

THE GOAL OF INTERPRETATION  
(OR, THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE INTERPRETER)

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Introduction

The goal in any successful communication, whether oral or written, is to ensure that the sender's intended message (SIM) is accurately and properly interpreted by the receiver. In other words, the message sent must always equal the message received. It is the role of the interpreter to hold in abeyance any preunderstandings and presuppositions so that the SIM is not distorted by one's own biases and prejudices, and to discover what is already there. Unfortunately, many churches today have fallen prey to random opinions, and dogmatic conjecturing which result from poor knowledge and improper interpretation of God's Word. Never before has there been the need for clear and accurate biblical interpretation. Research by the Barna Research Group indicates that while more people today profess to be born-again Christians, their knowledge of the Bible is considerably less than even fifteen years ago.<sup>1</sup> The tendency is to believe that biblical truth is determined by one's feelings, and that multiple interpretations are valid even when they are subjective. This paper discusses the need for understanding the goals, roles, and responsibilities of the interpreter in the overall cycle of communication whether oral or written.

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<sup>1</sup> Barna Research Group, *Americans' Bible Knowledge Is In the Ballpark, But Often Off Base*, July 12, 2000. [<http://www.barna.org>].

### The Goal and Role of the Interpreter in the Communication Cycle

The proper objective in any communication cycle is for the sender's intended message to be accurately and clearly interpreted by the receiver. Whenever something prevents the sent message from being accurately received it is usually due to some form of communication "noise." Gibson and Ivancevich define communication noise as "anything which distorts, distracts, misunderstands, or interferes with the communication cycle."<sup>2</sup> Rockey further points out that there are at least ten components to a complete communication cycle. These include the sender, the message, encoding, decoding, group attachments (the sender's audience), the background of the sender, feedback, channels, the background of the receiver, and common backgrounds of the sender and receiver.<sup>3</sup> Anything that adversely affects any of these components will create communication noise. Communication noise can also result when the interpreter (receiver) fails to put aside preunderstandings, presuppositions, failing to listen carefully and sympathetically, and neglecting to compare the received message to the sent message.

### The Goal and Role of the Interpreter in Written Communications

The goal of the interpreter in written communications is identical to any communication whether oral or written, that is, the SIM must be identical to the received message. Since biblical interpreters cannot conduct face-to-face oral discussions with the authors of the Bible, it becomes necessary to interpret exclusively from the written form. Modern biblical interpreters are separated from biblical message-senders by distance of time, cultural distance, geographical

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<sup>2</sup> James L. Gibson, John M. Ivancevich, Jr., Organizations, Structure, Processes, Behavior. Business Publications, Dallas, Texas, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Edward H. Rocky, Communicating in Organizations, Winthrop Publishers, Inc, 1977.

distance, distance of language, and therefore must take special care to avoid typical decoding errors. To do this, the interpreter must place a high emphasis on understanding the author's original language (both textual and grammatical), his culture, intended audience, and circumstances. Knowing the sender's problems at the time of the writing can also aid in sound interpretation.<sup>4</sup> When attempting to understand the sender's culture, it is important to avoid interpreting the sent message exclusively in the domain of the receiver's culture. For example, Jesus said "no man putteth new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish."<sup>5</sup> A modern Westerner, using a pesheritic approach, might read this scripture in the context of today's culture and not see any significance to the age of a bottle since today's old and new glass bottles have essentially the same strength. However, goatskins ("bottles") in ancient times would lose their elasticity and burst when they became old.<sup>6</sup> Stereotyping and overgeneralizing an ancient culture can also generate communication noise. Knowing that most people in ancient times lived very agrarian lifestyles might lead an interpreter to think that biblical authors were uneducated and unable to express deep thoughts. Such overgeneralizing and stereotyping of the sender's culture will prevent an accurate interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mortimer J. Adler, Charles Van Doren, How to Read a Book, the Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading, Simon & Shuster, 1940-1972. This is in reference to the fourth rule in reading a book and is focused on discovering the author's intentions.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 5:37, 38 (KJV).

