

HERMENEUTICS

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HERMENEUTICS I

The Word of God and the God of the Word

Hermeneutics involves the science of biblical interpretation. As we begin our course on hermeneutics, we need to spend some time in this first lesson dealing with some fundamental concepts underlying the interpretive process. These concepts have to do with the nature of God, the nature of language, the nature of the Bible, and the doctrine of inspiration. By the very nature of the course and the time frame available to us, we will only be able to address these matters briefly.

WHY IS HERMENEUTICS IMPORTANT?

If the Bible is indeed God's Word, His revelation to His human creatures, what can be more important than being able to comprehend and rightly apply that revelation? While God has indeed revealed Himself to us in His creation, the Scriptures are the primary mediator of God's truth to us today. Consequently, we must give careful attention to the right understanding of the Bible if we truly desire to know God and please Him.

We also need to recognize the dangers of failing to interpret the Bible rightly. Very little time is required to think of numerous examples of those who have justified all sorts of ungodly behavior on the basis of misinterpretations of Scripture. Heresy and immorality of the worst kind have been supported through the twisting of Scripture. Furthermore, in our postmodern era, we are often told that no text has inherent meaning, but only means something as interpreted by the reader. Only the horribly self-righteous and intolerant would dare to insist that their interpretations of Scripture are the right ones. Hermeneutics, then, is also a safeguard against a variety of abuses, from manipulation to mushiness, to which the Bible and those who read it are often exposed.

THE SELF-REVEALING GOD

Hermeneutics begins with God and who He is. Here, we must begin with the doctrine of the Trinity. Because God is triune, He is by very nature a communicator. This communication occurred before time began, before the creation of man, and is evident in the opening chapter of Genesis (Genesis 1:26). God is also Truth (John 14:6; Hebrews 6:18), so what He communicates is beyond question in its veracity. In addition, God is immutable (Hebrews 6:17; James 1:17), so that what He has said in the past continues to be His word for the present.

THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE

Furthermore, He created man in His image and communicated with man from the very beginning (Genesis 2:16; 3:8-9). God is thus the creator of language. We have been taught that human language has evolved from the grunts and growls of lesser animals, but Scripture indicates that man was a communicator from the time of his creation, and that his communicative skills were given for the purpose, not only of interacting with his fellow creatures, but also for communicating with his Maker. Unlike those who would tell us that communication is so deeply individual that human beings can never really hope to convey real meaning to one another, the Christian must affirm that real communication, both between man and man and between God and man, is not only possible, but is a fundamental aspect of who we are as people.

THE WORD OF GOD AND THE BIBLE

God, as a speaking God, communicates in many ways. He reveals Himself through His creation (Romans 1:20), through oral discourse (e.g., Genesis 3:9; 4:9; 6:13-21; Exodus 3-4), dreams and visions (e.g., Genesis 28:13-15; Matthew 2:13), and preeminently through His Son (John 1:1; Hebrews 1:1-2). Much, though not all, of this communication has been recorded for us in the Bible, God's written Word. Scripture is therefore the primary means by which God speaks to us.

THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE

The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture is critical to the task of hermeneutics. When we say that the Bible is inspired by God (II Timothy 3:16), we are saying that it is *God-breathed*. The basic idea here is that, while the Bible was written by over forty human authors in three different languages over a period of about 1500 years, it is primarily *God's* Word because the human authors, though writing in their own vocabularies and styles and in the contexts of their own cultures and experiences, were nonetheless preserved from error by the superintendence of the Holy Spirit (II Peter 1:20-21).

Because the Bible is inspired by God, we approach it with the assumption that it does not contradict itself. As a result, apparent conflicts have their source in our incomplete understanding rather than in flaws in the text itself. Consequently, we may do something with Scripture that would be preposterous with any other body of literature - use different parts of it to interpret other parts. Jesus or Paul, therefore, may be expected to give insight into what Moses or Isaiah meant when they wrote. Similarly, Leviticus and Hebrews shed considerable light on one another, though written 1500 years apart.

THE PERSPICUITY OF SCRIPTURE

This idea is an important one, since it tends to be overlooked or at least implicitly denied by many interpreters of Scripture. The basic point here is that God intended His Word to be understood by those to whom He gave it. It is therefore, in its most fundamental sense, *clear*. This important idea has several implications.

First, the perspicuity of Scripture is limited by our finite nature as creatures. God's communication with us is true without being exhaustive. What we know, we know truly, but we must expect that we will never know everything or understand everything about God. Mystery is thus inherent in divine revelation. Anyone who claims to understand fully the Trinity or the theanthropic nature of the incarnate Christ is fooling himself, deceiving his hearers, and is likely on the downhill road to heresy. We must accept the Word by faith because our minds are not capable of comprehending logically everything God has told us about Himself.

Second, perspicuity is limited by our sin. We want to twist the message of Scripture to satisfy ourselves. This is not only true of Sadducees (Matthew 22:29), cultists, and charlatans, but is a temptation for even the most sincere Christian in his approach to the Word. We must approach Scripture humbly, with an awareness of our own tendency to read into it what we want to see there.

Third, perspicuity is rooted in who man is as the image-bearer of God. This means that God intends us to use our reason to interpret His Word. While we recognize that the Word transforms our minds (Romans 12:2), God expects us to use those transformed minds to comprehend His revelation of Himself (Acts 17:11). Interaction with Scripture may sometimes involve mystical experience, and has done so in many cases, but we should never fall into the trap of believing that *thinking* about the Word of God is somehow less than pious.

Fourth, the perspicuity of the Scriptures should cause us to send up red flags whenever someone seeks to oversimplify or over-complicate the task of biblical interpretation. For instance, if you hear, “The key to the interpretation of Scripture is . . . ,” you should immediately begin to ask questions. Sincere Bible scholars and heretics alike have claimed over the years to have isolated the key by which all of Scripture is to be understood, and the result is always a distortion, or at best an unbalanced understanding, of God’s revelation to us. If God is far too complex for the human mind to grasp, how much more is His revelation unable to be unraveled by the use of a simple, manmade “key”?

Furthermore, hermeneutics has been dominated over the years by scholars who have given the impression that the simple Christian cannot possibly hope to understand the Bible. The result of such an assertion, of course, is the conclusion that, because of the findings of scholars, the Bible can’t possibly mean what it appears to mean. While I am certainly not denigrating the role of scholarship in biblical interpretation - and we will see how such scholarship can be valuable as we go through the course - we must affirm that God has given us His Word with the intention that it be understood by those who read it. The New Testament, after all, was written in *Koine* Greek rather than the literary language of the scholars of the day. We should therefore be suspicious of anyone who insists that the Bible must mean something quite different from what it says because of the contributions of modern scholarship.

THE OUTLINE OF THE COURSE

In the remaining weeks of this course, we will be discussing matters of biblical interpretation by tracing the hermeneutical task from the original writings through the transmission of the text to us as the recipients and interpreters of the text. The sequence will be arranged as follows:

I. INTRODUCTION

Lesson #1 - The Word of God and the God of the Word

II. ORIGINS

Lesson #2 - Grammatical Context and Figures of Speech

Lesson #3 - Literary Genres

Lesson #4 - Historical Context

Lesson #5 - Cultural Context

III. TRANSMISSION (BIBLICAL)

Lesson #6 - Theological Context

Lesson #7 - New Testament Use of the Old Testament

IV. TRANSMISSION (EXTRABIBLICAL)

Lesson #8 - Manuscript Transmission

Lesson #9 - The Problem of Translation

Lesson #10 - The Authority of the Church

V. RECEPTION

Lesson #11 - Contemporary Cultural Contexts

Lesson #12 - Personal Application - The Heart of the Reader and the Role of the Spirit

HERMENEUTICS II

Grammatical Context and Figures of Speech

Because the Bible is written in human language, the first step in rightly interpreting it is to follow the conventions of human language - in other words, grammar. The writers of the Bible were human beings using the languages of their day, and the words they wrote contained familiar vocabulary, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs. At this most fundamental level, in other words, the Bible is to be interpreted as any other book would be. The writers of Scripture did not use spiritual grammar or esoteric language, but the common language of their readers, and we must begin our interpretive task with this basic truth.

USAGE VERSUS ETYMOLOGY

Etymology refers to the origin and roots of a word. When we interpret Scripture, we must recognize that usage, rather than etymology, determines a word's meaning. For instance, the English word "prevent" comes from two Latin roots meaning "come before." In the seventeenth century (see I Thessalonians 4:15, KJV) the word actually had this meaning. Today, it obviously no longer does. So for a speaker to insist that the word *prevent* had to mean "come before" because of the roots from which it came would be utter foolishness - we don't use the word that way anymore (note that when far too many pastors say from the pulpit, "The meaning of the Greek root is . . ." they are often guilty of this fallacy). This means we must place great emphasis on interpreting Scripture in context.

UNDERSTANDING THE WORDS

WORDS WITH MANY MEANINGS

In Greek, as in English, a word may have several meanings and usages (have your students think of examples in English). The only way to discover how a word is being used is to look at its context (*not* the etymology); see, for instance, the use of the word *world* in John 3:16 and I John 2:15. Both verses are written by the same author, both use the same Greek word *κοσμος* (*kosmos*), yet in one verse the word refers to people, while in the other it refers to an evil system. Make sure the students understand how the contexts clarify the meanings.

UNIQUE WORDS

Some words appear only once in Scripture and are not extant at all in secular literature. How are we to find their meanings? Since such words appear most frequently in the poetic sections of the Old Testament, poetic parallelism can often help us to figure out what such words mean. We will give examples of parallelism next week when we look at the subject of literary genres.

EXTRABIBLICAL SOURCES AND COGNATE LANGUAGES

Scholars frequently attempt to illuminate the language of Scripture by noting how the words found in the Bible are used in the secular writings of the day or in the religious literature of pagan societies. Such an approach may be of some value, but must be used cautiously. For instance, the story of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32 may be illuminated by understanding the symbolism of the

calf in the religions of Egypt and Canaan; in those religious systems, gods were often portrayed as riding on a bull calf as a symbol of strength.

Note, however, that scholars often arrive at erroneous conclusions by taking such an approach. This is true for two reasons. First of all, biblical use of terminology is often deliberately set in contrast to the use of the same language in a secular setting. For example, the term *propitiation* was a common one in the pagan mythologies of Greece and Rome (e.g., the sacrifice of Iphigenia by Agamemnon in the story of the Trojan War); Paul borrows the term, but uses it in a radically different way by presenting a God who propitiates Himself by offering His Son as a sacrifice for sin. Similarly, biblical writers often take common language and invest it with new meaning. Most of the theological terms in the New Testament fit into this category - such words as *baptism*, *justification*, *redemption*, and *adoption*, for example. Scholars tend to assume, however, that the use of a word in the Bible may be understood by its use in contemporary literature; in other words, what it meant to the pagans must be what Paul meant when he used the term.

Cognate languages are often used in a similar way. This is particularly true in Old Testament scholarship, where the use of cognate words in the languages of the Canaanites and other surrounding cultures becomes the norm for interpreting the same words when found in the Scriptures. For example, the famous *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* by Brown, Driver, and Briggs is notorious for using this procedure to ascertain the meanings of obscure words, and even some common ones.

UNDERSTANDING THE SENTENCES

Words, of course, are combined into sentences, and understanding the sentences requires that we ask certain basic questions of the text. First of all, we must take note of who is speaking. This is an important question to answer. For example, the Bible says, "There is no God," but a fool is speaking (Psalm 14:1). Jehovah's Witnesses derive some of their arguments for soul sleep - the idea that there is no consciousness between death and the resurrection - from the book of Ecclesiastes, but they do so by using statements that Solomon later repudiates as meaningless (e.g., Ecclesiastes 9:5). We must be careful here, however - Balaam, though a false prophet, spoke a beautiful and true Messianic prophecy (Numbers 24:17).

Secondly, we must ascertain the speaker's purpose. Is he speaking generally, or in terms of a specific problem or situation (Matthew 5:34)? Is he being sarcastic (I Kings 22:15)?

Thirdly, we must ask what kind of language is being used. Is it literal or figurative? Is it poetry or prose? We don't have time here for an extensive study of figures of speech, but we should note that the Bible makes use of similes (most of Jesus' parables are extended similes) and metaphors (Song of Solomon 1:14 is one of many examples from this highly figurative piece of poetry), hyperbole (Jesus' words to the disciples in Mark 10:25 provide a good example here) and a wide variety of other schemes and tropes. These are to be interpreted according to the normal procedures for dealing with figurative language. Note that the free acknowledgment of the use of figurative language undermines the typical straw-man arguments of those who would ridicule anyone who would be so foolish as to take the Bible *literally* (this is also why we are better off speaking of a natural interpretation of the text rather than a literal one).

We also need to determine if the author explains what he means later in the passage. One notorious example of the need to avoid taking biblical language out of context is found in Ezekiel 37:15-23. Mormons say this prophecy refers to the “stick” (scroll) of the Book of Mormon being joined to the Bible, but the context makes it clear that the prophecy is talking about the Northern and Southern Kingdoms being reunited. Another more subtle example of the use of context within a paragraph involves Hebrews 6:4-8. In this case, the figurative language of verses 7-8 illuminates and clarifies the admittedly difficult expository language of verses 4-6. The passage is not referring to the saving grace of God that may be lost, but to the height of common grace that may be rejected, with bad fruit resulting (compare Jesus’ Parable of the Sower).

