

## **Biblical Interpretation**

### ***Interpreting the Word of God... or Biblical Hermeneutics***

#### ***Introduction:***

1. Biblical Interpretation is just what it means, the science of the interpretation of the Scriptures.
2. Since we take the Bible as the only authoritative book, there is no secondary means of making clear the meaning of the Bible, such as by some others authoritative interpretation. Therefore, we must know only what God said if we are to faithfully interpret the Holy Word.
3. The primary need is to have and understand a system of hermeneutics or biblical interpretation so we can ascertain the meaning of the Word of God.
4. We are interested in, a) what it says -- or *observation*; b). what it means -- or *interpretation*; and, c) how to apply it -- or *application*.
5. Upon the correct interpretation of the Bible lies our own doctrine of salvation, of sanctification, eschatology, Christian living, etc. If we know not we will have confused the voice of God and the voice of man or satan.
6. Various denominations, who still cling to one Bible, exist largely because of the fact of the differences in interpretation.

#### ***The Great Need!***

1. The primary need is to understand the meaning of the Word of God. Little is ours if God has spoken and we do not know what He has said.
2. The secondary need is to bridge the gap between our minds and the minds of the Bible writers and to know what the Holy Spirit was saying through them.
  - a. Strictly speaking, we interpret one another's speech or writing in the same age, locality, and culture. We already know the sense of the person's meaning. But that is not largely true in the study of the Word of God.
  - b. There are language differences, cultural differences, and a difference in customs, manner of things, economic systems, etc. between Biblical times and the age in which we live.
  - c. The historical and geographic aspects also must be understood for the correct Biblical interpretation to take place.

## ***Basic Assumptions!***

There are certain things that we assume before we approach this topic. Certain things are already accomplished before we commence our job of interpreting the Word of God.

1. We assume that the Bible we have is the Divine Inspired Word of God, without error in the original texts, and that theologically it has been proven so.
2. We assume that the text of the canon has been determined. That is, what we have in the Bible belongs there, nothing less, nothing more. We are commanded not to add or to take away from the word of God.
3. We also assume that the problems of Biblical introduction has been settled. That is, the authors of the books, circumstances under which they were written, when written, date, etc., has been settled.

## ***Approaching the Task of Bible Interpretation!***

### ***1. We will consider two divisions in this science:***

- a. General principles of Biblical interpretation, and
- b. Special interpretation of specialized literature such as parables, types, prophecy, etc.

### ***2. Some limitations involved:***

- a. We may be endowed with a slow intellect as a person.
- b. We may approach the subject or a passage with a strong bias, and the rules of interpretation, therefore, will not keep us from error.
- c. A good knowledge of Biblical Hermeneutics or Bible interpretation will not supply a lack of thorough, personal study of a passage of Scripture.

### ***3. Some Qualifications of a good interpreter:***

- a. He must be born again, for spiritual truths are open only to those who are spiritual people. (See I Cor. 2:14.)
- b. He must have a passion to know the Word of God.
- c. He must have a deep reverence for God, approaching the Word of the God with trust and love.
- d. He must have an utter dependence upon the Holy Spirit to guide, to direct, to illumine the mind and heart for understanding.

- e. He needs to study well the Word of God. It is good if the person also makes a thorough study of Bible history, geography, etc. A theological base is very important for the correct interpretation of the Scriptures.

### ***Historical Schools of Interpretation!***

#### ***- Allegorical School -***

***Jewish allegorism*** is the method of interpreting a literal text as though it is only the vehicle for a secondary, more spiritual, more profound meaning. Thus fables were given meaning. The Word of God was often considered to be the *hull* and the meaning was inside, hidden, and to be found through their system.

The Jews found this system ready at hand. It was used by the heathen in the interpretation of many things about their gods.

When two traditions clashed, teachings of Plato and The Old Testament for example, many of them took Plato literally and allegorized Moses. In this manner they reconciled the two.

