

## Does Everyone Interpret the Bible Differently?

Have you ever heard someone say, “Each person interprets the Bible in a different way”? Or, “You can never expect people in other countries to understand the Bible like you do”? Or, “What a person believes depends on how he was raised and what he was taught. People who grow up Catholic will always see religion through Catholic eyes. Muslims see the world through Islamic eyes. Baptists, churches of Christ, Mennonites, Jehovah’s Witnesses and others do the same. We all see the world through our own set of lenses. The glasses we wear are different.”

Did you know that this is being taught, in a more sophisticated way, in seminaries and Bible colleges today? Professors in those schools are molding future ministers and missionaries with this kind of mindset.

This view really began to take hold in religious education during last three or four decades of the 1900s. But if we really want to see where this emphasis came from, we’ll have to go back much farther than that.

We’re about to uncover one of the main sources of this kind of thinking. Of course, some people develop this view on their own without the help of a book or a professor. They see all the different beliefs in the world and conclude that this diversity is inevitable and unavoidable. But what I’m emphasizing is that the arena of so-called Bible scholarship is full of this theory. And, those same supposed scholars, who appear to be independent and original thinkers, have actually adopted this particular theory from unbelieving philosophers. This way of looking at Bible interpretation, Bible translation, and mission approaches can be traced back to a prominent German philosopher who lived in the 1700s.

So if you’ve ever heard a student in a Christian university say something strange about the Bible, if you have noticed that Bible translations have become more and more loose, or if you have been shocked at something that a missionary taught, and if, when you questioned this person, you were told, “Well, you’re just looking at this through your own set of lenses,” then this discussion will help you to understand where this idea came from and why it’s unbiblical.

Let's go back a few hundred years to what many people call the modern period of philosophy in Europe. It was a time of change in thinking about virtually everything. People began to question and doubt things that had been taken for granted. One issue that came to the forefront was the question of knowledge. Can we be certain of anything, and if so, how? Does our knowledge come through the mind (that is, reason) or through the physical senses? This was logically connected to another key issue: does anything exist beyond the physical? That is, do we have a soul, is there a God, and is there life after death? The Medieval European culture, which was dominated by the Catholic church-state, answered with a resounding yes to these questions. But after the Renaissance and the Reformation movement, the dogmatism of the old order gave way to skepticism. The mind-matter problem in Greek philosophy resurfaced and took center stage in the 1600s and 1700s. The ancient debate about whether we know through the senses (empiricism) or through reason (rationalism) came to a head in this era. Does knowledge come through the senses, the mind, through some interaction of both, or through neither?

Intellectuals in the modern period gave different answers:

a. *Rene Descartes* (1596-1650) said that we can't trust our senses because sometimes they mislead us. For instance, you see a pencil in a glass of water and it appears to be broken, but it's not. Or, you see what seems to be a pool of water in a road on a very hot day; but when you get closer, you realize it was just a mirage. So Descartes said the answer must be with reason itself, not senses. He is famous for saying, *cogito, ergo sum*, that is, "I think, therefore I am." That was his answer to the question of how we can know. Even if you doubt everything else, you cannot seriously doubt that you exist because you have to exist in order to think. So, he used that piece of knowledge as a starting point.

b. *Baruch Spinoza* (1632-1677) said there is no mind/body problem because only one substance exists. In other words, he was a pantheist. Pantheism says that everything is God and God is everything. Now Spinoza's version of pantheism was different from pantheism in eastern religions like Buddhism or Hinduism, but it is interesting that his

thinking influenced the German philosopher Hegel who in turn influenced the writings of Karl Marx.

c. *John Locke* (1632-1704) said that knowledge comes primarily through the senses. He is known for saying that at birth the mind is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. Although he was a devout man who believed in God, he did not believe that we are born with innate ideas. Most people today know him as one who influenced the founders of United States by his writings. But we're noticing him because he entered into the debate about how we can know.

e. *David Hume* (1711-1776) gave a definite answer to the question of knowledge. He said *we can't know anything*. He argued that we cannot prove a causal relationship exists between ideas in our minds and events in the world. He was such an extreme skeptic that he said we can only assume cause and effect but we can't really prove it! This is why some today call him the father of modern-day skepticism. To Hume, it was impossible to prove that God exists, and, it was just as impossible to prove that God does not exist.

This was the backdrop of a man named Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), the German philosopher we alluded to at the beginning of this discussion. He said that Hume's skepticism awakened him out of his "dogmatic slumbers." He weighed in on the question of knowledge with his "Copernican revolution" in epistemology. Just as Copernicus had said the earth revolves around the sun and not the sun around the earth, Kant said the objects of sense experience conform to the operations of the mind, not that the mind conforms to those objects. He said Hume and others assumed that the *ideas of experience* correspond to the *objects of experience*. They assumed that we have the idea that a table is round or square because the mind cannot avoid this knowledge of sense experience; it must submit to this raw sense data. But Kant argued that this is not so. He said there *is* a world of sense experience, but when we perceive that world, our mind is structured in such a way that it creates certain impressions about the world. Those ideas the mind forms may or may not agree with the actual state of things in the world of experience. The table may or may not be round. All you know is the ideas you have

in your mind. You can only know how the world *appears* in your mind. You cannot directly perceive it. There is thus always a difference, an insurmountable wall, separating appearance and reality. Kant called the world of experience phenomenal reality—that is, things in themselves, as they really are. The ideas we have about it, our perceptions of it, he called noumenal reality. Reality is one thing. Your perception of it is something else.