BROADER CONTEXTS

Not only are sentences parts of paragraphs, but paragraphs are parts of arguments (chapters and verses were much later additions to the text, of course, and represent an attempt on the part of a group of scholars to divide the Scriptures into logical units for ease of study and location of specific texts), arguments are parts of books, books are parts of the output of a specific author, and the works of authors make up the Bible as a whole under the direction of God, the ultimate and supreme Author. All of these contexts except the last (often called *theological context*, which we will discuss in more detail in Lesson 6) are subject to the normal rules of grammar, and we may find our understanding of the Scriptures increased by noting, for example, the structure of Paul’s argument in the book of Romans, the cycles found in the book of Judges, or the relationship of the language used in John’s Gospel and his epistles. Note, however, that as we deal with larger units of text, the connections have a tendency to become increasingly speculative. Few would argue that the group of parables found in Luke 15 share a common theme, but considerable disagreement exists regarding the overall theme of Luke’s Gospel. We must beware, therefore, of those who would dogmatically assert “the central theme” of a particular book or body of literature in the Bible and proceed to use that presumed theme to interpret individual passages. Such conclusions must be asserted lightly, and with considerable humility, unless such a theme is clearly stated by the author (e.g., justification by faith in Romans 1:17).

Thus, on its most fundamental level, the Bible may be understood in the same way any other work of literature is to be understood. Certainly, that was the expectation of those who initially read the books that have been incorporated into the canon. But the Bible is also far more than merely a human book, as we will see as we explore other aspects of interpretation in the weeks to come.

HERMENEUTICS III

Literary Genres

The Bible, as we know, is unlike any other book in the history of mankind. Because it is inspired by God, it can't be treated "like any other book." On the other hand, because it was written by human beings, there is a sense in which it can be treated like other books. Our ability to understand its message can be greatly enhanced if we are able to recognize the literary techniques used by its authors and place those techniques within the cultures to which the authors were writing.

WHAT ARE THE DANGERS OF TREATING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE?

The primary danger involved with treating the Bible as literature is that, by focusing on the human characteristics of the text, we too easily lose sight of its divine character. In short, studying the Bible as a human literary work often leads to considering it as *no more than* a human literary work, fundamentally indistinguishable from other great works of literature, though certainly to be classified as among the greatest. Once people begin viewing the Bible in this light, it is easy to begin to assert the existence of errors, thus undermining the entire doctrine of inspiration. No one would be so foolish as to claim infallibility for a work of literature.

An even worse danger that can result from a literary approach to Scripture is the tendency to equate literature with *fiction*. Too many scholars have blithely assumed that, because the Bible displays many of the characteristics of literature, it must be treated as fiction, and therefore must not be thought to have any objective validity. Because the Bible is literature, they assert, it cannot in any objective sense be *true*.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF TREATING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE?

How often in the past has the Church been led astray by those who allegorize the text of Scripture in order to proclaim some tradition of which the Bible knows nothing? How many of us have been confronted in the past by those who insist on treating the figurative language of biblical poetry as if it had been part of some future newspaper article? Both of these errors have had serious consequences in the history of the Church, and both stem from the failure to treat the Bible as literature. Knowledge of the literary conventions within which the authors of Scripture were operating prevents us from reading their work as if it were the product of our own times, and thus reading into it either popular philosophies or modern social and political conditions. Application to our own times and circumstances is only possible as we become able to read the Bible in the context of its own times and circumstances.

GENRE CATEGORIES AND THE BIBLE

These basic principles of genre apply to the Bible as well as to other works of literature. The genre classifications applicable to the writings found in Scripture are not the same ones we find in modern literature. The Bible contains no novels or short stories, and even the poetry of the Bible is not self-consciously designated as such (there is no Hebrew word for *poetry*, though it is clear that the passages of Scripture that we recognize as poetic follow conventions that differ from those that

we speak of as prose). On the other hand, the Bible contains examples of literary genres that are not found in modern literature, including gospel and apocalyptic.

Even where genres overlap modern forms, conventions differ. Hebrew poetry is nothing like English poetry, either ancient or modern. Biblical history is pointedly didactic, while modern history prides itself (inaccurately) on its objectivity. Even the epistles found in Scripture follow a format that differs significantly from letter-writing in the Western tradition.

BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

Several basic principles are at work in the narratives of Scripture. The first of these is common to all good narrative literature, and that is that a good story draws the reader into the action. The reader identifies with characters and events and is thus able to generalize on the ideas contained in the narrative. While Bible stories are about unique individuals who existed in real space and time rather than literary stereotypes, Scripture emphasizes that, in some fundamental way, these people are *like us* (James 5:17), and therefore their experience is meaningful in our lives.

This leads to the second principle; biblical narrative is explicitly didactic. It is intended, not merely to entertain and delight, but to instruct in foundational spiritual truth (I Corinthians 10:11). Thus the authors of Scripture not only choose stories with didactic purposes in mind, but structure those stories to maximize their instructive value. Two common examples of this didactic purpose may be found in the selectivity of the Gospels, which completely ignore Jesus' early life and focus the overwhelming bulk of their attention on the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection because they are intended to accomplish an evangelistic purpose (John 20:31), and the narratives of historical books like Kings and Chronicles, where the former emphasizes God's covenant with Israel and how rulers kept or violated it, while the latter give their chief attention to the Temple and the extent to which rulers were faithful in their worship of God and adherence to the ceremonial law.

A third principle is not universal, but is found in the vast majority of biblical narratives and contributes to the didactic purpose already mentioned. The stories in the Bible are almost always told in the third person, by someone who is not personally involved in the story, but has an omniscient perspective, not only being privy to private conversations and secret councils, but also giving insight into thoughts and motives, though these are most frequently demonstrated through words and actions rather than explicitly described by the author.

FICTION - THE PARABLES OF JESUS

Needless to say, the Bible does not contain a great deal of fiction. The genre was not widespread in the ancient world; in fact, the lines between fiction and non-fiction tended to be blurred considerably in the writings of the era. When reading fantastic stories such as the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* or Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, we wonder whether the authors intended these stories to be believed as fact and whether the readers actually believed them as such, though we have no qualms about treating them as mythological rather than factual. This problem, of course, is what causes many modern scholars to label almost everything in the Bible as fiction; they identify the genres of Scripture with these fantastic tales of the ancient world and see them all as examples of myth-making.

The Bible clearly treats its narratives as historical fact, however, because it so often builds doctrines upon them. The stories of Scripture are not like Aesop's fables, with their nice little morals attached to the end; the morals would be of value whether the stories happened to be true or not. Instead, in the Bible, we find doctrines concerning the nature and plight of man, the character of God, and the way of salvation derived from these stories; if they are not true, the doctrines built upon them are rendered nonsensical.

Having said all this, however, we must note that the Bible does contain a few examples of fiction - stories that are plainly intended to be read as made-up accounts rather than historical incidents. The most notable of these, of course, are the parables of Jesus. What is a parable? First of all, a parable is an earthly story. It is drawn from the common experience of Jesus' listeners. Every parable Jesus told described a situation familiar to His readers. It should be noted in passing that knowledge of first-century Jewish culture is thus essential for a proper understanding of the parables. What was commonplace to Jesus' listeners is often foreign to us.

Secondly, a parable is a piece of fiction. Though any of the parables could have happened, it is erroneous to assume that any parable was based on an actual incident (the existence today of an inn called The Inn of the Good Samaritan on the Jerusalem-Jericho road, for instance, is a patent absurdity).

Thirdly, a parable is intended to convey spiritual truth in a symbolic way, but differs from other symbolic forms of literature. Unlike a fable (e.g., Judges 9:7-21; Aesop's fables), a parable is a story that actually could have taken place; unlike an allegory (e.g., Ezekiel 16, *Pilgrim's Progress*), a parable is intended to convey a single truth. It is a mistake to assign symbolic significance to every detail of a parable unless Jesus Himself does so. This is perhaps the greatest error made in the interpretation of the parables of Jesus.

A parable is thus an extended simile or metaphor, a word picture in the form of a story. It is the discovery of the single truth Jesus is seeking to communicate that is the goal of the interpretive process.

THE GOSPELS

The Gospels found in the New Testament have no true parallel in secular literature. Though they come closest to the style and content of biography, they fail to fit the pattern of a typical biography for a number of reasons. First of all, the fact that they are clearly intended for a didactic purpose sets them apart from most biographies (e.g., the biography of George Washington penned by Parson Weems is both clearly didactic and clearly bad biography). They are more evangelistic tracts than objective examinations of the life of Jesus. Their purpose is underscored by the fact that almost a third of the total Gospel materials focus on the events surrounding the death and resurrection of Christ.

Secondly, they deviate from typical biographies in their lack of interest in Jesus' life prior to His public ministry. While most biographies take great pleasure in dredging up incidents from the childhood of their subject to explain what he or she eventually became, the Gospels are almost completely silent about the first thirty years of Jesus' life on earth.

What, then, are the Gospels? The first obvious conclusion we must draw is that they are set up in the form of *stories*. While they weave many styles of prose into the overall narrative, the simple truth is that the Gospels tell the story of the ministry of Jesus from beginning to end, always driving toward the climactic events of His death and resurrection. It is worth noting that throughout the stories, the authors have left pointers directing our attention toward the coming climax. They constantly bring up things that the disciples didn't understand until after the resurrection and include words and events in Jesus' life that pointed forward to His coming death.

THE EPISTLES

Unlike the Gospels, the epistles of the New Testament occupy a familiar genre, and one that was common to the world of the first century. Hundreds of letters have been found whose structure has much in common with the epistles of Paul. As letters, the New Testament epistles begin with salutations that identify both author and addressee, an opening greeting, and a prayer or word of thanksgiving, and end with greetings and personal notes. Most are not personal letters (Philemon and the Pastorals being the obvious exceptions), and are intended for circulation, both within individual churches and among churches (Ephesians was clearly intended to be read by a group of churches, and thus it lacks the personal references common to epistles intended for a single Christian community, such as Romans or the Corinthian letters; I John was an open circular letter, and thus contains none of the distinctive opening or closing characteristics). Some New Testament books are characterized by epistolary frameworks built around distinct genre writings (Hebrews is a sermon within the context of a letter; Revelation is an example of apocalyptic literature attached to a circular letter addressed to the churches of western Asia Minor). Many have also noted the tendency of Paul, in particular, to divide the body of the letter into doctrinal and practical sections (e.g., Romans 1-11 and 12-16), though this distinction should not be pressed too far; Paul, like the other writers of Scripture, knows nothing of doctrine apart from application.

BIBLICAL POETRY

Poetry is marked by conciseness of expression. A poet is able to communicate in few words what a novelist might take pages to say. If one were to render in prose form one of the short poems of Emily Dickenson or Robert Frost, for instance, one might write on at considerable length in an attempt to capture what the poet has encapsulated in a few evocative lines. Even comic poetry is marked by conciseness. Note, for instance, what is reputedly the shortest poem in the English language:

Fleas

Adam
Had 'em.

Secondly, poetry differs from prose in its use of symbolic language. While prose writers frequently make use of symbolism, the concentration of metaphors, similes, and other such devices is much higher in poetry than in prose.

We should note, of course, that these basic characteristics of poetry apply to biblical poetry as well as such varying forms as the blank verse of Shakespeare, the limericks of Ogden Nash, or the haiku of Japan. Though the Bible never uses the word *poetry*, nor is there any evidence of such a word in ancient Hebrew, what we know as the poetic books of Scripture are full of such types of writing.

Biblical poetry is built around the idea of repetition, but it is not the repetition of sounds, as in English poetry, that provides its structure. Instead, biblical poetry is built around the repetition of ideas. Poems in the Bible are most frequently made up of couplets - two lines of similar length and (often, though not always) similar grammatical structure. In these couplets, ideas are repeated using a technique known as parallelism, which can be synonymous (the two lines say the same thing in different words), antithetical (the two lines express contrasting ideas), or synthetic (the second line of the couplet builds on the idea expressed in the first).

Biblical poetry takes many forms, as is the case with poetry in English literature. Lyric poems, nature poems, encomiums, love poems, proverbs, and prophecies all find a place in Scripture, and each sub-category carries its own set of conventions, which are vital for correct interpretation. Sadly, we do not have the time to discuss these conventions within the context of this course.

APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE

Apocalyptic is another one of those literary genres found in Scripture that is unknown in contemporary literature. Though fantasy comes closest to the characteristics of apocalyptic, there are certain elements that set apocalyptic apart from the writings of modern authors such as J.R.R. Tolkien.

First of all, apocalyptic literature is more concerned with what is happening *outside history* and *beyond history* than with what is happening within the historical process. When a book such as Revelation pictures events occurring on earth, they are seen as reflections or consequences of what is happening in heaven (without commenting on their literary or theological quality, perhaps the novels of Frank Peretti - e.g., *This Present Darkness* - came closest to duplicating this characteristic of apocalyptic in the twentieth century). In addition, such literature looks toward an ultimate consummation that is to occur, not within the historical process, but with the termination of history as we know it.

