

Wineskins Magazine

A Christ-Centered Hermeneutic

Volume 2, Number 6 Jan-Feb 1994

Contents

A Christ-centered Hermeneutic By Rubel Shelly

Living Interpretations By Mike Cope

Reading the Bible in an Age of Crisis By Darryl Tippens

Movie Review: Schlinder's List by Larry James and Gary Cogill

My Life with the Bible (A Meditation on Hermeneutics) By John Allen Chalk

Preach the Text, Brother! By Joel Stephen Williams

And Find Thirty Minutes to Read My Bible By Eddie Sharp

A Reader's Guide to the Bible By Mark C. Black

The Baptism of Jeffrey Dahmer: Can the Chief of Sinners Be Saved? By Rob McRay

Hope Network Newsletter: Changing Perceptions By Lynn Anderson

AfterGlow: Positions, Proof-texts and Preaching By Phillip Morrison

A Christ-Centered Hermeneutic

by Rubel Shelly

January – February, 1994

There is a great deal of discussion these days (most of it without real substance or value!) about a subject many of us have trouble spelling. The issue is *hermeneutics*. People around the shallow edges of the discussion think its point is to force a choice between “old hermeneutics” and “new hermeneutics.” What a shame.

Hermeneutics is the technical term for a discipline of study that focuses on principles and procedures of interpretation. For religious people, the text we are concerned to interpret is the Holy Bible. Biblical hermeneutics, then, is the search for a technique of fruitful study of the 66 books of our Christian Scripture.

Although there is one divinely given Scripture, *there is no divinely ordained system for its study and interpretation*. Every proposed method of systematic Bible study is of human origin. Thus every one of them is faulty in some respects, and all are subject to the limitations—and I am thinking here not so much of intellect as purity of heart versus self-willed and sinful agendas—of the women and men who apply them to the sacred text.

Until the current discussion of hermeneutics began among the Churches of Christ, there was only one setting in which the term had been used seriously and applied with any consistency. That setting? *Debates*.

With much of our theology framed on polemic platforms, the only consistent approach to Scripture we have evolved in our small branch of the Christian community is a hermeneutic of “command, example, and necessary inference.” In my opinion, it has been a helpful approach—to some parts of the Word of God.

This tripartite method is derived from British and American legal methodology. How do courts come to decisions about matters of dispute? First, the parties involved look for a *law* that specifically addresses the issue. Second, they search the history of legal interpretation for a *precedent* to establish how courts have ruled on similar matters previously. Third, they file briefs and make oral arguments about the *implications* of law and precedent to the specific case at hand.

Does it sound familiar? It should, for it is the same approach we make to the Bible when disputing matters of authority, statute, and law. Must people be baptized? What ought the church to do with funds from its treasury? How should a local church be organized? We have looked for guidance in solving these issues by searching Scripture for a law (i.e., command) or precedent (i.e., example). Lacking either to specifically address an issue, we have filed briefs (i.e., tracts, church papers) and staged oral arguments (i.e., debates, church fights).

I repeat: *This method is not “bad” and ought not be abandoned—when dealing with certain parts of the Bible.* Minus the inflated egos and personal agendas that have employed this method to sling mud, alienate brothers, and destroy churches, the *method* itself is not a bad one. Since there are segments of the Bible that are written as law codes (e.g., Deuteronomy), a standard method of legal interpretation is the natural and correct one to employ. When dealing with the commands of the Lord Jesus Christ or apostolic edicts given by his authority, the approach that searches for the command, looks for examples of its application in Scripture, and draws careful inferences from the relevant facts is appropriate.

But a rather small percentage of the Bible is delivered as a law code. Jesus gave many more parables, for example, than statutes. Trying to interpret a parable by a legal methodology can produce interesting (bizarre!) results. Is God really a reluctant dispenser of justice and compassion? (cf. Luke 18:1-8). Did Jesus really admire and applaud a dishonest manager? (cf. Luke 16:1-9).

The command-example-inference method does not address issues of textual criticism. Its application without regard to historical and grammatical criticism has produced eccentric readings of the Bible. What about the insights of literary or form criticism? And what is the contribution of the reader’s own personal spiritual life (i.e., surrender to the indwelling Spirit of God) to the interpretive process?

We must get past the petty infighting and shouting about hermeneutics to the real issue involved. Bible study that is redemptive follows a “guiding principle” that is offered in Scripture itself.

In the life of Jesus, he once chided the professional students of the Law of Moses (i.e., scribes) for thinking their approach to Bible study would bring them eternal life (John 5:39a). Their scrutiny of and debate over the text blinded them to the presence of Jesus in their midst! “These are the Scriptures that testify about me,” he said, “yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5a:39b-40).

Paul pointed to the same guiding principle in his writings. He affirmed that the “veil” on Bible-readers’ hearts is lifted only when he or she “turns to the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:16). With whatever human methodology one employs, the Bible must be read through Christ-colored glasses to discover God and how to have a relationship with him.

This guiding principle may be called *Christocentricity*. It is perhaps best explained by identifying its alternative. Reading the Bible as a text of rules for right conduct makes us moralists, critics, and judges. Simply searching out commands to enjoin and examples to imitate may reduce the Bible to a self-help manual. Devoting all of one’s energy to the minutiae of textual and grammatical-historical criticism may reduce him to a dry academic who lacks the fire of personal spirituality.

On the other hand, seeing Scripture as a record of God’s self-disclosure in Christ (cf. Hebrews 1:1-2) opens new possibilities. It does not set us free of moral restraints and spiritual duties, but it leads us to undertake them in grateful response to God rather than in dutiful compliance out of

fear. It does not release us from the duty of solid and responsible academic research, but neither will it allow us to remain detached from Christ and the people for whom he has died.

Read the Bible to discover Christ. When you are confused about living out some spiritual obligation, study the example he left (cf. Mark 2:23-28). And if you ever catch yourself systematizing Scripture so that you are hindering people who are seeking Christ, scrap your system and start over.

While we are looking for “hermeneutical keys” to unlock the door to understanding God and his will, we must remember that the clearest word God ever delivered to us was Jesus. All theology generated apart from that definitive word will be nothing more than “foolish and stupid arguments” that subvert faith (2 Timothy 2:23).

In this issue of *Wineskins*, a collection of writers looks at the hermeneutical issue from this Christocentric perspective. We hope some clarifying insights come to our readers. Above all, we pray that our efforts will move people beyond fear and fussing about the methodology of Bible study to the reading of Scripture as a personal quest for the living Lord.

Living Interpretations

by Mike Cope

January – February, 1994

Finally! A chance to sit! Robert's day had begun when "the enemy" (a.k.a., the alarm clock) started screaming, "It's 5:45, you sluggard! Get out of bed!" And it had been a screamer of a day ever since. For some reason, Robert's boss seemed to think that someone needed to fill the potholes on this wonderful new information highway people kept talking about. So, guess who was now the Assistant-Manager-in-Charge-of-Fixing-Potholes?

Anyway, the normally hard church pew felt like an old Lazyboy recliner this Wednesday night. At first, the thought of tacking a night at church onto his frantic day wasn't very appealing. But, hey, at least no one could reach him by phone.

His mind was treading water for a while as everyone else swam. He suddenly realized he'd been in a coma through the announcements, the opening prayer, and the first three songs. But now it was time to focus. The special guest speaker was supposed to address something of grave concern: a new hermeneutic that was invading the church.

Robert's first question was, "What is a hermeneutic?" His second question was, "What was the old hermeneutic?" But the fervent minister was getting to that. Some lame joke about "Herman Who?" followed by the three-fold hermeneutic: command, necessary example, and inference. Or was it command, example, and necessary inference? "What's an unnecessary inference?" Robert wondered.

Despite his best effort to knuckle down and follow the fiery darts that were being launched, it wasn't long before Robert's thoughts were diverted. The last thing he'd heard the preacher say was that he was really talking about interpreting the Bible.

With his mind now floating free, Robert remembered how his father used to quote Mark Twain: "It isn't the part of the Bible I don't understand that bothers me. It's the part I do understand." And as the arcane lesson droned on and on, he started noticing how much clearer the Bible became as he looked around the auditorium.

Off his right shoulder, a couple of rows behind, he could see the Johnstons. Not two of them. But three—as usual. This godly couple, surely now in their sixties, had shown a lifetime of love to their son who had been born in 1955 with Down Syndrome. When Donnie was born, there wasn't much support for families with children who are retarded. The Johnstons had endured years of gaping stares; they had watched their savings account slowly dwindle; they had forfeited things like new cars and vacations. But they had their son! And the amazing thing was, they always seemed (at least on good days!) to consider themselves the beneficiaries of a great gift rather than the butt of a bad joke.

Robert recalled the passages in the New Testament that said to “practice hospitality.” One of them said something about receiving strangers who might be angels. As he looked again at the Johnstons, he thought how they provided the hermeneutic he needed: a living interpretation of Scripture.

Then his eyes moved to the “perfect family,” the Hodgkins. They always looked like they’d stepped out of the latest Dillard’s catalog. They’re the kind of family you could easily hate: good-looking, wealthy, and children who starred on ball teams, helped older widows cross streets, and stayed on the honor rolls (producing those infuriating ‘MY CHILD IS AN HONOR STUDENT AT YO-YO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL’ bumper stickers!).

But on the other hand, he didn’t hate the Hodgkins at all. He had deep admiration for them. They were genuine. They didn’t think of themselves as a cut above everyone else. In fact, they gave up a part of every Saturday to work in the church’s food and clothing pantry. Robert remembered seeing them assist the people who asked for help. They—the whole family!—had a marvelous way of doing it so that no one was demeaned in the process.

