

HOW DO YOU READ?

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I would like to help you. One way of doing that is to make suggestions, which, if you accept them, would lead you to an alertness, an awareness which you may not have had previously. I am quite sure that our awareness can be very much enhanced. It often depends on how we look, the expectation we have, and this in turn depends upon our understanding. Often a very triple point can be of great help. Once it is made clear, it becomes very obvious and we then experience the joy of discovery. People who read the Bible seriously and try to understand it will welcome help which enables them to benefit more and more from the time they spend with it. So we start with the simple question: 'How do you read?'

It is both important and interesting to ask it. The word 'how' suggests different kinds of further question. What are your intentions, motives, attitudes as you pick up the book and read? We shall be concerned in particular to ask a further question: Do you understand what you are reading? That may seem strange. After all, one does not read what one does not understand, does one? At least, one likes to think that the time spent in reading produces results, that at the end and with application, consistency and patience, one attains an understanding that one did not have when one started. That is certainly true of what we call our 'serious reading.' But let us hope when we read. Let us always hope when read that we shall come to understand what we did not understand before.

You will by now have remembered stories in the New Testament with ask the same questions which we have raised. Philip the Evangelist encountered the Ethiopian courtier, and he (the courtier) was reading. Philip asked him the question, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' The courtier was interested in what he was reading, even interested enough to persist, but his reply to the question indicated that he had not understood. He wanted a clue. He knew he was reading something important, but did not know what it was. There was a gap to be closed between his reading and his understanding. It was when Philip explained to him the meaning that he had himself come to understand, that the uncomprehending reader came to an enlightenment. The meaning consisted in interpreting the passage the courtier was reading in the light of the event of Jesus Christ,

Then there was the question which Jesus asked of the inquiring lawyer, 'How do you read?' (*Luke 10:26*). The lawyer, in reply, quoted the appropriate passage, but he needed further instruction and illumination before he understood. In both of these cases there was appropriate action once understanding had come about. But that was not automatic or inevitable. One could read the words and neither understand nor act appropriately.

So there may be a gap to be bridged between reading and understanding. There is a particular danger with the reading of the Bible. A familiarity with the words gives us the feeling that we understand when we are simply used to the sound, the ring of the language, or the line of the story. We may be pleased with the sound, familiar with the story, but may not be able to explain what we hear. Of course Christians often read their Bibles to gain strength and encouragement, and not primarily as a doctrinal, let alone an intellectual exercise. But even devotional reading is possible only if we understand what we are reading. The reading may sometimes produce in us an emotional state, or suggest interesting ideas, or supply us with interesting information. But primarily, the Bible is the means through which God reveals himself to us.

If the reader is to appreciate the Bible, if the reader is going to appreciate Christian teaching, an *adequate* understanding of the Bible is essential. Paul in dealing with problems created in Corinth by the undisciplined exercise of the gift of tongues stated an important negative principle: 'If I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me' (*I Cor. 14:11*). What Paul has said of the spoken word is true also of the written word. If I do not understand what someone means, he might as well be a foreigner. This happens when you listen to people speaking in a foreign language, or read material in a code. But it also happens with your own language. A person may give a speech and you hear the words but have no clue as to what they mean. You may even exclaim, 'I did not understand a word of what he was saying.' There is a gap between the words and the meaning. There is obscurity. The gap must be bridged and the obscurity dispelled if there is going to be meaning, understanding. It seems that in such circumstances you will need an interpreter. Certainly you will need explanation.

But there are passages in the Bible which produce such impressions as these. The tendency is then to read the Bible selectively, picking out those pieces which appeal to us and which we believe we understand. For example, if our experience is an emotional one, we shall select those passages which feed that sort of experience. If we

have a certain attitude we shall select such passages as co-ordinate with it and so reinforce that attitude.

So what are we to do when we do not understand? Well, certainly we must be patient. It will help us at this stage if we look at some reasons why we do not understand. It may be, first, that a quite simple clue is missing, or because the materials are genuinely difficult and require an intelligence and a concentration which we do not have, or which we have not yet given them. Thirdly, we may not understand because they seem to offend and we are resisting certain meanings.

It is easy to ignore what we do not understand. When questions arise, as they always will, when we read the Scriptures seriously, we might like to pretend that they have not arisen. Certainly there are difficult passages in the Bible. Peter did not always understand Paul, but the difficult passages of Paul have now become part of our New Testament. They are therefore worthy of careful and prolonged effort at understanding. We so easily pass over the riches with our concern to get somewhere else, or to cover so much ground.

So let us take notice of the interesting passage:

‘So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures’ (*II Peter* 3:15-17).

