

Interpretation of Scripture

"Using the things of this world in a manner designed of God"

Seventy Richard F. Neill

I have purposely entitled this paper the "Interpretation of Scripture". I do this because all Restoration believers will have a belief in the Scriptures being given to the Church and the world as a witness of Jesus Christ and showing "the way" that leads to the kingdom of God.

However, we are very much aware of the fact that although our Scriptures are essentially the same within Restoration Branches, we have seen different interpretations placed on these same Scriptures. In this paper I would like to discuss how interpretation can lead to different views even though we all use the same Scriptures.

People who have embraced the gospel restored on April 6, 1830 have some common understanding. It is my belief we have agreement on the understanding that God speaks in all ages. We believe in a living and personal God. We believe in the Holy Scriptures, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants. There would be those who trace their beginning to the 1830 founding of the church date, but would hold to the Book of Commandments instead of the Doctrine and Covenants. Different ones who are in different parts of the Restoration would have some additional Sections to the Doctrine and Covenants. The Restoration Branches would hold to the Holy Scriptures, the Book of Mormon, and the Doctrine and Covenants through Section 144 as being of divine origin. Some would extend that to selected sections and verses beyond Section 144. An example would be the use of D&C 147:5a, which states, *"Stewardship is the response of my people to the ministry of my Son and is required alike of all those who seek to build the kingdom."* I have heard this verse quoted in Restoration sermons, and Arthur Oakman made reference to this in his lecture series on the Endowment. (The Endowment Series, Lecture #6, *Toward Spiritual Endowment*) Arthur referred to it as a "beautiful principle".

So, we come back to the question, "How do we come to different interpretations and to different positions and read mostly the same scriptures"? This would apply to individual thinking as well as group or branch or church thinking. I cannot speak with complete authority how this happens, but I do believe there are some factors that contribute to these differences. I will share some of these factors. I am sure some others would look at this a bit differently.

What causes us to have different interpretations?

We begin by looking at how we study the Scriptures. Let's start with how often we read our Scriptures. Within the three books of Scripture already referred to there is a lot to read. It will take a great deal of time to read all of the Scriptures. I think we can assume that people have read and studied the Scriptures in different amounts of time. There can be different reasons

for this, and these can range from having little interest in doing so, to lengths of time available. In foreign lands we might not have good translations, and different translating messages across culture and languages are very difficult. There can be many other reasons as well.

Our understanding of the Scriptures is affected by the family we grow up in, and the family that we develop of our own, over the years. People may come unto the knowledge of Jesus and the gospel at different times of life. I knew a man, George Ruffe, who was baptized at the age of 66. He lived into his 80's, and became an elder and pastor before he passed away.

Our understanding of the Scriptures is affected by our knowledge and desire to understand. Our knowledge is affected by several things. I list just some of the key factors here.

1. One factor is that we are impacted by our family, our friends, and even the particular people that we find ourselves worshipping with. We are impacted by the opportunities we have in our lifetime and what we do with those opportunities.
2. Another factor would be our ability to understand and retain information. This can be affected by educational and personal levels such as our ability level to read and understand. This does not necessarily mean formal educational levels. Jesus was not viewed as a formal scholar and yet he was teaching in the synagogue when he was 12. Personal levels are affected by qualities such as desire to learn, wisdom, perseverance, and diligence. Abraham Lincoln was not formally educated to a great degree, but we have learned of his reading by the fireside when he was growing up.
3. A third factor would be our own experiences. We are molded by our experiences. Our experiences are shaped by events in our lives, our environment, our personal interests, the people around us, our careers, our trials, our faith, and much more.
4. Another factor would be our testimonies - those times when Our Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit enter into our lives in recognizable and very personal ways. These testimonies help to shape our understanding for our lifetime.
5. We cannot forget our personal habits of study. How disciplined are we in our study? Do we start something and then because of being inconsistent in our study, we don't finish it and our reading then becomes incomplete? Included in our personal habits would be our method of study. Do we study the Scriptures some place where we can give full attention to what we are reading, and that gives us the quiet place to ponder and meditate about what we are reading? Do we approach our study by using helpful techniques, such as cross-referencing? We come back to asking the question again - How dedicated are we to studying the Scriptures?

These factors and more make us different from one another. 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 states, *"Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal."* However, even though this Scripture allows for us to be different from one another in how we process our learning and experiences, it still calls us to worship the same Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Our understanding of Scripture is affected by how we study the Scriptures, and our willingness to ask questions and learn from others. There are two primary ways to study the scriptures.

1. Read Scripture from cover to cover. Not all of the books of scripture are written in chronological order, but many of them are, since all three books also relate a history. This type of study is helpful for our understanding of the flow of scripture and history. The Bible is mostly chronological since it narrates history. The prophets and the two kingdoms after Solomon passed away are not strictly in order. The Book of Mormon is in order with the exception of the book of Ether. The Doctrine and Covenants is not chronological in every case as to the date the revelation was given. For example, Section 1 was not the first revelation given to Joseph Smith Jr. The Lord helped the church to place the sections in the order He desired them to be (particularly in the beginning days of the church). After the early days of the Church the sections are in order, and they are almost completely in order by when given in the Reorganization.
2. The other major method of study is to do it by subject. Again, it is helpful to cross-reference your scriptures. Subjects can include a study of Peter, faith, repentance, the resurrection, etc. I give you one example that is important to me and this is on the subject of repentance. D&C 58:9b-d talks about what it means to repent, and the forgiveness that will come to those who truly repent. But if we look at D&C 81:2-3 we see that the promise of forgiveness is removed if we return to the former sins. The Lord ends verse 3 with these words, *"I, the Lord am bound when ye do what I say, but when ye do not what I say, ye have no promise."* The promise of forgiveness is gone in verse 2 with these words, *"but unto the soul who sinneth shall the former sins return, saith the Lord your God."* A spouse who has committed adultery may be forgiven by the other spouse, and we should try to be like the Lord in D&C 58:9c and try to *"remember no more"* the sin and be gracious to the repentant spouse by not constantly holding this transgression over their head, but if the offending spouse commits adultery again it is acceptable for the offended spouse to point to the *"former sins return."* These two scriptures together give us a clearer understanding to repentance and forgiveness.

