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Biblical Hermeneutics and the Indian Christian Student

The Indian Christian university student, says a member of an Evangelical Union, is interested in the Bible. He would like to understand it. He has had no formal Bible training, but has opportunity for Bible study, in groups, through the activities of the E. U. Still, he knows that he has little real Bible knowledge. And what is worse, he doesn't think that he can get it.

As for hermeneutics, he may never have heard the word. But he reads his Bible (probably in the King James version), thinks about it and gets some convictions of its meaning either through his own reading or through what he hears from preachers. So, he uses hermeneutics, though he doesn't know it. He interprets the Bible. The trouble is that the hermeneutics he uses may be good hermeneutics or bad hermeneutics, probably some of both. What is serious is that though the student may use both good and bad hermeneutics he may not know the difference.

The result is that the Christian student is largely ignorant of the Bible. And there are factors that help to produce this result. One major factor comes from the prevailing religious climate in

India. A second comes from a section of the evangelical church. A third comes from within the student himself. A fourth comes from a current philosophical outlook.

There is a religious climate prevalent in India, one that is primarily in Hinduism but which also invades the Christian church. It is the conviction that religious knowledge can be possessed only by an expert. One may become an expert through a long period of discipline, self-mortification, meditation and specialized prescribed activities. These are means to that inward illumination or knowledge of the divine that makes the expert. He has experienced, he knows. As the idea comes into the church, it is that the expert is the one who has been theologically trained, or has a deep spiritual life and acquaintance with the Bible. But however he has attained it, the expert becomes a teacher or "guru." He alone has the knowledge, he alone can impart it. Others must get it from him.

Consequently many Christian students believe that only the theologian, the priest or pastor—the Christian guru—can know the Bible, and that they

cannot know it themselves. Unfortunately, many of the clergy foster and perpetuate this notion.

This idea of knowledge only for the expert is not confined to India or the east. For example, note the following statement made by Dr. Daniel Fuller, of Fuller Theological Seminary, in his mimeographed volume, "The Inductive Method of Bible Study."

"Likewise, if we are really interested in thinking along with the biblical writer's thoughts—and thus God's thoughts—we will never be satisfied until we are working, not with the translations of the original, but with the original words themselves. Yet by their very nature, translations come between the original author and the interpreter, and should therefore be of only secondary interest to those who wish to study the Bible with precision.

"In addition to the knowledge of the original languages, the interpreter should assure himself that the words of the text which he is studying represent the best results of textual criticism, but should examine the textual evidence himself.

"But now let us consider the various kinds of historical data that can be useful in interpreting the Bible. First of all, we must know the historical situation at the time a passage was written.

"We must also be aware of the customs of the people to whom a particular passage was addressed.

"We must also have an understanding of the temperament of the national group to which the writer and readers belonged.

"In addition, we should become well-versed in the geography, topography, and climate of the lands where biblical narratives occurred.

"We must know the cultural background of the writer and his readers.

"Where then should we look to find all this information? The answer is that we look to every source which gives promise of help. Parallel passages in the biblical text, grammars, lexicons, commentaries (preferably exegetical), word studies, atlases, secular histories, scholarly investigations in the biblical field, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias . . . all these and many more are to be consulted to gain that historical knowledge third party readers need in order to interpret the Bible.

"The great critical and exegetical commentaries are essential for interpretation."

What is to be said about such a point of view? If it is true, several obvious things follow. Since only a tiny minority of Christians can get such theological training, then the precise knowledge of the Bible is confined to them and to those whom they can adequately teach. But they will still be a tiny minority of Christians. Again, it is only in recent years that the commentaries and books of Bible study have been printed and circulated widely, therefore the precise knowledge of the Bible has been shut away from Christians during most of the period of the church. Furthermore, these Bible helps are largely in the English and European languages, therefore Christians in many countries of the world have no access to them, and so are shut off from precise knowledge of the Bible. And since vast numbers of Christians in many countries are so poor that only with difficulty can they even afford to buy a Bible, they cannot think of the additional helps. Therefore, even where the helps are available, most Christians cannot have them. This seems to force the inescapable conclusion that though God has revealed himself and

his truth in the Bible, yet this Bible is largely a closed revelation to nearly all of the Christians in the world throughout the church's history.

