

# The Holy Spirit's Role in Biblical Interpretation

*How is the proper understanding of a passage in the Bible obtained? This article shows that it is gained by those who the Holy Spirit leads and maintains in the love of God rather than in the foolish desire to love ourselves.*

by Daniel P. Fuller

In the history of the Church there have been some who have insisted that the proper understanding of a passage in the Bible is gained only by those who go beyond the wording of the text and seek the illumination that the Holy Spirit provides. For example, Origen (185-254 A.D.), in his *De Principiis*, part iv, argued for this by affirming that the biblical spokesmen wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the interpreter will miss the meaning of a scripture text unless he, like its human writer, is taught by the Holy Spirit. He will surely miss the text's meaning if he construes it merely from the way the writer used words. So Origen urged people to go beyond a text's historical-grammatical data. He wrote: "Let us do our utmost endeavor, by abandoning the language of the elements of Christ, which are but the first beginnings of wisdom, to go on to perfection, in order that the wisdom which is given to the perfect may be given to us also" (iv.7). According to Origen, this involved seeking the "spiritual" rather than the literal meaning of a biblical passage: "Now the reason for the erroneous apprehension of all these points . . . is no other than this, that the Holy Scripture is not understood according to its spiritual but according to its literal meaning" (iv.9).

It is well known how Origen, despite his firm belief in the inspiration of the Bible, greatly distorted its intended meaning through his hermeneutical conviction that the proper understanding of Scripture could be gained only through a direct illumination of the Holy Spirit. It was this conviction which led him to allegorize the Bible. For

Luther, the rejection of Origen's allegorization was essential for bringing the Church back under the authority of the Bible.

St. Jerome and St. Origen, God forgive them, were the cause that allegories were held in such esteem. But Origen altogether is not worth one word of Christ. Now I have shaken off all these follies, and my best art is to deliver the Scripture in the simple sense. . . .<sup>1</sup>

C. N. Mackintosh, a Plymouth Brethren writer of the last century, provides a more recent example of one who sought the meaning of a Bible passage through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Regarding the typological interpretation of the details of the tabernacle as outlined in the latter part of Exodus, Mackintosh said,

Nature can do nothing here. Reason is blind. . . . The most gigantic intellect, instead of being able to interpret the sacred symbols, appears like a bat in the sunshine, blindly dashing itself against the objects which it is utterly unable to discern. We must compel reason and imagination to stand with out. . . . God the Holy Spirit is the One Who can. . . expound to our souls beautiful symbols [of the tabernacle] can alone interpret them.<sup>2</sup>

The problem with this understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in biblical interpretation is that the words of the text can play no essential role in conveying its intended meaning, even though it is these very words which the writers were inspired to use in transmitting God's message to men. According to 1 Cor. 2:13, biblical spokesmen uttered the divine message "not in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Holy

Spirit."

In the next verse, however, Paul adds, "The natural man receives not the things of the spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). In other words, the message which Paul and others were inspired to transmit can be "received" and "known" only by those who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Obviously, then, the Holy Spirit does play an indispensable role in enabling the interpreter to gain the proper meaning of a biblical text. But what is his role? And how does this role urge the exegete always to acknowledge his complete dependence on the Holy Spirit, and at the same time urge him to develop his skill in using valid exegetical means to determine the meanings that were intended by the words which the Holy Spirit inspired the biblical writer to use? We commence our answer to this question by examining 1 Cor 2:14 more closely.

## Interpreting 1 Corinthians 2:14

We note that *dechomai* rather than *lambano* is the Greek word for "receive" in Paul's statement. "The natural man receives not the things of the spirit of God." Whereas *lambano* means "simply to receive something, *dechomai* means to "accept some requested offering willingly and with pleasure, either because one accepts it with gratefulness and eagerness for himself, or for the purpose of helping and supporting someone else."<sup>3</sup>

So in the statement, "The natural man does not receive [*dechomai*] the things of the Spirit of God," the

meaning is that apart from the Holy Spirit, a person does not accept what the Bible teaches with pleasure, willingness, and eagerness. In other words, the natural man does not welcome the things of the Spirit of God.

This refusal to welcome the teachings of the Bible hardly excludes, however, the natural man's having a cognition of what he repudiates. To the contrary, the fact that he experiences a revulsion against a biblical teaching presupposes a prior cognition of that teaching, for how can a man hate something without having some knowledge of it?

