

# Grammar, Syntax and the Holy Spirit

## *The Role of the Holy Spirit*

A large portion of understanding the Bible could be summed by the two words: *grammar* and *syntax* - understanding the words and how they fit together to communicate a message. Yet by saying this, we are not denying the role of the Holy Spirit in understanding the Bible. The Spirit *uses* what is understood (through grammar and syntax) to change the mind, heart and actions of a person. When we study the Bible, we are focusing on the first part (understanding what is written), but what happens with the message (once it is understood) is between you and the Holy Spirit.

There are two clarifications we need to make to this statement. First, the Holy Spirit doesn't need a *totally perfect* understanding on our part, before he is able to work in our lives. If this were necessary, then the Spirit would probably *never* have the opportunity to work in any of us, because all of us are imperfect people! He works *in spite of* our imperfections, not *because* of them.

Second, there is no value in excusing (or encouraging) *ignorance*, by claiming that the Holy Spirit can still work in a person's life. Scripture repeatedly associates ignorance with concepts such as folly, deception, destruction, and perishing, rather than with the Holy Spirit working in our lives. *Willful* ignorance or ignorance due to laziness, is even worse.

## *The Issue of Word Definitions*

People often overlook the issue of word definitions, but it is very important. A person who does not understand what the words mean will be less able to understand what is being said. Obviously, a dictionary can be quite useful. If a word has multiple meanings (and many do), the context will normally help determine which meaning best fits the word. If you plan to use an old translation (such as the King James Version), you should probably obtain an old dictionary that gives old definitions. In addition to the obsolete words that one might be unfamiliar with, a person can become misled by the words he *does* know, if he reads *modern* definitions into an old translation. (If you do not have an old dictionary, comparing the older translation to a newer one will help you spot potential problem areas.)

In addition to the naturally-occurring change that sometimes occurs in the meanings of words (down through the years), we face an additional problem today. In many instances there has been a deliberate change in the meanings of words, as the framework of our culture has become increasingly hostile to the moral foundation of the Word of God. In situations like this, even understanding a *modern* translation can sometimes be difficult, if we read these changes into the text. A few examples of such changes will show this:

1) The Bible uses the word "*believe*" in the sense of accepting something that is true (such as a fact about Jesus), and living according to that truth. Today many people use that word to refer to personal

opinion or acceptance of something that is imaginary and at times contrary to reason. To such people, "believing" in Jesus means something like holding to an opinion about something that is not necessarily relevant to life - and perhaps even imaginary.

2) *Truth*, which in the Bible is absolute and unchanging, has been redefined as something relative and variable, with each person deciding for himself what his "truth" is going to be. For people with such a view, one person's "truth" can be totally contradictory to another person's "truth," and it doesn't matter. Neither (according to them) is more correct than the other, and neither has a right to tell the other that his "truth" is wrong.

3) Today many people have blurred the distinction between *love* and *lust*, to the point that such a distinction is sometimes even denied. In contrast, the Bible's concept of love is the *opposite* of lust.

4) The word "*church*" is also greatly abused, today being used most often in reference to a building or a man-made institution. (This specific false definition has existed for many centuries, and shows that such changes aren't always a new phenomenon.) To the apostles the word "church" simply referred to *people* who were following Jesus. To be "outside the church" *didn't* mean that you weren't part of some specific denomination or institution. It didn't mean that you were outside of the building! Rather, it simply meant that you weren't a follower of Jesus.

Various helps, such as a Bible dictionary, may provide insight into the way the *Bible* uses different words (as opposed to the way that modern society uses the words). On the other hand, frequent reading of the Bible (and observing what it says) will also help familiarize you with the way the Bible uses most words.

### *Connotations Given to Words - Ideas Which Are Implied*

Even when the dictionary definition is still the same, the *connotation* may have changed, as people have abandoned the foundation of God's Word and have gone after their own ways. Often these changes in connotation will be rather obvious, as the Bible will make direct statements that go against the modern connotations. Sometimes the change in connotation may be so opposite to what the Bible says, that it will be like the change that occurs when we begin calling evil "good" and good "evil."

Here are two examples of ways in which the connotation of a word has radically changed:

1) Today, most people think of *slavery* as *always* and *only* evil - and if you accept the modern connotations normally given to that word, perhaps this is true. Yet the Bible's concept of slavery includes a wide range of concepts, some of which could even be *desired* by a person. (Some examples: Deuteronomy 15:16-17; Romans 1:1; 6:22; 1 Corinthians 7:20-22; 9:19,27; and James 1:1.)

2) The Bible describes *homosexuality* as a form of moral depravity, an offense to God, and something which can bring a whole nation under judgment. Yet today, it is often considered a legitimate "alternate lifestyle" that hurts no one (if both participants agree to it), and which a person has a right to freely choose.

### *Putting the words together*

There is a reason for the way words are put together: to communicate a specific message. We need to train ourselves to pay attention to the relationships between words. We don't necessarily need to know everything about the technical terms used to *describe* these relationships (though it can be helpful), but ignoring these issues results in *mis*-communication.

One could wish that this issue was obvious and didn't need mentioned. But many people mistreat *God's* Words in ways that they would never consider mistreating the writings of humans. Some randomly select verses out of separate contexts and paste them together, to get statements and interpretations that were never intended when the Word was written. Others cling to verses that say what they want, and ignore the verses they don't like. Still others randomly pick verses (often with their eyes shut), and think that doing so will help them to understand "God's will" for their lives.

Methods that people use (knowingly or unknowingly) to abuse God's Words are probably endless. But none of them are ways in which God intended his Word to be used. If God *does* on some occasion use one of these ways to accomplish something good in a person's life, it would be *in spite of* the misuse, not *because of* it.

### *Final Comments*

Again, we must emphasize that relying on the Holy Spirit and studying the Bible go together. Though the Spirit doesn't need to wait until we have a *perfect* understanding of God's Word, he does not work in a vacuum. He uses (works with and directs) what *we* do, to accomplish his purposes - and this includes using our willingness to grow in our understanding of his Word.

Some people may use Jesus' instructions in Mark 13:11, as a "justification" for not studying and learning what the Bible says. Jesus was telling the disciples not to worry about what they would say (when confronted), but to trust the Holy Spirit to give them the right words to say. Yet Jesus wasn't telling them, "Be stupid and the Holy Spirit will bless you!" Instead, the Spirit would accomplish his purposes by using the truth that was already in their hearts - the things Jesus had taught them. They didn't have to memorize a pre-planned speech, but could trust God to use what they had learned.

In the end, when all is said and done, we must still acknowledge that the final outcome is made possible only by what the Holy Spirit has accomplished, working through us. Though we exert the effort to learn and to apply what we learn, we will not boast, at the Day of Justice, that the final outcome was due to what *we* did. The changes necessary in our hearts were simply too great to be possible by a mere increase in understanding; it required a change of our *natures*. Instead of boasting about ourselves, we will thank *God* for the understanding we gained through our studies, and for the way the Holy Spirit used this understanding, to change us. We will give credit to the One who saved us, and will confess that, from beginning to end, "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2:9).