He had learned of their love that was demonstrated in giving time and resources for children who either had no parents or had been removed from abusive homes. Robert had also noticed that any time he passed their house, it looked like the official gathering place for kids from all over town.

What was that passage in James? “Pure religion is taking care of widows and orphans in their afflictions.” Robert realized he didn’t need a better hermeneutic. The Hodgkins were his hermeneutic. They were the ones who had properly interpreted the passage for him.

Then he noticed Katie. She was the member of their church whom he would vote “Most Deserving of Resentment.” She and her husband had divorced about a year ago because of different interests: She liked Kenny G playing in the background during a quiet, romantic dinner, and he liked her (former) best friend, who lived two blocks away.

Now Katie was just trying to get by. She was lonely, obviously. But on top of the hurt and loneliness was exhaustion. She was trying to be Superwoman who worked 12 hour shifts as a physical therapist at the children’s hospital and then returned home to her own two children. As time rolled on, the kids’ father saw them less and less often—after all, his new wife was having a new baby—so they needed Katie’s attention even more. And the medical bills for her son’s cystic fibrosis kept piling up. At least she didn’t have to pay for a physical therapist!

But amazingly, Robert mused, Katie had managed to turn her resentment over to God. She still hurt—terribly. But she had made the decision not to live in bitterness. What new or old hermeneutic could ever interpret Jesus’ command to “love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you” like Katie’s living example? She was a commentary in 3-D.

Eventually, the familiar words “as we stand and sing” snapped Robert out of his trance. He stood and began singing, “O do not let the word depart, and close thine eyes against the light...” But even as he sang, he thought about how much light was already around him: the light of God’s

Scripture was being interpreted for him by these people who had been captured by God's love. Interpretation surely centers on love, he thought—love for God and love for others.

“Is that the old hermeneutic or the new hermeneutic?” he wondered. Unfortunately, he hadn't paid enough attention to know. He chuckled to himself that he had been trying to be a living interpretation of Paul's command “Wake up, O Sleeper.”

Reading the Bible in an Age of Crisis

by Darryl Tippens

January – February, 1994

Let us begin with two remarkable scenes. The first is set in Achaia about A. D. 51. Finding no successful way to silence the Apostle Paul, his frustrated opponents drag the great missionary before Gallio, the Roman magistrate. First, the plaintiffs lay out their accusations. Paul, about to reply, is interrupted by Gallio:

If it had been a question of crime or grave misdemeanor, I should, of course, have given you Jews a patient hearing, but if it is some bickering about words and names and your Jewish law, you may settle the matter yourselves. I do not intend to be a judge of these matters (Acts 18:14-15, Revised English Bible).

Gallio is no fool. He knows these enthusiasts, especially their penchant for theological debate. With serious crimes and grave misdemeanors crowding the court docket, he dismisses the suit.

The second remarkable scene comes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* which opens dramatically with a ship about to sink in a violent storm. Two groups of men appear on the deck—the common sailors who work feverishly to keep the ship afloat and a group of aristocratic passengers, including the King of Naples, who badger the deck crew and interfere with its ability to save the ship. When one of the noblemen orders the boatswain to be polite to the aristocratic company, the boatswain replies in so many words, “I’ll be patient and polite when the sea is!” The boatswain asks bluntly: “What care these roarers [winds and waves] for the name of king?” Considering the crisis, the sailor asks in effect, “Why are you quoting Emily Post?”

Today, the air is apocalyptic. Our society feels the growing weight of multiple crises. “Tempest” is a proper metaphor for our very existence. Living in a time of “crimes and grave misdemeanors,” ordinary people have every right to ask us: “Do you spiritually elite have anything to say to us? Do you have a word from God, or do you just quibble about names and words? We need to know because we’re drowning!”

A strange thing has occurred among Christians in the late twentieth century. As the world’s crises mount, as the need for faith grows daily more apparent, even at this moment of grand opportunity Christians find themselves preoccupied with complicated questions of how to interpret the Bible. Ironically, this general preoccupation with method is diminishing our ability to proclaim good news to a lost world. The traditionalists proclaim, “We already have a perfect method, and someone’s trying to wrest it from us.” The avant-garde reply, “We don’t have a perfect method yet, but we’re working on it. Give us time.” Both groups are united by the Enlightenment dream of a perfect method. Their only disagreement concerns whether it has been already realized or not. “Method” possesses them, not the desperate audiences who need the message.

Meanwhile, the ship sinks. Meanwhile the crisis worsens.

I am all for finding a sound method of Bible reading. As an academic I care about complicated hermeneutical issues. I care about the modern crisis in meaning afflicting all branches of learning today including philosophy, anthropology, psychology, the sciences, literature, and theology. But as a Christian I am troubled by the unspoken assumption that we could solve our spiritual problems if we could just agree on a method of reading.

I have to ask, even if a golden age of hermeneutic consensus were to descend on us, would the tempest go away? And until consensus arrives, what are we to do in the meantime?

I believe that we must proclaim the good news to a crisis-ridden world *now*, and that we can do it quite well even without a settled method of interpretation. We are much like physicians who can enjoy the luxury of debating medical theory in their journals, but who also have to lay the journals aside in order to help real patients afflicted with real illnesses. Christians must do the same.

“The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost” (1 Timothy 1:15). There is little dispute about this text and many others like it that the world desperately needs to hear. The essentials are clear and easy to articulate.

Since we want to be sure that our message is life-giving bread, not a stone or a snake, how can we be confident of our message? Let me suggest six broad tests for good interpretations of the Bible in an age of crisis. Although these tests will not necessarily help us settle the particular issues that currently enamor us, they can help us to decide what is most important, and they may help us to know what will earn a “patient hearing” (in Gallio’s terms) among those caught in the tempest:

First, good readings begin with a solid understanding of the Bible in its original languages and historical setting. Since the medium of Scripture is language (there’s no way around this fact), it stands to reason that those proficient in biblical languages can generally give us better readings. Just as a good physician knows his physiology, so a good reader knows his grammar and lexicons, “the bone structure and nervous system of language,” as George Steiner puts it. *Yet linguistic and historical proficiency alone never guarantee truth.* If it did, the world’s seminaries would be bastions of biblically-centered believers, and Bible scholars long ago would have settled the big disputes for us. Yet nothing is more obvious than the endless, irresolvable arguments that consume the attention of the world’s Bible scholars. Good scholarship gives us only probabilities, not certainty. Something more is required for a good reading.

Second, good readings rely on the full canon of Scripture. Good readers are aware of the human inclination to reduce the canon, and so they try to be receptive to all God’s word. A friend told me that he once examined his father’s well-worn Bible. He noticed that the gold edges between Romans and Philemon were worn away, but the pages of the Gospels were still mostly untouched and shiny. Perhaps never realizing it, this reader had narrowed the canon to the Pauline epistles. For centuries, Christians with a Puritan bent have privileged a few texts from Paul over the Gospels. Shouldn’t we ask why?

The next time you listen to an interpreter, don't just hear what's *included*; notice also what's *excluded*. You may discover glaring omissions—the life of Jesus, the Psalms, Job, Isaiah, or the prophets. Good readers understand that certain elements of Scripture are central and privileged (the story of Jesus, for example). However, understanding the danger of shrinking the canon, they do their best to resist it.

Third, good readings occur in the light of the community's collective wisdom. Good interpretations are best achieved in community. They gain power and plausibility from the collective perception of the saints, living and dead. One church father observed: "While there were many things in the sacred word that I could not come to understand by myself, I could often grasp their sense when I was in the presence of the brothers." When I was young, I noticed that my fellow believers cared deeply what older Christians thought. It mattered what Brother Ayers or Sister Wilks thought. We weren't bound by their opinions, but we were respectful of them. Listening to the wisdom of the past—Steiner calls it "counting heads and counting years"—is intelligent. As G. K. Chesterton put it: "Tradition is democracy of the dead, extending a vote to our ancestors, refusing to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who are walking about."

Tradition is a dirty word for many, but it shouldn't be. Though fallible, historic readings of the Bible provide balance, perspective, and sheer insight. Without them, we are cut off from the collective wisdom of the world's greatest Bible readers.

Fourth, good readings emerge from the spiritual life of the interpreter. As we listen to the interpretation, it is appropriate to examine the spiritual life of the interpreter. If he or she claims to wield the sword of the Spirit, but you can't find the fruit of the Spirit (love, peace, patience, kindness, self-control, etc.) in this person's life, something is very wrong.

Ancient Christians didn't just listen to words; they examined the prophets who spoke the words. Interpreters were not expected to be perfect, but they were expected to conduct their lives in a certain way—honestly, confessionally, and humbly. Hence Paul tells his readers: *examine my life, see what I do* (Philippians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:6, etc.). Paul believed a true Christian interpreter emptied himself daily and identified closely with the life of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:10-11). The life of Jesus and the life of the interpreter should be a seamless robe and a single narrative.

There's a corollary to this test: Good readings not only come from good *interpreters*; good readings are completed by good *listeners* to the interpretation. There is no interpretation unless there is open-minded, open-hearted audition. Before we agree or disagree with a reading, we must practice self-reflection. What *in me* makes me able to hear or not to hear? How might my own brokenness, my own tendencies to jealousy and pride, lead me to distort what has been said? What might cause me to accept blindly or to attack unfeelingly the words of a fellow interpreter?

Good reading and listening demand, above all, a deep humility. Proud men and women, Scripture tells us, are deaf to the Word of God. Only in confession and humility, only when we conquer our smug assumption that we already know what God is saying can we truly hear God: "Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?" (Mark 8:18).

