

Bible Study on Hermeneutics Handout 2

Grace Bible Chapel

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General Principles of Interpretation (Under the Normative Approach)

- The interpreter must recognize the Bible being a divine book has mystery – it has many things hard to understand and especially in these categories: prophecy, miracles, and doctrine.
 - Prophecy – the prediction of future events is supernatural & mysterious
 - Miracles – these are unexplainable humanly – supernatural & mysterious
 - Doctrine – the Trinity, the Incarnation, Omnipresence, etc.. – all are matters that are beyond the capability of human reason & understanding.
 - Pressure will be placed particularly in these areas of interpretation – why?
 - As a mystery they are outside the bounds of human logic.
 - Skeptics and liberals will assail them.
 - The Bible is not a human book – it has a divine origin and is about a divine being. Much therefore that is written must be accepted and understood on the basis of faith.
 - Even though mysterious – these truths of consistent with the Person & work of God throughout His Word – therefore they are predictable.
- The interpreter must rest his theology on those passages that are clear and not upon those that are obscure – essential truth is not tucked away in some incidental remark in Scripture nor in some passage that remains ambiguous even after thorough research.
- The interpreter must recognize Christ is the center of Christian theology and all doctrines are to be related to Christ. Thus all doctrines are unified in their radial relationship (like spokes on a wheel) to Christ and not in terms of a network of dogmas forming a system.
- There is one system of truth or theology contained in Scripture, and therefore all doctrines must cohere or agree with each other. That means that the interpretations of specific passages must not contradict the total teaching of Scripture on a point.
- There is only one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study. But a given text or a given passage may speak to a number of problems or issues. Therefore, the interpreter presenting must always distinguish the primary meaning from particular applications.
- The basis for accepting a certain interpretation must be made explicit and clear. There must be demonstrated critical exegesis which means to bring into one's methodology the kinds of procedures that are characteristic of good scholarship.
- The interpreter has as his goal to discover the original meaning and intention of the text. His goal is exegesis – to lead the meaning out of the text and shun eisegesis – bringing a meaning to the text.
- All exegesis must be done in the original languages if it is to be competent and trustworthy exegesis.
- The interpreter can understand a particular passage only if he knows what the whole Scripture teaches; but can only know what the whole Scripture teaches by knowing the meaning of its parts – theological interpretation of Scripture is a rotation or spiraling from the parts to the whole, and whole to the parts.

- The interpreter must come to the Old Testament or the New Testament with the proper mind set which corresponds to the essence, the composition, the peculiar historical configuration, the place in the progress of divine revelation, of the Testament.
- The interpreter must come to the particular book in which the passage occurs and understand the time, culture, recipients, author, situation, and purpose of the writing.
- The interpreter must know the context of a particular passage by studying the materials immediately before it, and immediately after it. The material before the passage is the radar which guides the approaching, and the following material is the radar of the leaving. And if we can track the material approaching and leaving the particular passage, we have the framework in which the passage is to be understood.
- The interpreter must pay special attention to the immediate context – not only the verse itself, but the paragraph of the verse.
 - This principle pays careful attention to the physical location of each word and verse and the relationship to other words and verses.
 - God sheds light upon a subject either through passages that are within the same paragraph (or nearby) that establish the theme for that section.
 - What is the setting and the main theme of the passage in light of its immediate context?
- The interpreter must recognize that modern chapter and verse delineations in all translations should largely be ignored as they may or may not contribute to the correct understanding of the passage.
- The interpreter must recognize a real cross reference is that parallelism of words or expression where the content or the idea is the same and there is profit from the mutual study of the texts.
 - Looking up all passages that contain a concept – such as “Son of Man.”
 - When studying Ephesians examining parallel passages with the same word expressions or subject matter in Colossians.
 - Studying Romans 9:8 and looking at all the references where Paul uses the word “flesh.”

Note: For these kinds of cross references there are a variety of software tools.

