

More on interpreting the Bible

Written by Calvin Fox

Thursday, 15 January 2009 16:36 -

I continue to find the subject of the “Word of God” fascinating. What is it? I have written often about this. The Scripture selections in my morning reading today once again caused me ponder it. I absolutely believe the canonical Scripture (the traditional 66 Books of the Bible to be the Word of God. It is the Word of God written and the first and last authority for our Faith. The questions I have are about interpretation- how we read and understand this written Word. I visited the website of a purportedly evangelical para-church organization I heard about this week. I wanted to read their doctrinal statement. The website said they would not be so presumptuous as to write a Statement of Faith, rather they said they believe the entire Bible. Whatever it teaches is what they believe. Does this sound humble, as well as orthodox? Well, maybe; but in fact this is either naïve or ignorant and it is almost meaningless. What does the Bible teach? Every Christian, every church and Denomination and Christian organizations of every stripe claim to follow what the Bible teaches. And many of them strongly disagree with each other about what that is! Anyone reading their website does not know what this para-church group believes- it probably means whatever its leaders believe. But they are not saying what that might be on the website.

To know what the Bible does teach, we must first settle on the rules of interpretation we will use when we read the Book. I notice the group in question had a speaker recently who addressed the group about Creation, using Genesis 1-2. What he said on the topic was determined by whatever interpretive rules he uses for those chapters. Does he use the Framework Hypothesis about the “days” of creation or does he interpret them literally as six 24 hour days. It makes a great difference. How do we read this morning’s Old Testament passage?

Isaiah 41:21-29

21 Set forth your case, says the LORD; bring your proofs, says the King of Jacob. 22 Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, so that we may consider them, and that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the things to come. 23 Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be afraid and terrified. 24 You, indeed, are nothing and your work is nothing at all; whoever chooses you is an abomination. 25 I stirred up one from the north, and he has come, from the rising of the sun he was summoned by name. He shall trample on rulers as on mortar, as the potter treads clay. 26 Who declared it from the beginning, so that we might know, and beforehand, so that we might say, "He is right"? There was no one who declared it, none who proclaimed, none who heard your words. 27 I first have declared it to Zion, and I give to Jerusalem a herald of good tidings. 28 But when I look there is no one; among these there is no counselor who, when I ask, gives an answer. 29 No, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their images are empty wind.

This text claims to be the very words spoken by God to Israel and written down by Isaiah the prophet. The passage is obviously meant to be taken literally. In fact, that is part of its message. God proves He is the true God by His ability to predict and cause specific future

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events. What He says through the Prophet is trustworthy. He challenges idols to do the same. Their inability to do exactly that proves they are not the true God. This text, indeed, is the Word of the Lord. But how about the Psalm this morning?

This text does not claim to be from God at all. Rather, it is a testimony, an account written by the Psalmist about God. And what He says is written in a very figurative manner and could not possibly be taken literally. It must be interpreted as metaphorical, like poetry. Could the text from Isaiah be interpreted this way? No. Could the first chapters of Genesis be interpreted that way? Maybe. How do we decide? In either case, we accept both passages, however they are interpreted, to be the Word of God written. This means that when we say that all Scripture is inspired by God and inerrant we must clarify how in each case. My point here is that the Word of God comes in various literary forms and can not all be read in the same way.

Psalm 18

6 I called upon the LORD in my distress and cried out to my God for help. 7 He heard my voice from his heavenly dwelling; my cry of anguish came to his ears. 8 The earth reeled and rocked; the roots of the mountains shook; they reeled because of his anger. 9 Smoke rose from his nostrils and a consuming fire out of his mouth; hot burning coals blazed forth from him. 10 He parted the heavens and came down with a storm cloud under his feet. 11 He mounted on cherubim and flew; he swooped on the wings of the wind. 12 He wrapped darkness about him; he made dark waters and thick clouds his pavilion. 13 From the brightness of his presence, through the clouds, burst hailstones and coals of fire. 14 The LORD thundered out of heaven; the Most High uttered his voice. 15 He loosed his arrows and scattered them; he hurled thunderbolts and routed them. 16 The beds of the seas were uncovered, and the foundations of the world laid bare, at your battle cry, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. 17 He reached down from on high and grasped me; he drew me out of great waters. 18 He delivered me from my strong enemies