

Bible Study on Hermeneutics Handout 1

Grace Bible Chapel

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“The Church and the Scripture stand or fall together. Either the Church will be nourished and strengthened by the bold proclamation of her Biblical texts or her health will be severely impaired.” Walter Kaiser

“Scripture is the foundation of the Church: the Church is the guardian of Scripture. When the Church is in strong health, the light of Scripture shines bright; when the Church is sick, Scripture is corroded by neglect; and thus it happens, that the outward form of Scripture and that of the Church, usually seem to exhibit simultaneously either health or else sickness; and as a rule the way in which Scripture is being treated is in exact correspondence with the condition of the Church.” John Albert Bengel

“It sometimes seems almost anything can be proved by the Bible, for there is scarcely a religion, sect, or cult in Christendom that does not use Scripture texts to “prove” its doctrine. In that respect the Bible may well be the most abused book in the world. The solution to this problem is not to be found alone in a correct view of inspiration, important as that is. Origen (A.D. 185-254), for example, held a high view of the inspiration of Scripture and yet was guilty of mishandling the Bible by minimizing its literal meaning and treating it as one vast allegory with many hidden meanings. The solution to this problem of widely differing interpretations is to employ the correct method of biblical interpretation.” Donald Campbell

Why Interpretation is important:

- 2 Timothy 2:15 – Commanded & demanded
- We are responsible and accountable to know the truth presented in God’s Word.
- Without proper biblical interpretation, the theology of an individual or of an entire Church will be misdirected, superficial, or false.
- Studying the Bible is a lifelong process and responsibility – it is required for ongoing warfare.
- Without a personal correct understanding of the Bible, each individual will not know how to evaluate the message presented, or the ministry.
- Without discernment a ministry can be taken over by apostasy and become the enemy of God.

Introduction:

Definition of Hermeneutics:

“Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation. It is a science because it is guided by rules within a system; and it is an art because the application of the rules is by skill, and not by mechanical imitation.” Bernard Ramm

There are two major needs in hermeneutics:

- To ascertain or understand what God has communicated in the Holy Scriptures.
- To bridge the gap between the minds of the Biblical writers (ultimately the mind of God) and our minds – as God has used men & their circumstances to communicate.

The Inspiration of the Bible:

The superintending of God over human authors to write the very Word of God in the original manuscripts.

- It is the work of God – Ephesians 3:3-5; Heb 1:1-2; 2:3-4
- It is unique in:
 - Origin – 2 Peter 1:20-21
 - Survival – 1 Peter 1:24
 - Claims – 1 Thess 2:13; Matthew 5:18
 - Ability – Heb 4:12; Jms 1:17; Jhn 8:31-32; 17:17; Rom 10:17
 - Inseparability to Christ – John 1:1
- It cannot be improved:
 - Final – Jude 3; Eph 2:20; Rev 22:18
 - Adequate – 2 Timothy 3:16-17
 - Inspiration guarantees its accuracy
 - In fulfillment – Mat 5:17-18; Lk 24:44-46
 - It's completeness – Rev 22:18-19

The Illumination of the Bible:

The process by which the Holy Spirit enables a person to understand the things of God.

- The need:
 - Blindness of natural man – 2 Cor 4:3-4; Job 37:19; John 3:19
 - The growth struggle of the Christian – Mat 16:13-14; Heb 5:11-14
- The solution – 1 Cor 29-14; Eph 4:11-12; 1 John 2:27; 2 Cor 3:15-18
 - There is no other way to God, and the way to God is not a casual task: Mat 7:13-14; Phil 2:12; 1 Pet 1:3-9
 - The hindrance is deceivers – Titus 1:10; 2 John 1:7; Jude (entirety)
 - The antidote is the Word – 2 Timothy 3:13-15
 - The Church is the responsible steward of the Bible – 1 Tim 3:15, and the contender of the faith – Jude 1-2

The Integration of the Bible:

The process by which the Bible was put together with each book providentially ordered by God for a specific purpose in harmony and conjunction with the whole.

- The Canon of Scripture – Canon means “a rule or measuring rod.”
 - It is the 39 books of the OT, and 27 of the NT
 - These books are exclusively God's Word
- The criteria for the NT:
 - Either written by an Apostle or close associate
 - Content met standard of appropriate truthful subject matter consistent with all other books
 - Acceptance by early Fathers of the Church
 - Unmistakable evidence of Divine Inspiration
- The confirmation:
 - The authentication by an apostle or writer in another book.
 - The authentication of the OT – Jhn 10:34-35; Lke 11:51; 24:24
 - The pre-authentication of the NT – Jhn 14:26; 16:12-13
 - The preservation of the Canon – 1 Pet 1:22-25; Lke 16:17

The Integrity of the Bible:

The comprehension the Bible is absolutely trustworthy in every statement, word, and in every area it address, and in every way.