There is no hearing without a deep respect for Scripture's transcendent "otherness." The Word stands above us and beyond us. It is not something we master or totally penetrate. To think otherwise is to make an idol of one's interpretive prowess. We freely confess that our particular reading of God's word is never identical to the whole counsel of God. We see something in the Bible; we do not see everything. We recognize one pattern in the carpet, but we know that the pattern is not the carpet. We are constantly humbled by Oliver Cromwell's exhortation to the Scottish assembly of preachers. "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken."

Fifth, we look for the Jesus story. The New Testament writers proclaim that Jesus is the model, the test case, the exemplar of faith. If you would please God, you must think and live like him. This central New Testament premise must guide our interpretation: "A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher" (Luke 6:40). While we honor the diverse portraits of Jesus in the Gospels, with Paul, Peter, and John we personally submit our lives to the powerful paradigm of Christ's Passion which we have been called to imitate.

Whenever Paul wanted to get something straight, especially relationships in the church, he cited the example of Jesus. Quit pleasing yourself, he would say; build up your neighbor, "for Christ did not please himself" (Romans 15:3). "Let the same mind be in you which was in Jesus Christ..." (Philippians 2:5). John and Peter agree: "As he is, so are we in the world"; "you should follow in his steps" 1 John 4:17; 1 Peter 2:21).

The goal of a good reading of the Bible is never information for its own sake but for conformity to the image of the Son (Romans 8:29).

Sixth, we consider the practical effects of the interpretation. All interpretations have consequences. Before we fully accept a reading, we have every right to inspect it for its "fruitfulness." Does it lead to love of God and love of fellow creatures? Does it promote faith, hope, and charity? If not, approach with caution.

A good reading is not always pleasing, but it does bring hope to sincere seekers. John 6 illustrates how the Word of God can cut two ways at once. After Jesus explains that his flesh is the bread of heaven which must be eaten if the disciples would be saved, many turn away in disgust, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" they ask. Jesus then turns to the Twelve: "Do you also wish to go away?" (6:60). Peter gives the forlorn reply of one who knows what it is like to sink in the tempest, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (6:63). When the Word is spoken, the comfortable are afflicted, and the afflicted are comforted.

Do you want a litmus test for a good reading? It is one we can take to the streets. A good reading makes sense to people living in darkness. Ask: How will it sound in the cancer ward or the AIDS hospice? How will it resonate in the ears of a grieving mother who has lost her son to drugs? How will it play in the streets of Sarajevo or Mogadishu?

While people sink into the deep, we tidy up the life vests and swab the deck. While people starve, we debate the nutritional content of the bread. We must reorder our priorities. We don't

have an information problem or a methodological problem. We have a heart problem. The question is not, “Where can we get a good method that will guarantee our message?”” But “Why are we not telling people that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners?””

I don't know who you spend your time with, but most of the people around me are like Gallio or Shakespeare's mariners. They live in crisis. They're not sure they're going to make it. The tempest rages, and they're grasping for something solid. They want to know: Do we have a word from God for them? Will it make a difference? The answer is, yes, yes. And we do not need to wait for any method to tell us what to say.

Movie Review: Schindler's List

by Larry James and Gary Cogill
January – February, 1994

[The following is a joint review written by Gary Cogill, film critic with WFAA-TV, the ABC affiliate in Dallas, and Larry James, *Wineskins* Media Editor]

Schindler's List is a monumental movie-going experience based on the true story of a Nazi industrialist who miraculously saved the lives of over 1,100 Jews living in occupied Poland during World War II. Liam Neeson (*Darkman*, *Ethan Fromme*, *Husbands and Wives*) gives a towering performance as Oskar Schindler, a complicated womanizer who lays his life and his vast fortune on the line when it counts most. Schindler became known throughout Nazi Germany as a flamboyant opportunist who found a way to exploit the labeled Jews of Poland to help him build his own financial empire. In exchange for their hard work in his metal-working, pot-making factory, Schindler assures them protection and life. While millions of Jews were being slaughtered systematically, Oskar Schindler offered, by comparison, a blessed labor camp experience.

Oscar winner Ben Kingsley (*Ghandi*, *Bugsy*, *Searching for Bobby Fisher*) plays Itzhak Stern, the Jew who runs Schindler's factory while serving as the voice of his boss's conscience. In addition to managing all accounting, Stern orchestrates his own careful strategy to move as many of his fellow Jews into the protection of Schindler's factory as possible. In one of the dramatic closing scenes as he assists Schindler in preparing the famous list of Jews who would be marked purchase, Stern reminds his master, "The list is life." Kingsley gives a profoundly subtle performance as a man who speaks volumes by barely speaking at all.

Ralph Fiennes is the real find in *Schindler's List*, playing the horrendous Amon Goeth, the much-feared German commandant who uses helpless, unsuspecting humans for target practice from the balcony of his villa. Fiennes portrays the real-life criminal with vicious power and eerie depth. Amon Goeth saluted Hitler with his last breath at his public hanging following the war.

Schindler's List explores complicated emotional ground for people of all faiths while serving as the ultimate reminder that pure evil exists in our world. Spielberg's masterpiece reminds us no one is immune from the power of the darkness found at work on our planet. The darkness takes various shapes, assumes the disguise of many ideologies and hits human life with relentless fury. In one remarkable sequence, while every Jew on the screen is stripped of all belongings and loaded into railway cars to be sent off to die, a dazed child wearing a red coat wanders through the frenzied chaos on Spielberg's black and white canvas without suffering a scratch. The image of the red coat reappears later in the film, but this time lifeless amid the piles of death. For Spielberg, long known as a filmmaker with the heart of a child (*E. T.*, *Hook*, *Jurassic Park*), the child in the red coat likely explains one of the chief reasons the film was produced.

By his own admission Spielberg grew up feeling passionately about two things. "I wanted to be a gentile with the same intensity that I wanted to be a filmmaker," he noted in an interview with

Philip Wuntch (*The Dallas Morning News*, December 12, 1993, C-1). Spielberg's grandparents lost about a dozen relatives in the Nazi death camps. As a teenager, Spielberg suffered physical and emotional abuse and rejection at the hands of classmates because he was a Jew. His personal spiritual pilgrimage brought him back to his family roots as his children grew older and when his wife, Kate Capshaw, converted to Judaism. Given this understanding of the director's personal struggle with faith, *Schindler's List* takes on the proportions of a restatement of his personal identity. The result provides viewers with a stunning portrayal of the powerful connections at work in the human experience between genuine faith, personal identity, and uncontrollable suffering.

In the life story of Oskar Schindler viewers confront the maddening contradictions inherent in the human dilemma. Held hostage in a fallen world caught in the clutches of the bizarre cruelty of Adolph Hitler and, at the same time, captured by his own personal sinfulness, Schindler represents unaided mankind's best effort in the face of menacing evil. As his story unfolds, Schindler "grows up" as a person before our eyes. His capacity for compassion and redemptive involvement increases with every just and loving decision he makes. The longer he cares for his strange and pitiful "family," the more he is able to care. Yet, in spite of his courageous bargaining to save his fellows, Schindler never manages to rescue himself from his own capacity for life-disrupting evil. In the powerful closing scene Schindler cries out in agony, weeping in despair over the value of a single human life. As a man who extended life to hundreds and who reached the end of his noble effort heart-broken because he had not been able to save more, Schindler epitomizes humanity's desperate need for grace and the miracle of redemption only an all-powerful God can deliver.

The stunning three-hour film is one of the best ever made. We find great hope and joy in viewing the film. Oskar Schindler eventually bargained away his hard-earned fortune to save the lives of his workers. In spite of his personal moral flaws, much like ancient King David, he stands as an angel in the middle of despair. Most films of heroic genre tend to be "Rocky-esque," reducing life's valuable lessons to neat formulas or to bumper-sticker theology. Oskar Schindler is remarkable in his unpredictability. Likely, even he did not know the nature or the depth of the good he was doing. Often we find truth in unlikely places. In this case we find it in a movie created by the master of aliens, dinosaurs, and adventure. Steven Spielberg deserves an Oscar for his directing, and the film should be named "Best Motion Picture." Movies, when crafted well, serve the masses and elevate our notion of popular culture and its sense of values. *Schindler's List* serves all of us well. In the process the film reminds us of our absolute need for grace and insures we will never forget just what humans are capable of when unchecked evil takes control.

[The following is an exclusive interview by film critic Gary Cogill with Liam Neeson who played Oskar Schindler in the film *Schindler's List*.

GARY COGILL: I want you to know up front that *Schindler's List* is a monumental film for me personally and professionally.

LIAM NEESON: Well, thanks Gary.

COGILL: Even though Spielberg's film deals with such a tough subject, you must have experienced great joy as an actor in being in a film so expertly conceived and crafted. Are you aware of that?

NEESON: Yes, I am aware of it and was well aware of it at the time. I am also aware of the fact that I am playing someone who actually lived and there seems to be reams of documentation and even footage of the man himself. It was interesting as an actor and I wanted to be careful not to do an imitation of the man. To present his spirit essentially because I don't even have a resemblance to Oskar Schindler. We are close in height. He was a big, bulky man. In fact, he looked like Curt Jurgens mixed with George Sanders. Oskar Schindler loved to be compared to Curt Jurgens who was a major movie star at the time. I just wanted to avoid that pit that every mannerism had to be exactly like his. Also, I wanted free range because it's not Winston Churchill I am playing. Not everyone knows what Oskar Schindler looked like. With Schindler I just wanted to have that size and project a feeling of gregariousness, which is the opposite of what I am. I'm basically shy and retiring and Oskar Schindler was the exact opposite. From an acting point of view, it's great to play opposites.

COGILL: Did you feel comfortable in his skin?

