

# *Analysing* Errors Of Interpretation



**Dr. Saneesh Cherian**  
**Dr. Johnson C. Philip**

# Analysing Errors Of Interpretation

Series: Tools Of Apologetics

Johnson C. Philip, PhD (Physics), ThD, DSc, DNYS  
Saneesh Cherian, MA (Sociology), PhD, DMin

Copyright: 1990-2011

This edition is released under Creative Commons Copyright. You are welcome, and encouraged to, print, publish, promote, distribute this book in any form that you deem fit for the promotion of the gospel with the single stipulations that the documents should not be edited, that the names and pictures of the authors should always be there. No permission is required for such reuse.



## Let Us Work For Restoration:

This Ebook is made available by the Brethren Research Group, free of cost, for the promotion of biblical Christianity. We invite you to join this mission by spending at least 5 minutes a day to send free copy to a new person via email or other means available to you. Freely you have received, freely you should give. Do not keep the blessings to yourself.

## Join Us Work For Restoration:

This free ebook and numerous other free ebooks and magazines are available for totally free download from the following websites

- <http://FreeEbooks.Itz4u.com>
- <http://www.BrethrenAssemly.com>

# Analysing Errors Of Interpretation

## Chapter – I: Errors Of Interpretation

**T**o anyone experienced in Christian Apologetics or Polemics, it is obvious that a large proportion of the questions and problems raised against the Bible stem from improper interpretation.

Interpretation is a normal part of human life. Without a sufficiently accurate interpretation of what our family, friends, teachers, or the media say, no one can survive for long. But the very fact that we communicate well with all these people, and they with us, shows that we are following common rules of interpretation in our lives.

The same principles apply to the Bible also, but many times people overlook these principles. This might be accidental or deliberate, but the result is that a great many questions are unnecessarily and unfairly raised against the Bible.

In the case of the Bible, the common rules of interpretation are supplemented with additional rules derived from the Bible and from theology. This makes misinterpretation of the Bible even more difficult, yet errors continue to plague Bible interpretation. This surprises many. On the other hand, some are not even aware that errors of interpretation exist. All this is because many are ignorant, not only of Hermeneutics, but also of the probable causes of interpretive errors.

In this chapter we will look at common causes that give rise to errors of interpretation. Though there are hundreds of types of errors of interpretation, they can be grouped into a few general categories. These are:

- 1-Errors Related To Prejudices And Biases
- 2-Errors Related To Meaning And Perception
- 3-Errors Related To Collection And Integration

We will discuss each one of them in detail, and will illustrate some of the varieties of errors in each group.

*God's children should do everything in their power to properly understand the greatest document produced ever – the Word of God!*

## Errors Related To Human Prejudices And Biases

almost every person has some prejudices and biases. When all these work together, the result is errors resulting from prejudices and biases.

Errors of prejudices and biases are compounded by a number of reasons. First, many who interpret the Bible are not born-again. This is because more and more unsaved people are occupying positions as pastors, teachers, and even Seminary professors. Recently I read the story of a person who had been employed with the American Bible Society for almost three decades. He was a translation consultant, a job involving transmission of the Bible into numerous languages. What was shocking that this man was a "freethinker", which is another name for an atheist!

When people of that type occupy positions of authority in the spiritual world, distortion of interpretation is inevitable. Further, even among believers, the number of superficial people has been increasing. Instead of holding on to the fundamentals of the Christian faith like Sola Scriptura (Bible Alone), Sola Fide (Faith Alone), Sola Gratia (Grace Alone), and Solus Christus (Christ Alone), they are people who have compromised one or more of these doctrines. Consequently, their interpretations now correspond to their biases. All these biases show in many ways and some of them are:

**The Basic Human Tendency Is To Distort:**  
The basic human tendency is to distort the word of God and that is true even among believers. This is due to the ever-present influence of the world, the flesh, and the devil. When God revealed His future plans to Joseph even his parents found it difficult to believe. Furious with the

No human is all-knowing. In fact, humankind's knowledge is very limited. Therefore, humans cannot interpret accurately in areas in which they do not have sufficient background information. Further,

message, his brethren went one step further and even tried to nullify what God had predicted. The same is our tendency today, especially in matters that we do not like. We prefer to distort and oppose God's message if it does not suit our biases, prejudices, and tastes. When the Sadducees approached Jesus with a seemingly difficult problem, Jesus replied in Matthew 22:29 "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God".