Likewise, in affirming that "spiritual things are foolishness to the natural man," the meaning is not that biblical teachings are unintelligible, as things spoken in some unknown language would be. Foolishness applies more appropriately to what is understood and yet regarded as false. So when Festus, after hearing Paul's defense in Acts 26:4-23, replies in verse 24, "Paul, you are mad," it is more appropriate to understand this as a response to what Festus understood than to something that was unintelligible. Ernst Haenchen, in commenting on Acts 26:24, says, "Festus must surely have had a surprisingly good understanding of what Paul had been saying, in order to have been able thus to deny the teaching of the resurrection."<sup>4</sup>

Paul continues in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "Neither can the natural man *know* the things of the spirit of God, because they are spiritually discerned." If this "know" meant "have cognition," then this verse would mean that until regeneration, biblical teachings remain unintelligible. The word for "know" here is *ginosko*, and it can be used in the sense of *oida*, which in the present tense can represent the idea of mere perception or cognition.<sup>5</sup> But in general, *ginosko* means not merely perceiving, but "embracing things as they really are."<sup>6</sup> If *ginosko* is used in this sense, the

second half of 1 Cor 2:14 would mean, "The natural man does not embrace the realities represented by the Bible's teachings," and this would be a close parallel to the earlier statement that "the natural man does not *welcome* spiritual things."

At the end of the verse Paul gives the reason that the natural man does not "know" spiritual things: "because they are spiritually discerned." The Greek word for "discerned" is *anakinno*, and it represents an investigative action carried on for the purpose of rendering an appraisal or evaluation. Not being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, the natural man has no ability to see the worth, or value, of biblical teachings; and this is why he does not "know" them. One's inability to welcome spiritual things is supported more aptly by affirming that he cannot evaluate them than by affirming that he cannot even have cognition of them. Therefore, we conclude that the words "cannot know" in 1 Cor 2:14 mean "cannot have an experiential knowledge and appreciation" of the biblical message.

Consequently, the Holy Spirit's role in biblical interpretation does not consist in giving the interpreter cognition of what the Bible is saying, which would involve dispensing additional information beyond the historical-grammatical data that are already there for everyone to work with. Rather, the Holy Spirit's role is to change the heart of the interpreter, so that he loves the message that is conveyed by the historical-grammatical data.

Accordingly, the biblical interpreter does not look to the Holy Spirit to give him the meaning of a biblical text. Instead, he must expend just as much time and energy developing his exegetical skills and applying them to the hard work of understanding a text as others do who seek to determine the intended meanings of some group of ancient texts.

But because the Bible's view of reality clashes with the way people, apart

from the work of the Holy Spirit, want to see things, its message will therefore be regarded as foolishness. Naturally, the conclusion that the Bible is foolishness will not affect the accuracy of the exegetical results of those whose only concern is the academic task of describing what the biblical writers intended to teach. An agnostic or an atheist, whose concern is simply to set forth, say, a description of Pauline thought, can make a lasting contribution to this subject, if he has achieved a high degree of exegetical skill.

Krister Stendahl argues that "once we confine ourselves to the task of descriptive biblical theology as a field in its own right, the material itself gives us means to check whether our interpretation is correct or not... Our only concern is to find out what these words meant when uttered or written by the prophet, the priest, the evangelist, or the apostle--and regardless of their meaning in later stages of religious history, our own included." Therefore, Stendahl continues, "Both [agnostics and believers] can work side by side, since no other tools are called for than those of description in the terms indicated by the texts themselves. The meaning for the present -- in which the two interpreters are different -- is not involved, and part of their mutual criticism is to watch whether concern for meaning or distaste for meaning colors the descriptions where it should not."<sup>7</sup>

But the situation changes radically when one carries on the task of descriptive biblical theology not as an end in itself, but because one is convinced that the biblical message has value for our lives. Since the meaning uttered by the prophet, priest, evangelist, or apostle will be regarded by all who are unregenerated as foolishness, those who nevertheless regard the Bible as having potential for great value will proceed to modify its meanings so they become palatable. Such hermeneutical gambits as demythologizing, or inter-

preting a passage of the Bible from some religious *a priori*, or interpreting one biblical passage in the terms of another-- these are some of the ways people commonly justify modifying the meaning of a text that would stand simply by letting its pertinent historical- grammatical data speak for themselves. We need now to consider why the unmodified meanings of the biblical spokesmen are foolishness to the unregenerate person.

