

Hermeneutics 2

“It is not difficult to imagine the following scenario because many of us have experienced it. A group of people gather for food, fellowship, and Bible study. The initiator of the gathering thanks everyone for just “showing up.” He reads a verse and then asks the pivotal question, What does this verse mean to you? It takes a few moments but soon the responses flow. “To me, this verse means . . .” There is growing enthusiasm as the people offer their opinions. The initiator affirms each answer. After all, the Bible study is a safe zone—a venue for much-needed self-expression and acceptance. Anything goes (unless, of course, an answer critiques what someone else just said!).”

Brad Klassen

What is hermeneutics?

Michael Vlach

Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical Interpretation.

- *A definition* "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, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, p. 1)
- *The rules by which we play* Hermeneutics determines the methods, techniques, rules and principles which best help us determine the intended meaning of the biblical text. It is the rules by which we play. Just as a football player must understand the rules of football in order to effectively play the game, the interpreter of the Bible must also abide by certain rules to make sure his or her interpretation is true to the intended meaning of the text.

Difference between General and Special Hermeneutics

- *General Hermeneutics* The study of those rules that govern interpretation of the entire Bible.
- *Special Hermeneutics* The study of those rules which govern the interpretation of specific literary forms such as parables, types and prophecy.

Why is understanding and applying proper Hermeneutics important?

1. So we can know what God has said

"This is the primary and basic need of hermeneutics: *to ascertain what God has said in Sacred Scripture; to determine the meaning of the Word of God.*

There is no profit to us if God has spoken and we do not know what He has said. Therefore it is our responsibility to determine the meaning of what God has given to us in Sacred Scripture" (Ramm, p. 2).

Excerpts from "What Does This Verse Mean to You? Finding Meaning in Scripture"

Brad Klassen

This challenges us to consider several fundamental questions: ***What is meaning, and who has the authority to determine it?***

What is meaning?

The first question can be answered simply.

'Meaning' refers to the content of a communication which a writer or speaker consciously willed to convey by the words and grammar he used.

Stated negatively, meaning is not what a reader or listener feels; it is not what a reader or listener presupposes; and it is not what a reader or listener creates.

The reader or listener does not contribute anything to meaning. Instead, the meaning of any kind of communication—oral speech, written text, or hand gestures—is centered in the communicator and not the recipient.

- Romans 3:2
- 2 Timothy 3:16

If we truly believe the Bible is what it says it is, the revelation of God, then it is nothing short of blasphemous to believe that we—its recipients—contribute to its meaning.

And who has the authority to determine meaning?

The answer is two-fold...

On the one hand, the authority to determine meaning is located solely in the author himself. The author must be given the first and last word about the meaning of his text.

On the other hand, a derivative kind of authority also exists. Interpreters today derive authority from the author when they interpret his text consistent with his intent. Thus, to the extent that an interpreter refuses to lean on his own understanding and instead submits to the will of the author, he has authority to tell others “what the text means.”

2. So we can avoid misinterpreting the Bible

- 2 Corinthians 4:2
- 2 Peter 3:16

Excerpts from “Mistaking the Voice of Man for the Voice of God”

Brad Klassen

“Accurate interpretation is a matter of life and death. Yet...some contend that interpretations of Scripture are neither correct nor incorrect. Whatever meaning the biblical text has to an individual will be different for different people, or even different for the same person from one day to the next. Judging the validity of an

interpretation is not only unnecessary, but offensive—a shameful attempt to assert control over others. To challenge readers on the accuracy of their interpretation is viewed as a subtle attempt to bully believers back into the Dark Ages, a time when the Bible was kept out of the hands of the people and only the religious elite were deemed fit to interpret it correctly.

Others may not articulate these arguments, but they apply them in their everyday handling of the Bible. Their haphazard approach reveals an underlying conviction that inaccurate interpretation has few, if any, harmful side effects.

What is most important is that a person uses the Bible. How he or she uses it doesn't matter. After all, they would say... 'God is gracious' ”

Bernard Ramm helps us consider what really is at stake:

To determine what God has said is a high and holy task. With fear and trembling each should be ever so careful of that which he has adopted as his method of biblical interpretation. Upon the correct interpretation of the Bible rests our doctrine of salvation, of sanctification, of eschatology, and of Christian living. It is our solemn responsibility to know what God has said with reference to each of these. This can be done only if we have carefully, thoroughly, and systematically formulated that system of biblical interpretation which will yield most readily the native [original] meaning of the Bible.

We need to know the correct method of Biblical interpretation so that we do not confuse the voice of God with the voice of man.

3. So we can correctly apply what God has said

"We must know the meaning of the Bible before we can know its message for today. We must understand its sense for then before we can see its significance for now" (Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, p. 10).

Excerpts from “Objectivity and the Interpretation of Scripture”

Brad Klassen

The term “exegesis” comes from a compound Greek word which literally means to lead or guide out of. Therefore, “exegesis” came to refer to the act of interpretation because it carried the notion of “leading out of a text its meaning.”

But when bias is permitted to influence the interpretive process, a preconceived understanding is read into the text. This is called “eisegesis.”

- James 3:2

One is either naïve or dishonest to claim that he never dons the lens of bias.