NEESON: I did. After all, I was working with a great director and a great actor's director, too. We conceived this together along with Ben Kingsley and Ralph Fiennes. When we started the film, I wanted to be on set and just be confident as me, Liam Neeson, and whatever colors Steven Spielberg and the other actors wanted to throw on my artistic palette, I just kept myself open.

COGILL: Yet, you are in the middle of a film that is huge in scope with plenty of extras and elaborate sets. It's cold. It's outdoors. That must have helped you live the moment.

NEESON: Sure, because there is no leap of the imagination to make. The city of Krakow has not changed in more than 50 years when Schindler was on the go. The actual physical aspect of the city hasn't changed in more than 200 years. There were buildings where you could still see bullet holes in the masonry. It was all there, you just had to step into it and not imagine too much.

COGILL: When I watched the film, I realized Oskar Schindler was a complicated man and not easy to figure out.

NEESON: He was living in a complicated world that was turned upside down by the genocide and the principles and doctrine of Hitler and his Nazi cohorts. Life was complicated. Schindler is a hero in the true sense of the word in that he's not whiter than white. He's not Francis of Assisi. He was a flesh and blood human being filled with contradictions like all of us. He was constantly living on a knife edge. The one thing I do know he had was an enormous depth of humanity. Of course he was a womanizer. Of course he drank too much and gambled, but the essence of his being was human and that was certainly put to the test.

COGILL: I want to ask you an odd question about acting. If you take away any sense of income, publicity, and notoriety about what you do, and it gets down to the moment of doing it, what do you really love about acting?

NEESON: It's kind of like a child playing, and play is very, very important to all of us. As adults, we may call it recreation. For children, play is important for their development of imaginative skills, as well as their educational skills. That's what I love about it, the chance to play.

COGILL: Is acting as fulfilling now as when you started?

NEESON: It is. It is. I must admit when I became a professional, I missed the freedom of being an amateur, a theatrical actor. There was a bunch of us: bank managers, school teachers, secretaries, doctors, nurses; all of us getting together in some little hall to rehearse a play. There was some level of purity to that. Today, the ingredients are slightly different, the politics are slightly different and money is at stake. I originally missed that innocence and purity of acting with bank managers and teachers.

My Life With the Bible (A Meditation on Hermeneutics)

by John Allen Chalk

January – February, 1994

I am a child of the rural West Tennessee non-instrumental Church of Christ. I am also a congenital believer in the Lord God Jehovah.¹ My vivid childhood memories are of Sunday School classes, church services, gospel meetings, religious debates, funerals, sermon preparation and delivery as a teenage “preacher” and long, serious Bible discussions at our family dinner table with the occasional visiting preacher, song leader, debater, and other church leaders (always stimulated and oftentimes guided by my mother, our local school principal and planner of school and church events in our little Henderson County, Tennessee community).

As the third generation of my maternal family and the second generation of my paternal family to attend and graduate from Freed-Hardeman College in Henderson, Tennessee I studied the Bible with H. A. Dixon, C. P. Rowland, Frank Van Dyke, and others. I have never studied Bible or theology at a non-Church of Christ educational institution but did take some graduate Bible courses at Harding University School of Religion and Abilene Christian University. My academic training ultimately centered in English, American History, and the Law.

My early years in full-time ministry, starting when I was 19 years old, were spent with direct religious descendants of Barton W. Stone in the hills of Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee in churches, some of which actually arose directly out of Barton W. Stone revivals. Bible study in these years of local church pulpit ministry and countless evangelistic meetings across the United States was a frantic search for persuasive texts that would fit my communication style. At 29 years of age I became the radio voice for an international radio and television ministry where one well-intentioned advisor initially cautioned me, “John Allen, you’ve got to preach what the brotherhood (meaning the Churches of Christ supporting the ministry) preaches in the words the brotherhood uses.” But in that radio ministry I was forced to seek out what God had to say to all kinds of contemporary people. With technical help from a few patient textual scholars and diligent personal study, the Bible began to yield for me powerful messages for modern man about the staggering personal and social consequences of man’s alienation and estrangement from the God of the Bible.²

After 15 years in full-time ministry in Churches of Christ, I left the pulpit, went to law school, and have now practiced law for more years than I was a preacher. My Bible study took a back seat to law school studies and then to vocational demands of my practice of law. But the God of the Bible remained a constant in my otherwise up-and-down spiritual life. The discipline of my Lord Jesus Christ and the moral and spiritual power of God’s Holy Spirit were ratified and confirmed over and over again in the years that followed, even through a period of personal rebellion and disobedience.

Through these three major chapters of childhood, full-time ministry, and law practice I have remained a believer—sometimes responsible, sometimes not. In all these periods the Bible has been a core personal reality for me with many beautiful facets.

As a child the Bible was a gargantuan intellectual challenge grasped only by the Olympian personalities who came to my little country church and were entertained and hosted by my family. The Bible in those days was a battleground site, a textbook, an anthology of proof texts, understood correctly by a few, misunderstood by most (especially outsiders). The Bible in those days could be contained in a syllogism or a series of syllogisms by which all arguments could be won and all disputes settled quickly and cleanly.

As a young preacher and throughout my full-time ministry years the Bible for me changed slowly through painfully intense study from a sermon text source to a variegated but coherent guide for God-given life shaped by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and actualized in the personal presence of the Holy Spirit.³ This was a private, intimate, and often troubling journey about which I could say nothing that would belie my confident pulpit pronouncements. In these years I discovered a personal walk with God centered in daily devotional Bible study (as opposed to technical Bible study for sermons and classes which I was compelled to pursue)⁴ The controversy in Churches of Christ over the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit erupted in the 1960s just as I emerged from several years of personal search through the Bible for authentic spiritual and moral power. This quest inescapably led me to a new existential decision about Jesus as the living Word of God and a new personal relationship with God's Holy Spirit.⁵

In the third chapter of my life (which continues as I write), I have taken my life's experiences regardless of their qualitative content to the living God of the Bible.⁶ The God who works his mighty acts in human history.⁷ The God whose Word became flesh and dwelt among us.⁸ The God whose Spirit is holy and alive with transcendental and eschatological energy.⁹ I have also learned to worship God freely and foolishly.¹⁰ I have acknowledged that my destiny is the worship and praise of the Lord God Jehovah.¹¹ The strength God has given me in the midst of overwhelming personal circumstances is what the Bible described for me and declared to me.¹²

And so, my heart is full of thanksgiving for the childhood heroes who made the Bible bigger than my denominational subculture, for the spiritually hungry people, including troubled and hurting church members, who wanted a "word" from me as God's spokesman during my full-time ministry years, and for the varied circumstances and experiences of my secular vocational life where the God I had previously come to know through the Bible, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit has been tested and found faithful, merciful, loving, and responsive.¹³

God's ultimate word to me was a person—the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁴ My introduction to him came from my study of the Bible. The Bible encouraged me to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.¹⁵ In that relationship, actualized by God's Holy Spirit, I am becoming a new human being¹⁶ to whom the word of God is living, active, incisive, and awe-inspiring.¹⁷

1 Psalms 139:13-16.

2 See *Three American Revolutions* (New York: Carlton Press, Inc., 1970), a series of radio sermons presented on Herald of Truth in the summer of 1968 on race, sex, and crime in America.

See also Great Biblical Doctrines (Austin, Texas: Sweet Publishing Company, 1973), a series of radio sermons presented on Herald of Truth in 1968 on the salvation themes of the Old and New Testaments.

3 1 Corinthians 2:6-16.

4 Romans 8:12-17.

5 John 3:31-36; 7:37-39.

6 Romans 8:31-39.

7 Hebrews 4:1-10.

8 John 1:14-18.

9 Ephesians 3:14-21.

19 Psalm 150; Revelation 19:1-8; see also p. 71, Jack R. Taylor, *The Hallelujah Factor* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1983).

11 Psalm 146:1,2; Isaiah 61:1-3.

12 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

13 Psalms 136; 1 Peter 4:7-11.

14 1 John 4:1-6.

15 Romans 8:9.

16 Romans 5:12-21; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21.

17 Hebrews 4:12,13.

Preach the Text, Brother!

by Joel Stephen Williams
January – February, 1994

“It’s the economy, stupid!” became a household phrase when it was revealed that these words, written on a chalkboard, summarized the key to Bill Clinton’s campaign strategy. The point was bluntly made, and the strategy won the election. Not long afterwards the Republicans wore buttons which gave their philosophy: “It’s the spending, stupid!” I am sometimes tempted to go up to a preaching brother and say, “It’s the *text*, stupid!” In the interest of peace and harmony, it’s much better for me to say, “It’s the *text*, brother!”

Much preaching passes as biblical preaching because it is either preceded by a Bible reading or has numerous single verses interspersed throughout the sermon. Unfortunately, much preaching has little to do with the Bible. The ideas do not come from the Bible and the structure of the sermon rarely comes from the Bible. What is greatly needed today is more Bible preaching, whether it comes in the form of expository, textual, or topical sermons. Good expository sermons are particularly rare.

One way that the *text* is being overlooked today is through allegorical interpretation. The audience usually thinks it is biblical preaching and the preacher may think it is biblical preaching, but both are wrong. Consider two examples. One preacher outlined what he called an expository sermon from Luke 2:42-46. When the parents of Jesus left him behind in Jerusalem, they soon discovered that he was not with any of their friends. This was allegorized to mean that we ought to examine whether or not Jesus is with us in our doctrine and in our conduct. When Joseph and Mary returned to Jerusalem to find Jesus, this was said to mean that we need to repent and go back to Christ and the Bible. This text supposedly gave precedent for the Restoration principle! As this preacher urged his audience to listen to the Bible, his allegorizing caused him to ignore the very message of the Bible. It’s the *text*, brother!

