

The Deep Things of God
By Jon Paulien

Chapter Three

Living Lessons from Dead Prophets

In December of 1974, a man named Donald Yost found two large packages wrapped in paper at the headquarters building of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in Takoma Park, Maryland. The dusty and forgotten packages had been untouched for more than 50 years. They contained some 2400 pages of typed, stenographic notes from a lengthy Bible conference held at the GC in July and August of 1919. While the conference was nearly forgotten after 50 years, even by historians, the papers suggested that the conference had been one of the pivotal moments in Seventh-day Adventist history.

You see, the early decades of the Seventh-day Adventist Church were marked by the presence of a living prophet. Adventists believed that the visions and testimonies of Ellen G. White were derived from her direct connection with God. From 1844-1915 her books, articles, sermons, and private letters provided a constant stream of insight into how God viewed the developing movement. Live questions were answered. Institutions were located and built on the basis of White's recommendations. The various results of Adventist biblical study were at

times confirmed and at other times denied.

The presence of a living prophet provided serious challenges, but it also provided great security. Through interaction with the prophet, Adventist leaders could have a strong sense of God's direct guidance in the many difficulties the fledgling movement faced. Theological and political issues could be solved with reference to the prophet's voice. For those fully committed to Ellen White's authority, there was a sense of certainty that few have in this life.

But in 1915 Ellen White died and the living voice was stilled. No longer could the problems of the moment be addressed with direct and specific guidance from God. While her writings could be consulted, the applicability of those writings to specific issues was now easily disputed. A church that was accustomed to the living voice of God in its midst now had to struggle with the writings of a dead prophet, a reality most Christians have always had to live with.

By 1919 the issue of what to do with a dead prophet was becoming life and death for the young movement. So, at the conclusion of the Bible Conference of July 1-21, 1919, the General Conference convened a Bible and History Teacher's Council which continued from July 21 well into the month of August. From July 30 through August 1, 1919, the issue of the dead prophet and her relation to Adventist education and the Bible were at center stage among the 20 or so delegates, which included many of the leading officers of the General Conference itself. It was a momentous occasion.¹

A. G. Daniells, president of the General Conference, raised sparks when he described Ellen White's book *The Life of Paul* as "badly put together." He went on, "We could never claim

inspiration in the whole thought and makeup of the book.” W. W. Prescott then remembered a church controversy over Daniel 8 and reminded the group of Ellen White’s letter warning them not to settle such a public controversy over Bible interpretation on the basis of her writings. Daniells responded by telling the group of a personal conversation with Ellen White over an exegetical issue in Daniel 8 (the “daily”), saying she denied having any revelation on the subject, even though she was quoted in support of both sides!

Daniells and others asserted that Ellen White was no expert in details of history either. With Daniells’ agreement, H. C. Lacey summarized, “In our estimate of the ‘spirit of prophecy,’ isn’t its value to us more in the spiritual light it throws into our own hearts and lives than in the intellectual accuracy in historical and theological matters? Ought we not to take those writings as the voice of the Spirit to our hearts, instead of as the voice of the teacher to our heads? And isn’t the final proof of the ‘spirit of prophecy’ its spiritual value rather than its historical accuracy?”

Things moved on to even more radical ground, at least for some Adventist ears today. Daniells pleaded for common sense in the use of Ellen White’s writings. Vegetarianism is a good principle in general but is not for everyone in every place. Apples may be an excellent food, but Daniells himself got sick when he ate one late in the day! Daniells recalled Ellen White serving meat to her husband when he was sick. The whole group swapped stories of how balanced a person the prophet was. They concluded that her writings must be used with caution in daily living and in biblical interpretation.

On the surface of the discussion, all seemed agreed that “verbal inspiration” was not a

helpful concept in relation to the writings of Ellen White. They agreed that much care and common sense were needed if one was to interpret her writings correctly, especially her writings regarding the Bible and its interpretation. But in the aftermath of the Council, a couple of those present began to spread the word that Daniells and other key leaders had abandoned true faith in the prophet. Three years later Daniells was ousted from the presidency against his will. The death of a prophet can leave believers with more questions than answers. And the problem of what to do with a dead prophet's writings doesn't diminish with the passage of time.

