

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

(Biblical Interpretation)

I. Introduction

Those who accept the Bible as the Word of God all know that God has spoken to us through His Word, but the point is “what has He said?” This is where we get divided and where we get confused. In order to escape and elude this confusion, folly and error, and to avoid the pitfall of confusing the Voice of God with the voice of man, it behooves us to master the principles of the correct interpretation of the Word of God.

Hermeneutics is the science that teaches the principles, laws, maxims and methods of interpreting the Word of God. Hermeneutics is concerned with meaning. I’m sure that you will agree that a need exists for the proper and correct interpretation of God’s Word, otherwise, we would not have so many varied opinions, approaches and divisions, and we would not witness the proliferation (growth) of so many cults. Too often the Word of God is mishandled, misread, misused and misinterpreted. The objective of this course is to help you learn how to correctly, skillfully and soundly interpret the Word of God.

II. Considering Differences

When attempting to interpret the Word, it is important to remember that the Bible was basically written in an eastern environment, and we live in a western environment; therefore, we will sometimes find a gaping distance between our minds and the minds of the eastern writers. The Biblical writer’s history, culture, customs, scenario, environment and language are diverse and removed from our culture and way of life.

We will find that great gaps exist between eastern and western culture; therefore we need some help in binding these gaps. We, as westerners, will find ourselves separated from the Bible culturally, geographically, historically and especially by language.

III. Revelation, Inspiration, Illumination, and Interpretation

Revelation- The act of God the Holy Spirit unveiling or uncovering truths that man through his own intellect, reason and investigation cannot discover for himself (example: the matter of creation).

Inspiration- The act of the Holy Spirit choosing out of the writers' own vocabulary and personality to write down the truths that God wants man to know. Thus God being sure that His truths were recorded accurately and without error.

Illumination- The act of the Holy Spirit enabling the believer to understand what God has revealed or inspired. God speaks to us through His written Word, then the Holy Spirit will help us to know what God is telling us.

Interpretation- The act of God whereby the Holy Spirit wises us up to what is written in the scripture by using the principles of interpretation, which are embedded in the Word of God.

“We cannot have revelation about revelation, but we can have an illumination about revelation.”

IV. Schools of Biblical Interpretation

A. The Allegorical Schools of Interpretation

This method of interpretation was developed among the Greeks who were more concerned about their own sacred writing than the sacred scriptures; however, this method was adopted by both Jews and Christians.

This school teaches that beneath each verse of scripture (beneath the obvious) is the real meaning of the passage. This school says that hidden in each sentence or statement is a secret spiritual meaning that too many people pass over.

The Roman Catholic Church today still follows the method of allegorizing the Bible. For instance: the Old Testament priesthood still considered as valid; the bread and wine of Melchizedek in the Book of Genesis; the manna in the wilderness; the oil in the diet of Elijah, all of which are a part of the Catholic Mass and are allegorical types.

This method of interpretation was rejected by all of the religious reformers: Luther, Calvin, etc. Luther called it a scourge. Calvin called it Satanic. Be warned against this method of interpretation which goes against the power and impact of the literal Word.

B. The Devotional Schools of Interpretation

The devotional interpretation of scripture is that method of interpreting scripture, which places emphasis on the edifying aspects of the scriptures and the interpretation, has the intention of developing ones spiritual life.

This method advocated the reading of the scriptures as a means of a mystical experience. This was developed by the Mystics and Pietons. Mysticism and Pietism says that the Bible should only be used for devotion, prayers and revival meetings, but should not be studied. The two major weaknesses of devotional interpretation are:

1. Devotional interpretation alone falls prey to allegorizing, especially in the use of the Old Testament.
2. It may substitute an emotional and spiritual exercise for real Bible study. May concentrate on the emotional more than the truth.

C. The Liberal Schools of Interpretation

Theological liberalism is very prevalent today. Liberal theologians do not accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God. They do not believe in the verbal inspiration of the Bible. All fundamental Christians believe that the Bible is God's Word in its totality (2 Timothy 3:16).

To the liberal, the doctrine of sin, Hell, Satan and the depravity of man are all rejected as too offensive. Many other basic Bible doctrines are rejected as adverse to their intelligence.

Liberal interpretation tends to rearrange the scriptures (as did Moffitt) and at times the text is tampered with (as in the Old Testament of the Revised Standard Version).

Liberal theology attempts to redefine "inspiration."

D. The Literal Schools of Interpretation

The literal method of interpreting the Bible is to accept the literal rendering of each sentence unless by virtue of the nature of the sentence or phrase or a clause within the sentence renders it impossible.

For instance, figures of speech or fables of allegories do not admit to being of a literal interpretation.

The spirit of literal interpretation is that we should be satisfied with the literal interpretation of a text unless very substantial reasons can be given for advancing beyond the literal meaning.

The Syrian schools of Antioch were the first literal schools of Biblical interpretation. The first Christian school of literalism in its hermeneutics flourished in Antioch. The Christian community was influenced by the Jewish community and the results were a hermeneutical theory, which avoided the legalism of the Jews and the allegorizing of the Greeks.

V. **Incorrect Methods of Biblical Interpretation**

- A. **The Allegorical Approach-** This approach seeks to find some hidden meaning beyond the plain statement of the text.
- B. **The Extreme Literalism Approach-** When the Word of God is taken at such face value until it becomes ridiculous. This is more than literalism, it is extreme letterism (example: Jesus says, “I am the door,” or “I am the bread of Life”).
- C. **The Rationalistic Approach-** This approach filters every scripture through the grids of our human minds. If what is read in the scriptures does not correspond with what the one has always believed or what one’s rational processes seem to indicate; then it is rejected.
- D. **The Fragmentary Approach-** This approach says that we should separate the scriptures into essential and non-essential parts. This approach divides the Bible into that which is important and that that is not important. For instance, some want to adhere to the ethics of the Bible and ignore the doctrines of the Bible, while others want to adhere to the doctrines of the Bible while ignoring its ethics.
- E. **The Dogmatic Approach-** This approach attempts to make the scriptures fit into one’s own way of thinking.
- F. **The Promises Approach-** This approach has to do with the promises of the Bible. Those who use this approach believe that every promise in the Bible belongs to them. Every promise in the Bible is not to everyone. All of the Bible is for us, but not all of the Bible is to us. Some promises were only to the Hebrews, some were conditional, some are universal, some are to certain churches, and some were just to individuals.