Secondly, apocalyptic literature utilizes as its basic plot the reversal of present conditions. Because this reversal includes the exaltation of the downtrodden and the defeat of the oppressors, apocalyptic as a genre tends to arise within the context of persecution or oppression. The two greatest examples of the genre in Scripture, Daniel and Revelation, both fit this description.

Thirdly, apocalyptic literature is visionary. It most frequently consists of the record of dreams or visions experienced by the writer. As such, it is explicitly *written* rather than spoken communication (unlike most of the messages of the prophets, which were intended to be preached to the people). Like a dream, apocalyptic tends to consist of unconnected bits and snatches, whizzing rapidly from one place to another, from heaven to earth, and from time to eternity. But

because it is written, it may also have a very deliberate and self-conscious structure, often utilizing numbers.

Fourthly, apocalyptic literature is highly symbolic in character. While symbolism is found throughout the Bible in poetry, prophecy, and parables, most of it tends to be realistic in the sense that what is pictured corresponds to something in the real world. Jesus talks about shepherds and sheep, farmers and seed, while John talks about ten-headed monsters and flying women. The symbolic character of apocalyptic fits with the first three characteristics summarized above. Because apocalyptic deals with other-worldly events and scenarios, it uses symbolism to describe that which is beyond human experience. The vision of God in Ezekiel 1 effectively conveys God's otherness. Unlike the beautifully precise statues of the gods made by the ancient Greeks, which served more than anything else to limit their understanding of deity to the scope of idealized manhood, Ezekiel's vision is ultimately open-ended and inexplicable - our God is a mystery who cannot finally be contained, either in human words or human pictures. John's vision of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22 illustrates the same point - the truth is found not so much in what John describes as in what he obviously was unable to put into words. And because apocalyptic describes the reversal of present conditions, some commentators have suggested that symbolic language was essential for political purposes, in order to mask the true content of the work from the oppressors whose overthrow was being predicted therein.

It is also worth noting that the symbolism of apocalyptic literature is in most cases not original. The apocalypses of the Jews of the Captivity and beyond as well as the apocalypses of the Ancient Church commonly mined their images from the writings of the Old Testament prophets, particularly Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and the later visions of Isaiah. The same is true of the book of Revelation, which draws much of its imagery from the same Old Testament books, though often making use of the images in fresh ways and in novel combinations.

Finally, apocalyptic in its extrabiblical form was commonly pseudonymous. Writers would couch their visionary predictions of future deliverance and judgment in an ancient context, putting the words into the mouths of ancient seers, who were then ordered to "seal up" the visions until an appropriate later time (namely, that of the author). Biblical apocalyptic pointedly does *not* share this characteristic. The fact that the biblical writers use their own names and speak in the context of their own times was one of the major factors in ascertaining the canonicity of books like Daniel and Revelation while rejecting as non-inspired literature the apocalypses of the Apocrypha, along with those of the second century. Critical scholars, of course, ignore this distinction, and use the common pseudonymity of non-canonical apocalypses to argue that Daniel and John must be pseudonymous. In so doing, of course, they patronize those in ancient Israel and the Early Church who, unlike modern scholars, clearly could tell the difference between legitimate works and pseudonymous ones.

HERMENEUTICS IV

Historical Context

Two of the books we read in my A.P. English class were *The Crucible* and *Inherit the Wind*. One is the story of the Salem witch trials in 1692, while the other deals with the Scopes trial in 1925. We spend quite a bit of time in class talking about the actual historical events depicted in the plays, noting the extent to which the histories have been distorted by the playwrights for their own purposes. But the students are not equipped to understand why these distortions take place unless they comprehend the historical context in which the playwrights themselves were writing - the McCarthy era in the early fifties. Thus historical context - both that of the events and that of the authors - becomes vital to proper interpretation of the plays. The same is true of Scripture. Our knowledge of the historical events described in biblical narratives and our understanding of the historical contexts in which the authors are writing become critical for a correct interpretation of the text.

Note that this is another area where, in essence, we interpret the Bible as we would any other book. A key difference does exist, of course, and that is that the history contained in the biblical narratives, because they are inspired by God, is without error. Consequently, unlike critics who love to speculate about the purposes for which the biblical authors distorted or even invented history in order to communicate their messages, we begin with the assumption that the biblical narratives are historically accurate, though, as we shall see, they are also selective.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT - THE EVENT

The more we know about the times and places in which the Bible was written, the better we will be able to understand it. A few examples should illustrate this point.

The first involves the influence of Abraham. The book of Genesis ascribes extraordinary power and influence to Abraham. He goes to war, defeats kings, and travels at will throughout Canaan. A little historical knowledge illuminates the situation. There were three great Near Eastern powers in the third millennium BC, but during the time of Abraham all three were relatively weak - Mesopotamia in the east was declining; the Hittites in the north, though once powerful, were also declining; and Egypt in the south was busy with dynastic squabbles. Thus Canaan was free of external influence, and petty chieftains had free rein to fight their wars and play their political games. It is worth noting that the same situation prevailed 600 years later at the time of the Conquest; no great power was in a position to oppose Joshua and the Israelites when they entered the land.

Another example is the Hittite treaty formula. The book of Deuteronomy is structured according to the form of treaty designed by the Hittites, who had influenced Canaan for seven centuries prior to the Exodus. The formula includes the introduction of the parties involved in the covenant, the history of dealings between them, the stipulations of the covenant, curses and blessings associated with keeping or violating the treaty, and succession arrangements should a ruler die. Deuteronomy thus clearly pictures God as Israel's King and the nation as His vassal. The formulaic structure also speaks strongly in favor of the unity and early date of the book.

New Testament history can also be enlightened by knowledge of the history of the period. When the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, they dispersed the people and brought in peoples from other parts of the empire in order to minimize the possibility of rebellion. This mixing of populations soon led to intermarriage and a blending of religious ideas. When those who remained in northern Palestine intermarried with the imports from elsewhere in the Assyrian Empire, the result was a group of people who were called Samaritans. They were of mixed blood, and their religion contained elements of Judaism and elements of other religions. Jews of the Southern Kingdom looked down on them as half-breeds and apostates from the faith. The hatred between the two groups provides the context for understanding the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of the Woman at the Well, among others.

Knowledge of the origin of the Pharisees and Sadducees can also help us understand the events of the Gospels more clearly. Both groups had their origins in the Intertestamental Period, when the Seleucid Empire was attempting to force Greek culture on their subject peoples. Those Jews who stood firm on the ancient traditions and refused to adopt modern ways became the Pharisees, while those who wanted to see Judaism adapt to Greek cultural norms became the Sadducees. The Pharisees were thus the “fundamentalists” of the day, while the Sadducees were the liberals. The two groups hated each other and could agree on little except their hatred of Jesus.

The seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2-3 can also be illuminated by knowledge of the history of the period. Any number of examples could be cited here, but we’ll restrict ourselves to a few.

- Pergamum boasted a temple of Aesculapius, the Greek god of healing, whose symbol was the caduceus (the modern symbol of the medical profession - a serpent wrapped around a sword) - thus “Satan’s throne” (2:13).
- Sardis was located on a supposedly impregnable cliff, but had been sacked twice in its history by the armies of Cyrus and Antiochus the Great, who came upon the city in the middle of the night “like a thief” (3:3).
- Philadelphia was a city built at the intersection of the two major Roman roads through western Asia Minor, and thus faced “an open door” for spreading the Gospel (3:8).
- Laodicea was located near the famous hot springs of Hierapolis, but by the time the water reached Laodicea, it produced nausea rather than medicinal effects (3:15-16). The city also was a financial center, produced fine black-wool garments, and “Phrygian powder,” a famous eye remedy (3:18).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT - SELECTIVITY

The message of the author of a book of Scripture may often be more clearly understood by considering what he includes and what he omits. Selectivity in historical narrative gives many clues about the intentions of the writer. A few examples should suffice to illustrate this point.

One of the most powerful kings of the Northern Kingdom of Israel was Omri; he won many major battles and brought great prosperity to Israel. From a secular point of view, he was probably the most important of the Northern Kingdom kings. In fact, over a hundred years after his death, the chronicles of the kings of Assyria continued to refer to Israel as “the land of Omri.” But in Scripture, he hardly rates a paragraph (I Kings 16:21-28), and everything said about him is bad.

The situation with his son Ahab is comparable. The Bible has nothing good to say about this wicked king. In fact, the greatest feat of his life, his victory over Assyria at the battle of Qarqar, is completely ignored by Scripture; in its place chronologically is inserted the episode of Naboth’s vineyard, which shows Ahab at his despicable worst. The selectivity of Scripture thus serves to underscore what is really important about a king; it is not his victories or his wealth, but his fidelity to God and the fairness with which he rules the people.

In the New Testament, a good example involves Herod the Great, one of the most powerful rulers of the first century BC. Despite his political machinations and great building projects (including remodeling the Temple in Jerusalem), the Bible only tells us one thing about his rule - the slaughter of the innocents of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16). Again, while not an incident that secular historians would be likely to consider important, nothing more clearly illustrates the true character of the man and his relationship to God.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT - THE AUTHOR

Knowledge of the historical context in which the author lived can also be helpful in interpreting his writings. This is especially true when dealing with the Old Testament prophets. Knowing that Habakkuk wrote in the years shortly before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians and that Haggai wrote in the years shortly after the return from the Babylonian Captivity does much to enlighten the messages they deliver.

Yet much that has been said about this aspect of historical context is highly speculative, and thus highly suspect. A few examples should help us understand the potential abuses of this issue.

Julius Wellhausen’s Documentary Hypothesis is built around this sort of speculation. He argued that the historical context in which the Pentateuch was written was not the Mosaic era (mid-second millennium BC), but the early Divided Monarchy period (J and E), the reign of Josiah (D), and the Intertestamental Period (P). He essentially attempted to argue backwards from his observations concerning the text to speculations about its historical origins. In the process, of course, he denied the inspiration of Scripture. Similar speculations may be associated with the late-dating of the latter portions of Isaiah and the book of Daniel by critical scholars, based largely on the presumed impossibility of predictive prophecy (Isaiah mentions Cyrus by name, and Daniel gives detailed symbolic descriptions of events in the Intertestamental Period in chapters 8 and 11).

Less overtly dangerous but just as speculative are attempts by scholars to identify the historical contexts of the anonymous books of the Old Testament. Were Judges and Ruth written during the reign of David to defend the monarchy? Were the books of Chronicles written as theodicies to defend God’s destruction of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians? We don’t know the answers to these questions definitively, and drawing concrete conclusions from speculations on

these matters may not always be helpful, and can in fact limit our ability to understand and apply the teachings of these books.

The historical contexts of the New Testament writings, though almost all are attributed to specific authors, can also sometimes be problematic in the way they generate speculation, which then is used as a basis for interpretation. For example, the common assertion that the four Gospels should be placed in historical context as being addressed to Jews (Matthew), Romans (Mark), Gentiles (Luke), and everyone (John) has some reason behind it, but should not be used dogmatically. Of course, the approach taken by critical scholars that denies apostolic authorship and places the Gospels in the second century has no leg whatsoever to stand on, and may easily be refuted from the documents of the era [an interesting sidelight to the matter of using historical context to date the books of the New Testament is a recently-developed argument from silence; even some liberal critics now agree that the books of the New Testament had to have been written before 70 AD because they *don't* mention the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans!].

Lack of knowledge of the historical context of the author can also lead to misinterpretations of Scripture. For instance, I cannot count how often I have heard speakers expound on passages in the New Testament epistles that talk about persecution by going into gory detail about the tortures of Christians during the reign of Nero. In fact, almost all of the New Testament epistles were written prior to the Neronian persecution, which broke out in 64 AD and was almost completely restricted to the city of Rome and its environs. The persecution to which Paul and others allude is the persecution generated by the Jewish authorities, in which the Romans became involved reluctantly if at all.

Thus, we must conclude that historical context can have great value in enabling us to interpret the text of Scripture rightly, but that it must be used with great care, avoiding speculation and being sure not to draw dogmatic conclusions from things that may be less than certain. This knowledge is accessible in commentaries, histories of Bible times, and even good reference Bibles. Much insight into Scripture can be gained by acquiring this knowledge, which can keep us from divorcing the words of the Bible from the framework in which they were written.

HERMENEUTICS V

Cultural Context

Last week, in looking at the historical context of Scripture as an aid to proper interpretation, we saw how knowledge of events - empires, wars, rulers, etc. - could add depth and richness to our understanding of the Bible if used appropriately and without reckless speculation. Today, we will see how knowledge of the lifestyles of the people of Bible times - the cultures in which they lived - helps illuminate the Scriptures.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURAL CONTEXT

While the Bible is a universal book, intended by God as a revelation of Himself to people of all times and places, it was also written to people who lived in a particular time and place. The circumstances surrounding the narratives, the images used in the stories, the figurative language through which communication occurs, all presuppose the time, place, and lifestyles of the original recipients. Unless we know something about life in Bible times, therefore, we will be ill-equipped to comprehend fully what God is telling us in His Word.

EXAMPLES OF CULTURAL CONTEXT

Examples of the value of cultural context for biblical interpretation are legion (a division of Roman soldiers numbering up to 6000 men; this sheds light on the story of the Gadarene demoniac in Mark 5). A few representative examples should suffice to make the point.

