CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Need to Interpret

Every so often we meet someone who says with great feeling, "You don't have to interpret the Bible; just read it and do what it says." Usually, such a remark reflects the layperson's protest against the "professional" scholar, pastor, teacher, or Sunday school teacher, who by "interpreting" seems to be taking the Bible away from the common person. It is their way of saying that the Bible is not an obscure book. "After all," it is argued, "anyone with half a brain can read it and understand it. The problem with too many preachers and teachers is that they dig around so much they tend to muddy the waters. What was clear to us when we read it isn't so clear anymore."

There is a lot of truth in this protest. We agree that Christians should learn to read, believe, and obey the Bible. And we especially agree that the Bible need not be an obscure book if read and studied properly. In fact we are convinced that the single most serious problem people have with the Bible is not with a lack of understanding but with the fact that they understand many things too well! For example, with such a text as "Do everything without grumbling or arguing" (Phil 2:14), the problem is not understanding it but obeying it—putting it into practice.

We are also agreed that the preacher or teacher is all too often prone to dig first and look later, and thereby at times to cover up the plain meaning of the text, which often lies on the surface. Let it be said at the outset—and repeated throughout—that the aim of good interpretation is not uniqueness; one is not trying to discover what no one else has ever seen before.

Interpretation that aims at, or thrives on, uniqueness can usually be attributed to pride (an attempt to "outclever" the rest of the world), a false understanding of spirituality (wherein the Bible is full of deeply buried truths waiting to be mined by the spiritually sensitive person with special insight), or vested interests (the need to support a theological bias, especially in dealing with texts that seem to go against that bias). Unique interpretations are usually wrong. This is not to say that the correct understanding of a passage may not often seem unique to someone who hears it for the first time. But it is to say that uniqueness is *not* the aim of our task.

The aim of good interpretation is simple: to get at the "plain meaning of the text," the author's intended meaning. And the most important ingredient one brings to this task is an enlightened common sense. The test of good interpretation is that it makes good sense of what is written. Correct interpretation, therefore, brings relief to the mind as well as a prick or prod to the heart.

But if the plain meaning is what interpretation is all about, then why interpret? Why not just read? Does not the plain meaning come simply from reading? In a sense, yes. But in a truer sense, such an argument is both naive and unrealistic because of two factors: the nature of the reader and the nature of Scripture.

THE READER AS AN INTERPRETER

The first reason one needs to learn *how* to interpret is that, whether one likes it or not, every reader is at the same time an interpreter. That is, most of us assume as we read that we also understand what we read. We also tend to think that *our understanding* is the same as the Holy Spirit's or human author's *intent*. However, we invariably bring to the text all that we are, with all of our experiences, culture, and prior understandings of words and ideas. Sometimes what we bring to the text, unintentionally to be sure, leads us astray, or else causes us to read all kinds of foreign ideas into the text.

Thus, when a person in our culture hears the word "cross," centuries of Christian art and symbolism cause most people automatically to think of a Roman cross (✝), although there is little likelihood that that was the shape of Jesus' cross, which was probably shaped like a T. Most Protestants, and Catholics as well, when they read passages about the church at worship, automatically envision people sitting in a building with "pews" much like their

own. When Paul says, "Make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts" (Rom 13:14 NKJV), people in most English-speaking cultures are apt to think that "flesh" means the "body" and therefore that Paul is speaking of "bodily appetites."

But the word "flesh," as Paul uses it, seldom refers to the body—and in this text it almost certainly did not—but to a spiritual malady sometimes called "the sinful nature," denoting totally self-centered existence. Therefore, without intending to do so, the reader is interpreting as he or she reads, and unfortunately all too often interprets incorrectly.

This leads us to note further, that in any case the reader of an English Bible is already involved in interpretation. For translation is in itself a (necessary) form of interpretation. Your Bible, whatever translation you use, which is your *beginning* point, is in fact the *end result* of much scholarly work. Translators are regularly called upon to make choices regarding meanings, and *their* choices are going to affect how *you* understand.

Good translators, therefore, take the problem of our language differences into consideration. But it is not an easy task. In Romans 13:14, for example, shall we translate "flesh" (as in KJV, NIV, NRSV, NASB, ESV, etc.) because this is the word Paul used, and then leave it to an interpreter to tell us that "flesh" here does not mean "body"? Or shall we "help" the reader and translate "sinful nature" (NIV 1984, GNB, NLT, etc.) or "disordered natural inclinations" (NJB) because these more closely approximate what Paul's word really *means*? We will take up this matter in greater detail in the next chapter. For now it is sufficient to point out how the *fact* of translation in itself has already involved one in the task of interpretation.

The need to interpret is also found by noting what goes on around us all the time. A simple look at the contemporary church, for example, makes it abundantly clear that not all "plain meanings" are equally plain to all. It is of more than passing interest that most of those in today's church who argue that, despite contrary evidence in 1 Corinthians 11:2–3, women should keep silent in church, on the basis of 1 Corinthians 14:34–35, at the same time deny the validity of speaking in tongues and prophecy, the very context in which the "silence" passage occurs. And those who affirm, on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, that women as well as men should pray and prophesy, usually deny that

women must do so with some form of head covering. For some, the Bible "plainly teaches" believers' baptism by immersion; others believe they can make a biblical case for infant baptism. Both "eternal security" and the possibility of "losing one's salvation" are preached in today's churches, though never by the same person! Yet both are affirmed as the plain meaning of biblical texts. Even the two authors of this book have some disagreements as to what certain texts "plainly" mean. Yet all of us are reading the same Bible, and we all are trying to be obedient to what the text "plainly" means.

Besides these recognizable differences among Bible-believing Christians, there are also all kinds of strange things afloat. One can usually recognize the cults, for example, because they have an authority in addition to the Bible. But not all of them do; and in every case they bend the truth by the way they select texts from the Bible itself. Every imaginable heresy or practice, from the Arianism (denying Christ's deity) of the Jehovah's Witnesses, to baptizing for the dead among Mormons, to snake handling among Appalachian sects, claims to be "supported" by a biblical text.

Even among more theologically orthodox individuals, many strange ideas manage to gain acceptance in various quarters. For example, one of the current rages among American Protestants, especially charismatics, is the so-called wealth and health gospel. The "good news" is that God's will for you is financial and material prosperity! One of the advocates of this "gospel" begins his book by arguing for the "plain sense" of Scripture and claiming that he puts the Word of God first and foremost throughout his study. He says that it is not what we *think* it says but what it *actually* says that counts. The "plain meaning" is what he is after. But one begins to wonder what the "plain meaning" really is when financial prosperity is argued as the will of God from such a passage as, "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth" (3 John 2, KJV)—a text that in fact has nothing at all to do with financial prosperity. Another example takes the plain meaning of the story of the rich young man (Mark 10:17–22) as precisely the opposite of "what it actually says" and attributes the "interpretation" to the Holy Spirit. One may rightly question whether the plain meaning is being sought at all; perhaps, the plain meaning is simply what such a writer wants the text to mean in order to support some pet ideas.

Given all this diversity, both inside and outside the church, and all the differences even among scholars, who supposedly know "the rules," it is no wonder that some argue for no interpretation, just reading. But as we have noted, this is a false option. The antidote to *bad* interpretation is not *no* interpretation but *good* interpretation, based on commonsense guidelines.

The authors of this book labor under no illusions that by reading and following our guidelines everyone will finally agree on the "plain meaning," *our* meaning! What we do hope to achieve is to heighten the reader's sensitivity to specific problems inherent in each genre, to help the reader know *why* different options exist and how to make commonsense judgments, and especially, to enable the reader to discern between good and not-so-good interpretations—and to know what makes them one or the other.

THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

A more significant reason for the need to interpret lies in the nature of Scripture itself. Historically the church has understood the nature of Scripture much the same as it has understood the person of Christ—the Bible is at the same time both human and divine. "The Bible," it has been correctly said, "is the Word of God given in human words in history." It is this dual nature of the Bible that demands of us the task of interpretation.

Because the Bible is *God's* message, it has *eternal relevance*; it speaks to all humankind, in every age and in every culture. Because it is the word of God, we must listen—and obey. But because God chose to speak his word through *human words in history*, every book in the Bible also has *historical particularity;* each document is conditioned by the language, time, and culture in which it was originally written (and in some cases also by the oral history it had before it was written down). Interpretation of the Bible is demanded by the "tension" that exists between its *eternal relevance* and its *historical particularity*.

There are some, of course, who believe that the Bible is merely a human book, and that it contains only human words in history. For these people the task of interpreting is limited to historical inquiry. Their interest, as with reading Cicero or Milton, is with the religious ideas of the Jews, Jesus, or the early church. The task for them, therefore, is purely a historical one. What did these

words mean to the people who wrote them? What did they think about God? How did they understand themselves?

On the other hand, there are those who think of the Bible only in terms of its eternal relevance. Because it is the word of God, they tend to think of it only as a collection of propositions to be believed and imperatives to be obeyed—although invariably there is a great deal of picking and choosing among the propositions and imperatives. There are, for example, Christians who, on the basis of Deuteronomy 22:5 ("A woman must not wear men's clothing"), argue that a woman should not wear slacks or shorts, because these are deemed to be "men's clothing." But the same people seldom take literally the other imperatives in this list, which include building a parapet around the roof of one's house (v. 8), not planting two kinds of seeds in a vineyard (v. 9), and making tassels on the four corners of one's cloak (v. 12).

The Bible, however, is *not* a series of propositions and imperatives; it is not simply a collection of "Sayings from Chairman God," as though he looked down on us from heaven and said: "Hey you down there, learn these truths. Number 1, There is no God but One, and I am that One. Number 2, I am the Creator of all things, including humankind"—and so on, all the way through proposition number 7,777 and imperative number 777.

These propositions of course are true, and they are found in the Bible (though not quite in that form). Indeed such a book might have made some things easier for us. But, fortunately, that is not how God chose to speak to us. Rather, he chose to speak his eternal truths within the particular circumstances and events of human history. This also is what gives us hope. Precisely because God chose to speak in the context of real human history, we may take courage that these same words will speak again and again in our own "real" history, as they have throughout the history of the church.

The fact that the Bible has a human side is our encouragement; it is also our challenge, and the reason that we need to interpret. Two items should be noted in this regard:

1. One of the most important aspects of the human side of the Bible is that, in order to communicate his word to all human conditions, God chose to use almost every available kind of communication: narrative history, genealogies, chronicles, laws of all kinds, poetry of all kinds, proverbs, prophetic oracles, riddles, drama, biographical sketches, parables, letters, sermons, and apocalypses.

To interpret properly the "then and there" of the biblical texts, one must not only know some general rules that apply to all the words of the Bible, but one also needs to learn the special rules that apply to each of these literary forms (genres). The way God communicates the divine word to us in the "here and now" will often differ from one form to another. For example, we need to know *how* a psalm, a form often addressed *to God*, functions as God's word *to us*, and how certain psalms differ from others, and how all of them differ from "the laws," which were often addressed to people in cultural situations no longer in existence. *How* do such "laws" speak to us, and how do they differ from the moral "laws," which are always valid in all circumstances? Such are the questions the dual nature of the Bible forces on us.

2. In speaking through real persons, in a variety of circumstances, over a 1,500-year period, God's Word was expressed in the vocabulary and thought patterns of those persons and conditioned by the culture of those times and circumstances. That is to say, God's word to us was first of all God's word to them. If they were going to hear it, it could only have come through events and in language *they* could have understood. Our problem is that we are so far removed from them in time, and sometimes in thought. This is the major reason one needs to learn to *interpret* the Bible. If God's word about women wearing men's clothing or people having parapets around houses is to speak to us, we first need to know what it said to its original hearers—and why.

