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The Principles of Bible Interpretation

MARK BURKILL

There was a time when someone who went under the name of evangelical would have had a clearly defined position on the Bible. Such a person would have been marked off from a liberal theologian by his assertion of the infallibility of Holy Scripture, and he would have asserted the sufficiency of the Bible over against Catholicism which exalted tradition and the authority of the Church.

This is no longer the case. Furthermore, it may be said that the weakening of the evangelical position has come mainly from a failure to understand the principles of interpreting God's Word. The confusion generated by this state of affairs has in turn led to many evangelicals losing confidence in the Word of God as 'the power of God unto salvation'.

It is very unfortunate that this has happened, since this generation of evangelicals has opportunities to gain a hearing in many places which earlier generations of evangelicals could not have dreamt of. Old-fashioned liberalism is in retreat. It has been the voice of the world for too long to be listened to by the world. It has no message to give to people in parishes, and if the denominational structure of the Church of England were dismantled, it is doubtful whether the liberal clergy who make so much of the running in synods and the media would have any congregations to care for.

Similarly, catholicism within the Church of England (and perhaps even in Rome itself) is less sure of itself than it used to be. The formidable Anglo-Catholic theologians of an earlier generation are no more. Naturally these are generalizations and it would be unwise to underestimate the strength of these traditional adversaries of evangelical truth, but it does seem that these trends are now discernible.

Thus evangelicals are presented with unprecedented opportunities to preach the gospel. Some very wide doors for effective work have opened up. Yet a lack of confidence in the Bible is in danger of fatally weakening the effectiveness of evangelical work. The blame for this lack of confidence must rest on the failure to appreciate the principles of hermeneutics, the way in which we interpret God's Word written.

Any evangelical who is remotely worthy of the name will say in all sincerity that he believes in the authority of God's Word. However it is one thing to make such an affirmation, it is quite another to put it into practice. The most revealing question that can be asked of an

evangelical today is: 'How does God speak to us?' All will answer that He speaks through the Bible, but many will want to add certain caveats. Some will highlight the problem of cultural relativity. They will ask whether books written in situations very different from our own can speak to us today. This issue is most clearly seen in the debate over the rôles of men and women in the Church.

Others, misunderstanding the principles of Bible interpretation and frustrated by the Bible's apparent lack of precision, will want to add extra-biblical sources as means through which God speaks. For instance it has been said that the Bible offers no guidance on genetic engineering. If this is understood to be the case, then the voice of the Church, whether through bishops or synods, becomes increasingly attractive. The horrible phrase 'The Spirit of God is saying to the Church today' comes to the fore. At a personal level this tendency is revealed in the thirsting after visions and so-called 'prophecies' as means of guidance to supplement Scripture.

How does God speak to us? That is the vital question which is answered by understanding the principles of Bible interpretation. If evangelicals cannot grasp these clearly then our much vaunted growth in numbers will be worth nothing. Our gospel will lose its effectiveness.

Here various principles of interpreting the Bible will be looked at and their importance will be shown through particular illustrations. It must be emphasized that these principles of interpretation have not been arbitrarily dreamt up by this writer or anyone else. They stem from the nature of the Bible as God's Word. It is through misunderstanding the humanity of the biblical authors at the expense of the divinity of Scripture that misinterpretation and confusion arise. It is when we lose sight of the fact that we are handling the Word of God that the correct principles for interpreting the Bible are mislaid. There are many texts in Scripture which insist upon a proper handling of the Word of God (2 Tim. 2:15; 2 Pet. 3:16; 2 Cor. 4:2).

Five principles of interpretation are given here. These are not intended to be definitive or exclusive. They are simply a convenient way of getting the main ideas across. There is an overlap between some of them and some are more important than others in today's climate.

1. To interpret the Bible correctly, words must not be abstracted from their context.

This is a very straightforward principle. It is not one that is peculiar to the Bible. It is a principle which we use in everyday speech and in reading any written work. Yet despite the simplicity of this principle it is frequently ignored in interpreting the Bible.

In 1 Cor. 11:3 we read: 'Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God'. It is often argued by proponents of the ordination

of women that the word 'head' here has no connotation of authority, but is rather conveying the meaning of 'source'. Thus it would mean 'the source of the woman is man'. This argument is buttressed by appeal to the usage of *kephalē* (head) in classical Greek. Apart from the fact that this appeal has itself been demolished, the principle of interpretation which understands a word in its own context must be applied. The verse here states that 'the head of Christ is God'. To interpret 'head' as meaning 'source' involves the danger of the Arian heresy. There is therefore every reason to say that the word 'head' here implies the notion of authority.