How do you draw living lessons from the writings of a dead prophet? Ultimately, the answer to that question is the mission of this book. To rightly handle the writings of a dead prophet like John you have to begin by taking seriously the time, place, and the circumstances in which the document was produced. This is a bottom line for the understanding of any biblical prophecy. But there are also related questions: How does the Bible text become relevant for today? How can we apply a biblical prophecy to our day, when it was written to somebody else in a different time and place, and reflecting different cultures, ideas and language?

Three Approaches to the Bible

There are three different legitimate ways to approach the Bible and I will call them "exegesis," "biblical theology," and "systematic theology." A chart entitled "Three Ways to Approach Scripture" is provided a bit later in this chapter. We will define each of these procedures in some detail, but first a short definition of each. *Exegesis* has to do with finding

out what a writer was trying to say, determining his or her intention for the text. Exegesis asks the question, “What was the writer trying to say?” **Biblical theology**, on the other hand, seeks to determine the big theological picture that lies between the lines and behind what the author wrote. It asks the question “What did the writer believe about. . . God, the end of the world, how to get right with God, etc? By way of contrast, **systematic theology** tries to determine what truth is in the broadest sense. It asks questions like “What should I believe?” and “What is God’s will for me (for us)?” All three of these approaches to the Bible is valid, but they each approach the Bible in a slightly different way.

	Biblical Exegesis	Biblical Theology	Systematic Theology
	“What was the writer trying to say?”	“What did the writer believe?”	“What should I believe? What is truth?”
Time of Reference	1 st Century	1 st Century	21 st Century
Language	Biblical	Biblical	Philosophical
Result	Unchanging	Unchanging	Changing
Unit of Study	Passage	Theme	Theme
Field of Study	Comprehensive	Selective	Selective
Level of Significance	Descriptive	Both	Normative
Agency Examined	Human	Both	Divine

Biblical Exegesis

For **biblical exegesis** the fundamental question, then, is “What was the Bible writer trying to say?” Since God meets people where they are, the author’s original intention is vital

for biblical understanding. This places the time of reference squarely in the first century. John lived in the first century and had something specific to say to specific churches in a particular part of the world. So in describing what John was trying to say, it is helpful to use “biblical categories.” In other words, the interpreter should use John's own language and meanings to explain his book.

You will notice also that exegesis is by definition “unchanging.” The biblical text that we have received does not change. Our understanding of that text and its manuscript tradition may change. But what John actually set down to write over 1900 years ago has not changed. This means we have an unchanging basis for testing various claims to truth outside the Bible. Exegesis is also “passage-oriented,” you go verse-by-verse and text-by-text. You try to understand line-by-line what a writer was trying to say. Exegesis is also “comprehensive” in that it is a procedure you can perform on any written text. I even do it on student papers, because exegesis is the process of trying to understand the *intention* of the writer at the time when they wrote. The reality is that all of us have some difficulty in communicating. (I struggled a great deal with just how to word this book) “Comprehensive” means that anything that is written is subject to exegesis.

If you go further down the chart you will see that exegesis is a “descriptive process.” It is a process of describing, as best you can, what you think the biblical writer was trying to say. This gives you a look at the human side of the Bible. Biblical writers were inspired and received messages from God. But they were also human beings who had friends, family and the daily issues of life to deal with. They traveled to various places, read newspapers, encountered

people in business, bought and sold things, ate and drank, and talked to people. Exegesis asks human-type questions such as, "What was the writer really intending to say? When John wrote to the churches, what did he want those churches to understand? What did he understand to be the purpose of the book?"

The process of exegesis is far more relevant than may appear at first sight. By nature we humans tend to protect our favorite ideas by misreading texts that might seem threatening (consciously or unconsciously). Psychologists call this tendency "defense mechanisms." Defense mechanisms go all the way back to Adam and Eve who hid in the bushes from God. One of the best ways to bypass these defense mechanisms in Bible study is exegesis. You see, a descriptive approach to the Bible is not threatening to me. For example, Paul wrote a letter to Romans. I am not a Roman, so Paul was not targeting me. Sam Bacchiocchi may be a Roman, but I'm not. And neither Sam nor I live in the first century, so even he is off the hook when it comes to Romans!