Thus the task of interpreting involves the student/reader at two levels. First, one has to hear the word they heard; we must try to understand what was said to them back *then and there* (exegesis). Second, we must learn to hear that same word in the *here and now* (hermeneutics). A few preliminary words are needed about these two tasks.

THE FIRST TASK: EXEGESIS

The first task of the interpreter is called *exegesis*. This involves the careful, systematic study of the Scripture to discover the original, intended meaning. This is primarily a historical task. It is the attempt to hear the Word as the original recipients were to have heard it, to find out what was *the original intent of the words of the Bible*. This is the task that often calls for the help of the "expert,"

a person trained to know well the language and circumstances of a text in its original setting. But one does not have to be an expert to do good exegesis.

In fact, everyone is an exegete of sorts. The only real question is whether you will be a good one. How many times, for example, have you heard or said, "What Jesus *meant* by that was ..." or, "Back in those days, they used to ..."? These are exegetical expressions. Most often they are employed to explain the differences between "them" and "us"—why we do not build parapets around our houses, for example—or to give a reason for our using a text in a new or different way—why handshaking has often taken the place of the "holy kiss." Even when such ideas are not articulated, they are in fact practiced all the time in a kind of commonsense way.

The problem with much of this, however, is (1) that such exegesis is often too selective and (2) that often the sources consulted are not written by true "experts," that is, they are secondary sources that also often use other secondary sources rather than the primary sources. A few words about each of these must be given.

1. Although everyone employs exegesis at times, and although quite often such exegesis is well done, it nonetheless tends to be employed *only* when there is an obvious problem between the biblical texts and modern culture. Whereas it must indeed be employed for such texts, we insist that it is *the first step in reading EVERY text.* At first, this will not be easy to do, but learning to think exegetically will pay rich dividends in understanding and will make even the reading, not to mention the studying, of the Bible a much more exciting experience. But note well: Learning to think exegetically is not the *only* task; it is simply the *first* task.

The real problem with "selective" exegesis is that one will often read one's own, completely foreign, ideas into a text and thereby make God's word something other than what God really said. For example, one of the authors of this book once received a letter from a well-known evangelical, who argued that the author should not appear in a conference with another well-known person, whose orthodoxy on a point was thought to be suspect. The biblical reason given for avoiding the conference was the command to: "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thess 5:22 KJV). But had our brother learned to read the Bible exegetically, he would not have used the text in that way. For this is Paul's final word in a *paragraph* to the Thessalonians regarding Spirit manifestations in

the community. What Paul really says, in current English, is: "Do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil" (NIV). The "avoidance of evil" had to do with "prophecies," which, when tested, were found not to be of the Spirit. To make this text mean something God did not intend is to abuse the text, not use it. To avoid making such mistakes one needs to learn to think exegetically, that is, to begin back then and there, and to do so with *every* text.

2. As we will soon note, one does not begin by consulting the "experts." But when it is necessary to do so, one should try to use the better sources. For example, at the conclusion of the story of the rich young man in Mark 10:24 (Matt 19:23; Luke 18:24), Jesus says, "How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!" He then adds: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." You will sometimes hear it said that there was a gate in Jerusalem known as the "Needle's Eye," which camels could go through only by kneeling, and with great difficulty. The point of this "interpretation" is that a camel could in fact go through the "Needle's Eye." The trouble with this "exegesis," however, is that it is simply not true. There never was such a gate in Jerusalem at any time in its history. The earliest known "evidence" for this idea is found in the eleventh century(!) in a commentary by a Greek churchman named Theophylact, who had the same difficulty with the text that many later readers do. After all, it is *impossible* for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, and that was precisely Jesus' point. It is impossible for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom. It takes a miracle for a rich person to get saved, which is quite the point of what follows: "All things are possible with God."

LEARNING TO DO EXEGESIS

How, then, do we learn to do good exegesis and at the same time avoid the pitfalls along the way? The first part of most of the chapters in this book will explain how one goes about this task for each of the genres in particular. Here we simply want to overview what is involved in the exegesis of any text.

At its highest level, of course, exegesis requires knowledge of many things we do not necessarily expect the readers of this book to know: the biblical languages; the Jewish, Semitic, and Greco-Roman

backgrounds to much of what is written; how to determine the original text when early copies (produced by hand) have differing readings; the use of all kinds of primary sources and tools. But you can learn to do good exegesis even if you do not have access to all of these skills and tools. To do so, however, you must learn first what you can do with your own skills, and second how to use the work of others.

The key to good exegesis, and therefore to a more intelligent reading of the Bible, is to learn to read the text carefully and to ask the right questions of the text. One of the best steps one could do in this regard would be to read Mortimer J. Adler's still popular classic *How to Read a Book* (1940, revised edition, with Charles Van Doren [New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972]). Our experience over many years in college and seminary teaching is that many people simply do not know how to read well. To read or study the Bible intelligently demands careful reading, and this includes learning to ask the right questions of the text.

There are two basic kinds of questions one should ask of every biblical passage: those that relate to *context* and those that relate to *content*. The questions of context are also of two kinds: historical and literary. Let us briefly note each of these.

The Historical Context

The historical context, which will differ from book to book, has to do with several matters: the time and culture of the author and audience, that is, the geographical, topographical, and political factors that are relevant to the author's setting; and the historical occasion of the book, letter, psalm, prophetic oracle, or other genre. All such matters are especially important for understanding.

1. It makes a considerable difference in understanding to know the eighth-century BC background of Amos, Hosea, or Isaiah, or that Haggai prophesied after the exile, or to know the messianic expectations of Israel when John the Baptist and Jesus appeared on the scene, or to understand the differences between the cities of Corinth and Philippi and how these differences affected the churches in each, and thus Paul's letters in each case. One's reading of Jesus' parables is greatly enhanced by knowing something about the customs of Jesus' day. Surely it makes a difference in understanding to know that the "*denarius*" ("penny" KJV!) offered to the workers in Matthew 20:1–16 was the equivalent of a full day's wage. Even matters of topography are important. Those raised in the American West—or East for that matter—must be careful not to think of "the mountains [that] surround Jerusalem" (Ps 125:2) in terms of their own experience of mountains, since they are actually low hills and plateaus.

To answer most of these kinds of questions, you will need some outside help. A good Bible dictionary, such as the four-volume *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ed. G. W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995]) or the one-volume *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney; ed. Moises Silva [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011]) or *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. David Noel Freedman [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000]), will generally supply the need here. If you wish to pursue a matter further, the bibliographies at the end of each article in these dictionaries would be a good place to start.

2. The more important question of historical context, however, has to do with the *occasion* and *purpose* of each biblical book and/or its various parts. Here one wants to have an idea of what was going on in Israel or the church that called forth such a document, or what the situation of the author was that caused him to speak or write. Again, this will vary from book to book; it is after all somewhat less crucial for Proverbs, for example, than for 1 Corinthians.

The answer to this question is usually to be found—when it can be found—within the book itself. But one needs to learn to read with their eyes open for such matters. If you want to corroborate your own findings on these questions, you might consult your Bible dictionary again or the introduction to a good commentary on the book (see the appendix on p. 275). But make your own observations first!

The Literary Context

The literary context is what most people mean when they talk about reading something in its context. Indeed this is *the* crucial task in exegesis, and fortunately it is something one can learn to do well without necessarily having to consult the "experts." Essentially, *literary context* means first that words only have meaning in sentences, and second that biblical sentences for the most part have full and clear meaning only in relation to preceding and succeeding sentences.

The most important contextual question you will ever ask—and it must be asked over and over of every sentence and every

paragraph—is: What's the point? We must try to trace the author's train of thought. What is the author saying, and why does he say it right here? Having made that point, what is he saying next, and why?

This question will vary from genre to genre, but it is *always* the crucial question. The goal of exegesis, you remember, is to find out what the original author intended. To do this task well, it is imperative that one use a translation that recognizes poetry and paragraphs. One of the major causes of inadequate exegesis by readers of the King James Version and, to a lesser degree, of the New American Standard Bible, is that every verse has been printed as a paragraph. Such an arrangement tends to obscure the author's own logic. Above all else, therefore, one must learn to recognize units of thought, whether paragraphs (for prose) or lines and sections (for poetry). And, with the aid of an adequate translation, this is something any good reader can do with practice.

The Questions of Content

The second major category of questions one needs to ask of any text relates to the author's actual content. "Content" has to do with the meanings of words, their grammatical relationships in sentences, and the choice of the original text where the manuscripts (handwritten copies) differ from one another (see next chapter). It also includes a number of the items mentioned above under "historical context," for example, the meaning of a denarius, or a Sabbath day's journey, or high places, etc.

For the most part, these are the questions of meaning that people ordinarily ask of the biblical text. When Paul writes to the believers in Corinth, "Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer" (2 Cor 5:16, NASB), you should want to know *who* is "according to the flesh"—Christ or the one knowing him? It makes a considerable difference in meaning to learn that "we" know Christ no longer "from a worldly point of view" (NIV) is what Paul intends, not that we know Christ no longer "in his earthly life."

To answer these kinds of questions a reader will ordinarily need to seek outside help. Again, the quality of one's answers to such questions will usually depend on the quality of the sources being used. This is the place where you will finally want to consult a good exegetical commentary. But note that from our view, consulting a commentary, as essential as this will be at times, is the last task you perform.

The Tools

For the most part, then, you can do good exegesis with a minimum amount of outside help, provided that the help is of the highest quality. We have mentioned three such tools: a good translation, a good Bible dictionary, and good commentaries. There are other kinds of tools, of course, especially for topical or thematic kinds of study. But for reading or studying the Bible book by book, these are the essential ones.

Because a good translation (or better, several good translations) is the absolutely basic tool for one who does not know the original languages, the next chapter is devoted to this matter. Learning to choose a good commentary is also important, but because this is the last task one does, an appendix on commentaries concludes the book.

THE SECOND TASK: HERMENEUTICS

Although the word "hermeneutics" ordinarily covers the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis, it is also used in the narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts. In this book we will use it exclusively in this way—to ask questions about the Bible's meaning in the "here and now"—even though we know this is not the most common meaning of the term.

This matter of the here and now, after all, is what brings us to the Bible in the first place. So why not start here? Why worry about exegesis? Surely the same Spirit who inspired the writing of the Bible can equally inspire one's reading of it. In a sense this is true, and we do not by this book intend to take from anyone the joy of devotional reading of the Bible and the sense of direct communication involved in such reading. But devotional reading is not the only kind one should do. One must also read for learning and understanding. In short, you must also learn to study the Bible, which in turn must inform your devotional reading. And this brings us back to our insistence that proper "hermeneutics" begins with solid "exegesis."

The reason you must *not begin* with the here and now is that the only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found *in the*

original intent of the biblical text. As noted earlier in this chapter, this is the "plain meaning" one is after. Otherwise biblical texts can be made to mean whatever they might mean to any given reader. But such hermeneutics becomes total subjectivity, and who then is to say that one person's interpretation is right and another's is wrong? Anything goes.

In contrast to such subjectivity, we insist that the original meaning of the text—as much as it is in our power to discern it—is the objective point of control. We are convinced that the Mormons' baptizing for the dead on the basis of 1 Corinthians 15:29, or the Jehovah's Witnesses' rejection of the deity of Christ, or the snake handlers' use of Mark 16:18, or the prosperity evangelists' advocating of the American dream as a Christian right on the basis of 3 John 2 are all *improper* interpretations. In each case the error is in their hermeneutics, precisely because their hermeneutics is not controlled by good exegesis. They have started with the here and now and have read into the texts "meanings" that were not originally intended. And what is to keep one from killing one's daughter because of a foolish vow, as did Jephthah (Judg 11:29–40), or to argue, as one preacher is reported to have done, that women should never wear their hair up in a topknot ("bun") because the Bible says "topknot go down" ("Let him that is on the housetop not go down" [Mark 13:15 KJV])?