See Matthew 25:21  
HOLD UP ... WE ALSO FORGOT TO CARRY A ONE ON PAGE THREE

The Sadducees were the rationalists of their time, and thus they were biased against God and Revelation. Consequently they misinterpreted the Bible, due to their bias. Peter says the same thing when in 2 Peter 3:16 he remarks about the Pauline Epistles, "As also in all [his] epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which

are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as [they do] also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction". It must be noticed that though some things in the Scriptures are hard to understand, the distortion is not because of this difficulty, but rather because these people are unstable and away from divine wisdom. The only solution is to go back to sound hermeneutics, with full dependence upon the Holy Spirit, and without even an iota of a human idea.

Since the flesh (sin nature) rebels against God, the reproof and instruction of the word of God are not very pleasing to them. Consequently these people try to distort the Scriptures.

**The Basic Human Tendency Is To Disbelieve The Divine:** Divine Revelation is totally at variance with human thinking. This is one reason why the invitation for receiving Salvation through the simple act of belief is rejected by many. Like Namaan, they would be happy to cross seven seas to get a reward, but when the same thing is offered as a gift they are not ready to believe it. Most of them are not even willing to give it a try. When God told Abraham and Sarai that they would have a child of their own, they disbelieved God – even after hearing Him face to face. When an angel of the Lord spoke to Zachariah, he did not believe though what he witnessed was a miracle. When the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus to his

brethren so that this resurrection might convict them, Abraham replied that if they do not believe the word of God, they will not believe anything. In other words, the basic disbelief in the heart of people forces them to ignore the message of God. The result, when they express their views about this message is only distortion.

**Rebellion Is A Basic Human Tendency:**

Unbelievers live a life of continuous rebellion against God, because they are controlled by their flesh. But even after salvation, many people spend a greater amount of time under the flesh rather than under the control of the Spirit. Consequently, even such believers manifest the same basic rebellion that is seen in the lives of unbelievers. Since the flesh (sin nature) rebels against God, the reproof and instruction of the word of God are not very pleasing to them. Consequently these people try to distort the Scriptures. Jonah is a good example. As a Jew he was horrified when God asked him to preach the gospel to Assyrians who were, at that time, the most degenerate enemies of Jews. This rebellion forced him to question God's will and commands repeatedly. The same thing can be seen when rebellious believers interpret the Bible.

**A Good Number Of People Lack**

**Theological And Biblical Background:** The message of the Bible is vastly different from the best human wisdom. It is also at total variance from the greatest man-made religious treatises. Consequently, a certain minimum Biblical background is essential for perceiving the truth of the message of the Bible.

When people approach the Bible from their own human background, many

divine pronouncements look like a laughing matter to them. In Genesis 19 we read the history of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction. Lot's daughters were married to men of Sodom. These men had already seen the way in which the Lord blinded the wicked men of Sodom. After all this "And Lot went out, and spake unto his sons in law, which married his daughters, and said, Up, get you out of this place; for the LORD will destroy this city. But he seemed as one that mocked unto his sons in law" (Verse 14). Obviously, to the depraved minds of the people of Sodom, the divine plan looked like a laughing matter, and they just laughed it off. The word of God was challenged, mocked, and rejected, due to their human background.

**A Good Number Of People Lack Spiritual Maturity:** Just as a certain amount of mental maturity is essential before a person can understand many of the human activities, a certain minimum amount of spiritual maturity is essential before a person can understand the Word of God. In the Bible there is a whole range of doctrines, ranging from the simple milk to the solid meat. Many of the more serious doctrines cannot be understood without a certain basic minimum amount of maturity. That is why Paul says in Hebrews 5:11 that "Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing". Obviously, when believers dull of hearing try to understand (or try to teach) these tougher doctrines, they are bound to present them according to their simplistic understanding. The result will be a distortion of doctrine.

