

Biblical Studies Program Fall 2011

Introduction to the Bible

Lesson Five

The Interpretation and Use of the Bible

- I. An Introduction
 - A. Scripture is clear enough that anyone can grasp the essentials of the faith
 - B. Yet, skill in interpretation is needed in order to gain the most from Bible reading and study (and to avoid misinterpretation and misapplication)
- II. The Requirements for Interpretation
 - A. Interpretation of the Bible requires technical skill and spiritual receptivity
 1. Having the ability to read and possessing the Bible in one's own language are necessary prerequisites
 2. More detailed and precise questions about the meaning of certain words or passages may also require a more technical knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, as well as an understanding of the geography, history, and culture of the region
 3. Interpretation is also a spiritual task
 - a. As people read Scripture, it leads to a Person, not just truths
 - b. All Scripture points to Jesus Christ – to forgiveness and to personal knowledge of God through Him
 - B. One must take the right posture as he approaches Scripture
 1. We must be careful not to place ourselves “over” God's Word
 - a. At one extreme, the skeptic questions and judges whatever he or she reads
 - b. At the other, an overconfident reader can ignore or explain away whatever does not support his or her belief system
 2. We should all approach the Word of God with reverence, expecting to learn and be corrected (placing ourselves “under” God's Word)
 3. Isa 66:2 – *“But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.”*
- III. The “Three Teachers”
 - A. The Enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (Holy Spirit is the primary teacher)
 1. John Stott identifies two stages in the work of the Holy Spirit in communicating God's truth to us through the Scriptures
 - a. **Revelation** – the “first and objective stage” is the work of the Holy Spirit is to make known the truth in Scripture
 - b. **Illumination** – the “second and subjective stage” is the work of the Holy Spirit to enlighten our minds to comprehend the truth made known in Scripture
 2. *“Without revelation we have no truth to perceive; without illumination no*

- faculty with which to perceive it.”*¹
3. Those whom the Holy Spirit enlightens
 - a. The Holy Spirit enlightens the regenerate (the born again)
 - b. The Holy Spirit enlightens the humble
 - (1) A way we express our attitude of humble expectancy is through prayer
 - (2) The relationship between prayer and the Word of God - to neglect one or the other affects both
 - (3) *“I began to read the Holy Scriptures upon my knees, laying aside all other books, and praying over, if possible, every line and word. This proved meat indeed and drink indeed to my soul. I daily received fresh life, light, and power from above”* (George Whitefield)
 - c. The Holy Spirit enlightens the obedient
 - B. The Need for Personal Disciplined Study (we teach ourselves [Heb 5:12])
 1. Thinking is essential to knowing the truth
 2. Two passages of Scripture
 - a. 2 Tim 2:7 - *“Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.”*
 - (1) The command to Timothy is that he think - use his mind to understand what Paul means
 - (2) The reason: the Lord will give understanding
 - (3) Thinking and receiving the gift of understanding from God go together
 - (a) Thinking is essential to understanding
 - (b) But understanding is the gift of God
 - b. Proverbs 2:3-6 - *“...if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.”*
 - (1) We should use our minds with skill, for seeking is essential to finding
 - (2) But finding is a gift of God
 3. *“It is not enough to humble ourselves before God and look to Him for understanding; we must also set our minds to understand Scripture and think over what is written in it.”*²
 - C. The Teaching of the Church (the Church is called to teach His Word)

¹ John Stott, *Understanding the Bible*, page 178.

² Stott, page 183.

1. God has placed teachers in the Church
 - a. Eph 4:11-12 – *“And [Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ”*
 - b. 1 Tim 3:2,3 – *“Therefore an overseer must be... able to teach”*
2. A teacher’s authority is directly tied to the Word of God
 - a. Titus 2:1 – *“...teach what accords with sound doctrine”*
 - b. 2 Cor 4:2 – *“we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word...”*
 - c. 2 Peter 2:1 – *“...there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them”*
 - d. 2 Peter 3:16 – *“...the ignorant and unstable twist [the Scriptures] to their own destruction...”*

IV. Basic Principles of Interpretation

- A. The aim of good interpretation – to understand the intended meaning of the biblical author
 1. This involves two primary tasks
 - a. To find out what the text originally meant (exegesis)
 - b. To hear that same meaning in the variety of new or different contexts of our own day (hermeneutics ³)
 2. *“The most important ingredient one brings to this task [that is, getting to the plain meaning of the text] is enlightening common sense” ⁴*
- B. The “Hermeneutical Gap” – the “distance” between us and the Biblical authors
 1. The historical gap
 2. The cultural gap
 3. The linguistical gap
 4. The geographical gap
- C. The proper approach to Biblical interpretation is called the “Historical-Grammatical” method – which follows the ABC’s of interpretation
 1. **Analysis:** breaking down the whole into its parts
 - a. Primary analysis
 - (1) Who? What? Why? When? Where? How?
 - (2) These questions should be asked of both the book as a whole and its parts (the natural literary units)
 - b. Secondary analysis (different literary styles require different

³ The word “hermeneutics” ordinary covers the whole field of interpretation (including exegesis); however, I am using the word in the narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of the Biblical text