Another word which is often abstracted from its context is the word 'church'. This term suffers from misinterpretation in two ways. It is well known that the Greek word for church is *ecclēsia*. It is frequently stated that this is derived from Greek root words which mean 'called out'. This is true as far as it goes. However, the meaning of a word in a particular context cannot be determined solely on the basis of its roots.

The word 'church' also suffers from the fact that it is a word which has strong connotations in modern usage. It is all too easy to read back the modern usage into the biblical word. We must resist this temptation and seek to understand the way biblical writers used the word. Acts 7:38 can be translated (as the A.V. does): 'Moses was in the *church* in the desert, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers'. Stephen's use of the term *ecclēsia* must be understood in its own context.

Thus: To interpret the Bible correctly words must not be abstracted from their context.

2. To interpret the Bible correctly verses must be not abstracted from their context.

In some ways this is simply an extension of the previous principle. Again it is one that should be used with any human work, as well as God's Word. However the problem of 'proof-texting' is so widespread among evangelicals that it deserves separate treatment.

Many believers are confused by apparent contradictions which are set up between verses in different parts of the Bible. Many believers perpetuate this confusion by refusing to apply this basic principle of interpretation which demands that verses should be understood in context.

1 John 4:18 which says 'perfect love casts out fear' is often set up in opposition to texts like Proverbs 9:10: 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. It is frequently used to minimize the wrath of God against sin. However attention to the context in 1 John 4 resolves this so-called contradiction. John is speaking to Christians, to those who are entitled to the assurance of sins forgiven through the Cross. The previous verse (4:17) indicates that John is talking about the fear of judgment on the Last Day. John is not denying that there is a proper

fear of God, a fear which is expressed for example in Proverbs. John is referring to the fear of final judgment. He is reminding Christians that their fear of punishment has been removed by what Christ did on the Cross for them.

Matthew 7:1 ('Do not judge, or you too will be judged') provides another example of a text which is frequently misinterpreted in violation of this second principle. These words of Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount are not intended as a command that forbids discernment about other people. Yet it is common to hear this verse being used to condemn those who wish to draw attention to error or immorality.

The context elucidates Jesus' point. He is warning about a censorious spirit which always thinks the worst of others. Such a fault-finding attitude will be noted by God and in turn applied to us. That this verse is not intended to preclude wise Christian discernment is evident from verse 6 which tells us not to cast our pearls before swine, and verse 15 which warns us to look out for false prophets.

Thus: To interpret the Bible correctly verses must not be abstracted from their context.

With the third and fourth principles we arrive at areas which are extremely important for our understanding of the Word of God. The first two principles are ones which should be applied in order to understand any written work. These third and fourth principles are different. They are at least in part dependent on the fact that the Bible is God's Word. Because of this feature these principles are especially liable to be abused in a way which denies the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

3. To interpret the Bible correctly account must be taken of the type of writing in which a passage occurs.

Sometimes this principle has been ignored by Christians who are determined to extract every ounce of truth out of the pages of Scripture. This is an admirable motive, but it often leads to unwarranted spiritualization and allegory.

We must always be aware of the intent of the author when we interpret and apply Scripture. The descriptions of the Temple furnishings in Jerusalem were intended to ensure that it was built exactly according to God's plan. Although there is much Christian significance in some of the details we must be wary of going beyond the mind of God in our interpretation.

Augustine's allegorization of the parable of the Good Samaritan is often cited as a violation of this principle. In his interpretation he sees the two coins given to the innkeeper by the Samaritan as the sacraments of baptism and communion being given to the church. Perhaps such allegory merely seems amusing to us, yet the principle by which we condemn it is this principle of having regard for the

author's intent. Jesus simply never intended this sort of thing in what he said. It has nothing to do with the point of the parable. A good word ought to be put in for Augustine nevertheless. He was a magnificent theologian and it was actually his respect for the authority of Scripture that led him into such a fanciful interpretation.

The importance of this third principle may be brought home by further examples. Many Christians misuse the historical narratives in the Bible. Because the intent of the author and the type of literature is not appreciated, certain historical incidents are made into absolute events in a way which was never intended.

