

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS: PART I

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I

HERMENEUTICS (from the Greek *hermēneuō*, to interpret) is the science of interpretation. It may be applied to both sacred and secular literature, so that its study in application to Holy Scripture is further defined as Biblical Hermeneutics or Hermeneutica Sacra.

The purpose of Biblical Hermeneutics is to provide rules and principles for the correct understanding of Scripture. It serves as an aid in answering such questions as: Is Genesis 1-3 history in the sense in which we normally understand the term? To what extent may we see Christological significance in the tabernacle? Is the Song of Songs just a love poem or an allegory of Christ and His Church? Who is the beast with the number 666? Is there any deeper significance in the two pennies given by the Good Samaritan to the innkeeper?

The need of such rules and principles is paramount for several reasons. First, because to so many teachers of Holy Scripture it has never occurred that there is any place for such a study. 'Every man his own interpreter' has been taken to excess and the Bible has suffered too much and too long at the hands of those to whom any kind of check is unknown.

Second, to prevent further division in the Christian Church. One of the understandable results of the Reformation with its emphasis on private judgment has been the coming into being of an increasing number of denominations and sects. But if we can at least agree on some rules and principles of interpretation we are one step nearer to agreeing on the interpretation itself.

Third, and allied to this last reason, such study will help to prevent the existence of further heretical sects and the increase of existing sects; or at least to show more clearly why existing sects are heretical. For the majority do, or say they do, accept the authority of the Word of God. So it must therefore be their use and interpretation of the Bible which constitutes their particular heresy. The words which Shakespeare put into the mouth of Bassanio have some point here: 'In religion what damned error but some sober brow will bless it and approve it with a text hiding the grossness with fair adornment!' The Bible can be used to support the most flagrant heresy simply by faulty hermeneutics. The tragic tenet of the Jehovah's Witnesses concerning blood transfusion, based on Leviticus 17: 12, is a glaring example of this.

Fourth, such principles are necessary because of the sinful and biased mind of the interpreter, for so often it is more convenient and less costly in Christian living to interpret Scripture in one way rather than another. An honest adherence to hermeneutical checks would help to remedy this. Moreover, tradition has such a powerful influence on our thought that we often fail to investigate the meaning of the Word of God for ourselves. Indeed, we approach Scripture with certain predispositions and preconceptions which in themselves may be untrue and unbiblical and consequently our minds may well be closed to alternative interpretations. The tradition may be right, but at least let us make sure that such traditional interpretations have been thought out firsthand and checked by sound hermeneutical rules. Truth matters more than loyalty to a local group. Scripture must never subserve a dogmatic system, and neither must the interpretations of Scofield, Thomson or any other pundit be put on the same level of authority as the Bible itself. Commentaries written right alongside the text of Scripture can be an insidious snare. 'Scofield says so' does not necessarily finish any discussion on the meaning of a verse. Luther has said, 'The first business of an interpreter is to let the biblical author say what he does say instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.' And though we may not easily and lightly disregard the thought of the Church throughout the centuries (the *communis opinio*), the Church must never dominate in matters of interpretation.

Lastly, and not of least importance, hermeneutics is necessary because of its bearing on the conservative-liberal debate. So often liberals, in dismissing

the conservative evangelical view of Scripture and authority, have really dismissed a certain interpretation of the word 'authority' (and an obscure one at that). The baby of authority has been thrown out with the dirty bath water of a false interpretation. Since both had been so closely allied (to some, alas, the bath water is the baby) it is understandable that one was lost with the other. We shall not begin to make ground on the question of authority until we have divorced it from certain obscurantist interpretations which have little to do with a thoroughgoing hermeneutic. Let us beware of unscriptural stumblingblocks.

In this kind of study we have to allow a certain amount of freedom. It is hardly possible this side of heaven (and in heaven we won't need them anyway) to get a complete set of rules by which the correct meaning is arrived at infallibly. We must not lean over so far from the completely subjectivist position that we fall over backwards into the Roman camp. We must aim at eliminating as much of the subjective as possible on the one hand, so ensuring that exegesis does not become eisegesis. (For example, how much so-called exposition of the tabernacle is really a flight of the religious imagination? The most famous magician would be hard put to produce more hitherto unseen pigeons and rabbits from his hat than many Bible teachers get from the Word. The Bible is not a magician's top hat.) Yet, on the other hand, we must allow for the freedom of the Holy Spirit and not cramp Him by a water-tight system. And sometimes, many times, we must in all honesty confess our ignorance! The Talmudic rule, 'Teach thy tongue to say, "I do not know,"' should constantly be observed. It is salutary to remember that there have been at least thirty interpretations of 1 Corinthians 15: 29!