But rather than working harder to neutralize this subjectivity and believing this to be a worthy pursuit, interpreters are increasingly waving the white flag and embracing bias as good and necessary. ***In fact, it is not unusual today to hear claims from today’s prominent evangelicals that the Bible cannot be understood unless it is read through the “lenses” of particular social, economic, ethnic, or sexual identities.***

This glorying in bias decreases Christians’ confidence in the Bible, leading many to echo the question of the Serpent himself, “Indeed, has God said?” (Gen 3:1).

4. Because the Bible is our sole authority

"Conservative Protestantism takes *only* the Bible as authoritative, there is no secondary means of making clear the meaning of the Bible." (Ramm, p. 1).

Excerpts from “Finding Meaning in Scripture”

Brad Klassen

“Meaning” refers to the content of a communication which a writer or speaker consciously willed to convey by the words and grammar he used.

“Meaning” is the aim of interpretation.

In sum, the purpose of genuine Bible study is to discover in the biblical text the meaning God willed to convey by the words and grammar recorded by his chosen instrument, the biblical writer.

Meaning = Authorial Intent

Recognizing and respecting this equivalence is necessary for success in everyday life. Abandoning it leads to disaster.

The consequences of this discussion are no less pertinent to the realm of Bible interpretation. So much of the chaos and confusion that exists today within the church originates from the failure to equate the meaning of the biblical text with the intent of the biblical writer.

As readers wrestle meaning away from the divinely-inspired writers, they not only usurp the writers' authority, they destroy the concept of meaning itself

Therefore, the pivotal question in Bible study can never be, "What does this verse mean to me?" It must always be, "What did the writer intend by what he wrote?"

1. "Meaning" is the product of dual authorship.

On the one hand, Scripture testifies from beginning to end that it is the word of God. This overwhelming testimony is summarized well by Paul: "All Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tim 3:16).

At the same time, Scripture also testifies that its contents were delivered through human instrumentality. The writers were fully involved—heart, mind, and soul—in the inscripturation process.

...God superintended the mental processes of the biblical writers to such a degree that their intent for their words conforms directly to his intent for those same words.

2. "Meaning" is singular, fixed, and objective.

The principle of authorial intent necessitates the principle of single meaning.

The meaning of a text is synonymous with the divine-human intent and is not impacted by the response of the reader...there is always and only one meaning present in a text—the meaning intended when it was originally written.

Moreover, since the meaning of a text is inseparable from that divine-human intent as expressed in the original writing, ***the meaning of a biblical text never changes over time.***

Furthermore, the meaning of that text is the same for all readers. It does not change from interpreter to interpreter, from culture to culture, or from generation to generation.

Meaning remains constant, objective, stable, and fixed on the pages of Scripture.

3. “Meaning” is distinct from significance.

“Significance” is the relationship that exists between the meaning revealed in a text and some other context, concept, or entity.

While a text’s meaning is singular and unchanging, the significance of that meaning is flexible and varies from reader to reader.

Even though there is just one meaning in a text, that meaning can have many applications—applications which the writer never even envisioned

- Ephesians 4:29

There is one definite meaning to these words, the meaning intended by Paul as he was moved by the Holy Spirit to write. When he recorded these words for the Ephesian church, Paul certainly was not thinking of the kinds of communication that exist today in the various forms of social media. He had in mind oral communication, the kind that proceeds “from your mouth” and benefits “those who hear.” Nevertheless, there is a relationship between the meaning of Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:29 and the way in which Christians are today to engage in social media. We call this relationship significance, and it is here—not in meaning—where variations occur.

While variations occur in the realm of significance, this significance must still be anchored to the immutable, objective meaning of the text itself if it is to have authority.

Excerpts from “Mistaking the Voice of Man for the Voice of God”

Brad Klassen

In particular, the interpreter must give attention to three factors which give rise to error. In a sense, all distortions of Scripture trace their origin to these three influences:

1. An Inappropriate Attribution of Authority

Common candidates include human reason, personal experience, or religious tradition. When these things are treated as unassailably reliable, and even as sources of truth in themselves, the text of Scripture is inevitably distorted in an effort to make it agreeable to one's reason, intuition, or tradition.

2. A System of Interpretation which is Inconsistent with the Nature of Scripture's Language

The meaning of the biblical text can be distorted even by those with a high view of Scripture. The problem here is not the failure to recognize Scripture as the ultimate authority. Rather, the problem is traced to a system of interpretation which is inconsistent with the nature of Scripture's language.

3. An Incorrect or Inconsistent Application of the Right Hermeneutics

Interpreters can rightly acknowledge Scripture's ultimate authority and embrace an interpretive approach consistent with Scripture's language. But limitations in skill or lack of experience can still lead to interpretive error. This explains why those who have the same reverence for the word of God, and agree on the same interpretive methodology, can still arrive at different exegetical conclusions.

Any interpreter can fall under the effect of any of these influences. He must remain vigilant against these dangers if he is to avoid substituting his voice for the voice of God.

In Conclusion...The Need of God's People Requires An Accurate Understanding of the Meaning of Scripture

- Romans 10:14,17

The lost in our world and the members of our churches need to hear the word of truth cut straight. If we truly believe that the word of Christ is necessary for true conversion to take place, then a misinterpretation of that word—a substitution of our voice for God's voice—has awful significance for the hearer. If we truly believe that the saints are sanctified by the truth of the word of God, then a misinterpretation of that word—a substitution of our voice for God's voice—will be a dangerous impediment to their growth. They will suffer consequences, and so will we.