Kant did not say the world is an illusion. He did not mean that the material world was non-existent or that matter and mind were just two manifestations of one substance. He believed there is an actual world we see, hear, feel, and so forth. But when we take in this raw data of the world through the senses, our mind causes us to look at it in certain ways. Kant called these ways categories. All we can know, according to Kant, is *how we perceive* the world; we can never know the world itself, only the perceptions we have of it.

Kant believed our minds see things in the world through the “lenses” of space and time, and categories of thought such as quantity, quality, relation, and modality. Most books about Kant use this illustration. That is, we see the world through a certain set of glasses. We can never remove those lenses because of the way our minds are structured. That was Kant's theory.

Kant said our mind determines how we see or interpret the world. He believed his theory applied to all of mankind, and that we inevitably perceive the world in a predetermined way.

Kant had no intention of influencing Bible interpretation and translation, but his writing eventually did. And, Bible translators and interpreters today may not realize that a great deal of translation theory and interpretation theory can be traced to Kant, but it can. Let us see if we can connect the dots.

Kant lived from 1724-1804. Hume, Kant, and others in the modern period were concerned with the question of what is ultimately real (metaphysics) and what we can know (epistemology). A century after his death the focus shifted. The question was no longer so much about whether we can know, but how we *understand*. The issue was not so much, “Is this statement *true*?” but, “What does it *mean*?” The interest

was in the mental operations of the knower, not so much the thing known. A mutual concern about the operations of the mind developed between the fields of philosophy and psychology, and the results have been felt in the field of theology ever since.

One philosopher who contributed to this transition was Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). Though his overall philosophy was existential, his emphasis on the role of *pre-understanding* has had a widespread impact on theology. According to Heidegger, we interpret the world according to how our minds have been pre-conditioned. (We are not at this point talking about interpreting the Bible. That was not Heidegger's or Kant's concern). But Heidegger did think that each of us projects his or her own "world" as it exists in our minds onto the actual world. Each person has his or her own context in the world situation and so every person looks at the same world in a different way.

Here is how Heidegger described his theory: "Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. An interpretation is never a presupposition-less apprehending of something presented to us." (*Being and Time*, p.192).

While Kant's lenses were the same for everybody, Heidegger's glasses vary according to the individual. And while there are differences in the way these two philosophers approached questions of knowledge, they are similar in that both believed that conditions of the mind unavoidably affect the way that we interpret the world. Thus, Kant believed everyone wears the same colored glasses, while Heidegger thought every individual's glasses have a different tint. So in the end the general theory of Kant was adapted and applied a century later by a fellow German.

One philosophy textbook says this means "There can be different worlds even composed of the same things because of the different ways individuals project 'their' world. We speak of 'a women's world' or compare the different worlds projected by our different moods" (Stumpf, *Philosophy: History and Problems*, p. 465).

Again, Heidegger was not just talking about how we interpret words. His theory of “Being” (or, Dasein) in the world is that the way we perceive music, movies, paintings, nature, or life itself is shaped by our motives, moods, and presuppositions. Heidegger’s view, which is a modified version of Kant’s categories or “colored lenses,” had a profound influence on theologians.

The key words here are *presupposition* and *preconception*. Heidegger says your mind is preconditioned and that you never interpret anything without these presuppositions.

The next important link in this chain is a theologian who was contemporary with Heidegger. His name is Rudolph Bultmann (1884-1976). With him, we see the transition of this thinking from philosophy to religion. Bultmann said our perception of the world is so radically different from the way people in the NT saw their world, that we can’t possibly understand the writings of the NT unless we “demythologize” it, that is, strip the record of references to demons, miracles, and other miraculous phenomena (which he didn’t believe happened) in order to get to the real core message of the NT. Otherwise, we can’t relate to their worldview anymore than they would be able to appreciate ours.

Bultmann wrote about this in a 1941 essay, “New Testament and Mythology” (interestingly, Bultmann makes reference to Heidegger twice in this article). Some regard this article as the most controversial and discussed religious writing of the 1900s. Others have said that Bultmann was the most influential theologian of that century. Regardless of whether you know a little or a lot about him, there’s no doubt that he impacted religious thinking—and not in a good way.

Most people who know anything about Bultmann realize that he was a liberal theologian who wrote about these so-called myths in the Bible. But what many don’t know is that his reason for denying the miraculous setting of the New Testament was that he said it is impossible for people in modern times to understand it the way it was written because of these stories. Bultmann said we live in a different world (and he wrote this in 1941!) than the world of the first century. So, he insisted, we need to remove all the talk about miracles and the

supernatural so that we can see the real core message of the New Testament.