- When Rachel stole Laban's household gods (Genesis 31:19), she was taking the symbols of family inheritance.
- The plagues directed against the Egyptians were attacks on specific Egyptian deities (Exodus 12:12).
- The Golden Calf was a common symbol of deity among the Egyptians and Canaanites; gods were typically portrayed as riding on a bull calf, a symbol of strength (Exodus 32).
- Ruth's request that Boaz serve as her kinsman-redeemer may be understood in the context of the law of levirate marriage.
- The story of David and Goliath contains several cultural elements; the idea of conflicts being resolved by champions saved a lot of bloodshed and was common at the time. Also, the stones David used were about the size of tennis balls and could be hurled by a skillful wielder of a sling at speeds approaching 100 miles per hour; David was actually at an advantage in the battle against the immobile giant.
- The fact that Baal was the Canaanite storm god gives added pungency to the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18).
- The Jewish manner of speaking about time resolves problems of understanding connected with many New Testament passages. Days were reckoned in a way that counted both the beginning and ending days of the period in question. Thus, a week is commonly referred to as "eight days." Similarly, Jesus was in the tomb for three days even though He was crucified on Friday and rose from the dead on Sunday morning. Hours during the day were measured from sunrise to sunset - for example, in the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matthew 20, the men would have been hired at about 9:00 AM, noon, 3:00 PM, and 5:00

PM - while the night hours were measured in four three-hour watches, so that when Jesus walked on the water in the fourth watch of the night, it would have been between 3:00 AM and 6:00 AM.

- The parable of the Good Samaritan takes on life for one who has driven the road from Jerusalem to Jericho - even today, it is a barren, rocky wasteland, full of caves where bandits could easily have found refuge.
- Knowledge of the role of shepherds in New Testament society gives deeper meaning to stories like the announcement of Jesus' birth to a group of shepherds. Shepherds were outcasts because of their perpetual ceremonial uncleanness and could not even testify in court because they were assumed to be untrustworthy. Jesus' birth was thus announced to the lowest of the low (the dregs of Jewish society) and the highest of the high (Mesopotamian astrologers - Gentiles who had no claim on a Jewish Messiah).
- In Luke 15:1-2, the religious leaders are upset with Jesus for eating with sinners. Table fellowship was closely connected to ceremonial cleanliness (see also the conflict between Peter and Paul in Galatians 1), and the term *sinners* was reserved by the religious leaders of the day for those who were ceremonially unclean.
- The architecture of first-century houses in Palestine illuminates passages such as the parable of the importunate friend (Luke 11:5-8, where the house consisted of one room in which the entire family would sleep), the healing of the paralytic (Mark 2:1-5, where the flat roof was covered with tiles that could be lifted and moved aside), and the story of Peter's vision (Acts 10:9, where the flat roof served as an extra room and a place one could go to find privacy).
- The practice of foot-washing (John 13) was necessary because of the dirt roads on which travelers would walk, covering their bare or sandaled feet with dust.
- The expensiveness of clothing, and thus the fact that most people had no more than one or two sets of garments, gives added power to passages like Matthew 5:40, where Jesus exhorts His followers to give their clothing away to those who ask for it, and Matthew 27:35, where the soldiers at the cross divide Jesus' clothing and gamble for His robe - apparently one of the perquisites granted to those who drew this nasty detail.
- Knowledge of agricultural practices in first-century Galilee illuminates stories such as the parables of the Sower and the Wheat and the Weeds (Matthew 13).

MISUSE OF CULTURAL CONTEXT - UNIVERSALIZING THE PARTICULAR

The most common problem resulting from the failure to utilize cultural context is the universalizing of cultural practices or biblical instructions peculiar to the lifestyles of the age. Two examples should suffice.

- Matthew 5:21-48, the section of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus criticizes what was said by "those of old times," involves, not a repudiation of Old Testament law, but a faithful exposition of that law in contrast to the ways it had been distorted by the religious leaders of His day. In order to understand Jesus' teachings rightly, we must understand the distortions against which He is speaking. For example, the prohibition against swearing in Matthew 5:33-37 was directed against the rabbinical hierarchy of oaths, and was never intended to teach that taking an oath to speak the truth in court was unbiblical.
- Another area where some have mistaken words directed against a contemporary cultural practice for universal teaching is in connection with the head coverings mentioned by Paul

in I Corinthians 11:1-16. Somewhat like the practice of Muslims today, the idea that a woman would go out in public with her head uncovered was a sign of immodesty, even of immorality. The same connection does not exist in our culture, though the need for modesty remains the same.

- One final note in this area is that the problem associated with these failures to recognize cultural context is endemic in Islam. The *Hadith*, a supplementary Muslim holy book, contains descriptions of the lifestyle and practices of Muhammad. Because Muslims do not view these in their cultural context, but consider them of universal validity, they hate modernity in all of its forms, and look to an ideal world in which the clock is turned back to the seventh century, there to remain.

MISUSE OF CULTURAL CONTEXT - PARTICULARIZING THE UNIVERSAL

As we noted last week, the abuse of context is most frequently associated with speculation. Such speculations come from those who have hermeneutical axes to grind. In other words, they have some stake in making the Bible say the opposite of what it really says and use unsubstantiated assertions about the culture of the age to allow them to shrug off the clear teachings of God's Word. In our day, such abuses most frequently come from feminists and gay rights activists. Both tend to use cultural speculations to particularize what the Bible clearly intends to be universal teachings. I Timothy 2:11-15 is deprived of its contemporary force by speculations about what women must have been doing in the Ephesian church to elicit such a prohibition (apparently the Corinthians were having similar problems - I Corinthians 14:34-35). Similarly, advocates for homosexuality want to picture the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a failure of hospitality and Paul's condemnatory words in Romans 1 as addressed to male prostitutes.

Thus, cultural context can be abused by a desire to turn the particular into the universal (legalism) and a desire to reduce the universal to the particular (antinomianism). We all have these temptations when we approach the Bible. Only careful study of the Scriptures and the environment in which they were written can enable us to understand and apply rightly the revelation that God has given us.

HERMENEUTICS VI

Theological Context

So far in our studies, we have examined texts in the contexts in which they were written. Now we will begin to move beyond that immediate context and consider how later events contribute to our understanding of the Scriptures. Our next two lessons will examine contexts within the Bible itself. How do earlier or later biblical writings help us to understand whatever text may be before us? This week we will look at some general principles of theological context, while next week will be spent examining more closely the ways in which the New Testament writers interpret the Old Testament.

WHAT IS THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT?

The Bible is not only sixty-six books, it is also one book. So while the idiosyncrasies of the individual writers are of importance to us in proper interpretation, we must also recognize that the Bible's one Author, the Holy Spirit, has given us divine revelation that is fully coherent, without the contradictions that one could rightly assume in any other collection of writings produced over a 1500-year span by more than forty different writers. Because the Bible is in this way a unique writing, we may expect to use it in ways that no literature of similar scope could ever be used. For instance, the time period over which the Bible was written is roughly the same as the entire scope of English literature, from the Venerable Bede and *Beowulf* to the present. Who would dare suggest, however, that the true meaning of *Beowulf* could only be comprehended by reference to *The Lord of the Rings*? Yet those of us who seek to understand the Bible do exactly this; we argue, for instance, that the law of Moses may only be rightly understood by reference to Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount.

In short, theological context means that Scripture interprets Scripture. Such an approach would be nonsensical were it not for our belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible. But because the Bible is God's Word, we may assume that it does not contradict itself, so that one part of the Bible may rightly be used to shed light on another. How, then, do we go about taking advantage of the unity of Scripture as an interpretive tool?

THE OVERALL MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE

Over the years of Christian history, interpreters of Scripture have sought to approach the question of theological context by isolating a central theme that unites the Bible and then using that central theme as a basis for interpreting individual passages of Scripture. Such an approach has value, but it also has drawbacks that must be noted if we are to use it rightly.

First of all, one must face the question of what the unifying theme of the Bible actually is. Needless to say, scholars over the years have not been in agreement on this subject. Various approaches taken by evangelical scholars include the following:

- The Bible is essentially God's self-revelation, so that God is its chief subject. We must therefore ask ourselves, as we approach each individual passage of Scripture, "What is God intending to teach us about Himself in this passage?"

- The unifying theme of the Bible is the concept of *covenant*. God in the Scriptures is telling us about the relationship that He has determined to establish with man. Each passage should therefore be approached by seeking to answer the question of what it tells us about God's relationship to man. Note that this approach has been a unifying factor in the hands of covenant theologians, who see in the Bible the outworking of one great Covenant of Grace between God and man, while it has been a means of dividing the text of Scripture in the hands of dispensationalists, who wish to interpret each text in the light of God's designated basis for relating to man in the particular age in which the passage was written, thus "rightly dividing the Word of truth" (II Timothy 2:15, KJV).
- The unifying theme of the Bible is *salvation* (II Timothy 3:14-15). We must therefore ask ourselves, as we approach each passage, "What does this tell us about God's redemptive plan for mankind?"
- The unifying theme of the Bible is *Christ*. In Luke 24, we have what must have been the greatest Bible study in human history. The risen Christ was walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus with two of His followers, who were kept from recognizing Him. Along the road, He explained the Scriptures to them, focusing on the Old Testament teachings about Himself (verses 27, 44-45). Some look at these verses and see in them an indication that Christ Himself is the unifying theme of the Scripture, and thus advocate that every passage be approached by asking the question, "How can we see Jesus in this passage?"

One might note that, while these unifying themes proposed by Bible scholars are similar and may be related in various ways, they are not identical. While each may be supported from Scripture, each also carries with it certain problems. Note the following:

- The biggest danger associated with seeking a unifying theme in the Scriptures and using it as an interpretive tool is that of *oversimplification*. Those who seek the same overriding agenda in each passage of Scripture tend to overlook the specifics of the passage in their rush to get to their chosen overall theme. In the process of bringing out the chosen theme, matters of context that have been the subject of our discussions in the early part of the course tend to be ignored.
- Another danger associated with the approach described here is one of undue *spiritualizing*, especially in relationship to Old Testament texts. Covenant theologians have often crossed this line by ignoring the significance of prophecies concerning the restoration of Israel to the Promised Land in favor of vague applications connected with evangelism. In many cases, this leads to the identification of types and symbols where the text of Scripture gives no warrant to do so.
- A third problem with this approach is a logical one - proponents are often guilty of committing what logicians call the *division fallacy* - assuming that each part must bear the characteristics of the whole (e.g., "the baseball team leads the league in stolen bases, so their catcher must be a fast runner"). Even if one could establish that the theme of the entire Bible is the concept of covenant, or redemption, or Christ, one should not then arrive at the conclusion that *every single passage of Scripture* must be about that central theme. For instance, in the Luke 24 passage, we are told that Christ spoke to the travelers on the road and "explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself," saying that "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Note that these verses do not say that everything in the Old Testament is about

Christ, simply that He spoke of all the things in the Scriptures that were about Him. If in fact His discourse to His followers covered *everything* in the Old Testament, Resurrection Sunday must have been extended like Joshua's long day.

- A danger of such a narrowing approach is illustrated in Paul's treatment of God's sovereignty in Romans 9:14-24, where Paul is responding to readers who apparently assumed that salvation was the overall goal of God's work in the world. Such an assumption, however, gave them problems when they faced the matter of reprobation - that God had created some vessels for destruction. Paul's response is that the ultimate purpose of God is not man's salvation, but His own glory (verses 22-23).

WORD STUDIES

We now turn to the question of how theological context may be rightly used as an interpretive tool. First of all, we should briefly address the practice of word studies. Anyone who owns a concordance has at one time or another used it to compare uses of the same word in different places in Scripture. We should note that, while this approach has value, it also has its limitations.

The first issue that arises when dealing with word studies is the language question. Just because the same word appears in different places in the English Bible (whatever translation you may be using) does not mean that those words are derived from the same Hebrew or Greek originals. Thus comparisons based on English words alone should be used with great caution.

Secondly, when using a good concordance that allows the researcher to gain access to the original words, caution must still be exercised simply because words have ranges of meaning, and even the same writer may use the same word in different ways (note the example taken from John 3:16 and I John 2:15 in Lesson 2). We may not automatically conclude that the same word has the same meaning everywhere it is used in the Bible, though one is much safer if he compares uses in the works of the same author or in passages dealing with the same subject. Word studies may also be useful when attempting to grasp the richness of meaning associated with certain key words or images.