It will be argued, of course, that common sense will keep one from such foolishness. Unfortunately common sense is not always so common. We want to know what the Bible means *for us*—legitimately so. But we cannot make it mean anything that pleases us and then give the Holy Spirit "credit" for it. The Holy Spirit cannot be brought into the process to contradict what is said, since the Spirit is the one who inspired the original intent. Therefore, the Spirit's help for us will come in our discovering that original intent and in guiding us as we try faithfully to apply that meaning to our own situations.

The questions of hermeneutics are not at all easy, which is probably why so few books are written on this aspect of our subject. Nor will all agree on how one goes about this task. But this is the crucial area, and believers need to learn to talk to one another about these questions—and to listen. On this one statement, however, there must surely be agreement: *A text cannot mean what it could never have meant for its original readers/hearers.* Or to put it in a positive way, the true meaning of the biblical text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken or written. This is the starting point. How we work it out from that point is what this book is basically all about.

Someone will surely ask, "But is it not possible for a text to have an additional [or fuller or deeper] meaning beyond its original intent? After all, this happens in the New Testament itself in the way it sometimes uses the Old Testament." In the case of prophecy, we would not close the door to such a possibility, and we would argue that, with careful controls, a second, or ultimate, intended meaning is possible. But how does one justify it at other points? Our problem is a simple one: Who speaks for God? Roman Catholicism has less of a problem here; the magisterium, the authority vested in the official teaching of the church, determines for all the fuller sense of the text. Protestants, however, have no magisterium and we should be properly concerned whenever anyone says they have God's deeper meaning to a text—especially if the text never meant what it is now made to mean. Of such interpretations are all the cults born, and innumerable lesser heresies.

It is difficult to give rules for hermeneutics. What we offer throughout the following chapters, therefore, are guidelines. You may not agree with our guidelines. We do hope that your disagreements will be bathed in Christian charity, and perhaps our guidelines will serve to stimulate your own thinking on these matters.

CHAPTER 2

The Basic Tool: A Good Translation

The sixty-six books of the Protestant Bible were originally written in three different languages: Hebrew (most of the Old Testament), Aramaic (a sister language to Hebrew used in half of Daniel and two passages in Ezra), and Greek (all of the New Testament). We assume that most of the readers of this book do not know these languages. This means, therefore, that one's basic tool for reading and studying the Bible is a contemporary English translation or, as will be argued in this chapter, *several* such translations.

As we noted in the last chapter, the very fact that you are reading God's Word in translation means that you are already involved in interpretation—and this is so whether one likes it or not. To read in translation is not a bad thing, of course; it is simply the only thing available and therefore the necessary thing. What this means further, however, is that, in a certain sense, the person who reads the Bible only in English is at the mercy of the translator(s), and translators have often had to make choices as to what in fact the original Hebrew or Greek author was really intending to express.

The trouble, then, with using only *one* translation, be it ever so good, is that you are thereby committed to the particular exegetical choices of that translation as the Word of God. The translation you are using will, of course, be correct most of the time; but at times it also may not be.

Let's take, for example, the following four translations of 1 Corinthians 7:36:

NKJV: "If any man thinks that he is behaving improperly toward his virgin ..."

NASB: "If any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin *daughter* ..."

NIV: "If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to ..."

NEB: "If a man has a partner in celibacy and feels that he is not behaving properly towards her ..."

The NKJV is very literal but not very helpful, since it leaves the term "virgin" and the relationship between the "man" and "his virgin" quite ambiguous. Of one item, however, you may be absolutely certain: Paul did not *intend* to be ambiguous. He intended one of the other three options, and the Corinthians, who had raised the problem in their letter, knew which one; indeed they knew nothing of the other two.

It should be noted here that none of these other three is a *bad* translation, since any of them is a legitimate option as to Paul's intent. However, only one of them can be the *correct* translation. The problem is which one? For a number of reasons, the NIV reflects the best exegetical option here (in fact the NEB reading is now a marginal note in the newer REB). However, if you regularly read only the NASB (which also has a less likely option here), then you are committed to an *interpretation* of the text that is quite unlikely to be what Paul intended. And this kind of example can be illustrated hundreds of times over. So, what to do?

First, it is probably a good practice to regularly read one main translation, provided it really is a good one. This will aid in memorization as well as give you consistency. Also, if you are using one of the better translations, it will have notes in the margin at many of the places where there are difficulties. However, for the *study* of the Bible, you should use *several* well-chosen translations. The best option is to use translations that *one knows in advance will tend to differ*. This will highlight where many of the difficult problems of interpretation lie. To resolve these matters you will usually want to consult one or more commentaries.

But which translation should you use, and which of the several should you study from? No one can really speak for someone else on this matter. But your choice should not be simply because "I like it" or "This one is so readable." You should indeed like your translation, and if it is a really good one, it will be readable.

However, to make an intelligent choice, you need to know something about the science of translation itself as well as about some of the various English translations.

THE SCIENCE OF TRANSLATION

There are two kinds of choices that translators must make: textual and linguistic. The first kind has to do with the actual wording of the original text. The second has to do with the translators' theory of translation that underlies their rendering of the text into English.

The Question of Text

The first concern of translators is to be sure that the Hebrew or Greek text they are using is as close as possible to the original wording as it left the author's hands (or the hands of the scribe taking it down by dictation). Is this what the psalmist actually wrote? Are these the very words of Mark or Paul? Indeed, why should anyone think otherwise?

Although the details of the problem of text in the Old and New Testaments differ, the basic concerns are the same. (1) Unlike Thomas Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence," for example, whose handwritten original is preserved in America's national archives, no such handwritten "original" exists for any biblical book. (2) What does exist are thousands of copies produced by hand (thus called "manuscripts") and copied repeatedly over a period of about 1,400 years (for the NT; even longer for the OT). (3) Although the vast majority of manuscripts, which for both Testaments come from the later medieval period, are very much alike, for the New Testament these later manuscripts differ significantly from the earlier copies and translations. In fact, there are over five thousand Greek manuscripts of part or all of the New Testament, as well as thousands in Latin; and because these hand copies were made before the invention of the printing press (which helped guarantee uniformity), no two of them anywhere in existence are exactly alike.

The problem, therefore, is to sift through all the available material, compare the places where the manuscripts differ (these are called "variants"), and determine which of the variants represent errors and which one most likely represents the original text.

Although this may seem like an imposing task—and in some ways it is—translators do not despair, because they also know something about textual criticism, the science that attempts to discover the original texts of ancient documents.

It is not our purpose here to give the reader a primer in textual criticism. This you may find in convenient form in the articles by Bruce Waltke (Old Testament) and Gordon Fee (New Testament) in volume 1 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (ed. Frank Gaebelein [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979], pp. 211–22, 419–33). Our purpose here is to give some basic information about what is involved in textual criticism so that you will know why translators must do it and so that you can make better sense of the marginal notes in your translation that say, "Other ancient authorities add ..." or, "Some manuscripts do not have ..."

For the purposes of this chapter, you need to be aware of two items:

1. *Textual criticism is a science that works with careful controls.* There are two kinds of evidence that translators consider in making textual choices: external evidence (the character and quality of the manuscripts) and the internal evidence (the kinds of mistakes to which copyists were susceptible). Scholars sometimes differ as to how much weight they give either of these strands of evidence, but all are agreed that the combination of strong external and strong internal evidence together makes the vast majority of choices somewhat routine. But for the remainder, where these two lines of evidence seem to collide, the choices are more difficult.

The *external evidence* has to do with the quality and age of the manuscripts that support a given variant. For the Old Testament this often amounts to a choice among the Hebrew manuscripts preserved in the Masoretic Text (MT), primarily medieval copies (based on a very careful copying tradition), earlier Hebrew manuscripts that have been preserved, in part, in the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS; dated before the first Christian century), and manuscripts of ancient translations such as the Greek Septuagint (LXX; produced in Egypt around 250–150 BC). A well-preserved copy of Isaiah found among the Dead Sea Scrolls has demonstrated that the Masoretic tradition has carefully preserved a very ancient text; nonetheless, it often needs emendation from the Septuagint. Sometimes neither the Hebrew nor Greek yields a tolerable sense, at which times conjectures are necessary.

For the New Testament, the better external evidence was preserved in Egypt, where again, a very reliable copying tradition existed. When this early evidence is also supported by equally early evidence from other sectors of the Roman Empire, such evidence is usually seen to be conclusive.

The *internal evidence* has to do with the copyists and authors. When translators are faced with a choice between two or more variants, they usually can detect which readings are the mistakes because scribal habits and tendencies have been carefully analyzed by scholars and are now well-known. Usually the variant that best explains how all the others came about is the one presumed to be the original text. It is also important for the translator to know a given biblical author's style and vocabulary, because these, too, play a role in making textual choices.

As already noted, for the vast majority of variants found among the manuscripts, the best (or good) external evidence combined with the best internal evidence yields us an extraordinarily high degree of certainty about the original text. This may be illustrated thousands of times over simply by comparing the NKJV (which is based on poor, late manuscripts) with almost all other contemporary translations, such as the NRSV or NIV. We will note three variants as illustrations of the work of textual criticism:

1 Samuel 8:16

NKJV/NASB: "he will take ... your finest young men and your donkeys"
NRSV/NIV: "he will take ... the best of your cattle and donkeys"

The text of the NRSV/NIV ("your cattle") comes from the Septuagint, the usually reliable Greek translation of the Old Testament. The NKJV/NASB follows the Masoretic Text, reading "young men," a rather unlikely term to be used in parallel to "donkeys." The origin of the miscopy in the Hebrew text, which the NKJV followed, is easy to understand. The expression for "your young men" in Hebrew is *bḥwrykm*, while "your cattle" is *bqrykm* (they are as much alike as "television" and "telephone"—i.e., the error could not have been oral). The incorrect copying of a single character by a scribe resulted in a change of meaning. The Septuagint was translated some time before the miscopy was made, so it preserved the original "your cattle." The accidental change to "your young men" was made later, affecting medieval Hebrew manuscripts, but too late to affect the premedieval Septuagint.

Mark 1:2

NKJV: "As it is written in the Prophets ..."
NIV: "as it is written in Isaiah the prophet ..."

The text of the NIV is found in all the best early Greek manuscripts. It is also the only text found in all the earliest (second-century) translations (Latin, Coptic, and Syriac) and is the only text known among all but one of the church fathers before the ninth century. It is easy to see what happened in the later Greek manuscripts. Since the citation that follows is a combination of Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3, a later copyist "corrected" Mark's original text to make it more precise.

1 Corinthians 6:20

NKJV: "therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's."
NIV: "Therefore honor God with your bodies."

This example was chosen to illustrate that, on occasion, changes to the original text were made by copyists for theological reasons. The words "and in your spirit, which are God's," though found in most of the late-medieval Greek manuscripts, do not appear in any early Greek evidence or in the Latin-speaking church in the West. Had they been in Paul's original letter, it is nearly impossible to explain either how or why copyists would have left them out so early and so often. But their late appearance in Greek manuscripts can be easily explained. All such manuscripts were copied in monasteries at a time when Greek philosophy, with its low view of the body, had made inroads into Christian theology. So, some monks added "in your spirit" and then concluded that both body and spirit "are God's." While this is true, these additional words deflect Paul's obvious concern with the body in this passage and are thus no part of the Spirit's inspiration of the apostle.

