their uniqueness.

Bernard Ramm explains literal not as literalism, but as normal interpretation and says:

"*The customary, socially-acknowledged designation of a word is the literal meaning of that word.* But there is enough usage of terms in speech and writing to create a *common language mentality*, if we may so speak, and the literal meaning of terms is their native meaning in this common language mentality. ... The literal meaning of a word is the *basic, customary, social designation of that word.*"⁵⁶

So in the literal grammatico-historical method, we interpret words and sentences in their normal, usual, and customary proper designation. This includes all figures of speech. This is certainly a safeguard against the fallen imagination and mystical impulses of many.

A WHOLE LOT OF SHAKIN' GOING ON

An example of the total violation of the literal or normal approach can be seen in the Shaker movement of the 18th century. John and Jane Wardley, who broke from the Quakers' movement, founded the Shakers in England in 1747. To justify vigorously

scratching their bodies, shaking, trembling, and screeching in their meetings, they applied Isaiah 2:19 and Ezekiel 38:20, disregarding the obvious meaning of the words.

The immediate context and obvious meaning of these verses is straightforward and the words show clearly that these statements have nothing to do with worship meetings at all. They clearly have to do with lost people herding themselves into caves trying to escape the imminent judgment of God. They are a parallel to the latter chapters of the book of Revelation.

This kind of Scripture twisting and ignoring the plain sense of the words gave the Shakers justification to follow any irrational emotion or outlandish fleshly manifestation, no matter how crazed. It also allowed them to teach that Ann Lee (who was illiterate, had a history of anorexia, and spent time in an insane asylum) was the “second appearance” of Jesus Christ.⁵⁷

THE HEART OF THE INTERPRETER

The second L is *Live It*. Proverbs 1:7 tells us that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” We must handle and read the Word of God devotionally, always ready to apply it to our own struggles and growth.

As we study Psalm 51, and the historical details of David’s sin, we may see the need of using the Psalm as our own prayer of confession and repentance. As we ferret out meaning in Paul’s armor passage (Ephesians 6), are we putting on the whole armor of God? Peter says we must “desire the unadulterated milk of the Word” if we are to grow (1 Peter 2:2). As we get behind the words in Ephesians 4, are we daily seeking to “put off the old man and put on the new”? As we dig into Romans 12, are we praying for transformed minds and being more loving, hospitable, prayerful, and returning good for evil as the context commands? Are we letting our studies in the Word convict us, shape us, mold us, discipline us, instruct us, and help us grow as 2 Timothy 3:15-17 suggests?

A BALANCED LIFE

Hermeneutics must be an exercise of head and heart. A loss of balance here can create either Pharisees or mystics. Just as a train needs two tracks lest it lose control, so we need the two tracks of a serious study life and a serious devotional life.

Howard Hendrick’s book, *Living by the Book*, is an excellent introduction to hermeneutics. It is non-technical and has a section on application, as well as a chapter on “A Process of Life Change.” Jay Adams’ *What To Do On Thursday* is equally helpful. Its subtitle, “A Layman’s Guide to the Practical Use of the Scripture,” emphasizes the book’s instruction of understanding and application of Scripture on a daily basis.

T.M. Lindsay reminds us of God’s intent and the power in His Word in dealing with us directly:

“All the Reformers of the sixteenth century, whether Luther, Zwingli, or Calvin, believed that in the Scriptures God spoke to them in the same way as He had done in earlier days to His prophets and apostles.”⁵⁸

James 1:22 commands us to “be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” If the Scriptures are just an exercise of the mind and not a life-changing dynamic, we are deceived. Paul E. Little gives us a way to read the Bible devotionally so as to get “spiritual food” and personal application with the use of questions:

“Is there an example for me to follow? Is there a sin for me to avoid? Is there a command for me to obey? Is there a promise to claim? What does this teach me about God and about Jesus Christ? Is there a difficulty with which I need further help? What should be my prayer for today from this passage?”⁵⁹

We may want to add, “Does this passage teach me anything about doctrine? Does it reprove, correct, or instruct me? Does it convict me in any way and surface any sin I should confess? Does it urge me to any duty I have been avoiding?” It is unthink-

able that we would try to feed others while starving ourselves. We must stay tender and teachable as we walk before the Lord.

James adds, “But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does” (James 1:25, NASV). Blessing comes from application and obedience.

The application of Scripture and the maintaining of a godly lifestyle is the constant theme of the book of Titus. Our lives must “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things” (2:10). Are we making doctrine attractive by the way we live?

CONCLUSION

During Hitler’s Holocaust, Oskar Schindler finagled the German authorities into letting him employ 1,100 Jews in his factory for the war effort, thus saving them from the death camps. He paid the German government a price for each one, and today there are more than 6,000 descendants of the 1,100.

At the end of the film, *Schindler’s List*, Schindler is at the train station — the war just ending. He is to see those he saved for the very last time. They give him a letter of thanks so the American government will know what he did for them and not try him as a war criminal. They then give him a ring that they were able to make secretly. On the ring is an inscription from the Talmud, “Whoever Saves One Life, Saves The World Entire.”

In an incredibly powerful and moving scene, Schindler begins to weep and says, “I could have got more out. I could have got more — I don’t know — if I just — I could have got more out if I’d made more money. I threw away so much money. You have no idea — if I had just. I didn’t do enough. This car, [Amon] Goeth would’ve bought this car. Why did I keep the car? Ten people right there. Ten people. Ten more people. This pin. Two people. This is gold. Two more people. He would have given me two for it; at least one. He would have given me one, one more. One

more person. A person, Stern."⁶⁰ Collapsing in sobs and tears he cries out, "For this I could have gotten one more person and I didn't. And I didn't."⁶¹ He looks at the 1,100 wishing he had gotten even one more.

We need to get serious about properly handling God's Word with passion and intellectual honesty and understand the urgency of getting clear and precise teaching out to others while there is still time. "Only one life twill soon be past" is more than a cliché.

How many Christians in days to come will shed tears of regret and say, "If only I had taken the Word of God more seriously. If only I had studied it more diligently. If only I had been more committed to rightly dividing the Word of Truth. If only I had applied the truth more personally to my own life. If only I had obeyed it more fully. If only I had done more for the cause of truth, more for my Savior, more for the Church of Christ, more for the lost and confused. If only..., if only..., if only..."

Don't wait. Be doing it *now*.

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