

Living Way Church  
Biblical Studies Program – March 2013  
Knowing Scripture: The Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation  
Lesson Two

I. Introduction

- A. Many of the modern controversies surrounding the Bible revolve around questions concerning hermeneutics
- B. The science of hermeneutics is the science of biblical interpretation
  - 1. In Greek mythology, the god Hermes was the messenger of the gods; it was his task to interpret the will of the gods
  - 2. Hermeneutics, then, deals with conveying a message that can be understood
- C. The purpose of hermeneutics is to establish guidelines and rules for interpretation (in this case, properly interpreting the Bible)
- D. Scroll uses the analogy of the Supreme Court – one of its primary tasks is to interpret the Constitution of the United States
  - 1. We recognize the difference between a strict constructionist (also called an “originalist”) and a justice who is a broad constructionist (one that views the Constitution as a “living document” that must be interpreted in light of modern attitudes)
  - 2. The fear of conservatives is that an increasingly activist court interprets the Constitution so broadly that the court “reads into” the Constitution “rights” that are simply not there and becomes a legislative rather than interpretive agency
- E. The same kind of crisis has occurred with regard to Biblical interpretation

*“When Biblical scholars utilize the method of interpretation that involves ‘bringing the Bible up-to-date’ by reinterpretation, the original meaning of Scripture is obscured and the message is brought into conformity with contemporary trends in opinion.”*

II. Hermeneutics: The Science of Interpretation

- A. The analogy of faith
  - 1. The Reformers taught the Bible was to be the supreme authority of the church
  - 2. They were also careful to define basic principles of interpretation
  - 3. The primary rule of hermeneutics was called the “analogy of faith”
    - a. The analogy of faith is the rule that Scripture is to interpret Scripture
    - b. 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

4. This principle rests on the conviction (and confidence) that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and is therefore consistent and coherent
  5. Our view of the nature and origin of the Bible has a significant effect on how we interpret the Bible
  6. If the Bible is the inspired Word of God, then the analogy of faith is not an option but a requirement of interpretation
- B. Interpreting the Bible literally
1. The second rule of hermeneutics listed by Sproul is that the Bible should be interpreted according to its literal sense
  2. This was one of the most significant advances in biblical scholarship during the Reformation
  3. The term literal comes from the Latin *litera* meaning "letter"
  4. To interpret something literally is to pay attention to the letters and words being used – to interpret the Bible literally is to interpret it as literature
    - a. That the meaning of the passage is to be interpreted according to the normal rules of grammar, speech, syntax, and context
      - (1) Syntax -- the study of the rules for the formation of grammatical sentences; the rules that govern the way words combine to form phrases, clauses, and sentences
      - (2) Syntax is the way in which words are put together in sentences
    - b. To be accurate interpreters of the Bible, we need to know the rules of grammar
  5. Literal interpretation and genre analysis
    - a. The term "genre" has to do with the types of literature
    - b. Genre analysis involves the study of such things as literary forms, figures of speech, and style
  6. The classical method of seeking the literal sense of Scripture means seeking a knowledge of what is being communicated through the various forms and figures of speech used in biblical literature
  7. The history of biblical interpretation records the development of a method of interpretation that became firmly established by the Middle Ages
  8. This method examined each text of Scripture for four meanings: (1) literal, (2) moral, (3) allegorical, and (4) anagogical
    - a. The literal sense of Scripture was defined as the plain and evident meaning

- b. The moral sense was that which instructed humans how to behave
  - c. The allegorical sense revealed the content of faith
  - d. The anagogical (or spiritual) interpretation expressed future hope
9. For example, a passage that mentioned “Jerusalem” was capable of four different meanings according to this hermeneutical method:
- a. The literal sense referred to the capital of Judea and the central sanctuary of the nation of Israel
  - b. The moral sense of Jerusalem is the human soul (that is, the “central sanctuary” of a person)
  - c. The allegorical meaning of Jerusalem is the church (the center of the Christian community)
  - d. The anagogical meaning is heaven (the final hope of future residence for the people of God)
10. Therefore, if the Bible mentions “the people went up to Jerusalem”
- a. It meant that they went to a real, earthly city
  - b. Or that their souls went up to a place of moral excellence
  - c. Or that we should go to church
  - d. Or that we will someday go to heaven
11. Another example: Augustine’s allegorical interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan

*“...the wounded man stands for Adam; Jerusalem, the heavenly city from which he has fallen; the thieves, the devil who strips Adam of his immortality and leads him to sin; the priest and Levite, the Old Testament Law and ministry which was unable to cleanse and save anyone; the good Samaritan who binds the wounds, Christ who forgives sin; oil and wine; hope and stimulus to work, the animal, the incarnation; the inn, the church; and the innkeeper, the apostle Paul.”*

12. The Reformers rejected multiple meanings to biblical passages
- a. In doing this, they did not restrict the *application* of Scripture to a single sentence
  - b. Although a Scripture passage has one meaning (the author’s intended meaning), it may have a number of applications
13. Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics:
- a. “We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed.”
  - b. “We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application.”

14. The analogy of faith and the principle of seeking the literal sense are safeguards against “unbridled speculation and subjectivistic interpretation”
  15. Again, the literal interpretation recognizes figures of speech, etc.
- C. The grammatical-historical method
1. This method focuses attention not only on literary forms, but on grammatical constructions and the historical context out of which the Scriptures were written
  2. Grammatical structure determines whether words, for example, are to be taken as questions (interrogative), commands (imperative), or declarative (indicative)
    - a. *“You shall be my witnesses”*
    - b. Is Jesus making a prediction of future performance or issuing a sovereign mandate?
  3. Historical analysis involves seeking a knowledge of the setting and situation in which the books of the Bible were written
  4. Questions of authorship, date and destination of books are important for a clear understanding of a book
    - a. If we know who wrote a book, to whom, under what circumstances and at what period in history, that information will greatly help us to understand the book
    - b. Matters of authorship and dating are closely linked
  5. *“Sound interpretation demands a careful analysis of the grammar and historical context of a writing”*
- D. So, the three primary principles of interpretation (that Sproul highlights):
1. The analogy of faith keeps the whole Bible in view less we suffer from the effects of exaggerating one part of Scripture to the exclusion of others
  2. The literal sense keeps us from letting our imaginations run away with wild interpretations and invites us to examine closely the literary forms of Scripture
  3. The grammatical-historical method focuses our attention on the original meeting of the text, keeping us from reading into Scripture our own ideas drawn from the present
- III. Practical Rules for Biblical Interpretation
- A. Rule one: read the Bible like any other book
1. We do not mean this in the way the Enlightenment philosophers would exhort us – that the Bible was a purely human book like any other book
    - a. We recognize the Bible to be uniquely inspired and infallible, which puts it in a class by itself
    - b. Graeme Goldsworthy’s insight:

- (1) In fact the Enlightenment philosophers got it exactly wrong
    - (2) *“The only thing that enables anyone to read and [properly] understand other books are the realities expressed in Christian theism; therefore, we should read all other books as we read the Bible in the sense that the ultimate interpretation of all literature, of every spoken or written word, can only be achieved in the light of Christ.”*
  - c. But for matters of interpretation, we must read the Bible as we would any other book – a verb is a verb, and a noun is a noun
- 2. What about prayer?
  - a. Should we seek the assistance of God the Holy Spirit in interpreting the Bible? Yes.
  - b. For the spiritual benefit of applying the words of Scripture to our lives, prayer is enormously important
  - c. We also need to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit to illumine the spiritual significance of the text
  - d. Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics:
    - (1) *“We affirm that the Holy Spirit enables believers to appropriate and apply Scripture to their lives”*
    - (2) *“We deny that the natural man is able to discern spiritually the Biblical message apart from the Holy Spirit”*
  - e. But to discern the difference between historical narrative and metaphor, or syntax, prayer alone would not be the best approach
  - f. *“Mystical flashes”* do not provide a shortcut around the basic work of exegesis
- B. Rule two: read the Bible with passion (Sproul *“read...existentially”*)
  - 1. Seeking to identify with – and to experience the feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of – the biblical characters
  - 2. Allowing yourself to be influenced by the narrative – absorbed into the world of the text, so that that world begins to shape us
- C. Rule three: interpret the historical narratives by the didactic
  - 1. The term *“didactic”* comes from the Greek word that means *“to teach or to instruct”*
  - 2. Didactic literature teaches or explains
  - 3. Much of the apostle Paul’s writing is didactic in character
  - 4. Since the New Testament epistles are largely interpretive and come after the Gospels in order of organization, the Reformers maintained the principle that the epistles should interpret the