In that article Bultmann asked, “Can Christian proclamation today expect men and women to acknowledge the mythical world picture as true? To do so would be both pointless and impossible.” He insisted that “We cannot use electric lights and radios and, in the event of illness, avail ourselves of modern medical and clinical means and at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament.” And we would ask, WHY NOT? The Bible says these miracles were written to lead us to believe (John 20:30-31), but this liberal theologian said those stories only make the Bible harder to understand. That’s a strange accusation. Millions of people have understood those stories from childhood.

It is true is that Bultmann left his mark on theology. This does not necessarily mean that seminaries at first bought into his thinking all the way. Not all of them accepted his view of what he called “myth.” But, many took his basic point about there being such a vast difference between our “world” and the “world” of the NT that we need to adjust the way we interpret it. And, these schools and scholars have been preaching to us ever since that we should be cautious about saying we know what the Bible means. Of course, they always seem to be able *to tell us what it means*.

Now let us see how this view of interpretation has come down to us. One of the areas affected by this thinking is missiology, especially foreign missions. The “world” of the evangelists from one country may be very different from the world of those being evangelized. For instance, when Christians from a highly industrialized nation like the United States with its advanced technology and republican form of government enter a third-world country, the two cultures clash. People in the third-world nation don’t understand American thinking, and Americans don’t understand why. Their perspectives are different. In other words, they see through a different set of lenses. There are differences in customs, in gestures, in manners, in food, in clothing, in political thinking, in family traditions, and in many other areas of life.

Also, in addition to these two cultures, there is the culture of the Bible. This means that when the evangelists and the evangelized read the Bible, they are not only wearing different glasses, but both sets of glasses are different from the way people in the Bible saw the world. This is why books on this subject talk about three “horizons” in interpreting and teaching the Bible to others.

The term “contextualization” is used in missions to describe this problem of communication. It explores ways to overcome these cultural and conceptual hindrances. The goal is to bring the horizon of understanding in each of these contexts of life together to transmit the gospel.

Like other specialized terms, the word *contextualization* is defined differently by different people. There is nothing wrong with the idea of contextualization as long as it is kept in biblical context and is not taken too far. Paul adjusted to cultures where he preached. He said, “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:19-22). But Paul never compromised the message. It is one thing to accommodate different customs that don’t affect or violate the doctrine of Christ; it is another to change the doctrine to accommodate culture. That is something God forbids.

Tragically, missionaries sometimes use the concept of contextualization to compromise the teaching of the NT in order to win converts. The issue of polygamy is an old example in missions. A surprising number of schools tell missionaries in training to ignore the issue. “The practice is ingrained in their culture and you can’t change that,” they say. The excuse is, “In their culture, there’s nothing wrong



with men having four wives, so we can't expect them to see marriage like we do."

That is faulty reasoning. The New Testament applies to all nations in all times. Jesus told the disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:19-20). God's law of marriage goes back to the beginning of the creation of males and females and applies to all (Matt. 19:3-9). Jesus said there was a concession made in the law of Moses about divorce, but He emphasized that this was not God's original intent for marriage. He went back to Genesis and taught that, in this new dispensation, divorce and remarriage is sinful unless one divorces a mate for the cause of fornication. In the same way, polygamy was temporarily allowed in the Mosaic law, but today under the New Testament every man is allowed to have his own wife, not wives (I Cor. 7:2; Eph. 5:25-33).

Perhaps even more tragic is that mission studies in Christian colleges often teach an agnostic view of truth. That is, they follow the lead of Kant, saying that we have our perceptions of the truth, but those perceptions may not correspond to reality. And, they follow Heidegger in that they say people's minds we're trying to teach have been so pre-conditioned that we can't possibly expect them to understand the Bible the way we do. This kind of thinking has affected mission departments of Christian universities for decades. The subtle danger is that there is some truth in the idea of contextualization, but in many cases it is over-applied and allowed to overshadow the authority of Scripture. So while we must not be naive to cultural barriers, we also must not surrender the Truth.

Listen to what one professor in a Christian university said about this. He was conducting a seminar on the role of women. He openly advocated having women preachers and women elders and even suggested that women going topless in some cultures is not wrong. He said, "Any attempt for us to discuss this topic without **presupposition** is

probably going to be useless, because we have all grown up in an environment which has given us the feelings that we have... I'm going to discuss this matter first of all from a bit of a historical perspective before we get to the text because, like it or not, the historical perspectives are the **lenses** through which we view these texts. And we just need to be honest with ourselves. And sometimes that's one of the hardest things in the world to do: is to reckon that something that I have always felt was deeply rooted in the Bible is really nothing more than the way I grew up... Because on almost every one of these texts, you see, you could say, it's clear as a bell, what the text teaches. But frankly, on everyone of these texts, there are a variety of ways of looking at that depending on your **glasses**..." Then why on earth is he trying to teach anybody anything at all? If he can't be sure, then why is he so dogmatic that the rest of can't be sure? Now we are beginning to see how the dots connect all the way back to the 1700s.