The payoff is this! By learning to read the Bible in a descriptive manner, I can be fully honest and open with the text. I can describe what Paul is saying to those first century Romans. It is no threat to me or my pet ideas. But then an interesting thing happens. Once I have studied a Bible book exegetically, I can never read it the same way again. I will have seen things and thought things that I would never have seen and thought had I taken the text personally. While a descriptive reading of the Bible is not sufficient by itself, it is a marvelous aid toward authenticity in Bible study.

Biblical Theology

As a method, **biblical theology** builds on what the Bible writer was trying to say in order to ask what the Bible writer believed. The focus remains on the first century and on the use of biblical categories. Biblical theology is also unchanging. Why is it unchanging? Well, I don't think John or Paul has had a new thought in the last 2,000 years. Since they are dead, they are no longer thinking, writing, theologizing. So what John or Paul believed is something unique to the first century. We have a solid, unchanging source of information about God.

Up to this point, biblical exegesis and biblical theology are identical in basic approach. But there are also differences between them. When doing biblical theology, instead of studying passages, you study themes and ideas. You ask questions such as: "What did John believe about the end of the world?" The minute you deal in themes you also become selective. If you were to ask, "What was John's view on salvation?" for example, you might look at some passages in Revelation but not at others. You wouldn't look at all passages equally because your theme is "salvation" and passages that have nothing to do with salvation would not be of interest to you at that point. If you were to ask the question, "What was Jeremiah's view on health?" you would probably find very little on that subject in the book of Jeremiah, because it doesn't address that theme. So thematic questions about what a writer believed are very selective. You only select the material that addresses your question.

Is biblical theology a descriptive process? Yes and no. Biblical theology is descriptive because you are trying to describe what John and Paul believed; but it is normative because what John or Paul believed as an inspired prophet is a rule for your life whenever your

circumstances are similar to those being addressed. In other words, where there are similar circumstances, what is true in one time is true in another time as well.

Circumstances alter cases, but to the extent that our times are parallel to the times in which the prophet wrote, then what the prophet said is as normative for us today as it was back then. Suppose the prophet were to say something about health or a certain lifestyle. Such a principle would probably not change as long as our bodies are fairly similar to the way they were back then. Circumstances alter cases, but where the circumstances are similar, the principles remain in same force now as they did then.

Is biblical theology human or divine? Again the answer needs to be yes and no. In part, it's a human process because Paul and John were human beings. But through inspiration these human beings also spoke for God (1 Pet 1:18).

Systematic Theology

In ***systematic theology***, by way of contrast, everything seems to change. When you ask what you should believe, what God's will is for you, you move the point of focus from the first to the twentieth-first century. Now, instead of the biblical categories of exegesis, you're asking your questions in your own language. The language of systematic theology is not "biblical," it is "philosophical." What do I mean by that? Every person has a philosophy--some people know it and some people don't. But philosophy is more than simply a view about the world. It's what you think about how things are put together, where we came from, where we're going, why we're here, etc. Everyone has a certain philosophy of life. When you ask philosophical

questions, you're asking the personal questions that burn in your heart.

Philosophical questions by definition include questions that John never heard of or that the Bible never addresses. An example: "Should a Christian smoke?" Nowhere in the Bible is the question of tobacco addressed. Tobacco wasn't even discovered by people in the Old World until about the 16th Century. So we know that the Bible doesn't directly address the issue of smoking. Instead we could ask what there is in John's or Paul's belief system that addresses the issue of smoking.

Can you, however, address the question of smoking from the Bible alone? I would suggest that you can't. Ultimately, the reason that many Christians reject smoking is not a biblical reason but a scientific one. Yes, one can talk about the biblical principle that God wants us to be stewards of our bodies, which He so lovingly made. Scientifically, however, Christians have come to realize that tobacco products are damaging to the human body. Moving beyond science, may people experience the damage of smoking first hand. They wheeze, cough, annoy others and experience smoking-related health issues. So where smoking is concerned, the evidence seems clear even though the Bible doesn't address the issue directly.

