Why do ministers have to spend so many years learning how to interpret the Bible? Especially when there are so many churches looking for a pastor, aren’t we hindering people from a calling to ministry by requiring them to study the Scriptures for three or more years at seminary? Someone might well protest, “A person doesn’t need to go to seminary to understand the Bible. All you have to do is simply read it and do what it says!”

The Perspicuity of Scripture

There is, of course, some truth to this objection. As Reformed Christians, we believe in the perspicuity of Scripture, that is, the “clearness” of the Bible. In contrast to the medieval Roman Catholic Church which entrusted the interpretation of the Bible only to educated priests, the Reformers emphasized the clearness of Scripture’s teachings such that all believers, not just those trained for the ministry, could read and understand God’s Word.

These same Reformers, however, did not claim that everything in the Bible was clear and easy to understand. They knew well what Peter said about Paul’s letters: “There are some things in them that are hard to understand” (2 Pet. 3:16). They also remembered the story of the Ethiopian eunuch who was reading from the Old Testament and, when asked by Philip if he understood what he was reading, replied: “How can I unless someone explains it to me?” (Acts 8:31).

Therefore, when the Reformers talked about the perspicuity of Scripture, they used this term in a limited sense of referring to those teachings in the Bible that are essential for salvation. In other words, not everything in the Bible is clear and easy to understand—only those things that are “needed in this life for God’s glory and the salvation of his own” (Belgic Confession, Article 2). Or as another Reformed confession puts it: “All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all”; the perspicuity of the Bible is limited to “those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation” (Westminster Confession, Ch. 1, Art. 7).

On the one hand, this means that one doesn’t have to go to seminary to be a Christian and to understand those teachings of the Bible that are indispensable for salvation. On the other hand, however, this means that the Bible does contain many things that are not easy to understand and consequently require some serious study. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that Scripture was originally written in a different language (Hebrew and Greek), different time period (ancient), and different culture (middle-eastern) than our own. This is why John Calvin, who argued vehemently for the perspicuity of Scripture, nevertheless also claimed: “We must not have the foolish arrogance of thinking we shall easily understand everything we hear or read [in the Bible]” (sermon on 1 Tim. 3:8-10). It is crucial, therefore, that pastors—those who have a strategic role in the proclamation and interpretation of God’s Word—be trained in such a way that they “correctly handle the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).
The Rapture: A Biblical teaching?

This command of Paul to Timothy implies that pastors can “handle the word of truth” in an incorrect way. There are, sadly, many examples of Christian leaders who have misinterpreted God’s Word and made the Bible say things that its original authors never intended. Such misreadings of Scripture are often well intentioned but typically occur because of a failure to understand and follow some basic principles of interpretation.

Take, for example, the subject of Christ’s second coming as discussed in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Paul’s words that “we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (4:17) are interpreted by some to refer to the “rapture.” This is the idea that Jesus will have a two-stage return: first, a secret coming in which all Christians will suddenly disappear when they are raptured up to heaven; then, after a seven-year period of tribulation on earth for those who are left behind, a public coming in which all these raptured Christians will return with Jesus to earth for his 1,000-year millennial reign. This belief is formally known as “Premillennial Dispensationalism” and has been popularized most recently by the twelve-volume Left Behind series that has sold a staggering 62 million copies so far.

While this belief in the rapture is certainly popular, it does not correctly reflect the teaching of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. This becomes clear when we follow a Reformed approach to Scripture and look at this passage from four different perspectives: historical, literary, grammatical, and theological.

Four Approaches to Scripture

Historical — First, we approach this passage from a historical perspective. The Bible, of course, did not fall down from heaven in the King James Version, maps and concordances included. Instead, God chose to reveal himself and his work of redemption in specific historical events. For understanding 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, this means looking at the Thessalonian Christians and the particular problem that Paul is trying to address in his letter to them. The Thessalonians were grieving over the fate of their fellow Christians who had died before Jesus’ second coming (4:13). More specifically, Paul’s emphatic claims that living believers “will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep” (4:15b) and that “the dead in Christ will rise first” (4:16b) suggest that the Thessalonian church feared that deceased believers would not participate fully in the glory of Christ’s return and would be at some kind of disadvantage compared to those who are still alive on that day.

