

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

BIBLE STUDY METHODS - INTERPRETATION

INTERPRETATION - WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

A. Introduction

1. Why is interpretation important?
 - a. We need to know the correct method of biblical interpretation so that we do not confuse the voice of God with voices of men.
 - b. We need to understand the differences between us and the Biblical writers so we can properly understand Scripture.
 - c. Howard Hendricks, *I like to refer to the step of interpretation as the re-creation process. We're attempting to stand in the author's shoes and re-create his experience— to think as he thought, to feel as he felt, and to decide as he decided. We're asking, What did this mean to him? before we ever ask, What does it mean to us?*
 - d. A Christian's personal responsibility, 2 Timothy 2:15, *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*
2. Positions on interpretation
 - a. The Reformation
 - 1) The Bible is the only authoritative voice of God to man.
 - 2) There are no secondary means of making clear the meaning of the Bible.
 - 3) We know what God has said by the faithful and accurate interpretation of Scriptures.
 - b. John Calvin, *Let us know, then, that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and obvious meaning; and let us embrace and abide by it resolutely. Let us not only neglect as doubtful, but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions those pretended expositions which lead us away from the natural meaning.*
 - c. Some current views
 - 1) The Church alone interprets Scripture.
 - 2) Feminists have the proper perspective for interpreting Scripture.
 - 3) Theological sophistication without literal interpretation - relativism.
 - 4) Relate the text directly to today without considering historical context.
 - 5) The Bible may be personally understood.
3. Qualifications of a Bible interpreter, Bernard Ramm
 - a. New birth
 - b. Passion to know God's Word
 - c. Reverence for God
 - d. Dependence on the Holy Spirit to guide and direct, *To pray well is to study well.*
4. Pitfalls to interpreting Scripture correctly
 - a. Misreading the text
 - 1) John 14:6, *I am the way or I am a way*
 - 2) Rodney Howard-Browne, *It's not what you think, it's what the Bible says.*
 - b. Contradicting the text
 - 1) Jesus' claim to be God, John 10:30, *I and the Father are one.*
 - 2) George Bernard Shaw, *No public man in these islands ever believes that the Bible means what it says; he is always convinced that it says what he means.*
 - c. Subjectivism
 - 1) Bill Graham, *It is extremely important to declare what the Bible holds, and be silent where the Bible is silent.*
 - 2) Martin Luther, *I have observed that all the heresies and errors have arisen not from Scripture's own plain statements, but when that plainness of statement is ignored, and men follow the Scholastic arguments of their own brains.*

- d. Relativism
 - 1) Meanings in the Bible can change to accommodate current beliefs.
 - 2) Francis Schaeffer, *Because of lack of fortitude and faithfulness on the part of God's people, God's Word has many times been allowed to be bent, to conform to the surrounding, passing, changing culture of that moment rather than to stand as the inerrant Word of God judging the form of the world spirit and the surrounding culture of that moment.*
- e. Overconfidence
 - 1) 1 Corinthians 8:1, *...knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*
 - 2) John Milton, *If there be any difference among professed believers as to the sense of Scripture, it is their duty to tolerate such difference in each other, until God shall have revealed the truth to all.*
 - 3) Alexander Carson, *No man has a right to say, as some are in the habit of saying, "The Spirit tells me that such or such is the meaning of a passage." How is he assured that it is the Holy Spirit, and not a spirit of delusion, except from the evidence that the interpretation is the legitimate meaning of the words?*

B. How to interpret the Bible

- 1. Basic steps
 - a. Ask questions.
 - b. Look for answers.
 - c. Integrate (bring together) parts into a whole.
- 2. Issue to address
 - a. Language barriers: Howard Hendricks, *We have to go back and recover the shades of meaning that translated words alone cannot convey.*
 - b. Cultural barriers
 - 1) The Bible is the product of cultures dramatically different from our own.
 - 2) Sir William Ramsay, *A basic principle in the interpretation of the Bible is that one must first ask what a given Scripture was intended to mean to the people for whom it was originally written; only then is the interpreter free to ask what meaning it has for Christians today.*
 - c. Literary barriers
 - 1) Genres (types)
 - a) Exposition - explanation of a body of truth
 - b) Narrative - story telling
 - c) Poetry
 - d) Prophecy
 - e) Proverbs
 - f) Parables
 - 2) Note difference between Song of Solomon and the Book of Romans.
 - 3) Excellent resource: Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible*
 - d. Bernard Ramm, *...the two great needs for the science of hermeneutics (interpretation) are: that we may know what God has said, and that we may span the linguistic, cultural, geographical, and historical gaps which separate our minds from those of the Biblical writers.*
- 3. Keys to interpretation
 - a. Content: the material collected from observation
 - b. Context: that which goes before and that which follows after
 - 1) Howard Hendricks, *Whenever you get lost, climb a "contextual tree" and gain some perspective.*
 - 2) F. F. Bruce, *Any part of the human body can only be properly explained in reference to the whole body. And any part of the Bible can only be properly explained in reference to the whole Bible.*
 - c. Comparison: compare Scripture with Scripture
 - 1) Never interpret a clear passage by means of a difficult passage.
 - 2) Donald Grey Barnhouse, *You very rarely have to go outside of the Bible to explain anything in the Bible.*

- d. Bible memorization
 - 1) Ezekiel 3:10, ...*Son of man, all my words that I shall speak to you receive in your heart, and hear with your ears.*
 - 2) Ready access to the Word of God in heart and mind enables one to understand Scripture more clearly.
 - e. Cultural and historical background: Book of Ruth, spent the night laying at Boaz' feet (not sexual but high moral standard)
 - 1) *Nelson's Complete Book of Bible Maps and Charts: Old and New Testaments*
 - 2) Thompson, J. A. *Handbook of Life in Bible Times.* IVP.
 - 3) Beers, V. Gilbert. *The Victor Handbook of Bible Knowledge.* Victor Books.
 - 4) Wilkinson, Bruce. *Talk Thru the Bible.* Nelson.
 - 5) Zuck, Roy. *Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old and New Testaments.* Victor Books.
 - f. Consultation: the use of secondary resources
 - 1) Trusted individuals
 - 2) A good study Bible, concordances, Bible dictionaries, Bible handbooks, atlases, Bible commentaries
 - 3) Caution: Never forget the order, first, the text of Scripture, then, secondary resources.
4. Interpretive Type - Literal or Figurative
- a. Use the literal sense unless there is good reason not to.
 - b. Use the figurative sense when the passage tells you to do so, Daniel 7-12, Genesis 37
 - c. Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning is impossible or absurd, Rev. 1:16
 - d. Use the figurative sense if a literal meaning would involve something immoral, John 6:53-55
 - e. Use the figurative sense if the expression is an obvious figure of speech (like or as), Prov. 11:22, Ps 29:6
 - f. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation involves a contradiction of other Scripture, Mark 10:25
 - g. Use the figurative sense if a literal interpretation would involve a contradiction in doctrine, 1 Cor. 3:16-17

CONCLUSION

- A. Interpreting Scripture is crucial to proper Bible study which must lead to personal application.
- B. Howard Hendricks, *As someone has well said, the task of Bible study is to "think God's thoughts after Him." He has a mind, and He has revealed it in His Word.*
- C. John Wesley, *Try all things by the written word, and let all bow down before it. You are in danger of fanaticism every hour, if you depart ever so little from Scripture; yea, or from the plain, literal meaning of an text, taken in connection with the context.*