PARALLEL PASSAGES

The use of parallel passages is often more helpful than word studies. Because of the fundamental unity of the Scriptures, we may assume that passages describing the same incident will be coherent, and at worst complementary rather than contradictory. This approach is very fruitful when studying the Gospels (e.g., the elucidation of Luke 14:26 by comparison with Matthew 10:37, the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 compared to the Parable of the Pounds in Luke 19:11-27, the genealogies found in the beginnings of Matthew and Luke, or the different versions of the Resurrection story) or when trying to make sense out of the difficult narratives of the books of Kings and Chronicles. The main thing to watch out for here is that the passages being compared are truly parallel. For instance, an attempt to reduce the Feeding of the Five Thousand and the Feeding of the Four Thousand to two contradictory versions of the same story is easily seen to be absurd by the fact that both are included in Mark's Gospel (6:30-44 and 8:1-10); note that critics try to do the same thing with the three stories of patriarchal duplicity in Genesis 12:10-20, 20:1-18, and 26:1-11.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Without question the most fruitful application of theological context may be found in the discipline of systematic theology. Systematic theologians seek to answer the question, “What does the Bible say about _____?” with the blank being filled in by a particular topic addressed by the Scriptures. From Origen in the third century to Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Charles Hodge, Christian scholars have sought to address the contents of Scripture in topical form. While the subjects are chosen and arranged differently by different scholars, this approach has been remarkably helpful in enabling Christians to understand the contents of the Bible more clearly and fully. One must note here, however, that the key to doing systematic theology well remains the proper interpretation of individual texts; thus good systematic theology must be built upon correct application of grammatical, literary, historical, and cultural contexts. When verses are divorced from such contexts, systematic theology becomes proof-texting, where verses are wrenched from the passages that give them their fundamental meanings and drawn together to support the idea the author intends to convey, whether creedal (theological controversies such as the debate between Calvinists and Arminians are full of such inappropriate uses of Scripture; even worse, cultists take verses out of context all the time to support their doctrinal distinctives) or philosophical (in this respect, Origen’s *Hexapla* is an excellent example of how *not* to do systematic theology).

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

The last point for consideration today is the use of the concept of progressive revelation as an interpretive tool. God did not reveal everything He had to say to man all at once; He revealed His truth gradually over time (Hebrews 1:1-2). We must thus always ask ourselves the question, “What did the writers (and readers) know, and when did they know it?” Careful interpreters do not seek to draw doctrinal conclusions about the afterlife from the Old Testament, for example, since God had revealed little of that subject to the people of that age. Because of the gradual unfolding of God’s truth, we should assume that later sections of Scripture will shed increasing light on topics addressed in the Bible, i.e., that the New Testament will interpret the Old Testament rather than the other way around. This brings us to our subject for next week, which is the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament and how that helps us in our attempts to interpret the Bible rightly.

HERMENEUTICS VII

The New Testament Use of the Old Testament

Given that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, we should expect to find in it not only truth about God and ourselves, but also truth about *itself*. If, indeed, Scripture is its own best interpreter, we ought to be able to find in God's Word important examples and guidelines for our own interpretation of the sacred text. For this reason, the passages where the writers of the New Testament quote the Old Testament have always been of great interest to Bible scholars. After all, shouldn't the way in which the Holy Spirit guided the writers of Scripture to interpret words written earlier by divine inspiration serve as a guide for us as well? As we will see today, this principle is much easier to state than it is to apply, especially when one seeks to deal with the prophetic passages in the Bible.

HOW DO NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS QUOTE THE OLD TESTAMENT?

The task before us would be much simpler if the writers of the New Testament were consistent in the way they refer to the Scriptures available to them. Unfortunately, they are not. Instead, we find considerable variety in a number of areas, which we will examine briefly in the lesson before us.

To begin, we should note that the writers of the New Testament were very familiar with the Old Testament. The New Testament contains over 250 direct quotations of Old Testament passages, along with many other oblique allusions. The problem we face comes from the fact that, somewhat like preachers today, the writers of the New Testament did not all seem to be using the same version as the basis for their quotations. Today we have a multiplicity of versions, but in the first century, Christians had only two - the original Hebrew text and the Septuagint, a translation of the Hebrew original into Greek. Since the New Testament is written in Greek, it should come as no surprise to us that most of the quotations from the Old Testament are taken from the Septuagint rather than being freshly translated from the original Hebrew. [A small tangent - this fact became the basis for an argument presented by Augustine, among others, for the inclusion of the Apocrypha in the Bible, since the Septuagint included the Apocrypha and it appears to have been the Bible of choice used by the apostles.] A few quotations, however, appear to have been fresh Greek renderings of the Hebrew original, while a number of others are rough paraphrases that correspond to neither extant text completely. Thus verbal precision does not seem to have been a priority, though in some places the point being made by the New Testament writer turns upon a particular word, or even a verb tense. We would expect verbal precision to matter if we are indeed dealing with the Word of God. The reason it sometimes did not, however, is related to our next topic - the purposes for which the quotations are being made.

WHY DO NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS QUOTE THE OLD TESTAMENT?

In the same way that the writers of the New Testament quote from different versions with different degrees of precision, so they quote the Old Testament for many different purposes. Note the following:

- Fulfillment of prophecy - this is among the most common, and will be the subject of further discussion later in the lesson. Often quotations of this kind are introduced by the formula, “that it may be fulfilled . . .”
- Identification of types - people or events specifically intended by God to foreshadow something that would later appear. In Hebrews 3, Moses is explicitly identified as a type of Christ.
- Doctrinal proofs - among numerous examples of this kind of quotation are Romans 3:9-19 and Galatians 3:16.
- Apologetic arguments - Jesus often did this in responding to the religious leaders of His day (e.g., Matthew 22:29-32,41-46); He even did it in response to Satan’s temptation (Luke 4:4,8,12).
- Linguistic or situational similarities - examples include Mary’s use of Hannah’s song in the Magnificat and Jesus’ quotation of Psalm 31:5 in Luke 23:46.
- Illustrative purposes - examples include Paul’s use of the contrast between Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:21-31 and Peter’s allusion to the story of Balaam and his donkey in II Peter 2:15-16.

This, of course, complicates our task as we seek to use the interpretive techniques of the New Testament writers as a hermeneutical model. To what extent do these quotations really help us to know how to understand the Bible correctly?

THE PRINCIPLE OF INTERPRETIVE MOVEMENT

An idea that may be helpful in drawing lessons from these varying quotations is the concept of *interpretive movement*. By this I mean the direction in which meaning is intended to flow when quotations are being cited. Thus quotations in which the writer intends the passage being quoted to shed light on the subject at hand involve a forward flow of meaning, and may be said to be examples of positive interpretive movement (Paul’s use of Psalm 24:1 in I Corinthians 10:26 is an example of this). On the other hand, quotations that are intended by the author to shed light on the real meaning of the text being quoted involve a backward flow of meaning, and thus are examples of negative interpretive movement (when Jesus quotes Psalm 110:1 in Luke 20:41-44, He intends to show His critics what the verse being quoted really meant). These concepts might be expressed in simpler terms by noting that positive interpretive movement is what we commonly call *application*, while negative interpretive movement fits much better into the category of hermeneutics - actually seeking to gain understanding of the passage in question.

We must first notice that all quotations may be assumed to involve some degree of positive interpretive movement. If the writer did not expect that the passage being quoted would shed light on the discussion at hand, he never would have quoted it in the first place. On the other hand, negative interpretive movement is relatively rare among New Testament quotations of the Old Testament. Of the six purposes for which quotations are used that are cited above, only the first two involve negative interpretive movement. The others simply take the meaning of the text as a given and apply it to the situation in question.

HERMENEUTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF INTERPRETIVE MOVEMENT

Why is this distinction an important one? First of all, we should note that only those quotations containing negative interpretive movement - those where the author intends to delineate the true meaning of the text being quoted - may serve as hermeneutical models for us. Since a text may have many legitimate applications, positive interpretive movement tells us little about *meaning*, though much about the appropriate *use*, of a given text.

Secondly, caution dictates that we should not seek negative interpretive movement unless it is specifically indicated in the text itself. We must assume that the intent of the New Testament author is to infuse the meaning of the quoted Old Testament passage into the context about which he is writing unless he specifically says otherwise. If we fail to do this, we open the Scriptures to all sorts of allegorical interpretation. For instance, if we were to take Paul's quotations of Deuteronomy 25:4 in I Corinthians 9:9 and I Timothy 5:18 as interpretations rather than applications, we would have a difficult time criticizing the sort of medieval allegorizing that led to the conclusion that the lists of clean and unclean beasts in Leviticus really refer to character qualities of those seeking the priesthood.

Thirdly, we should note that positive interpretive movement is far more flexible than negative interpretive movement. When meaning is being brought forward in application, we may find that general principles are applied to specific circumstances or specific incidents are used to illustrate general principles. The direction is not reversible, however. For instance, the fact that Paul used the specific practice of keeping working animals well-fed to enunciate a general principle of paying people what they deserve does not mean that the sole significance of the teaching about oxen is to tell people to pay their pastors; it may have other legitimate applications as well. Furthermore, the fact that Paul applies the general principle of the whole earth belonging to God to the problem of meat offered to idols does not mean that the question of the *adiaphora* exhausts the meaning of Psalm 24:1.

Negative interpretive meaning is far more rigid, however. If Jesus says that Psalm 110:1 is talking about Him as the Messiah, to say that it is talking about anything else would be unfaithful to God's revelation (note, however, the comments on interpretation of prophecy that follow; multiple fulfillments are indicated, though this is not quite the same thing as multiple meanings).

APPLICATIONS TO THE INTERPRETATION OF BIBLICAL PROPHECY

We have already noted that the most common examples of negative interpretive movement in the quotations of the Old Testament by New Testament writers - passages that truly shed light on the meaning of the verses being quoted - occur in connection with the fulfillment of prophecy. The hermeneutic associated with biblical prophecy has been a source of considerable debate, and is at the heart of the controversy between dispensationalists and covenant theologians, for instance. We obviously lack time to discuss this material in any detail, but note the following.

First of all, the writers of the New Testament use the word "fulfillment" rather broadly. While Matthew 2:6 reveals the meaning of Micah 5:2 unambiguously, Matthew 1:23 gives the ultimate significance of a passage that had immediate application for the people to whom it was

written (Isaiah 7:14 cf. Isaiah 8:1-4) and Matthew 2:15 gives the “meaning” of Hosea 11:1 only in the sense that the nation of Israel, which is clearly the referent in Hosea 11, was the “son of God,” while Jesus was God’s greater Son, and thus the fulfillment of the True Israel (see also Matthew 2:18 and Jeremiah 31:15).

Secondly, these comparisons imply that a final fulfillment does not eliminate the possibility of earlier partial fulfillments. Isaiah 7:14 really is talking about Mahershalalhashbaz, though its complete fulfillment is in the Virgin Birth of Jesus, and the prediction of the weeping that would accompany the Babylonian Captivity in Jeremiah 31 really came to pass, and in a much larger sense than in first-century Bethlehem. One scholar seeking to sort these matters out noted that these different “fulfillments” might be compared to a cup that was “partially full” and one that was “completely full.”

Thirdly, we should note that fulfillments of biblical prophecies are generally unpredictable before the events actually occur. While exceptions like the prophecy in Micah 5:2 do exist, much more common are passages like Psalm 22, which would have required an Emmaus Road experience to connect with the crucifixion. And who could have predicted the fulfillments of the obscure symbols in Daniel 11 before the events of the Maccabean Revolt actually occurred?

We must therefore conclude that the interpretation of prophetic passages must be approached with great caution and humility. Nowhere have Christians made themselves look more foolish than in their attempts to identify ahead of time how biblical prophecies were going to come to pass. From the date-setters who have plagued the Church for a thousand years to those who are convinced that they know the identity of the Antichrist, those who claim to have biblical prophecy figured out have done little but bring disgrace to the name of Christ. Our approach should not involve being preoccupied with the details of future events, but being ready for whatever God may bring as He glorifies Himself in human history and prepares for the certain return of His Son. Otherwise, we must be careful not to cast aside what is clear in God’s Word in favor of speculation or preconceived interpretations that Scripture does not specifically warrant.

HERMENEUTICS VIII

The Transmission of Biblical Manuscripts

In continuing to trace the progress of the Word of God to us, we now move beyond the biblical text itself to the impact of the events in the years following the writing of the manuscripts on the whole issue of biblical interpretation. Today we will deal with the question of the transmission of the text.

WHAT HAS TEXTUAL TRANSMISSION TO DO WITH HERMENEUTICS?

In bringing the Bible to us over the last two millennia, God has used human instruments in the same way that He used human instruments to give us the text in the first place. Because of the use of human instruments in the transmission of the text, many critics have raised questions concerning the reliability of the text of Scripture that we have available to us. The truth of the matter is that we affirm the inerrancy of Scripture in the original autographs, yet we do not have those original autographs. How can we then place confidence in the texts we do have? Do the differences among manuscripts undermine our assurance that we indeed do have in our possession the Word of God? Do these textual differences affect our understanding of the message of the Bible? These are important questions, especially in the light of the challenges that Christians face from an unbelieving world.

TRANSMISSION OF THE TEXT IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Our knowledge of the transmission of the text of Scripture in the early years is somewhat limited. As far as the Old Testament is concerned, we know that the order of scribes, established by Ezra near the end of the Old Testament era, took upon themselves the responsibility of preserving the Jewish Scriptures by copying them with meticulous accuracy. By counting letters and words and knowing the middle letter and word of each book of the Bible, scribes were able to check one another's work and maintain an incredibly high level of accuracy in copying the Bible. The greatest evidence of scribal accuracy in the transmission of the text may be found by comparing the Dead Sea Scrolls, the earliest of which were copied around 250 BC, with the oldest Hebrew Scriptures available before the discovery of the Scrolls in 1948 (tenth century). When comparing, for example, the versions of Isaiah, copied a thousand years apart, one finds that the differences are negligible. The scribes did a marvelous job of preserving the manuscripts of the Old Testament, and we may therefore approach them with great confidence concerning their accuracy.

