

# The Harvester



## Preparing Souls

## To Serve The Lord



Volume 31

May 2011

Number 10

## The Hermeneutic of Good Intentions

By Gene Burgett

People sometimes ask for my opinion as to the meaning of a Biblical text. I have learned through the years that asking for my understanding of a text does not mean the individual has not already formulated his or her own view of the passage referenced. Often the inquiry is framed with these words: "I believe the passage means just what it says." In this article I shall refer to this as the *hermeneutic of good intentions*.

### Hermeneutic of Good Intentions Explained

Whether or not one realizes it, when people frame their interpretation of a passage in this way, they have not only revealed what they believe the passage means, but they have also set forth the hermeneutic used to justify the position taken. Knowing the hermeneutic one uses to arrive at the meaning of a passage is crucial, for while a faulty hermeneutic sometimes yields a conclusion that coincides with truth, it is more likely to lead to an interpretation that is opposed to truth.

An obvious question to consider at this point is this: If a hermeneutic is false, then how is it possible for it to ever lead to a conclusion that is true? Perhaps an illustration will help us see what may appear to some to be, at best, splitting hairs, while some even maintain that if a method yields a correct answer then it cannot be wrong.

Note the following example from mathematics that will help us see how it is possible for a false method to yield an answer that coincides with truth. The square of a number is the product of that number when it is multiplied by itself. Thus the square of the number two is four because the product of two times two is four ( $2 \times 2 = 4$ ).

Suppose, however, another individual mistakenly believes that one arrives at the square of a number by multiplying that number by two (i.e. doubling the number). In this case, the faulty method and the correct method for arriving at the square of two yield the same answer, two.

It is also important to realize that even though in the above example both the correct and faulty methodology yield the same answer, it would be incorrect to say that the faulty method reached the correct answer. It would be more accurate to state that the faulty method provided an answer that coincided with the answer obtained by the correct methodology.

Another point that one ought to recognize about situations where an incorrect method provides an answer that coincides with the correct answer, is the false security it engenders. After all, if people get the same conclusion even though their method was incorrect, why bother changing the method? But, as our mathematics illustration reveals, the number two is the only instance (when using positive integers) where the false procedure yields

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an answer that coincides with the correct answer. We can see this illustrated when we solve for the square of four. The square of four is sixteen ( $4 \times 4 = 16$ ), however four multiplied by two (the incorrect method) equals eight ( $4 \times 2 = 8$ ).

Let us now look at a Biblical illustration of the idea under consideration. When one states of a Bible passage "I think it means just what it says," what he is really saying is that he interprets that passage literally. For this reason, when the "I-think-it-means-just-what-it-says" hermeneutic is applied to a literal statement in the Bible it yields a correct answer. Consider, however, the nutty conclusions one reaches when this hermeneutic is applied to figurative statements.

Would anyone, for example, approach Jesus' statement, "I am the door" literally? Would anyone say, "I believe it means just what it says"? The situation sounds absurd and perhaps some are thinking this article is dealing with hypothetical situations with little chance of occurring. However, before one gets too confident in the ability of expositors to recognize absurd literalizations, consider what one's Roman Catholic friends conclude when faced with Jesus' words, "Take, eat; this is my body" (Mt. 26:26). Roman Catholics would say of this statement, "I believe it means just what it says," and absurdities cannot be dished-out in large enough quantities for them to apprehend how preposterous it is to believe that the disciples, sitting at the table with the flesh and blood Jesus, actually believed Jesus literally meant the bread was an extension of His physical body and His actual blood was in the cup.

also, he cannot be My disciple" (Lk. 14:26). The Calvinist, however, does "believe it means just what it says" when he reads in Romans 9:13, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I hated."

Church history is littered with individuals who "believe it means just what it says" with reference Jesus' words, "And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out" (Mk. 9:7). Some, struggling with lust, may have removed an eye, but most mutilated their genitalia believing this was Jesus' prescription for lust.

## Positive Aspect of the Hermeneutic of Good Intentions

One might wonder if anything positive can be found in the hermeneutic under consideration. I can think of at least one positive angle. If the individual is prepared to live consistently with the conclusions of this method of interpretation, then he must surely have great faith. He must have great faith to put God's word over his own heart, which surely must be screaming, "This cannot possibly be right!" as he mutilates himself in the name of obeying God.

