



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 7 – HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION
LESSON 132 –THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION: THE BIBLE AS UNITY

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – LOUIS BERKHOF, PGS. 133-160
KNOWING SCRIPTURE – RC SPROUL

UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED, ALL SCRIPTURE TAKEN FROM THE NEW KING JAMES VERSION. COPYRIGHT © 1982 BY THOMAS NELSON, INC. USED BY PERMISSION. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Reading the Bible Theologically

- ▶ Many writers on Hermeneutics are of the opinion that the Grammatical-Historical Interpretation does not meet all the requirements for the proper interpretation of the Bible. They refuse to place the Bible on the same level as other books. Our hermeneutic then must do justice to the special theological element of the Bible.
- ▶ Scripture contains a great deal that does not find its explanation in history, or from secondary authors (un-inspired works), but only in God as the *Auctor Primarius* (Principle Author).

Reading the Bible Theologically

- ▶ Purely historical and psychological considerations will not account for the following facts:
- ▶ The Bible is the Word of God.
- ▶ The Bible constitutes an organic whole, of which each individual book is an integral part.
- ▶ The Old and New Testaments are related to one another as type and antitype, prophecy and fulfillment, germ and perfect development.
- ▶ Not only the explicit statements of the Bible, but also what may be deduced from it by good and necessary consequence, constitutes the Word of God.

Reading the Bible Theologically

- ▶ The name “Theological Interpretation” deserves the preference, as expressive of the fact that its necessity follows the divine authorship of the Bible, and of the equally important consideration that, in the last analysis, God is the proper Interpreter of His Word.
- ▶ The following subjects will be discussed under this heading:
- ▶ The Interpretation of the Bible as Unity
- ▶ The mystical sense of Scripture
- ▶ The implications of the Bible
- ▶ Helps for theological interpretation

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ The relation of the Old Testament to the New Testament is not one of diversity, but unity.
- ▶ The New Testament sheds light on the Old, the substance being revealed from out of the shadow and types.
- ▶ The danger of a dispensational framework for interpretation is that it tends to focus only on the New Testament and disregards the Old as “not for the church.”
- ▶ Both the Old and New Testament are God’s Word and both have the same purpose in mind. They both contain the same doctrine of redemption, preach the same Christ, and impose on men the same moral and religious duties.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ At the same time, the revelation they contain is progressive and gradually increases in clarity. As the New Testament is implicit in the Old, so the Old is explicit in the New. Therefore we say that the Old and New Testaments constitute a unit.
- ▶ The doctrine of redemption was essentially the same for those who lived under the Old Covenant as it is for the church of the New Testament. What is symbolic in the Old Testament ceremonies and rituals is explicitly revealed in the New – the form is filled in, so to speak.
- ▶ In the Old Testament, external forms point to spiritual realities. For example, the external ceremony of circumcision points to the necessity of regeneration through being given a new heart (Romans 2:28-29).

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ The Old Testament sacrifices are a picture of the forgiveness of sins that requires the atoning blood of Christ, and the oft-repeated washings symbolized the purifying influence and work of the Holy Spirit in our sanctification.
- ▶ The Tabernacle as a whole was a revelation of the way that led to God, and Canaan itself constituted a symbol of the rest that remains for the people of God (Hebrews 4:9).
- ▶ Old Testament passages demonstrate that the Israelites had some conceptions of the spiritual significance of their rituals and ceremonies: Lev. 26:41; 20:25-26; Psa. 26:6; 51:7, 16-17; Isaiah 1:16.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ The True Israelites in the Old Testament, as well as in the New, are not the natural descendants of Abraham, but only those who share his faith (Gal. 3:6-9; Rom. 4:7-12; John 8:37-44; Rom. 2:28-29; 9:6-8 - see last week's Bible study lesson – [The Sons of Abraham](#) – Gal. 3:6-9).
- ▶ God did not aim at the separation of Israel as a nation, but the formation of a spiritual people within the nation, primarily gathered at first out of the chosen race, but also at the same time gathered from the surrounding nations. From the earliest times, proselytes were incorporated into Israel.
- ▶ Solomon in his dedicatory prayer for the Temple, included the stranger who might come to worship (1 Kings 8:41 ff), and the prophets looked forward with joyful expectancy to the time when Gentiles would bring their treasures into the Temple of the Lord.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ The difference between the privileges and duties of the Old and New Testament people of God was purely relative, and not absolute. The law and grace work together to bring us to Christ. Old and New Testament saints were not saved differently and needed the same Mediator and the same Holy Spirit, and received the same blessings of saving grace.
- ▶ The Old and New Testaments are related to each other not merely as type and antitype, but also as bud and flower – as primitive and then more perfect.
- ▶ The ordinances of the Old and New Covenants include external ritual that has spiritual significance. The blessings is not in merely going through the motions, but faith is required on the part of the worshipper. Ultimately they all point to Christ.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ The Old Testament offers the key to the right interpretation of the New and the New Testament is a commentary on the Old.
- ▶ The contents of the New Testament are already the fruit of a long previous development. And while the Old includes a shadowy representation of the spiritual realities the New brings it all into perfect light.
- ▶ At times the writers of the New Testament furnish explicit and striking explanations of the Old Testament passages, and reveal depths that might easily have escaped the interpreter (Acts 2:29-31; Matt. 11:10; 21:42; Gal. 4:22-31; and the whole epistle of Hebrews!).

