

Reading with understanding

As a new Christian I found a wonderful encourager and teacher in a young Air Force chaplain who guided me in personal Bible study one hour a week for a year. Ken



**Michael
Olmsted**

reminded me that God inspired the writing of the Bible through humans who faced the same challenges we all encounter. He also cautioned me to not read my own ideas into Scripture and to interpret a passage in light of what other texts say.

We have already considered the influence of God's Spirit through generations of writers, editors, compilers and translators. I am continually amazed by how God loves us so deeply that he speaks to us about eternal truths through our limited earthly languages. This Bible that contains the true keys for living as God's people deserves our diligent study.

How do you read the Bible? Some see the Bible as a book of secret-sacred clues that tell us details of the future and formulas for success. One of my college classmates was determined to identify the Antichrist and work out a timetable for the second coming. Another friend believed there are formulas hidden in the Bible that guarantee blessings and answered prayers. There were others who viewed the Bible as a legal handbook, specifying how we are to please God by keeping all the rules. Jesus encountered individuals who operated out of similar approaches.

There is nothing new; people are the same every generation. Keep in mind that God and his truth are the same no matter the calendar date.

Our Matthew 22:34-40 text follows Jesus' confrontation with the Sadducees in which he refuted their harsh legalistic and twisted interpretation of God's laws. Their rigid idea of God excluded people instead of offering life and possibilities. So a member of the Pharisees (a legal expert) was sent in

to try a different approach: "Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?" (v. 36, CEB). Actually, his question equates to, "What kind of God do you (Jesus) believe in?"

Jesus' beautiful answer includes both Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, encapsulating our need to love God and translate that love into our relationship with others. Not surprisingly, this love replaces legalism and sentimentality with relationship as the core of faith.

My own commitment to God came at the precise moment I understood that God not only loved the world, but God loves me and Christ died for me! When I maintain that understanding, life is a blessing, but when I forget that truth, the joy lessens until I come to my senses and repent!

For Jesus, the way of understanding Scripture is built on God's love and our commitment to share that love with others. To read the Scripture with understanding is to seek ways of thinking and acting shaped by God's love and grace. Understanding begins when we get beyond trying to proof-text our existing ideas and actions. Scripture is less a detailed map of how to get to heaven and more about sharing God's love all along the way. The destination is certain; our journey is often erratic! The Bible is our foundation and operations manual.

The second text, Acts 17:10-12, presents the singular key idea that we must always search out the meaning and truth of every text. The unbroken thread of grace, the truth of God's love, the message of salvation, is found from Genesis to Revelation. If your interpretation of any passage violates that truth, you have made a mistake. Likewise, the unfolding narrative of the entire Bible points us to Christ. Sound interpretation includes a knowledge of historical facts, culture, religious traditions, political events, literary form and language distinctives.

The Bible we read today has come down to us through the immense

Formations

November 22, 2015

Scripture: Matthew 22:34-40;
Acts 17:10-12

changes in our world. What we call the "canon" of Scripture first appears in a letter written by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt, in AD 367. It is different from the Bible of modern Judaism, Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox Church. The books of our Bible were designated because of their historical connections, authorship and wide acceptance (usefulness) of the earliest churches.

The Berean Jews (Acts 17) offer us a wise example. Upon hearing the gospel from Paul, a Pharisee trained in the fine points of the Law, they set about searching their scriptures to determine if the message of Christ was true (v. 11). We have an amazing advantage over the Bereans because of numerous translations and books that provide the rich scholarly resources of hundreds of years.

Every time I think about God sending his Son into my world to bring the biblical narrative to its climax, to show me what all those generations and biblical books were pointing to and to offer me the gift of salvation in Christ, I am overwhelmed. Even beyond that staggering truth is the idea that the God who inspired Scripture and sent his Son to be our Savior is the same God who, in the person of the Holy Spirit, now helps us understand the Bible and live by its precepts and promises!

Spend time in the Word. Learn from sound teachers. Seek what God is saying to you about your relationships, values and actions. Dedicate yourself to growing in faith. Romans 15:4 reminds us: "Whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scripture we might have hope" (NASV).

Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.