That is to say, in effect, that the Bible is written for experts. I believe that is a dangerous error. The Bible is written for the common man. It is written for Christians and most Christians are laymen. The Bible is written for laymen, and if so, then laymen are able to understand it. The idea of accurate Bible knowledge only for the expert is not only wrong by logic, but there is empirical evidence to prove it.

The university student is schooled in research and investigation. There are several ways by which, without going through a prolonged process, he can see the evidence contradicting the idea that precise knowledge of the Bible can be gained only by profound scholarship.

One way is to take a verse of the Bible that is difficult to understand, then compare the critical commentaries which are the fruit of thorough scholarship, to see if they give finality. Such finality would show that scholarship is the necessary means for knowing the Bible. That would lead us to the conclusion that only a few scholars in the world can know the Bible directly, and all others can know it only in a second-hand way, as they are taught by the scholars. But if the commentators do not agree, or fail to clarify the difficulties of the verse, it will indicate that scholarship is not the necessary key to Bible knowledge.

A passage that has challenged interpreters and scholars in all periods of the church is Hebrews 6. We need not consider the whole passage now, in fact, one phrase will be sufficient. We may note "of the doctrine of baptisms", found in verse two. This is a simple phrase composed of straightforward words, and it might be thought that the interpreta-

tion would present no major difficulties. But an examination of the commentaries shows that the Greek scholars come nowhere near agreement. It would seem that the plural "baptismoi" is the main thing that hinders precision of interpretation, as seen in the following comments:

J. P. Lange, *in loc.*, mentions the views of a number of expositors, some of them quite early: "outward and inward baptism" (Grotius, Braun, Reuss); "different acts of baptism" (Calvin); "triple immersion" (DeWette); and threefold baptism: "*fluminis, fluminis, sanguinis*" (Thomas Aquinas).

The Interpreter's Bible refers to various views held: "Christian and Jewish proselyte baptism" (Winer); J. F. B. also suggests this view. Jewish ablutions alone is the view of other expositors, and K. S. Wuest agrees. "Christian baptism as over against the use of water in contemporary cults" is another view.

Dr. James Moffat in the I.C.C. mentions the view of Theodoret that what is meant is "the plurality of the recipients." He indicates his own view that the word means "ablutions or immersion such as the mystery religions and the Jewish culture required for initiates, proselytes or worshippers in general." So here it is the teaching of the difference between the Christian rite and the rites for Jewish proselytes and ablutions of Christians in worship.

Dean Alford, in his Greek New Testament, adds one more variation to the list, that the *baptismoi* include "the various washings which were under the Law, the baptism of John, and even Christian baptism also perhaps included, the nature of which, and their distinctions from one another, would naturally be one of the fundamental and primary objects of teaching to Hebrew converts."

The point to be made is not that all these views are totally distinct or mutu-

ally exclusive. Indeed there is considerable overlapping. But the differences are considerable and sufficient to show that scholarship (at least as represented by the above interpreters) may not give a precise understanding of Scripture.

It may be said that the point at issue above is a minor one, and therefore the divergence of views is not important. But that is to miss the point. The question is whether knowledge of Greek and other competence in scholarship can bring finality of interpretation, whether the issue is large or small. Furthermore, if there is no finality with regard to a minor matter, how can it be expected in a major one, which is presumably more difficult of interpretation?

This point may be confirmed by consulting the commentaries on almost any problem passage. If precise knowledge of the Bible includes finality in its interpretation, then the scholars who write the commentaries have not reached that knowledge. If certainty of biblical interpretation is a mark of precise biblical knowledge, then the scholarship available to the church so far appears to lack that knowledge.

