Reading

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Hermeneutics: How to Read and Understand the Bible

What Is Reading?

Is this question a joke? No; pitifully, it is not. Some think the Bible can be understood simply by reading it. Others think it can be easily understood with a dictionary. And yet others think that a dictionary and lexicon (dictionary of a dead foreign language) will easily get the job done.

Reading is the action of perusing written material to recognize the marks of your language that indicate specific words and combinations of those words forming written communication. The full idea and import of the words and their combinations are dependent on interpretation, which is the action of determining the sense, or meaning, of a reading. We will consider interpretation separately.

Reading is simply and only the means to identify the words used to convey meaning, while interpretation must determine the proper meaning of those words. Reading gives us the sound of words, but interpretation gives us the sense of words. Rules of interpretation should not be confused with reading. Young children can read the simple words of *Proverbs*, but few can understand the sense and meaning of Solomon's writings. Proverbs need interpretation, just as the Holy Spirit told us when introducing the book (Prov 1:6), and just as Jesus explained to His disciples (John 16:25,29).

Words are important, since they are the basis for communicating with language. Every language and writing assumes that words will be understood in their common usage and meaning, which is a word's primary definition. In a current language, even the illiterate understand these meanings, for it is the common verbal and written use of words that establishes their primary definitions. We only move to secondary meanings of words when one or more of the following reasons exist:

1. We are reading a work clearly spiritual, prophetic, poetic, and/or figurative in nature.
2. We are reading a work beyond the third-grade level where secondary senses add appeal.
3. We are told or shown in the larger or smaller context that secondary meanings are needed.
4. Primary definitions would create an internal contradiction with what is written elsewhere.
5. Primary definitions would create an obvious absurdity, logically or naturally or factually.

This matter of primary definitions is not a rule of interpretation, since it is a basic assumption of reading any writing in any language. Reading cannot be done with even elementary comprehension without starting from this beginning point, which we have all assumed since about the first grade. When we read that Spot was a "dog," we did not think hotdog, slow car, ugly girl, sodomite, or cat.

Reading is the first step in understanding the Bible, as we see clearly in the wonderful example of Ezra (Neh 8:8); but it does not get us far. Reading gives us the sound of words, but interpretation gives us the sense, or

meaning, of words. The Pharisees and other Jews read the Bible, but they did not understand what they read. Reading is only the means to identify the words used to convey the sense.

We read Scripture carefully with full identification of each word before we begin any interpretation.

Some answers and explanations will be in the words carefully considered (John 8:58; 10:35; Galatians 3:16; Matthew 22:31-33; Daniel 9:2; Matthew 24:15).

Trying to interpret words that have been confused is merely compounding a previous error.

We reject as ridiculous and dangerous any trust in number schemes, hidden meanings, word patterns, and so forth, which deranged heretics use to prove anything from the Bible (II Cor 1:13). And with the advent of the personal computer, there are such schemes proliferating as sound Bible interpretation.

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