I'm not attempting in this very brief overview of contextualization to give an in-depth analysis and critique of it. I'm certainly not denying the need to give attention to it. Any missionary knows the problem of cross-cultural communication. I'm not even saying that Kant's thinking alone led to the idea of contextualization. That concept was present a long time before Kant. The word was not used, but the idea was. For instance, Catholic missionaries long before Kant dealt with the difficulty of transmitting their message into primitive cultures and other non-Catholic environments. And, it is a fact that Catholic missionaries, even with the approval of the church, have in centuries past overextended the concept of contextualization by "Christianizing" pagan areas while they allowed pagan rituals to be mixed with Catholic symbols. So, in regard to present day missions, I'm saying that the epistemology of Kant has affected theology to the point that the views many have of contextualization have been tainted, and in some cases eclipsed, by Kant's dogma. More importantly, I am saying that the gospel of Christ is able to transcend these barriers. It has done this for centuries and it will continue to do so. The same God who confused the language at Babel is able to communicate His gospel to all the languages of the world.

People are different, but they're not that different. Human nature is basically the same anywhere. Paul said, "No temptation has overtaken you, except such as is common to man" (I Cor. 10:13). Anyone anywhere can know that God exists because "the heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament shows his handiwork" (Psa. 19:1). In fact, this display of God is universal. There is no "speech or language" in any nation where the voice of nature is not heard (Psa. 19:3). "He is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27). And, because of this revelation in the creation, people can know by nature itself that some things are right, and others are wrong (Rom. 2:14-15). For instance, Paul taught in Romans 1:26-27 that homosexuality—men with men and women with women—is against nature itself. Then there are things like murder and lying which basically any culture will say are wrong. So in spite of our differences, we do have many things in common as human beings. We all have the same lenses available to us. It is our choice as to whether or not we use them.

This overemphasis on the way people perceive the Bible was bound to affect Bible translations. The last half of the 20th century brought a new emphasis on clarifying language in the Bible which translators felt would be unfamiliar to certain audiences. They felt that the words of the Scriptures had to be adjusted because of the ways people see them. In other words, translators began to be more sensitive to the reader's colored glasses, and they made adjustments to the text accordingly. This has given rise to an explosive growth in the number of Bible translations available. Many translators now say people will misunderstand the Bible if it's translated literally. The readers might take it the wrong way because of how they have been conditioned to think. And, those translators adjust the Scriptures so that people won't be as likely to misunderstand it.

Now this view of translating is not new and Kant is not to blame for all of it. For instance, in Genesis 24:10–11, the Bible says that the elders of Israel "*saw the God of Israel.*" The Septuagint, which is an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, was translated generations before Jesus was born. It renders Exodus 24:10 "And they

saw *the place where the God of Israel stood.*” The Hebrew text just reads that they saw the God of Israel. Why did the translator or translators make this change? Perhaps because Jewish belief holds that God cannot take on material form or appear to physical sight. Whatever the reason, this is a case of translators feeling that they had to soften the original text, because readers might have been confused if it was translated literally.

Communicating the gospel from one culture to another involves translating from one language to another. This has always been necessary in mission efforts—even when the translation is not in written form. That's because missionaries often use translators in their sermons and Bible classes. And, sometimes translators take too much liberty when they transfer the message from one language to another. They may do more explaining and rewording than they should. And, their motives may be sincere. They don't want people to misunderstand, so they change the wording to make it easier to understand. But, whether intentionally or not, they sometimes change the meaning in so doing.

This may also involve the translation of verses of Scripture used in the missionary's lesson. That's where the problem can arise. Now, when an organization or group of churches later decides to publish a Bible in one of these foreign languages, they have to deal with this challenge. And, it's not as easy as one might think. For instance, years ago missionaries went to remote places with a history of cannibalism. How should they have translated a passage like John 6:53? That's where Jesus talked about eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the Son of Man! Or, consider a less shocking example. Some people in tropical countries have never seen snow. How can they relate to Isaiah 1:18, which says the people's sins would be white as snow? And what about Jewish customs in the New Testament like *Corban* in Mark 7:11 and the wearing of *phylacteries* in Matthew 23:5? Can non-Jews today appreciate these words, or, will these strange terms hinder the communication process? Do these expressions need to be adjusted or even replaced to make them understandable?

What are we dealing with? Here is the same colored-glasses issue. It's obvious that these translation problems existed a long time before

Kant. It's also clear that these or similar questions still arise today, even if the people involved have never heard of Kant or been affected by his philosophy. But here's the point: Kant's philosophy has been a factor in Bible translation theory, and, it has contributed to Bible versions becoming more and more loose.

It is impossible to deal with even the most fundamental aspects and issues of Bible translation in this discussion. That is not my purpose. I am showing how liberal theologians adversely affected this field. And, I'm saying that the source of much of this thinking, goes back to the modern period of philosophy, to the work of one man in particular. We live in a post-modern world, that is, an age where we may take for granted the views of the modern age of philosophy, which covered roughly the late 1500s, the 1600s, and the 1700s. The mindset we inherited from that period is one of skepticism about knowing anything.