- The Infallibility of the Bible means it is unfailingly accurate (without error) in the original manuscripts.
- The inerrancy of the Bible means it does not contain any error in a statement of fact – it is incapable of teaching deception.
 - It is verbal – every word is inspired by God.
 - It is plenary – all parts are equally inspired by God.
- The Bible is to be trusted absolutely, completely, unquestionably, and unreservedly.
 - It alone is the source all final authority and thinking.
 - The importance of trust - God's promise – Isa 66:2
 - Knowing the Bible brings the highest benefits possible in this life – wisdom, joy, & peace – Ps 119

The Initial issues for beginning Bible Interpretation:

- The beginning point and continuing point of all interpretation is absolute confidence in the truthfulness of the Bible (in its original language) – Acts 17:10-11
 - The Bible is the authority whether the interpreter can understand the message or not.
 - If the message cannot be understood, the problem is not the Bible, the problem is with the interpreter.
 - The interpreter must prayerfully use all possible resources to understand the true meaning of the message.
- Understanding of the Bible is related to relationship with God, and therefore the work of the Spirit – John 10:26-27; 1 Cor 2:14; John 8:43; 2 Pet 3:16
 - Understanding of the Bible does not come all at once, it is a matter of continuing growth – John 12:16; 13:7; Acts 8:30; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18
 - Understanding requires serious effort – 1 Tim 2:15
- The interpreter needs a savvy general understanding of Progressive Revelation:
 - The manner in which God has revealed Himself has been a process of evolution in the cultural and religious sphere.
 - A broad understanding of the role of each of the 66 books.
 - How each book relates to the whole.
 - The promises of God and how they relate to progression.
- The interpreter needs a convicted understanding of basic doctrines:
 - The purpose of God
 - The attributes of God, His character, His sovereignty
 - The fall of man, man's condition in sin, salvation by grace
- The interpreter must accurately apply general truths - the Bible's reliance, the role of the books, progressive revelation, basic doctrine, the understanding of God, understanding of man, and salvation by grace practically to every interpretation.
 - This is not the same as preconceived non-biblical ideas.
 - The interpreter knows the Scripture will not violate these truths.
- The interpreter must have a reverence for and interest in God's Word.
 - A willingness to subject the mind & thinking to God's Word.
 - A willingness to explore what the Word says and change the personal thinking if convinced by the Word.

- The Interpreter must recognize the Bible is a human book.
 - It was recorded in a written language by men, and followed normal, grammatical meanings, including figurative language. It was immediately understandable in its original context.
 - The men that wrote it were seeking to make sense not nonsense.
 - As the intention of the writer was to write something meaningful, the concept of making the passage mean whatever is rejected.
 - The writing was written to specific hearers in a specific historical, geographical setting, for a specific purpose.
 - The Bible is affected and influenced by the cultural environment from which each human writer wrote.
 - Each biblical writing was understood in the light of its context.
- The Interpreter must recognize the Bible is a Divine book.
 - The Bible because it is a Divine book has unity.
 - This means that whether OT or NT there is no contradiction
 - This means that what God was doing at any time must make sense in relation to everything else in the Word.
 - This means that the interpreter can clarify the meaning of one passage from parallel concepts, principles, and truth in other passages.
 - The Bible as a Divine book most often interprets itself within the context.
 - As there is a theme of progress in revelation (meaning later Scriptures purposely build on earlier portions) the interpreter must recognize the position of the context in relation to the whole progress of the Bible.
 - It does not mean that revelation has evolved into something different.
 - It does not mean that early revelation is contradicted by late revelation.
 - It means that as it has progressed, additional truth and clarity has come.
 - It does mean that some of God's commands had a purpose that has now been superseded.
 - It does not mean the interpreter can take a later passage to change the original meaning of an earlier passage.
 - It does mean later passages should be understood considering the building blocks of earlier truth, taking into account the consistent themes of the Bible, and the distinctions of God's method of revelation during the progressive plan.
- The interpreter must understand "progressive revelation."
 - The ultimate goal of history is for God to glorify Himself (Ps 72:18-19).
 - The Bible repeatedly shows God's sovereign rule (Ps 97:1-6) and purpose in history even using Satan's attempt to thwart & mankind's rebellion.
 - God has used different methods to reveal Himself throughout history (Heb 1:1-2):
 - Directly to Adam & Eve, Enoch, and Abraham
 - Through the Prophet Moses to Israel under a theocracy & through laws
 - Through His Son at His first coming
 - Through His Word exclusively in the NT Church age
 - For contextual interpretation, there is a need to recognize and understand God's different revelation arrangements in history – ie: different administrations (Eph 1:10; 3:9) or dispensations.
 - The character of God, His general purposes, His means of salvation, nor His ultimate goal does not change through these distinctions – only His method of revelation.

