The Quest for Understanding the Bible

"Original Intent and Meaning"

By Richie Temple

There is a wonderful record in the Book of Nehemiah of a time when the faithful Israelites who had returned from exile to Judea gathered together to hear the Old Testament Law of God read and explained to them by Ezra and the Levites. Let us compare this account in two different versions. This will help us understand as clearly as possible the meaning, or sense, of what is being said:

> *"They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear (*or, footnote*, 'translating it') and* **giving the meaning** *so that the people could understand what was being read" (Nehemiah 8:8, NIV).*

> "They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly (*or, footnote*, 'with interpretation'), and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."(Nehemiah 8:8, ESV).

This record, which is translated similarly in all major translations, teaches us that when Ezra and the Levites read the Book of the Law to the assembly of Israelites who were gathered to hear it that day that their primary goal was to give the "meaning" or "sense" of the text to the listeners. It may very well be that the biblical text was in Hebrew and that it had to first be translated into Aramaic before being explained; however, it is also possible the listeners understood enough Hebrew but simply needed a clearer interpretation of its meaning. At any rate it is clear that the end goal was not gaining"word for word" knowledge of the text, but rather, *understanding* the original meaning or sense of the text so that the people of Israel

could *apply* that original sense or meaning to their new situation in Judea.

This biblical account is a great example for us today and illustrates the two basic steps, or principles, involved in trying to properly understand and live according to the truth of the Bible. These two principles can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. 1. We must *understand* the original intent and meaning of the biblical writers in the light of their own historical, literary and cultural context.

2. 2. We must then *apply* that original intent and meaning of the biblical text to our own present day situations.

Though this may seem simple enough and, even, obvious to many people, it is not the way that most people go about understanding and applying the Bible today. Most people appeal to "the plain sense of the text." They simply read it, or hear it, and then understand it according to a "what it means to me" way of thinking and then apply it according to a "common sense" way of living. Fortunately, the "what it means to me" way of thinking often coincides with the original meaning and intent of the biblical text and the "common sense" application of it is usually in line with the general sense of scripture as a whole – that is, "to love God" and "to love one's neighbor as oneself."

If either the interpretation or the application were way out of line with the general overall sense of scripture most people would recognize that there is probably some problem with one or the other. That, of course, is because most people retain a general sense of right and wrong and most people live with at least a modicum of common sense. However, relying on this methodology for understanding

and living according to the Bible is subject to both to grave errors. It also potentially, leaves the Bible open to be interpreted and applied according anyone's own personal whims, or even, evil manipulative intent. The consequences of this can be catastrophic for individuals, for marriages, for families, for churches, for societies and for nations as a whole as the history of the world has shown. It must always be remembered that the "plain sense" to a modern reader can often be wrong. We must seek, instead, what would have been the "intended sense" or the "original sense" of the biblical writers.

Suppose someone wrote you a letter and you were unclear about what that person was saying. What would be the best way to clear up the failure to communicate effectively? Some possible choices are:

1. To guess about the meaning intended.

2. To supply one's own preferred meaning.

3. To say that it means anything anyone wants it to mean.

4. To try to find out the author's original intent and meaning.

Obviously, only #4 is a correct choice. And so it is with understanding the Bible. The process of doing this is at times difficult and requires a study of the historical times, culture, vocabulary, etc. in which the documents originally appear. Though this may take time and effort, it must be recognized that there is no other *proper* way to understand the Bible just as, for example, there is no other proper method for understanding the U.S. Declaration of Independence or the U.S. Constitution. How then does one begin this process? A few fundamental principles are as follows:

1. Read, read and read the Bible for scope and overall context. The details of the Bible will always fit within the scope and context of the Bible's overall structure and themes.

2. As you read ask yourself two basic questions:

    a. Do I understand what is written?

    b. How does what is written apply to me?

3. To get help in understanding the Biblical text we should use:

    a. Several good English versions of the Bible along with a Greek-English Interlinear for the New Testament.

    b. Several good study Bibles, Bible Dictionaries and Bible Commentaries to see what Biblical scholars say about the passages that you are reading. Compare what these different scholars say in the light of what seems to be the most reasonable understanding of the text from your own personal reading and study of that text.

To understand the Bible well we must maintain humility, honesty and integrity in our quest for truth. We must also read widely and deeply, not only the Bible itself, but also works that can help us understand the original intent and meaning of the Biblical text. Though we can know and understand the most important truths of the Bible without having a vast and deep overall knowledge of the Bible, we *cannot* be faithful interpreters, guardians, or teachers of the Bible as a whole if we do not possess a scope, knowledge, understanding, and feel for the Bible as a whole. The first step in doing this is to find and use a good translation or version of the Bible, or better yet, several good

translations or versions. Then, to use them most effectively we must understand the nature of translation itself and which translations or versions of the Bible can best help us to properly understand and then apply the truth of the scriptures to our lives today. That will be the subject of our next *Notes & Quotes on the Bible*.