As far as the books of the New Testament are concerned, our knowledge is very limited. We know that copies of the books of the New Testament were in circulation even during the New Testament era (Colossians 4:16 shows that such circulation was common and deliberate, as does Peter's comment in II Peter 3:15-16). Second-century Christian writings such as the *Didache* and the letters of Clement of Rome, Ignatius, and Polycarp show a broad acquaintance with the books of the New Testament, which are quoted frequently in the writings of these early Church Fathers. We have little knowledge of the circumstances under which these copies were made and circulated, but we know that the Word of God was not only being copied and spread around among the churches, but that it was also recognized as the Word of God by those churches.

COMPILATION OF THE CANON

Questions often arise concerning the compilation of the canon when people talk about the authority of Scripture. For instance, the absurd assertions made in Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* show how questions of the compilation of the canon can be used to undermine people's confidence in the text of Scripture as a reliable guide to Christian truth. We must thus spend a few minutes talking about how the canon as we have it today was compiled.

With regard to the Old Testament, there seems to have been no question as to its contents. The Jews recognized their Scriptures as such from the time they were produced, and no record exists of any controversy concerning them. We should also note that the books of the Apocrypha, Jewish writings from the Intertestamental Period that are included in the Catholic Bible, were never recognized as Scripture by the Jews themselves, but were clearly distinguished from the canonical writings, which had clear connections with God's divinely-appointed prophets.

As far as the New Testament is concerned, the controversy involves far less than most people often think. While it is true that the canon of the New Testament as we have it today was not affirmed by the Church until the latter part of the fourth century, the majority of the books found there were recognized as Scripture from the beginning with no controversy whatsoever. From the very beginning, the four Gospels, Acts, the thirteen letters of Paul, I Peter, I John, Jude, and Revelation were accepted as Scripture (Eusebius of Caesarea questioned Revelation because he was an amillennialist and wanted the book excluded because it so obviously taught premillennialism, but received little support for his objections). Early attempts to list the canon were first stimulated by the Gnostic teacher Marcion, who wanted to limit the canon to parts of Luke and ten letters of Paul. Around the same time, false gospels began appearing, written by Gnostics to promote their peculiar doctrines. In order to combat these false views of Scripture, the Church began to make lists of the books of the New Testament. As noted above, the only books about which any significant controversy existed were Hebrews, James, II Peter, and II-III John - the last two because they are so short that they often were lumped with I John in discussions of the canon, the first three because of questions regarding apostolic authorship. A few non-canonical books such as *The Shepherd* and *Didache* were discussed, but were quickly rejected because of their late date and non-apostolic authorship. The books finally accepted in the canon were those emanating from the first-century apostolic environment, written by apostles or their close associates. The books so beloved by skeptics such as those seen in *The Da Vinci Code* were never seriously considered, since they were written in the second or third century and were clearly not apostolic. By the end of the fourth century, the case was closed (without the aid of Constantine, I might add). The controversy over the Apocrypha arose in the late Middle Ages and carried over into the Reformation, and was of a completely different character.

TRANSMISSION OF THE TEXT IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The key issue regarding the transmission of the text of Scripture in the Middle Ages was the rise of monasticism. The task of copying manuscripts became part of monastic life during the time of Cassiodorus in the fifth century. Monks living in monasteries would maintain extensive libraries and preserve those libraries by copying and illuminating manuscripts that came into their possession.

Though they copied manuscripts of all kinds, they devoted their greatest attention to the copying of the Scriptures.

The monks were careful in carrying out their sacred task, though not as careful as the Jewish scribes had been. As a result, discrepancies did enter into the manuscripts as they were preserved by the monks. But what was lost in diligence was compensated for by sheer volume. Because of the work of the medieval monks, we have literally thousands of copies of the books of the Bible done by hand in the monasteries. No other ancient book is able to compare to this volume of manuscript evidence. One might ask what good do thousands of copies do us if they're wrong, but we will seek to answer that question in the next section.

EDITING THE TEXT IN THE MODERN AGE

The invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century eliminated the need for copying manuscripts in monasteries. The main issue in the transmission of the text of Scripture now became the problem of editing together all of the copies that had been made in the previous thousand years. Textual critics now began comparing manuscripts and noticing discrepancies. One of the earliest scholars to take on this task was Erasmus, who compiled a Greek text of the New Testament from the manuscripts available to him; this text later became the foundation for the *Textus Receptus*, the Greek edition from which the King James Version was translated.

As time passed, more and more old manuscripts were uncovered. The nineteenth century produced a large number of new manuscript finds, including the fourth-century *Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Vaticanus*. Textual scholars now began to take seriously the question of how to derive something close to the original text from the multiplicity of manuscripts available. Scholars such as B.F. Westcott and F.H.A. Hort devised principles that enabled them to identify copyists' errors, and thus identify correct readings as well. Their work, which has been widely accepted, became the foundation for eclectic texts that bring together the best available evidence from thousands of manuscripts; these eclectic texts then became the foundation for modern translations such as the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, and the English Standard Version.

The discrepancies that remained were almost all so minor as to be negligible. The few that deserve notice, including two extended passages - Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11 - and a clear monastic insertion (I John 5:7) do not in any way raise questions about the fundamental teachings of Scripture.

THE RELIABILITY OF THE TEXT OF SCRIPTURE

The bottom line, then, is that the Bible we have may be accepted as the Word of God as delivered to His people with a great degree of confidence. The books themselves were readily recognized by the Church without significant controversy, the texts were transmitted faithfully with minor discrepancies, most of which may be easily sorted out, and even the discrepancies that appear to be of some significance do not in any way impact the content of God's Word and what it communicates to His Church. For instance, even if John 8 is original, one cannot conclude from it that adultery should be ignored by those who are truly loving, nor would Mark 16:18 be appropriately used to justify snake-handling cults. Thus critics who argue that the text of our Bible

today is not reliable, but is instead a fabrication of the Church to advance its own agenda, have no historical basis on which to stand. God has given us the Word He wants us to have, and we may submit to its teachings and apply them to our lives with confidence.

HERMENEUTICS IX

The Problem of Bible Translation

The issue of Bible translation also forms a piece of the picture of hermeneutics, simply because the language we speak is not the language in which the Bible was written. Since most of us are not fluent in the original languages of Scripture, we are dependent on the work of translators to mediate the sense of Scripture for us. As a result, those who would rightly interpret the Bible need to understand something of the nature of the translation process.

EARLY BIBLE TRANSLATION

The earliest Bible translation of which we have knowledge is the Septuagint, which was a translation of the books of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek done in Alexandria by a group of Jewish rabbis several hundred years before the time of Christ. As we've already seen, this translation played an important role in the Early Church because it was the version of the Bible most frequently used by the writers of the New Testament when they quoted passages from the Old Testament. In the three centuries following the writing of the New Testament, some translations were produced into languages such as Syriac and Latin, but these had limited impact on the history of the Church or on the transmission of Scripture.

THE LATIN VULGATE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The first really significant translation of the entire Bible was the Latin Vulgate, produced by Jerome near the end of the fourth century. The purpose of the Vulgate was to get the Bible into the language spoken by the people of the day. In the West, that language was Latin. Jerome's translation had an impact beyond what he could have imagined, and in fact beyond what he would likely have approved. The Vulgate, over time, became the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. This decision had a number of consequences. First of all, it cut the Church off from the original languages of Scripture. Throughout the Middle Ages, only scholars in the West knew Greek (few priests would have had any exposure to the language), and no one in the West apart from a few Jewish rabbis knew Hebrew. The result was that, despite the fact that the Vulgate was a good translation in general, its theological peculiarities significantly influenced the doctrine of the Church (the most obvious of these being Jerome's tendency to translate the Greek word for *repentance* as *do penance*).

The second consequence is that the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages became the enemy of Bible translation. In the early fifteenth century, John Wycliffe's body was disinterred (over 40 years after his death), and the bones were burned to ashes and thrown in the river. A century later, William Tyndale was burned at the stake in Belgium for translating the Bible into English. The basic argument of the Catholic Church against Bible translation was that allowing people to read the Bible in their own language was dangerous: the common people were too ignorant to understand the Bible rightly on their own, so they would fall prey to all kinds of heresies unless the Church protected them (the Church cited the examples of the Waldensians and Lollards, both of whom circulated the Scriptures in the vernacular, to justify their fears). When the Catholic Church in Spain produced a three-column Bible for scholars called the Complutensian Polyglot in the late fifteenth century, the languages were Hebrew, Greek, and Latin - no Spanish.

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION AND THE USE OF THE VERNACULAR

One of the great foundational principles of the Protestant Reformation was *sola Scriptura* - the idea that the Bible alone was our authority for faith and practice. A corollary to this principle was the concept that the Holy Spirit within each child of God gave him the ability to understand and apply the Bible for himself. As a result, Bible translation became a vitally important part of the Protestant Reformation. From the French translation of Jacques Lefevre d'Etapes to the German translation of Martin Luther to the multiple sixteenth-century English translations by men such as Tyndale and Miles Coverdale to the influential King James Version of 1611, the Reformation produced Bibles in the language of the people that helped spread the teachings of the Protestant churches. Note that another consequence of the emphasis on people reading the Bible for themselves was a renewed focus on widespread education. The Puritans in New England, for instance, formed schools in every village so children could learn to read so they could read the Bible for themselves so they could maintain the Holy Commonwealth.

The Catholic Church was slow to catch on to the importance of putting the Bible in the vernacular. As noted above, Bible translators were initially persecuted, some to the point of death. Later, Protestant Bible translations were placed on the Index of Forbidden Books by the Council of Trent. Eventually, the Catholic Church began to produce its own Bible translations (the Rheims-Douai English translation was completed in 1610), though these were of inferior quality because they were based on the Vulgate rather than on the original languages, and thus were second-level translations that perpetuated the errors of the foundation on which they were based. In fact, the Catholic Church did not produce an English translation based on the original languages until the publication of the Jerusalem Bible in 1966, following the liberalizing policies of Vatican II.

BIBLE TRANSLATION AND MISSIONS

Bible translation has also played a major role in the spreading of the Gospel throughout the world. Early in the age of modern missions, men such as William Carey understood the need to get the Bible into the language of the people to whom the Gospel is being preached. Missionaries over the last two centuries have thus emphasized the need for Bible translation, with groups such as Wycliffe Bible Translators devoting their entire efforts to laying the groundwork for Gospel preaching by translating the Bible into the languages of unreached people groups. The translations produced on the mission field have become increasingly sophisticated over the years and have played a major role in spreading Christianity in the non-Western world.

THE MULTIPLICATION OF TRANSLATIONS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A chart on English translations of the Bible in my *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History* lists 47 significant translations of the Bible into English between the time of Wycliffe in the late fourteenth century and the completion of the book in 2005. Of those forty-seven, thirty-three (70%) appeared after 1900. We thus face a problem that virtually no one in the Church has faced in previous ages - such a multiplicity of Bible translations that confusion is virtually unavoidable. Given the sheer number of available translations, we must be equipped with principles that will help us to sort out differences and use Bible translations to help us rather than to undermine our confidence in ever really knowing what God is saying to us.

APPROACHES TO BIBLE TRANSLATION

In dealing with the great variety of Bible translations available in English, one should first note the two major approaches to Bible translation practiced by those who produced these Bibles. The two approaches are described as *formal equivalence* and *dynamic equivalence*. The first considers the word as the primary unit of thought and seeks to produce a translation that conveys the words of the original languages of the Bible most accurately into the words of the receptor language. Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, considers the sentence the basic unit of thought and seeks to convey the meaning of the sentences of the original most effectively into the receptor language, even though doing so might require differences in wording, verb tenses, or word order. Though some translations lean in the direction of one or the other of these approaches, almost any translation will make some use of both ideas. What we thus find available to us today is not a list of Bible translations in English that fit into the two given categories, but a continuum between one pole and the other along which different translations may be arranged. Pure formal equivalence would produce an interlinear Bible - one that gives the English word for each Hebrew or Greek word in the original, but pays no attention to grammar or readable English word order. These can be useful for study, but one would never want to read one. At the other extreme are the loosest of paraphrases, such as *The Message*, which try to convey basic ideas without paying any attention to the original words at all. Along the continuum one would find, in order from proximity to formal equivalence to favoring principles of dynamic equivalence, the New American Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, the King James Version (close to the middle of the continuum), the New International Version, the Good News Version, and the New Living Translation.

EVALUATING BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

When evaluating Bible translations, the translation principles followed will obviously make a difference when using the version for reading or study. Formal equivalence clearly makes the Bible more useful for study purposes. The New American Standard Bible allows the reader to discern the verb tenses of the original easily from the English translation, while its notorious woodenness makes it difficult for public reading (a problem that the English Standard Version sought to address). Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, produces a Bible that communicates the truth of Scripture in a much more intelligible fashion than is the case with formal equivalence. Translations done for the mission field, for example, almost always favor dynamic equivalence. One of the main reasons for this is that the culture of the receptor language is so different from that of the Bible that some terms and ideas simply do not transfer in any useful form (see Don Richardson's *Peace Child* for an example of this). Thus different approaches to Bible translation have value depending on that for which they are being used.

