Hermeneutics: Accurately Interpreting Bible Teaching

Don Closson provides a good understanding of hermeneutics, the ways in which one interprets the Bible with accuracy and integrity. He provides a step by step guide to understanding and interpreting Scripture in a consistent way. He helps us understand how to deal with the cultural, historical and language barriers we face in dealing with a text written in a different language and culture than our own.

Understanding the Bible

If you have ever had a prolonged discussion with a Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, or New Ager over a passage of Scripture, you might relate to an experience that I had recently. I sat down with someone who had obviously spent considerable time in the Bible, who stated a desire to know God's truth and was willing to work diligently to please God, sacrificing both time and money. However, when it came to determining what the Bible taught concerning how we might please Him and what we must do to be saved, we found little we could agree upon. At times it felt as if we were reading two completely different texts.

The problems I encountered were the result of different rules of interpretation. These rules are part of a discipline known as hermeneutics, which many consider to be both an art and a science. The rules that one uses to interpret Scripture play a vital role in determining the meaning of a passage, and thus, our understanding of God and ourselves. Does John 1:1 refer to Jesus as the co- creator of the universe, existing with God the Father eternally, indeed, being of the same essence as the Father? Or is Jesus' divinity somehow inferior to the divinity of God the Father, a view that Jehovah's Witnesses hold? The way we interpret this passage will be determined by the rules of interpretation we bring to our study. It is obvious that

both interpretations cannot be correct. When John wrote the words for his Gospel, and specifically for the first chapter, he had one meaning in mind. He may not have understood all of the implications of what he was writing, nor could he have imagined all of the applications possible in future contexts. However, via the inspiration of the Holy Spirit John's words were to communicate a specific truth about God.

There are three good reasons why we have difficulty understanding the biblical text. First, we are separated from the historical events written about by thousands of years of history. Second, we live in a dramatically different culture, and third, the biblical texts were written in foreign languages. These obstacles to understanding can be daunting to those who want quick and easy comprehension of the Bible. They also make it possible for others to place their own agenda over the text, knowing that few will take the time to uncover what the writer's original intent might have been.

Our goal should be to exegete, or draw meaning from the Scriptures, rather than to impose meaning onto them. Jehovah's Witnesses have decided that Jesus cannot be God; they claim that it is an irrational doctrine. As a result, they have worked hard at interpreting direct references to His deity as something else. In Hebrews 1:6 the angels are told to worship Jesus. Since the Witnesses at one time taught that Jesus was an angel, they translate the word found in the passage as obeisance rather than worship. More like a gesture of respect than the worship of the one true God. Unfortunately, they have to misquote a reference work in order to justify their translation. Their New World Translation has changed numerous passages in order to keep their doctrines intact.

In this essay we will review some of the principles of hermeneutics that have been accepted by the majority of conservative Protestants for many years. Our goal in doing so is that we may be able to rightly divide the Word of truth.

God’s Communication Link

One of the first steps to correctly interpreting Scripture is being aware of what the Bible says about itself and understanding how it has come down to us through the centuries.

Rather than causing a complete text about Himself and His creation to simply appear, God chose to use many individuals, over thousands of years to write His words down. God has also revealed something of Himself in nature. General revelation, in the world around us, gives us an indication of God’s glory and power. However, without special revelation, the specific information found in the Bible, we would be lacking the redemptive plan that God has made available through Jesus Christ. The Bible clearly claims to have revealed information about God. Deuteronomy 29:29 declares that, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.” In 1 Corinthians 2:12-13 the writer adds that, “We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.”

The unique nature of the Bible is made clear by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16. Paul tells Timothy that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”

None of the original writings, or autographa, still exist. Nevertheless, textual criticism has confirmed that the transmission of these writings have been very accurate. The accuracy of the Old Testament documents are attested to by the Dead Sea Scrolls which gives us copies of parts of the Old Testament almost a thousand years closer to the original texts than previously available. The dependability of the New

Testament is confirmed by the availability of a remarkable volume of manuscripts which were written very near the time of the original events.

Once we appreciate what God has done to communicate with us, we may begin to apply the principals of interpretation, or hermeneutics, to the text. To be successful this process must take into account the cultural, historical, and language barriers that limit our understanding of the original writings. There are no shortcuts to the hard work necessary to accomplish this task.

