

Hermeneutics--Principles of Interpretation

by Leland M. Haines

The science of interpretation is called Hermeneutics. The aim of hermeneutics is to enable an interpreter to understand Scripture.

If one follows faulty rules of interpretation, he may not understand God's message and will likely interpret Scripture to fit his own views. Such interpretation is to be avoided. To prevent this from occurring, it is necessary to use sound and well-defined principles of interpretation.

The most important principle to follow to understand biblical passages is to interpret them by the same rules used to interpret other writings. Scripture is not written in some heavenly language, but in ordinary human language as other books. Thus it should be understood by the same common-sense process as other writings.

The interpreter should realize that principles, not fixed rules or formulas, should be followed. These principles should not be thought of as rigid rules that when mechanically applied give correct interpretations. They are principles that are to be used thoughtfully. Several of the principles are listed below:

1. THE GRAMMATICAL--HISTORICAL PRINCIPLE of interpretation requires the interpreter to use the laws of grammar and the facts of history to understand Scripture. The laws of grammar require the literal sense, which means words are to be understood in their most direct, simple, and ordinary meaning, unless the context indicates they are used in a figurative sense. To use the facts of history means that the writing be understood in light of the time and circumstances connected with the writing. This grammatical-historical method of interpretation is in simple words the common-sense method readers use to interpret everyday writings.

2. A WRITING HAS BUT ONE MEANING. Writing is used to communicate thoughts, and the writer's goal is to communicate his thoughts in the clearest possible way. This means his writing should never be given several meanings. New Testament writers wrote in this normal manner. They never attempted to hide their meaning; therefore, the meaning which is clearest and most evident is to be understood, and it alone. There is no conceivable reason a writer would try to obscure the ideas he wished to present by giving the words hidden meaning. Sometimes writers use words in other than their literal sense in their communications; they occasionally used figurative language. Interpretation of figurative language will be discussed later.

Scriptures do not contain contradictions. Paul emphasized this truth when he cautioned Timothy to "avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge" (I Tim. 6:20 RSV). Paul knew that only false knowledge contained contradictions.

3. THE PLAN, PURPOSE, AND CONTEXT should be taken into account when interpreting a writing. These are considered in the grammatical-historical principle. A writing should be viewed as a unit to discover its plan or overall structure. This enables one to better understand smaller sections of it. The same can be said about the author's purpose in writing. Often to understand a word or passage one needs to look at the context in which it appears. Normally, authors write in some logical order. They use a continuous, logical flow of thoughts that may carry through an entire book. To disregard this order of context and to interpret a statement by itself may lead to a distorted interpretation or complete misinterpretation of a passage. Therefore, a word or passage must be understood in its context.

4. THE MEANINGS OF WORDS change from time to time, making it necessary to search for the

meaning the author intended. Generally, an author uses a word's common meaning, although sometimes a special or peculiar meaning may be given. In such cases the word's meaning may be found in the immediate context or in his other writings, where he might have defined the word. A word may also be understood by studying parallel passages to see how the author used it there. When seeking the meaning, care must be taken that the author's meaning is found and not some later developed meaning.

5. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE is sometimes used and is not meant to be understood literally. It is not necessary to set up a hard and complex rule to determine when language is figurative. In most cases the literal sense is to be understood unless such an interpretation involves obvious contradictions or absurdities. Generally, interpretation of figurative language is not difficult, and a figurative term or passage can be readily understood when considered in the author's context. But some figurative language associated with prophecies, such as appear in the Book of Revelation, can require great effort and Holy Spirit guidance before being understood. In interpreting such symbolism, the reader should look for a divine interpretation. It may possibly be found in other books. If a divine interpretation is not given, the symbolism may remain an unsolved mystery. In such cases we should simply acknowledge we do not know what it means and avoid guessing at meanings.

The parable was one of Christ's favorite methods of teaching. The parable is a special type of comparison; it places the idea to be communicated alongside another idea that is understood. To understand a parable one must first understand the common idea and then seek the main point or emphasis of comparison. A parable usually contains one main point of comparison and its details generally should not be compared or given special emphasis. Many parable parts are only incidental, and if they are given special meaning, the parable's meaning might be obscured.

An example of a parable and how it is to be interpreted is the "weeds in the fields" found in Matthew 13. Jesus spoke to His disciples and a crowd about how "the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat" (Matthew 13:24-29 RSV). Jesus' disciples did not understand this parable, and after the crowds left they asked Jesus to explain it. He then placed the meaning alongside the familiar term used. "He who sows the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels." What is the main point of this parable? Jesus explained, "The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of the Father. He who has ears, let him hear" (Matt. 13:36-42). This parable's familiar picture of sowing and the harvest makes the judgment clearer.

An example of how figurative prophetic terms are defined is found in Revelation 1. John writes about lampstands, a son of man, seven stars, etc., in Revelation 1:12-16. In the next paragraph he defines these figurative terms. The one he saw in the preceding paragraph, "a son of man" (v. 15), spoke to John and said, "I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades." This clearly is Jesus Christ. He explained to John that the "seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the lampstands are the seven churches." So all the figurative terms of the preceding paragraph are defined, and when the reader finds these terms later in the book, he will know their meaning.

6. SCRIPTURE MAY HELP TO INTERPRET SCRIPTURE. Since God has given us His word in Scripture, each part must be understood in the light of the whole. Thus, if a passage is hard to understand, it should be compared with other passages on the subject and to the message of the Scripture as a whole. When this is done, the plain passages will help to interpret the difficult ones. The passages should harmonize^{3/4}and will^{3/4}unless passages are compared that do not address the

same subject or unless the Scripture leaves a mystery that will only become clear at a later date.

7. THE TWO MAJOR DIVISIONS of Scripture, the Old and New Testaments, should be observed. Since this is such a major point, it will be discussed in the next section.

Before we go on, let us make a couple other points. The reader should not control interpretation by accepting what he wants to hear and rejecting what he doesn't. If this is done, the reader will not understand the Word, and the Bible will say different things to different people. This interpolation can become even more difficult if the Scriptures are all negative; there is a general reluctance in man to listen to negative expressions. The reader must be careful not to screen these out.

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