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ The interpreter should beware of minimizing the Old Testament.
- ▶ The interpreter should guard against reading too much into the Old Testament.
- ▶ The interpreter should understand the significance of the different books of the Bible in the organism of Scripture: The Word of God is an organic production, and consequently the separate books that constitute it are organically related to one another.
- ▶ The Holy Spirit so directed the human authors in writing the books of the Bible that their productions are mutually complementary. They are one in recording the work which God, in the execution of His divine plan, wrought in Christ for the redemption of a people that would glorify Him eternally.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ The Old Testament reveals this work, first of all, historically in the formation and guidance of Israel as a nation.
- ▶ The poetic books and the wisdom literature discloses its fruit in the spiritual experiences and practical life of God's people.
- ▶ The prophets view it is the light of God's eternal council, emphasizing the failure of the people to live up to the Divine requirements, and directing the hopes of the righteous to the future.
- ▶ A similar line runs through the New Testament. The Gospels and Acts contain the history of the work and redemption in Christ. Th Epistles reveal the effect of this work in the life and experience of the churches. And the Apocalypse discloses its final issue in rays of heavenly light.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ How is each book related to the Bible as a whole?
- ▶ The answer to this question can be found only by a careful study of the books in connection with the leading ideas of Scripture.
- ▶ The interpreter should make it his aim to discover, not merely what message each book contained for the contemporaries of the authors, but what permanent value it has, what word of God it conveys to all following generations.
- ▶ Here are a few simple examples:
- ▶ Genesis speaks to all ages until the end of time, of the creation of man in the image of God, of the entrance of sin into the world, and of the initial revelation of God's redeeming grace.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ Exodus acquaints the successive generations of men with the doctrine of deliverance through the shedding of blood.
- ▶ Leviticus teaches them how sinful man can approach God and stand in His holy presence.
- ▶ Numbers pictures the pilgrimage of God's people.
- ▶ Deuteronomy points to the blessing that accompanies a life of obedience to God and the curse that awaits the unfaithful.
- ▶ The book of Job offers a solution for the problem of suffering in the life of God's people.
- ▶ The Psalms furnish an insight into the spiritual experiences of the people of God – their struggles and triumphs, joy and sorrow.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ Isaiah describes the love of God for His people, Jeremiah offers a revelation of His righteousness, and Ezekiel emphasizes the holiness of the Lord, who would sanctify His name among the nations.
- ▶ Daniel reveals the glory of the Lord, as exalted above all the kings of the earth.
- ▶ Moving to the New Testament, in Galatians, Paul defends the liberty of the people of God as over against the ceremonialism of those who twist the Old Testament.
- ▶ Ephesians calls attention to the unity of the Church.
- ▶ Colossians magnifies Christ as head of the Church.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ If the interpreter studies the books of the Bible with such leading ideas in mind, this will greatly aid him to see, for instance, that Paul and James do not teach conflicting doctrines, but simply view the same truth from different aspects and are therefore mutually complementary!
- ▶ Our Confession of Faith includes these statements regarding the Word of God that apply to the study of Theological Interpretation:
- ▶ LBCF, 1689 – Chapter 1
- ▶ 5. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the people of God to gain a high and reverent estimation of the Holy Scriptures. We may be similarly affected by the nature of the Scriptures—the heavenliness of the contents, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God, the full disclosure it makes of the only way of man's salvation, together with many other incomparable excellencies and entire perfections.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ 5. By all the evidence the Scripture more than proves itself to be the Word of God. Yet, notwithstanding this, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth of Scripture and its divine authority, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.
- ▶ 6. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture, to which nothing is to be added at any time, either by new revelation of the Spirit, or by the traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ 6. There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and church government which are common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word which are always to be observed.
- ▶ 7. All things in scripture are not equally plain in themselves, nor equally clear to everyone, yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and revealed in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the educated but also the uneducated may attain a sufficient understanding of them by the due use of ordinary means.

The Bible as Unity

- ▶ 9. The infallible rule for the interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself, and therefore whenever there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched by other passages which speak more clearly.
- ▶ 10. The supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and by which must be examined all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, and doctrines of men and private spirits can be no other than the Holy Scripture, delivered by the Spirit. And in the sentence of Scripture we are to rest, for it is in Scripture, delivered by the Spirit, that our faith is finally resolved.
- ▶ Next Week – Lesson 133. Theological Interpretation: The Mystical Sense of Scripture.