

READING ONLY THE "PURE WORD"—AN UNBIBLICAL AND DANGEROUS NOTION

From time to time a brother will trumpet the misguided notion that saints should read only the Bible, the "pure Word", "untainted" by anyone's interpretation. Some have used this notion as a ploy to entice the saints to reject the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee as "man's interpretation." On the surface, the teaching that we should read the Bible exclusively and without any interpretation may sound laudable. Actually, this notion is both unbiblical and impractical. It casts aside a crucial means by which God perfects men in this age, and, conversely, inflates the self and makes a person subject to being misled into serious errors.

Interpretation Is Biblical

Nehemiah 8:1-6 tells us that because of the great need for the returned Hebrews to hear and understand the "book of the law of Moses," the Scriptures were brought forth and read publicly. However, verse 7 names thirteen men in addition to uncounted Levites who "helped people understand the law." What the helpers said is not recorded, but the Bible approves of their service, saying in verse 8, "And they read in the book, in the law of God, interpreting and giving the sense, so that they [the people] understood the reading." Thus, not only was the law (the "pure Word") read to the people, but the helpers also interpreted the law and gave the sense of the reading so that the people could understand it.

In Acts 8 Philip the evangelist met an Ethiopian man who was reading the prophet Isaiah (vv. 26-28; cf. 21:8). Philip asked him, "Do you really know the things that you are reading?" (v. 30). The Ethiopian responded, "How could I unless someone guides me?" (v. 31) and later, "I beseech you, concerning whom does the prophet say this?" (v. 34). Philip did not tell him that it was adequate for him to read the "pure Word" or that he did not need human exposition to understand it. Rather, "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he announced Jesus as the gospel to him" (v. 35). The Bible does not record what Philip said, but through his speaking he led the eunuch to "believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" and baptized him (vv. 37-38). The eunuch was not saved through merely reading the "pure Word"; he needed Philip's teaching to open the Word to him.

Paul strongly stressed the need of teaching in his Epistles to his young co-worker Timothy (1 Tim. 3:2; 4:11, 13, 16; 5:17; 2 Tim. 2:2, 24). Such teaching refers to the speaking of the Lord's servants and the leading ones in the churches based on the teaching of the apostles concerning God's New Testament economy (Acts 2:42; Titus 1:9; 1 Tim. 1:4). Ephesians 4:11-12 tells us that God gave gifts to the church in the form of gifted members— apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers—to perfect the members of His Body. Through their ministry these gifted members perfect the saints by teaching the truth in God's Word. To reject their ministry is to reject God's way of perfecting His people.

A Vain and Dangerous Proposition

According to the "pure word" teaching, how far must we go to arrive at the "pure Word"? Do we rewind time to before the Reformation, so as not to be influenced by Martin Luther's teaching of justification by faith? Recognizing that every translation of the Scriptures is influenced by the translators' understanding and is hence an interpretation, do we read the Bible only in the original languages? Do we ignore the work already done to sift through the available ancient manuscripts to assemble the most authoritative Hebrew and Greek texts and instead make that determination ourselves? Do we reevaluate which writings constitute the Scriptures, even though the books included in the canon were acknowledged and confirmed by godly men centuries ago as being written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? Or, should we not rather recognize the divine guidance moving throughout human history to bring us the Bible and to progressively open it through God's servants?

The root problem underlying the "pure Word" teaching is misplaced self-confidence. The Lord's word is surely pure, but we are not. As Brother Nee explained in the first chapter of *How to Study the Bible*, the problem of the person is paramount when coming to the Bible. No one can initially approach the Bible without his reading being colored by his own culture, background, and opinion. As Brother Lee explained,