That being said, let us comment briefly on the questions we raised. The Bible is God's inspired word (II Tim. 3:16). The more a translator believes that, the more careful he will be in translating it. In regard to John 6:53, there is no need, and certainly no biblical authority for, omitting the offensive or even potentially dangerous expressions about eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood. We should translate those words as closely as possible in the receptor language. It is up to missionaries to use good judgment about when and where to use these verses. Don't we do the same with some passages, for instance, in the Song of Solomon in mixed audiences? It is also the teacher's responsibility to explain the Scriptures. And it is the hearers' duty to listen honestly and understand it as God intended. In regard to people living in warm climates who have never seen snow, translators should translate Isaiah 1:18 with the equivalent term in the receptor language, or, use the closest possible term. The same is true with words like *Corban* or *phylactery* or any other word that may be unfamiliar in some areas today. We have no right to deviate from God's word. And once we go down the road of adjusting the wording of the Bible because it sounds strange to our ears, there will be no end to how much it will be revised. It is impossible to put everything in the Scriptures into the framework of current understanding. And attempting to do so is not even good for us.

One of the beauties of studying Bible history is learning to relate to things we have never experienced. And if we have to experience something before we can relate to it, then how can we relate to heaven or hell?

Different words and expressions are used to refer to this factor of Bible interpretation: “dynamic equivalence”, “functional equivalence”, and “idiomatic” translations. These are seen in contrast to “literal” translations. There are different degrees in each direction. In other words, some translations are very idiomatic, some are idiomatic and some are slightly idiomatic. Some translations are or at least attempt to be very literal; some are more literal and others are less literal. Perhaps no translation is completely idiomatic or literal, but most have a leaning in one of these two directions. Today’s New International version is a more idiomatic translation while the KJV is more literal translation

But again, these are general descriptions. The rationale for more idiomatic translations is the difficulty modern readers in many cultures have in understanding the language of the Bible. Because of the way that people have been preconditioned to think about certain words, concepts, objects, and relationships, Bible translators deal with the question of how to overcome these barriers to understanding.

Translators today stress two challenges to this work of translating: keeping the translation accurate, and making it understandable. There should be a balance of these two concerns. However, the trend in recent decades has been to make the translation understandable at the expense of keeping it as accurate as possible to the original text. And, I’m saying that the idea of our lenses unavoidably interfering with our understanding of any translation has amplified rather than clarified this difficulty.

This has become more and more the case with English Bibles. The gender issue, for instance, is the most obvious example. Bible readers for centuries understood the English word *man* is both a generic and specific term. It can mean a male in contrast to a female; but it can also mean mankind, or, human beings in general – both male and female. But the women’s liberation movement and the unisex philosophy of the

1970s and the 1980s created a prejudiced concept of the word man. The feminist movement in politics and culture affected theology and Bible translators followed suit.

In 1990 the preface to the New Revised Standard Version complained about "the danger of linguistic sexism arising from the inherent bias of the English language towards the masculine gender." The NRSV also said its goal was that masculine-oriented language should be eliminated as far as possible. Five years later, Oxford University Press released "The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version." The Introduction says it was based on the NRSV. This translation sought to "replace or rephrase all gender-specific language not referring to particular historical individuals, all pejorative references to race, color, or religion, and all identifications of persons by their physical disability alone, by means of paraphrase, alternative renderings, and other acceptable means of conforming the language of the work to an inclusive idea." In practice, the Introduction says the translators removed: Masculine pronouns—he, him, his; the word "Father" for God substituted God the "Father-Mother"; "Son of God" for Jesus and put "Child of God"; and replaced "the Son of Man" with "The Human One."

In 2001, Zondervan released a more gender-neutral edition of the NIV called Today's New International Version, now known simply as the NIV. The translation committee noted the "many diverse and complex cultural forces" which "continue to bring about subtle shifts in the meanings and/or connotations of even old, well-established words, and phrases." As a result, these translators aimed at "the elimination of most instances of the generic use of masculine nouns and pronouns." He, him, and his were replaced with they, them, and theirs. The NIV has always been more of an idiomatic translation than it has claimed to be, but this revision created a backlash of criticism from several parts of the evangelical camp which had once endorsed it.

It's interesting, however, that none of these gender-neutral versions followed their policy in First Peter 5:8. That verse says the devil walks

about as a roaring lion, seeking whom *he* may devour. Those translations retain the masculine pronoun referring to the devil.

As the early years of this century progressed, political correctness, ecumenical theology, and homosexual/transgender ideology has led to further disregard for what the Bible says. The only thing that matters now is how people take the Bible based on how they feel. Activists in these areas often feel no responsibility to give a rational explanation of their views of the Bible. But those who do attempt to give such proof often eventually begin to talk like Bultmann, Heidegger, or Kant. The theological justification for this shift is rooted in postmodern thinking. It places an emphasis on how a text is perceived. And that goes all the way back to Kant.

You even see this change in Greek grammars and Greek lexicons. For instance, in 1950 Broadman Press published the book *Essentials of New Testament Greek* by Ray Summers. The definition of the Greek word *anthropos* in that edition was simply “man.” The 1995 revision of that book defined the same word “person, human being” and lastly “man.” The widely-used Greek lexicon known as Bauer or Arndt-Gingrich or BAGD followed suit. In 2000 this Greek-English dictionary for the first time showed marks of the gender-neutral trend. It listed the Greek word *pater*, the word for father. But it gave “parent” as an equivalent meaning. It also suggested that the plural form of *adelphos*, the word for brother, could be translated "brothers and sisters." So even the field the so-called Greek scholarship has been tainted with this approach. And since translators depend on Greek and Hebrew scholars, the results in Bible translations were inevitable.