It should be noted here that, for the most part, translators work from Greek and Hebrew texts edited by careful, rigorous scholarship. For the New Testament this means that the "best text" has been edited and published by scholars who are experts in this field. But it also means, for both Testaments, that the translators themselves have access to an "apparatus" (textual information

in footnotes) that includes the significant variants along with their manuscript support.

2. *Although textual criticism is a science, it is not an exact science, because it deals with many human variables.* Occasionally, especially when the translation is the work of a committee, the translators will themselves be divided as to which variant represents the original text and which is (are) the scribal error(s). Usually at such times the majority choice will be found in the actual translation, while the minority choice will be in the margin.

The reason for the uncertainty may be either that the best manuscript evidence conflicts with the best explanation of how the error came about, or that the manuscript evidence is evenly divided and either variant can explain how the other came to be. We can illustrate this from 1 Corinthians 13:3, which in the 1984 NIV looks like this:

NIV text 1984: "surrender my body to the flames"
NIV note: "surrender my body that I may boast"

But in the 2011 NIV, the verse now looks like this (cf. NRSV, NLT):

NIV text 2011: "give over my body to hardship that I may boast
NIV note: "give over my body to the flames"

In Greek the difference is only one letter: *kauthēsōmai/kauchēsōmai*. The word "boast" has the best and earliest Greek support; the word "flames" appeared first in Latin translation (at a time when Christians were being burned at the stake). In this case *both* readings have some inherent difficulties: "Flames" represents a form that is ungrammatical in Greek; moreover, Paul's letter was written well before Christians were martyred by burning—and no one ever voluntarily "gave over their bodies" to be burned at the stake! On the other hand, while supported by what is easily the best evidence, it has been difficult to find an adequate meaning for "that I may boast." Here is one of those places where a good commentary will probably be necessary in order for you to make up your own mind.

The preceding example is a good place for us also to refer you back to the last chapter. You will note that the choice of the correct text is one of the *content* questions. A good exegete must know, if it is possible to know, which of these words Paul actually wrote. On the other hand, it should also be noted that Paul's final *point* here is little affected by that choice. In either case, he means

that if one gives the body over to some extreme sacrifice, or the like, but lacks love, it is all for nothing.

This, then, is what it means to say that translators must make textual choices, and it also explains one of the reasons why translations will sometimes differ—and also why translators are themselves interpreters. Before we go on to the second reason why translations differ, we need to make a note here about the King James Version and its most recent revision, the New King James Version.

The KJV for a long time was the most widely used translation in the world; it also served for several centuries as the classic expression of the English language. Indeed, its translators coined phrases that will be forever embedded in our language ("coals of fire," "the skin of my teeth," "tongues of fire"). However, for the New Testament, the only Greek text available to the translators of the 1611 edition was based on late manuscripts, which had accumulated the mistakes of over a thousand years of copying. Few of these mistakes—and we must note that there are many of them—make any difference to us doctrinally, but they often do make a difference in the meaning of certain specific texts. Recognizing that the English of the KJV was no longer a living language—and thoroughly dissatisfied with its modern revision (RSV/NRSV)—it was decided by some to "update" the KJV by ridding it of its "archaic" way of speaking. But in so doing, the NKJV revisers eliminated the best feature of the KJV (its marvelous expression of the English language) and kept the worst (its flawed Greek text).

This is why for study *you should use almost any modern translation other than the KJV or the NKJV.* But how to choose between modern translations takes us to the next kinds of choices translators have to make.

The Questions of Language

The next two kinds of choices—verbal and grammatical—bring us to the actual science of translation. The difficulty has to do with the transferring of words and ideas from one language to another. To understand what various theories underlie our modern translations, you will need to become acquainted with the following technical terms:

Original language: the language that one is translating *from;* in our case, Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. For convenience, we will usually say just "Hebrew or Greek."

Receptor language: the language that one is translating *into*; in our case, English.

Historical distance: has to do with the differences that exist between the original language and the receptor language, both in matters of words, grammar, and idioms as well as in matters of culture and history.

Formal equivalence: the attempt to keep as close to the "form" of the Hebrew or Greek, both words and grammar, as can be conveniently put into understandable English. The closer one stays to the Hebrew or Greek idiom, the closer one moves toward a theory of translation often described as "literal." Translations based on formal equivalence will keep historical distance intact at all points. The problem here, however, is that "understandable" English is not the goal of good translation; rather the goal is good "contemporary" English that is comparable in language and meaning to the original author's intent—as much as that can be determined from the context.

Functional equivalence: the attempt to keep the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek but to put their words and idioms into what would be the normal way of saying the same thing in English. The more one is willing to forego formal equivalence for functional equivalence, the closer one moves toward a theory of translation frequently described as "dynamic equivalent." Such translations sustain historical distance on all historical and factual matters but "update" matters of language, grammar, and style.

Free translation: the attempt to translate the *ideas* from one language to another, with less concern about using the exact words of the original. A free translation, sometimes also called a paraphrase, tries to eliminate as much of the historical distance as possible and still be faithful to the intent of the original text. The danger here is that a free translation can easily become *too* free-reflecting how the translator wishes the concepts would have been conveyed, rather than reflecting faithfully how they actually are conveyed in the original text.

Theory of translation has basically to do with whether one puts primary emphasis on formal or on functional equivalency, that is, the degree to which one is willing to go in order to bridge the gap between the two languages, either in use of words and grammar or in bridging the historical distance by offering a modern equivalent. For example, should "lamp" be translated "flashlight" or "torch" in cultures where these serve the purpose a lamp once did?

Or should one translate it "lamp," and let readers bridge the gap for themselves? Should "holy kiss" be translated "the handshake of Christian love" in cultures where public kissing is offensive? Should "coals of fire" become "burning embers/coals," since this is more normal English? Should "endurance inspired by hope" (1 Thess 1:3), a formal equivalent that is almost meaningless in English, be rendered "your endurance inspired by hope," which is what Paul's Greek actually means?

Translators are not always consistent, but one of these theories will govern all translators' basic approach to their task. At times the free or literal translations can be excessive, so much so that Clarence Jordan in his Cotton Patch Version "translated" Paul's letter to Rome as to Washington (!), while Robert Young, in a literal rendering published in 1862, transformed one Pauline sentence into this impossible English (?): "Whoredom is actually heard of among you, and such whoredom as is not even named among the nations—as that one hath the wife of the father" (1 Cor 5:1). This is not a valid translation at all.

The several translations of the whole Bible that are most easily accessible may be placed on a formal or functional equivalent and historical distance scale, as shown on the following graph (line 1 represents the original translations, line 2 their various revisions; note that in the case of the RSV, both the NRSV and ESV move more toward the middle, as does the NIV^2 (2011), while the NJB, REB and NLT [the revision of the Living Bible] also have moved more toward the middle from their originals).

Formal Equivalence (literal)				Functional Equivalence (dynamic)				Free
1. KJV	NASB	RSV	NIV^1	NAB	GNB	JB	NEB	LB
2. NKJV	HCSB	NRSV ESV	NIV^2	NJB	REB	NLT		The Message

Our view is that the best theory of translation is the one that remains as faithful as possible to *both* the original and receptor languages, but that when something has to "give," it should be in favor of the receptor language—without losing the meaning of the original language, of course—since the very reason for translation is to make these ancient texts accessible to the English-speaking person who does not know the original languages.

But note well: If the best translational theory is functional equivalence, a translation that adheres to formal equivalence is often helpful as a *second* source; it can give the reader some confidence as to what the Hebrew or Greek actually looked like. A free translation also can be helpful—to stimulate thinking about the possible meaning of a text. But the basic translation for reading and studying should be something in the NIV/NRSV range.

The problem with a formal-equivalent translation is that it keeps distance at the wrong places—in language and grammar. Thus the translator often renders the Greek or Hebrew into English that currently is never written or spoken that way. It is like translating *maison blanche* from French to English as "house white." For example, no native English-speaking person, even in the sixteenth century, would *ever* have said "coals of fire" (Rom 12:20 KJV). That is a literal rendering of the Greek construction, but what it *means* in English is "burning coals" (NIV) or "live coals" (REB).

A second problem with a literal translation is that it often makes the English ambiguous, where the Greek or Hebrew was quite clear to the original recipients. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5:16 the Greek phrase *kata sarka* can be translated literally "[to know] according to the flesh" (as in the NASB). But this is not an ordinary way of speaking in English. Furthermore, the phrase is ambiguous. Is it the person who is *being known* who is "according to the flesh," which seems to be implied in the NASB, and which in this case would mean something like "by their outward appearance"? Or is the person who *is* "*knowing*" doing so "according to the flesh," which would mean "from a worldly point of view"? In this case, however, the context is clear, which the NIV correctly renders: "So from now on [since we have been raised to a new life, v. 15] we regard no one from a worldly point of view."

The problem with a free translation, on the other hand, especially for study purposes, is that the translator updates the original author too much. In the second half of the twentieth century, three "free translations" served succeeding generations of Christians: Phillips (by J. B. Phillips), the Living Bible (by Ken Taylor, who "translated" into language for the young not the Greek Bible but the KJV), and The Message (by Eugene Peterson). On the one hand, these renditions sometimes have especially fresh and vivid ways of expressing some old truths and have thus each served to stimulate contemporary Christians to take a new look at their

Bibles. On the other hand, such a "translation" often comes very close to being a commentary, but without other options made available to the reader. Therefore, as stimulating as these can sometimes be, they are never intended to be one's only Bible, as even these translators would be quick to admit. Thus the reader needs regularly to check these rather eye-catching moments against another translation or a commentary to make sure that not too much freedom has been taken.

SOME PROBLEM AREAS

The way various translations handle the problem of "historical distance" can best be noted by illustrating several of the kinds of problems involved.

1. *Weights, measures, money.* This is a particularly difficult area. Does one transliterate the Hebrew and Greek terms ("ephah," "homer," etc.), or try to find their English equivalents? If one chooses to go with equivalents in weights and measures, does one use the standard "pounds" and "feet" still in vogue in the United States (but not Canada), or does one follow the rest of the English-speaking world and translate "liters" and "meters"? Inflation can make a mockery of monetary equivalents in a few years. The problem is further complicated by the fact that exaggerated measures or money are often used to suggest contrasts or startling results, as in Matthew 18:24–28 or Isaiah 5:10. To transliterate in these cases would likely cause an English reader to miss the point of the passages altogether.

The KJV, followed closely by the NKJV and NRSV, was inconsistent in these matters. For the most part they transliterated, so that we got "baths," "ephahs," "homers," "shekels," and "talents." Yet the Hebrew *'ammāh* was translated "cubit," the *zeret* a "span," and the Greek *mna* ("mina") became the British "pound," while the *dénarion* became a mere "penny." For most North Americans all of these have the effect of being meaningless or misleading.

The NASB uses "cubit" and "span"—both of which, according to modern dictionaries, represent "an ancient linear unit"—but otherwise consistently transliterates and then puts an English equivalent in the margin (except for John 2:6 [where the NASB had put the transliteration in the margin!]). This is the way the original NIV also chose to go (except for Genesis 6–7, where

"cubits" were turned into feet), while the marginal notes are given both in English standards and in metric equivalents. The apparent reason for this is that the "cubit" was just flexible enough in length so as to preclude precision in English—especially when translating the measurements of structures.

