**Hermeneutical Principles**

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* Series: How to Interpret the Bible

It is both the privilege and responsibility of every Christian to interpret the Bible for himself/herself. This principle of *private interpretation*, based on the doctrine of the *priesthood of all believers*, was articulated by Martin Luther in the 16th century. The response of the Roman Catholic Church was as follows:

"To check unbridled spirits it [the Council of Trent] decrees that 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."

According to the RCC, it is neither the right nor the responsibility of any individual Christian to interpret the Bible and declare its meaning. That right ultimately rests with the teaching office (the Magisterium) of the RCC.

The above quotation, however, reflects several misconceptions concerning the Protestant principle of private interpretation:

1.         *Private interpretation does****not****mean that we should rely solely on our own judgments, ignoring the insights and research of others;*

2.         *Private interpretation does****not****mean that we have the right to "distort" the Bible in accordance with our own conceptions;*

3.         *Private interpretation does****not****mean that we can ignore the history of interpretation in the church*.

At the same time as we exercise our God-given responsibility to interpret the Scriptures, we must be aware of the element of subjectivity that influences all interpretation. Interpreting the Bible is not to be compared to a man looking into a fishbowl, but to a fish in his own fishbowl looking at another fish in his! Some of the factors that affect our objectivity in studying the Bible are:

a.         personal prejudice

b.         hidden agendas (personal and theological)

c.         cultural conditioning

d.         historical circumstances

e.         socio-economic factors

f.          unconscious expectations

g.         educational background (the "wet cement" syndrome)

h.         personality distinctives

i.          occupational pressures

j.          pride

k.         interpersonal relational background

As we seek to interpret the Scriptures, we must also keep in mind the contributions of the past. Fee and Stuart remind us that,

"Interpretation that aims at, or thrives on, uniqueness, can usually be attributed to pride (an attempt to 'out clever' the rest of the world), a false understanding of spirituality (wherein the Bible is full of deep truths waiting to be mined by the spiritually sensitive person with special insight), or vested interests (the need to support a theological bias, especially in dealing with texts that seem to go against that bias). Unique interpretations are usually wrong. This is not to say that the correct understanding of a text may not often *seem* unique to someone who hears it for the first time. But it is to say that uniqueness is *not* the aim of our task."

Our approach to interpretation is called **the Grammatical-Historical method**. According to the G-H method, the student seeks to ascertain the meaning of a text by an analysis of the simple, direct, ordinary sense of grammatical constructions, with special attention paid to the facts of history, cultural milieu, and literary context.

There are three theological assumptions to keep in mind from the outset:

a.         divine revelation is *inerrant*

b.         divine revelation is *accommodated*

(N.B. It is the **form** of divine revelation, **not** its **content**, that is accommodated.)

c.         divine revelation is *progressive*

Cf. Mt. 5:17; Heb. 1:1-2. PT: temporally subsequent revelation never contradicts earlier revelation; it may embellish and illuminate, but never alters the truth, of antecedent revelation.

We are now ready to examine the fundamental principles of the grammatical-historical method.

1.         The Bible is to be interpreted by the same rules and principles that govern the interpretation of all other literature.

2.         The principles of interpretation are native to all people, regardless of their spiritual condition. In other words, unbelievers can apply the basic principles to interpret the Bible, but will always be morally opposed and resistant to the truth they discover.

3.         It is essential that the interpreter distinguish between **meaning** and**significance**. Meaning is what the original author intended by his words. Significance, on the other hand, points to the relationship between that meaning and a person or a concept or a situation. Thus, we must distinguish between, what the text then **meant**, to the original author (and audience), and what the text now **means**, to us and others. Determining what a text meant is always a precondition for ascertaining what it means. In other words, we must never bypass exegesis on our way to application.

4.         Thus the goal of the interpreter is to reproduce the sense or meaning which the biblical author intended for his original audience.

a.         therefore, authorial will = the meaning of a text

b.         a text of Scripture, consequently, can mean but one thing in the connection/context in which it is found, namely, what the author intended (however, this should not be taken as a denial of the validity of the *sensus plenior*, or fuller sense of Scripture)

c.         however, whereas a text can have only one meaning, it may have numerous applications (cf. 2 Cor. 12 and Paul's "thorn in the flesh").

5.         Each text is to be interpreted according to its **literal** sense.

a.         the meaning of a text is to be determined by the normal or accepted standards and rules of grammar, speech, syntax, and context

b.         the literal sense is not necessarily the literalistic sense (i.e., literal interpretation does not exclude figures of speech, symbolism, typology, etc.).