The Oxford translation mentioned earlier went to even more ridiculous extremes, replacing “King” with “ruler” or “sovereign” for God and eliminating “dark” and “darkness” because dark-skinned people might find these words offensive.

So, in a way it was political correctness that led to this transition. But underneath was the same old theory: that people today look at these concepts in different ways than people in the Bible, or in ways people in



the time of older translations understood them. People now see through a different set of lenses, and adjustments have to be made to the text.

At this point we need to make the same clarifications we offered about the impact of Kant and Heidegger on mission studies. Obviously, Kant was not interested in Bible translating. But later theologians picked up his theory of epistemology and transferred it to this area. In the same way, seminary and Bible college professors who have studied Kant, Heidegger, Bultmann and others have brought those philosophical theories into the realm of theological studies. These schools of theology have produced Bible translators, authors, missionaries and influential Biblical educators and church leaders. This is why it is good to trace these trends back to their philosophical, not just their theological, roots. What I am saying is that there is too much of a tendency in this direction in translations today, and that the epistemological model we've been examining has only made this worse.

If the effect of Kant on mission theory and translation theory is not clear, there will be no question in the field of Bible interpretation or hermeneutics. It's in this area that Kant's emphasis on appearance and reality comes into full view. It will also become clear that Heidegger's emphasis on pre-understanding has had a major influence in the arena of Bible interpretation.

Do you remember the quote from Heidegger we looked at a few minutes ago? Would you be surprised that this very section is quoted in a book on interpreting the Bible, and that, that same book gives prominence to the role of presuppositions in reading the Bible? Here is what one author wrote in a book about Bible interpretation:

“According to Heidegger, interpretation is always grounded in three things— something we have in advance, or “a fore-having,” something we see in advance, or a “a fore-sight”, and something we grasp in advance, or “a fore-conception...”

In a section entitled “The Role of Preunderstanding,” he says, “Every reader approaches a text under the guidance of a perspective. Any text is read, perceived, and interpreted within a preexistent structure

of reality. All understanding and interpretation proceed from a prior understanding or a system of making sense of reality. There is no such thing as a pre-reading, an objective interpretation” (W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, 165-166). Really? Then how are we supposed to interpret what he just said?

Another book on Bible interpretation says, “A key factor in the hermeneutical process is the interpreter’s horizon or pre-understanding—one’s world-view, presuppositions, and personal predilections. All Evangelical exegetes acknowledge the importance of this element...The interpreter’s pre-understanding or horizon is the context in terms of which the text’s meaning is understood” (William L Larkin, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics*, 97).

Still another book on Bible interpretation objects to the idea of reading the Bible without preconceived ideas: “Such thinkers as Martin Heidegger, for example, have forced us to take seriously the role that pre-understanding plays in the process of interpretation. None of us is able to approach new data with a blank mind, and so our attempts to understand new information consist largely of adjusting our prior “framework of understanding”—integrating the new into the old” (Moises Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible?*, 6).

Under the heading “Language and Pre-understanding” still another author writes, " It is well known that Rudolf Bultmann, among others, has **repudiated** the idea that an interpreter can “understand’ the New Testament independently of his own prior questions. One cannot, for example, understand a text about economic history unless one already has some concept of what a society and an economy is. In this sense Bultmann rightly insists, “*there cannot be any such thing as presupposition-less exegesis....* Historical understanding always presupposes a relation of the interpreter to the subject-matter that is... expressed in the texts.” “The demand that the interpreter must silence his subjectivity... in order to attain an objective knowledge is therefore the most absurd one that can be imagined...” (Donald K. McKim, *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics*, 86).

Yet another author of a book on Bible interpretation discusses the “‘fusion of horizons’; namely, the horizon of the text and that of the interpreter. Building upon the thought of the later Heidegger, Gadamer argues that language and text are autonomous entities with a life of their own... The act of interpretation does not so much unlock the past meaning of the text as establish a dialectic with the text in the present” (Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 368).

Still another widely used textbook on Bible interpretation emphasizes “one’s prior understanding of the subject about which the text speaks, is a necessary condition for any understanding of the text to take place, for no one comes to the task of expounding a text without a frame of reference, a pattern of assumptions derived from sources outside of Scripture. The interpreter’s pre-understanding or horizon is the context in terms of which the text’s meaning is understood” (Anthony Thiselton, *New Horizons*).

These books reveal the shift that has occurred in Bible interpretation in the last 50-75 years. That change has been from a text-centered approach to a reader-centered approach. Some would add a third factor—the author of the Bible book in question—and would call it an author-centered approach. But since what we know about the human author comes from the text, I’m not granting the need for this distinction. Besides, the Holy Spirit is the real author of Bible books. Sadly, some books on Bible interpretation don’t even accept the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. This is perhaps the key reason why the shift has been away from examining the text of the Bible to analyzing instead the mind of the reader.