### The Offense of the Biblical Message

One way the biblical message may be understood as foolishness is to say that it is absurd from the standpoint of every mode of thinking that is possible to the human mind. As Soren Kierkegaard, the most radical spokesman for this alternative, put it, "The absurd is that the eternal truth has come into being in time, that God has come into being, has been born, has grown up, and so forth precisely like any other individual human being. . . ."8 No attempt must be made, Kierkegaard argued, to reduce the absurdity of the Christian message, for then the message would become what someone could know. But to the extent that something becomes intelligible and therefore capable of being known, "it is impossible to *believe*. For the absurd is the object of faith, and the only object that can be believed."<sup>9</sup>

Although Karl Barth, after the 1920s, ceased to use Kierkegaard's categories, he has emphasized that the message of the gospel is based "only on the power of God with its self-justifying wisdom," and that the wise are simply those who accept the Word of the Cross by faith" (*Church Dogmatics*, II/1, p. 437). This understanding of the nature of the biblical message disconnects it from any categories--such as inner coherence, and common ground bases for argument--in which human thinking could detect evidence for regarding it as true. In support of this view, Barth points to Paul's statements in 1 Cor 2:1, 4

that he did not employ "excellency of speech or wisdom" or "persuasive words of man's wisdom" (II/1, p 436). Consequently, Paul "must be content with . . . the self-justification of divine wisdom in the face of all the folly of men . . ." (II/1, p.438).

But there is evidence that "persuasive words of man's wisdom" was a phrase used to denote the distinctive rhetorical style of Greek orators.<sup>10</sup> So in using this phrase, Paul wanted to deny that his purpose in preaching at Corinth was to acquire a following of those admiring his rhetorical prowess. As Leon Morris puts it, "Paul insists that preaching with *wisdom of words* was no part of his commission. . . . A reliance on rhetoric would cause men to trust in men, the very antithesis of what the preaching of the cross is meant to effect."<sup>11</sup> Paul's aim in preaching was to persuade his hearers to worship God and stop glorying in men, and so he avoided an oratorical style which would have implied that he was seeking men's praise.

So, then, if we understand "not with excellency of speech or wisdom" and "not with persuasive words man's wisdom" (1 Cor 2:1, 4) in this way, Paul's description in these verses of how he preached at Corinth does not clash with Luke's description of it in Acts 18:4. There Luke says that Paul "argued [*dialogizomai*] in the synagogues every sabbath, and persuaded [*peitho*] Jews and Greeks."

In Luke's understanding, the use of coherency and the appeal to common ground, which is implied in the verbs for "argued" and "persuaded," characterized Paul's preaching both before he came to Corinth (Acts 9:22; 13:16-41, esp. vv. 23, 27, where the argument from fulfilled prophecy is used for a Jewish audience; 17:2-3; and at Mars Hill in Athens, 17:22-, esp. v. 31 ; and after he left (Acts 19:8-9; 24:24-25; and 26:26 with its obvious appeal to common ground). All these affirmations that Paul,

in his preaching, reasoned with men and based arguments on ground shared in common with his hearers bodes ill for the supposition that the gospel is foolishness in that its message involves categories from which the human mind can make no sense.

But if Paul's preaching did appeal to reason (coherence, and an appeal to common ground) without conforming to a style of oratory used for gaining the praise of men, then another way of understanding his message as foolishness presents itself. Precisely because its message is so comprehensible and yet collides head-on with people's deep-seated desire to exult in themselves, men reject it and seek to justify this by regarding it as foolishness.

There is considerable evidence in the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians to support this way of understanding the gospel as foolishness. Surely Paul emphasizes that the Christian message allows no room for boasting in one's own person or accomplishments. "No flesh should boast before the Lord"; but rather, "He who boasts, let him boast in the Lord" (1:29, 31). The same point is brought out in 3:18-21, where the shift from the wisdom of men to the foolishness of God, or (from another viewpoint) from the folly of men to the wisdom of God, is equated with ceasing to glory in men. It is quite understandable how those who would not relinquish the pleasure of exulting in themselves would find it most convenient to justify their rejection of the Christian message by denouncing it as foolishness.