It is hard for us to have no opinions when reading the Bible, unless we do not read the Bible at all. We all have the same Bible in our hands, yet the results of our reading are altogether different. What one person reads in the Bible is one thing, and what I read may be another thing. If you do not believe this, we can do an experiment. We can let everyone read the same chapter, the same verse, and even the same phrase. In the end we will all come up with different things. This is because even before we read, we already have our own

opinions. We do not simply discover the things in the Bible; rather, we put our own opinions and thoughts into the Bible. We may use an illustration. Water itself is colorless, but if we are wearing a pair of glasses with green lenses, we may insist that water is green. The fact is that it is not the water that is colored but that we looked at it through a pair of colored glasses. (*The Path of Our Growth in Life*, 67)

If we realize our shortcomings and bias, we will humble ourselves and allow ourselves to be perfected by those whom the Lord has constituted as gifts to His Body. Otherwise, we will inevitably inflate our assessment of ourselves and our opinions (cf. Rom. 12:3; Phil 2:3-4). To reject the opening of God's Word through His faithful servants and to exalt one's own private understandings is an act of arrogant self-conceit that has historically led to many great heresies, such as those of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Apart from the peril of heresy, interpreting the Bible with no governing vision or principles leads to an individualistic, self-centered Christian life rather than to a life of being perfected as a member for the building up of the Body in the way of fellowship and mutuality (Eph. 4:11-12, 16).

A Proper and Balanced Approach

It is surely wrong to read only the interpretation of the Word and not the Word itself, but it is also misguided to believe that a person can read only the Bible and receive from it all the accrued insights the Lord has given to His people over the last twenty centuries. We often say that the teaching in the Lord's recovery stands on the shoulders of those who have gone before, but what does that mean in practical terms? It means that those whom the Lord used in His ministry among us—particularly Brother Nee and Brother Lee—diligently studied the writings of the great Christian teachers throughout the centuries and kept that which matched the Bible. With such a solid foundation in the truth they were enabled to see even more than what their predecessors saw. Brother Lee told us that Brother Nee had a personal library of three thousand Christian classics, and that he and Brother Nee pored through those writings to learn from them. He said that from the beginning of their service:

We began to read the Bible diligently and to study Christianity. We laid everything down to serve the Lord. We realized that we could not develop our practice in isolation and that we needed to broaden our view by reading others' writings. Therefore, we labored to collect and to study all the prominent writings from the two-thousand-year history of Christianity. We were not biased. Using the Bible as our standard, we accepted whatever was according to the Bible and rejected whatever was not according to the Bible. (*The Full Knowledge of the Word of God*, 54)

Those who aggressively promote the teaching that we should read only the Bible as the "pure Word" imply that the labor of our two brothers has no value, has borne no fruit, and should be set aside. They presume to have the capacity to discern the truth apart from such labor. In fact, these ones merely seek to make room to advance their own opinions and to free themselves from the constraints of the light that the Lord has already given.

Brother Lee also called us back to the pure word of the Scriptures, by which he meant that we should drop man's natural, superficial, and traditional interpretations in order to see what the Bible reveals. He emphasized receiving the words of the Bible by prayer and as spirit and life (Eph. 6:17-18; John 6:63). He also stressed the need to apply proper principles of biblical interpretation. Key among these is giving precedence to the Bible's plain words, not interpreting any passage in isolation but in the light of the Bible as a whole, and always basing our interpretation on the central revelation of the Bible, which is God's eternal economy with Christ as its centrality and universality (1 Tim. 1:3-4; Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:15-20). We believe the proper way is to read the Bible and to use the ministry of the word as a means to enter into a deeper understanding of the Bible. We should take the ministry of the word as a tool for apprehending the truth in the Bible. While we should not accept things uncritically, time and again our experience has been that the ministry of Brother Nee and Brother Lee has proven to be faithful and accurate in its presentation of the divine revelation in the Bible. Moreover, it has brought us to the central revelation of the Bible concerning the eternal purpose of God.

If you are not convinced, try a simple test. Read a portion of the Word—for example, Romans 1:16-17—and dig into it with no other assistance. Take as much time as you want. Then read a portion from the ministry that expounds that passage—say, *Life-study of Romans*, message 57. Then consider whether the ministry you read has helped you to understand the verses. We are confident that the answer will be yes.