



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 7 – HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION
LESSON 124 – PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY AND PRIVATE INTERPRETATION

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – LOUIS BERKHOF
KNOWING SCRIPTURE – RC SPROUL – PGS 26-48

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The Bible as Revelation

- ▶ The Bible provides us with information that is not available elsewhere.
- ▶ We learn by observation, analysis, and abstract speculation – knowledge is acquired by human investigation of the natural world.
- ▶ With all the skills of knowledge that we have at our disposal in the world, there is no one who can speak to us from a transcendent perspective, no one who can reason with us, as the philosophers say, from the eternal perspective.
- ▶ Only God can provide us with an eternal perspective and speak to us with absolute and final authority.

The Bible as Revelation

- ▶ In Scripture we find knowledge that is made available to us that can be learned from no other source.
- ▶ The Scripture does also include matters that can be learned by other means, however the matters contained in the Holy Bible “unveil” for us that which is not exposed to the natural course of human investigation.
- ▶ The Bible tells us we are given information about God in nature (Rom. 1:18-23), but it is His self revelation in Scripture that is most complete and most valuable for us.
- ▶ When we speak about the concept of revelation, we are talking about the basic principle of self-disclosure. The Scriptures come to us as divine self-disclosure. Here the mind of God is laid bare on many matters. In the Bible, God reveals Himself.

The Bible as Revelation

- ▶ The spirit of America has been defined as the spirit of pragmatism. This is nowhere more manifested than in the arena of politics and education.
- ▶ The principles of John Dewey, who laid the foundation of the public education system, seek not to learn what is true, but what works. To the pragmatist, whatever delivers results determines “truth.”
- ▶ John Stott wrote, “The modern world breeds pragmatists, whose first question about any idea is not ‘Is it true?’ but ‘Does it work?’ Young people tend to be activists, dedicated supporters of a cause, though without always inquiring too closely whether their cause is a good end to pursue or whether their action is the best means by which to pursue it.”

The Bible as Revelation

- ▶ How can we discover the ultimate test for pragmatism so that we might learn if our purpose has a purpose?
- ▶ God alone can give us the final evaluation of the wisdom and value of our purposes and our practice.
- ▶ The fatal weakness of pragmatism is overcome by revelation.
- ▶ In the church, too many have become sensuous Christians, that is, living by their feelings rather than through our understanding of the Word of God. Sensuous Christians will do believe or do something unless they “feel like it.”
- ▶ These will use their experiences and “inner feelings” to test for truth.

The Bible as Revelation

- ▶ Sensuous Christians do not need to study the Word of God because they already know the will of God by their feelings. They don't want to know God; they want to experience Him. They equate believe "child like faith" means faith without content, a faith without understanding. Just a gut feeling.
- ▶ Sensuous Christians cannot deal with pain or disappointment in life and so bad feelings must be avoided at all cost.
- ▶ "God forbid that we should lose our passion or go through the Christian pilgrimage without any experience of Christ. But what happens when there is conflict between what God says and what I feel? We must do what God says, like it or not. That is what Christianity is all about. Death to self.

Bible Study and Private Interpretation

- ▶ The average home in the United States has 4 Bibles. Undoubtedly, many of these Bibles serve as decorative displays.
- ▶ Two of the great legacies of the Reformation were the principle of private interpretation and the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. Scores of people paid with their lives by being burned at the stake for daring to translate the Bible into common languages so that any literate person could read it.
- ▶ Private interpretation is best expressed by Luther during his trial: “Unless I am convinced by sacred Scripture or by evident reason, I cannot recant. For my conscience is held captive by the Word of God and to act against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me.”

Bible Study and Private Interpretation

- ▶ Luther had dared to interpret Scripture contrary to the interpretations rendered both by Popes and church councils. This is why he was charged with arrogance.
- ▶ He believed he could be wrong but maintained that Popes and councils had been wrong while the “Scriptures never err.” If his teaching could be shown from the Scriptures to be in error, he said he would “be the first in casting my writings into the fire.”
- ▶ His conscience, convinced and bound by the authority of Scripture alone, would be his guide. In response the RCC launched the Counter Reformation.

