

The Pitfalls of Biblical Misinterpretation, Part 2

Scripture: Luke 12:12; 1 Timothy 5:17

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If you had to give a presentation on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, how would you prepare? Would you study the work of scholars to absorb as much pertinent information and insight as you could? Or would you simply mull the few facts and details you already know, hoping for the shreds of disparate information to coalesce into a useful outline?

Obviously the second method is a path to embarrassment, misinformation, and failure. But why then do we tolerate similar patterns when it comes to studying and teaching God's Word?

We've been identifying some key pitfalls in the area of Bible interpretation, and the next one is simple: **avoid superficial study**. Good, accurate Bible study is hard work. As we have seen already, discerning what God is saying to us through His Word cannot be done by flipping through quickly and looking for messages wherever our eyes happen to settle. Nor is understanding the Bible a matter of personal opinion ("To *me* it means . . .").

Careful and accurate handling of God's Word requires diligence. If we are diligent, we can arrive at a correct interpretation of the major truths of Scripture and the general thrust of particular passages. God has not hid His truth from us.

But neither is the meaning of His Word always instantly clear. Sometimes the real meaning of a passage is revealed in an understanding of the culture to which it was addressed. Sometimes it is made clear by a simple nuance in the original language. That's why we cannot get by with the haphazard ad-libbing and flippant freewheeling that is so popular in some churches today. Some differences of interpretation may never be resolved in this life, but that does not negate our responsibility to study carefully and diligently.

In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul describes the "double honor" to be given to those in the church "who labor in the word and doctrine." The reason God has given teachers to the church is that understanding His Word and correctly instructing people in the Scriptures requires people who are committed to persistent, conscientious labor in response to the divine calling.

Bernard Ramm wrote,

It is often asserted by devout people that they can know the Bible completely without helps. They preface their interpretations with a remark like this: "Dear friends, I have read no man's book. I have consulted no man-made commentaries. I have gone right to the Bible to see what it had to say for itself." This sounds very spiritual, and usually is seconded with *amens* from the audience.

But is this the pathway of wisdom? Does any man have either the right or the learning to by-pass all the godly learning of the church? We think not.

First, although the claim to by-pass mere human books and go right to the Bible itself sounds devout and spiritual *it is a veiled egotism*. It is a subtle affirmation that a man can adequately know the Bible apart from the untiring, godly, consecrated scholarship of men like Calvin, Bengel, Alford, Lange, Ellicott, or Moule. . . .

Secondly, such a claim is the old confusion of the inspiration of the Spirit with the illumination of the Spirit. The function of the Spirit is not to communicate *new* truth or to instruct in *matters unknown*, but to illuminate what is revealed in Scripture. Suppose we select a list of words from Isaiah and ask a man who claims he can by-pass the godly learning of Christian scholarship if he can out of his own soul or prayer give their meaning or significance: Tyre, Zidon, Chittim, Sihor, Moab, Mahershalahashbas, Calno, Carchemish, Hamath, Aiath, Migron, Michmash, Geba, Anathoth, Laish, Nob, and Gallim. He will find the only light he can get on these words is from a commentary or a Bible dictionary.¹ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), pp. 17-18 (emphasis in original).

What Ramm was describing—that lack of respect for the work of gifted theologians and expositors who have spent years studying and interpreting Scripture—is on display in many churches, ministries, and in particular, on Christian college campuses today.

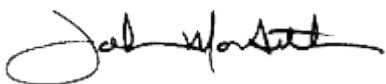
I won't pretend to understand all the reasons that mentality appeals to people, and especially young people. It could flow out of a deep dissatisfaction with the church models and practices of their youth. Or it could simply be evidence of a heart bent to outright rebellion. No matter the reason, the impact is still the same: it cuts the individual, the congregation, or even the whole community off from the collected teaching and wisdom of the church and the guidance and instruction of church history.

In terms of your own spiritual growth, along with that of anyone who might follow your example, the spiritual stakes are far too high to rely solely on your own understanding, or to wait for special, unique instruction from the Lord.

I once heard a radio interview in which a woman pastor was asked how she “got her sermons up.” She replied, “I don't get them up; I get them down. God delivers them to me.” Her words reflect an attitude all too familiar in the church today. Many believe it's unspiritual to study. “After all,” some say (taking a verse completely out of context), “didn't Jesus say, ‘For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say’?” (Luke 12:12).

That kind of shallow, superficial approach to Scripture is a sure way to miss its true meaning. You can't ad-lib your way to biblical understanding and spiritual maturity—not in the pulpit and not in your personal study. Don't attempt to speak for God when you have no idea what you're talking about—and don't follow anyone who does.

Tomorrow we'll look at one more interpretation pitfall—unnecessary allegory.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

(Adapted from [*Charismatic Chaos*](#).)

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