**Many People Interpret The Scriptures Under The Influence Of Various Philosophies:** Almost none of us likes to abandon our philosophical biases. When

such philosophies become very strong, they distort Bible interpretations. Thus there are many who interpret the Bible in the light of Feminism, Syncretism, Pluralism, Radicalism, Evolutionism, Humanism, Rationalism, etc. Feminists are able to see only masculine bias and prejudice in the Bible. Syncretists and Pluralists see only a one-world religion in the Bible. Evolutionists are quick to see a "gap" in Genesis.



**BEFORE YOU TRY, I SHOULD LET YOU KNOW THAT IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE A CAMEL THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE**

Alternately, they are able to see Genesis 1-10 only as poetry, though it is written in straight Hebrew prose. The end result of all kinds of philosophical prejudice is error. In essence, though, the Bible is often very clear about its statements and people misinterpret it because of their own prejudices and biases. These prejudices and biases are created by their basic human tendencies to distort, disbelieve, rebel, lack biblical background and lack spiritual maturity. The solution is not to heed to their distortions, but to show where they have erred. In addition, the whole counsel of the Word of God should be declared to them. The Bible itself is the

best defense and offence against distortion, because, according to Hebrews 4:12 "the word of God [is] quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and [is] a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart".

**Often People Show An Imbalance**

**Between Cause/Commitment:** the Bible mentions many causes and expects believers to demonstrate an appropriate commitment to it. For example, the cause of orphans, widows, and strangers is mentioned repeatedly in the Law. The Israelites were expected to manifest commitment appropriate to this cause. In the same way causes ranging from care of the helpless believer, to guarding one's purity are commanded in the Bible. Obviously, not all causes are of equal priority, and consequently not all commitments are of the same priority.

Some causes, and commitment to them, are placed on the highest level, while others are ranked lower. Believer are

expected to understand the relative importance of the cause and exhibit a commitment proportional to it. Depending upon a person's perception, four different kinds of situations can arise, as shown below:

- Low Cause, Low Commitment
- High Cause, High Commitment
- Low Cause, High Commitment
- High Cause, Low Commitment

In the first two cases the level of the cause and commitment match, and that is how it ought to be. In the last two cases there is a mismatch between the level of the cause and that of the commitment. People with such a misplaced sense of value are bound to misinterpret the Bible to fit in with their preconceived views, and the result will be error. For example, a person who places high priority on the externals might be more concerned about passages dealing with clothing, facial expression, hairstyles, and food while he ignores Biblical statements related to purity of heart and life. The result will be an imbalanced interpretation and erroneous theology.



## Chapter – 2: Errors Related To Meaning And Perception

The meaning of a statement has two parts: the absolute (or semantic) meaning, and the contextual meaning. The absolute meaning is determined with the help of vocabulary and grammar, while the contextual meaning is obtained by considering the historical, sociological, cultural and textual context.

Without having both the meanings at hand it is often difficult to understand the precise message of the Bible. For example, in Songs of Solomon, the shepherd addresses his beloved as his "sister". While a dictionary is sufficient to find out the meaning of this word, it does not make any sense to the modern reader. Once the contexts mentioned above are considered it becomes clear that the word "Sister" had many usages for the Hebrews. One of them was a term of endearment used for one's wife. Thus if the meaning of the passage is not perceived properly, it can lead to many types of errors. Some of these are:

**Ignorance About The Nature Of A Passage:** The nature of a statement plays an important role in interpreting and applying its meaning. Statements may be of many types, such as Concrete/Abstract, General/Specific, Affirmative/Negative, etc. Thus, what is specific will create problems if interpreted as general, and what is negative will create problems if it is interpreted as affirmation. Many statements about Israel and the Church are specific to these groups. If they are generalised to include other groups also, the result will be catastrophic.

**Right Or Wrong Keys:** There are many keys to understand the message of a particular

passage. Thus, God's dealings with Israel can be explained only if several factors governing the choice of Israel are taken into consideration. Thus these factors are the right key to understand those passages, and any other factors would act only as wrong keys.

REVERENDFUN.COM COPYRIGHT BIBLE GATEWAY



EVERYBODY ELSE MERELY TALKS ABOUT SURVEYING THE WONDROUS CROSS ... HE ACTUALLY DID IT

Similarly, when passages related only to the Church are applied to Israel, or passages related only to Israel are applied to the Church, errors are bound to arise. A study of dispensations also makes it clear that the correct key is essential to



understand a given passage correctly. When that is not done, or when the wrong key is used, errors are bound to arise.