A second way of investigating this question is to consider a passage of Scripture, using only the tools that may be available to many Christian students today. Those tools are mainly the various translations and versions of the Bible. While there are Christians in the world who do not have the whole Bible in any language, and many others who have it only in their mother tongues, still others have access to several different versions. An Indian student, for example, can have the Bible in his mother tongue, one of the regional languages of India. He will more than likely own a copy of the English Authorized (King James) Version. And he can easily have a cheap edition of the New

Testament, say the R.S.V., N.E.B., or T.E.V. Various other versions also are available in the Christian book stores. Another tool that he can have and should use is an ordinary dictionary. Some good English dictionaries give the biblical usage of a word along with the other meanings.

A passage such as Philippians 2 is worth considering. It certainly is not an easy one to understand. In fact, there is one word here that has, it is said, occasioned as much theological writing as any word in the Bible. That is the word "ekenosen," or the phrase "heauton ekenosen": "he emptied himself." Wrapped up in this phrase is the mystery of the hypostatic union of the two natures, divine and human, in the person of our Lord. Scholars have wrestled with this mystery, and still do. They think deeply upon it, and they have been able to answer the heretical views and theories of the "kenosis" that deny the true theanthropic person of Christ. But no one has unravelled the mystery.

So this is a good passage to consider. For if the scholars cannot probe the meaning it may be thought that an ordinary Christian student must find the passage simply mysterious, perhaps pause to worship, but pass on with no clear understanding. But that is not the case.

The student who knows that the Bible asserts Christ's deity might wonder uneasily whether "being in the form of God" could mean that Christ is less than God. But when he finds in his English dictionary that one meaning of "form" is "mode of being," he realizes that no denial of deity can be proved here, and this passage is quite in line with other clear statements in the New Testament that Jesus is God.

But the student may be baffled when he comes to verse 7, that Jesus "emptied himself" (ASV, RSV). What does this

mean? He emptied himself of what? That he “emptied himself of all but love” may be a beautiful and good thought, but is hardly an accurate doctrinal statement.

To find the meaning the student can do two things. He can first read the context of this difficult passage. He will soon find that this act of self-emptying was an expression of “the mind (attitude-TEV) of Christ”; that his mind is the example of the “one mind” and “lowliness of mind” for which the apostle pleads in vv. 2 and 3.

In the second place, the student can check other versions. He will immediately discover that the grammar of v. 7 is different from AV in ASV and RSV. In those versions the sentence reads, “but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made (or, born) in the likeness of men.” This sentence structure, of a main verb followed by two participles, may suggest immediately that what the self-emptying meant (or is meant to teach) is that Christ’s humble mind led him to take the form (or mode of being) of a servant, as a human being.

The student may then think again of the context he has just noticed, and realized that his meaning of the emptying fits in with it. His understanding of the practical force of the verse is confirmed, and a definite knowledge of the passage is gained.

If the student then consults the commentaries, he will find that he has come to the same conclusion as, for example, R.P. Martin in the Tyndale Commentary, who says that the verse “teaches that his ‘kenosis’ or self-emptying was his taking the servant’s form.” The student may not be able to back up his conviction with a discussion of the Greek text, but has all the support needed by comparison of English versions and study of the context. His conclusion is precisely

that of the Greek scholar. That seems to be the thing that matters.

The objection may be raised that much of this is relevant mainly for those who can study in English, so with the aid of different versions, etc., but will not mean much to others. But as we shall see, the basic principle of interpreting the Bible is to see a thing in its context. There are principles of study and interpretation that are useful in any language. The versions help but they are not essential.

Some will question whether this is the “precise knowledge” of the Bible to which Dr. Fuller refers. But can the most profound scholarship fathom the person of Christ? And if not, is it likely that this passage was given by God to enable anyone to do so? But if this passage was given so that Christian students (and scholars) might have the mind of Christ, then the student who gets that meaning from the passage (and enters into that meaning by submitting to Christ) can surely be said to have the precise knowledge *that God intended him to have*.

The point of this discussion is not to decry reverent and thorough biblical scholarship, nor to say it has no place in the church. It has a very important place. The church needs its scholars who can clarify, expound, and defend the faith. Scholarship can throw much light on many passages of Scripture. Historical or cultural allusions often are made clear by the work of the scholar. Nevertheless, it still is true that valid knowledge of the Scripture is not dependent on the exact understanding of such allusions. Or, simply: the Indian Christian student can know the Bible.