Because of the influence of Kant as it was passed down through Heidegger, Bultmann and others, the focus of many studies in hermeneutics has little to do with the actual text of the Bible. The emphasis is on the psyche of the reader. If you pick up a book on Bible interpretation written in the 1800s or the first half of the 1900s, you will likely find that it centered on how to interpret the Bible—figures of speech, historical background, original languages, the importance of context and the different levels of context, and so forth. But if you look

at a book on the subject written from, let's say, the 1980s or the 1990s on, you will see a discussion of the different kinds of readers of the Bible. The old material on how to interpret the Bible gave way to psychoanalyzing the reader of it. Older books assumed that we can understand the Bible, and I believe they were right, but newer theologians spend most of their time challenging, ignoring, or ridiculing that belief.

What has been the result? Less genuine Bible study and less Bible knowledge. And, less faith and godliness. This is inevitable. It is impossible to spend most of one's time on theories of understanding and theories about Bible interpretation and at the same time devote oneself to the practical study of the Word of God. Yet, this is the trend in many seminaries and theological journals.

Do presuppositions play a role in how people interpret the Bible? Yes. Of course. The question is, has God given us the mind and conscience to see through *faulty* preunderstanding? Yes!

*We can* understand the Bible. Paul told the Christians at Ephesus, that it was by "revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ)—Ephesians 3:3-4. In I Timothy 2:4 Paul said God wants "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

Jesus certainly didn't teach what these theologians are teaching. Consider the Pharisees. If any group in the New Testament had a preconceived way of looking at the Scriptures, they did. Yet consider how Jesus taught them. He told the Pharisees, "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice'" (Matt. 9:13). These words are from Hosea 6:6. They were hundreds of years old and had been read by many generations of Jews. The Pharisees were a more recent group of Jews in this history. They had their own way of looking at the Old Testament. They believed that the Scriptures should be interpreted in light of their oral traditions. That is what they taught their disciples. They were very strong in this approach to interpretation. But that was no excuse for their misunderstandings. It was no justification for them to

teach false doctrines. Jesus rebuked them and told them just to read this Scripture. Does that sound like they couldn't take off their “Pharisaic glasses”? And if these lenses are so thick that a person can hardly see through them, they how can you explain the fact that Paul, Nicodemus, and Zaccheus were able to see through their Pharisaic traditions?

Then consider the Sadducees. They were conditioned not to believe in the resurrection. They had their own interpretation of the Old Testament. They had arguments against the idea of life after death. Yet when they made their case to Jesus, He said, “Have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living” (Matt. 22:31). Jesus quoted the Bible to them and expected them to understand it. Their “Sadduceean glasses” were not permanently attached. They could have removed them.

After his resurrection, Jesus had a conversation with two of his disciples as they walked toward Emmaus. They were discouraged and doubtful that he had been raised from the dead. Jesus rebuked them for being slow to believe what the Old Testament prophets had written about Him. Then “beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). He expected both of them to understand these passages in the same way. Why would he do this if each person interprets the Bible differently and cannot avoid doing so?

The Lord never said, “Moses lived in a very different situation; He wrote under different circumstances. So did David, Isaiah and others. Customs are not the same. The language has changed. And the political situation?—that’s much different. So, what Moses said in the 10 commandments or what David wrote had a different meaning than it has now.” That is not what we find at all. Jesus quoted the OT freely, especially in Matthew, and expected people to understand it.

The real colored glasses people wore were the ones that they chose to wear—stubbornness, prejudice, pride; but, anyone with a good and honest heart could see clearly (Luke 8:15).

Jesus plainly said, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). He said, “If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority” (John 7:17). *People could understand Jesus*. That’s why the Bible says, “The common people heard Him gladly” (Mark 12:37).

The truth is, if you believe Jesus, you cannot believe Kant, Heidegger, Bultmann, and all of the modern theologians that follow them.

We *can* recognize and see through our prejudice and pre-conceived ideas. Thousands of Jews did when the church was established. In Acts 2, Peter and the other apostles taught a mixed audience of Jews. They came from different countries. They spoke different languages. Some were Jews by birth and others were proselytes. Some in the audience accused the apostles of being drunk. In general they had supported the crucifixion of Jesus. So it would be safe to say that their minds were preconditioned! Yet when they heard preaching that went against their pre-understanding, they changed their thinking and three thousand of them were baptized. Can you imagine what would've happened if Peter had told them, “I know that you and I see this whole thing through a different set of lenses, so I can’t tell you that my version of truth is right and yours is wrong. After all, we’re the products of our surroundings.” How absurd!

Also, Jews in the first century thought the kingdom of OT prophecy would be a political empire with an earthy king. Did it take a while for them to take off these colored glasses and see the Kingdom as it is—a spiritual Kingdom, the church? Yes! Did it happen? Yes!

Jews in the NT had also been pre-conditioned not to associate with Gentiles (Acts 10:28). But, the gospel enabled them to see through this thick racial barrier. Was this hard? Yes! Was it impossible? No! These two groups could not have been more different in many ways, but they could lay aside those old prejudices if they chose to. Paul plainly explained this in Ephesians 2:11-3:6.