*Many people attempt to explain or understand more than that which is actually possible for finite humans. Thus all such attempts by the finite intelligence are bound to face problems, and often the solution that is offered will be an erroneous interpretation.*

**Human Limitations:** The Bible is a communication from the infinite God to finite men and women. Consequently, some difficulties of perception and understanding are bound to occur on our side. This difficulty is compounded by many other factors that add to our limitations of perception. Depending upon our upbringing and training, each one of us has our blind spots: logical, perceptual, linguistic, comprehensional and doctrinal limitations. Consider the example of multiple reports of the same event, as often recorded in the four Gospels.

A person who is exposed to newspapers knows that faithful multiple reports of the same event can often not be reconciled with one another. This is not because of problems with reporting, but due to problems of integration. Similar limitations lead many people to misinterpret the Bible, though others find no serious problem with the same passages. Doctrines related to divine discipline, and

the command to pray (even though God already knows all that we need), can often be understood only after one has been living as a loving and concerned father or mother for several years. A bachelor cannot, usually, gain the same depth of perception into these things. Further, many people attempt to explain or understand more than that which is actually possible for finite humans. Thus all such attempts by the finite intelligence are bound to face problems, and often the solution that is offered will be an erroneous interpretation.

**Multiple Meanings:** Many words have multiple meanings, and only the context makes the precise meaning clear.

Many people, unfortunately, are in the habit of interpreting a statement only in the light of the predominant meaning of a given word. Thus when they hear about Salvation, Justification, or Filling with the Spirit, they force an interpretation upon the passage. Salvation is used in several ways in the Bible. It might refer to salvation from the condemnation of sin, but it might also refer to experiential sanctification. Only the context makes the meaning clear, and unless this is done, careless interpretation of words with multiple meanings may give rise to errors.

**Inability To Perceive Divine Actions:** When finite humans look at the actions of the divine, they are perplexed by many things. For example, they feel that for similar actions God punishes different individuals differently. One individual speaks a lie, and he dies. Another one commits adultery and murder, yet is let off without any seeming punishment. On encountering these kinds of problems people are quick to judge that God is unfair. What most such people overlook is the fact that we are able to see only certain immediately visible actions, whereas God is able to see

the past, present, and future. He is also cognizant of what has been, and will be, passing through the heart of the individuals involved. No finite human can understand such things. Thus in haste they come to conclusions and deductions that are erroneous.

**The Mystery Characteristics Of Doctrines:**

Many Bible doctrines are totally different from everyday human thinking. This difference becomes pronounced in the New Testament period. For example, humans think of salvation through works whereas the Bible speaks of salvation as an unmerited gift. Many of the New Testament doctrines were kept as mysteries even at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. A clear revelation on these subjects only came after Pentecost. Further, only a believer filled with the spirit, having a transformed mind (Rom. 12:1-2) can understand many of these subjects. They are a mystery to outsiders, and even insiders need the right frame of mind to understand these things. Thus, if anyone (specially an unregenerate or uncommitted person) tries to understand

these doctrines, the result will be only error.

**Linguistic Limitations:** Human languages are very powerful and flexible. Yet they are quite limited when describing the person and work of God. Thus when humans try to probe the inner details of certain information in the Bible, they might find it very difficult to comprehend or express those ideas. When the words "son", "generation" and "proceeds" are used for Jesus Christ, and when the word "flesh" is used for the old sin nature, difficulties are bound to arise due to linguistic limitations. Further, many human words such as "repent" are used in connection with the divine. At the same time, these words might have connotations that are not applicable to the divine. The interpreter must clearly distinguish the meanings which are applicable, and which are not, when a certain term is used to describe the divine. No words are sufficient to describe God and His actions totally or accurately, and errors are bound to arise if this is not kept in mind.



## Chapter – 3: Errors Related To Collection And Integration

The Bible is a massive book, and it discusses numerous subjects. However, the discussions on a given subject are not all in one place. Often the information is scattered all through the Bible. Further, these discussions of the same subject are often presented in different contexts, cultures, and even in different idioms.