A statement of Donald Macleod, writing in the Evangelical Library *Bulletin*, Autumn 1968, is very apt, “But we must not institute a priesthood of the expert, nor imbibe that habit whereby men des-

pair of understanding a particular passage simply because they have no commentary in hand. Every such tendency must be met with a firm emphasis upon the Protestant doctrine of the perspicuity of the Word.”

The second factor that helps to keep the Indian student from a knowledge of the Bible is a quasi-spiritual attitude common in some sections of the evangelical church. It seems to go something like this: since the Bible is the Word of God, and therefore a supernatural book, we must expect to understand it only in a supernatural way. That supernatural understanding is given by God through the illumination of the Holy Spirit as we pray. Therefore careful study and hard thinking are not only unnecessary, but may be unspiritual and therefore wrong. They may show dependence on human wisdom, and this the New Testament condemns. So we can simply pray and wait for impressions. Whatever impressions then come will be the teaching of the Holy Spirit. And they will be, ipso facto, the highest understanding of the Scripture.

So there are some Indian students, influenced by their church leaders, who come with questions like these: Is there not a “heavenly language” in the Bible, as it were, a heavenly grammar, heavenly figures of speech, as well as heavenly thoughts? Is there not a sort of language that cannot be understood by applying the rules of human grammar, but rather by a spiritual insight that is gained through prayer? Is it not the teaching of the Holy Spirit that enables a person to understand the Scripture?

“But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (I Cor. 2:14). Does this mean that the truths of revelation are not to be understood through ordinary

laws of languages, but only through an illumination given by the Holy Spirit? The answer to this question is not a simple one.

There are of course promises in the Bible that the Holy Spirit will be our teacher. For example, I John 2:27. The anointing mentioned here is indicated by II Cor. 1:21 to be the Holy Spirit. Christ himself promised the teaching work of the Holy Spirit in John 16:13, “He will guide you into all truth.”

The Holy Spirit is our teacher. This is a fact and cannot be questioned. And in I John 2:27, it is stated not only that the anointing teaches you, but also “you need not that any man teach you.” However, Eph. 4 and I Cor. 12 state that God has put teachers in the church. That is, the Holy Spirit is the teacher, but normally he teaches through men, through human teachers called of God. That is, the Holy Spirit uses means or instruments for his teaching.

Again, what does the Holy Spirit teach? What is the content of his teaching? Does he teach supernaturally what we can learn for ourselves? Do we expect, for example, that God will give a special revelation, through prayer and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, to tell us what are the “bulls” and “dogs” of Psalm 22, vv. 12 and 16? Not at all. In v. 6 the Psalmist calls himself a worm, showing his use of an animal metaphor. The reference to men in vv. 6 and 7; the poetic parallelism of verse 16; the prophetic reference to Christ both in the general picture of the Psalm and in the specific quotations of vv. 18 and 22: all these things show plainly that the animals refer to evil men.

This understanding is gained by study and clear thinking. If God has given us the ability to learn some truth by this means, then he does not teach us that truth in another way. It would be presumption on our part to ask him to do

so. It would also be presumption merely to pray and wait for some special illumination instead of giving time and effort to study and thought.

And the Scripture itself tells us to study and to think. We are to "gird up the loins of our mind" (I Peter 1:13). The Berean Christians were commended because they "searched the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so" (Acts 17:11). They did not merely pray and wait for impressions.

The Bible was written in human language. This does not mean that it cannot go beyond the limitations of the human authors through whom it was written. If it were bound by those limitations, then it would have all the mistakes of the first century (or earlier) understanding and writing. But it does mean that the Bible comes through human thought forms, grammar, figures of speech, etc. The Holy Spirit does not do away with those thought forms and human characteristics. Rather, the truth of God is revealed through them.

Most of those thought forms are the same as are found in human language today. If it were not so, there would be no communication with the past. By study we can find out the thought forms that are different from ours, so we can understand them.

So the Bible was written in human language through human authors. Therefore we need to study the laws and forms of language as used in the Bible, to help us in understanding it. And this is biblical hermeneutics.