Another sermon was built around the story of the great catch of fish in Luke 5:1-11. When the disciples caught so many fish that their nets were about to break, they signaled for their partners to help. The preacher said this text means we are to cooperate with others in evangelistic work. What? No! This is not a secret message for soul-winning techniques encoded in allegorical form; it means that they caught so many fish they needed help from their fishing partners to handle the huge catch. It’s the *text*, brother. Preach the *text*, not an allegorical dream of your own concoction.

Allegory has a long history in biblical interpretation, but it should be shunned. Look for the literal and historical meaning first. With the allegorical method there is no control. The text means whatever the imagination of the interpreter wants it to mean. Bernard Ramm explains: “The curse of the allegorical method is that it obscures the true meaning of the Word of God... The Bible treated allegorically becomes putty in the hand of the exegete” (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 30). Luther called allegory “a nose of wax,” that is, it can be twisted into any

shape one desires. Even if the point being made through allegorical interpretation is a true one, the end does not justify the means.

Topical preaching may also include lots of Bible without being true Bible preaching. There is a place for topical preaching. Some subjects are found only in bits and pieces throughout the Bible. Word studies make an appropriate topical sermon. But all too often, a topical sermon is built with our ideas, our outline, and our arguments. Then a verse or two or three is tacked on the end of each line of the outline to make it “biblical.” The resulting sermon may contain 50 or even a hundred verses. Someone may remark after it is preached, “That preacher sure does quote lots of Scripture!” But we should ask if the *text* truly drove the lesson. Were all of the verses at the end of each line taken in context?

If ninety-five percent of one’s preaching comes in topical form, is one being true to the Bible? Yes, the Bible does contain propositional statements of truth which are only one short sentence long, but is not a majority of the Bible in story form? If we preached mostly expository sermons, would we not find that many of our old, favorite sermon topics must be ignored because no Bible writer devoted any attention to those topics? Would we not find that many new topics would come to the forefront? In expository preaching the biblical text stands front and center instead of the preacher’s delivery, creativity, or ingenuity. This is why Ramm said, “The crowning method of preaching is the expository method” (*Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 97). Yes, it’s the *text*, brother.

I tried for most of a semester to get students to study a single text of five to ten verses in the Gospels and write a lesson devoted to expounding that text. The students kept taking off in all directions, outlining their own ideas, adding truckloads of prooftexts at the end of each line—thinking the more prooftexts, the higher the grade. Finally in frustration, I held up a King James Bible and asked, “What do you see?” After a variety of answers were given, I helped them see that every verse was a paragraph standing alone. I then held up a New Revised Standard Version and asked, “What do you see?” They saw paragraphs that were blocks of material which fit together. These paragraph and verse divisions are the translators’ opinions, but there is usually good internal justification for them. I did my best to teach my students not to treat the Bible as if it’s a collection of one-liners, which is what much topical preaching does with the Bible.

Recently I heard an older preacher at a rural church on a Sunday evening. I confess that I was not expecting much from the sermon announced: “The Transfiguration of Jesus.” What a surprise. That sounded quite good. At least it was not an extra-biblical idea superimposed on the Bible. The preacher told the locations of the story in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and 2 Peter. He then used Mark as his text. He gave an appropriate introduction and then worked through the passage verse by verse. He alluded to Luke’s account when necessary. The meaning of the *text* was expounded, and quite accurately, I might add. He had done his homework. Finally about five minutes of application was given. After the lesson I complimented the preacher so much that he got a little embarrassed. But his lesson expounded the *text*, not his ideas and not some brotherhood issue.

Yes, it’s the *text*, brother. Preach the *text*.

And Find Thirty Minutes to Read My Bible

by Eddie Sharp

January – February, 1994

Every year the Abilene Christian University Bible Teachers Workshop uses rooms in the University Church of Christ building. We get a chance to see and hear interesting things as our brothers and sisters bustle around in our building. In 1990 while I was walking down the hall I overheard the following comment as one man was talking to another: “Well, back home our preacher has been preaching on the new hermeneutic, but what I’m trying to do is stop cussing and find 30 minutes a day to read my Bible.” I smiled. I sighed.

I think that the feelings of many people were voiced in the hall that day:

“The preacher’s off on another one of the tangents that get his juices pumping. While he’s in his office reading the latest dispatch from the *Journal of What You Oughta Think Now*, I am slipping away from God.”

“Our preacher, Our preacher, why hast thou forsaken us? The dawn breaks. Satan is stirring. The children are growing. My mate is so lonely. What will you share with us to help us on our journey? A gible from some intramural church squabble? Please!”

What a great comment the brother in the hallway made. Our brotherhood has created a hot topic that has intruded into the Bible classes and pulpits of local churches. Certainly the hermeneutics discussion is worthy of serious thought and dialogue. The outcome of the discussion should have an impact on the way we study and teach the Word. Still, we cannot forget that good brothers and sisters seek holiness and godliness.

Members of the Body ask that their ministers and elders, their Bible classes and sermons feed them spiritual nourishment for the daily grind and the long journey. Such lessons and sermons are found in the center cuts of spiritual meat, not in the vestigial organs of brotherhood controversy. Something is seriously wrong when ministry providing encouragement and nourishment for the Christian life is neglected in favor of bringing academic dispute into the assembly Sunday after Sunday.

I imagine one could have a good sermon grow out of the hermeneutics discussion, but the papers and journals offer a more appropriate forum for free, thoughtful interchange about such issues and questions. Brotherhood issues cannot set the preaching and teaching agenda for the church. The souls of our folks are not fed by the things that tantalize our egos. May our congregations feed those who are trying to quit cussing and find 30 minutes a day to read their Bibles!

A Reader's Guide to the Bible

by Mark C. Black

January – February, 1994

It was only about ten weeks ago that I responded to a lady who had just explained a difficult situation and asked me for advice. “What does the Bible say about it?” I asked. Her answer: “I don’t know Greek. I’m not a Bible scholar. That’s why you are here, isn’t it?” It is a good question, and it has bothered me a lot. On the one hand, I am supposed to be trained to interpret Scripture. On the other, she was not asking me to discuss the finer points of particular passages. She was asking me just to give her the bottom line. I decided I couldn’t do that. I am convinced that Christians must take personal responsibility for living under the Word of God. But is this reasonable? After all, she had said it well. She was no Bible scholar.

Do you really have to know about the synoptic problem, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Greek word for “knowledge” in order to understand the great majority of biblical teachings? I don’t think so. I fear that we have been subtly encouraged to leave the task of interpretation to the “experts,” and we are much the poorer for it. Let me offer a few rules and a few tools which, when combined with a little effort, will lead to effective Bible study. You can do these things.

Rule Number One: Read the text, and then read the text. The next step is to read it again. Quite seriously, there can be no substitute for familiarity with the text, including those portions you do not fully understand. This will require some time at the beginning of a study of a new book, but nothing you can do will pay greater dividends. As you read, ask questions: What themes are repeated? Why is the writer saying this? What has led the writer to write this book? What is happening in the lives of the intended readers? The first time through you will pick up on repeated themes and the basic flow of the book. The next time through the structure will begin to reveal itself. You will discover hints regarding the intentions of the author, and the interpretive process will be in full swing. After the third or fourth time through the whole book, you should focus your study on a specific section. You will by that time have enough understanding to know how your smaller section relates to the whole.

A negative way of stating rule number one is this: Leave the popular books and commentaries on the shelf until you have wrestled with the text for yourself. There are many reasons for this advice. Most important is the fact that nothing hinders the thinking process as much as having someone else do it for you. Not only are we intimidated by the knowledge of the scholarly author (“Who am I to argue with William Barclay?”), even worse, we are robbed of the opportunity even to ask the questions and formulate possible answers. Consequently, we are left without the knowledge which would allow us to evaluate the answers of others. So don’t pick up popular authors until you can carry on a dialogue with them. Read the text. You can do this.

Of all Bible readers of all generations, we are the most fortunate. Not only do we have the benefit of the oldest and best manuscripts of the Bible (many of which have been discovered in the last 75 years), more importantly, there have never been more readable or more accurate translations than there are today. Any of a dozen or more versions will give the reader a

trustworthy account of God's Word to humanity. That does not mean, of course, that all versions are of equal value for all people. Several have been translated for children or for other groups which need a simplified Bible. While they are excellent for these purposes, there is always a trade-off between simplicity and accuracy. Fortunately, there are a number of versions which combine accuracy with readability.

I recommend that all serious Bible readers adopt the habit of reading two translations, one from each of two categories. The first category includes such Bibles as the *New International Version*, *New English Bible*, and others which have sought to restate in modern English the thought rather than the language, grammar, or style of the original. (This does not include the paraphrases such as *The Living Bible*, which should be read only after coming to conclusions based on better translations.)

The NIV, now the largest-selling bible in the U.S., illustrates well the strengths and weaknesses of these versions. For example, it often replaces the term "flesh" in Paul's writings with the phrase "sinful nature." This probably represents well what Paul intended and is certainly easier to understand than the term "flesh," which implies to many that Paul believes the physical body is the real source of sin.

The strength of such versions is obvious, but it is clear that their philosophy of translation involves considerable interpretation. In the above example, the reading "sinful nature" is perhaps the closest equivalent to what Paul intended—but there are other possibilities. The advantage to the reader is that the translators have made clear the meaning that they assume the original readers would have understood. The disadvantage is that the translators are not infallible, and the reader is not given the opportunity to derive a different meaning. The ambiguity of the original is lost. While most in our churches will normally agree with the NIV interpretation since it was done by a fine team of Bible-believing scholars, it is too interpretive to be one's only Bible. It is, however, a fine translation. I am especially impressed with the *NIV Study Bible*, whose notes actually serve sometimes to counteract the interpretive approach of the translators. Although some of its interpretive notes are unacceptable, its good introductory articles, background notes, maps, diagrams, and concordance place this edition high on my list of recommended study aids.