Bible Study and Private Interpretation

- ▶ In the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the sharpest attack against Protestantism took on the issue of private interpretation: “No one, relying on his own judgment shall, in matters of faith and morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine, distorting the Holy Scriptures in accordance with his own conceptions, presume to interpret them contrary to that sense which holy mother Church, to whom it belongs to judge of their true sense and interpretation, has held or holds, or even contrary to the unanimous teaching of the Fathers, even though such interpretations should never at any time be published.”
- ▶ In other words, the Church declares the meaning of Scripture.

Bible Study and Private Interpretation

- ▶ Trent misses one major truth in railing against private interpretation: the Reformers did not promote an unbridled right for anyone to interpret Scripture to suit himself without restraint or validation.
- ▶ The Reformers taught sound principles of Biblical interpretation as a check and balance to counter fanciful interpretations.
- ▶ The Reformers did not seek to control interpretation by declaring the teachings of the church infallible, but instead upheld that the Scriptures are infallible, hence the importance to understand the correct meaning of its message.
- ▶ Trent declares that no one has the right to distort the Scriptures. The Reformers heartily agree! Private interpretation never meant that individuals have the right to distort the Scriptures into whatever they want them to say.

Bible Study and Private Interpretation

- ▶ With the right of private interpretation comes the sober responsibility of accurate interpretation.
- ▶ You and I may interpret Scripture, but we must work diligently to be sure that we are not distorting it as we do so.
- ▶ Luther understood the dangers of putting the Scriptures into the hand of ordinary men and women, but he also was convinced of the clarity of Scripture. “We need not regret that the books of many fathers and councils have, by God’s grace, disappeared. If they had all remained in existence, no room would be left for anything but books; and yet all of them together would not have improved on what one finds in the Holy Scriptures.”

Bible Study and Private Interpretation

- ▶ The great danger of private interpretation is the clear and present danger of subjectivism in Biblical interpretation. A New Testament scholar, when addressing a disputed passage, said, “In the final analysis we all read what we want to read in it, and that’s all right.”
- ▶ Too often when the meaning of a passage is discussed, those who disagree reply by saying, “Well, that’s just your opinion.”
- ▶ To the subject way of thinking, contradictory interpretations can both be true. What is true for you may not be true for me...in my experience!
- ▶ To avoid distorting Scripture we must avoid subjectivism.

Bible Study and Private Interpretation

- ▶ In seeking an objective understanding of Scripture, we seek to understand what the word says in its context before we go about the equally necessary task of applying it to ourselves.
- ▶ “A particular statement may have numerous possible personal applications, but it can only have one correct meaning.”
- ▶ This brings us to the terms exegesis and eisegesis.
- ▶ Exegesis means to explain what Scripture says. The word means “to guide out of.” It is to get out of the words the meaning that is there.
- ▶ Eisegesis means “into” and therefore involves reading into the text something that isn’t there at all.

Bible Study and Private Interpretation

- ▶ As we study the Bible in the church, we must be aware that there is a role for teachers. In many small group Bible studies while it is good for people to gather and study the Scriptures, there is a great danger in the pooling of ignorance. The blind cannot lead the blind and get anywhere safely or successfully.
- ▶ The church needs educated ministers to teach the Word of God. A good teacher must have sound knowledge and the necessary skills to unravel difficult portions of Scripture. Here then is the need for the mastery of languages, history, and theology.
- ▶ The responsibility of the teaching office requires study and personal discipline (James 3:1).

Bible Study and Private Interpretation

- ▶ Christ has given His church pastor-teachers exactly for this purpose, to be skilled at teaching His Word to His people so that they might know and love Him better.
- ▶ Private Bible study is an important means of grace for Christians. It is a privilege and a duty for all of us. In His grace and kindness toward us, God has provided not only gifted teachers in His church to assist us, but His own Holy Spirit to illumine His Word and search out its application to our lives.
- ▶ Next week, Literal Interpretation and Genre Awareness.