Let the student study hermeneutics then. Not that he should get one of the usual books on hermeneutics and wade through it (or *plough* through it may be a better metaphor, since in the beginning it may seem to him more like hard ground than soft water). Rather let him get the tools that are available to him: translations and versions of the

Bible, and a good dictionary in the language he is using. Let him get one or more notebooks, to record carefully the facts he learns and the conclusions to which he comes. Let him have confidence that he can learn the Bible and determination that he will do so. Let him set aside regular time for his study and stick to it faithfully.

For this kind of study he will need a hunger to know the Scriptures, a willingness to do hard work, a readiness to do hard thinking and meditation, a perseverance that will not give up, and a prayerful, teachable spirit.

In seeking to correct a one-sided and supposedly spiritual attitude that Bible knowledge can be gained solely through prayer and without study, an opposite and equally serious error must be avoided. While perhaps not so common among Indian Christian students, still the anti-supernaturalistic philosophies taught in the universities do affect them also. Prayer and looking to God for illumination are necessary along with thorough study. Study is to be prayerful as well as careful. The Bible is not a human book like others, that is, one produced by human intellect and that can therefore be understood by other human intellects using purely intellectual means. There is a spiritual dimension in biblical truth. Only the Holy Spirit imparts it. True knowledge of the Bible can never come without that impartation.

A third factor is found among some Indian Christian students. It is by no means found only in India, but is no doubt true of some students in every country. It is a lack of desire for knowledge of the Bible and therefore an unwillingness to persevere in study until that knowledge is obtained. This is essentially a failure of the student in his own spirit, but it is stimulated by conditions found at least partly in the

system of education. Often the student is concerned with only one thing, to pass his examinations, get a degree, and get a job. If his ambition is a little higher, he hopes to "get a class," that is, higher marks giving him Second or First Class standing. But the higher standing means a better job, that is all.

Not only is the interest so often merely in knowledge for job's sake, rather than in the knowledge itself, but also the pass or the class is sought (and sometimes attained) by a short-cut. To avoid the grind of reading all the required books and mastering the subject, the student can get from the bazaar various abbreviated helps: books that list the questions asked on the examinations of previous years; summaries of some of the longer text books; simplified discussions of various subjects in the curriculum. The student who hasn't the will to study hard and thoroughly will go through some of these bazaar books, and hope for a good result. Sometimes he gets it.

Christian students too may be caught in this vicious parody of education. And the approach to other areas of knowledge may carry over to knowledge of the Bible. The student may think that by reading casually in the Bible, reading a few devotional books, or hearing some spiritual messages, he can come to know the Scriptures. He finds that he can't. With no real thirst for the knowledge itself, and with no habit of will for hard study, he soon gives up, at the most maintains a "quiet time" in a desultory fashion, and concludes that Bible knowledge is not for him.

The answer, like the problem, is in the student himself. His attitude must change, for he will not drink if he is not thirsty, no matter what his interest in the water may be. But he often needs an encouragement he does not get, that he can learn the Bible even without

studying for the B.D. degree. And he often needs a challenge he does not want, that learning the Bible is hard work, sometimes without thrill, but finally with much blessing. He must give up the "short-cut" mentality, and realize that Bible knowledge is not ripe fruit to be picked from a low tree, but precious ore to be dug from a deep mine.

A fourth factor is worthy of mention, not because it has up to now affected a large number of Christian students in India, but because it fits in with some current theology in the church and therefore may have greater influence in the future.

There is a philosophy which asserts that ultimate truth is beyond any present formulation of it, and that it includes formulations which are, or seem to be, mutually contradictory. This can lead to a practical outlook that effectually prevents a real knowledge of the truth of Scripture. The practical effects of this philosophy are obvious and inevitable. If the ultimate truth is beyond us, then we can never be sure how much or how little we have of it. Even our strongest convictions and those truths that seem most clear to us may or may not be finally valid. Furthermore we cannot certainly say that any thing is wrong, no matter how clearly it contradicts what we know to be right and true. For in the end it may prove to be part of the larger, ultimate truth.