Even if you have become attached to one of the easy-to-read Bibles, you should also use one of the more literal versions. These versions, among which are the *New American Standard Version* (NASV), *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), and *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), have attempted to maintain the structure, style, and often the idioms of the original languages. They occasionally sacrifice easy understanding in favor of retaining the form of the original, and they will often leave a passage ambiguous. However, this will be seen as an asset rather than a liability by the most serious students, and they will use one of the more literal versions as their primary Bible.

Some may be puzzled by the inclusion of the NASV and the NRSV in the same category. The NASV is the most literal Bible available today. It is unfortunate that it has been made more difficult to understand by being divided into verses rather than paragraphs. This arrangement, like that of the King James Version (KJV), encourages reading sentences and even half-sentences as separate paragraphs which stand on their own. But for those who can get past this

drawback and who can understand the “Greekized” and “Hebrewized” English, it will serve them well.

The NRSV lies on the other end of the spectrum of “literal” versions but is nonetheless in that group. One should be warned, however, that it is the first of what will be many “inclusive language” versions. The NRSV has not tampered with the gender of any of the biblical characters, including the gender of God or the references to him as father. However, the translators have avoided generic references to “men,” “brothers,” and male pronouns such as “him” when those terms in the original were not meant to exclude women. For example, Paul’s letters in the NRSV are often addressed to “brothers and sisters,” a reading which does not violate what Paul intended. The rationale for such a change is that American English is changing, and that, increasingly, the use of masculine terms implies that only males are being addressed. Most of the resulting changes will be found generally acceptable, but the translators did occasionally give up good translation in order to use inclusive language (see Matthew 18.) Each reader must decide whether or not she or he can live with this approach.

Rule Number Two: Read your Bible just as you read other literature. Of course, this does not mean you regard the Bible as uninspired and unauthoritative writings, as you do the works of Shakespeare or Frost. It does mean that the rules for understanding are pretty much the same. In fact, you already know most of them. Poetry, for example, allows for greater freedom of expression than prose. Consequently, just like the poetry you studied in school, the psalms and other poetry in the Bible are often purposefully metaphorical and are intended to evoke a response from the heart. Similarly, as you know from reading Benjamin Franklin, sayings of the wise are general truths rather than absolute laws. The same is true of the proverbs in the Bible. The interpretation of letters likewise has its own set of rules. They must be read as if you are hearing only one end of a conversation, because that is precisely what is happening. The reader must have at least a minimal knowledge of the situation of the writer and recipient, because the writing of the letter was occasioned by a specific situation.

A further rule in common with all literary interpretation is that every passage in the Bible must be read in light of the entire book in which it is found. You cannot simply open your Bible, read a verse or even a paragraph, and expect a blessing from God. It matters, for example, that the command, ““seek and you will find,”” comes toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount and not in isolation. The intent was never to encourage a carte blanche approach to prayer but to encourage prayer for the attributes expressed in the Sermon. Our Bibles are simply not collections of thousands of single-sentence sayings which yield up their message only to those who somehow have discovered the code by which to decipher this mysterious puzzle. It comes as a surprise to many to discover that the Bible was written just as other literature was written—by ordinary people for ordinary people. The big difference is that God has through inspiration guided the process.

I have found that my 18-year-old students are actually quite good at interpreting their Bibles when given a few rules and the permission to read them as they do the writings in their literature courses. It is only when they are given interpretations which seem to violate their common sense or which are based on what seems to be some sort of esoteric knowledge that they lose confidence and get discouraged. My advice is to pay little attention to those who constantly use

arguments which you are not able to follow or evaluate. You can interpret your Bible. In fact, you can do it well.

Rule Number Three: Acquaint yourself with the background information which relates to your text. This is the most difficult step in the process. The simple fact is that none of the biblical writings were written directly to us. Therefore the initial goal of Bible study is to determine how the author intended for his original readers to understand his writing. We must ask what it meant before we can ask what it means.

We must therefore learn all that we can about the people and the culture of the biblical book we are studying. This is the time to turn to the “experts.” Fortunately, we live in a time in which there are marvelous resources which offer easily understood discussions of every imaginable topic. Bible encyclopedias such as the new four-volume *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ed. G. W. Bromiley, 1988) or the one-volume *New Bible Dictionary* (Ed. J. D. Douglas, 1962) are the primary tools for this purpose. They contain articles on people (for example, Pilate or Gamaliel), institutions (Sanhedrin, synagogue), events (building of Herod’s temple, persecution under Nero), and customs (head coverings, divorce). They also offer brief introductions to each book of the Bible which are quite helpful after the first or second time you read the text. They discuss such information as the identity and situation of the author and recipients.

You can do this, and you will feel confident about your understanding of the Bible. You can pick up a readable translation, interpret it according to the rules you are accustomed to, and look up strange customs and events just as you use a dictionary when you do not know a word. Of course, there will be areas in which you will be unsure of the meaning. What do you do then?

This is the point at which the commentaries are to be consulted, but they must be chosen and used carefully. A good commentary is one which acquaints the reader with several possible interpretations of difficult passages and then offers a preferred interpretation. Incidentally, there are no extra points given for new and unusual interpretations. If only one author has the answer, it is probably a wrong answer. As a general rule, you will find helpful the following commentary sets: *Tyndale*, *New International Commentary*, *New International Bible Commentary*, and *Living Word Commentary*.

Only after you have arrived at your own understanding should you turn to the popular books and tapes which address your text (for example, Swindoll’s books which are loosely based on biblical texts.). These writings are often very helpful because they are usually written to accomplish a practical goal, they are written with passion, and they tend to be far more interesting than commentaries and encyclopedias. But they are no substitute for serious Bible study, and they are often wrong. Unfortunately, you will have no basis on which to evaluate them if you have not studied the passage for yourself.

Rule Number Four: Always combine Bible reading with constant prayer. This is the most important part of the process. It is not that God whispers answers in our ears. But to seek God’s guidance in prayer is to recognize that our greatest problem in interpreting the Bible is not our lack of tools or even our lack of knowledge. The greatest obstacle is our tendency to use the text

for our own ends, whether to prop up our own righteousness, to attack our enemies, to support our predetermined ideas, or to dazzle our Sunday school class with our expertise. Only with the help of God can we hope to stand under the text rather than above it, to let God use his Word to do his work on us rather than us using the text for our own agendas.

Our fellowship has a commendable history of making no distinction between clergy and laity. It has been our claim that Christians have the right and even the duty to interpret the Bible for themselves. Our future as a back-to-the-Bible movement depends on continuing this emphasis. By following these rules, you will gain a confidence with the Word of God that is unavailable to the dabbler in God's Word. And just a few years from the time you begin, you will be a tremendous source of blessing to the church in which you will be an influential leader. With God's help, you can do this.

The Baptism of Jeffrey Dahmer: Can the Chief of Sinners Be Saved?

by Rob McRay

January – February, 1994

“Who do you think are candidates for the title, ‘the chief of sinners’?” We were studying First Timothy in our Wednesday Bible study. Our text was Paul’s description of himself as a violent, blasphemous persecutor who had been saved by grace. My question was slow to draw response. One theologically astute member responded that he was—that each of us is as guilty of being a sinner as anyone else. He made a valid point. But Paul seemed to be saying that as the chief of sinners, he was somehow worse than the rank and file of sinners. So I pressed on, and the nominations were those I expected. After Hitler, I knew that in Milwaukee [Jeffrey Dahmer](#) would be among the first nominated—and he was.

Jeffrey Dahmer is our local monster. He is serving 15 consecutive life sentences in a Wisconsin prison for 17 of the most grotesque murders ever committed. His crimes are so unimaginably horrifying that I cannot even describe them. In Milwaukee you don’t have to, for they were vividly described, day after day, in graphic detail, during his televised trial.

Was Paul really a worse sinner than Dahmer? If God’s unlimited mercy could save Paul, could it also save Dahmer? The question prompted an interesting and, for the most of us, unsettling theoretical discussion. The one who seemed the most comfortable that Dahmer could also be saved by God’s grace was the member who had identified himself as the chief of sinners.

Late Wednesday afternoon, April 6—just four weeks after that class—I found myself on the phone with Curtis Booth, who works with a prison ministry in Oklahoma. A prisoner in Wisconsin had completed a Bible correspondence course and wanted to be baptized. They needed a local minister to arrange it. We had talked for several minutes before he mentioned the prisoner’s name ... *Jeffrey Dahmer*.

I admit I was speechless. The thought occurred to me that I had just been made the object of some kind of prank. I finally, hesitatingly asked, “Is this legit?” Booth’s response was, “Yes. Do you know who Jeffrey Dahmer is?” I assured him that everyone in Milwaukee knew who Dahmer was.

His story seemed somehow credible and incredible at the same time. Mary Mott, a Christian in Virginia, had seen a television report on Jeffrey Dahmer and concluded that if anyone needed the gospel, he did. So she sent him a World Bible School correspondence course. Jeffrey Dahmer was searching for some answer to the distress in his conscience (surely that must be an understatement). The Bible study offered a glimmer of hope.

I explained to Curtis Booth that the prison was a few hours away, that I was leaving the next morning for a theology conference, but that I would find someone to take care of the request. I then called the prison chaplain to confirm the story, but he had left for the day. Still uncertain that the story could be true, and reeling from the implications if it were, I called Roy Ratcliff.

Roy is a minister in Madison, Wisconsin, a friend I felt I could call, and a man who knows the gospel of grace. I related the story, confessed my confusion, offered my assistance, and left town.

