



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 7 – HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION
LESSON 125 – LITERAL INTERPRETATION AND GENRE AWARENESS

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – LOUIS BERKHOF
KNOWING SCRIPTURE – RC SPROUL

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The Science of Hermeneutics

- ▶ “The purpose of hermeneutics is to establish guidelines and rules for interpretation.” – RC Sproul
- ▶ Any writing is subject to misinterpretation, so the rules and safeguards found in the study of hermeneutics guide us to a right understanding of a text. Comprehension of the message being communicated is the goal.
- ▶ Many modern “Bible scholars” are motivated to “bring the Bible up to date” by reinterpretation. The original meaning of Scripture is obscured, and the message is conformed to contemporary trends and opinions.
- ▶ The Scriptures may be interpreted by studying the words in light of what they meant at the time they were written down. The opposite approach claims that as a “living document,” the Bible changes with the times and must do so to remain relevant.

The Analogy of Faith

- ▶ With the truth of Sola Scriptura came a claim during the Reformation that the Scriptures alone were the supreme authority for the church. The Reformers understood that they had to carefully define rules for interpretation to ensure a right handling of the Word.
- ▶ Their primary rule is called the Analogy of Faith, stating simply that Scripture is to interpret Scripture. **Scripture is its own interpreter.** This means that no part of Scripture can be interpreted in such a way as to render it in conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture.
- ▶ As the inspired, inerrant Word, the Scripture is coherent and consistent and must be because with God as its author we know God cannot contradict Himself.
- ▶ Our view of the nature and origin of Scripture will have a profound effect on how we go about interpreting it.

Literally!

- ▶ A common question is asked, “Do you take the Bible literally?” As if this is more accusation than question, the intended meaning being that surely we are not so naïve as to take the Bible literally in this modern age.
- ▶ The correct answer of course to the literal question is, “Of course.”
- ▶ The second rule of hermeneutics is that **the Bible should be interpreted according to its literal sense.**
- ▶ The term “literal” refers to “letter”, so to take something literally is to pay attention to the words being used.
- ▶ To take the Bible literally is to read it a literature. That means the natural meaning of the passage is to be interpreted according to the normal rules of grammar, speech, syntax, and context.

Chicago Statement on Hermeneutics

- ▶ Article 15: We affirm the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text.
- ▶ Taking things literally means a noun is a noun, a verb is a verb, questions do not become exclamations, and historical narratives do not become allegory.
- ▶ To be accurate then, the interpreter needs to know the rules of grammar and must be able to recognize the genre, or sort of speech is being used by the writer.

Types of Literature

- ▶ We distinguish between types of literature all the time – forms, figures, poetry, legal documents, news reports, and personal letters, etc.
- ▶ Some who reject miracles deny the reality described in passages of the Bible where we see miracles performed. This is not a matter of interpretation, but of philosophy influencing the approach to the text. It is reading in a presupposition, not exegeting what the text says.
- ▶ We hopefully understand concepts like hyperbole and desire accuracy above all so that we might understand the meaning of the text we are studying.
- ▶ We also need to understand personification. This is a poetic device where inanimate objects or animals are given human characteristics. The impersonal is described in personal terms to help the reader understand something.

Types of Literature

- ▶ Personification is seen in phrases that depict the hills clapping and dancing or the stones crying out.
- ▶ The question arises when we look at passages like Balaam's donkey speaking. Did the donkey speak? Or is this personification? The key again is found in whether we accept the premise presented by the Bible that miracles happen. The immediate context of this passage is a historical narrative, reporting the facts. It is not poetic or prophetic, so we must take the text at face value and believe what it tells us.
- ▶ Trying to explain away the miraculous is actually an attempt to say that what the Bible says happened didn't actually happen.

Types of Literature

- ▶ A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or idea is used in the place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them. For example, when Jesus says, “I am the door,” is He literally saying that He is a door? Yes and no! He is the only Way (passage) to God for men, but He is not a wooden door with a knob and hinges.
- ▶ Differences in literary analysis regarding the passage where Jesus says, “This is My body” have led to differences in understanding the Lord’s Supper. Did the bread represent His body as a symbol, or was the bread literally transformed into His actual flesh?
- ▶ Seeking the literal sense of Scripture means seeking a knowledge of what is being communicated through the various forms and figures of speech employed in Biblical literature.