On the matter of monetary equivalents translations are sometimes puzzling, but in fairness the difficulties here are enormous. Take, for example, the first occurrence of *talantōn* and *dénarion* in the New Testament (Matt 18:23–34, the parable of the unmerciful servant). The *talantōn* was a Greek monetary unit of a varying, but very large, amount. Traditionally it was transliterated into English as "talent," which you will immediately recognize as quite problematic, since that word has changed meaning over time in English to connote "ability." The *dénarion*, on the other hand, was a Roman monetary unit of a modest amount, basically the daily wage of a day laborer. So what to do with these words? In the parable they are intentionally not precise amounts but are purposely hyperbolic contrasts (see ch. 8). The NIV, therefore, rightly translates "ten thousand talents" as "ten thousand bags of gold" and "a hundred denarii" as "a hundred silver coins," and then explains the words in a footnote.

On the other hand, when a precise amount is in view or the coin itself is being spoken about, most contemporary formal- and functional-equivalent translations have moved toward transliterating "*denarius*" but are still ambivalent about the "*talent.*"

We would argue that either equivalents or transliterations with marginal notes are a good procedure with most weights and measurements. However, the use of equivalents is surely to be preferred in passages like Isaiah 5:10 and the Matthew parable noted above. Note, for example, how much more meaningfully—though with some liberties as to precision—the GNB renders the purposeful contrasts in Isaiah 5:10 than does the NKJV (cf. NASB):

Isaiah 5:10

NKJV: "For ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and a homer of seed shall yield one ephah."

GNB: "The grapevines growing on five acres of land will yield only five gallons of wine. Ten bushels of seed will produce only one bushel of grain."

2. *Euphemisms.* Almost all languages have euphemisms for matters of sex and toilet. A translator has one of three choices in such matters: (1) translate literally but perhaps leave an English-speaking reader bewildered or guessing, (2) translate the *formal equivalent* but perhaps offend or shock the reader, or (3) translate with a *functionally equivalent euphemism.*

Option 3 is probably the best, if there is an appropriate euphemism. Otherwise it is better to go with option 2, especially for matters that generally no longer require euphemisms in English. Thus to have Rachel say, "I am having my monthly period" (Gen 31:35 GNB; cf. NIV) is to be preferred to the literal "the manner of women is upon me" (NASB, cf. KJV, RSV). For the same idiom earlier in Genesis (18:11) the GNB is consistent ("Sarah had stopped having her monthly periods"), while the NIV is much freer, having the public reading of Scripture in mind ("Sarah was past the age of childbearing"). Similarly, "[he] forced her, and lay with her" (2 Sam 13:14 KJV) becomes simply "he raped her" in the NIV and GNB.

There can be dangers in this, however, especially when translators themselves miss the meaning of the idiom, as can be seen in the original NIV, GNB, and LB renderings of the first assertion addressed in 1 Corinthians 7:1 "It is good for a man not to marry," which unfortunately is both wrong and misleading. The idiom "to touch a woman" in every other case in antiquity means to have sexual intercourse with a woman, and never means anything close to "to marry." Here the NAB has found an equivalent euphemism: "A man is better off having no relations with a woman"; but this has the possibility of being misunderstood or misconstrued to mean no relations whatsoever—including friendly ones. So the NIV has eliminated the euphemism altogether: " 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman,' " which it also correctly puts in quotes as something being put forward in Corinth, to which Paul will eventually answer with both a "yes" and "no," qualified by the circumstances.

3. *Vocabulary.* When most people think of translation, this is the area they usually have in mind. It seems like such a simple task: find the English word that means the same as the Hebrew or Greek word. But finding precisely the right word is what makes translation so difficult. Part of the difficulty is not only in the choosing of an appropriate English word but also in the choosing of a word that will not already be filled with connotations that are foreign to the original language.

The problem is further complicated by the fact that some Hebrew or Greek words have ranges of meaning different from anything available in English. In addition, some words can have several shades of meaning, as well as two or more considerably different meanings. And a deliberate play on words borders on being nearly impossible to translate from one language to another.

We have already noted how various translations have chosen to interpret "virgin" in 1 Corinthians 7:36. In chapter 1 we also noted the difficulty in rendering Paul's use of the word *sarx* ("flesh"). In most cases, almost anything is better than the literal "flesh." The NIV handles this word especially well: "sinful nature" when Paul is contrasting "flesh" and "spirit"; "human nature" in Romans 1:3 where it refers to Jesus' Davidic descent; "from a worldly point of view" in 2 Corinthians 5:16 noted above (cf. 1 Cor 1:26 "by human standards"); and "body" when it means that, as in Colossians 1:22.

This kind of example can be illustrated many times over and is one of the reasons why a translation by functional equivalence is much to be preferred to a more literal one, since the latter has the frequent possibility of misleading the English-speaking reader, and thus misses the reason for translation.

4. *Wordplays.* Wordplays tend to abound in most languages, but they are always unique to the original language and can seldom, if ever, be translated into a receptor language. The same is true with wordplays in the Bible, which abound in the poetry of the Old Testament and can be found throughout the New Testament as well. So what does the translator do?

Take, for example, the play on the sounds for the words "summer" and "end" in Amos 8:1–2, where even though the Hebrew consonants are *qyṣ* and *qṣ* respectively, the two words themselves were pronounced virtually alike in Amos's day. Translations that tend toward formal equivalence translate in a straightforward manner:

> NRSV: "[God] said, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A basket of summer [*qyṣ*] fruit.' Then the LORD said to me, 'The end [*qṣ*] has come upon my people Israel.'"

Translations that move toward functional equivalence try to work with the wordplay, even when doing so may alter the meaning somewhat:

> NIV: "'What do you see, Amos,' [God] asked. 'A basket of ripe [*qyṣ*] fruit,' I answered. Then the LORD said to me, 'The time is ripe [*qṣ*] for my people Israel.'"

An example of the same difficulty can be found in some instances of Paul's use of the word "flesh," noted above and in the previous chapter (p. 23). This happens especially in Galatians 3:3, where Paul says (NASB): "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" Lying behind this rhetoric is the issue of Gentile believers yielding to Jewish-Christian pressure to submit to circumcision (of the literal flesh!). But it is clear from the full argument of Galatians that Paul here means more than just circumcision when referring to "by the flesh." In Galatians 5 the "flesh" has to do with living in a self-centered, ungodly way as opposed to living "by the Spirit." So what does the functional-equivalent translator do in 3:3? The 1984 NIV renders it "by human effort" (cf. NLT) and the GNB "by your own power"; but in doing so they must lose the "Spirit/flesh" contrast that is picked up again later (4:28 and 5:13–26). Both ways of translating are "right," of course, in keeping with the respective theories of translation; but in both cases something is lost, simply because these particular wordplays are not available in English. And this is yet another reason why you should frequently use more than one translation, especially when "reading" borders on "studying."

5. *Grammar and Syntax.* Even though most Indo-European languages have a great many similarities, each language has its own preferred structures as to how words and ideas are related to each other in sentences. It is at these points especially where translation by functional equivalence is to be preferred. A formal-equivalent translation tends to abuse or override the ordinary structures of the receptor language by directly transferring into it the syntax and grammar of the original language. Such direct transfers are often *possible* in the receptor language, but they are seldom *preferable.* From hundreds of examples, we choose two as illustrations, one from Greek and one from Hebrew.

a. One of the characteristics of Greek is its fondness for what are known as genitive constructions. The genitive is the ordinary case of possession, as in "my book." Such a true possessive can also, but only very awkwardly, be rendered "the book of me." However, other possessives in English, such as "God's grace," do not so much mean, for example, that God owns the grace as that

he gives it, or that it comes from him. Such "non-true" possessives can always be translated into English as "the grace *of* God."

The Greek language has a great profusion of these latter kinds of genitives, which are used, for example, as descriptive adjectives to express source or to connote special relationships between two nouns. A "literal" translation almost invariably transfers these into English with an "*of*" phrase, but frequently with strange results, such as the "coals of fire" noted above, or "the word of His power" (Heb 1:3 NKJV). Both of these are clearly adjectival or descriptive genitives, which in the NIV are more accurately rendered "burning coals" and "his powerful word." Similarly the NASB's "steadfastness of hope" (1 Thess 1:3) and "joy of the Holy Spirit" (1:6) are translated in the NIV as "endurance inspired by hope" and "joy given by the Holy Spirit." These are not only to be preferred; they are, in fact, more accurate because they give a genuine English equivalent rather than a literal, Greek way of expressing things that in English would be nearly meaningless.

Interestingly enough, in one of the few places where the KJV (followed by the RSV but not the NASB) offered something of an equivalent (1 Cor 3:9), the translators missed the meaning of the genitive altogether. Apparently they were led astray by the word "fellow-workers" and thus translated, "For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building." But in Paul's sentence each occurrence of "God" is clearly a *possessive* genitive, with an emphasis on both *we* (Paul and Apollos) and *you* (the church as God's field and building) as belonging to him. This is correctly translated in the 2011 NIV as, "For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field, God's building." Paul's point is made even more clearly in the NAB, where they have rendered "field" as "cultivation."

But the still greater problem exists with the first of these Greek sentences, which is regularly rendered "God's co-workers." In almost anyone's understanding of English this would mean co-workers *with* God, as it has in fact been so often understood. But Paul's genitive is almost certainly intended as a "possessive," meaning "co-workers in God's service" as the 2011 NIV renders it, not working "alongside God," as the standard rendering seems to imply and is thus frequently misunderstood and misused

b. Thousands of times in the Old Testament the KJV translators woodenly followed the Hebrew word order in a way that does not

produce normal idiomatic English. One common example is how often verses (with each verse a paragraph!) begin with the word "and." For example, in Genesis 1 every verse, without exception, begins with "and"—a total of thirty times. Even the NKJV translators had difficulty with this idiom; nonetheless they still rendered the Hebrew "and" in almost every case (using "and," "then," "so," etc.). Now compare the NIV. It reduces the number of occurrences of "and" to fifteen, while at the same time improving the flow of the language so that it sounds more natural to the ear.

The NIV translators produced an improved English version by taking seriously the fact that the vast majority of prose sentences in Old Testament Hebrew begin with one of the two Hebrew forms for the word "and." The word for "and" appears even when there is absolutely nothing preceding it to which the sentence logically connects. In fact, six books of the Old Testament (Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel, Ezra, Ruth, and Esther) begin in Hebrew with the word "and," though these obviously do not follow any previous statement. Accordingly, it is now recognized by Hebrew grammarians that "and" at the beginning of a sentence is virtually the equivalent of the use of capitalization at the beginning of English sentences. This does not mean that the Hebrew "and" should *never* be translated by the English "and"; it simply means that "and" is only *sometimes,* and certainly not a majority of the time, the best rendering in English. A simple English sentence beginning with a capital letter will do nicely in most cases.

Another example is the KJV's repeated "and it came to pass," which is frequently retained in the NKJV, even though this is never used in normal English anymore. Indeed, it was rare even in the seventeenth century when the KJV was undertaken. Because the Hebrew narrative verb form that lies behind it was followed literally and woodenly, the resulting translation, "and it came to pass," occupied a prominent position in Old Testament style but nowhere else in English speech. We once heard a sermon on the concept that all things are temporary and shall eventually pass away (cf. 1 Cor 13:8–10) based on the frequency of the clause "and it came to pass," which the preacher misunderstood to mean, "And it came *in order to* pass away." In fact, the NIV translators (rightly) do not give expression to the Hebrew clause as such. Judiciously rendering Hebrew into English requires an equivalent *meaning,* not an equivalent word or clause pattern.