In all fairness, it should be noted that believing a passage "means just what it says" is a very useful hermeneutic when addressing a passage God intends to be taken literally, but the method leads to strange interpretations when misapplied, and it often is misapplied.

## Negative Aspects of the Hermeneutic of Good Intentions

The first problem with the hermeneutic under consideration is the most obvious one: some Biblical texts were never intended to mean exactly what they say.

This method of interpretation, applied too liberally, creates an atmosphere where it may be easy to forget that the meaning of any passage cannot be understood without also knowing what is taught elsewhere in Scripture on the subject the passage addresses. We would do well to remember the frustration we often feel when studying the Bible with someone who believes salvation is by faith only, with no intervening actions on the part of the individual between his belief and salvation. In such a Bible study, one might bring passages like Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16, and many others, into the discussion; thus proving that God's word teaches that faith does not save an individual until it leads one to turn away from sin and be baptized. The faith only advocate often replies with John 3:16, "Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life," and I believe it means just what it says."

Does anyone believe Jesus was literally mandating hating one's parents as a requirement of discipleship? Few would say they believe it means just what it says to Jesus' words, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life

### The Harvester

Published Monthly

Florida School of Preaching

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Lakeland, Florida 33803

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The attitude often admits upfront that there is nothing we can show one in Scripture that will convince him that water baptism is essential to salvation.

## Conclusion

The lesson that one ought to take away from this article is simple: properly interpreting the Bible demands diligence, and we must not allow the attitude, "I believe it means just what it says," stand between us and well-reasoned arguments that are contrary to our good intentions.

**Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. (2 Tim. 2:15, NKJ)**

# WHY LET OUR LIGHT SHINE?

By Brian R. Kenyon

Speaking of Christians' influence, Jesus said, "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. <sup>16</sup>Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Mt. 5:14-16). Being the kind of influence Jesus spoke of here is serious business. Jesus Himself came as "light" (Jn. 1:4-5, 7-9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36, 46), and we are to be like Jesus (Rom. 8:29; 1 Pet. 2:21; 1 Jn. 2:6). The verses quoted above give us three reasons why we should let our "light so shine."

First, our light should shine to dispel darkness. John wrote of Jesus, "In him was life; and the life was the light of men. <sup>5</sup>And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (Jn. 1:4-5). Light is so dispelling to darkness that "every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved" (Jn. 3:19-20). We must live as children of light (1 Thes. 5:4-10), dispelling darkness by our influence!

Second, our light should shine to guide others to God (Mt. 5:14-15). In the first century world, a city set on a hill was unmistakably visible. Likewise, a Christian's light should be obvious. It is not meant to be concealed under a basket. Light has been defined as a "wave of energy that can be seen." God's word should be our light, or guidance (Ps. 119:105; Pr. 6:23), and we in turn should guide others to that light by our influence!

Third, our light should shine to glorify God (Mt. 5:16). The reason we were created in the first place was to bring glory to God (cf. Isa. 43:7). Everything we do must glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17). This God-glorifying life can influence the world only if the world can see it! Thus, we must let our "light so shine" that God may receive all glory!

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**Thanks to Our Generous Supporters** for another successful school year! Our 2010-2011 school year came to a conclusion May 6, with a graduation ceremony conducted at the South Florida Avenue facilities on May 8, which also happened to be Mother's Day! The faculty and staff are just as happy (maybe even happier) than the students! As we reflect on the successes (and some disappointments) of the previous school year, we cannot help but to thank God for our generous supporters. Without your help, we simply could not operate as we have since 1969! Thank you!

As we turn our attention to the 2011-2012 school year, we cannot help but feel enthusiastic about the future! We continue to covet your prayers that the Lord continues blessing us with students and supporters! We are always looking for new students and new opportunities to introduce the school to more of our great brotherhood. If you know able men of good character, potential, and a willingness to serve the Lord in preaching, please let us know in order that we might contact and encourage them to enroll. If you know churches of Christ that are looking for good works to support, please let us know, or if you are a member of a church of Christ, and would like to know more about the school, please talk with the leadership that they might contact the school, and we would be glad to visit, present the school, and let the membership know more about us! I have been doing lots of traveling on behalf of the school lately and would count it a joy to stop by and visit the congregations with whom you are members. As long as this world stands, preachers will be needed! Thanks for your support! —*Brian*



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