***Christian Allegorisms*** is a system begun by the pagans and copied by the Jews, and now crept into the Church. This method of interpretation dominated the church until the time of the reformation. Clement and Origen both were of this group. It is said by them that the "literal sense is the milk, the allegorical sense is the meat." Mixed in this method was an exaggerated typical system of interpretation.

**Note:** There is one redeeming blessing in their system of that day, they did emphasize the truths of the gospel in their fancies.

The curse was that it obscured the true meaning, there were no controls to the imagination. The Bible was putty in the hands of each person, thus doctrine was adversely effected.

***Roman Catholic Allegorism*** has continued until this day. The obedient accept whatever the Roman church has said about matters of Biblical interpretation. Texts as defined by the church must be so interpreted. All teachings must bear witness to Catholic truth, so called, not to what the Bible actually says. In many cases there are fanciful imaginations that have become cardinal doctrine. The Pope, cardinals, etc., demand that all must be interpreted in the light of their system.

#### ***- Literal School -***

The literal method of interpreting the Bible is to accept the literal rendering of sentences and words in their usual, obvious sense, then proceed to the parabolical or figurative only if the nature of the language demands it in the text and/or context.

1. Ezra is considered to be the first interpreter, Neh. 8:8.
2. Often the Jews in this school grossly exaggerated the incidental and accidental and ignored the essential.

## BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

3. The school at Antioch in the early church produced the most competent Bible expositors for over a 1,000 years. It was a school which endeavored to be logical, grammatically correct, and historically accurate. They stood against allegorizing the text.
4. The Reformers of the Reformation said, (Luther) ***“The literal sense of Scripture alone is the whole essence of faith and Christian theology.”*** Luther and others rejected allegorizing, calling it dirt, scum, obsolete, loose rags and that which is to be rejected.

They believed that the Bible is the supreme and the final authority above all ecclesiastical authority. Not only that it was supreme, but also sufficient. They believed that the Scriptures were sufficiently clear for the individual believer to understand, and they stressed the right of private judgment. John Calvin was one of the greatest interpreters of the reformation period, and he was a literalist and a grammarian.

### ***- Devotional School -***

The *mystics* took the Bible as the means or tool of prompting mystical experience, not as the source book for dogmatic theology.

There is great strength in the devotional emphasis in that it does keep spiritual life in the center of ministry rather than just to interpret in order to pass on information. The devotional approach should be present in most all of the ministries of the Word.

### ***But there are also weaknesses in this school.***

1. It is easy for people to mix the devotional with allegorism or excessive typology in an effort to find an application that will bless someone. Too often the primary meaning is obscured as the person tries to find some devotional thought.
2. It also tends to keep people fed on a superficial diet. People go to get an emotional stir rather than to hear the Word of God, and to glorify God. True piety comes from sound theology and comprehensive knowledge of the Word of God.

### ***- Liberal School -***

1. First, it is rationalistic for the interpretation emphasizes that which is reasonable to the mind of the person.
2. Inspiration is redefined and the Word is considered to be fallible.
3. The supernatural is redefined as they are naturalistic at this point.
4. The notion of accommodation is applied. That is, Christ accommodated himself to the usual stories of the time and did not necessarily mean what he said nor what the *literalist* wants to think he said or meant.

## ***The Biblicists Position Of the System of Interpretation or Biblical Hermeneutics!***

### ***- Foundation -***

1. The Divine Inspiration of the Bible is the foundation of Historic protestant (biblical) hermeneutics and exegesis. We are dealing with divine documents.
2. In Biblical inspiration there are a number of dimensions which ought to be brought to our attention:
  - a. There is the ***moral*** aspect, which is not present in any of the classics.
  - b. There is the ***supernatural*** aspect, for we accept the miraculous.
  - c. There is the ***revelational*** aspect; the adding of new content to old words, for there is an added depth of meaning to classical Greek.