6. *Matters of Gender.* When this book first appeared in 1981, the problem of using masculine language where women are included or are in view was just beginning to become an issue for translators. By the time the second edition appeared in 1993, one revision (NRSV) of a well-established translation (RSV) had already appeared, which became deliberately inclusive in all such instances in both the Old and New Testaments. In the following decade all the other leading translations have followed suit to a greater or lesser degree, while at least one revision (ESV) came into existence to "stem this tide," as it were, so that in effect it is deliberately exclusive of women in many places where it is quite unnecessary to do so. Indeed, there can be no question that standard usage in both Great Britain and North America has now shifted strongly toward inclusiveness when both men and women are being addressed or are in view. Recent surveys show that a majority of people up to age seventy (!) will consider a statement like "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone" to refer only to men or boys, not to women or girls.

But this also presents some agonizing decisions on the part of translators. There is very little difficulty, for example, in translating Paul's vocative "brothers" as "brothers and sisters," since in almost all cases it is clear that women are also in view—and in any case some Christian traditions (Pentecostals, for example) have been using this inclusive vocative for several generations. But other cases are more problematic. Two examples will suffice.

In order to avoid excluding women from passages that are spoken to or about people in general, it has been deemed necessary by some to make certain clauses plural that are expressed in the singular (although this usually does not have significance in itself). Psalm 1:1 ("Blessed is the man" [RSV]) is an example, where many revisions of existing translations have moved to the plural in order to avoid unnecessarily excluding women from this psalm, since the generic use of "man" as a way of saying "person" has generally fallen out of current usage. To render this as "person" here would require the translator to follow up with either masculine pronouns (v. 2 "his delight") or with some kind of awkwardness ("his or her") that would distort the poetry.

Although there have been a variety of attempts to resolve this problem in contemporary English versions, the present NIV seems to have done so quite successfully, by recasting to "one" in verse 1, to "the person" in verse 3, and simply "the wicked" and "the righteous" for the concluding contrasts in verses 4–6. Here, functional equivalence rules, since the only item lost in the poem is the author's own move from speaking first in the singular and then the plural. What is lost in terms of actual meaning is usually relatively small in these sorts of cases. It should be noted that "pluralizing" is not usually particularly harmful, and the issue is more a matter of getting used to a shift in English grammar. In gnomic sayings that begin with "If anyone" or "Whoever" or "When someone," the standard English rule learned by the authors as schoolboys was that these must be followed by a singular pronoun, which of course was always masculine. But that was not everyone's rule, since it turns out that several well-known authors of nineteenth-century English novels frequently used a "singular" *them, their,* or *they* in such sentences. Again, this is now becoming standard English, at least in the print and spoken media, so that one can regularly hear, "If anyone ..., let them ..." For one of the authors of this book the issue was settled a couple years back, when a TV advertisement used "anyone ...,... they" in the sentence.

ON CHOOSING A TRANSLATION

We have been trying to help you choose a translation. We conclude with a few summary remarks about several translations.

First, it should be noted that we have not tried to be exhaustive. There are still other translations of the whole Bible that we have not included in our discussion, not to mention over eighty others of the New Testament alone that have appeared since the beginning of the twentieth century. Several of the latter were excellent (e.g., Weymouth, 1903; Helen Montgomery, 1924; Williams, 1937) but now tend to be quite outdated in their use of English.

Among the whole-Bible translations not discussed are some that are theologically biased, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses' New World Translation (1961). This is an extremely literal translation into which have been worked the heretical doctrines of this cult. Others of these translations are eccentric, such as that by George Lamsa (1940), who believed that a Syriac translation from around AD 400 held the keys to everything. One should probably also include here The Amplified Bible, which had a run of popularity far beyond its worth. It is far better to use several translations, note

where they differ, and then check out these differences in another source than to be led to believe that a word can mean one of several things in any given sentence, with the reader left to choose whatever best strikes his or her fancy.

Which translation, then, should one read? We would venture to suggest that the current NIV (2011), a committee translation by the best scholarship in the evangelical tradition is as good a translation as you can get. The GNB, HCSB and NAB are also especially good. One would do well to have some or all of these. The NAB is a committee translation by the best scholarship in the American Catholic tradition. The HCSB is a committee translation by evangelical scholars holding to the inerrancy of Scripture. The GNB is an outstanding translation by a single scholar, Robert G. Bratcher, who regularly consulted with others and whose expertise in linguistics has brought the concept of dynamic equivalence to translation in a thoroughgoing way.

Along with one or more of these, readers would also do well to use one or more of the following: the NASB or the NRSV. Both translations are attempts to update the KJV. The translators used superior original texts and thereby eliminated most of what in the KJV did not exist in the original languages. At the same time they tried to adhere as closely as possible to the *language* of the KJV, with some modernization. The NRSV is by far the better translation; the NASB is much more like the KJV and therefore far more literal—to the point of being wooden.

Along with one or more of these, we recommend you also consult either the REB or NJB—or both. Both of these are committee translations. The REB is the product of the best of British scholarship and therefore includes many British idioms not always familiar to North American readers. The NJB is an English translation from the French *Bible de Jerusalem*. Both of these translations tend to be freer at times than the others described here as functionally equivalent. But both of them also have some outstanding features and are well worth using in conjunction with the others.

In the following chapters we will follow the NIV 2011 unless otherwise noted. If you were regularly to read this translation, and then consult at least one from three other categories (NRSV/NASB; GNB/NAB; REB/NJB), you would be giving yourself the best possible start to an intelligent reading and study of the Bible.

CHAPTER 5

The Epistles: Learning to Think Contextually

We start our discussion of the various biblical genres by looking at the New Testament Epistles. Our reasons for doing this are twofold: First, along with the Gospels they are the most familiar portions of the Bible for most people, and second, for many readers they appear to be generally easy to interpret. After all, who needs special help to understand that "all have sinned" (Rom 3:23), that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23), and that "by grace you have been saved, through faith" (Eph 2:8), or the imperatives "walk by the Spirit" (Gal 5:16) and "walk in the way of love" (Eph 5:2)?

On the other hand, the "ease" of interpreting Epistles can be quite deceptive. This is especially so at the level of hermeneutics. One might try leading a group of Christians through 1 Corinthians, for example, and see how many are the difficulties. "How is Paul's opinion about 'virgins' at the beginning of his long discussion of 'the married' and 'the not yet, or unmarried' in 1 Corinthians (7:25–40) to be taken as God's Word?" some will ask, especially when they personally dislike some of the implications of this opinion. And the questions continue. How does the excommunication of the brother earlier in the letter (ch. 5) relate to the contemporary church, especially when he can simply go down the street to another church? What is the point of the corrections of the abuses of Spirit-gifting (chs. 12–14), if one is in a local church where the gifts of the Spirit mentioned here are not accepted as valid for the twenty-first century? How do we get around the implication that women should wear a head covering when pray-

ing and prophesying (11:2–16)—or the clear implication that they do in fact pray and prophesy in the community gathered to worship?

It becomes clear that Epistles are *not* as easy to interpret as is often thought. Thus, because of their importance to the Christian faith and because so many of the important hermeneutical issues are raised here, we are going to let them serve as models for the exegetical and hermeneutical questions we want to raise throughout the book.

THE NATURE OF THE EPISTLES

Before we look specifically at 1 Corinthians as a model for exegeting Epistles, some general words are in order about the whole collection of Epistles (all the New Testament except the four gospels, Acts, and Revelation).

First, it is necessary to note that the Epistles themselves are not a homogeneous lot. Many years ago Adolf Deissmann, on the basis of the vast papyrus discoveries, made a distinction between letters and epistles. The former, the "real letters," as he called them, were nonliterary, that is, they were not written for the public and posterity but were intended only for the person or persons to whom they were addressed. In contrast to the letter, the epistle was an artistic literary form or a species of literature that was intended for the public. Deissmann himself considered all the Pauline Epistles as well as 2 and 3 John to be "real letters." Although some other scholars have cautioned that one should not reduce all the letters of the New Testament to one or the other of these categories—in some instances it seems to be a question of more or less—the distinction is nevertheless a valid one. Romans and Philemon differ from one another not only in content but also to the degree that one is far more personal than the other. And in contrast to any of Paul's letters, 2 Peter and 1 John are far more like epistles.

The validity of this distinction may be seen by noting the *form* of ancient letters. Just as there is a standard form to our letters (date, salutation, body, closing, and signature), so there was for theirs. Thousands of ancient letters have been found, and most of them have a form exactly like those in the New Testament (cf. the letter of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:23–29). The form consists of six parts:

1. name of the writer (e.g., Paul)
2. name of the recipient (e.g., to the church of God in Corinth)
3. greeting (e.g., Grace to you and peace from God our Father ...)
4. prayer wish or thanksgiving (e.g., I always thank God for you ...)
5. body
6. final greeting and farewell (e.g., The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.)

The one variable element in this form is number 4, which in most of the ancient letters either takes the form of a prayer wish (almost exactly like 3 John 2), or else is missing altogether (as in Galatians, 1 Timothy, Titus), although at times one finds a thanksgiving and prayer (as often in Paul's letters). In three of the New Testament Epistles this thanksgiving turns into a doxology (2 Corinthians, Ephesians, 1 Peter; cf. Rev 1:5–6).

It will be noted that New Testament Epistles that lack either formal elements 1–3 or 6 are those that fail to be true letters, although they are partially epistolary in form. Hebrews, for example, which has been described as three parts tract and one part letter, was indeed sent to a specific group of people, as two passages (10:32–34 and 13:1–25) make clear. Note especially the letter form at the end (13:22–25). Yet the first ten chapters are little like a letter; indeed, they are in fact an eloquent homily in which the argument as to Christ's total superiority to all that has preceded is interspersed with urgent words of exhortation that the readers hold fast to their faith in Christ (2:1–4; 3:7–19; 5:11–6:20; 10:19–25). In fact, at the end, the author himself calls it his "word of exhortation" (13:22).

The apostle John's first letter is similar in some ways, except that it has *none* of the formal elements of a letter. Nonetheless, it was clearly written for a specific group of people (e.g., 2:7, 12–14, 19, 26) and looks very much like the body of a letter with all the formal elements shorn off. In any case this suggests that it is not simply a theological treatise for the church at large.

James and 2 Peter, on the other hand, are both addressed as letters, but they lack the familiar final greeting and farewell, not to mention lacking specific addressees, as well as any personal notations by the writers. These are the closest writings in the New

Testament to "epistles" (that is, tracts for the whole church), although 2 Peter seems to have been called forth by some who were denying Christ's second coming (3:1–7). James, on the other hand, so completely lacks an overall argument that it looks more like a collection of "sermon notes" on a variety of ethical topics than a letter.

Despite this variety of kinds, however, there is one item that all of the Epistles have in common, and this is *the* crucial item to note in reading and interpreting them: They are all what are technically called *occasional documents* (i.e., arising out of and intended for a specific occasion), and they are *all* from the *first century*. Although inspired by the Holy Spirit and thus belonging to all time, they were first written out of the context of the author to the context of the original recipients. It is precisely these factors—that they are occasional and that they belong to the first century—that make their interpretation difficult at times.

Above all else, their *occasional* nature must be taken seriously. This means that they were occasioned, or called forth, by some specific circumstance, either from the reader's side or the author's. Almost all of the New Testament letters were occasioned from the reader's side (Philemon and probably James and Romans appear to be exceptions). Usually the occasion was some kind of behavior that needed correcting, or a doctrinal error that needed setting right, or a misunderstanding that needed further light.

Most of our problems in interpreting the Epistles are due to this fact of their being occasional. We have the answers, but we do not always know what the questions or problems were—or even if there was a problem. It is much like hearing one end of a telephone conversation and trying to figure out who is on the other end and what that unseen party is saying (an experience from life for one of the authors; when informed, everything made "perfectly good sense"!). Yet in many cases it is especially important for us to try to hear "the other end" so that we know to what our passage is a response.

