

Words and Sentences Have Meaning

(by Bob Pulliam)

When it comes to interpreting the Bible, it is easy to tell people it interprets itself and leave it at that. But the truth is, we must still discern its message. Even in places where authors tell us their intention in plain terms, we must still process the information and assign it correctly. Here is a short primer on interpreting words and sentences:

Concerning Words:

Definitions Change with Time...

The definitions of words change over time, and this especially becomes a problem when you rely on translations from another language. The word "prevent" was a perfectly suitable word in I Thessalonians 4:15 at the time of the King James Version. Today, however, the word "prevent" does not convey the thought Paul intended. The word he used meant "precede", and you will usually find newer translations using that word.

Where definitions are concerned, here is the bottom line: Definitions may change in languages, but the intentions of author's statements do not. We cannot say that a word meaning has changed and therefore we can abide by the new meaning. The author meant what he said, not what society did with language after he said it!

The word "baptize" or "baptism" is a classical example of definition change. You can look up the word "baptize" in Webster's and find "to dip (a person) into water, or pour or sprinkle water over him, as a symbol of admission into Christianity or a specific Christian church" (Webster's New World, p111). Now we could assume this definition to be valid for an understanding of the Bible, or we could recognize the true purpose of Webster's dictionary. Two important points made in the introduction to the above mentioned dictionary should prove this to be a foolish assumption. "1. Language rests upon use; anything used long enough by enough people will become standard. ... 2. However language started, it has been shaped and directed by man's mind, his society, and his vocal equipment." (*ibid.* p xvii) The point here is that Webster's is not a dictionary of the meaning of Bible words. Many words have evolved through our use, and did not retain the intended meaning of God. Webster's is offering the meanings of words as they are used by people today.

The word "church" offers a good example of misplaced meaning. Webster's definition perfectly accords with the modern use of this term, but leaves any resemblance to what the scriptures teach for its last definition. Does the Bible teach that the *church* is "a building set apart or consecrated for public worship"? (*ibid.* p255) Of course it doesn't, but that is the way the world today uses the word. (see Mt 18:17; Acts 2:47; Rom 16:5, 23; I Cor 11:18; III Jn 1:6) The word *church* refers to the body of believers who have been called out of the world into Christ's kingdom.

The Bible Defines Some Words Explicitly...

In other words, the Bible actually offers the meanings. Of course, these still must be discerned by reading and applying. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is the word "baptism". You know from reading above that the world includes the idea of sprinkling or pouring water in its definition. If you have any doubt about God's intention on the matter,

you need only read Romans 6:1-5. In verses three and four, Paul writes, "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." Here we can clearly see that baptism was a burial. That burial was intended to pictorialize the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Baptism is the point at which we attach ourselves to that soul-saving event 2000 years ago. To sprinkle or pour is not to associate ourselves with Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. Only a burial will do it. (see also Col 2:12)

We learn that this burial is in water by looking at other passages, and we find again that God has defined these matters for us. If you read, "Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, `See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?'" (Acts 8:36), would you conclude that baptism was in *water* ? And then there is Peter's question, "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47) Can you miss the fact that baptism is in water? Even further, we have this statement, "who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved by water. There is also an antitype which now saves us; baptism ..." (I Pt 3:20f). We see then that the Bible would define baptism as a burial (immersion) in water.

Reliable dictionary...

It must be clear by now that we cannot go to an English dictionary and find Bible definitions. Such is too risky a proposition for such an important topic. Many Bible dictionaries and lexicons are on the market to the general public, and are a worthwhile investment. One of the best, and most readily available is *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Nelson Publishers). It allows you to look up words in English, and gives clear English definitions with scriptures where the words are found. This with a concordance is an invaluable aid to Bible study. Remember, however, the Bible clearly means something, and it is up to us to discern that meaning. Never leave the task to others.

Concerning Sentences:

Two aspects of this area will not be considered here. Please consult the sections "[Determine the Speaker](#)", and "[Determine the Listener](#)". These are very important considerations when determining the meaning of a Bible passage. When these two aspects have been considered, one must then...

Consult the Author's Purpose...

One of the greatest downfalls in Bible understanding today is an unwillingness to consult the author's purpose. If someone can find a verse to say what he wants, he ignores the author's intention and applies the words to his whim. In just this way many churches have sprung up. But how can we know the intention of the author?

By a simple statement of such, the author, or speaker, may make his meaning clear. Luke, on several occasions gave intention to the words or parables of Jesus. In Luke 15:1f he notes the indignant attitude of the Pharisees and scribes, prefacing Jesus subsequent parable with, "So He spoke this parable to them...". In Luke 18:1, he wrote, "Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart..." We know, then,

why Jesus offered the parable that followed. Then there are the parables for which Jesus offered the interpretation. Matthew 13 contains two such parables (interpretations at vv18 & 37).

Immediate context often clearly conveys the intent. The multitude asked Peter what they were to do in Acts 2:37. What should they do about what? Peter knew, and by his answer let's us know that they had salvation on their minds. So Peter told them what they must do to be saved in verse 38. People commonly quote Matthew 7:1, "Judge not, that you be not judged." They think they know what Jesus meant, and when they are rebuked for error tell others not to judge them, because Jesus said... But they have missed Jesus' intention entirely. The four verses that follow clearly reveal that Jesus was talking about judging others when one has sins of his own to rectify. And it is essential that we recognize this, for if this isn't so, then Jesus contradicted Himself in John 7:24 when He said, "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." Here we are to judge!

Speech isn't the only thing that aids understanding. Actions and locations in a passage can offer great insight. Pilate asked Jesus "What is truth?" Did he really want to know? We know he didn't, because rather than wait for a reply, he turned and walked out. (Jn 18:38) The disciples pointed out the buildings of the temple to Jesus, Jesus made a remark about them, and a majority of the chapter is about those very buildings the disciples admired (Mt 24:1ff). Many a Bible student misses the mark on this chapter, because he wants to apply the first half of it to the second coming of Jesus.

If harmony is maintained, proper understanding is not far behind. Too many Bible readers think nothing of making two passages contradict each other. They will justify such by claiming that the Bible has many such contradictions in it. A sad admission from one who claims to trust a Savior, for that very Savior sent the Holy Spirit to inspire the men who wrote that book! While we're at Matthew 24, compare verses fifteen and sixteen to Luke 21:20f. The passages are parallel accounts of Jesus' words, and must be harmonized by the student. Ephesians 5:18f has a parallel in Colossians 3:16. What does Paul mean by being filled with the Spirit? The command obviously related to letting the word of the Spirit richly dwell within them. A tragic disharmony is created between Ephesians 2:8f and James 2:24. Are works involved, or not? Is it by faith only, or not? If you cannot harmonize the two passages, then you do not understand one or both scriptures.

Conclusion:

Other factors enter into this discussion that have merited their own sections (*i.e.* [Figures of Speech](#); [Listener](#); [Speaker](#); [Symbolism](#); [Harmonizing Scripture](#)). Keep these points in mind while studying the Bible. It was not written for us to make of it what we please. It was written to reveal the mind of God on the most important of topics: Salvation in Christ.