⁴ Gordon Fee. I would recommend the book *How To Read the Bible For All Its Worth* (by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart) as a great text dealing with the issue of how to properly read and interpret Scripture

approaches

- (1) For example, narrative passages (stories) usually do not teach doctrine; they usually illustrate a doctrine propositionally taught elsewhere in Scripture
 - (2) So, a “secondary analysis” of a New Testament epistle (like Romans) would include identifying the...
 - (a) **Themes** [major points] have...
 - (b) **Sub-points** [minor ideas] which consist of...
 - (c) **Arguments** backed by...
 - (d) **Scripture citations**...
 - (e) **Illustrations** and...
 - (f) **Experiences**
- c. Literary analysis
- (1) Genre (literary style), for example...
 - (a) Historical narrative
 - (b) Poetry
 - (c) Prophecy
 - (d) Gospel
 - (2) Literary devices, for example...
 - (a) Figures of speech
 - (b) Hyperbole
 - (c) Metaphor
 - (3) Rhetorical devices
- d. Grammatical analysis
- (1) Diagraming
 - (2) Identifying connectives
- e. Lexical analysis (word studies)
2. **Background:** the historical and cultural setting of the passage
- a. The Bible often gives background information
 - b. Other resources can be extremely helpful
 - (1) Bible dictionary (*The New Bible Dictionary*)
 - (2) Bible Encyclopedia (*ISBE*)
 - (3) Bible Handbook (*Eerdmann’s Handbook of the Bible*)
 - (4) Old Testament and New Testament Surveys and Introductions
 - (5) The “Introduction” or “Background” section of a good commentary or Study Bible
 - (6) Bible Atlas (Holman Bible Atlas)
3. **Context**
- a. “A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text”
 - b. Context determines meaning (that is, all meaning is context-dependent)

- (1) Unique interpretations are usually wrong
 - (2) A text cannot mean what it never meant
 - (3) The true meaning of a text for us is what God originally intended it to mean when it was first spoken
- c. Circles of Context (from smallest to largest)
- (1) Word
 - (2) Verse
 - (3) Surrounding passages
 - (4) Literary unit
 - (5) Book (and author [when known])
 - (6) Historical/Cultural context
 - (7) Redemptive “era”
 - (a) At what point in redemptive history does this book appear
 - (b) Biblical revelation is progressive – God’s plan of salvation becomes more clear and specific
 - (8) Testament (Old or New)
 - (9) Whole Bible
 - (10) History of Interpretation, Present Culture, World View
4. The Steps in the Historical-Cultural and Contextual Analysis
- a. Determine the historical and cultural setting of the writer and his audience
 - b. Determine the purpose in writing the book
 - c. Understand how the passage fits into its immediate context
- D. By starting with the Historical-Grammatical method, we have an objective standard for further insight gained through typology and meditation
1. Typology is an extension of the literal meaning of the text
 2. Typology is not the same as allegory (allegory reads meanings into the text that were never intended by the original author)
- V. John Stott’s Guidelines
- A. Look for the natural sense of the Biblical text (the principle of simplicity)
 1. God has spoken to us in order to be understood
 2. *“God’s whole purpose in speaking and in causing His speech [the Bible] to be preserved is that He wanted to communicate to ordinary people and saved them.”*⁵
 3. We should recognize that much of the disagreement among God’s people (with regard to what Scripture teaches) has to do with doctrines of secondary importance

⁵ Stott, page 187.

- a. The Trinity, the Person of Jesus Christ, and the nature of salvation are examples of doctrines of primary importance – and these are doctrines on which all true Christians agree
 - b. The nature of water baptism, church government, and the millennium are examples of doctrines of secondary importance
4. We must pay attention to the rules of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax
 5. An accurate translation of the Bible is essential
 - a. Three basic theories of translation
 - (1) Literal – keeping as close as possible to the original language, yet still making sense in the receptor language (that is, the language one is translating into); an example is the King James Version
 - (2) Free – Less concerned about using the exact words of the original (sometimes called a “paraphrase”); an example is The Living Bible
 - (3) Dynamic equivalent – attempts to translate words, idioms, and grammatical constructions of the original language into precise equivalents in the receptor language; an example is the New International Version
 - (4) The English Standard Version is an “*essentially literal*” translation – emphasizing a word-for-word, while at the same time “*taking in account differences of grammar, syntax, and idiom between current literary English and the original languages*”⁶
 6. As mentioned earlier, there are many helpful resources available⁷
- B. Look for the original sense of Scripture (the principle of history)
1. What did the original author intend to convey
 2. This is the “grammatical-historical” method of interpretation
 3. Must consider three things:
 - a. The situation (that “occasioned” the writing)
 - b. The style (literary genre)
 - c. The language
 4. Also, cultural setting and customs
 - a. Tension between permanent validity and culturally dated
 - b. Cultural transposition (“*greet one another with a holy kiss*”)

⁶ From the Preface of the ESV Bible

⁷ I would recommend a good study Bible, like the ESV Study Bible or NIV Study Bible

- C. Look for the general sense of Scripture (the principle of harmony)
 - 1. Scripture interprets Scripture
 - 2. Progressive revelation – from truth to more precise truth
- VI. Use of the Bible
 - A. God speaks to us through His Word
 - B. Attitudes towards God’s Word – do we receive God’s Word or reject it?
 - 1. The parable of the sower (Luke 8:5-15)
 - 2. The two houses (Matthew 7:24-27)
 - C. The exhortation in John 13:17 and James 1:22
 - 1. John 13:17 – *“If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them”*
 - 2. James 1:22 – *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves”*
 - D. Attributes of a Doer of the Word – a lifestyle marked by...
 - 1. Worship
 - 2. Repentance
 - 3. Faith
 - 4. Obedience
 - 5. Witness
 - E. Applying God’s Word
 - 1. Biblical application chiefly requires careful prayer and meditation, but one must realize that application is more than following commands (1 Cor 8:1; James 1:23-34)
 - 2. Applying Scripture means accepting and fulfilling God-given duties, seeking a godly character, pursuing those goals that the Lord blesses, and seeing the world His way
 - 3. People also apply the Bible when they let it lead them to Christ
 - 4. Thus interpretative skills must lead beyond conceptual knowledge to a Person – to Jesus Christ and a vital relationship with Him