The latter part of Acts 8 (the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch) provides an illustration of this. The way in which the eunuch believed in Christ and was then baptized in a nearby pool is often turned into an absolute event in a way which is very far from Luke's original intention in recording the incident. Luke has not recorded this story in order to tell us about believers' baptism. He has put it in because it is an important example of his overall theme, which is the way the gospel spread from Jerusalem all over the world. The way in which the eunuch is baptized is not intended as a dogmatic pattern for all baptisms today. If it were that, then logically we should try and find the pool in which he was baptized and go there ourselves for baptism. This is not to say there is nothing to learn about the practice of baptism from this passage, but historical incidents must not be made definitive in a way which violates the intention of the author.

There are other well-known examples of biblical writings where account must be taken of the purpose and type of literature with which we are dealing, for example, Proverbs, Revelation. Nevertheless the illustration above is sufficient to show how this principle operates.

However, the operation of this principle must be investigated from another angle. This is because the principle has been twisted and abused in order to undermine the authority of Scripture. Some evangelical theologians have misused this legitimate principle in order to evade uncomfortable truths in the Bible or in order to bow to the pressures of critical orthodoxy. There are several important examples which demonstrate this.

One is the issue of pseudonymity. This is where it is said that there was a convention by which an author used the name of someone else, like Peter or Paul, when writing his works. Thus it has been argued that 2 Peter and the Pastoral Epistles were pseudonymous writings. It is said that Peter did not write 2 Peter, but that someone else wrote it and used his name. Liberal theologians do not worry much that 2 Peter 1:1 declares that Peter wrote the letter. They are quite accustomed to finding supposed errors in the Bible. However for the evangelical theologian there is a problem. He believes that the Bible is God's Word. Some evangelical theologians believe quite sincerely that letters such as 2 Peter belong to a pseudonymous type of writing. The

principle of taking account of the author's intention seems to support them. They would say that the author who pretended to be Peter would never have thought of what he was doing as lying or deception.

The key point in response to this position is that there must be a way of recognizing a particular genre or type of literature for what it is. The criteria for recognizing pseudonymity must be established. If this is not done then theologians can label whatever they like as fable, myth or legend, and conclude that it has no historical value whatsoever. Thus the early chapters of Genesis, for example, cannot blithely be labelled as myth and of no historical value. To do that without any evidence is a subjective judgment of a very extreme kind. Where is the evidence within the early chapters of Genesis that it was not intended to be understood as conveying historical truth? Where is the evidence in 2 Peter by which we can be sure it was intended to be understood as a pseudonymous letter?

These questions must be asked; otherwise, the authority of Scripture is undermined by a legitimate principle of interpretation. It is a very important issue. A debate a few years ago in the United States was over precisely this issue. That does not mean we cannot recognize the elaborate structure and poetic style of Genesis 1-3. Nor does it mean that differences in style between 1 and 2 Peter are overlooked. This third principle of interpretation must be preserved, but abuse of it must not be permitted.

The reason why problems over this principle appear is an underlying philosophical question. For much of this century philosophers have been interested in the rôle of language in human existence. Some of their ideas have found their way into the discussion of how God speaks to us. Many theologians have come to question how effective words and the Bible are in communicating truth. The most sceptical of them believe that the type of literature in the Bible and the situation with which it is dealing are so remote from our twentieth century experience as to render it irrelevant and useless to us.

It is these concerns which are tackled by what is called the New Hermeneutic. In some ways, the concerns are perfectly legitimate, yet it must be pointed out that Christian theologians were well aware of the issue before the New Hermeneutic came along. In response to such ideas about language it is the clarity of perspicuity of Scripture that must be emphasized. The Biblical books are not just human writings. These books were written by men who spoke from God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Language does not have an autonomous existence of its own. It is a tool which is subordinate to the wills of men, and it was created by God. God gave men the gift of speech and writing.

In human writings we may expect the occasional obscurity or ambiguous mode of expression. Within the Word of God we do not. God has chosen the language and words of the Bible in order to

communicate saving truth to us. It is hardly plausible that with this intention God would make the Bible incapable of being understood two thousand years after it was completed. Any obscurity in our understanding of Scripture lies in our sin-darkened minds and not in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The problem of cultural relativity has been greatly exaggerated. Taken to its logical extreme, it would mean that we would be incapable of understanding those very German academics who have written so extensively about it. It must be insisted that language is an excellent tool by which human beings communicate and by which God can speak and has spoken to man.