Thus the effect of such a philosophy is to destroy certainty. And the Bible contradicts such ideas. The Scripture makes affirmations which are true, and the opposites of which are false. Also the note of certainty is sounded again and again in Scripture, and when the Apostle Paul says, "We know in part," it cannot mean that we guess in toto. If that is the meaning, then language ceases to have significance.

The effect of this philosophy as it creeps into Christian thinking and affects the Indian student is to deny any absolute standard of truth and error in doctrine, and of right and wrong in ethics. And since leaders within the church are teaching a view of the Bible that effectively removes it as the Word of God with absolute and divine authority, the Christian student is left to uncertainty. If he is influenced by this philosophy and so-called Christian teaching, he will either continue reading his Bible with that uncertainty, not knowing how much he can have confidence in, or else he will stop reading it altogether. In either case he cannot come to know it.

There is an insistent need for prophets in the church who will proclaim the full authority of Scripture and the divine sanction of Scriptural standards. The student needs to be reassured that he can know the Bible and that it is worth knowing above all other books, for it is God's Holy Word.

These factors tend to keep the Indian student from serious Bible study and from clear, intelligent interpretation. But he need not be hindered. The student can learn the Bible, in spite of the contrary influences. He can learn to interpret the Bible.

Of primary importance is the approach. This determines everything. The student must come to the Bible as the Word of God in human language. These two characteristics of the Scripture, divine and human, will determine the guide-lines the student must follow if he would know the Bible. Failure to recognize them will effectively keep him from that knowledge.

Accepting the Bible as God's Word will channel the student in studying it along three lines. First, he will bow to its authority. When he understands its

meaning he can only seek to obey its mandate. He will acknowledge the Bible as giving God's standards of truth and error, right and wrong, which cannot be challenged in spite of other philosophies.

Second, since God is the Author of Scripture, no human intellect of itself is sufficient to grasp it. So the student, as he studies, will continually look to the Holy Spirit to enlighten him and make clear the truth.

Third, if God has spoken there can be no more important work than to learn what he has said. So the student will put the study of Scripture at a central place in his life.

The student is guided, then, in his Bible study by knowledge that it is the Word of God. He knows also that it is in human language, so he can study it as he studies other human language. As we have noted before, this means that he must recognize the laws and forms of the language, and interpret in the light of them. There are practical steps he can use in carrying this out.

For one thing, he can use a dictionary to understand words he reads. A dictionary like Chambers' *Twentieth Century Dictionary* (available now in an Indian edition) defines the old words that are found in the King James version but are not current today. For example, fourteen times in the Old Testament and once in the New occurs the word "reins," as in Rev. 2:23, "he which searcheth the reins and hearts." Chambers' dictionary points out that the word means "kidneys", which may not make sense except for the helpful additional note: "now, especially as formerly supposed, seat of emotions."

Help on theological words also comes from the dictionary. One meaning of "propitiation" given in Chambers is "atoning sacrifice." And when, for further clarification, the student looks up "atone," he finds atonement defined as

the “reconciliation of God and man by the incarnation and death of Christ.” The student will get help in understanding these words, but he also must use caution, knowing that the dictionary is not concerned with the evangelical understanding of biblical words, but rather what is common to all Christians. So he needs to check the dictionary definition by the various Bible passages where the word occurs to be sure it is accurate.

The dictionary gives help not only for archaic and technical words, but also for some which seem simple and without difficulty, but which need to be understood carefully. The word “study” in II Tim. 2:15 can be misleading. One meaning as given in Chambers is to “make one’s object, seek to achieve,” so the student realizes the verse is not necessarily a command to read books or go to theological school.

The word “prevent” in I Thess. 4:15 (AV) has almost reversed its meaning in the 350 years since the AV was translated, and as it stands in this verse does not make sense to the student. It may be cleared up by referring to any one of the modern translations, or by noting that the first definition of the word in Chambers is “(obs.) to precede.” Thus the dictionary is a useful, necessary tool for the student as he seeks to interpret his Bible.

A second practical step he can take is to note carefully the grammar of the passage of Scripture that he is studying. He may find that he needs first to get a grammar book and brush up on his knowledge of the subject. But grammar and syntax are foundations on which language is built, and therefore vital for interpretation. We have already noted the importance of the grammar in Phil. 2:7, giving a key to the understanding of one of the great problem verses of the Bible. We also recognized that by comparing versions we may get light

on the true grammatical structure of a sentence.