6.         Each text is to be interpreted according to the **Analogy of Faith**

a.         Definition

1)         No part of Scripture should be interpreted in such a way as to place it in conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture.

2)         No single statement or obscure passage in one book of Scripture should be allowed to set aside a doctrine which is clearly established by many passages in several books (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:29; Acts 2:38; 1 John 3:6).

b.         Basis

1)         The inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible

2)         Unity of thought in the midst of diversity of expression

3)         The coherency, rationality, and general clarity of Scripture

(Observe the difference between paradox, mystery, and contradiction)

c.         Degrees

1)         positive and explicit

2)         general and implicit

d.         Limitations

1)         The analogy of faith does not mean that a statement in Scripture lacks authority unless it has support in other statements (cf. 1 Tim. 5:3ff.; 1 Cor. 11 and the Lord's Supper).

2)         Neither can we set aside a legitimate inference from a statement of Scripture on the ground that the inference is unsupported by other parallel statements.

3)         Therefore, unless a statement in Scripture is clearly excluded by several other equally explicit statements, one positive declaration of God's Word is sufficient to establish either a fact or a doctrine.

e.         The authority and value of texts in the analogy of faith vary.

1)         The analogy of faith is stronger (but not necessarily more authoritative) when the doctrine is found in ten rather than in two texts.

2)         The value of the analogy will be in proportion to the agreement of the passages on which it is based (be sure that parallel passages are truly parallel).

3)         An analogy that depends largely upon obscure passages is of dubious value (don't interpret one obscure text on the basis of another obscure text).

4)         The distribution of passages is also important. If the analogy is based upon texts derived from a single book, it will not be as strong as one based on texts found in both the OT and NT, dating from various times and coming from different authors.

f.          The analogy of faith and Biblical Theology

g.         Other principles related to the analogy of faith

1)         The implicit is to be interpreted by the explicit (cf. Rev. 2-3 [the "angel" of the church] and the issue of church government).

2)         The unclear is to be interpreted by the clear.

3)         Historical narratives are to be read and interpreted in the light of didactic literature (cf. the relation of Acts to the Epistles; however, this is not to say that doctrine cannot be gleaned from narrative literature).

4)         Be sensitive to the nature of progressive or cumulative revelation:

a)         the analogy of antecedent Scripture (the meaning of a word or passage is to be determined in the light of that Scripture which has preceded it in the sequence of revelation)

b)         the analogy of subsequent Scripture (the more complete interprets the less complete; i.e., the NT interprets the OT).

All Scripture is organically interrelated:

seed --- sprout --- root --- stem --- bud --- flower --- fruit

The fruit will tell you far more about the seed than the seed will tell you about the fruit.

7.         The crucial role of **Context**

a.         The nature and function of context

1)         immediate context

a)         what precedes (antecedent)

b)         what follows (subsequent)

Examples: Mt. 7:1-5 and 7:6; Mt. 18:15-20; Rom. 12:17-21 and Rom. 13:1-6; Rom. 14:23; 1 Cor. 11 ("unworthily"); 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 4:13; 1 Thess. 5:19-22; 2 John 10.

2)         remote context

a)         in the same book

b)         in other writings of the same author

3)         historical context (time when written)

4)         literary context (type of literature)

5)         absence of context (Proverbs)

b.         Contextual connections

1)         types of contextual connections

a)         purely historical (Mt. 3:13-17 and 4:1-11)

b)         historical/dogmatic (when doctrinal discourse or teaching is connected with a historical fact; cf. Jn. 6:1-14, 26-65).

c)         logical (1 Cor. 15:2 and 15:12-19)

d)         ethical (Eph. 1:1-3:21 and Eph. 4:1ff.)

e)         psychological (something in the preceding context triggers a related idea; results in parenthesis, etc.)

2)         determining contextual connections

a)         pay close attention to conjunctions (but, since, therefore, because, now, however, etc.)

b)         seek the nearest possible connection

c)         watch for recurring words, phrases, themes

d)         watch for

1 -        parentheses (Eph. 3:1 / 3:14)

2 -        digressions (Heb. 5:10-7:1)

3 -        anacolutha (Rom. 5:12 / 5:18)

e)         identify the natural divisions of the text (not necessarily those in your English version; cf. 1 Thess. 2:17-3:10; Rom. 8-9)

Conclusion:

**"It is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until, at last, you come to talk in scriptural language, and your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord, so that your blood is 'bibline' and the very essence of the Bible flows from you"**(Charles Spurgeon).