

Why Do We Need Interpretation?

Why must we interpret Scripture? Why can't we just open the Word, read what we're supposed to do, and then do it? Why do we have to go to so much trouble to understand the text? The answer is that time and distance have thrown up barriers between us and the Biblical writers, which block our understanding. We need to appreciate what those roadblocks are. They are not insurmountable, but they are substantial.

Language Barriers

Have you ever learned a foreign language? If so, you know that learning the words is not enough. You have to learn the mind-set, the culture, the worldview of those who speak it if you really want to understand what they are saying.

In the same way when it comes to the Bible, we have some excellent translations from the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic languages in which it was originally written. Even so, the English text leaves us a long way from a complete understanding. That's why the process of Interpretation involves the use of a Bible dictionary and similar resources. We have to go back and recover the shades of meaning that translated words alone cannot convey.

Cultural Barriers

These are closely related to the problem of language because language is always culture bound. The Bible is a product and presentation of cultures that are dramatically different from our own – and also different from each other. To appreciate what is going on in Scripture, we have to reconstruct the cultural context in areas of communication, transportation, trade, agriculture, occupations, religion, perceptions of time and so on. Archaeology proves helpful in this area.

Literary Barriers

Another problem we run into in interpreting Scripture is the variety of the terrain. If it were all mountains or deserts or oceans, we could outfit ourselves appropriately and have at it. But the literary genres of the Bible are quite diverse and demand vastly different approaches. We can't read the Songs of Solomon with the same cold logic we bring to Romans. We won't get the point of the parables through the same exhaustive word studies that might unlock truths in Galatians.

TRUTH THAT TRANSFORMS

Communication Barriers

Even though God Himself was working to communicate through the writers of Scripture, we must still contend with breakdowns in the communication process. As finite creatures, we can never know what is going on in someone else's mind completely. As a result, we have to settle for limited objectives in our interpretation of Scripture.