The chaplain told Roy that Dahmer had indeed requested to be baptized. He agreed to be baptized. He agreed to set up a meeting and to investigate where the baptism could be performed. A couple of weeks later, Roy sat in a small room inside the prison and waited uneasily for Jeffrey Dahmer to enter. Roy discovered that Jeffrey was as anxious about the meeting as he was.

Jeffrey's biggest fear was that Roy would say no—that Roy would tell him he could not be baptized. When Roy said that he would indeed baptize Jeffrey, and that he would visit the prison regularly to study with him, Jeffrey seemed genuinely amazed, relieved, and grateful.

On Tuesday, May 10, in a whirlpool in the Columbia Correctional Institution, Roy baptized Jeffrey Dahmer into Jesus Christ.

Earlier that same day, John Wayne Gacy was executed in Illinois. But Wisconsin doesn't have the death penalty, so Jeffrey will spend the rest of his life in prison. And there is nothing he can ever do to atone for his crimes. He will die in prison, and there is nothing ...*nothing* ... he can do to atone for his sins.

But the blood of Jesus Christ can cleanse even "the chief of sinners!" If it can't—if Jeffrey Dahmer cannot be saved by grace—then no one can. Not me ... and not you.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life ([1 Timothy 1:15-16](#)).

Hope Network Newsletter: Changing Perceptions

by Lynn Anderson and Carey Garrett
January – February, 1994

[This article and earlier ones in this series are excerpts from Lynn Anderson’s new book, *Navigating the Winds of Change*, by Howard Publishing Company.]

Dr. Bob Scott of World Christian Broadcasting frequently reminds me, “Perceptions are reality.” This is doubly true for change agents! In fact, this brings us to the single most important factor in change management: Understanding Perceptions.

SO, WHAT’S A PERCEPTION?

And, what do we mean by perceptions? Perception is the way we see things. It is our interpretation of reality. Our collective cultural (this can be a religious culture) values, experiences, assumptions, and beliefs shape our perceptions and so do our own personal values, experiences, assumptions, and beliefs. The following figure shows how this happens:

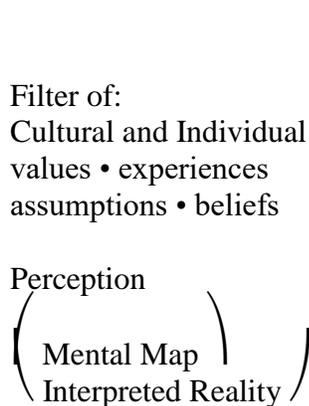


Figure 1. Perception Equals Filtered Reality.

In a sense, perceptions are mental maps. Imagine trying to lead a parade through New York City by following a map of Denver. Charting our change strategies by the wrong map—a distorted perception—is just as hopeless. Trying harder won’t help. Even good strategies will produce bad results if we operate from a warped mental map.

For example, your mental map may say “Reaching unchurched people is job one!” (your perception of the congregation’s values), and “Contemporary music and dramatic skits in assemblies will connect with unchurched people” (your perception of what works). But, walk carefully here. The congregation may verbalize evangelism as first priority, yet you may learn while testing your perceptions that the real internalized priority for the church may be security, held in place by tradition. Besides, the unchurched people you are trying to reach may not like contemporary music. Thus, even though you may understand systems and transitions as

discussed in previous articles), your strategy is built on major misperceptions and will produce ineffective outcomes. What you thought would please the church and connect with the unchurched may actually offend the church and repel the unchurched. Outcome: Your church would likely double-shrink!

Before we implement strategies for congregational changes we must test the accuracy of our mental maps by (1) reexamining our original data, and (2) comparing notes with a number of respected people.

Again, at its most crucial point, change is about perceptions. Put simply, change management is perception management.

OLD AND NEW PERCEPTIONS

Apply this to our rapidly changing times. Some dominant old perceptions of reality might be the following:

- The earth is flat. This perception controlled global exploration until Columbus drew a new mental map.
- Women have no right to vote.

Some “old” perceptions about churches might be these:

- No people know the bible like our people!
- The Bible commands that we must only sing congregationally in worship assemblies.
- Revivals and door-knocking and handing out tracts are the most effective evangelistic methods.

Some new perceptions, on the other hand, include the following:

- Capitalism is possible in communistic countries—new in the last five years!
- Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk could share the Nobel Peace Prize.

Some “new” religious perceptions might be:

- “Ah! I see our people are not the only ones who read the Scriptures.”
- Spiritual growth is nurtured better in small group relationships than under powerful preaching.
- Evangelism is relational more than confrontational.
- Leaders should liberate and empower the people in the pews rather than make decisions and withhold or grant permissions.
- Churches can no longer build their future on denominational “brand name” loyalties. Baby boomers will not keep attending a Church of Christ or a Baptist Church or a Presbyterian Church simply because their parents did, or for its “doctrinal correctness.” When a church no longer serves their spiritual purposes, they are down the road to one that does.

HOW PERCEPTIONS FORM

Chris Argyris charts another way of looking at the developmental pattern of a perception on the following ladder:

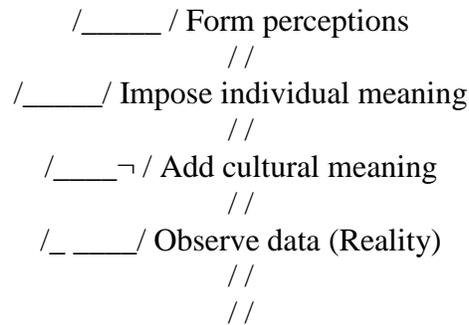


Figure 2: Perception Formation

Adapted from Christ Argyris

First, we observe actual data through such channels as conversation or body language. For example, you may observe that a man’s face turned red. However, data also comes from widely held history, statistics, or trends. For example, statistics tell us that church growth has declined X percent in the last X years. We usually have fairly objective data when most people, regardless of their culture or personal background, agree on the data.

Second, we add cultural meaning, which is colored by a number of elements, such as our church roots or the country we’re from. For example, our cultural interpretation of a red face is that it indicates either anger or embarrassment.

Third, we impose individual meanings based on our own personal life experiences and upbringing. For example, I may believe that anger is unhealthy and unprofitable.

Fourth, we form perceptions or theories. These perceptions or mental maps are generated from our understanding of reality. Of course, these perceptions, in turn, determine our actions. For example, I may perceive it is best to avoid or withdraw from this angry person.

But watch the mental model shift instantly when we think “baseball diamond.” John hits a triple, but the “masked man” tags him out at home plate. Note that we first heard basic data: the man left home. Then we added cultural meanings congruent with our sensitivity to street crime. Then we imposed our individual meaning—and abracadabra!—we pulled a perception out of the hat, which filtered our reality—so that perception distorted a baseball game into a mugging.

Let us revisit an earlier illustration of the way perceptions affect worship forms and evangelistic strategies:

- 1) We observed data. Our religious fathers held Sunday night services at the church building. Some early minister began this strategy to capitalize on the crowds of country folks who gathered to see the modern gas lights in his town. Other ministers saw that Sunday evening evangelistic meetings “worked,” so the practice spread, gathering perceptions as time went on.
- 2) We added cultural meaning to the data. “Sunday night church services are an effective evangelistic outreach.” Therefore, churches across the country adopted this strategy.
- 3) We imposed individual meaning. Going to church on Sunday nights became an indicator that

reflects our commitment to the Lord.

4) We formed the perception that Sunday night services held at the church building are essential. This perception now often persists as an old mental map by which we determine our course of action in today's world. We even slid Bible verses under our perception so that it escalated from the best way to do things to the way God wants them done! A strategy became an event. An event became a tradition. A tradition became identity. Identity became dogma. Consequently, when an urban church today wants to change its church calendar and replace traditional Sunday night services with some alternative like Sunday night house churches, that church's soundness may come under question.

But the culture keeps changing, so that strategies built on these old perceptions become increasingly ineffective. This has happened with whole constellations of church strategies, programs, events, vocabularies, and even beliefs. The larger and older a church, the more likely it will resist change, because older institutions are composed of intertwined layers of long-standing collective perceptions or mental models. However, like the proverbial frog in the kettle, the church is often unaware that the surrounding culture is changing slowly, gradually—but drastically—so that the church drifts out of meaningful connection with the culture and into irrelevance. Many churches are moving comfortably on a course toward eventual oblivion!

Oh, yes. As my friend Dr. Scott says, perceptions are reality. They are not abstract ideas inside our heads, but they affect what we say and what we do. They determine strategies and outcomes.

HOW PERCEPTIONS AFFECT STRATEGIES

Carey Garrett illustrates it this way, “My perception that my husband won't help prepare meals affects my strategies with him. I do the preparation myself and get upset because he won't help. That, of course, affects the outcome. He is less likely to help and more likely to become upset when I angrily accuse that he won't help. Then his reaction only reinforces my mental model that he won't help.

“But the root problem may be in the perception I hold of my husband, not primarily in the strategies I use. If I changed my assumption to be, ‘He really does want to help, but needs directions on how to help,’ then instead of doing it all myself and angrily criticizing him, I would probably approach him non-defensively, specifically asking him if he would like to make a salad or grill the steak. If this resulted in his cheerful and willing partnership in the kitchen work, the outcome would confirm my altered perception, so I would likely continue holding it.”

A common assumption or perception in the western management world—and thus in the church—is that leaders know the right things to do. Therefore, leaders decide what is going to happen. Then leaders employ persuasive strategies to help people see the benefits of what the leaders want to do. The inevitable “uninformed” resistance is considered invalid by the “informed” leaders. So the leaders' strategy is to step up persuasion and sell the change more aggressively.