- The interpreter must recognize conceptual cross references where there is a verse or a passage in one book of Scripture that has the identical substance or content of another part of Scripture even though there is no use of common words. The concepts in the passages are identical rather than just the words being the same.
 - Heb 2, and Phil 2 discuss the character of the incarnation.
 - Rom 3 and Heb 10 both discuss the atonement
 - 1 Cor 15 and Rev 20 both discuss the resurrection

Note: A topical reference such as “Nave’s Topical Bible,” or “The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge” or software that has these or other topical helps will assist.

- The interpreter must recognize when two or more books of the Scriptures describe essentially the same events, to obtain the whole picture, the interpreter must compare these parallel accounts, before determining the meaning of the initial passage.
 - The events in the life of Christ must be compared as they are differently recorded in the four Gospels (*Harmony of the Gospels* – by A.T. Robertson)
 - The life of Paul is recorded in Acts, and pieces of his autobiography are spread throughout his Epistles. The material in Acts will feed the understanding of the setting in his writings – (*A Harmony of the life of St. Paul* – by Goodwin)
 - The same historical time frame is covered in the OT by Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles.

- The interpreter must recognize there are ways in which thought can be expressed which cannot be understood by ordinary grammatical examination. A special manner of expression is used, and these special kinds of expressions are called either the literary mold, where mold has the idea of a fixed or standard pattern or genre – genre meaning type, kind, style, or category.
Examples: All passages must be interpreted within general genre.
In a general sense we divide the Bible as follows:
 - Genesis-to-Deuteronomy – The Law and the Pentateuch
 - Joshua-to- Nehemiah – The history of Israel
 - Job-to-Song of Solomon – The poetic and wisdom books
 - Isaiah & Jeremiah – The major prophets
 - Lamentations-to-Malachi – The minor prophets
 - Matthew-to-John – The Gospels
 - Acts – The history of the early church
 - Romans-to-Jude – Epistles to the church
 - Revelation – The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ
- There are three circles of literary genre in Scripture, each circle being larger than the other – these are “figures of speech”, “special literary expressions,” or “specific literary genre.”
 - Metaphor – expresses something by direct comparison, similarity, or parallelism (Hosea 7:8 “Ephraim is a cake”).
 - Simile – functions like a metaphor only uses the words “like” or “as” (Ex 24:17 “the glory of the Lord is like a devouring fire”).
 - Hyperbole – means that some idea or event is stated in an exaggerated manner to show its importance (John 21:25 “But, there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written”).
 - Special literary expressions – used throughout Scripture within the text of a larger work. These include:
 - Parables, allegories, fables, myths, and riddles – the interpreter must take these types into account and make exegetical effort to understand them within their contextual purpose.
 - Every book of Scripture is cast into a specific literary genre – examples:
 - Acts – historical, and when not recognized as a transition book and interpreted as an epistle – error occurs.
 - Job – a dramatic epic – when statements made by Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, or Elihu are taken as righteous statements or commands used as support for belief – error occurs.
 - Ecclesiastes – a book of wisdom when in the context of “under the Sun” is not understood as a phrase for “living under the curse” great confusion exists.
- The interpreter must recognize the genre of a passage or book of Scripture sets the mood or the stance from which all the rest of the book is seen. No book can be intelligently assessed and interpreted without first noting its literary genre – example:
 - Song of Solomon – the most controversial book in the Scriptures. It is either taken allegorically as representing some sort of relationship between God and man (Israel and the Lord, Christ and the Church, Christ and the believer, God and the believer, etc.), or it must be taken literally as theological interpretation of appropriate human sexuality. However, the interpreter determines the genre will effect any effort to correctly interpret the writing.

- The interpreter must recognize the setting of each writer – their biblical geography, and their biblical history.
- Closing of session:
 - There is nothing more important than truth!
 - Associated with God – He is the truth!
 - Used to set us free – it is liberating!
 - It sanctifies – it is enabling to set us apart to Christ!
 - But, we must mine it! It doesn't come through leisure!
 - The purpose of the principles is to guide us into the truth – they should become intuitive.
 - There is no single principle or rule that will provide us everything we need to understand the truth – it is the combination of the whole working together that narrows us to the truth.

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