Thus it is necessary to be very wary of anyone who speaks about the cultural limitations of the Biblical writers. There is very likely an abuse of this third principle of interpreting the Bible. Paul is frequently accused of being a child of his time when he writes about women. His teaching in 1 Tim. 2 forbidding women to hold teaching authority in the church is often cited as an example. It is dismissed as a 'rabbinic' form of argument. The implication is that this chapter of God's Word has nothing to say to us today. Such ideas must be resisted to the uttermost. Paul was a child of his time, but he was also an apostle writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

It must be noted that this scepticism has even been applied to Jesus Christ himself. To accuse our Lord of being bound by cultural limitations is very dangerous. It is directly related to the error of kenoticism and similar forms of Trinitarian heresy.

Thus: To interpret the Bible correctly account must be taken of the type of writing in which a passage occurs.

And a postscript may be added: The literary type of a Biblical book must be established on good evidence. Genre must not be used as an excuse to evade the authority of Scripture as God's Word.

The fourth principle is if anything even more important than the previous one. It too is based on the nature of the whole of Scripture as being God's Word written. This principle can also be distorted as the third one is. However, it seems that it is usually not so much abused as misunderstood. The principle is this:

4. To interpret the Bible correctly account must be taken of its structure and unity as God's Word.

At a straightforward and fundamental level this means that the teaching of Scripture on a subject must be established on the basis of the clearest statements that relate to it. Incidental references must be understood in the light of direct teaching on a matter. The teaching of one passage must be placed within the context of the Bible's overall teaching.

This is clearly a principle which relates directly to the character of the Bible as a unified Word from God. There is no other collection of

human writings to which this principle could be applied. It is the fact that the Holy Spirit inspired all the Biblical authors which gives this unique unity to the Word of God. Therefore, as Article XX says, it is incumbent upon us not to expound one place of Scripture 'so that it be repugnant to another'.

In the current climate this is a most important principle. It must operate for example in our interpretation of James 5. However v.15 is understood (the prayer offered in faith will make the sick man well), it cannot be interpreted in a way which contradicts the rest of the Bible. The whole tenor of the New Testament is such that the Christian is encouraged to pray to God about sickness and suffering, yet we have no warrant to assume that it must be the Lord's will to heal a believer. He may in his grace and mercy do that, but people in the Bible fall sick and they die. This cannot be ignored when interpreting James 5.

Another example may be taken from the account in Acts 2 of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost after Jesus had ascended into heaven. It is clear from this account that the extraordinary tongues with which the disciples were able to speak were real languages. Furthermore it appears that this gift was given so that the Jews from 'every nation under heaven' might hear the wonders of God in their own human language. Thus when other references to tongues are found in 1 Cor. 12-14, this fourth principle must be applied. Whatever is ultimately made of the Corinthian passage, the clarity of Acts 2 *must* be allowed to throw light upon it.

Many books which describe the principles of interpreting Scripture will state that one place of Scripture must not be expounded in a way so that it be repugnant to another. These books give examples along the lines of those above. However, evangelicals do not give enough attention at a more popular level to drawing out the implications of this principle.

It is not sufficient simply to state that the Bible is a unity. The way in which this unity operates must be spelt out. The Bible was not revealed at one point in time (and thus it differs from the Koran for example). It is a progressive revelation over thousands of years which culminated in the closure of the canon at the end of the apostolic age. It is this progressive revelation which gives the unity of the Bible a particular structure. Hebrews 1:1-2 is a very important text which demonstrates this.

The progression of revelation in the Bible seems to be such that to begin with God spoke directly to those whom he purposed to redeem. Then as these messages were written down, further revelation was built upon them. This is especially true after God's revelation given to Moses on Mount Sinai and the formation of the Pentateuch. It is very noticeable how the prophetic books depend strongly upon the Law of God that has already been given. Thus the further revelation

given to Isaiah, Amos, Jeremiah and others is all framed within the structure of the Pentateuch. Indeed it can also be said that the later prophets operated within a framework which included the messages of the earlier prophets (cf. Joel 3:10 and Micah 4:3).