Of course, some Jews didn’t remove their colored glasses. Paul called the prejudice of unbelieving Jews a “veil” that kept them from

understanding the OT—2 Corinthians 3:15. But, could they have removed the veil? Yes! Many Jews did!

And what about the Gentiles in the New Testament? In the first century world, the Gentile mind had been preconditioned with superstitions, mythology, idolatry, strange customs, prejudice toward Jews, ungodly rituals, a different philosophical and political outlook, and numerous other influences. But, many of the Gentiles heard, *understood*, and obeyed. When Paul preached in the pagan city of Corinth, the Bible says “many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8). And what about those in Thessalonica who had been preconditioned to accept idol worship? Paul said they “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (I Thess 1:9).

Someone might say, “What about the problems in congregations with Gentile members because of how they had been taught? And what about the conflict between Jews and Gentiles in the church?” Yes, it is true there were problems. The differences between these two groups caused friction. But it is also true that two people can be raised in the same environment but make completely different choices! If we are products of our environment, as the behaviorist school of psychology contends, then how can anyone explain the story of Cain and Abel? Yes there were conflicts in the churches of the New Testament. But that’s why the epistles were written! Was it a useless idea for the Holy Spirit to send these letters to churches?

*There is almost no end* of the levels to which this over-emphasis can be applied—and, is actually being applied. If people can’t be expected to understand the Bible because of different cultures, then how can they be expected to overcome the bias of different subcultures, different races, different economic levels, different political thinking, different dialects, different genders, different age groups, different body types, different personality types, different family relations and experiences, and the list could go on and on. If the view that we are looking at is true, we would have to custom design the gospel for every individual. We would also have to tailor-make a different version of the Bible for every individual.

Maybe this is one reason why so many churches are turning away from the Bible and turning to charismatic religion. They reason that if they can't take these glasses off and agree on what the Bible says, then it's better to say that God speaks to them directly. Then each person ends up with his or her own personalized revelation from God. But, if the theory we're talking about is true, wouldn't the colored glasses still be there? And, wouldn't the person be even more affected by his preconceptions? And, since we all grow in our understanding of the Bible, wouldn't God have to revise each person's "Bible" continually?

But it gets even worse. *When this theory is taken to its logical end, the result is a very ecumenical, "coexistent" pluralism.* According to this theory of interpretation, no one *religion* can say it has the truth because Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and atheists all inherit some of their thinking and are conditioned by the elements of their environment. If our pre understanding affects the way we interpret the written Word, then it will affect the way we interpret the *world*.

Consider a book by John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Yale University, 1989). In it he argued that the world is ambiguous. Different people interpret it in different ways; the universe is one, but people perceive it in various ways. One person may say God created it. Another may say God and the world are the same. Another may say it is the work of many gods. Another may say there is no creator or creators; it came from nothing and evolved. Others are agnostic about the evidence and suspend judgment. The evidence, the world, is ambiguous according to Hick. It is interpreted or perceived by each one according to his own way of looking at things. And, Hick doesn't hesitate to tell us that he got this idea from Kant. He said, "In developing this thesis our chief philosophical resource will be one of Kant's most basic epistemological insights, namely that the mind actively interprets sensory information in terms of concepts, so that the environment as we consciously perceive and inhabit it is our familiar three-dimensional world of objects interacting in space" (pp. 240-242).

It is ironic too that the same *theologians, who preach to us about our presuppositions, have their own presuppositions!* We've seen that



many have been preconditioned by Kant, Heidegger, and others. In other words, they've been preconditioned about preconditioning. They have presuppositions about presuppositions. I'm talking especially about theologians here. We've seen that some of them admit being influenced by these men. But how is it that they can objectively see through their own preunderstanding, but the rest of us can't— at least not without their help! And if they admit that their views of the subject are just opinions formed by their environment or “horizon” of understanding, then why are they so dogmatic, and why should we listen to them? After all, the same bias that clouds our mind when we read the Bible also distorts our understanding when we read *their books*. And yet they consistently talk as if their writing is so clear that everyone should understand it!

The theory of Kant and Heidegger and its application to theology by Bultmann and now several generations of Bible scholars is nothing more than agnosticism. According to this reasoning, we can't know truth. We can only know how we perceive it. It is an agnostic view. And yet, like other agnostics, they speak as if they are *very sure and talk as if their conclusions are facts*.

The impact of Kant's thinking is well stated by Edward J. Young in his 1957 book *Thy Word is Truth* (p.245):

“We do not actually get to the heart of things until we first realize that much of modern theological thought is, whether consciously or not, based upon the philosophical thought of Kant.”

“Kant made a distinction between what he called the phenomenal and the noumenal and it is this distinction which has exerted tremendous influence upon modern thought.”

Thank God He has given us a Bible that even children can understand. Sure, there are “some things hard to understand” in the Scriptures. Peter admitted that in II Peter 3:16. But he didn't say they are impossible to know. He also said *some* things are hard to understand— not *everything*.

Thank God we can see the truth. So let us take comfort in these words of the Bible: “Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