But when people feel they are being pressed to “buy in” without being asked their input, at best they comply, but they do not feel true commitment or ownership. More often they resist strongly.

The resulting resistance matches the manager's original misperception and reinforces his mental model that "those uncooperative people just don't know what is good for them." An Associated Press cartoon during the height of the Vietnam War illustrated this mindset: President Lyndon Johnson complains to his aide, "What's wrong with them Vietnamese? Don't they realize I'm killin' 'em for their own good?" This perception handles resistance by stepping up intensity and selling harder. Consequently the change agent does not learn from this exchange, nor does the church. Both only become further entrenched in their perceptions.

As navigational guides (not "manipulators" or "managers"), leaders do well to reexamine their own perceptions rather than intensifying the persuasion campaign to overpower the resistance of others. A healthier perception might be, "We don't hold a corner on understanding. Let's get the people involved in the change process. Their thoughts and ideas will enhance our mental maps and may produce more effective strategies." The outcomes then may be both emotional and intellectual ownership by the church and full cooperation in implementing change.

In his book *Overcoming Organizational Defenses*, Chris Argyris spells out in depth how perceptions affect the strategies and actions we use and how these, in turn, affect the resulting outcomes we get.

If the outcome matches our original perception that resistance simply confirms that people don't know what's good for them, we will likely keep believing and doing the same things (strategies or actions). The outcome is that no change occurs.

However, when there is a mismatch between our perceptions and our outcomes, our first reaction is usually to try a new strategy or approach, rather than reexamine our perceptions. "Hmmm! Looks like I'll have to change my approach with this person to get my point across" (or with this church to get my change adopted). This leads to superficial change, and we keep recycling our old perceptions. Sometimes a light goes

Match
Strategies (nochange)
Perception (Actions) Outcomes

Superficial Change

Fundamental Change

Figure 3. Superficial vs. Fundamental Change

Adapted from Chris Argyris, *Overcoming Operational Defenses* Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1990), 94.

off in our head and our new actions eventually lead us to a new perception. But, unless we revisit and revise our perceptions, we won't genuinely learn how to change. To get at the root of things, we must go back and reexamine our perceptions, the mental maps which steer the strategies. When we actually change our perceptions, we will be on our way to fundamental change and may learn to move from manipulator to navigator.

With Chris Argyris' perception-strategies-outcomes graphic in mind, let's revisit a former illustration and suppose that I hold the following three perceptions:

- 1) Everybody in our church holds evangelizing the unchurched as the top priority of this church.
- 2) Contemporary music in our assemblies is the most effective way to connect with the unchurched.
- 3) It is my responsibility to get things changed. Based on these perceptions, my strategy may be, "Tell 'em my reasons this week and start the contemporary music next week."

But when the inevitable uproar ensues, I wonder what went wrong? First, I may have wrongly perceived the church's perceptions and therefore used the wrong strategies. I didn't look deeply enough to see that their verbalized values were not their real values. What they really may value is not evangelism but the status quo for themselves and their grandchildren. Besides, their unchurched friends may be offended by "this new stuff."

Second, and far more importantly, I may be out of touch with my own perceptions. I may have misperceived my own motives for wanting the change. Deep down, maybe I want contemporary music because of my own musical taste or because I want to be considered "in" by certain of my colleagues or because I want to win a power struggle with the old guard. And perhaps some of us old preachers may feel younger when we sing young music!

Finally, I may have perceived myself as a change agent rather than a change navigator.

If I do not reflect on my own perceptions and dialogue my way into the perceptions of others, redoubling my efforts will only generate more resistance/compliance and little or no ownership/commitment. In fact, I may only further convince the flock that I am a misguided and impetuous shepherd. I will have only caused many heartaches and will have learned nothing. My best solution to this dilemma will not be another strategy but authentic conversation!

HOW PERCEPTIONS AFFECT STRUCTURES

Another variable that plays into our church system is the connection between perceptions and structures. Structures are the easier to understand because they are visible and concrete, while perceptions are invisible and abstract. The following graphic illustrates the relationship between the two.



Figure 4. Perceptions/Structures

Adapted from William Bridges, *Managing Transitions* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1991), 70.

Visible structures are only the tip of the iceberg of a congregational system. The bulk of the system is hidden below the waterline. When we walk into a church service we see the tip of the iceberg: the style of worship, the symbols and signs, the mood of the color and furnishings, the demeanor of the people, the expressed values, and other externals. Structures. But, below the waterline lie the reasons those structures exist: the perceptions that drive that church. The invisible why undergirds the visible what.

The graphic above maps perceptions and structures in reinforcing circles, showing that perceptions drive structures and that the structures, in turn, reinforce perceptions in a self-perpetuating loop (vicious cycle?).

OUTDATED PERCEPTIONS

Think back again to the story about the source of Sunday evening services in small-town nineteenth-century America. People flocked from the country to see the gas lights. Preachers seized this evangelistic opportunity. Result: Sunday evening evangelistic preaching. This evolved into orthodox structure which rural Christians took to town when they planted urban churches. Today, crowds no longer gather around gas lights, yet, we still continue Sunday evening services! The structure still reinforces the old perception that it is important to have Sunday evening meetings. Thus, a perception created a structure which perpetuates a perception, which maintains a structure, which... Such loops often keep running long after neither perception nor structure have much to do with current realities.

Understanding how such perceptions come into being might help us break the vicious cycle. Consider the following process:

1950 Reality
Week-long revival
meetings are effective

1950 Filter

Experience: I saw people brought to Christ during revival meetings.

Values: I value a method that brings people to Christ.

Belief: I believe committed people will support revival meetings.

Assumption: What worked then, will always work.

1990 Outdated Perception
Our church should have week-long revival meetings.

1990 Reality
People do not attend week-long revival meetings.
Thus they are no longer effective.

Figure 5> Outdated Perceptions vs. Current Reality

BUILDING NEW STRUCTURES

Thus, to initiate transitions that can break a church out of this loop, change agents must define new structures that are still true to the foundational noble intentions which initiated the old structures. We must assure conscientious Christians that our change is not a threat to the fundamental truths of Scripture. While we may be dismantling the old structure and building a new one, the foundational truths and values remain solidly in place, and the new structure will actually perpetuate those values more effectively (see figure 6).

Assuring our closed-to-change fellow Christians that we revere the same biblical truths they do may modify their perspective of our proposed changes.

Dismantled
Structure
Old New
Structure Structure

Foundational Truths Foundational Truths Foundational Truths
and Values and Values and Values

Figure 6. Dismantling Old Structures

CLOSING THE GAP

Effective change agents cannot afford to ignore the gaps between outdated perceptions, current realities, and future vision. The gaps must be recognized, respected, and dealt with.

On the other hand, cautiously modified structures can help alter perceptions and close the gaps between out-dated perceptions and current reality. For example: Suppose a congregation changes from Sunday night assemblies to meeting in house-church groups. The change agent may attempt to alter perceptions by talking about the value of small groups—defining them, describing parameters, targeting leadership development, hearing testimonies from veterans of effective groups, etc. Then, when at least one effective small group is actually meeting, the structure itself leads to even further positive perceptions of small groups. So altered perceptions and new structures facilitate one another. In this case, we have created a “virtuous cycle” rather than the “vicious cycle” we talked about before.

While changing perceptions—our own or someone else-s—is not an easy task, understanding how perceptions form and how they affect our strategies and our structures will provide us with helpful tools as we navigate the inevitable winds of change.

AfterGlow: Positions, Proof-texts and Preaching

by Phillip Morrison

January – February, 1994

The first book I remember reading all by myself was a volume of Bible stories for children. The heroes of those stories were as real as a young mind could make them. I was an open container into which God's message was poured. Though Mrs. Latimer would guide me through several years of reading almost every book in our small community library, none of them had the excitement or the authority of the Bible.

But something happened along the way. As an aspiring young preacher, I began reading the Bible a different way. Rather than letting the Bible guide me, I began guiding my "study" to conform to a position.

I memorized the verses that proved instrumental music wrong, the heresy of faith only, and the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins. No longer did I read for the sheer joy of letting Jesus come into my heart. Now I was reading with an interpretation—a hermeneutic—already in mind. Others may have read and reached certain conclusions, but I accepted their conclusions and searched for Scriptures to support them.

The proof texts could be instantly recalled to explain why the example of observing the Lord's Supper every Sunday was binding while the example of meeting in an upper room was not. I knew the sinfulness of "one-cuppers" though it took the church 19 centuries to discover individual cups. I could prove it was right to use an instrument to produce a single musical note to pitch a song and wrong to produce multiple notes while the song continued.

While insisting that everything be authorized by command, example, or necessary inference, I learned that there was an unspoken test of allowable expedients. What we did was allowed, what others did was not. Thus we produced an era when churches could have heated buildings but not air-conditioned ones, water coolers but not refrigerators, outside picnic tables but no kitchens in the building. And we had to claim Scriptural authority, otherwise our childish squabbles would have been exposed for the foolishness they were—and are.

How God must weep when he sees how we treat his story. He never intended for his revelation to be dissected and rearranged to man's liking.

My earliest preaching was done in churches where people judged me by how many Scriptures I used, whether I could preach without notes, and how well I affirmed conclusions already held. Even while capitulating to the system, I could never silence that inner voice which kept telling me I was perverting the whole process.

Now, at long last, I am free again. As free as a small boy discovering the wonder of God's Word...free to let God lead me by his indwelling Spirit...never free from God's boundaries, but forever free from Satan's bondage.

God doesn't expect me to know all the answers—or even all the questions. He does expect me to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8), to love God supremely and to love my neighbor as myself (Matthew 19:37-39). Any interpretation of Scripture that does not help me live up to these expectations is inadequate and wrong.