<sup>6</sup> G. Christian Weiss, Insights Into Bible Times and Customs, The Good News Broadcasting Association, Inc., 1972.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Ryan Ruggiero, Beyond Feelings, A Guide to Critical Thinking, Mayfield Publishing Company, 2001.

### Faulty Interpretive Approaches

One approach used to form a basis of interpretation is the *reader-centered* approach. This approach makes the assumption that any text's meaning depends on the reader's perception of it, and not the author's.<sup>8</sup> The weakness here lies in subjectivity of the reader, and the potential for creating many meanings which were not part of the sender's (author's) message. Because the sender's intended message is not identical to the receiver's message, the proper goal of communication is therefore not achieved. This can be illustrated by the married woman who fell in love with another man and wanted to know what advice she could find in the Bible. She went to Ephesians 4:24 and read, "And that ye put on the new man..." She interpreted this to mean that it was biblically sound for her to divorce her husband and marry the "new man" in her life. She accepted her interpretation as the only meaning of this verse and failed to take the full context into consideration. To her the text alone contained the meaning and not the sender's intended message.

Still another faulty approach is called *text-centered* approach. When dealing with written communications there are three overall aspects to consider: 1) the sender's intended message, 2) the receiver's understanding, and 3) the grammatical and textual meaning. The text-centered interpreter who focuses exclusively on the grammatical and textual meaning, while ignoring the SIM, will not see the "forest for the trees," and will often experience paralysis-by-analysis by relying only on grammatical principles. Such an approach produces a myopic interpretation and will miss the SIM. The text-centered interpreter is also likely to force meaning into the message (eisegesis) rather than discovering the SIM (exegesis). Text-centered interpretation also tends to

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<sup>8</sup> William Klein, Graig L. Blomberg, Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., Introduction to Biblical Interpretation, W Publishing Group, 1993.

assume there is only one meaning when in fact there may be multiple meanings. The proper goal of successful communications will therefore not be met.

Even well intentioned believers might use the faulty approach of short circuiting sound interpretive methods and simply take a message's meaning at face value assuming that it was revealed to them by the Holy Spirit. Having a simplistic understanding of the illumination of the Holy Spirit is dangerous and very much like the reader-centered approach.

### Responsibilities of the Interpreter

The primary responsibility of the interpreter is to make every effort to ensure that the received message is identical to the SIM. One of the key methods for achieving this is to *synthesize before analyzing*. Looking at the entire context of a scriptural passage and then focusing on smaller aspects of the context will produce a better understanding of the SIM, especially when interpretation is made only after making a full and complete observation.

The interpreter must also be conscious of the normal human tendency to bring his/her *presuppositions* and *preunderstandings* into the communication process. Interpretation must be made from an objective point of view rather than a subjective point of view. Mickelsen reminds us that "...we cannot escape subjectivity in our interpretation of the Bible. An interpreter brings to bear upon the text all that he is, all that he knows, and even all that he wants to become."<sup>9</sup>

Another responsibility of the interpreter is to make every effort to understand the conditions and circumstances at time of writing, author himself, the intended audience, and to use every method possible to discover the message that is already there. This means avoiding the human tendency to eisegete and to hold one's preconceived ideas and opinions in abeyance, or what Peter Senge

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<sup>9</sup> A. Berkely Mickelsen, Interpreting the Bible, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963.

called practicing “suspended assumption.”<sup>10</sup>

An effective Christian interpreter will seek the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit while relying on sound hermeneutic processes. This requires an attitude of submission and humility while seeking the truth of the ultimate message sender, God himself.

### Conclusions

The goal of the interpreter is to make every effort to ensure that the received message is as close as possible to the sender’s intended message. Doing so will achieve the proper objective of any communication whether written or oral. Care must be placed on understanding the historical meaning of the text, the author’s original language (both textual and grammatical), the author’s culture, the intended audience, and the circumstances. The interpreter should keep in mind that there is the human tendency to impose one’s own presuppositions and understandings on the received message and instead to work objectively toward discovering the message that is already there. If biblical interpreters are to discover intended message of the Bible, it is vital that they have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and seek the fuller sense of the Word by relying on the Holy Spirit for illumination while using sound hermeneutic practices.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter M. Senge, The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization, 1990, Currency Doubleday, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.