So systematic theology is not always dependent on the Bible for its answers. When you ask what God's will is for you, you are not limited to what the Bible says. The possibilities for theological study are almost endless. Can you find God's will through the study of psychology? Yes. Why? Because the Bible says that we are all created in the image of God. If that is true, then as you study the mind, you can learn something about the God that created those minds. Sociology can teach us how groups of human beings created in the image of God relate to one

another. History can show us the successes and failures of those who have, or have not, tried to carry out God's will. History, sociology, science, spiritual gifts, experience, the writings of Ellen White--all are ways to find out God's will for us. Systematic theology is not limited to the Bible. It asks open-ended questions: "What is truth? What is God's will for me? What is God's will for us?"

Let me illustrate the difference between systematic theology and the biblical approaches. A student once came to me and wanted to do a dissertation on the subject of "Sanctification in the Book of Revelation." I told him he couldn't do that.

He said, "What do you mean, I can't do that?"

"You're wanting to do biblical theology, to study what John believed about sanctification. There's only one small problem, John never used the word. You would have to go outside Revelation, or even the Bible, to deal with the question. So it would be like mixing apples and oranges. If you want to know what John believed about character growth, Christian life and Christian development, you're not going to find it in the word 'sanctification.'"

I suggested instead that he could do a dissertation on "good works" in the book of Revelation. In the book of Revelation the word "works" *is* used. John *is* interested in how people behave after they become Christians but he doesn't use the word "sanctification" to describe it. I suggested to this student that if he wanted to do a dissertation in the book of Revelation that he use the actual words of John with the meanings that John intended. To do otherwise would lead to an unending and confusing result.

When studying the Bible it is very important not to mix our own philosophical use of

language with that of the Bible. If you ask the question, “What is the biblical view of sanctification?” you need to let the biblical writers define the terms and not assume that the word meant the same thing to them that it means to you. Luther used the word “sanctification” in a way that Paul didn't use it. When we use Luther's definitions to study Paul, we distort Paul. When we use our contemporary definitions to study Revelation, we can distort the meaning of Revelation. It was not written in the twenty-first century but in 95 A.D. It is to that time and place that we need to go to if we are to rightly understand the intention of John. And since Jesus met John where he was, His intention for us will also be discerned in that original situation.

Notice on the chart above that the time of reference for systematic theology is the twenty-first century, its terminology is philosophical, and the status of its results is constantly changing. Why is systematic theology changeable by definition? Because the questions we ask are constantly changing. We are asking new questions that were not asked in past centuries and that the Bible writers never addressed like: “Should women be ordained? Should Christians smoke? What role should television and the internet play in a Christian’s life?”

As the questions change, new answers must be developed to meet those questions. So we could say that *circumstances alter cases*. As circumstances change, the will of God sometimes adjusts to help us deal with changing circumstances. This is not to say that God is changing His mind in the ultimate sense, but that God meets people where they are. We have seen that principle over and over again in Scripture. As circumstances and questions change, God is able to accommodate Himself in such a way as to communicate in the living language of

the people.

Notice that systematic theology, like biblical theology, is thematic and selective. As we ask our philosophical questions, we are setting a theme and we are automatically selecting our sources. When it comes to smoking, as we have seen, we find a basic principle in the biblical doctrine of taking care of our bodies, but we will discover how to apply that principle in detail through scientific study. If somebody came up with a cigarette that was good for you, there is no biblical reason not to smoke *that* type of cigarette. It is for scientific reasons alone that chewing spinach is accepted and chewing tobacco is rejected.

On the bottom of the chart you'll notice the words "normative" and "divine." Systematic theology has to do with normative truths. The word normative means "a rule for life"--how people ought to live. Examples of normative questions are: "Should a Christian smoke?" "What is God's plan for my life?" and "Is pre-marital sex appropriate for a Christian?" When you get a clear answer from God (regardless of the source) to any of these questions, it becomes a law for your being. "Normative" has to do with the way you are expected to live.

Systematic theology, in the way I am defining it, is also divine, it assumes that there is a God, and that He has an opinion on the particular subject. You are seeking to understand how God wants you to live. In this sense systematic theology is very personal and very practical. It can play a similar role for the church at large, "What is truth?" "What is God's will or plan for us?"