Several things are quite clear from this passage. *II Peter* recognised and *accepted* the sophisticated mind of his ‘beloved brother Paul’ and the writings which it produced. That is an important attitude. Many people demand that they shall immediately understand as a condition for accepting the author. They reject or pass over a writer who does not immediately descend to their level. *II Peter* is prepared to admit both his own limitations and the worthwhile ness of these Pauline writings which he admits he finds it difficult to understand. He admitted that there were difficulties in the Paul writings. The interesting fact is that the Pauline letters, difficult to understand as they are, were the earliest to be accepted as Scripture, and were consistently accepted as Scripture from the very beginning. To say that the letters contain difficulties means that they need careful interpretation through sustained study. You can’t do it quickly. You just do not move in with your answer and then accommodate the passage, ‘twist’ it, to fit that pre-determined answer. The third point is that the

difficulties in Paul led to wrong and harmful misunderstanding. Why did such misunderstanding arise?

Why does misunderstanding of any sort arise?

One way of misunderstanding a written passage is to assume too easily that it says what we want it to say. We can sometimes accommodate the meaning of the passage to what we think by a process of over-simplifying it. Desire for simplicity is not at all the same as concern for the truth, nor for faithfulness to the text. What is simply is not necessarily true. What is difficult or profound is not necessarily false. To understand seriously, there will always be need for patience and for persistence.

When we are challenged to renew our understanding, we do wrong to remain where we are. And to be exposed to what is unfamiliar is an opportunity to make progress. But it is only natural to seek to accommodate the unfamiliar to what we already believe we know. Faced with the unfamiliar, we easily seek to accommodate it to our pre-existing modes of thought. You can't carry Niagara away in a tin pail. But if all you have is a tin pail and you must carry something away, don't call it Niagara.

Paul and other biblical writers write 'according to the wisdom given them.' So do their interpreters. We shall be able to understand them according to the wisdom given us. Sometimes we should have the humility to recognise our limits and not to censure the interpreters.

The rule which we must follow if we wish to avoid this kind of misunderstanding is to let the passage, be it short (a verse) or long (a whole book), speak on its own terms. We shall let it speak on its own and not muzzle it by imposing our categories on it, and then saying that that is what its author intended. We will be prepared to adjust and to modify our thinking and acting, if that is appropriate.

It's a two-way traffic. We must, of course, start where we are in understanding the passage. We must also let the passage speak to us from its own context, its own past. This, in the case of the Bible, will be a very different context from our own.

But what if we cannot assimilate the revelation of God or the words of Scripture to our present understanding? Then we will be puzzled, perhaps confused, even offended. Remember that part of the offence of the Gospel is that it unsettles our secure world and, to change the metaphor, challenges us to rebuild.

Take an example from the Gospel. Jesus is teaching. The passage is *John* 6: 51-62. It is an official, formal occasion: the Sabbath worship in the synagogue. Jesus said,

‘I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.’

Such a saying produced an immediate reaction, both on the part of the Jews, and on the part of his disciples. The Jews had an argument among themselves as to what it might mean and that meant that they wondered just what it was that Jesus was claiming. Disciples found it a hard saying. Some left Jesus because the saying had offended them (vv.60,44). Jesus’ response to the offence was not to soften it. He said, ‘There’s more to come, if this offends you, worse to come’ (vv.61,62).

Should the teacher follow Jesus’ example? When he finds that his words cause offence, should he then say that this offence is only the beginning? Jesus spoke a hard saying, and when it caused a disturbance he did not try to soften it. Indeed he called for his hearers to take sides, to make up their mind about his far-reaching claim.

If we cannot accommodate God’s revelation to our previous understanding then we must either pass it by, reject it, or revise our previous understanding. But we may not pretend, if we learn the lesson of this story, that everything is as it always was.

So, how do you read?

This story is from the fourth Gospel. There is nothing like it from the first three, sometimes called because of their likeness in many respects the ‘synoptic’ gospels. The portrait of the glorious, divine, Jesus making far-reaching claims about himself and expounding the claims in lengthy discourses stands in striking contrast to the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels, who speaks in parables and instructs his disciples, when they show some glimmer of understanding him as something more than a teacher, to keep it to themselves. The context of the story is therefore of importance in understanding it.

This brings us to an obvious enough but very important point. The Bible is a collection of books, of literary works. Since the books which make up the Bible are literary works we must in approaching them try to achieve two goals: (1) we must try to understand what the words say, understand the language. (2) we must, as well and at the same time, try to understand the author’s *style* his purpose and the manner of composition of his book. Different books of the Bible have very different literary forms. We must take notice of the form of the book. Some books are great literary masterpieces, for example the book of *Job*. As with other such masterpieces, you don’t just take a few sentences here and there. You don’t assume that it is a straightforward piece of writing. You deal with it in view of its form.

There is another quite fundamental principle. This has to do with the *imagery* of the Bible. An *image* is the creation of the human. Do not think that the human imagination creates only what we call the imaginary, It is a strange quirk that we often equate the imaginary with the fantastic or the fictional.

The Christian imagination is shaped by reference to the event of Jesus Christ. The believer uses appropriate images when he expresses well the meaning of faith and of the Christian experience. The Hebrew imagination had its roots in the Hebrew conviction that Yahweh had acted to redeem and to guide a people. Yahweh was God of a people. Christian imagination, i.e. the image creating ability of the Christian, has its roots in the event of Jesus Christ. By using human language, human beings speak imaginatively of God. And then whole host of images, of symbols, of literary expressions and creations come into being.