Thus the Bible cannot be treated like a textbook or encyclopedia which is divided into various subjects. Since information related to the same subject is scattered so widely, an interpreter has to collect all this information, sift them, then arrange them, and then deduce the correct information. This is a difficult task, and many interpreters are not willing to take pains sufficient for doing a proper job. The result is often an incomplete picture or a skewed interpretation. Some errors related to collection and interpretation of information are as follows:

**Ignoring Some And Emphasizing Other Portions:** Almost all interpreters have their own biases and pet philosophies, and these affect the way they interpret a given passage. In addition, these biases and pet theories force some people to totally disregard those passages that go against their biases. On the other hand, they gladly pick up and harp upon those verses that seem to support their biases. This distorts the process of collection and interpretation, and the net result is error. Another trick used by proponents of pet philosophies is to take all verses into consideration, but to interpret statements unfavorable to them in such a way as to conform to their pet theories.

A good example would be the teaching on Limited Atonement. According to this philosophy, Christ died only for the church. When numerous statements related to Christ's death for the whole

world are brought to their attention, they insist that these verses should be interpreted according to their philosophy. The same is the method used for arguing that some people are chosen by God for salvation, and others are chosen by God for damnation into hell fire.

The Bible cannot be treated like a textbook or encyclopedia which is divided into various subjects. Since information related to the same subject is scattered so widely, an interpreter has to collect all this information, sift them, then arrange them, and then deduce the correct information.

Error is introduced when a person insists that statements in the Bible should be interpreted in the light of certain extra-biblical philosophies. The correct procedure would be to compare Scripture with Scripture and come to right deductions. All philosophies should then be evaluated in the light of these biblical deductions, and not the other way round.

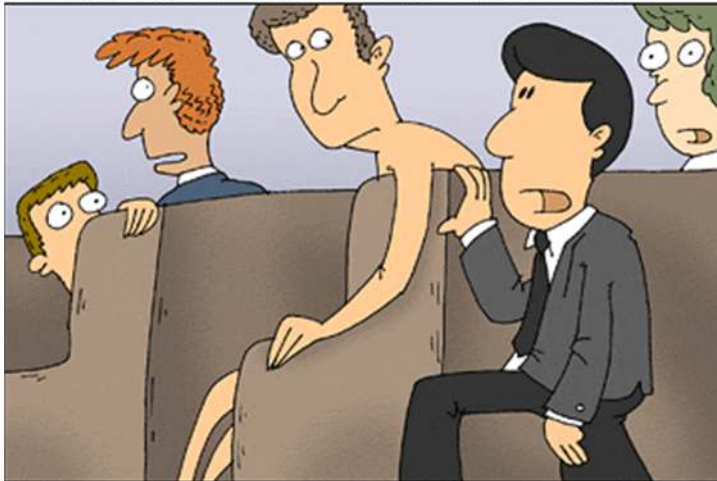
**The Progressive Nature Of Revelation:** Though we now have the complete Bible in our hands, this was not always the situation. Biblical revelation started being

written down in parts in the Old Testament era. The New Testament makes it very clear that such revelation was progressive in nature, and it came to completion only with the incarnation of Jesus and the arrival of the Church age. Consequently, many doctrines which have found full expression in the New Testament were either veiled, or were known only partially in the Old Testament. This progressive nature of revelation requires that a given doctrinal passage be interpreted only in the light of revelation available up to that time. When this is not done, errors are bound to arise.

immediately reveal that the first four to five centuries were periods when a large number of heretical teachers rose up and many of them confused the Christians because the understanding of doctrine was at a primitive level.

However, starting from this period, and continuing through the Protestant Reformation, our understanding of doctrine has progressively been increasing. However, our perception and understanding will never be complete in this life. Consequently, there will always be some errors of interpretation. These errors are compounded in the case of people who try to interpret doctrinal passages without first studying the understanding that has been gained during all these years. This is why this the history of Christian doctrine, (Historical Theology), is taught as an essential subject in many evangelical theological seminaries.