### ***- The Goal is Edification -***

The purpose of interpreting is too produce a spiritual effect in the life of the man who reads the Word of God. Of course, above all, to present and magnify Christ. The Bible is not an end; it is a means to an end. (II Tim. 3:16,17; I Tim. 2:15.) *God has spoken - what has He said?*

Thus the purpose of interpreting the Word is to impart a taste, a thirst for the Word of God in others, unto the end of nurturing right relations toward God. (See John 5:37; Luke 24, *did not His words burn within us?*)

## ***The Historical Method: Literal, Cultural, Critical***

### ***- Literal -***

This is that view which adopts as the sense of a sentence or word as the meaning that is usual, ordinary, and normal in conversation or in writing. That is, to approach the meaning for just what it says in the same way we would talk, write, or think.

1. The literal meaning of sentences is the normal approach to all languages.
2. That all secondary meanings of documents, parables, types, allegories, and symbols still depend for their very existence on the previous literal meaning of the terms or word. So therefore, their meaning in application and understanding still depends upon the normal usage of the word.
3. The great part of the Bible makes adequate sense when interpreted literally.
4. This method is the only sane, safe check on the imaginations of mankind lest through allegorizing the words are meant to mean whatever the interpreter desires.
5. This method is the only one which agrees with the nature of inspiration. That God wanted written what He meant and did not want it obscured.

## **-Cultural -**

The word *culture* is used in the broad sense of referring to the total ways, methods, manners, institutions by which the people lived in the day in which the Word of God was written, or about the times to which it refers.

Often it is necessary that we know the cultural environment of the book in order to interpret it correctly. What sentences really mean can only be determined by the culture of the people at that time.

1. Therefore, there is the geographical approach, or the knowledge of the land.
2. There is the historical aspect as well as history of other lands, and what archaeology has found. There are also the facts of the people or nations with whom Israel had to do, as well as any other time of Biblical history.

This includes the material and social culture. The cultural approach is to be used with caution. Often, it is the basis of departure and should not be the dominating factor. It should be used to root our interpretation to facts of the day.

## **- Critical -**

This is an abused word; by this we mean that any interpretation of Holy Scripture must have its reasons, i. e. every interpretation must have its justification.

1. Thus its justification may be **historical** -- such and such is true because of the historical situation.
2. Its justification must be **grammatical** -- by pure usage of the word.
3. Or it may be **theological** -- for it has its base in many portions of the Word of God and is one of the cardinal doctrines of the faith.
4. If it is a hypothesis, or the interpretation just seems intelligible to us, due to lack of adequate justification of the forenamed -- we had better be careful.

We must subdue arbitrariness, dogmatism, and imagination. If our interpretation is really our bias we will teach something that the Word of God does not say. We need to be *critical* in the right sense of the term.

Interpretation therefore is grounded in fact, it is controlled by justification of the same, and it has had the great success of opening up the Word of God.

## **General Rules of Interpretation!**

1. **The Bible is to be interpreted in view of the fact that it is an accommodation of divine truth to the human mind.**
  - a. In terms of human, or earthly objects;
  - b. In terms of forms of thought for it is God's truth in human language.

## BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

2. ***We must interpret the Bible with the realization that it is a progressive revelation*** -- becoming more clear as it nears the completion. It grows from theological infancy in the Old Testament to maturity in the New Testament. (Hebrews 1:1,2)
3. ***Our interpretation must keep a sound historical basis.*** (See John 3:5)
  - a. What would water symbolize in Nicodemus' thinking?
  - b. What would be the historical, cultural thought here?
4. ***In our interpretation we must discover the meaning of the passage,*** not attribute one to it previously from some bias, or prejudice or to fit our doctrinal position or pet interpretation. (Cf John 3:5 - some teach baptismal regeneration from this text.)
5. ***Give preference to the clearest, most evident interpretation of a passage.*** (Many times it seems like there are two probably interpretations, but one will be a strain upon the text, credulity, or doctrine, etc. Only one makes good sense. (Cf Col. 1:6; and Romans 10:18 -- then known word, whole world?))
6. ***No portion should be interpreted as having more than one meaning unless strong reasons warrant it.*** One exception -- immediate fulfillment of prophecy - with a future meaning, e. g. prophecy. Rules will prevent excesses in spiritualizing, allegorizing, or using types of symbols excessively.
7. ***Interpretation is one; application is many.***
  - a. What a passage really means is one thing, and yet it may have more than one application.
  - b. John 3:30 has an immediate interpretation and application to John the Baptist's life, and also an application that can include our consecration for Christ must increase in all parts of our lives.
8. ***We must interpret the Bible harmonistically.*** Interpretation should be free from all contradictions. There is but one theology in the Bible; one main theme and we must forbid all fragmentation of it.
9. ***Everything essential in Scripture is clearly revealed.***
  - a. If trust is essential we need not scour the Bible to find it for it will not be taught in just one passing reference. We can use at least one verse out of context to support some pet dogma.
  - b. Roman Catholics only use allusions in the Bible to make their dogma authoritative! They claim this to be acceptable.
  - c. For example those who teach faith healing use Isa 53, and I Peter 2:24 to teach that by His stripes we are to be presently healed from illness, disease, etc. But is this what the Word of God teaches?

## BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

- 10. All Interpretations must be grounded in the original text, or languages if they are to pass as accurate, factual interpretations.**
- 11. Ignorance as to the meaning of some passages must be admitted.**  
Customs, idioms whose meanings are lost. Not every verse is lucid. (Cf Heb. 6:1-9 as illustration.)
- 12. Obscure passages must right right of way to the clear passages.**
  - a. There is danger investing a passage or verse with more meaning than the context will bear.
  - b. Certainly no doctrine should be made out of an obscure verse when not clearly taught, or clearly denied some other place. (Cf I Cor. 15:29.)
- 13. Check all interpretations by referring them to secular studies, doctrinal systems, and the great written works of the past.**
  - a. Check historically, archeology, geography, etc.
  - b. Good doctrinal books, accept, etc.
  - c. Good commentaries that have endured over the years.
- 14. Both the Old Testament and New Testament should shed light on the other in the process of interpreting.**

### ***Doctrinal Use of the Bible***

- 1. The main burden of doctrinal hermeneutics will rest upon the literal meaning of the Bible,** and on the New Testament. Thought it may also be given symbolically, parabolically and typically yet it is dependent upon the literal for its existence. And all the doctrines are clearly developed in the New Testament.
- 2. The theological interpreter must not extend his doctrines beyond the Scriptural evidence.** (Illustration much is said about heaven which is fancy, also about the tribulation.)
- 3. The theological interpreter must strive for a system!** There must be a complete relationship of Bible facts, brought together into a coherent statement of doctrine. Each effects the other and the grand edifice of Christian doctrine must be true to all the Word of God and set forth in numerous places in order to be accepted.
- 4. Unusual care must be taken in the theological use of proof texts.** We must be sure they prove grammatically, culturally, etc.
- 5. What is not a matter of doctrinal revelation cannot become a matter of faith.** Cf Roman Catholics, Christian Sc., Mormonism, etc.

## ***The Devotional, Practical Use of the Bible!***

Check with materials already written in other notes.

Commands in terms of one culture must be translated into our culture. Illus: I Tim. 2:9 must be reinterpreted for our culture. Application would be that Christian women should avoid all appearances of immodesty, and are to be chaste, dignified in dress and behavior.

## ***Figurative Elements Pertaining to Interpretations***

- 1. Simile** -- A figure of speech by which one thing or action or relation is linked or compared to something of different kind or quality. (See James 1:6; Isa 57:20,21; Jer. 23:29.)
- 2. Metaphor** -- an implied comparison, similar to above.
- 3. Hyperbole** -- extravagant exaggeration of statement. (Ps. 114:3,4 Num. 13:32)
- 4. Parable** -- a comparison, a short fictitious narrative from which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn.
- 5. Irony** -- Sort of humor, ridicule, light sarcasm, implication opposition of speech. (Cf Matt. 12:34; 16:3, 11)
- 6. Personification** -- Embodiment, incarnation, act of personifying, (Cf Heb. 1:3; Psa 114:3,4)
- 7. Allegory** -- A veiled expression or presentation -- a figurative story of a meaning implied but not expressed or expressly stated.