From Then to Now

The chart we began with summarizes three ways of approaching Scripture. Christians

sometimes try to “mix and match” these approaches. A church may claim, for example, that it follows the Bible and the Bible only. But if that church teaches that Christians shouldn't smoke, is it 100% accurate to say it follows the Bible and the Bible only? Isn't it also true that science has played a role in coming to that decision? As we raise questions on whether or not to ordain women, for example, are we not arguing also from psychology, sociology, history, and experience as well as from the evidence of biblical passages?

Although Adventists try to bring all beliefs to the test of Scripture, therefore, we should not think of the 27 Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church as biblical theology. They are more accurately understood as systematic theology. They express what the church as a whole thinks God wants people to believe and practice in today's world. The kinds of issues addressed in the Fundamentals go far beyond the issues addressed in the Bible. Perhaps thirty per cent of the Adventist fundamentals need support from science, history, experience, the writings of Ellen White, and other sources outside the Bible. Other Fundamentals are based on texts as they are understood in terms of a wider, contemporary meaning, not just the exegetical meaning of that text. And there is nothing wrong with that. We don't want to limit ourselves to exegetical understandings. Scripture needs to be applied in creative ways to the issues of today's world.

What about the writings of Ellen White? Are they to be understood as exegesis, biblical theology or systematic theology? Many have assumed that Ellen White's use of Scripture was exegetical. They are often eager to limit exegesis of biblical texts to the constraints of her off-hand comments about them. But careful analysis over time has led the White Estate to the

conclusion that Ellen White rarely attempted to do exegesis along the lines we have discussed in this chapter.² Less than one per cent of the time does she attempt to answer the human kind of question, “What was the biblical writer trying to say? I believe that a high percentage of her exegetical statements are found in the books *Thoughts from the Mount of Blessing*, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, and *Acts of the Apostles*. Exegetical statements are extremely rare in the *Testimonies* and most other writings.

Like most biblical prophets, she was relatively uninterested in the original meaning of the biblical text. She was more concerned to draw out the large principles and perspectives from the insights gained in her direct connection to God. She did not need to do exegesis of the Bible to attain those insights. I suspect most of her exegetical statements were drawn not from her visionary insights, but from books on the same topic that she read and decided to incorporate into her own work. We will address these issues in more detail shortly.

What about the proof-text method that is so popular in Bible studies and evangelistic presentations. Is the proof-text method exegesis, biblical theology or systematic theology? At its best, I like to think of it as biblical theology. It is the attempt to draw together all the biblical texts on a particular subject with the purpose of determining what the overall teaching of the Bible on that subject is. At its best, the proof-text method should use biblical texts in ways that do not contradict their exegetical meaning, but the comparing of passage with passage will tend to draw out a larger picture than the individual authors of the Bible may have understood.

As Adventists approach the book of Revelation, they have a natural tendency to ask questions of the book that it was never intended to answer. If you ask the book of Revelation

the question, “What is the outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?” or “Will this American president be the one who precipitates the final crisis of earth’s history?” the frank answer is that the Bible doesn't address the question. If the Bible doesn't address that question, your attempt to get that kind of information out of Revelation will distort the intention of the book.

When approaching Revelation, therefore, I believe it is critical to begin with the method of exegesis, “What was John trying to say when he wrote the book of Revelation?” We need to understand the significance that his words had in their time and place. We need to try to understand the God Who meets people where they are. When we’ve finished the basic groundwork, we can move on to explore the bigger theological picture of Revelation, including the meaning it should have for us today.

Practical Implications

Perhaps you are wondering why we have to do exegesis when Paul and Ellen White didn’t have to. I think there is a very good reason. You and I are in a very different situation from Paul and Ellen White. You see, prophets do not need to do exegesis. It’s a matter of authority. Let me explain.

The Source of Authority

Authority, in the ultimate sense, resides in God and God alone. Anyone else carries spiritual authority only to the extent that they speak for God. For example, suppose I said to you, “Last night I had a dream and in that dream God told me, ‘You ought to sell everything

you've got and move to Africa.” Would you do it? That depends, I suppose, on whether or not you believe God actually gave me that dream!

