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Biblical Hermeneutics

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By Ron Wofford

I. Introduction

A. This course is designed to give the student a brief, yet basic and intelligent method of interpreting the Bible.

B. The scientific term for this discipline is *hermeneutics*.

1. It is sometimes listed as Hermeneutica Sacra.
2. This is done to distinguish it from the interpretation of secular materials.

C. The Greek words *hermeneuo* or *hermeneia* are found in the New Testament 19 times.

1. Typically, they mean to “[explain](#)” or to “[translate](#)” as when Jesus explained to His disciples how the Old Testament was speaking of Him in [Luke 24:27](#) “[And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded \[hermeneuo\] unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself.](#)”

D. This session is designed to give you guidelines for learning how to interpret or “[explain](#)” the Word of God.

II. Reasons Why Scripture is Misinterpreted

A. A failure to recognize the communication gap between the modern reader and

the ancient people of Bible times.

1. Cultural settings, customs and practices all play a part in the correct interpretation of a passage.

B. A failure to distinguish between the dispensations of time.

1. For example, a correct understanding that God dealt with people at specific times in specific ways, yet His purpose remained the same.
2. There is one plan of salvation; based on Christ's atonement; by Grace; through Faith; expressed in obedience to God's plan at that time.

C. A failure to recognize the different covenants.

1. Conditional/Non-Conditional; Abrahamic; Exilic, etc.
2. Example: *“The gifts and callings of God are without repentance.”*
 - a. This passage is not directed to New Testament ministry at all.
 - b. Rather, it deals with God's promises and covenants with Israel.

D. A failure to distinguish between the three ethnic groups mentioned in scripture.

E. A failure to consider all that the Bible has to say on a given subject.

1. We do injury to the text when we do not consider what all texts pertaining to the subject have to say.

F. A failure to consider the context.

1. What are the times, dates, places and people of the text?

G. A failure to consider the significance of prophetic gaps of a particular passage.

H. A failure to understand the purpose for parables.

1. To make a spiritual application from a natural circumstance.

III. The Six Biblical Sciences

A. Canonology

1. The word *canon* comes from the Greek *kanon*, which has to do with a rod or straight edge.
2. This science concerns itself with the question of which books are inspired of God and are to be included in the canon of Scripture.

B. Historical Criticism

1. This science deals with *“the literary and documentary character of the books of the Bible.”*
2. Specifics of this would include authorship of the book, date of its composition, historical circumstances, the authenticity of its contents, and its literal unity.

C. Textual Criticism

1. This science concerns itself with establishing the original wording of the text of scripture.
2. This is accomplished by comparing ancient manuscripts and consulting other references such as early translations, quotations that allude to the original scriptures by early church fathers and reading lectionaries.

D. Hermeneutics

1. This science has to do with properly interpreting scripture.
2. Its goal is to understand scripture in the same way the original reader would have understood it.
3. When this is done then the reader will get the meaning which the author intended.

E. Exegesis

1. Exegesis is a compound word formed from the two Greek words *ex* and *egeomai*.
2. It has to do with explaining or interpreting and literally means "to guide" or "to lead."
3. This is different than *eisegesis*, which has to do with reading a meaning into scripture.

F. Biblical Theology

1. The word "theology" is also a compound word formed from the two Greek words *theos* (God) and *logos* (word).
2. It is the doctrine of God.
3. Biblical Theology is the result of all of the previous sciences.

IV. The 5 Methods of Interpretation

A. The Allegorical Method

1. The Allegorical Method essentially denies the literal meanings of scripture in order to search for hidden meanings not apparent on the surface.
2. Example: The parable of the Good Samaritan.
3. Dangers of this method:
 - a. It does not interpret scripture and treats scripture as the excess with the real substance hidden beneath it.
 - b. The basic authority in interpretation ceases to be the scripture and is instead the mind of the interpreter.
 - c. One is left without any real means whereby the conclusions of the interpreter can be tested.

B. The Mystical Method

1. Although similar to the Allegorical Method it differs in that instead of finding one meaning beneath the text it finds multiple meanings.
2. This method is the one which tends to bring in such practices as numerology.
3. It takes a literal text and "spiritualizes" it beyond its original intent.
4. The dangers of this method are the same as for the Allegorical Method but are more pronounced.

C. The Devotional Method

1. Ramm, in his book *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, defines this method as *“that method of interpreting scripture which places the emphasis on the edifying aspects of Scripture, and interpreting with the intent of developing spiritual life.”*

2. While this is a noble intent it should only be done after the scripture has been interpreted literally and historically.

3. It should also harmonize with doctrinal interpretation.

4. There is great benefit in using this method but one must be careful to not apply words specifically meant for another person and time to be applied personally today.

5. Two dangers come to mind with this method:

a. It falls prey to allegorization especially in the use of the Old Testament.

b. According to Ramm, Devotional Interpretation may be a substitute for the requisite exegetical and doctrinal studies of the Bible.

c. We hear this method a good bit in Pentecostal preaching.