Our interpretations of the Scriptures can make us think that we have a perfect understanding of what God means through Scripture when we may not fully understand. He has warned us in Isaiah 55: 8-9, *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

I wish to expand on this idea of someone coming to a viewpoint that they perfectly understand the Scriptures and the mind and will of God. I would like to restate part of a poem, entitled *The Blind Men and the Elephant*. This poem was written by John Godfrey Saxe (1816-1887).

*It was six men of Indostan
To learning much inclined
Who went to see the Elephant
(Though all of them were blind),
That each by observation
Might satisfy his mind.*

Each of the blind men touched a different part of the elephant. Even though they ably described what part of the elephant that they were touching, they realized that their description was different from one another. So, I skip to the last verse.

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!*

Here is the moral written of the story.

*So, oft in theologic wars
The disputants, I ween
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!*

Saints, I pray that you do not become alarmed or angry, about these words. How often in Jesus' day did the Twelve not understand fully what He was meaning by His words? In 1917, Elbert A. Smith, (Member of the First Presidency) brought counsel to a body of priesthood, gathered in Lamoni, Iowa, and said these words – *"I have many spiritual forces at work that you know not of. You see but the smaller part of my work, and the world perceives it not at all."* (Ch. Hist., Vol. 6, pg. 646) Arthur Oakman lectured on the point of how much would be taking place in the life of the church if there was more virtue in the Church.

One of the most eloquent speeches given by man on this topic was given by Ben Franklin during the ratification of the United States Constitution on September 17, 1787. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were not completely in favor of the Constitution because it did not include a Bill of Rights. Having a Bill of Rights was not a new concept. The colony, and now state of Virginia had already adopted a Bill of Rights. James Madison, who also was a delegate to the Convention, included this speech in his notes and here is what Benjamin Franklin said,

"Mr. President, I confess that there are several parts of this constitution which I do not at present approve, but I am not sure I shall never approve them: For having lived long, I have experienced many instances of being obliged by better information, or fuller consideration, to change opinions even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore that the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgment, and to pay more respect to the judgment of others."

"I doubt too, whether any other Convention we can obtain may be able to make a better Constitution. For when you assemble a number of men to have the advantage of their joint wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those men, all their prejudices, their passions, their errors of opinion, their local interests, and their selfish views. {Important in considering our interpretations of Scripture} From such an Assembly can a perfect production be expected? It therefore astonishes me, Sir, to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does; and I think it will astonish our enemies, who are waiting with confidence to hear that our councils are confounded like those of the Builders of Babel; and that our States are on the point of separation, only to meet hereafter for the purpose of cutting one another's throats. Thus, I consent, Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure, that it is not the best."

"On the whole, Sir, I cannot help expressing a wish that every member of the Convention who may still have objections to it, would with me, on this occasion doubt a little of his own infallibility – and to make manifest our unanimity, put his name to this instrument."

I have quoted the speech in its entirety. I did this because of its eloquence, and wisdom. Benjamin Franklin and the other Constitutional delegates wrestled with this document. But because it is a breathing document allowing for amendments to be added it is a "living" document. The purpose for including Franklin's remarks is not to compare the Constitution to the Scriptures, but rather to receive a clearer picture of the infallibility of man even with great intelligence and the best of intentions in regards to the interpretations of Scripture. If I *"have not charity, it profiteth me nothing."* Benjamin Franklin passed away in 1790, and the Bill of Rights became the first 10 amendments to the United States Constitution in 1791.

The Scriptures reveal God's working with His creation from the beginning of creation. The Scriptures are to be used as the guide for the Church, as well as the guide for our personal and family lives. All of us need to remain open to the fuller revelation of God through Jesus Christ. How many times have we sung the hymn – *We Limit Not the Truth of God (to our Poor Reach of*

Mind). Latter Day Saints sing that hymn with fervor, because we believe God speaks in all ages, and His ways are higher than our ways. We believe there is yet more light and truth to break upon our way. This may cause us in further examination of our present understanding of Scripture and under *"better information, or fuller consideration"* to re-think our interpretations of the Scriptures as to whether we are, *"using the things of this world in the manner designed of God."* (D&C 128:8c) Great truths are being spoken of in the Restoration Branches, even now, but before Zion appears there will be a flood of *"righteousness and truth"* that will sweep the earth. This promise is in Genesis 7:70. The Lord has chosen us to be the present generation on the earth in this day. We need to be open-minded. Not open-minded to be swayed by men in worldly pursuits, but to be open-minded to being swayed by God to the fuller revelation of His truth. Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life." We need to come unto Jesus.

Just as the United States Constitution is still alive and is the basis for law in our nation, the Scriptures are alive in the Living Church, and they are the basis for the law of the Church, and teaches us how we are to live our lives. The Scriptures testify to a living God, and a living Savior, and a living Church. May the Holy Spirit be our guide in understanding and interpreting the Scriptures. Amen.

We Limit Not the Truth of God

Hymn 292 (Gray Hymnal)

We limit not the truth of God
To our poor reach of mind.
By notions of our day and sect
Crude, partial, and confined.
No, let a new and better hope
Within our hearts be stirred -
The Lord hath yet more light and truth
To break forth from his word.