

A Brief Discussion about Primary and Secondary Application of Scripture.

Presented by Gregory B. Washington

“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”¹

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.”²

First, I confess my bias about Scripture:

- It is God’s breathed, sacred, authoritative, and inerrant Word.
- It is his revelation to mankind which contains that portion of his intended will about himself, his doxological plans for man’s redemption through his Son – Jesus Christ, and the eternal destiny of every human.
- It contains the information necessary for men to learn of their depravity, God’s holiness, and his offer of forgiveness of sins and eternal life to everyone that believes in his son, Jesus Christ.
- Every aspect of Scripture is intended to display some awesome aspect of God.
- It is meant to be understood only by continual personal study, illumination by the Holy Spirit, and applied consistent with its original intentional meaning.

I acknowledge these biases to clarify my position on proper primary and secondary application of Scripture.

I theorize that, in addition to the doctrinal and theological dangers caused by the presence of false teachers and false professors in local churches, failure to identify and declare the proper primary and secondary applications of Scripture is weakening the individual believer and the local Church.

*¹¹ And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.*³

I believe the evidence which confirms my theory is seen in the trend of diminishing attendance in strong Bible teaching and practicing churches especially for Bible studies. Meanwhile, churches sponsoring cultural, social or entertainment driven activities see growing attendance (for those activities) though the study and evangelism activities are sparsely attended.

¹ *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), 2 Pe 1:20–21.

² *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), 2 Ti 3:16–17.

³ *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), Mt 24:11.

The road to recognizing the primary meaning and application of Scripture is part of the hermeneutic and exegetical process of Bible interpretation. This process requires the student to diligently study in order to discover:

- The human author of a passage.
- The historical and literary aspects (genre) of the book or epistle containing the passage.
- When and from where human author wrote.
- Who was the original audience?
- What were circumstances facing the original audience?
- The accuracy of the text/translation you're using.
- The proper grammar, word meanings, sentence structure, and types of speech.
- The literary devices used (literal, figures of speech, prophetic, poetic, chiasmic, etc.)
- The primary and sub themes of book/epistle each of its chapters.
- The biblical and theological context of the passage.
- The primary and secondary application of the text.

Regardless of the homiletic method used by preachers/teachers, their ultimate goal is:

- to know and share what the text literally says
- to know and share what the text literally meant for/to the original audience
- to know and share what the primary application was for the original audience
- to discover and share any secondary application for contemporary hearers/readers

"¹⁵ Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth".⁴

Why all this trouble? Because accurately determining the primary and secondary applications of Scripture allow us to recognize God intended purposes and our proper responses to his intentions. Failure to investigate and discover these truths will certainly cause us to misinterpret Scripture and fall into error leading others right behind us.

God 'breathed' the Scripture through the human authors for the purpose of revealing his will to and for the original audience. Therefore, God's word must be seen in the light of his intended purposes to properly understand its context. Unfortunately In my lifetime I've come to recognize that people tend to determine meaning based on a personal bias or contemporary culture rather than the intent of the author/speaker. Additionally I've encountered those who have changed their personal interpretations when their personal experiences or the culture changed. This can be observed in our present culture where attitudes and actions supporting historical values about God, country, and family have changed in the past fifty years. Each successive generation, in each decade has embraced and developed values different from their parents. We're seeing the rewriting of history and redefining of standard to coincide with these

⁴ *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), 2 Ti 2:15.

new values. Consequently, we are seeing the redefining of and rewriting of Scripture not only in the culture but also in local churches, Bible colleges and seminaries.

Can we look to Scripture as a standard if we ignore its standards to accommodate personal or cultural desire? No! We cannot properly teach and preach Scripture if we concede to the practice of ignoring the primary meaning and application of Scripture. Likewise, we are guilty of redefining and rewriting Scripture when we improperly teach secondary meaning and application based on personal or cultural whims.

Consider Paul's instructions to Timothy:

"Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. ³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears;"⁵

and the Lord's declaration through Jeremiah:

"¹⁴ Then the LORD said unto me, The prophets prophesy lies in my name: I sent them not, neither have I commanded them, neither spake unto them: they prophesy unto you a false vision and divination, and a thing of nought, and the deceit of their heart."⁶

The culture continues to spiral further away from honoring God and his Word, as well as rejecting his Son and his salvation. The god of this world and its profane system of existence continues to distract and deceive men to the point of eternal destruction. False preachers and teachers distort God's word and present false images which undermine truth and holiness. False converts/professors flock to local congregations following or demanding doctrines of devils. They insist the Bible be made relevant to their personal lives but reject the call to holiness, selfless discipleship, and sacrificial service following Christ demands. Meanwhile, local congregations unwisely try to swell their numbers and finances by courting the demands of these spiritual terrorists. Fearing obscurity, poverty, or impotency these double-minded carnal believers exert energy trying to woo these spiritual terrorist, naively ignoring spiritual discernment and biblical standards. Just like militant terrorists, these goats among sheep, these tares among the wheat will go along to get along until they find the weakest link or smallest crack. When they do - they will make their demands, draw their lines in the sand, take their hostages, and detonate their bombs of lies, divisiveness, and destruction. They will lay waste to the weak of faith, destroy the reputation of the local Church, and confuse the apathetic who don't want to get involved in these 'faith wars'.

" Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. ⁴ For there are certain men crept in

⁵ *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), 2 Ti 4:2-3.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), Je 14:14.

unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁷

So by studying and searching for the primary meaning and application of Scripture we honor the sovereignty and inerrancy of Scripture. If Scripture doesn't have a static meaning then it cannot be relied upon and cannot be authoritative. By static I mean that the passage does not change its meaning. As time progresses from Old Testament to New Testament the expansion of a passage's meaning may become clear but its original meaning will be retained. The virgin birth of Christ prophesied by Isaiah was not fully understood but it was fulfilled when Mary gave birth to him.⁸ Once the primary meaning and application of Scripture is found, only then, by illumination of the Holy Spirit, can we seek to identify any existing secondary meaning and application of the text. We can accept the virgin birth of Christ as factual and crucial to God's plan for man's redemption, so we should declare this fact today as evidence of the authority and inerrancy of God's Word. Some passages will not have an application for us today, as seen in the Mosaic sacrificial system, however they point to the Christ as the ultimate atoning sacrifice of Christ on Calvary. We no longer need to make animal sacrifices for atonement from God, but we believe in Christ whose death was the payment in full for our redemption.

The steps to discovering the primary meaning and application of Scripture require us to resist the urge to gloss by it to make some contemporary/cultural relevant point. Believers are stronger, more confident, and more committed when they have a mature understanding of the primary meaning and application of Scripture. Any discovered secondary application will be in proper context to the primary meaning and not contrary to it.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), **Jude 1:3-4**.

⁸ *The Holy Bible: King James Version.*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), Isaiah 7:14 & Mat 1:23.