

1. What's it all about then?

(Why do we need to interpret?)

Introduction

Understanding the Bible is like gardening. Two mistakes people make in gardens:

- 1) not digging at all
- 2) over-digging (covering up the plain meaning).

The aim is to get to the **plain meaning**.

Two reasons we need to interpret:

1) The Reader

We bring all our experience, culture, expectations and assumptions to our understanding of the Bible. For example:

- "The Cross" wasn't a cross, it was a T shape.
- "Church" doesn't mean a building with pews
- "Flesh" doesn't just mean body

Translators have already had to make tough decisions. e.g. Do you use "Flesh" like Paul wrote, or "sinful nature" which is what Paul means?

Within the a wider Church, Christians understand the Bible differently, for example:

- women silent in church?
- homosexuality?
- infant or believer baptism?

WARNING: Cults have two things: selective about biblical texts and/or have additional texts to the Bible.

The antidote to bad interpretation is not *no* interpretation but *good* interpretation.

2) The Nature of the Bible

There is a twofold nature that is in tension:

written by people vs. inspired by God
human vs. divine

historically particular vs. eternally relevant

WARNING: It is a mistake to think the Bible is just one thing or the other!

Two things you need to remember:

- a) The Bible was written in a historical context: geographical, social, political, religious, purpose, situation of writer and reader.
- b) The Bible is almost every kind of literary genre: history, genealogies, chronicles, laws, poetry, proverbs, oracles, riddles, drama, biography, parables, letters, sermons and apocalypses!

To understand the Bible we need to understand the **historical context and literary genres**.

TIP: Use a Bible that recognises paragraph breaks, lines of prose, etc.

The two tasks of interpretation:

1) Exegesis

- Exegesis is studying the Bible to discover the **original intended meaning**.
- **Every** text needs **good** exegesis (whether the meaning appears obvious or not)

WARNING: We need to rely on expert resources so we don't read our own meaning into the text.

e.g. Camel though eye of needle (low gate idea comes from 11th Century!)

- We cannot all be experts (have a knowledge of Hebrew, historical Greco-Roman society, etc.)
- We need to **look at the text ourselves then use the work of experts**
- We need to understand the **context** as well as the **content**

TOOLS: Good Translation, Bible Dictionary, Bible Handbook, Bible Commentary.

2) Hermeneutics (Application)

Hermeneutics is working out **what the Bible means for us today**.

Hermeneutics **MUST** be based on good exegesis (otherwise we can make the Bible mean what we want).

WARNING: A text can never mean what it never meant!

Hermeneutics is difficult but over the coming weeks we will look at guidelines to help us.