VI. The Principles of Biblical Interpretation

There are certain principles that will help us to accurately handle the Word of Truth. These principles are embedded in the scripture itself. We do not need to go beyond the boundaries of the Bible to discover these laws and maxims that are used to determine the meaning of scripture. The Bible interprets itself (scripture interprets scripture).

Principle #1: The Literal Interpretation Principle

This approach says that we are to take the Bible at face value. We generally take everyday things in life as literal or at face value. This is a common sense approach. Even symbols and allegories in the Bible are based on the literal meaning of the scripture; thus the literal is fundamental to the symbolic or allegorical.

The greater part of the Bible makes more sense when interpreted literally. This approach takes the Bible at its fundamental face value. The golden rule of interpretation is *“When the plain sense of the scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.”* Therefore, take every word at its primary, usual, literal meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and fundamental truths, clearly indicate otherwise.

Principle #2: The Contextual Principle

This means that scripture interprets scripture or all passages are fully and clearly explained somewhere else in the Bible so that there is no disagreement on interpretation. What is said in one part of the scriptures may illuminate what is said in another part of the scriptures.

The word text is derived from the Latin word, which means to “weave.” The context is that which accompanies the text. The Word of God is a perfect unit. The scriptures cannot be broken; they all hang together, a perfect unity.

We must look and consider the verses immediately before, after, and around the passage. We must consider the book of the Bible and the section of the Bible in which the passage occurs. The Bible must be interpreted within the framework of the Bible. You must consider the division of chapters and verses (in the original writings there were no chapters or verses), we must consider the setting in which the passage was written.

Principle #3: The Progressive Revelation Principle

This says that the Word of God is to be understood from the Old Testament to the New Testament as a flower unfolds its pedals to the morning sun. God initiated revelation, but He did not reveal Himself, His truths, or all the matters of Biblical data at one time. It was a long and partial process. Therefore, we must recognize where we are in the Bible to properly understand the passage. We must not read the Old Testament truths into the New Testament and we must see in the New Testament the full bloom of Old Testament revelation. “The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.”

Principle #4: The Accommodation Principle

The Bible is to be interpreted in view of the fact that it is an accommodation of Divine truths to human minds. God the infinite communicating with man the finite. This is to say that God communicated His truths (His message) in a language that we are all familiar with. The Bible was written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The Bible was also written in terms of the surroundings of this earth; it was communicated in space, in time, and in history so that man could understand them. The truths of God made contact with the human mind at a common point, or else the revelation of God would be meaningless.

Principle #5: The One Interpretation Principle

This principle simply means that every verse in the Bible has only **One** interpretation, although that verse may have many applications.

Principle #6: The Harmonistic Principle

This principle states that no part of the Bible contradicts another part of the Bible. We believe in the fact that there are no errors in the Bible, which is what leads us to affirm there are no contradictions in the Bible.

Principle #7: The Genre Principle

Genre is a literary term having to do with the nature or type of literature. Genre simply means, are we dealing with poetry or prose? Are we dealing with history or exaltation and doctrine? It is important that when we interpret the Word of God, that we understand where we are. For instance, the following deals with the genre of these books of the Bible:

Psalms	Poetry
Proverbs	Wise Sayings
Isaiah	History and Prophecy
The Gospels	Biography and History
The Epistles	Teaching and Doctrine
Revelation	Eschatology and Prophecy

Principle #8: The Principle of Cultural Differences

By the principle of cultural differences, we mean the total ways, methods, manners, tools, customs, buildings, institutions, etc., by means of which and through which a clan, tribe, or a nation can carry on their existence.

Whatever men write, they write from their own cultural backdrop. Their culture modifies, determines, guides, colors, and influences the manner in which they express themselves. An author cannot ignore or reject his culture. He may override it to some extent; however, he can never really escape his culture.

When interpreting the scriptures, we must also be concerned with the “Then,” the “Now,” and the “Always.” When you read the scripture we are concerned with the “Then;” with how it was when the scripture was written; how people lived, how they felt, how they dressed, how they acted, how they behaved, and how they thought. Then we must build a bridge from that ancient culture and history to our present and contemporary culture. We must make that culture applicable to our present lives. This is the “Now,” the application of ancient scripture in the present.

Then, running through like a thread, all of those fluctuating cultural and trans-cultural aspects is the abiding concept of the “Always.” These are persistent principles that run throughout all of the scriptures.

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

EXAM

1. In what way do the following Scriptures speak of correct interpretation?
 - A. 2 Timothy 2:15
 - B. 2 Corinthians 2:17
 - C. 2 Peter 3:16

2. Read 1 Corinthians 2:9-16 and apply part of the verses to the following words:
 - A. Revelation
 - B. Inspiration
 - C. Illumination
 - D. Interpretation

3. What is the difference between the following schools of interpretation?
 - A. Allegorical
 - B. Devotional
 - C. Liberal
 - D. Literal

4. Name four ways in which the Bible may be interpreted incorrectly.

5. What are the 8 principles of Biblical interpretation?

6. What is the difference between the Contextual Principle and the Accommodation Principle of interpreting the Bible?