Now if you believe that I am a prophet (and I'm not) and that this dream came directly from God (remember, this is only hypothetical), you might take it quite seriously, wouldn't you? You might even start inquiring about airfares and job opportunities in Africa. But if you didn't believe that I spoke for God or that God gave me that dream, it should have absolutely no authority in your thinking, right?

The prophet's authority lies in the fact that he or she has a direct line to God! The genuine prophet receives revelations from God, often in visions and dreams, so when the prophet gives messages to people, it is as if they came directly from God Himself. If God tells me directly that I ought to sell all I have and move to Africa, I had better do it. That message has “normative” authority for me.

It is different with you and me. We have no direct line with God, the way a prophet does. That is why exegesis is so important. We need to do exegesis because, as non-prophets, the only absolutely reliable window we have to the mind of God is to rightly understand His Word. Without direct access to God or to a living prophet, our understanding of truth must be based on sound, careful exegesis of the words of inspiration.

Paul didn't have to do exegesis of the Old Testament in order to know the truth about God. The basis of Paul's authority was not the soundness of his exegesis, but the genuineness of his direct access to God. Paul sometimes applies the writings of the OT prophets in ways they wouldn't have recognized or to circumstances that the prophet wouldn't have foreseen. But,

this is all right as long as Paul is functioning under God's direction. God helped Paul to utilize the writings of dead prophets to create a living message for his time and place. The authority that comes through in Paul's letters is the authority of God. But I do not have the kind of authority that Paul had. He was inspired. His conclusions carry their own authority. But ***my conclusions have authority only as they accurately reflect the biblical content.***

If careful exegesis is important in the gospels or the letters of Paul, how much more is it important to the study of Revelation, a book that evokes as many opinions as there are interpreters of the book. So in the previous chapter we took a careful look at the big picture of the Bible. From that we've drawn some basic principles upon which to base our study of Revelation. Careful biblical work is necessary because I have no authority from God to write a book about Revelation unless I rightly handle the texts that God has given. I carry authority only to the extent that I am accurately reflecting what is actually there in the biblical text.

Dead Prophets

What you and I face is a problem faced by most generations: the problem of the dead prophet. As indicated in the title of this chapter, we are interested in "Living Lessons." But the place where we must go to find those living lessons is to the writings of dead prophets. God's revelations were given in the context of another time, another place, and other circumstances. Yet we go there to hear a word from the Lord for us, for our time and our place.

How then do you find living lessons in the dead prophets without reading into the Bible your own prejudices and pet ideas? Through a careful application of all three approaches

suggested above. 1) If you want a living lesson that has the authority of God behind it, be prepared to first understand what John's intention was and what God's intention was in working through him. 2) The next step is to move beyond the text to understand John's basic philosophy of life, the bigger picture of his theology that was applied in that text. 3) Finally you need to ask the questions of today. You need to ask how the great principles reflected in the text apply to the real issues of living in today's world.

But as important as exegesis is, you can't stop there. God's intention for Scripture is not limited to the original human author's intention but is expressed through it. Systematic theology compares scripture with scripture and sees things that the original writer never intended. Later history, later revelations, may expose extended meanings which were present in God's intention but not the human author's intention.

But how do we know that an extended meaning of the text is valid and has the authority of God behind it? Only if that ***extended meaning is a natural extension of the plain meaning of the original text***. You can only trust the extended meaning when you know the original meaning and the original intention of the text. Systematic theology can mislead us unless it is grounded in careful exegesis of the biblical text.

Do we always have to do exegesis when reading the Bible? No. There are many times in your devotional experience that God will touch your heart with a sense of what is right for you. For personal use in our own lives, God can often by-pass the exegetical meaning of the text to teach us something. Exegesis is not a devotional approach. It has to do with Christians seeking truth as a group. If a group of people seeks a common understanding of the Bible, it is

important that they are all reading the same text! If everybody in the group brings their own ideas, feelings, and impressions to the text, and insists that those impressions are the word of God, there can never be unity of understanding.

Antioch and Alexandria

How do you safely find living lessons in the writings of dead prophets? Historically, there have been two ways of trying to make the text of the Bible relevant for today. Those two ways are sometimes associated with two ancient cities--Antioch and Alexandria. Each became associated with a method of reading the Bible. The method of Alexandria is called "allegory." The method of Antioch was close to what we have called exegesis.

