

## HERMENEUTICS by Harold Anderson

### THE HISTORY OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION (PART 1)

**THE IMPORTANCE OF SOUND HERMENEUTICS.** There is a word that describes the process of interpreting the Bible. It is called hermeneutics. Biblical hermeneutics refers to the science and art of interpreting the Bible (or any other type of literature). There are three necessary steps in studying the Bible: (1) Observation, which answers the question, "What does it say?" (2) Interpretation, which answers the question, "What does it mean?" (3) Application, which answers the question, "What should I do about it?" Interpretation (hermeneutics) is the most difficult of the three steps. Many people skip from observation to application without doing the work of interpretation. Interpretation follows logically after observation, and if interpretation is omitted we run the risk of instructing others to do things that the Bible does not say. Paul told Timothy to "Be diligent to present yourself approved unto God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Timothy 2:15). The term "rightly dividing" means to cut straight. It has been suggested that Paul used his own trade as a tent maker as a reference to illustrate the need to properly interpret the Scriptures. In those days tents were made from animal skins. Every piece would have to be cut and fit together carefully. It is the same way with Scripture. It is important to put all the parts in the right place so the whole will be properly understood.

**JEWISH INTERPRETATION.** When the Jews returned from Babylonian captivity most of them spoke Aramaic rather than Hebrew. When Ezra stood before the Water Gate and read the Word of God to them, it was necessary for the Levites to translate from Hebrew to Aramaic so they would know what the Law said (Ezra 8). In addition, the Levites would give the meaning. They interpreted what the Law meant so the people could properly understand how to obey it. The Jews were greatly influenced by two rabbis. Rabbi Hillel (70 B.C. to A.D. 10) established a school in Jerusalem. He took a non-literal approach to interpreting Scripture. Shammai was a contemporary of Hillel, and he differed from him on how to interpret the Law. Shammai was more conservative and took a literal approach in interpreting the Scripture. The teachings of these two rabbis often conflicted with each other. After the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 the school of Hillel (non-literal interpretation) became prominent, and the school of Shammai (literal interpretation) lost its influence. The Jews became influenced by the Greeks and began to allegorize the Bible. Allegorizing refers to searching for hidden or secret meanings underlying the obvious meaning of a text, rather than interpreting the Bible literally.

Tomorrow: We will look at the views of interpretation held by the early church fathers.