Some have wrongly argued that knowledge of the culture and languages of biblical times is not necessary, that the Holy Spirit will interpret the text for us. The role of the Holy Spirit is to illumine the believer in order to accept and apply what is found in Scripture. The Bible says that the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:14). The Greek word for "accept" means "to take something willingly and with pleasure." The key role of the Spirit is not to add information to the text, or to give us special translating abilities, but to soften our hearts in order to receive what is there.

The goal of this process is to be mature in Christ. The Bible is not an end, it is a means to becoming conformed to the image or likeness of Christ.

What Is a Literal Interpretation?

Prior to the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, biblical interpretation was often dominated by the allegorical method. Looking back to Augustine, the medieval church believed that every biblical passage contained four levels of meaning. These four levels were the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the eschatological. For instance, the word Jerusalem literally referred to the city itself; allegorically, it refers to the church of Christ; morally, it indicates the human soul; and

eschatologically it points to the heavenly Jerusalem.(1) Under this school of interpretation it was the church that established what the correct meaning of a passage was for all four levels.

By the time of the reformation, knowledge of the Bible was scarce. However, with a new emphasis on the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, the fourfold method of interpretation was beginning to fade. Martin Luther argued that the church shouldn't determine what the Scriptures mean, the Scriptures should govern what the churches teach. He also rejected the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture.

Luther argued that a proper understanding of what a passage teaches comes from a literal interpretation. This means that the reader must consider the historical context and the grammatical structure of each passage, and strive to maintain contextual consistency. This method was a result of Luther's belief that the Scriptures are clear, in opposition to the medieval church's position that they are so obscure that only the church can uncover their true meaning.

Calvin agreed in principle with Luther. He also placed great importance on the notion that "Scripture interprets Scripture," stressing that the grammar, context, words, and parallel passages found in the text were more important that any meaning we might impose on them. He added that, "it is the first business of an interpreter to let the author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.(2)

Another approach to interpretation is letterism. While often ignoring context, historical and cultural setting, and even grammatical structure, letterism takes each word as an isolated truth. A problem with this method is that it fails to take into account the different literary genre, or types, in the Bible. The Hebrew poetry of the Psalms is not to be interpreted in the same way as is the logical discourse of

Romans. Letterism tends to lead to legalism because of its inability to distinguish between literary types. All passages tend to become equally binding on current believers.

If we use Jesus as our model for interpreting Scripture we find that He treated the historical narratives as facts. Old Testament characters and events are talked about as if they actually existed and happened. When making applications from the Old Testament text, Jesus used the normal, rather than allegorical meaning, of the passage. Jesus condemned the Scribes and Pharisees for replacing the original intent of the Scriptures with their own traditions. Jesus took a literal approach to interpretation which took into account the literary type of the passage.

Paul tells Timothy that he is to do his "best to present himself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." Having the right method of interpretation is a critical precursor to accomplishing this admonition.

Applying the Hermeneutic Process

Next, we will look at how one might approach a specific text. A first step should be to determine the literary genre of the passage. A passage might be legal, narrative, polemic, poetry, wisdom, gospel, logical discourse, or prophetic literature, each having specific guidelines for proper interpretation. For instance, the wisdom literature found in Proverbs is to be seen as maxims or general truths based on broad experience and observations. "They are guidelines, not guarantees; precepts, not promises.(3)

Now, it would be helpful to identify the use of figurative language in the passage. Various forms of Hebrew poetry, simile, metaphor, and hyperbole need to be recognized if the reader is to understand the passage's meaning. Hyperbole, for example, uses exaggeration to make a point. John says that the

whole world would not have room for the books that would be written if everything about Jesus's life was written down (John 21:25). John is using figurative speech. His point is that there were many things that Jesus did that weren't recorded.

The Hebrew language of the Old Testament is filled with examples of figurative text. Judges 7:12 claims that "The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore." Were there actually billions of camels in the valley, or is this an overstatement for the sake of making the point that there were many camels present? Interpreting a passage begins by looking for the plain literal meaning of the text, but if there are obvious contradictions of known facts we look for a figure of speech. Clues for interpreting a figure of speech are usually found in the immediate context.