One further point here: The occasional nature of the Epistles also means that they are *not* first of all theological treatises, nor are they summaries of Paul's or Peter's theology. There is theology implied, but it is always "task theology"—theology being written for or brought to bear on the task at hand. This is true even of Romans, which is a fuller and more systematic statement of Paul's

theology than one finds elsewhere. But it is only *some* of his theology; in this case it is theology born out of his own special task as apostle to the Gentiles. It is his special struggle for Jew and Gentile to become one people of God, based on grace alone and apart from the law, that causes the discussion to take the special form it does in Romans and that causes "justification" to be used there as the primary metaphor for salvation. After all, the word "justify," which predominates in Romans (fifteen times) and Galatians (eight times), occurs only two other times in all of Paul's other letters (1 Cor 6:11; Titus 3:7).

Thus one will go to the Epistles again and again for Christian theology; they are loaded with it. But one must always keep in mind that they were not primarily written to expound Christian theology. It is always theology applied to or directed toward a particular need. We will note the implications of this for hermeneutics in our next chapter.

Given these important preliminaries, how then does one go about the exegesis, or an informed exegetical reading, of an epistle? From here on, we will proceed with a case study of 1 Corinthians. We are well aware that not every epistle will be like this one, but nearly all the questions one needs to ask of any epistle are raised here.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The first thing one must try to do with any of the Epistles is to form a tentative but informed reconstruction of the situation to which the author is speaking. What was going on in Corinth that caused Paul to write 1 Corinthians? How does he come to learn of their situation? What kind of relationship and former contacts has he had with them? What attitudes do they and he reflect in this letter? These are the kinds of questions to which you want answers. So what do you do?

First, you need to consult your Bible dictionary or the introduction to your commentary to find out as much as possible about Corinth and its people. Among other important things, you should note that by ancient standards it was a relatively young city—only ninety-four years old when Paul first visited it. Yet because of its strategic location for commerce, it was cosmopolitan, wealthy, a patron of the arts, religious (at least twenty-six

temples and shrines), and well-known for its sensuality. With a little reading and imagination one can see that it was a bit of New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas, all wrapped up in one place. Therefore, it will hardly be a letter to the community church in Rural Corners, USA. All of this will need to be kept in mind as you read in order to note how it will affect your understanding on nearly every page.

Second, and now especially for study purposes, you need to develop the habit of reading the whole letter through in one sitting, and preferably aloud, so that mouth and ear join the eye. You may well be surprised by how much more you retain when you learn to read this way. You will need to block out an hour or more to do this, but nothing can ever substitute for reading the whole letter through at one time. It is the way one reads every other letter. A letter in the Bible should be no different. There are some things you should be looking for as you read, but you are not, at this point, trying to grasp the meaning of every word or sentence. It is the big view that counts first.

We cannot stress enough the importance of reading and rereading. Once you have divided the letter into its logical parts or sections, you will want to begin the study of every section precisely the same way. Read and reread; and keep your eyes open! And again, learn to read aloud whenever you can—to hear as well as see the Word of God.

As you read through the whole letter, you may find it helpful to jot down a few *very brief* notes with references if you have a hard time making mental notes. What things should you note as you read for the big picture? Remember, the purpose here is first of all to reconstruct the problem. Thus we suggest four kinds of notes:

1. what you notice about the recipients themselves (e.g., whether Jew or Greek, whether wealthy or slave; their problems, attitudes, etc.)
2. Paul's attitudes
3. any specific things mentioned as to the specific occasion of the letter
4. the letter's natural, logical divisions

If all of this is too much for one sitting and causes you to lose the value of reading it through, then read first and afterwards quickly go back through the letter with a skim reading to pick up

these items. Here are the kinds of things you may have noticed, grouped according to the four suggested categories:

1. The Corinthian believers are chiefly Gentiles, although there are also some Jews (see 6:9–11; 8:10; 12:2, 13). They obviously love wisdom and knowledge (1:18–2:5; 4:10; 8:1–13; hence the irony in 6:5); they are proud and arrogant (4:18; 5:2, 6) even to the point of judging Paul (4:1–5; 9:1–18), yet they have a large number of internal problems.

2. Paul's response to all of this fluctuates between rebuke (4:8–21; 5:2; 6:1–8), appeal (4:14–17; 16:10–11), and exhortation (6:18–20; 16:12–14).

3. Concerning the occasion of the letter, you may have noted that early on (1:10–12) Paul says he has been *informed* by people from Chloe's household; the beginning of the next major section (5:1) also refers to reported information. About a third of the way through he says, "Now for the matters you wrote about" (7:1), which means he has also received a letter from the church. Did you also notice the repetition of "now about" in what follows (7:25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; and 16:12)? Probably these all refer to items from their letter that he is taking up one at a time. One further observation: Did you notice the "arrival" of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus at the end (16:17)? Since Stephanas is to be "submitted to" (v. 16), it is certain that these men (or Stephanas, at least) are leaders in the church. Probably they brought the letter to Paul as a kind of official delegation.

If you did not catch all of these things, do not give up. We have gone over this material a lot of times, and it is all familiar turf. The important step is to learn to read with your eyes open to picking up these kinds of clues.

4. We come now to the important matter of having a working outline of the letter. This is especially important for 1 Corinthians because it is easier to study or read the letter in convenient "packages." Not all of Paul's letters are made up of so many separate items, but such a working outline is nonetheless always useful.

The place to begin is with the obvious major divisions. In this case, the beginning of chapter 7 is the big clue. Since here Paul first mentions their letter to him, and since earlier on (1:10–12 and 5:1) he mentions items reported to him, we may initially assume that the matters that have preceded (chs. 1–6) are all responses to what has been reported to him. Introductory phrases and subject

matter are the clues to all other divisions in the letter. There are four in the first six chapters:

- the problem of division in the church (1:10–4:21)
- the problem of the incestuous man (5:1–13)
- the problem of lawsuits among believers (6:1–11)
- the problem of sexual immorality (6:12–20)

We have already noted the clues to dividing most of chapters 7–16 on the basis of the introductory formula "now about." The items not introduced by this formula are three: 11:2–16; 11:17–34; and 15:1–58. Probably the items in chapter 11 (at least 11:17–34) were also reported to him but are included here because everything from chapters 8 to 14 deals with worship in some way or another. It is difficult to know whether chapter 15 is a response to the report or to the letter. The phrase "how can some of you say" in verse 12 does not help much because Paul could be quoting either a report or their letter. In any case the rest of Paul's letter can easily be outlined:

- about behavior within marriage (7:1–24)
- about virgins (7:25–40)
- about food sacrificed to idols (8:1–11:1)
- the covering of women's heads in worship (11:2–16)
- an abuse of the Lord's Supper (11:17–34)
- about spiritual gifts (12–14)
- the bodily resurrection of believers (15:1–58)
- about the collection (16:1–11)
- about the return of Apollos (16:12)
- concluding exhortations and greetings (16:13–24)

It may be that by following the headings in the NIV you divided chapters 1–4, 8–10, and 12–14 into smaller groupings. But do you also see that these are complete units? For example, note how thoroughly chapter 13 belongs to the whole argument of chapters 12 to 14 by the mention of specific giftings of the Spirit (vv. 1–2 and 8).

Before we go on, you should note carefully two things. (1) The only other place in Paul's letters where he takes up a succession of independent items like this is his first letter to the Thessalonians (chs. 4–5). For the most part, the other letters basically form one long argument—although sometimes the argument has several

distinct parts to it. (2) This is only a tentative outline. We know what occasioned the letter only at the surface—a report and a letter. But what we really want to know is *the precise nature of each of the problems in Corinth* that called forth each specific response from Paul. For our purposes here, therefore, we will spend the rest of our time zeroing in on only the first item—the problem of division within the church (chs. 1–4).

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF 1 CORINTHIANS 1–4

As you approach each of the smaller sections of the letter, you will need to repeat much of what we have just done. If we were giving you an assignment for each lesson, it would look like this: (1) Read 1 Corinthians 1–4 through at least two times (preferably in two different translations). Again, you are reading to get the big picture, to get a "feel" for the whole argument. After you have read it through the second time (or even the third or fourth if you want to read it in each of your translations), go back and (2) list in a notebook everything you can find that tells you something about the recipients and their problem. Try to be thorough here and list everything, even if after a closer look you want to go back and scratch off some items as not entirely relevant. (3) Then make another list of key words and repeated phrases that indicate the subject matter of Paul's answer.

One of the reasons for choosing this section as a model is not only because it is so crucial to much of 1 Corinthians but also, frankly, because it is a difficult one. If you have read the whole section with care and with an eye for the problem, you may have noted—or even been frustrated by—the fact that, although Paul begins by specifically spelling out the problem (1:10–12), the beginning of his answer (1:18–3:4) does not seem to speak to the problem at all. In fact, one may initially think these opening sections to be a digression, except that Paul does not argue as a man off on a tangent. Moreover, in the conclusion (3:18–23) "wisdom" and "foolishness" (key ideas in 1:18–3:4) are joined with "boasting about human leaders" and references to Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. The crucial matter for discovering the issue at hand, then, is to see how all this may fit together.

The place to begin is by making note of what Paul specifically says. At the outset (1:10–12) he says they are divided in the name

of their leaders (cf. 3:4–9; 3:21–22; 4:6). But did you also notice that the division is not merely a matter of differences of opinion among them? They are in fact quarreling (1:12; 3:3) and "puffed up in being a follower of one of us *over against* the other" (4:6, emphasis added; cf. 3:21).

All of this seems clear enough. But a careful reading with an eye for the problem should cause two other things to surface.

1. There appears to be some bad blood between the church and Paul himself. This becomes especially clear at the beginning and end of our chapter 4 (vv.1–5 and 18–21). With that in mind, one may legitimately see the quarreling and division to be not simply a matter of some of them *preferring* Apollos to Paul but of their actually being *opposed to* Paul.

2. One of the key words in this section is "wisdom" or "wise" (twenty-six times in chs. 1–3, and only eighteen more times in all of Paul's letters!). In this case it is also clear that this is more often a pejorative term than a favorable one. God is out to set aside the wisdom of this world (1:18–22, 27–28; 3:18–20), having done so in three ways: by the cross (1:18–25), by his choice of the Corinthian believers (1:26–31), and by the weakness of Paul's preaching (2:1–5). Christ, through the cross, has "become for us wisdom from God" (1:30), and *this* wisdom is revealed *by* the Spirit to those who *have* the Spirit (2:10–16). The use of "wisdom" in this way in Paul's argument makes it almost certain that this, too, is a part of the problem of division. But how? At the least, we can suspect that they are carrying on their division over leaders and their opposition to Paul in the name of wisdom, whatever form that may have taken for them.

Anything we say beyond this will lie in the area of speculation, or educated guessing. Since the term "wisdom" is a semitechnical one for philosophy as well, and since itinerant philosophers of all kinds abounded in the Greek world of Paul's time, we suggest that the Corinthian believers were beginning to think of their new Christian faith as a new "divine wisdom," which in turn caused them to evaluate their leaders in merely human terms as they might any of the itinerant philosophers. But note, as helpful as this "guess" may be, it goes beyond what can be said for certain according to what Paul actually describes here.

On the basis of his response here, three important items can be said with the highest level of certainty: (1) On the basis of 3:5–23 it is clear that the Corinthians have seriously misunderstood the nature and function of leadership in the church. (2) Similarly, on the basis of what precedes (1:18–3:4) they seem also to have misunderstood the basic nature of the gospel. (3) It is clear at the end (4:1–21) that they also are wrong in their judgments on Paul and need to reevaluate their relationship to him. You will notice that with this we have also begun to move to an analysis of Paul's answer.