There is also evidence from Paul's own words in these early chapters of 1 Corinthians that, as Luke indicated in Acts 18:4, Paul's preaching at Corinth was designed to persuade men by an appeal to reason. For one thing, that Paul termed his message as wisdom (1:24, 30; 2:6) indicates that he regarded it as possessing those qualities that affirmations must have in order

to be termed "wisdom" without transgressing language conventions. Paul's train of thought in 1 Cor 4:6ff., reveals a concern for coherence and for argumentation based on common ground-- matters that properly belong to what "wisdom" should represent. In verse 6 Paul enjoins the Corinthians "not to be puffed up one against the other." Then in verse 7 he provides an argument for why one is well advised to obey this enjoinder. He calls attention to the fact that anyone's possession, ability, or accomplishment is his only as a gift. "What have you," Paul queries, "which you did not receive as a gift?" The obvious answer is "Nothing," and it is significant that Paul expects his hearers to agree with this, not because he, as an apostle, is a purveyor of special revelation which men ought to believe just because God said it. To the contrary, people should agree with it because its truth is self-evident to anyone who will reflect on the way things are.

Some might object, however, that they now deserve to enjoy their "good life" because they have not been slothful like so many others, but have worked hard to achieve the standard of living they now enjoy. But as Deut 8:18 says, "You shall remember that it is the Lord your God who gave you the power to get wealth." To be sure, energy, ambition, and intelligence are essential for getting into high-paying vocations. But where do these components for the power to get wealth come from? Obviously, no one has these because he willed them. In the last analysis, they are given and not chosen. So even the power to get wealth belongs to people only as a gift for which they can take no credit.

The knowledge of this fact is available to anyone who will face up to reality. In that it has a claim to universality, it constitutes ground shared in common with all people who are willing to be reasonable. Consequently, the

conclusion which Paul draws from this fact, set forth in the last rhetorical question of 1 Cor 4:7, is inescapable. It is that to boast about anything one is or has is nonsensical.

But this highly reasonable conclusion collides head-on with our deep-seated desire to glory in ourselves. If this desire is not replaced with a desire to exult in God, we will reject this reasoning as foolishness, and justify our rejection of it by adhering to some delusion. And what we do with the argument of 1 Cor 4:6ff., we will do to other parts of the Bible.

Everywhere one turns in Scripture he encounters the assertion that he ought not to glory in himself but in God, the giver of every good gift. "The haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and the pride of men shall be brought low, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day" (Isa. 2:17). Jesus pointed to the ego as the crux of whether or not people would glorify God by trusting him. "How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only true God?" (John 5:44).

Apart from regeneration, however, men do not welcome the reasonableness of the teaching that fulfillment for their deepest yearnings comes from delighting in God's goodness by trusting his promises and thereby rendering him honor. People prefer instead to accomplish things that supposedly provide reasons for delighting in how much they can trust themselves.

In answering the question, "What is happiness?" Spinoza declared, "Joy consists in this, that one's power is increased"; and Nietzsche replied that it is "the feeling that power increases, that resistance is overcome." 12 Heinrich Harrer, a member of the first team to climb the beetle-browed north face of the Eiger in the Swiss Alps, confessed that his reason for undertaking such a risk was to overcome a sense of insecur-

ity.

Self-confidence is the most valuable gift a man can possess. . . But to possess this true confidence it is necessary to have learned to know oneself at moments when one was standing at the very frontier of things. . . On the "Spider" in the Eiger's north face, I experienced such borderline situations, while the avalanches were roaring down over us, endlessly.<sup>13</sup>

As long as one is obsessed with overcoming his finitude so he can delight in trusting in himself, he will find a way to denounce as foolishness the Bible's teaching that man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever (cf. Mark 12:29). This preference to delight in ourselves rather than in God is the root cause for our antipathy to such biblical doctrines as the substitutionary atonement of Christ, and faith alone as the way to receive God's forgiveness and make progress in living the Christian life. The doctrine of substitutionary atonement hurts the ego by declaring that men's rebellion against God is so serious that nothing less than the Son of God's shedding his blood in an execution like that of a common criminal establishes a sufficient basis for God to forgive men. For the same reason people chafe at the biblical doctrine that only through faith in what God has promised do men receive the forgiveness of sins and the impulse to behave in a way that pleases God. When one's behavior is shaped by a confidence that the Jesus who loved him enough to die for his sins will surely keep his promises to guide him and supply his needs (cf. Gal 2:20), then Christ receives the credit for that life-style, and all boasting is excluded.