- Gospels, rather than the Gospels interpret the epistles
5. As the Word of God, the Gospels and epistles have equal authority, though there may be a difference in the order of interpretation
  6. It is fashionable in some circles to put the authority of Jesus against the authority of the epistles (so called "red letter" Christians)
    - a. We must remember that Jesus wrote none of the New Testament, and we are dependent on apostolic testimony for our knowledge of what He did and said
    - b. Those who claim to embrace only "the words of Jesus" do not realize that they are not setting Jesus against an apostle, as much as they are setting one apostle (such as Matthew or John) against another (one who has written an epistle)
  7. One of the chief reasons why this rule is important is to warn against drawing too many inferences from the records of what people did
    - a. Popular slogan: What would Jesus do?
    - b. Better to ask, "*What would Jesus have me do in this situation?*"
  8. We should not attempt to build doctrine from narratives alone
  9. Phenomenological language describes things as they appear to the naked eye
    - a. For example, "*From the rising of the sun to the going down of the same*" (Ps 50:1; 113:3) does not mean that the Bible teaches geocentricity rather than heliocentricity
    - b. Nowhere do we find a didactic portion of Scripture teaching that the earth is the center of our solar system
- D. Rule four: interpret the implicit by the explicit
1. When an implication is drawn that is contradictory to what is explicitly stated, the implication must be rejected
  2. The basic rule is that of care: careful reading of what the text is actually saying will save us from much confusion and distortion
- IV. Hearing God Clearly (part two)
- A. Again, biblical hermeneutics is the study of those principles which help us to responsibly bridge any gap between what we currently understand and what God wants us to understand
  - B. God clearly assumes that we can understand His thoughts
    1. God holds people responsible to study in order to learn
    2. With regard to his human nature, Jesus grew in wisdom (Lk 1:80; 2:52)
    3. Paul, too, spent time in the province of Arabia, during which he re-examined his extensive knowledge of Scripture in the light of fresh understanding from the Spirit (Gal 1:17)
  - C. Critical to our understanding of God is the concept that since the Holy

Spirit is the final offer of Scripture, the same Holy Spirit wants you to understand exactly what He originated (2 Peter 1:21)

1. Therefore, to claim a revelation from the Spirit which violates the orderly communication of truth of Scripture is both nonsense and heresy
  2. The Holy Spirit can give you experiences with God, but these experiences will agree with the Scriptural revelation of God
  3. God has given us an objective deposit (His inspired, authoritative Word) whereby we can be certain about our subjective experience
- D. Taking verses out of context is a major source of error
1. When you do this, you prevent a text from changing you; rather, you simply integrate the text into your own context and “make” God say what He did not say
  2. Some evangelicals take First Corinthians 13:10 out of context and identify “the perfect” as our Bible; whereas, verse 12 suggests it is the return of Christ
- E. Cults and false teachers like to take the very words of God, remove them from their boundaries, and use them for their own purposes
- F. There are times when well-meaning Christian leaders, whose message is Scriptural, misuse a text to substantiate his point, but this practice is to be avoided – even when done in ignorance – because it misrepresents God
- G. The context begins with a recognition of the literary genre
1. You already do this spontaneously in other areas – you make unconscious adjustments in your thinking when to switch from reading history, to science fiction, to a fable, etc.
  2. Each genre has special rules of its own which are understood by anyone familiar with that type of literary usage
- H. In Scripture, we have a variety of genres (law, narrative, prophecy, poetry, wisdom literature, gospel, epistle, apocalyptic, etc), and it is important to observe the understood rules of interpretation for each type