THE LITERARY CONTEXT

The next step in studying the letter is to learn to trace Paul's argument as an answer to the problem of division tentatively set out above. You will recall from chapter 1 that this, too, is something you can do without initial dependence on scholars.

If we were to give you an assignment for this part of the lesson, it would look like this: Trace the argument of 1 Corinthians 1:10–4:21, paragraph by paragraph, and in a sentence or two explain the point of each paragraph for the argument as a whole—or explain how it functions as a part of Paul's response to the problem of division.

We simply cannot stress enough the importance of learning to THINK PARAGRAPHS, and not just as natural units of thought but as the absolutely necessary key to understanding the argument in the various epistles. You will recall that the one question you need to learn to ask over and again is *what's the point?* Therefore, you want to be able to do two things: (1) In a compact way state the *content* of each paragraph. *What* does Paul say in this paragraph? (2) In another sentence or two try to explain *why* you think Paul says this right at this point. How does this content contribute to the argument?

Since we cannot do this here for all of this passage, let us go into some detail with the three crucial paragraphs in the second part of Paul's answer: 3:5–17. Up to this point Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, has responded to inadequate understanding of the gospel by pointing out that the heart of the gospel—a crucified Messiah—stands in contradiction to human wisdom (1:18–25), as does God's choice of those who make up the new people of God (1:26–31)—as though Paul had said to them, "So you think the gospel is a new kind of wisdom, do you? How can

this be so? Who in the name of wisdom would have chosen *you* to become the new people of God?" Paul's own preaching also serves as an illustration of the divine contradiction (2:1–5). Now all of this is indeed wisdom, Paul goes on to assure them (2:6–16), but it is wisdom revealed by the Spirit to God's new people—those who have the Spirit. Since the Corinthians *do* have the Spirit, he continues now by way of transition, they should stop acting like those who do *not* (3:1–4). That they are still acting "like mere human beings" is evidenced by their quarreling over Paul and Apollos.

How, then, do the next three paragraphs function in this argument? First, note how the content of the first paragraph (vv. 5–9) deals with the nature and function of the leaders over whom they are quarreling. Paul emphasizes that they are merely servants, not lords, as the Corinthian slogans seem to be making them. Next (vv. 6–9), by means of an analogy from agriculture, he makes two points about his and Apollos's servant status, both of which are crucial to the Corinthian misunderstanding: (1) Both he and Apollos are one in a common cause, even though their tasks differ and each will receive his own "pay." (2) Everything and everyone belongs to God—the church, the servants, the growth.

Notice how crucial these two points are to the problem. They are dividing the church on the basis of its leaders. But these leaders are not *lords* to whom one belongs. They are servants who, even though they have differing ministries, are one in the same cause. And these servants belong to God, just as the Corinthians themselves do.

The following paragraph (3:10–15) has especially been wrongly interpreted because of the failure to think in paragraphs. Note two things: (1) At the end of the preceding paragraph (v. 9) Paul shifts the metaphor from agriculture to architecture, which will be the metaphor used from here on. (2) The particulars in both metaphors are the same (Paul plants/lays the foundation; Apollos waters/builds on the foundation; the Corinthian church is the field/building; God owns the field/building). However, the *point* of each paragraph differs. The point now is clearly expressed at the beginning (v. 10), "But each one should build with care." And it is also clear from Paul's elaboration of the metaphor that one can build well or poorly, with differing final results. Note that what is being built throughout is the church; there is not even a

hint that Paul is referring to how each individual Christian builds his or her life on Christ, which, in fact, is totally irrelevant to the argument. What Paul does here is to turn the argument slightly, to warn those who lead the church that they must do so with great care because a day of testing is coming. Building the church with human wisdom or eloquent speech that circumvents the cross is building with wood, hay, and straw.

The question that begins the following paragraph (3:16–17) has also frequently been misapplied, partly because many are well aware that a little later (6:19) Paul calls the Christian's body "the temple of the Holy Spirit." Thus the direct confrontation in 3:5–17, too, has been individualized to refer to one's abuse of the body or to the neglect of one's spiritual life. Elsewhere, however, Paul uses the temple metaphor in a collective sense to refer to the church as God's temple (2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19–22). This is surely his intention here, which the NIV tries to bring out by rendering it "you yourselves are God's temple."

What, then, is Paul's point in this context? The Corinthian church was to be *God's* temple in Corinth—over against all the other temples in the city. To put it in our words, they were God's people in Corinth, his alternative to the Corinthian lifestyle. What made them God's temple was the presence of the Spirit in their midst. But by their divisions they were destroying God's temple. Those responsible for so destroying the church, Paul says, will themselves be destroyed by God, because the church in Corinth was precious (i.e., sacred) to him.

Paul's argument has now come full circle. He began by exposing the Corinthians' inadequate understanding of the gospel, a gospel that is in no way based on human wisdom but in every way stands as the contradiction to it. Then he turns to expose their inadequate understanding of leadership in the church and at the same time warns both the leaders and the church itself of God's judgment on those who promote division. At the end of the chapter (3:18–23) he brings these two themes together in a concluding statement. Human wisdom is folly; therefore, "no more boasting about human leaders!"

Notice as we summarize this analysis: (1) the exegesis is self-contained; that is, we have not once had to go outside the text to understand what Paul is getting at; (2) there is nothing in the paragraph that does not fit into the argument; and (3) all of this makes

perfectly good sense of everything. This, then, is what exegesis is all about. This was God's word *to them.* You may have further questions about specific points of content, for which you can consult your commentary. *But all of what we have done here, you can do.* It may take practice—in some cases even some hard work of thinking—but you can do it, and the rewards are great.

ONE MORE TIME

Before we conclude this chapter, let us go through the process of exegesis one more time for practice, and this time in a somewhat easier passage in a later letter, but one that also deals with internal tensions in the church, namely, Philippians 1:27–2:18.

Read Philippians 1:12–2:18 several times. Note that Paul's argument to this point has gone something like this: *The occasion* is that Paul is in prison (1:13, 17) and the Philippian church has sent him a gift through a member named Epaphroditus (see 2:25, 30; 4:14–18). Apparently Epaphroditus contracted an illness that ordinarily ended in death, and the church had heard of it and was saddened (2:26). But God spared him, so now Paul is sending him back (2:25–30) with this letter in order to (1) tell them how things are with him (1:12–26), (2) thank them for their gift (4:10, 14–19), and (3) exhort them on a couple of matters: to live in harmony (1:27–2:18; 4:2–3) and to avoid the Judaizing heresy (3:1–4:1).

Paul has just completed the section (1:12–26) where he has told them how he is getting along in his imprisonment. The new section (1:27–2:18), where our interest lies, is the first part of the exhortation. Notice, for example, how he is no longer talking about himself, as before (vv. 12–26). Did you notice the clear shift from I/me/my to you/your at the beginning of the next paragraph (verse 27)?

What, then, is the point of each paragraph in this section?

The first paragraph, 1:27–30, begins the exhortation. The point seems to be what we read at the outset, that they should "stand firm in the one Spirit." This is (1) an exhortation to unity, especially because (2) in Philippi they are facing opposition. (Note: If we decide that v. 27 is really the point of the paragraph, then we have to ask, what is the point of vv. 28–30 and the emphasis on opposition and suffering? Notice how he tried to answer this.)

How then does what follows (2:1–4) relate to unity? First, Paul repeats the exhortation (vv. 1–2, which now makes us sure we were right about the first paragraph). But the point now is that humility is the proper attitude for the believers to have unity.

Now you try it with the next paragraph (2:5–11). What is the point? Why this appeal to the humiliation and exaltation of Christ Jesus? Your answer does not have to be in our words but surely should include the following: Jesus in his incarnation and death is the supreme example of the humility Paul wants them to have. (You will notice that when you ask the questions this way, the point of the paragraph is *not* to teach us something new about Christ. Rather, Paul is appealing to these great truths about Christ to get the Philippians to *have the same mind-set Christ had,* not simply to *know about him.*)

Go on to the next paragraph (vv. 12–13). Now what is the point? Notice how "therefore" clearly signals that this is the conclusion. Given Christ's example, they are now to obey Paul; but, in what? Surely it is in having unity, which also requires humility.

Finally, ask yourself how what follows (vv. 14–18) fits into this argument, and how it relates to the problem as noted above: disharmony in the church while they are facing opposition in Philippi.

At the end, you might note, from the way Paul deals here with the problem of disunity, that the similar problem in Corinth was surely of a much more serious and complex nature. This should further help to confirm our reconstruction of the problem there.

THE PROBLEM PASSAGES

We have purposely led you through two passages where we are convinced you could have done most of this kind of exegesis on your own, given that you have learned to think in paragraphs and to ask the right historical and contextual questions. But we are well aware that there are all those other texts—the kinds of texts the authors are repeatedly asked about: the meaning of "because of the angels" in 1 Corinthians 11:10, or "baptized for the dead" in 1 Corinthians 15:29, or Christ's preaching to the "imprisoned spirits" in 1 Peter 3:19, or "the man of lawlessness" in 2 Thessalonians 2:3. In short, how do we go about finding the meaning of the problem passages?

Here are some guidelines:

1. In many cases the reason the problem passages are so difficult for us is that, frankly, they were not written to us. That is, the original author and his readers are on a similar wavelength that allows the inspired author to assume a great deal on the part of his readers. Thus, for example, when Paul tells the Thessalonians that they are to recall that he "used to tell [them] these things," and therefore "you know what is holding him back" (2 Thess 2:5–6), we may need to learn to be content with our lack of knowledge. What he had told them orally they could now fit into what he was saying by letter. Our lack of the oral communication makes the written one especially difficult. But we take it as a truism: What God wants us to know has been communicated to us; what God has not told us may still hold our interest, but our uncertainty at these points should make us hesitant about being dogmatic.

2. Despite some uncertainty as to some of the precise details, one needs to learn to ask what can be said for certain about a given passage and what is merely possible but not certain. Look, for an example, at the puzzling words in the rhetorical question that begins a new phase of Paul's argument with the Corinthian believers regarding the *bodily* resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:29). What can be said for certain? Some of the Corinthians really were being "baptized for the dead," whether we like to admit it or not. Moreover, Paul neither condemns nor condones their practice; he simply refers to it—for a totally different reason from the actual practice itself. But we do not know and probably never will know *who* was doing it, *for whom* they were doing it, and *why* they were doing it. The details and the meaning of the practice, therefore, are probably forever lost to us.

3. Nonetheless, as we have suggested before, even if one cannot have full certainty about some of the details, very often the point of the whole passage is still within one's grasp. Whatever it was the Corinthians were doing in baptizing for the dead, we do know why Paul referred to this practice of theirs. Their own action was a kind of "proof from experience" that they were not consistent in their rejecting a future *bodily* resurrection of believers.

4. On such passages as this one you will need to consult a good commentary. As we point out in the appendix, it is the handling of just such a passage that separates the better commentaries from all the others. The good ones will list and at least briefly discuss the various options that have been suggested as solutions, including the reasons for and against. You may not always go along with the individual commentator's choices, but you do need to be informed about the variety of options—and the better commentaries will do this for you.

Finally, we suggest that even scholars do not have all the answers. You can more or less count on it that, where there are four to fourteen viable options as to what a given passage meant, even the scholars are guessing! Texts like 1 Corinthians 15:29 (on which there are at least forty different guesses) should serve to give us proper humility.

What we have done in this chapter is only half the task. It is the essential first half, but now we want to go on to ask how these various texts apply to *us*. We have learned to hear God's word to *them*. What about his word to *us*? This is the concern of the next chapter.