Quadruga – Fourfold Method

- ▶ The prevailing method of interpretation challenged by the Reformers was called the quadruga. This is a 4-fold method of interpretation that examined each text for four meanings: literal, moral, allegorical, and analogical.
- ▶ The literal sense of Scripture was defined as the plain and evident meaning.
- ▶ The moral sense was instructions for behavior.
- ▶ The allegorical sense revealed the “content of faith” – what needs to be believed.
- ▶ The analogical sense expressed future hope and expectation.

Quadrigena – Fourfold Method

- ▶ In this formulation, a text could have 4 meanings at the same time. For example, a text that mentioned Jerusalem could mean:
- ▶ in the literal sense the capital of Israel and the location of the Temple, the central sanctuary of the nation;
- ▶ in the moral sense, the soul, or central sanctuary of a person;
- ▶ In the allegorical sense Jerusalem in the church, or the center of Christian community;
- ▶ and in the analogical sense this is a picture of heaven, the final hope and future residence of believers.
- ▶ The most common error from this method was the ability to allegorize anything!

Quadrigena – Fourfold Method

- ▶ Intelligent people in the past came to bizarre conclusions using this method, finding things within a text that go beyond normal interpretation for the sake of finding each of these four senses.
- ▶ This in fact required a belief that a text had at least 4 meanings and the interpreters job was to find them all!
- ▶ Luther rejected the idea that Biblical passages could have multiple meanings, but he also refused to limit a passage to just one sense. He taught that a passage has one meaning, but can have multiple applications. These are not the meaning of the text, but the outworking of the truth of the text in our circumstances.
- ▶ The Chicago Statement says, “We affirm that the meaning expressed in each Biblical text is single, definite, and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application.”

Grammatical-Historical Method

- ▶ The third rule for hermeneutics is called **the grammatical-historical method of interpretation**.
- ▶ This method, after the analogy of faith and the literal sense of Scripture focuses on grammatical constructions and historical context out of which the Scriptures were written.
- ▶ Basic knowledge of English grammar is necessary to read and understand something written in the English language. Study of the original languages of Scripture also must include grammar and not merely consist of word studies!
- ▶ Grammar helps us define text as a question (interrogative), command (imperative), or declaration (indicative).

Grammatical-Historical Method

- ▶ Historical analysis involves seeking a knowledge of the setting and situation in which the books of the Bible were written.
- ▶ This is why it is important to study and understand who wrote each book of the Bible, to whom it was written (intended audience), and under what circumstances. Authorship, date, and destination matters if we are to understand the message being communicated.
- ▶ We also must confess that the inerrancy and inspiration of the Scripture is not negated or called into question if we find grammatical errors in the text. Some of these are due to translation of phrases and idioms, where the original meaning may be unclear, but there are also simple grammatical errors in the text. The Bible was not dictated to the writers by the Holy Spirit. Human men wrote as they were “carried along” by the Spirit. To say the Bible is inerrant means the text never errs away from truth.

Three Primary Principles

- ▶ The Three Primary Principles of Interpretation are:
- ▶ 1. The analogy of faith that keeps the whole Bible in view lest we suffer the effects of exaggerating one part of Scripture to the exclusion of others;
- ▶ 2. The literal sense offers a restraint from letting our imaginations run away with fanciful interpretations by inviting us to closely examine the literary forms of Scripture; and
- ▶ 3. The grammatical-historical method focuses our attention on the original meaning of the text lest we read into Scripture our own ideas.
- ▶ The Grammatical-historical method is a necessary foundation for understanding the Redemptive-historical method, which takes the interpretation one step further in order to find that the Scripture reveals to us Jesus Christ! He is in every single text. (More on this later).

Next Week

- ▶ Lesson 126: The Unity of the Sense of Scripture.