Of course these doctrines will present no problem to those whose only concern in biblical interpretation is to give an accurate description of biblical theology. Their desire to gain ego-satisfaction leads them to regard the biblical teachings as foolishness. But since they are concerned only to describe bibli-

cal theology and not also to say that the biblical message is true and beneficial, their exposition of the Bible does not clash with their desire for ego-satisfaction. So they have no need to modify the teachings determined by the pertinent historical-grammatical data of the Bible, and to the extent that they are skilled in exegesis, their exposition of what the biblical writers intended to say will be accurate.

But those who expound the teachings of the Bible as true will refrain from modifying the intended meanings of the biblical writers only as their desire for ego-satisfaction is replaced by a delight in God's faithfulness to keep his promises.<sup>14</sup> Otherwise they will take such doctrines as the substitutionary atonement and *sole fide* and modify them in some seemingly justifiable way so that they cease to offend the ego. Only God, working through the Holy Spirit, has the power to replace one's foolish desire for ego-fulfillment with the reasonable, well-advised desire to find peace and joy in depending on God to stand by his promises.

### Conclusion

Therefore, those who engage in the task of interpreting the Bible because of a conviction that it sets forth teachings that are true and beneficial must surely spare no effort to perfect their skills of exegesis. But they must also look to God to enable them to have and maintain that humble and contrite spirit (Isa 57:15) that will welcome what the Bible teaches. Otherwise the deceitfulness of sin will cause even the most skilled exegete, by some legerdemain, to modify the meanings yielded up by the historical-grammatical data so they will not offend the ego. Even though the teachings of the Bible are manifestly reasonable, our reasoning powers are not sufficient to suppress the awesome power of sin which predisposes us to glory in ourselves. Only God, through the Holy Spirit, overcomes this power of sin, so that we are willing to love from the

heart what our minds can tell us is reasonable.

We can understand, then, why A. H. Francke (1663-1727), one of the founders of the Pietistic revival in Germany, laid down as one of his hermeneutical principles that "to the extent that you are crucified to the world, you will be able to grasp what the holy scriptures are saying." "15 Paul said, "God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6:14). Since such a resolve leaves no room for ego-satisfaction, we will welcome this teaching, which is so fundamental to biblical theology only as the Holy Spirit maintains within us the reasonable desire to love God rather than the foolish desire to love ourselves.

### End Notes

1. *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*, W. Hazlitt, trans., 2nd ed. (1968), p. 399.
2. C. H. Mackintosh, *Notes on Exodus* (New York, n.d.), p. 275.
3. *TDNT* 2, p. 50, n. 1, quoting from F. W. Sturz, *Lexicon Xenophonticum*, 1 (1801), p. 653.
4. E. Haenchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte. Kritisch-exegetisch Kommentar ueber das Neue Testament*, begr. von H. A. W. Meyer, 3 Abt.; 12th ed. (1959), p. 614.
5. *TDNT* 5, p. 116.
6. *TDNT* 1, p. 690.
7. K. Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," *IDB* 1(1962), p. 422.
8. S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, D. F. Swenson, trans. (1944), p. 188.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
10. *TDNT* 6, p. 9.
11. Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (1958), p. 42.
12. Quoted by Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (1954), p. 180.

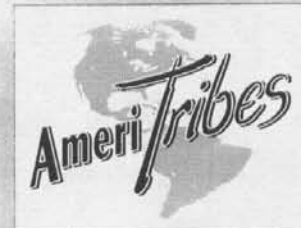
13. H. Harrer, *The White Spider* (1960), p.21.
14. It should be apparent to anyone that it is much more promising to depend on God than on ourselves, who are so finite as to be likened to a vapor that appears for only a short time (Jas. 4:14).
15. Quoted by Erhard Peschke, "Zur Hermeneutik A. H. Francke," *ThLZ* 89 (February, 1964), p. 103.

[This article is a reprint from *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation*, Festschrift in Honor of Everett F. Harrison. W. Ward Gasque and William S. LaSor (eds). Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Copyright 1978. Pp 189-198. With permission. ]

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