II

It is important and necessary to point out two differences which, by being confused or identified, have led to much wrong thinking. First, there is the difference between *interpretation* and *authority*. While a right hermeneutic must be based on a correct doctrine of authority, such a belief does not bind us to any one particular interpretation. Often in the past, and the present, the Church has fought unnecessary battles because it felt bound to one particular interpretation of a passage, especially if the passage had something to do with science. It was a long time before the Church realized that a heliocentric view of the universe was not in opposition to Scripture (see, e.g., Gn. 1: 16) and that they could while accepting this 'new' view still keep their view of Scripture. So it must be understood that authority and inspiration are not hermeneutical concepts. A biblical view of authority accepts the Bible as the sole and final standard with regard to faith and conduct. But the authority still needs to be interpreted. There is no imposition of a literalistic understanding of Scripture on the person who lives and thinks under the authority of the Word of God. It is a tragedy that because a person may have a different interpretation from another he is thought by that other to have changed the seat of his authority. Shades of Galileo!

The second distinction is that between *interpretation* and *application*. The meaning of any passage is one, even though it may have a number of levels of meaning as in prophecy, and we must do all we can to find this meaning; but the application may be many. The Bible is a book which teaches by principle as well as by precept. The principle may be plainly stated or it may have to be abstracted from an historical situation. It does not and could not offer a blue print for every possible situation, e.g. may I swim at camp on a Sunday afternoon? (though it is conceivable that some may get help from Elisha and the axe-head!). It is a great temptation to force the meaning of a passage because of a desired application, but this must be firmly resisted. For example, Bernard Ramm has well pointed out that the 'must' in John 4: 2 ('Jesus must needs go through Samaria') is a geographical must and ought not to be applied in the sense of evangelistic opportunity. And just as the meaning of a text or passage must not be forced because it makes a good preaching point, so it must not be forced because it brings a blessing. The blessing does not justify the interpretation (though God often allows us to be blessed by such means because of our immaturity. If we didn't get the blessing this way we might

not get it at all!). Correct interpretation must always precede application. This rule particularly applies in guidance. A missionary candidate, in trying to find guidance as to which Bible College she should attend, Lebanon or Glasgow, should not necessarily feel that Lebanon is the right one simply because she may read in 1 Kings 5 that Solomon fetched his cedars from Lebanon. (This particular case happens to be true.) This is hardly the original meaning of the passage. And, at any rate, Glasgow was at a disadvantage since it is not mentioned in Scripture. Having a 'word from the Lord' is both justifiable and helpful *providing* the word is first put into its original context and the true meaning grasped. For example, a fellow should not break off his engagement because he suddenly has a 'word' from Jeremiah 16: 2 ('You shall not take a wife') though this, too, is known nearly to have happened. The perplexed enquirer should first try to discover if his circumstances are similar to those of Jeremiah's, that is, to put the verse into its context. (He should, incidentally, try to discover a few other things as well.) We must be careful not to distort the passage just because we cannot get guidance or a blessing from it as it stands.

Another subsidiary point which may be noted under this head is that it is the principle which must be sought in a particular historical situation before the passage is applied. That is to say, it is the present day equivalent of the holy kiss (2 Cor. 13: 12) which has behind it the same principle of action which must be applied. (J. B. Phillips interprets for us in his 'A handshake all round, please!') Likewise with the veil of 1 Corinthians 11: 2ff.: is the modern hat the symbol of subjection that the veil was when Paul wrote his letter?