In our modern era, however, we also have to evaluate Bible translations on the basis of the theological commitments of those who do the work of translating. The growth of liberalism has led to the production of several Bible translations that do not grow out of any sense of the authority of the text being translated. The result is problems varying from alternative translations that undermine the theology of orthodox Christianity (the infamous rendering of Isaiah 7:14 in the Revised Standard Version) to the use of conjectural emendations to the Old Testament text that lack any documentary foundation. Bibles with questionable theological foundations include the Revised Standard Version, The Barclay New Testament, the New English Bible, the Reader's Digest Bible, and such clearly

heretical translations as Hugh Schonfield's Authentic New Testament and the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, put out by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

For those who lack knowledge of the original languages, a good evangelical Bible translation will allow you to gain access to God's Word with confidence. Technical differences can be sorted out with the use of a good Bible commentary, which will address translation issues if the passage in question contains any. We should never, therefore, view Bible translations as a barrier between us and God's Word. Instead, a good translation mediates God's Word to us faithfully. Beware, however, of the speaker or writer who uses alleged translation problems as a way of undermining the authority of the text. If someone says, "The Bible in front of you says 'no,' but in the original Greek it means 'yes,'" you should be very suspicious indeed.

HERMENEUTICS X

The Authority of the Church

What role should the Church play in the interpretation of Scripture? This question is far more complex than simply considering the question raised by the Protestant Reformation about the authoritative role of tradition in the Catholic Church. It also involves the role of creeds and the role of elders as teachers and rulers in the congregation. The balance here can be a tricky one, but understanding the legitimate role of authority in the interpretation of Scripture is nonetheless vital.

WHY CREEDS?

Creeds originally arose in the Church for two reasons - as simple summaries of the truths believed by Christians (the Apostles' Creed was initially a baptismal formula) and as safeguards against heresy (the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds were specifically directed against false teaching prevalent at the time). Since people at that time took their word very seriously, Christians who professed their faith publically at baptism were doing something very solemn and binding, while those who affirmed belief in a creed were distinguishing themselves from the heretics of the day. Creeds thus marked a strong line of demarcation; those who affirmed them often opened themselves up to persecution by the state, while those who refused to affirm them later were subject to persecution by the Church. The second and third centuries include many examples of the former, while the fourth and fifth centuries illustrate the latter.

One thing we should immediately recognize about creeds, therefore, is that they have historical contexts. Every creed produced in the history of the Church is based on conditions of the day - largely the theological conflicts with which the church was struggling at the time. This is as true of the Nicene Creed, with its allusions to Gnosticism, Arianism, and Adoptionism, as it is of the 1689 London Baptist Confession with its section on the Sabbath designed to be a response to the Book of Sports issued by James I in 1618.

APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION AND TRADITION IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

The word *tradition* is not necessarily a negative term, though the use of the term by Catholics has often led to Protestants considering it that way. In II Thessalonians 2:15 and 3:6, we find the word used positively to describe the apostolic teachings that had been handed down by Paul to the churches. The Early Church also used the term this way, such as in the writings of Irenaeus, where the traditions passed down from the apostles became the conclusive argument against the heresies of Gnosticism.

In this context, the evolution of the concept of Apostolic Succession becomes crucial. Irenaeus argued that the leaders of the Church were faithfully passing on the teachings of Jesus because, for instance, Jesus had spoken the truth to John, who had spoken it to Polycarp, who had spoken it to Irenaeus. Thus the missionary to Gaul could assure his readers that he spoke the truth, not human inventions. This was the original use of the concept of Apostolic Succession - that the leaders of the Church had faithfully preserved the teachings of the apostles as communicated to them by Christ.

Over time, however, the idea changed. Rather than arguing that the leaders of the Church were the custodians of the *teachings* of the apostles, the Church eventually argued that their leaders possessed the *authority* of the apostles. While initially the idea was to provide a safeguard against heresy, eventually what happened was that Apostolic Succession became the foundation for introducing novel teachings of which Scripture knew nothing. Thus, over time, the writings of the Church Fathers, the dictates of Church councils, the proclamations of popes, and the strictures of canon law came to be seen as holding equal authority with Scripture. After all, if the apostles were the source of divine revelation and the Church leaders bore the same authority as the apostles, why should their decisions not carry the same weight? Thus, through the Middle Ages and beyond, the Catholic Church arrogated to itself the authority to promulgate all sorts of unbiblical traditions. It was against this view of tradition that the Protestants protested.

SOLA SCRIPTURA AND THE ROLE OF CREEDS IN PROTESTANTISM

Protestants, of course, insisted that the conscience of the individual Christian, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, was fully capable of understanding the Scriptures apart from the authority of the Church because the Scriptures were perspicuous rather than being open only to those in positions of authority. This belief was at the foundation of Luther's famous "Here I stand" affirmation at the Diet of Worms, for instance. This stance, however, did not simplify the issue of right biblical interpretation, nor did it eliminate the need for creeds.

The first problem raised by the Protestant approach to biblical interpretation is that it destroyed the unity of the Church. While the leaders of the Reformation rightly argued that unity based on the teachings of men had no value, they were unable to avoid the divisive consequences of *sola Scriptura*. Not only did Protestants divide from Catholics over the matter of the interpretation of Scripture, but Protestants also were unable to agree among themselves. Lutheran and Reformed, Calvinist and Arminian, Anglican, Baptist, and Methodist divided over differing interpretations of Scripture. Worst of all, of course, is that for a period of 150 years, these divisions often led to war because of the involvement of state churches. While these religious wars were usually between Catholics and Protestants, different branches of Protestantism also managed on occasion to persecute one another (see the Anglican treatment of the Puritans and the Scottish Covenanters, for example). The damage to the Church's testimony caused by this lack of unity continues to be evident today.

Secondly, if the Protestants were such avid defenders of the authority of Scripture alone, why did they write creeds? The creeds of the Protestant churches fulfilled a number of functions. First of all, creeds were written to argue for the essential orthodoxy of Protestant teaching. Whether dealing with the Augsburg Confession or the exposition of the Apostles' Creed that eventually became Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the doctrinal statements of the early Protestants were intended to prove that they were not heretics, but instead stood within the realm of the long-accepted teachings of Christianity.

The next reason why creeds were deemed necessary was to ward off false teaching. Beginning with the eighteenth century, Protestant churches increasingly found themselves being assaulted by liberal criticism from within the ranks of professing Christians. In order to protect themselves against such illegitimate interpretations of Scripture, creeds were used as a measure of

the orthodoxy of those seeking ordination in the churches. A good illustration of this problem occurred in the Church of England in the late eighteenth century. In 1772, a group of ministers led by Theophilus Lindsey petitioned Parliament to allow men to be ordained to the Anglican priesthood upon affirmation of the Scriptures rather than the Thirty-Nine Articles. Though such a request sounds very pious - after all, our loyalty is to the Word of God rather than to documents produced by mere men - the fact is that Lindsey and the others wanted to affirm the Bible rather than the creed because they denied what the creed said about the Bible's teachings. They wanted to be free to interpret the Bible in their own way. When Parliament refused, Lindsey left the Church of England and formed an independent Unitarian congregation in London. A few years later, Parliament dropped the doctrinal requirement, and the Church of England was soon firmly in the hands of Unitarians. Creeds thus do play an important role in defining the common understanding of Scripture under which the church operates.

CREEDAL VERSUS NON-CREEDAL CHURCHES

Among Protestants, however, some churches have taken a stand in opposition to creeds because they want to preserve the Bible as the sole authority rather than any humanly-devised document, no matter how orthodox. While Anglicans, Lutherans, and Reformed churches of all sorts are openly creedal in defining their understandings of Scripture, Methodist and Baptist churches, among others, have tended to shy away from creedal definitions. Neither approach has had a very good track record in preserving the church from heresy and promoting biblical Christianity. The tendency among creedal churches - as recent general assemblies of the Episcopal Church and the PCUSA have illustrated in painful ways - has been either to revise the creed when it is seen to be out of step with modern society or to ignore the creed and refuse to enforce its clear teachings. Alternatively, the creed has become in some stricter Protestant circles a source of legalistic nit-picking that winds up placing the creed above the Scriptures, so that the first question asked about some controversial idea is, "Is it consistent with the Confession?" rather than, "Is it biblical?" Thus we must conclude that a creed is of value in preserving the truth of the Bible only if it is rightly used - not ignored when the societal environment changes, nor placed above Scripture itself (in practice if not in profession), but as the commonly-accepted expression of what we as a people believe the Scriptures to teach.

THE ROLE OF ELDERS AS INTERPRETERS OF SCRIPTURE

In the Bible, elders are given the responsibility of teaching the Word of God to God's people. What authority accompanies this role? Certainly a measure of submission and obedience is required (Hebrews 13:17), but abuse of authority may also become a real problem (I Peter 5:3). The main point here is that those chosen as elders are to be faithful teachers of the Word, and thus the congregation should listen to them. This does not, however, eliminate the need for people to study the Word for themselves and draw their own conclusions. After all, if the Bereans checked up on the teachings of the Apostle Paul (Acts 17:11), certainly we should do the same with what we hear from our pastors.

Consequently, we must take the church's interpretation of Scripture seriously. At the Diet of Worms, John Eck said to Luther, "Your plea to be heard from Scripture is the one always made by heretics. You do nothing but renew the errors of Wycliffe and Huss. How will the Jews, how

will the Turks, exult to hear Christians discussing whether they have been wrong all these years! Martin, how can you assume that you are the only one to understand the sense of Scripture? Would you put your judgment above that of so many famous men and claim that you know more than they all? You have no right to call into question the most holy orthodox faith, instituted by Christ the perfect lawgiver, proclaimed throughout the world by the apostles, sealed by the red blood of the martyrs, confirmed by the sacred councils, defined by the Church in which all our fathers believed until death and gave to us as an inheritance, and which now we are forbidden by the pope and the emperor to discuss lest there be no end of debate.” To an extent Eck had a point - we should be very careful about going against the understanding of the faith held by Christians throughout the centuries. On the other hand, Luther had a point as well: “Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.”

HERMENEUTICS XI

Contemporary Cultural Contexts

In Lesson 5, we looked at cultural context as an aid in interpreting Scripture. The basic idea before us was that understanding the text requires knowledge of the environment in which the writers and readers of the books of Scripture lived. But what about our own environment? To what extent does that influence our understanding of the Scriptures, and is this good or bad?

THE IMPACT OF CULTURE ON CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY

Start by discussing with the class the ways in which the culture in which we live influences our practice of Christianity. These would include things like the buildings in which we meet, the clothing we wear, and the music we use to worship God. Remind the class that these secondary characteristics of Christian practice differ markedly in time and place, not just in churches overseas, but even in different churches in our own country. These differences influence the way we read the Bible, and the more we are aware of the effects of our own culture on our understanding of Scripture, the more we will be able to separate the central from the peripheral and the essential from the negotiable - in other words, be able to tell the difference between interpretation and application. This is vitally important because of the tendency of these characteristics of cultural Christianity to create divisions among the people of God.

CULTURAL CONTEXT AND TRANSLATION

We also saw two weeks ago that contemporary culture affects the work of Bible translation. Whether we consider the use of idioms and note the differences between modern-language translations and the KJV, or whether we consider the problems faced by missionaries doing Bible translation into the languages of primitive cultures where many of the ideas and images used in the Bible are completely unknown, the fact of the matter is that the culture of the receptor language influences the work of Bible translation. We may not be Bible translators, but we certainly can be aware of how the language in our English Bibles is a reflection of our own culture.

CULTURAL CONTEXT AND THE QUESTIONS WE ASK

Consider at this point the many issues that we face in our modern world that we bring to the Scriptures for guidance, and that never would have been contemplated by the original authors of the books of the Bible. Our culture affects the questions we ask, and these questions mean that we bring to the Scriptures a certain set of expectations. These expectations in turn influence how we interpret what we find in the teachings of the Bible. Several examples would be helpful at this point.

First, consider the moral questions we face that were never considered by our ancestors, or by the authors of Scripture. Abortion may have existed in Bible times, but certainly not on the scale that plagues our world today. But when we turn to the Bible for answers on abortion, we find that the issue is never mentioned in the Scriptures. Sometimes our desire to use the Bible to defend human life leads to the misuse of the text (e.g., the common misapplication of Jeremiah 1:5 to the abortion question; you cannot use the verse to argue the humanity of the unborn child when it clearly says that God knew Jeremiah *before* he was conceived). At other times, the relevance of certain

passages may later become apparent, though it may not have been obvious to the translators (see, for instance, Exodus 21:22-25, where the original NASB, published in 1968 before *Roe v. Wade*, translated the issue as involving a miscarriage, which inadvertently supported a pro-abortion understanding of the value of the life of the baby in the womb; a later edition corrected the problem).

And what of the questions that arise in connection with advanced biotechnology - genetic engineering, euthanasia, test-tube babies, surrogate motherhood, cloning - both of animals and man? These are issues that the authors of Scripture never envisioned, and obviously the Bible does not address them directly. Yet we seek answers to these questions. We cannot simply allow them to pass by without biblical input, shrugging our shoulders and admitting that the Bible has nothing to say about these subjects, thereby abdicating the field to the scientists. Yet, on the other hand, we may not seek biblical connections where none exist - suggesting that Hagar and Mary were surrogate mothers, for instance. What we must do in connection with such questions is seek biblical principles that are applicable to the issues and strive to apply them with godly wisdom. Certainly biblical teaching on the sanctity of life, the uniqueness of man, the sanctity of marriage, and the sovereignty of God over life and death are relevant to these controversial questions posed by a society that tends to ask whether something *can* be done without thinking first to ask whether it *should* be done.