This understanding of the historical context of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 reveals that Paul’s primary purpose here is to comfort rather than to predict. In other words, it is dangerous to approach this text merely as a blueprint to foretell the future without recognizing its greater goal of providing pastoral care to a grieving congregation. The relevance of this passage for us today has less to do with predicting what will yet happen than with comforting those who are grieving the death of loved ones. The contemporary application of Paul’s words belongs, not in the bookstore as part of an imaginative twelve-volume series about will happen in the end times, but in the funeral home or at the graveyard where it provides rich words of comfort about the hope that believers have for their deceased loved ones.

Literary — Next we approach the passage from a literary perspective. This involves, among other things, having an appreciation for the overall structure of the passage. After introducing the problem of the Thessalonians’ grief in 4:13, Paul presents two arguments in response (both arguments are introduced with the little word “for” that the NIV has unfortunately omitted): first, he appeals to Christ’s resurrection as a guarantee of believers’ resurrection such that they will be present at Christ’s return (4:14); second, he appeals to the authoritative “word of the Lord,” which emphatically states that deceased believers will share equally with living believers the glory and events connected with Christ’s return (4:15-17). The apostle ends his discussion with a concluding exhortation that the Thessalonians comfort one another with his words (4:18).

The significance of knowing this structure is that it confirms the point made when looking at the historical context: Paul’s emphasis in this passage is not presenting the Thessalonians with a detailed explanation of what will happen in the end times. In fact, the teaching of the rapture in 4:17 is merely a minor point in the apostle’s second argument—an elaboration on the “word of the Lord” that guarantees that deceased believers will share equally with living believers the glory of Christ’s second coming. Paul’s main concern is reflected in the concluding exhortation, namely, the comfort that the Thessalonians have even in the face of their fellow believers’ death.

Grammatical — We next approach 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 with a grammatical eye, and it is here that we discover most decisively the error of the Dispensational or “Left Behind” version of the rapture. Although attention in 4:17 is usually given to the word “snatched” (the Greek verb harpazo is rendered in the Latin Vulgate as rapere, and this is where the word “rapture” comes from), more notice should be given to the word “to meet” used describe the gathering that takes place between believers—both deceased (resurrected) and living (transformed)—and the returning Christ. The Greek word used is apantesis, a technical term that always refers to the “reception” given to a visiting government official. It was customary in Paul’s day to send a delegation of leading citizens outside the city to welcome a visiting dignitary and escort that person on the final leg of the journey to their community.
The term *apantesis* occurs only twice elsewhere in the New Testament, where it has this same meaning. When the Roman Christians learn that Paul the prisoner is approaching their city, they send a delegation “for a reception” of the apostle to meet him and then escort him on the last part of his trip to Rome (Acts 28:15). In the parable of the ten virgins, the women go out “for a reception” of the bridegroom in which they meet and then escort him to the wedding banquet (Matt. 25:6). The meaning of this word here in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is now clear: when Paul speaks about believers being “caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air,” he is claiming that they will be the reception party that not only meets the returning Christ but also escorts him on the last leg of his journey to earth. In other words, believers do not escape to heaven for the seven years of the tribulation but remain on earth where the final judgment and restoration of creation take place. The meaning of the word *apantesis*, therefore, delivers a virtual deathblow to the popular Dispensational view of the rapture.

**Theological —** This interpretation is confirmed by our fourth approach to the passage. A *theological* approach to Scripture involves, among other things, interpreting Scripture with Scripture—comparing what one passage says on a specific subject with what the rest of Scripture says on this same matter. Dispensationalists typically cite Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:40-41 as further proof for their understanding of the rapture: “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.”

The context of this passage, however, shows that these two verses actually say the opposite of what Dispensationalists claim. The preceding verses reveal that Jesus is making a parallel between the coming of the Son of Man and the days of Noah (Matt. 24:37). These verses make it clear that the wicked were taken away for judgment (“...until the flood came and took them all away”) and that righteous Noah and his family were the only ones left. In Jesus’ comparison, therefore, one wants to be “left behind,” since those who are “raptured” are taken away for judgment!

**Handle with Care**

This is just one example of the importance of carefully interpreting God’s Word. At Calvin Theological Seminary we are committed both to handling the Word with care and to teaching our students the Reformed approach to interpretation by these four perspectives. Today’s church faces a myriad of challenges to the Christian faith — many of them far more complicated and threatening than one’s view of the rapture. This is no time to cut corners in the biblical training of our pastors or to weaken standards for those entering ministry. Now more than ever we need spiritual leaders who have a thorough training in Scripture that will enable them to “correctly handle the word of truth.”

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