



HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE

Step #6 - Interpretation (cont'd)

Parallels

Another tremendous aid in understanding Scripture is to compare parallel sections, where the same teaching is being given in slightly different language, by different writers, and/or to different audiences. This is especially pertinent in studying the Gospels. When Matthew recorded Jesus' response to those wanting continuing great "signs," he noted their inability to recognize "the signs of the times" (Matthew 16:3), whereas Luke used the phrase "this present time" (Luke 12:57 NAS) – i.e. the time when Jesus was speaking. Although many yank this phrase out of its context and try to associate it with the 2nd Coming, these parallels are both referring to the inability of first century Jews to recognize the "signs" (credentials/evidences) that were already pointing to Jesus as the Messiah at His first coming. From this, I conclude that the "signs of the times" have nothing to do with the 2nd coming!

For his Jewish readers (familiar with the Old Testament prophets), Matthew put Jesus' comments on the Mount of Olives (Matthew 24:1-21) about the approaching desolation of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. in terms of Daniel's "70 Sevens" prophecy (Daniel 9:24-27), whereas Luke clarified it for his Gentile readers by simply saying "when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies" (Luke 21:10-24) – get out of town!

Roman Catholicism gradually adopted the follow-up (vv. 18,19) to Peter's confession of Jesus as the promised Messiah (Matthew 16:15-19) as justification for Peter's supremacy amongst the Apostles and the foundation of the Papacy. However, it is more than interesting that the comments associated with this questionable doctrine can only be found in the Gospel addressed to a Jewish audience (Matthew). For, when Mark (Peter's Gospel material written for the Roman Church) and Luke (written for Gentiles & Greeks) related this incident and conversation, they totally omitted this material (cf. Mark 8:27-33; Luke 9:18-22). Obviously, they did not think the part of the discussion in Matthew that allegedly validates the Papacy was even worth mentioning to their audiences! When all four gospel writers do record something, that suggests that they all thought the item was important. The similarity and differences between parallels should make us think.

The Value of a Concordance

I believe the single best Bible study tool is an exhaustive concordance. A good exhaustive concordance can aid your study in a number of ways. But be sure to purchase a concordance that is based on the same Bible translation as you are using.

First of all, many people can think of a verse, but they don't know where it is. Since every Bible Word is arranged alphabetically in the concordance, you can simply pick a word that you know exists in that verse (in your version), go to that word in the concordance and run your finger down the listing until you see the segment of the verse which matches what you were looking for – the book, chapter, and verse will be listed. Of course, you can speed this process a great deal by searching for the least common word used in the verse.

Second, I believe that topical studies are one of the most basic methods of developing a systematic theology. “Topical Bibles” depend on the uninspired human who collected the verses, but an exhaustive concordance will help you to locate every place that a particular word appears and that is a good place to start your study. Let's say that you want to get to the bottom of the “antichrist” issue, but aren't sure of what to make of all of the popular “end-time” notions. Open your concordance and look up “antichrist” – you may be surprised to find that the word does not occur even one time in the book of Revelation! But John did discuss the matter in his first and second letters (1John 2:18,22; 4:1-3; 2John 7) and what he says in those verses is very different from the popular notions – there were already many “antichrists” present in John's time, they were apostates from the Christian community (1John 2:19), the spirit of antichrist was already at work in the world through false prophets, and “antichrist” is anyone and everyone who denies that Jesus is the Christ, come in the flesh! Wow – nothing there about popular expectations in our time of a single guy who ravages the world at the end of the Church age, desecrates a rebuilt Jewish temple, starts WWII, etc.

Third, another value of a concordance search is that you can find out what things are *not* in the Bible. Evangelicalism has really gone overboard on the notion of salvation by “faith alone.” but just try and find any Bible writers teaching that – salvation by “faith” yes, but “faith alone/only” never. In fact, the only place in the whole Bible where the phrase “faith alone/faith only” can be found is in James 2:24 and James said that we are NOT justified by “faith alone.” No wonder Paul advocated sticking with Biblical words and phrases to discuss Biblical concepts (2Timothy 1:13) – if you don't, you can gradually develop a completely different theological lingo for your beliefs that may even contradict Biblical teaching (now where did that begin? – Genesis 2:16,17 vs. 3:2-4).

Fourth, for those wishing to discover what Hebrew or Greek words are used, an exhaustive concordance will have either a separate and numbered Hebrew/Greek keyed dictionaries in the back or will organize their listing of English terms according to the different Hebrew/Greek words involved. If a numbering system is used to link to dictionaries in the back, the concordance will explain how to read each entry and make the connections on a separate page, usually in the front of the concordance.