We have introduced the idea of a symbol. A symbol stands for something. So the distinction between language which is used literally and language which is used symbolically is important. Let us take an example. 'You shall rest on the Sabbath day, because you were slaves in Egypt' (Cf. *Deut.* 5:12-15) is literal language It has a straightforward meaning and application. 'The Sabbath is a sign between me and you' (*Ezek.* 20:20), suggests that the Sabbath can point to something, represent something, stand for something. It is then a symbol. A symbol stands for something other than itself, and directs our attention to that for which it stands. It points you to look in a certain direction. The language of Scripture, as the language of theology, is taken from our ordinary discourse. We find the language of judge, shepherd, word, seed, harvest, marriage, son, father and much other language used in the service of Christian expression. The imagination has taken ordinary language and used it to express Christian convictions and Christian understandings. To understand the Bible means becoming familiar with a whole range of biblical images.

How do you read?

A most important principle is that we should try to be open to the symbols of the Bible. What do the symbols. say to us? What do the images have to convey to us? We cannot hurry here. We must consider and ponder. It is astonishing that we should rush through scripture passages when they invite us to step and to look and to listen. We may not be able to carry long passages around in our heads. But we can take an image along with us and explore its possibilities for expressing Christian meaning.

Often the images are put together in narrative form. Another kind of awareness we can develop has to do with the stories of the Bible. If you think of a few of the stories of the Bible, and there are many indeed, you will realise what great variety there is. Not all stories here are of the same kind. Nor are they told for the same purpose. Some are told with one aim in view, others with other aims. We simply have to think about the stories, asking ourselves, Why were they told? Why was this particular story told? We will realise then that there is no one answer to that question.

Another important point. A story does not have to be true in order to have meaning. A story does not have to be literally true to present us with truth, to present us with imagery which influences thought and action. The story form provides a framework in which actions, values, ideas, characters can be put together. The story is a unity of several incidents. Nathan's story to David (*II Sam. 12: 1-7*), Jesus' story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (*Luke 16*) are not literally true. They are in this respect like, for example, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Stories can provide true meaning without actually being the report of an incident or a series of events which happened exactly as it is told. The story of the Prodigal Son makes its point, whether based on an actual incident, or simply imagined. Stories can be true to life (as we say) without being literally true. Or, to put it rather differently, truth can be put in story *form*. Then you have to look behind the story and ask whether it has a meaning and what that meaning is. That takes some discernment. 'He that hath ears to hear, let him hear' said Jesus, of his parables. You have to go away and think about the meaning hidden in the narrative form.

So with the images which the Bible uses of God, and of Jesus. For, example, Luke in the parable to which we have referred (ch. 15) speaks of God, in story form, as a father. That is a symbol. It is a symbol drawn from our human experiences and used to point to important things the Christian wishes to say of what is beyond ordinary experience. God is in some respects like human fathers. 'In some respects,' that means, he is also unlike them. He is not a male progenitor for example. So we have to give serious consideration to the symbol in order to understand what it means and what it does not mean.

How do you speak of what is *beyond* the limits of human experience? Or of what is *at* the limits of human experience? Job, you remember, was silent when questioned about the creative act of God. But Christian theists do say that God *created* the heavens and the earth. We take a word, the word 'create,' drawn from our human

experience, and we apply it to what is at the very limits of human experience. Like 'father,' 'create' is a symbol drawn from our human experience and applied with due qualification to God.

There are ever fruitful questions which Christians should be asking themselves, over and over again. What does it mean to speak as we do? What does Scripture mean when it speaks as it does? What does theology, mean when it speaks as it does? Once we have got the imagery in our mind we can carry it around, think about it, let it work a response in us. This it will do for it is living imagery.

A story is sometimes a *narrative symbol*. It has a meaning which does not simply consist in a reporting of a series of incidents strung together. It is pedantic, to say the least, to want all biblical stories to be literally true. The story of Job is not simply the report of the fortune' of a sufferer. The story of Jonah is not simply the report of a recalcitrant prophet. The story of the sower is not about farmers and seed. The story of the miracle is not just about a marvellous deed. The characteristic word for 'miracle' in the Gospels is 'sign' not 'wonder.' When the New Testament speaks of Jesus ascending, sitting on the right hand of God, acting as a high priest, coming on the clouds, we may properly and profitably ponder these (and many other) sayings, asking, 'What do they mean?' The dramatic form of the sayings points us to God, his purpose, his act. The narrative form is a means to suggest to the reader a meaning. There is often so much more than meets the eye.

The life of the soul and of the community feeds upon the story, the stories. The stories point us to God and to the human condition. But we must follow them up, read the hints, have the ears to hear. We will then find them to have quite practical and living function.

So the Bible is a living book, presenting us with real challenges and nurturing us as we respond. It is not an ancient stuffed horse. It is contemporary, not just a museum piece. The history it tells is of a story which continues in the life experience of our Christian community. We keep alive the meaning of God's revelation in Jesus Christ by meditating on the biblical imagery. We also create new imagery as we witness in a contemporary world. The Holy Spirit thus guides us into the truth.