

**“UNDERSTANDEST THOU
what thou readest ? ”** (Acts viii. 30).

Some Helpful Hints to Bible Students

By

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QUESTION.—“ Would it be possible for you to give me some simple rules for the correct interpretation and understanding of the holy Scriptures ? ”

ANSWER.—The infallible Interpreter of the Bible is the Holy Spirit, “ Whom God hath given to them that obey Him.” He, under Whose inspiration the sacred Scriptures were written, knows the exact meaning He intended to convey, which cannot be said of many human commentators. And they that seek His presence and guidance by obedience to the conditions clearly laid down in the New Testament, will prove the truth of the Saviour’s promise :—“ He that followeth Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the Light of Life,”—the Living Light,—“ Who shall lead and guide into all the truth.”

None-the-less, under His direction and by His teaching, we can certainly give you some helpful advice. And at the outset we would beg of you not to treat the Bible as a mysterious book, which says one thing and means another. The human author of a book expects his readers to credit him with the desire to impart information ; and not to imagine that when he says something, his meaning is not intended to be clear. Why, then, should we believe that God, Whose written word was given

to be as "a lamp to our feet and a light to our path," has purposely made it obscure? Let us rather believe that the sacred Scriptures say what they mean, and mean what they say. If,—as is sometimes the case—figurative language and parables are used, then, the true explanation is the simplest and most obvious one; and the figure must not be strained to represent either that which is foreign to the subject, or not in agreement with the context.

Especially let us beware of taking figurative expressions as literal facts. Too often Bible-interpreters distort figures out of all proper proportions. This is apt to be the case, when "the blood," "the cross," "the new birth," "the marriage Supper of the Lamb," "the Lamb that was slain," "the fountain," and other similar expressions of the Scriptures are preached upon by the ignorant, or even turned into verse, and sung about. Hymn writers are responsible for much that is misleading and erroneous. Don't take your religious belief from the hymn book, or put its verses on an equality with the Bible. We are not really "clinging to the cross," or "trusting in the cross," or "gazing on the cross," as poets have too often affirmed. There never was, and never will be, literally, "a fountain filled with blood"; nor are we actually "washed in the blood of the Lamb." All the references to these and other things in the Scriptures, are very helpful and beautiful, when they are not run to an extreme; and when their true figurative meaning is not lost sight of, in the excesses of poetical imaginings.

Again, bear in mind that the fashion of preaching from a text of Scripture, while not wrong in itself, is sometimes apt to cause the preacher and hearers to give or receive an erroneous (because disjointed from the context) conception of its actual meaning. To take half a verse, or a few words of it, or even the whole of an isolated verse, and ignore all that the inspired Scripture has said in connection with it, is by no means the way to obtain the true meaning of the words. "Rightly dividing the word of truth," is only to be done by comparing Scripture with Scripture, and accepting no interpretations which any portion thereof plainly appears to contradict; however plausible, or popularly accepted, such views may be. "Half a loaf" may be "better than no bread," but too often half a text of Scripture is misleading, and worse than nothing.

Then, too, beware of human glosses and comments upon the Scriptures, which are found in some Bible editions. There are some excellent thoughts added as interpretations to Dr. Schofield's Bible, for instance, but we make bold to say that there are a good many errors as well, which in great measure spoil his work. Dr. Schofield's leanings evidently, are strongly towards "Brethrenism."

And if you are inclined to refer to Wilson's "Emphatic Diaglott," (which claims to be a word for word translation from the original Greek of the New Testament, and is undoubtedly a really helpful book to the Bible student), you will do well to bear in mind that Wilson himself was

not a believer in the immortality of the spirit and soul of man, and therefore his translation of certain words is strongly coloured by his religious views.

Even our well-known Authorised and Revised versions of the New Testament contain unmistakable evidence of the prejudice of the translators, or pressure which was brought to bear upon them, which hindered them from translating the Greek word "baptize" into its English equivalent "immerse." Dr. Weymouth's "New Testament in Modern Speech" is guilty of the same weakness.