Allegory seems to have started with Plato, who lived about four centuries before the time of Jesus. According to Homer (800 BC), whose writings were the "Bible" of the ancient Greeks, the gods of the Greeks were just like human beings in character, but had absolute power. Plato was unimpressed, *God is not like that*, he thought. *The true God is much greater than that*. Plato saw a clearer picture of God than most Greeks had, but his own teacher, Socrates, had been martyred for teaching that kind of picture. Plato wasn't anxious to experience a similar fate, so he developed the allegorical approach to Homer's writings. Through allegory, Plato was able to reshape the teachings of Homer in such a way that Homer seemed to be teaching what Plato was trying to teach. So allegory saved Plato's life by reducing the tension between his views and the sacred writings of the ancient Greeks.

Allegory has been frequently applied to the Bible as well, beginning with the work of

Philo and Origen in the ancient world. A classic example of allegory is Origen's interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan. Origen did not ask how the story functioned in Jesus' purpose. Instead, for Origen, the story became a parable teaching his own third-century theology. The victim in the story is Adam; Jerusalem represents heaven; and Jericho, the world. The traveler is Adam going from heaven to the world. The robbers are Satan and his angels. The priest represents the law; the Levite, the prophets; and the Samaritan, Christ. The donkey is Christ's body who carries the fallen Adam. The Inn represents the church and the two coins paid by the Samaritan are the Father and the Son. His promise to come back and pay the bills in the future represents Jesus promise to return--the second coming.

Origen of Alexandria certainly added a fresh dimension to the story. No doubt his interpretation made it more interesting to his audience. But does it have anything to do with the original meaning of that story? Hardly. Origen has allegorized the story by bringing in ideas and concepts from his time. He has used the story to do something entirely different than what Jesus intended. He read into the story ideas from his own standpoint in time. This is, in fact, the natural way humans read the Bible. Most of us read the biblical text in light of our own needs, ideas, and questions.

The ancient city of Antioch, on the other hand, had an exegetical approach to Scripture, insisting that the biblical text itself must govern the content of what an interpreter sees in the text. The original setting must be taken into account. Only after you understand the original setting should you make application to your own time and place. So the basic concepts of exegesis have had almost as long a history as allegory.

Allegory was triumphant during the Middle Ages. The Medieval Church used allegory to confirm its own teachings from the Bible, no matter how foreign to the gospel those teachings were. This led people far from Scripture and from the will of God. With the coming of the Protestant Reformation, however, the spirit of Antiochean exegesis was revived. The Bible was once again the final word in the search for truth. The Reformation promoted a return to the Bible and the meanings that are natural to the Bible.

Alexandria is far from dead, however, even in Protestant churches. Allegory is very edifying, so preachers use it to apply the Bible to the needs, concerns, and issues of their churches. In so doing they unconsciously impose these needs and concerns on the original context of the Bible. This is not usually a conscious act. In fact, it could be argued that that allegory is the “natural” way to read the Bible. It's not necessarily dangerous if the interpreter's theology is sound. But the conclusions of allegory say more about the interpreter's theology than the meaning of the biblical text. If we want to understand a complex book like Revelation, we need to examine carefully how we are reading the book.

In the last half of this book, I lay out in considerable detail what it means to do exegesis on the book of Revelation. The method is drawn from the evidence in the text itself. It is the method of Antioch, allowing the text to govern what is seen in the text. In the future I plan to apply this approach consistently to the twenty-two chapters of Revelation.

In the next chapter I will offer some guidelines and safeguards to pastors and lay people who may not have some of the scholarly tools but who would like to study and teach the book of Revelation in an exegetical way. The guidelines in the next chapter offer a practical tour

through the city of Antioch. Through these tools people living every-day lives can overcome the natural tendency to allegorize the Bible. They can gain a genuine understanding of the biblical text which will help them grow into the knowledge of God.

Notes

1. In my summary of the Council discussions I am particularly indebted to the transcripts and introduction found in *Spectrum*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1979), pages 23-57.

2. Cf. the comments by Robert Olson in *Ministry*, December, 1990, p. 17.