## ***When Studying Parables!***

1. Determine the exact nature, details -- of customs, practices, or elements that form the material, or natural part of the parable.
2. Determine the one central truth the parable is attempting to teach.
3. Determine how much of the parable is interpreted by Christ Himself.
4. Determine if there are any clues in the context as the parables meaning.

## ***Applying the Truths as Learned During Our Course:***

1. Luke 10:30-37            Cultural  
                                      Literal  
                                      Actual interpretation

## BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| 2. Luke 18:9-14   | Application  |
| 3. Isa. 1:18      | Word Study<br>Application  |
| 4. Psa. 23        | Word study<br>Application, etc.                                    |
| 5. Luke 15:1-24   | Cultural, actual interpretation<br>Literal, context, application   |
| 6. Phil. 2: 12-16 | Note context<br>Usual application of verse, cf.<br>real meaning    |
| 7. Luke 18:18-27  | Cultural aspect in this case of<br>vagueness. application, interp. |
| 8. John 16:24     | Meaning -- new desire on part of<br>Christ.                        |
| 9. John 17:19     | <i>Sanctify myself</i> -- word study of<br>this word.              |
| 10. Psa. 28: 4-10 | Type of, or figurative element?                                    |

### ***How To Understand Parables!***

1. Must be clear? Yes, but Jesus did not always work for clarity; His obscurities were on purpose at times.
2. Must know Scripture, all knowledge helps.
3. Take the plain sense as far as possible.
4. Think on paper; make lists and diagrams.
5. Parables are not sources of doctrines; they only illustrate it. Note., e.g. the tares or the phrase, *compel them to come in*.

#### **A. Find the Central Truth.**

Folly to bypass this step, e. g. Good Samaritan.

1. Does the Lord give it? In so many words?
2. Does the context suggest it?
  - a. To whom addressed -- Disciples? Crowd? Pharisees? Israel?
  - b. Circumstances just before? e.g. the laborers in the vineyard.
  - c. Other parables in the same series, e.g. the prodigal son, or Matt 13.
  - d. The explanation that follows, e.g. the unjust steward. Does the vital detail of the parable itself show the central truth? e.g. the talents, or the ten virgins?

### **B. Scripture Fits Together!**

1. Elements explained somewhere else in Scripture, e.g. leaven, birds, fig tree, vineyard, etc. Places, such as Jericho, Samaria (What duty toward a Samaritan?)
2. *Prophecy!* Since at least half the parables bear on prophecy, it is highly necessary to know the broad teachings of the last times.

### **C. Times Have Changed!** What elements might have once been perfectly obvious, but are now obscure to us?

1. Value of money, talent, penny, pound.
2. Customs: wedding, inheritance, pearl, royalty  
Note: the value of a Bible Dictionary, Bible Encyclopedia, or such a book as Edersheims' *Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*.

### **D. The Details Require Word!** Is every detail important? Or are the details only to make the parable vivid? Both these extremes are misleading.

#### **Many details are vital, but it becomes very difficult to force them all.**

Luke 14:15-24 differs from Matt. 22:1-14 only in details, but the differences are crucial: The two accounts are really not the same parable.

In the parable of the prodigal, the elder brother gets little notice from most of us; yet it is the reaction of the elder brother that explains and completes the chapter.

In the parable of the pounds, one is given rule over ten cities, another over five. Mere details? Yet they tend to explain the word *reign in Revelation twenty*.

Assume every detail meaningful unless it mars the unity of the passage, or goes beyond the obvious meaning that Christ had given to the parable. In the parable of the talents, does the faithless one lose his salvation?

**Notes:** Is the account of the rich man and Lazarus a parable? Even if it were:

1. Parables are always true to reality; the event still would have happened as described.
2. The leading thought remains the same: the unrepentant suffer in a real hell.