Another illustration of the point is in Matt. 26:27, at the institution of the Lord’s Supper. Christ gave his disciples the command, “Drink ye all of it” (AV). The sentence is ambiguous. Is it that the disciples were to drink all of the wine, or that all the disciples were to drink? The question is answered for the student immediately when he turns either to the RSV (drink of it, all of you) or to the TEV (drink it, all of you). The Indian student who knows Hindi finds that the word for “all” must connect with “you”: “Tum sab is men se piyo.” This is true of many languages other than English. Cf. French, “Buvez-en tous.” Often they have inflectional or conjugational forms that make clear what is ambiguous in English.

The third and most important practical step the student can take is to study the verse or passage of Scripture carefully in its context. If there is a basic hermeneutical principle, it is, I believe, that of context.

The handling of the Bible verses in isolation, with no reference to their connection in the passage, has had a serious negative effect upon the understanding of the Bible. This bad practice has been made easier by the every-verse-a-paragraph printing arrangement of the AV, by the printing of verses separately on cards for memorizing, use in promise boxes, etc. Such printing and use is not necessarily wrong, but may make the student tend to think of verses as separate entities.

They are not. The Bible was not given in inspiration nor recorded in writing as isolated verses. (Some parts of Proverbs may be exceptions to this.) There were no verse or chapter divisions in the original manuscripts. Paragraphs, sentences, and verses are normally meant to be understood in their setting

or context. Each is related to what goes before and what follows it in the text.

The student will find that by studying verses in this way, many that are otherwise obscure will become clear. He will also find that interpreting in the light of the context will give assurance to his understanding of the Scriptures and will keep him from making wrong or arbitrary interpretations.

An example or two will make this clear. Psalm 127:2, taken out of context, might be a welcome verse for students who find trouble in early rising: "It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep." But the first verse of the Psalm shows that this is no encouragement for long hours of sleep. It rather points out the fact that giving up sleep to concentrate on a job is really of no use unless the Lord is guiding the job, a very important truth for a Christian student.

Another verse where the context is important is Rom. 14:14, "I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself: but to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." Taken by itself and the context ignored, this verse could suggest that a Christian may do anything he likes, eat anything, think anything, and nothing will be unclean to him unless he considers it unclean. But such a meaning is impossible. Sinful things are unclean of themselves. So in the context the student can find the limitation of this verse and its true meaning. There are things, such as eating the meat that was sold in the markets after being offered to idols, which are not intrinsically evil, but which may prove evil to the person who cannot partake or participate with a clear conscience.

So the Christian student can learn the Bible if he will give himself seriously

to the study, using the dictionary, analyzing carefully the grammar, and especially studying each unit in the light of its context. There are some other principles also to be used, which he can learn. There are in addition many special forms of language in the Bible, such as parables, and for these the work of biblical scholars is most helpful. But even for such forms, the student can learn much by himself. If he will study the parables of Christ, noting carefully the ones where Christ himself interprets the parable, and the way he interprets it, the student will find keys that unlock for him much that otherwise is puzzling.

In conclusion, it is no doubt true that the Indian Christian student is much like other Christians around the world. The knowledge of the Bible is not easily acquired anywhere. Nor is careful biblical interpretation the activity of the mass of Christians. In India, as no doubt in many other countries, there are special factors, in the religious background, the life of the church and the educational system, that hinders the Christian student in this greatest of all pursuits, the understanding of the Word of God.

But they may be overcome. The student can learn and interpret the Bible. He cannot learn everything, but he can learn much. There are practical steps he can take. Whether he takes them or not, whether he learns the Scripture or not, depends on himself. Truly, the real secret is within. The student of today is living in a shallow age. "Take it easy" is a common watchword. And the church suffers.

May God touch at least some students who will so love God that they will love his Word, so love the Word that they will give themselves to learn it, and so learn the Word that they will speak it forth with prophetic voices to the church and to the world.