- Historic administrations each have a beginning and ending in failure, with the expectation and unifying principle exclusively pointing to the promise of Christ as the non-failing eternal ruler, who receives all glory, and worship (Rev 5).
- The interpreter must take administrations into account as this is the larger Bible context.
 - If the directive or circumstance in a context of a specific administration is arbitrarily brought into another administration in which it does not fit it will cause confusion and poor doctrine.
 - If the meaning and purpose of the first context is missed resulting in poor understanding, and it supports the second context, the meaning in the second context will be skewed resulting in poor doctrines and practices.
 - The circumstances of God's revelation in OT history was a progressive unveiling of Himself appropriate and purposeful for the time and situation of history in that specific context.
 - There is a need to understand the original type, purpose, and recipients of OT covenants.
 - If major contextual divisions in the Word are not defined, distinguishing commands and instructions given Israel from those given the Church, a resulting dilemma occurs on how they apply to the church, as this becomes subjective it leads to poor doctrines and practices.
 - There is a need to understand the law's relation to grace, and recognize that much of the writings in the New Testament epistles are actually written to sort this out.
 - There is the need to understand the special binding relationship God chose to have with Israel, and that Israel even yet has a future in the plan of God.
- The interpreter must have a solid understanding of these basic foundations and use those foundations to guide interpretation:
 - An understanding of God's character and purpose.
 - An understanding of man's natural condition (total depravity under the curse)
 - An understanding of progressive revelation (rightly dividing the Word)

The influence of allegorical interpretation:

- What is allegorical interpretation?
 - Allegory is simply looking for a higher sense of meaning from a passage than the literal brings (beneath the obvious meaning is the real meaning).
 - It was introduced historically by the Alexandrian school in the early centuries after the Apostles by Philo, and was adopted and promoted by Augustine.
 - It begun with the idea that much in the Bible was intellectually incredible if understood literally, but could be more acceptable if allegorized.
 - The method progressed with the thinking that by allegorization the intention of the Spirit who controlled the writers could be penetrated.
 - One major form of allegorization is typological interpretation which views the Bible as a recital of God's saving acts given in various pictures and types – literal meanings are neglected or avoided.
 - The most obvious problem with this form of interpretation is that the interpreters mind becomes the means of establishing meaning.

The influence of spiritualizing interpretation:

- What is spiritualizing interpretation?

- The NT is the fulfillment of the OT. The NT is taken back into the interpretation of the OT instead of allowing the OT meaning in the context of its own setting.
- The interpretation of any passage becomes subjective based on whether the interpreter wants to be more literal or figurative.
- It denies the concept of progressive revelation. By applying later revelation back to an earlier and different context, it changes the original meaning of the original context.
- Prophecy also becomes subjective rather than literal unless it can be seen as prophecy already fulfilled, and even that may be subjected to a spiritualized meaning.
- Future prophecy is more often than not taken figuratively rather than literally. As this is subjective, the interpreter can make the meaning of any yet unfulfilled prophecy anything.

The introduction to the normative interpretation approach:

- What is the normative interpretation approach?
 - The Scriptures are to be understood in the normative meaning of words.
 - The words of Scripture are to be understood in the historical and grammatical situation in which they are found (their immediate context).
 - The purpose of language is for communication given by God for communicating with man (1 Cor 2:13).
 - The fulfillment of all prophecies in the past demonstrate and show that yet to be fulfilled future prophecy is to be understood in a literal sense (Ps 22; Isa 7:14; 53:1-12; Micah 5:2).
 - This is a consistent manner of approaching all portions of Scripture for it has with it the same principles for interpretation (it takes away the subjective that leads to poor doctrine and practice).
 - There must be within the normative approach the recognition of figures and symbols, and these also must be interpreted in the most normative practical manner according to the contextual intent.
- What do we mean by normative?
 - “Each Biblical writing – that is each word, sentence, and book – was recorded in a written language, and followed normal grammatical meanings, including figurative language.
 - It was immediately understood. It did not have to be decoded, or deciphered by a magical formula. The words were immediately understandable.
 - The basic presupposition of interpretation is that God is a God of sense, not of nonsense. By this is meant that whatever God revealed through His ancient spokesmen must have made sense both to them and to their hearers.
 - The corollary suggests that we should not go to the Bible with preconceived notions or ideas, but instead should let the Bible speak for itself. For example in Mark 5:1-20 the demons do not mean false doctrine nor do the swine represent the unconscious mind.”
 - Example: “if you were to say to an audience, ‘I crossed the ocean from the United States to Europe,’ you wouldn’t want them to interpret your statement to mean that you crossed life’s difficult waters into the haven of a new experience.”
 - Whenever we read a book, an essay, or a poem we presume the literal sense in the document until the nature of the literature may force us to another level. This is the only conceivable method of beginning or commencing to understand literature of all kinds.
 - The goal of Bible interpretation is to determine the original meaning of the text. This is called exegesis.”*

* Principles and concepts derived from: “Principles of Protestant Interpretation” by Bernard Ramm, or “Interpretation” by Roy Zuck