D. The Rationalistic Method

1. The basis of this viewpoint is the denial of the supernatural.

2. It denies that the Bible is the inspired Word of God.

3. It relegates the interpretation to what the interpreter can reasonably and logically deduce from scripture.

E. The Literal Method

1. The Literal Method is also referred to as the Historical Grammatical Method.

2. It holds that the meaning of any text can be determined by considerations of grammar and history.

3. It allows for different meanings for words but concludes the word is to be interpreted in the context of the passage.

4. While a word may have several meanings it will have only one intended meaning in any one particular passage.

5. The Literal Method is obviously the one approved by the Holy Spirit.

a. It keeps the text within context and yet allows for allegorical meanings as well as differing definitions.

b. The literal method does not deny the use of symbols, figures of speech, etc.

c. But it demands that all interpretation must be made on the basis of the literal meaning of the Scriptures.

V. The Fifteen Principles of Interpretation

A. The Dispensational Principle

1. A dispensation is a particular way in which God deals with man in respect to sin and man's responsibility.

B. The Covenantal Principle

1. This principle is the one in which the interpretation of a verse or a group of verses is determined by a consideration of its covenantal setting.

2. These covenants refer to the agreements or contracts made between God and man.

C. The Ethnic Division Principle

1. This principle has to do with rightly dividing the Word in relation to the three ethnic groups mentioned in scripture:

a. The Jew;

b. The Gentile;

c. The Church.

D. The Typical Principle

1. J. Edwin Hartill, in his book *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics* states "œA type is a divinely appointed illustration of some scriptural truth."œ
2. The safest position to take is to use those types which come from the Old Testament that are specifically and clearly revealed in the New Testament.

E. The First Mention Principle

1. "œThis is the principle by which God indicates in the first mention of a subject, the truth with which that subject stands connected in the mind of God.â€ (Hartill)

F. The Progressive Mention Principle

1. "œThis is the principle by which God makes the revelation of any given truth increasingly clear as the Word proceeds to its consummation.â€ (Hartill)

G. The Full Mention Principle

1. "œThis is the principle by which God declares all that we need to know upon any subject vital to our spiritual life.â€ (Hartill)
2. This principle is seen as the ultimate end of The First Mention and Progressive Mention working in harmony to reach a logical conclusion.

H. The Context Principle

1. "œThis is the principle by which God gives light upon a subject through either near or remote passages bearing upon the same theme.â€ (Hartill)
2. You begin this process by consulting the context of the verse; then the passage; then the book, etc.

I. The Agreement Principle

1. "œThis is the principle under which the truthfulness and faithfulness of God become the guarantee that He will not set forth any passage on His Word which contradicts any other passage.â€ (Hartill)
2. In other words, no scripture will contradict another.

J. The Gap Principle

1. "œThis principle is defined as that principle of divine revelation whereby God in the Jewish Scriptures ignores certain periods of time, leaping over centuries without comment.â€ (Hartill)
2. This is seen numerous times throughout scripture when 2 events seem to bookend a gap in time that is not addressed.

K. The Double Reference Principle

1. "œThe Double Reference Principle is that peculiarity in the writings of the Holy Spirit, by which a passage applying primarily to a person or event near at hand, is used by him at a later time as applying to the Person of Christ, or the affairs of His kingdom.â€ (Hartill)
2. Compare [Hosea 11:1](#), which speaks to the nation of Israel as God's son in their calling out of Egypt and the same passage being used in [Matthew 2:14-15](#) to speak of Christ's return from Egypt after the death of Herod.

L. The Christo-Centric Principle

A. This principle is defined by six points:

1. The mind of Deity is eternally centered in Christ;
2. All angelic thought and ministry are centered in Christ;
3. All Satanic hatred and subtlety are centered at Christ;
4. All human hopes are, and human occupation should be, centered in Christ;

5. The whole material universe in creation is centered in Christ;
6. The entire written Word is centered in Christ. (Schofield, *The New Schofield Study Bible NIV*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN 1989.)

M. The Comparative Mention Principle

1. *“This is the principle by which a certain verse or group of verses may be interpreted by comparing and/or contrasting it with another verse or group of verses.”* (Conner and Malmin, *Interpreting the Scriptures*)
2. Compare: *“To bring things together in order to examine the close relationship they bear to each other, especially with the view of ascertaining their agreement or disagreement; points of resemblance or difference.”* (Conner and Malmin)
3. Contrast: *“To place together in view things widely differing from each other, though of the same category or class, in order to make the difference more vividly marked.”* (Conner and Malmin)

N. The Moral Principle

1. *“This principle is the one by which the interpretation of a verse or passage is determined by the discerning the moral it contains.”* (Conner and Malmin)
2. Every scripture has one interpretation but many applications.

O. The Parabolic Principle

1. *“This principle is the one by which any parable is interpreted by discerning its moral and interpreting its elements insofar as they are meant to be interpreted.”* (Ramm)
2. Guidelines for use:
 - a. Determine whether or not the passage is indeed a parable;
 - b. A parable is a comparison between the natural and the spiritual realm;
 - c. Every parable is designed to conceal and reveal one fundamental spiritual truth;
 - d. Since parables are drawn from the cultural background of their authors, the interpreter should research the manners, customs, and material culture involved in the parable he is interpreting.

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