After a passage's literary type is determined and figures of speech are identified, we can begin to focus on the content of a section of Scripture. Four levels of study are recommended. Word studies come first. Words are the building blocks of meaning, and by looking at the root origin or etymology of a word; its historical development over time; and the meaning of the word at the time of its use in Scripture we can gain insight into a passage's meaning.

Much is to be gained by focusing on the verbs and conjunctions within a text. In the Greek language, verbs have a tense, a mood, a voice, and a person. For instance, Ephesians 5:18 says to not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit. Does "be filled" mean a one time event? Do we accomplish this via hard work? Actually, the passive voice and present tense of the Greek word used translates better as "be kept being filled in Spirit." It implies an ongoing process that God performs as a result of our submission to Him, not as a result of our personal

efforts.

Connective words like “and” or “for” are important when reading long or difficult passages. The word “for” introduces a reason for a preceding statement. In Romans 1:15-17 Paul says that he is eager “to preach the gospel . . . **for** I am not ashamed . . . **for** it is the power of God for salvation . . . **for** in it the righteousness of God is revealed.” And, in Romans 8, “for” occurs 15 times.

Other techniques for studying words include looking at synonyms, antonyms, and cross references. Cross-references might be verbal, parallel (using the same words), or conceptual (using the same idea).

Continuing the Hermeneutic Process

Syntax is the way in which words are grouped together within phrases, clauses, and sentences. Two types of phrases are prepositional, like “in Christ” and “from God our Father,” and participial, such as “speaking the truth in love” or “making peace.” There are dependent clauses like “when we pray for you” and independent clauses such as “we always thank God.” There are simple and compound sentences, simple ones having only one independent clause, compound ones having at least two.

Why do we need to know about syntax? Because without it we have no valid assurance that our interpretation is the meaning God intended to convey. Since God used languages that function within normal grammatical rules, knowing these rules is necessary in order to discern the meaning of a text.

The next level of study should be context. First locate the beginning of an idea and its topic sentence. Start with the paragraph, and then consider the chapter and the entire book. Determine who is being addressed, who is speaking, and what the occasion is. Hebrews chapter six has been interpreted in a

number of different ways depending on how one answers these questions. Since the book was written to Jewish believers, deals with Christian maturity, and begins by exhorting the reader to leave elementary teachings and press on to maturity, many feel that the passage deals with Jewish believers tempted to return to Temple worship and the Jewish community. It warns not of the loss of salvation, but the negative impact on their Christian life if they return to the Jewish community and worship. In other words, they cannot start over if they ruin their testimony among the Jews.

Finally, ignoring the cultural context of a passage is one of the greatest problems in Bible interpretation. By culture we mean the behavior of a people as reflected by their thoughts, beliefs, social forms, speech, actions, and material artifacts. If we ignore culture, we often wrongly read into the Bible our twentieth century ideas. Knowledge of the religious, economic, legal, agricultural, architectural, and domestic practices of biblical times will decrease the likelihood of misinterpreting difficult passages.

God’s plagues on Egypt is one example of how cultural knowledge can help us to understand a text. The specific plagues sent by God spoke directly against the Egyptian gods. Turning the Nile into blood invalidated the protection of Isis, a goddess of the Nile, as well as Khnum, a guardian god of the Nile. The plague of frogs defied the Heqet, the goddess of birth who had the head of a frog. The plague of gnats ridiculed Set, god of the desert. Other plagues mocked Re, a sun god; Hathor, goddess with a cows head; Apis, the bull god; Sekhmet, goddess with power over disease, as well as others. God was communicating very clearly with the Egyptian people concerning His role as the creator and sustainer of the universe.

Reference works like Bible dictionaries, concordances, word study books, and commentaries are available to assist us in our study of the Bible. The goal of this process is to apply

God’s Word to our lives, but we must first have accurate knowledge of what God’s Word means. Understanding precedes application.

As Psalm 19:1 explains, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” Paul, in Romans 1:20 says, “…since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

Notes

1. Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 63.

2. Ibid., p. 67.

3. Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1991), p. 132.

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