This whole process of progressive revelation is brought to a climax with the supreme revelation given in and through Christ. That is what the passage in Hebrews is emphasizing. The finality and completeness of God's Word to man is found in His Son, Jesus Christ. The New Testament also teaches that the apostles were chosen by Christ to be the foundation of the Church and to provide the authoritative expansion and application of Christ's teaching and life. This is why the canon was closed and must remain so. At the end of the apostolic age there was no further need for revelation by God. His final Word had been given in Christ.

The way in which this structure of the Biblical revelation impinges on our interpretation of Scripture must now be examined. One obvious area is in understanding the Old Testament. There is enormous confusion among evangelicals over how the Old Testament should be understood. Some hardly bother with it at all—an extraordinary attitude among those who claim to sit under its authority as God's Word. Others interpret it in a wooden sense with no appreciation of how the final revelation in Christ affects our understanding.

It is remarkable for instance how the Exodus is taken as an account which can be applied to nations and the so-called 'oppressed' today. The fact that this was a specific event within God's plan of salvation and the election of the nation of Israel is ignored. Of course the Exodus has immense significance for the Christian's understanding of his final deliverance from judgment through Christ, yet the wild application of this event to all sorts of situations ignores the structure of the Bible and indeed the New Testament guidance on how this event is to be understood (see 1 Cor. 10:2).

Other evangelicals seek to understand the Old Testament in the light of the New, but in reality use vague principles such as the 'love of Christ' to dismiss passages in the Old Testament which are abhorrent to the modern mind. Nowhere is this more evident than in a passage like the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7. It is a common misapprehension that Jesus' words in 5:38–39 are in some sense doing away with the Old Testament or rendering it superfluous: 'You have heard that it was said "eye for eye, and tooth for tooth". But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also'. Yet a few verses earlier, in 5:17, Jesus has said: 'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets: I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them'. Jesus' words in verse 38 are really a rebuttal of those who have distorted the Old Testament. It could even be

argued that the whole Sermon on the Mount is an exposition of the true demands and teaching of the Old Testament. Jesus is rescuing the Old Testament from religious leaders who have blunted its force by tradition and casuistry. Of course there is a sense in which the Old Testament has been superseded by the final revelation in Christ, yet the coming of Christ does not render the Old Testament superfluous.

Some people seize upon texts like Mark 7:19b (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods 'clean') and Acts 15:24-29 (the considered instructions of the apostolic council at Jerusalem) as justifying a view which discounts portions of the Old Testament. However, there is no need to jump to such a conclusion. The laws of sacrifice and cleanliness were originally given with a purpose which was fulfilled in Christ. Because of Christ's advent they may no longer be applied, but that does not then make the Old Testament texts which describe them irrelevant to the Christian today. A thorough read of the book of Hebrews should caution those who would discard the riches of the Old Testament so lightly. The Old Testament's relationship with the New is a deep and complex subject, nevertheless this fourth principle should prevent anyone from foolishly and ignorantly misinterpreting such a large portion of God's work.

Yet, as with the third principle, it is not enough to point out this principle's correct application. This principle of the unity of Scripture has also been distorted through misunderstanding in order to serve as a weapon with which to attack the authority of Scripture itself.

It has been argued that Christians today should emulate the way in which the New Testament writers handle the Old Testament. At first sight this would seem to be a legitimate use or extension of the fourth principle. This is a most important field where very careful analysis is necessary. A distinction needs to be drawn between two ways in which the New Testament writers interpreted or used the Old Testament.

There is first of all the method in which the New Testament writers used the Old Testament according to the same principles which have been outlined here. Thus Paul in Romans 10:4 enquires in what circumstances righteousness was credited to Abraham. From a straightforward study of the text in Genesis, he shows that Abraham was justified before he was circumcised.

A similar example is found in Peter's explanation of Psalm 16 which occurs in Acts 2. He points out that the verse in Ps.16 which says 'you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay' cannot refer to the patriarch David. He can say that because the Old Testament tells him that David, who wrote the Psalm, died and was buried. Therefore he expounds the Psalm as applying to the resurrection of the Messiah. These two examples

illustrate a method of straightforward biblical interpretation which can be used as a model for our own use of Scripture today.