Political questions also arise in this fashion. The Bible never mentions capitalism, socialism, or communism, nor does it mention democracy. Its authors could never have envisioned the idea of the separation of church and state. Yet we come to the Bible asking questions about these things. Again, the principles of Scripture concerning the purpose of human government, how a just government ought to behave, and the need to consider the sinfulness of man will enter into our evaluation of such matters.

Beyond the question of morality, we also are led by our contemporary environment to ask questions dealing with the realm of science. Science as we know it today was unknown in the world of the Bible. No one thought of understanding the world through the kind of empirical approach that is assumed today to be correct. The possibility of understanding the world apart from God (or the gods) was incomprehensible to the ancients. They therefore did not ask the kinds of questions we tend to ask, yet it is very easy for us to come to the Bible with questions that the authors of the text never considered, let alone attempted to answer. The most obvious area in which this problem occurs is the whole question of Creation. To expect scientific answers from the Bible on this subject is simply unrealistic; the Bible was not written to answer such questions, and we should not expect it to do so, at least not in the terms in which we tend to phrase our questions. The same is true with regard to the Flood. Note that the lack of scientific explanations in the sense in which we would like to see them does not mean the Bible should be cast aside as written in poetic language that tells us nothing of scientific value at all, nor, worse yet, that it is written in the context of a primitive worldview that is simply wrong, so that God, through the writers, accommodated the language of the Bible to ideas about the world that are patently false. For example, we should not expect to find in Scripture hints that the earth is round and not flat (Isaiah 40:22), or, worse yet, support geocentrism through biblical affirmations that the earth does not move (Psalm 93:1). What we do find in Scripture is the teaching that the universe was directly created by the spoken word of God Himself, that He is sovereign over its operations, that man was a unique creation of God, made in His image, that Adam and Eve were historical figures, that the Fall of Man was an actual event in history, and that God judged the entire human race with a great deluge.

Note also that the so-called “worship wars” are in a sense hermeneutical questions related to the application of the Bible to contemporary culture. We may be certain that the apostle Paul never had to answer questions about the use of contemporary music in the house-churches of the cities to which he traveled. Again, we are asking questions that the Bible does not answer because they were not envisioned by the authors, whose cultural environments excluded anything close to these experiences.

CULTURAL CONTEXT AND THE ANSWERS WE FIND

What, then, is the key to the proper reading of Scripture in the light of our cultural experience and the questions it raises? Several points should be kept in mind. The first is what we already saw above, namely that biblical principle should be the foundation for dealing with such issues. We should not expect, nor should we accept, proof texts, since by definition the Bible contains no specific references to the questions our modern culture tends to ask. We should never sacrifice thereby the sufficiency of Scripture, of course. The Bible does give us all we need for life and godliness (II Peter 1:3), so in one sense there is no question that we can ask about which the Bible provides no guidance. This guidance, however, comes from principles.

Secondly, biblical principles must be applied with humility. Since the Bible does not provide direct answers, we must recognize the extent to which our application of biblical principle to the controversial matters before us is influenced by our own thinking on the subject in question. How else could sincere Christians come up with radically different, and often contradictory, answers on these matters? The basic teachings of the Bible must stand, and we can never ignore them when approaching contemporary questions, yet we must seek God’s help in faithfully applying those basic teachings to the world in which we live. We may thus make positive declarations on questions that directly impinge on matters of biblical principle, such as abortion and homosexuality, and remain somewhat flexible in our conclusions concerning the details of the Creation and the Flood (though not their reality).

Thirdly, we may never permit cultural concerns to override the teachings of the Bible. Too often in churches today we find those who are willing to dismiss the clear teachings of Scripture because our culture is so different from that of Bible times, so what the writers of Scripture wrote may be assumed to be irrelevant. Feminists and gay rights activists are easy targets in this regard, but the fact remains that they use their own understanding of the principles of Scripture (love, tolerance, etc.) to contradict the specific teachings of Scripture (male headship in home and church, the fact that homosexuality is an abomination, etc.). Similarly, scientists who are Christians have been altogether too willing to let “the assured conclusions of science” override the clear teachings of the Bible, failing to recognize the role of hermeneutics in their own understanding of the natural world (scientists, too, are engaged in the work of interpretation, and these interpretations are influenced by their own presuppositions, which are often naturalistic, and thus contrary to Scripture).

Finally, we must recognize that our cultural applications of Scripture are related to the context in which we live, and thus do not carry with them the authority of universal truth. Too often we are eager to impose on those of different cultures the applications of biblical principle that we have made to our own. This is legalistic, and therefore harmful, even if our applications have been faithful ones. We must, again, be humble in communicating the rightness of our own applications

of Scripture, though we must stand firm on the principles that the Bible gives for the use of all people in all times and all places.

HERMENEUTICS XII

Personal Application - The Heart of the Reader and the Role of the Spirit

The Bible is more than a reference book in which one looks up truth in order to make decisions; it is the living Word of God. As such, it plays a role in the life of the Christian that is intensely personal. How, then, as individuals, ought we to approach the interpretation of Scripture and its application to our lives? Such a question is of vital importance if the Word of God is to play the central role God intends it to play for His children.

THE HEART OF THE INTERPRETER

Because the Bible is God's book, the condition of one's heart makes a difference in the work of interpretation. One who does not have the Holy Spirit is in no position to discern spiritual truth (I Corinthians 2:14-16) and is in fact hostile to God (Romans 8:7). Consequently, the condition of the heart matters a great deal as one seeks to interpret Scripture. Initially, of course, one must be a child of God. Unbelievers are able to understand the words of the Bible and often offer useful insights in matters of grammatical and historical context, but will never really *get it*. As long as they approach the Bible as nothing more than a human book, its teachings will never get beyond their heads and reach their hearts. They will be like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, who knew the Scriptures but never got close to putting them into practice. They serve as good examples of those who seek truth in the Word while their hearts are far from God. But God only reveals His truth to those He has chosen (Luke 10:21-22).

Secondly, the godly interpreter is one who approaches Scripture with an attitude of submission and humility, like the psalmist in Psalm 119. He will want to know what God has to say to him rather than seeking confirmation for an already-formed conclusion. We often hear that "you can prove anything from the Bible," but this is only true when one approaches the text with preconceived ideas for which one is seeking justification. On the other hand, one who fears the Lord will be able to gain wisdom from His Word (Proverbs 1:7).

Thirdly, the godly interpreter will realize that the goal of the Scriptures is to sanctify the heart of the reader. God seeks to cultivate in His children the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). The purpose of reading the Bible is for God to make us holy, more like His Son day by day (John 17:17; Ephesians 5:26). This must be our purpose as well as we approach the Scriptures.

PITFALLS TO BE AVOIDED

In the late third century, a young man named Anthony, who lived in Egypt, went to church and heard the pastor preach on the story of the Rich Young Ruler. When he heard the speaker pronounce the words of Jesus, "Go, sell all you have, and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven," he understood those words as meant for him. He promptly went and sold his goods, leaving only a pittance to support his sister, and left to live in a cave in the wilderness, thus becoming the first Christian monk. Was Anthony of Thebes' action justified or not? While one should be cautious about judging the work of the Spirit in the heart of another believer, we may conclude that his decision involved bad hermeneutical practice in at least two ways. First of all, he took what was intended for a specific individual in the time of Christ and interpreted it in reference

to his own life. Christ was in fact speaking to the Rich Young Ruler, not to Anthony of Thebes. Anthony had no sound basis for applying Jesus' words to himself. Secondly, he, or at least the Church in the years following his action, was guilty of generalizing something intended to be specific. Jesus told the Rich Young Ruler what he needed to do to break down the barrier he had erected between himself and God, but other men have other barriers; not all need to become monks. So the first pitfall we need to avoid is the tendency to take instructions given in a specific context and apply them outside of that context.

As with commands, promises may be general or specific. Matthew 11:28-30 is a general invitation followed by a promise to all those who respond; many passages of Scripture follow this pattern. But Acts 18:9-10 was written specifically to the Apostle Paul, and may not be claimed by all missionaries entering hostile territory. Similarly, Philippians 4:13 does not guarantee victory in sports competitions, nor does Philippians 4:19 justify a prosperity gospel, but promises that those who give sacrificially of their substance will never want for the basic necessities of life.

Next, we must distinguish between the literal and the figurative. Problems here can show up in two ways. First of all, some have insisted on taking literally what was clearly intended to be figurative. One would hope that no one would take the injunctions of Matthew 5:29-30 literally; sadly, a few like the Church Father Origen have chosen to act on the literal meaning of Matthew 19:12 (he "made himself a eunuch for the sake of the kingdom of heaven"). On the other hand, that same Church Father, in his systematic theology *Hexapla*, argued that every text had three levels of meaning - the literal, ethical, and allegorical, corresponding to the body, soul, and spirit of man - and should be interpreted on all three levels by those who desired to be truly wise. The resulting tendency to assign figurative meanings to many passages of Scripture intended to be interpreted in their plain sense wreaked much havoc in the medieval Catholic Church and beyond.

Thirdly, we must distinguish between what the Bible records and what it approves. Gideon twice laid out a fleece to discern the will of God (Judges 6:36-40). Does this justify testing God through arbitrary signs, expecting providential answers to our very specific questions? Worse yet, Jephthah sacrificed his daughter (Judges 11:30-40) and Abraham almost sacrificed his son (Genesis 22), though the situations were very different ones; one would hope that no one would choose to follow the example of these godly men.

In general, the role of context can never be ignored in the personal interpretation and application of Scripture. The old joke about the man who decided to discern the will of God by closing his eyes, opening his Bible, and putting his finger on the page, leading to consecutive instructions from Matthew 27:5b, Luke 10:37b, and John 13:27b, shows the dangers of seeking advice from the Bible in a way that ignores the context of what one is reading.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION

Pietism was a needed corrective in the seventeenth-century German Lutheran church. The church of the day had become spiritually cold in its theological correctness, devoting most of its time to endless doctrinal disputes over trivia that demonstrated more of a desire to be right than to be holy. Men like Philip Jakob Spener, A.H. Francke, and Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf were greatly used by God to bring the church back to personal devotional exercises, applicatory and

evangelistic preaching, care for the poor and evangelism. But, like any corrective, Pietism tended to swing too far in the opposite direction, ultimately ignoring doctrine in an almost exclusive focus on Christian living. With regard to Scripture, the Pietists had a tendency to be more concerned with the question, “What does this verse mean to me?” than with the much more fundamental question, “What does this text mean?” Pietism, through the Methodist revival and the Second Great Awakening, had an enormous influence on American Christianity, so it should surprise us not at all to find that the same tendency is often present in American evangelicalism. Two points must be noted here.

The first is that all personal interpretation must be grounded in sound contextual interpretation. The text cannot possibly mean something to you that contradicts what it meant to the original readers, or what was intended by the author. The grammatical, historical, literary, cultural, and theological contexts of any text must control any attempt on our part to interpret the text today. If “what it means to me” conflicts with “what it means,” or with the clear teaching of Scripture elsewhere, “what it means to me” is clearly *wrong*, despite the fact that our subjective age doesn’t like to hear such judgments.

Secondly, interpretation must be distinguished from application. A given text has one meaning (though that meaning may be multiform, as noted in the case of some of the prophetic Scriptures), but may have many applications. Thus one who is prompted by God to respond to a particular text with a specific action may do so with confidence as long as his personal application does not contradict the general teaching of Scripture, but he may not then insist that all apply the text personally to their lives in precisely the same way. When God spoke to Samuel, He was not speaking to Eli (I Samuel 3); when Jesus spoke to Peter about his future, He was not speaking to John (John 21:18-22).

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN INTERPRETATION

I Corinthians 2:7-11 and Ephesians 1:17-18 clearly teach that the Holy Spirit is the One who enlightens God’s people to enable them to comprehend His truth. The Spirit also applies the Word He has inspired to the lives of those who read it (II Timothy 3:16-17). Note, however, that in these passages, the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit distinguishes believers from unbelievers, not one believer from another. In other words, without the Spirit, the truth of Scripture is unintelligible; with the Spirit, the truth of God’s Word is clear, but it is clear to all Christians. The Spirit therefore does not reveal secret meanings to some chosen individual or to a select few within the Church that He has concealed from others; apostles may have had that privilege of gaining insights that had been hidden from others throughout the ages, but they revealed them to God’s people in the Scriptures. Simply put, we must have the Holy Spirit in order to interpret the Bible rightly; we must not, however, expect sudden revelations from the Spirit that will give new meaning to Scripture that has been hidden from the Church in the past, and anyone who claims such insights (“the Holy Spirit told me this morning that this passage is telling us to . . .”) should be met with well-deserved skepticism.

The essential role of the Spirit in the proper interpretation of Scripture does mean, however, that prayer is an essential part of the hermeneutical process. We are dependent on God, not only for revealing His truth to us in written form, but also for giving us ears to hear and eyes to see and understand (Matthew 13:11-17; Revelation 2:7). We should acknowledge that dependence

constantly, lest we approach the Word of God through eyes and ears that differ little from those of the unbelieving world around us.