REVERENDFUN.COM COPYRIGHT BIBLE GATEWAY



Thanks to Jason Adelsberger (See Isaiah 61:10) 07-12-2010

I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE 'ARRAYED IN A ROBE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS', BUT YOU STILL NEED TO DRESS FOR CHURCH

**The Progressive Nature Of Human Perception:** Revelation from God was progressive, and the fullness came only in the New Testament. Thus many of the Bible doctrines were not clearly or fully known in the Old Testament. Though the progressive revelation has now reached its final form, our understanding of doctrine continues to be progressive. A look at the history of Christian doctrine will

**The Sufficient/Total Distinction:** God's revelation is "sufficient" for doctrine, reproof, correction, and for instruction in righteousness. However, it is neither exhaustive nor total, because exhaustive/total information would require a Bible running into thousands of volumes (John 21:25). Even if information were given so exhaustively, humans would still be able to raise doubts on subjects that are not addressed there. Instead of providing TOTAL information, the thrust of the Bible is to provide SUFFICIENT information to humans. When people try to use the Bible to gain total information, they often go into speculation and the making of hypotheses. This will obviously lead them into all kinds of errors. Thus questions related to the salvation of infants, details about guardian angels and about many such subjects have to be kept within

available information. Else, the result will be error.

### Emotionalism And Denominational

**Loyalties:** Emotionalism and denominational loyalties often introduce serious biases into Bible interpretation. What is worse, this often forces people to collect only that information from the Bible that suits their prejudices. The rest of the statements are often ignored. For example, for many Brethren people ornaments is an emotional issue. For many Pentecostals the subject of tongues, and for Episcopalian people the hierarchical church system are sensitive issues. Thus there is every possibility that they will fail

to collect and integrate the whole subject, because this might hurt some of their pet interpretations.

Consequently, many Brethren people take up only a maximum of a dozen verses and pretend to speak authoritatively on this subject. Most of them do not even know that there are close to 500 references in the Bible related to ornaments, gold, silver, precious stones, and decoration. In this way emotionalism and denominational loyalties often hinder people from collecting and integrating information. One should not be surprised if this gives rise to problems of interpretation.

## Summary

Principles of Bible interpretation are not radically different from principles of interpreting normal prose and poetry. (The only exception is prophecy, but that is not our concern here). In spite of this many people manage to misinterpret the Bible. This is due to their prejudices, problems related to perception, and their inability to integrate Biblical data. Though the above three problems manifest themselves in numerous ways, an understanding of the three basic causes would go a long way in facing problems created by faulty Bible interpretation.



### Brethren Research Group -- We Stand For:

- Sola Scriptura: Bible Alone
- Sola Fide: Faith Alone
- Sola Gratia: Grace Alone
- Solus Christus: Christ Alone

## About The Authors



**Dr. Saneesh Cherian**, MA (Sociology), PhD, DMin is a Bible teacher, communicator, and a researcher in sociology. He has authored numerous ebooks and articles in English and Malayalam. He is also the joint author of Systematic Theology, Complete Christian Apologetics, Bible Encyclopedia, all in Malayalam.

In the past he has served as the Academic Dean of several institutions and at present he is the Academic Dean of Brethren Theological College (Kallisseri, India) and also of the Assembly Bible School, which is a net-based international school of theology and Bible.

**Dr. Johnson C. Philip**, PhD (Quantum-nuclear Physics), DSc, ThD is the seniormost Christian Apologist in India and has trained more than 10,000 people in Christian apologetics worldwide. He has published numerous ebooks, articles, and books in English, Hindi, and Malayalam. His writings have been translated into many languages worldwide.



He has served as the Principal of several Bible Schools in the past and at present he serves as the Principal of Brethren Theological College (Kallisseri, India) and also of the Assembly Bible School, which is a net-based international school of theology and Bible.

### Please Join The Movement

Would You Spare 5 Minutes A Day For This Ministry??

The church needs to go back to the Bible. That will happen only if you and I go back to the Bible. What is more, we need to motivate people to go back to the Bible. This is exactly what the Brethren Research Group is trying to do.



You can play a vital role by investing a mere 5 minutes a day to send one email to a new friend each day. Tell them about the FREE Bible-based Ebooks available for download at

<http://FreeEbook.Itz4u.com>

Only eternity will reveal how these 5 minutes multiply 30, 60, or 100 fold with the help of the Lord! Do it now! Do not keep the blessings to yourself!