But leaving the various versions, and returning to that universal favourite, our English Authorized version of the Bible, even here a few notes of warning are necessary as to the words given in *Italics*, and the division into chapters and verses.

The division of the Bible into chapters and verses is a comparatively modern innovation, done for the sake of convenience in reading; and, of course, was not in the original Scriptures. But though this division is certainly thus convenient, it is often very misleading through being in the wrong place, and thereby cutting a subject into two or more parts; so that sometimes a few verses at the beginning of a new chapter really belong to the preceding one. Let the student bear these facts always in mind.

As for the words in *Italics*, these were added upon the translators'

own authority, to make better sense, as they thought ; though in many instances the true meaning of the Scripture would be far clearer without them.

In the study of the New Testament it will also be helpful to bear in mind that :—

Although the four Gospels contain enough information about our Lord and His commands to enable us to follow and obey Him, yet they are not a complete record of all that He said and did (see John xxi. 25) ; nor are we told in Acts i. all that He taught the disciples during His forty days with them between His resurrection and ascension. Hence, for fuller information, we have to look to the teaching and practice of the Apostles afterwards.

The same is true, in some measure, of the Acts of the Apostles, which by no means gives a full account of all that was done and taught in every instance. In one place, all who believed were commanded to be baptized ; in other places, those who were baptized received the Laying on of Hands for the gift of the Holy Spirit. And in some instances mention of one or of both of these ordinances is omitted. But as God's way is not changeable or contradictory, we may justly conclude that what was done under the guidance of God in some places, was also done elsewhere, even if particulars are not always given. And the testimony of the early Christian writers confirms our argument.

And in reading the Epistles, the fact must always be remembered

that everyone of them was written *to baptized believers*. Therefore, their doctrine, their commands, their promises, and their warnings, are not fully applicable to the ungodly, or even to believers who have not obeyed the word of the Lord in baptism. With this knowledge before us, the epistle to the Romans is seen in a different light to that in which it is often expounded ; and the exhortations to holiness, and to “ be filled with the Spirit,” in the letters to the Ephesians and others, are not found to be supporting the modern teaching of holiness and power without obedience, —but to the contrary.

One more caution we will give our readers before we conclude, and it is this :—Although the Sacred Scriptures were given by Divine inspiration, yet all that is in the Bible is not to be taken in the sense that it is the word of God to us, to be believed and acted upon as such. The Bible contains the sayings and doings of foolish and wicked men, and even words of the devil ; and while we may learn from their deeds and words what to avoid and disbelieve, we must beware of taking them for an example, or holding the views they express as truth. Take, for instance, the words of the Pharisees to the man who had been healed of blindness,—“ Thou was altogether born in sins.” How often we have heard this phrase “ born in sin,” quoted in support of the erroneous doctrine that we are sinners by birth. And much of the Book of Job is taken up by the speeches of Job’s friends, of whom God said,—“ My wrath is kindled

against thee (Eliphaz) and against thy two friends ; for ye have not spoken of Me the thing that is right, as My servant Job hath " (Job xlii. 7).

Yet the words of Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar have been quoted and preached from as Scriptural truth, by many good souls who have evidently never read what the Lord said in condemnation of them.

And this leads us back to what we said at the beginning :—The Divine Author of holy Scripture is its infallible Interpreter. And there can never be any contradiction in that which "the Spirit of Truth" has given for our guidance and instruction. Any interpretation, therefore, of any passage of Scripture, which is not in perfect harmony with every other part, is not the true one.

Bear also in mind, that the Old Testament writings, apart from the prophecies yet to be fulfilled, were given especially to the House of Israel ; and their requirements, ritual, offices, types and shadows pertained to the Old Covenant of the Law. And remember that the New Testament (or Covenant, in Christ) has succeeded to the Old one of the Law, which was nailed to the cross with our Saviour ; and hence it is to the order and teaching of the New Testament that we are to conform, and by its precepts that we are to live. Our Lord's message to all the world for all time until He comes again, is thus :—"Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them into the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost ; Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you " (Matt. xxviii. 19, 20).

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