However, some of the ways in which the New Testament writers use the Old Testament relate to their apostolic authority. We are not called to emulate this method today since we are not apostles. The apostles were not merely called and commissioned to understand the Old Testament. They were also called to draw out the significance of the Old Testament in terms of the final revelation given by God through the words and works of Christ. This is what lies behind the apparently strange use of Scripture by Matthew in the chapters which describe the birth of Christ.

Many theologians dismiss Paul's use of Scripture in Galatians 4:21–31 as ridiculous and absurd. It may certainly be admitted that the freedom of his method is not something to which we may aspire today. However, Paul is not being at all fanciful in his use of the Old Testament. He takes Hagar and Sarah, two of the wives of Abraham, as representative of two ways of approaching God. In verse 25 he says 'Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem'. Then he applies Isaiah 54:1 in terms of a contrast between the slavery of the law and the freedom of Christ in Sarah, the wife who was barren.

It would take a long time to explain the depths of Paul's thought here, yet it must be emphasized at least that what he is doing is by no means arbitrary. He is drawing out the full significance of the Old Testament in the light of the redemption won by Christ. The Christian who does not comprehend the unity and structure of the Bible will find Galatians 4 very odd, but those who do grasp the true nature of the Bible's unity will see the point that Paul is making. Augustine was one such Christian, and the title of his great work *The City of God* is inspired by this very passage from Paul.

This example demonstrates the fascinating depth of Scripture. It also shows that a correct grasp of this fourth principle for interpreting Scripture is essential for the full riches of God's Word to be discerned. The greatest glory of the Bible is found when the entire revelation of God is seen as all of a piece. It will not be seen by simply understanding the component parts of its human authors. Nevertheless this glorious principle must not be misunderstood so as to detract from Scripture's infallible authority. The apostolic use of the Old Testament does not justify a cavalier attitude to the Bible in which details are trifled with and texts misused.

Thus: To interpret the Bible correctly account must be taken of its structure and unity as God's Word.

The fifth and final principle can be dealt with rather more briefly:

- 5. To interpret the Bible correctly, extra-Biblical material must not be given an authority equal to or above Scripture.**

This principle needs to be stated because Christians often unwittingly ignore it. There are areas in which the importance of this principle is well known. Thus the authority of the Church, whether in the form of the writings of the early Fathers or in the opinion of modern synods, must not usurp the authority of Scripture. Neither must the findings of science.

However, it is still astonishing to find archaeological evidence or ancient writings, such as those by Josephus, being given an authority in interpreting Scripture which is totally unwarranted. The findings of archaeology which are presented in so authoritative a manner can be very shaky, or at least it may be said that its raw evidence is open to a wide variety of interpretation. Enthusiasm to understand the Bible's background and the circumstances of particular books must not reach the point where the text's interpretation is ruled by extra-Biblical material.

Of course scientific discoveries, archaeological evidence, and the writings of orthodox theologians can be of great assistance in interpretation. It would be very foolish to ignore them. Yet their authority can never be that of God's Word.

Thus: To interpret the Bible correctly, extra-Biblical material must not be given an authority equal to or above that of Scripture.

Conclusion

It needs to be emphasized by way of conclusion that the principles of interpretation discussed above are not intended to make reading the Bible a complicated matter. The Word of God is not esoteric and obscure. There is no necessity to depend on experts or theologians in order to read and understand its truths. It should be our greatest prayer that evangelicals (and others) will regain their confidence in understanding and applying the message of Scripture. These principles of interpretation are stepping stones to that end.

The Bible is a book which stands in a place all on its own as the Word of God. Its riches are inexhaustible and it is more precious than anything else this world affords. As the Word of God it does not sink in a sea of human culture. It towers over all the religious and ideological systems that men have ever devised. It has a message for every age and every person. Nor is the Word of God insufficient or inadequate to illuminate any area of our lives. It does not need a helping hand from synods on the one hand or visions on the other. It has something to say about genetic engineering even though it speaks primarily of salvation and morality.

In the end the principles of interpreting the Bible are a spiritual matter. Will we twist the Scriptures to our own destruction? Or will we submit our hearts and minds and lives to the Word of God in its entirety? Our attitude should be that for which Psalm 119:169–171 prays:

Churchman

May my cry come before you, O Lord; give me understanding according to your word.

May my supplication come before you; deliver me according to your promise.

May my lips overflow with praise, for you teach me your decrees.

MARK BURKILL is a curate at St. Peter's, Harold Wood