III

The most basic of all hermeneutical rules is *interpret scripture by scripture*, and from it spring several corollaries. It is founded on the fact of the unity of the Bible. Though there are many human authors there is but one divine Author, the Holy Spirit of truth, and such an Author cannot and does not contradict Himself. God is consistent. His truth may be expressed in a variety of ways but never in such a way as to run counter to itself. Moreover, while it is admitted that there is progression in revelation, such progression does not mean contradiction. So then, a first step in the interpretation of any passage is to discover what light is shed upon it by other parts of Scripture.

A word in parenthesis must be added here. It cannot be said that Scripture throws the *whole* light on every passage. If this were so the study of extra-biblical knowledge would become quite redundant. But it must be admitted that such knowledge often sheds great light upon the Word of God and for the specialist is indispensable. As Terry says, 'The professional interpreter of scripture needs more than a well balanced mind, discreet sense and acuteness of intellect. He needs stores of information in the broad and varied fields of history, science and philosophy.' And he goes on to list geography, history, chronology, antiquities, politics, natural science, philosophy and comparative philology!

It will readily be seen that a knowledge of extra-biblical knowledge of Babylonian mythology throws light on Rahab in Isaiah 51: 9; that a knowledge of Corinthian customs throws light on Paul's teaching on the veil in 1 Corinthians 11; that Jewish chronology helps the understanding of the phrase 'three days and three nights' (Mt. 12: 40); and so on. But it must be added that extra-biblical information in no way dictates the meaning of a passage. It serves only as a handmaid. In the realm of science especially, it may warn us of interpretations of passages which are ambiguous but it may never force us into an interpretation which is contradictory to other parts of Scripture. Before this parenthesis on the recognized limitation of this first rule is closed it must be said that the Bible is sufficiently self-interpreting for 'the man in the street'. After all, it is addressed to him primarily.

IV

This basic principle of the self-interpreting nature of Scripture, sometimes known as the analogy of faith, has a number of corollaries.

(i) *Interpret Scripture according to the purpose of Scripture.* a. *The whole*

of Scripture. The Bible confesses to a limited purpose. It does not profess to be an 'Enquire within on Everything', for the wisdom it offers to its readers is a saving wisdom, that is, a knowledge which is able to make us wise unto salvation (2 Tim. 3: 15). So it is not meant to make us wise unto biology, geology, botany. The wisdom it provides is soteriological. Calvin says, 'If you would learn geology or any other recondite art, go elsewhere.' Of course, the faith does not come to us *in vacuo*. It is an historical religion and is worked out in an historical and cultural medium. So we must be wary of the heterodoxy which divorces the history from the truth as though an infallible truth can be mediated through a fallibly recorded history. But God has not chosen to inform us on scientific matters which have no bearing on man's salvation. This would be outside the purpose of His Word, for the Bible is the plan of God's redemption. It would be absurd, then, to expect a 'scientific' (as we understand this word in the twentieth century) account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis. This is not to say that the chapter is not true. But it is to say that the beginning of things is recorded within the self-imposed purpose of Holy Scripture.

b. *Each part of Scripture.* Within this one main purpose there are several subsidiary purposes for the various parts. Generally speaking, each part is written for different situations and circumstances and the particular purpose of a passage or book must first be ascertained before the full meaning will become clear. Thus, to grasp the purpose of James and Galatians prevents any belief in a contradiction between Paul and James. The purpose of each letter is different. The Apocalypse can hardly begin to be understood without realizing that its primary function is to encourage the persecuted people of God (cf. Rev. 13: 10, 14: 12), and such an understanding will prevent much grave mishandling of this great book. So first ask the question: Why did the author write this? what need was he trying to meet?

(ii) *Interpret by the context.* Contextual interpretation is a further obvious corollary of the first basic principle. It is a common rule, but just as commonly disregarded. Many of us, having been brought up on the *Daily Light* and the tear-off calendar (excellent things both, but not really the best means of studying Scripture), have become bitty in our appreciation of the Word. After all, it was for convenience of reference and not for better understanding that the division of the Bible into chapters and verses was first introduced. It has been said that the first step in interpretation is the ignoring of the chapters and verses. And failure to do so is one of the gravest of mistakes in hermeneutics. Further, the immediate context is generally more important than the less immediate. The Bible took more than a few weeks in the writing and words tend to change their meaning as time passes. Consequently, word studies must be done in a progressive framework. Perhaps a few examples of passages which are commonly misinterpreted will be in place:

Romans 8: 28. What is the 'good' to which everything works together for the called of God? It would hardly appear from the immediate context to be either a peaceful domestic situation or a new avenue of Christian service. Surely the 'good' is elaborated on and explained in the following two verses. It is the three verses read together which contain the unit of thought, not just verse 28. The 'good', then, is tied up with our pre-destination. God is working for good in all our circumstances in that He is conforming us to the image of Christ. Nothing less than this is our 'good'. Paul is writing of our final destiny. This is the 'purpose' of verse 28. And note that verse 29 begins with 'For', showing that the reason and explanation follows. This is a word too often ignored in the interpreting of Scripture. So then, the 'good' is eschatological and must not be reduced to mean that the trying and incomprehensible circumstances which we are presently going through will soon resolve themselves to our own advantage.

Matthew 18: 19, 20. 'Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them.' Generally, these verses are taken to mean that God will answer the prayers of the members of a small prayer meeting, so long as

they agree with each other. Now this is true, but the passage is not primarily concerned with that. The whole context, verses 15-20, is a paragraph on church discipline, and verses 19 and 20 must be understood in the light of this. The Lord is here giving authority (in disciplinary matters) to the local church. For authority is not to be invested in one person, but in the twos and threes who are gathered in the name of Christ, thus guaranteeing His presence. Thus whatever they bind or loose on earth will be endorsed in heaven. (John 20: 19-23 should be compared with this passage, for the same thing is said in a different way.)

1 Corinthians 3: 10-15. These verses are commonly taken to refer to one's sanctification, but it would appear from the context that they are primarily to do with ministerial responsibility. The wood, hay, stubble, gold, silver and precious stones refer to the quality of one's pastoral services.

Genesis 6: 3. 'My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh; yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years.' The first phrase is very frequently applied to evangelism and conversion. How often have they been heard at the close of an evangelistic address to make the appeal more compelling. But the context does not appear to be that of evangelism. The writer is speaking of the length of life of man. He will only live one hundred and twenty years for he is flesh, and as soon as the Spirit which gives life to the flesh is withdrawn ('strive' could quite possibly be read 'abide', as in RSV) the man ceases to live. (Cf. Gn. 2: 7.)

(iii) *The obscure must be interpreted by the clear.* Someone has rightly said, 'Let not that which is obscure rob you of that which is clear.' But in biblical exegesis there seems to be a natural tendency to start at the wrong place: to attempt to sort out the difficult passages and then go on to squeeze the easier into its shape. Such methods are often current in the realm of eschatology. For example, Revelation 20: 1-6 is made the starting point and all other second coming teaching 'edited' in the light of it. Again, a more correct understanding of the biblical doctrine of marriage is more likely to be arrived at by examining Ephesians 5 and 1 Timothy 4 before 1 Corinthians 7.

(iv) *Scripture must be understood in terms of its meaning or intended meaning to the original hearers (or readers).* This principle obtains in both a general and a particular way.

a. *General.* The Bible was written for ordinary people, not primarily for the specialist. The divine Author is no respecter of persons. He writes to be understood. Thus, the Bible is a 'popular' book because it is addressed to the 'populace'. So it uses popular and not specialist language. It will be seen that this has special bearing on the problem of the Bible and science.

b. *Particular.* The word of the Lord came at sundry times and in divers manners. That is to say, it came to a variety of situations and so in a variety of ways. The recipients in some respects vary, for the situations in which the recipients were placed vary. Now God's word is always a relevant word. He addresses Himself to the situation of the time. So then His word must be meaningful to those who first hear it. Our danger today is that we tend to impose a present-day meaning on the original word which would have meant little or nothing to those who first heard it.

An examination of the beatitudes may be relevant here, for sometimes they are understood as though they were first given at the Keswick Convention. The disciples were our Lord's audience on that occasion. Such men would be reasonably well versed in the Old Testament, so that the words and phrases which our Lord used would be understood in their Old Testament sense. Now there seems to be a particularly close link between the first part of Matthew 5 and certain passages in the latter part of Isaiah, especially chapters 60 and 61. The disciples were the righteous remnant of Israel to whom so many promises were addressed in Isaiah. These were the people who were awaiting the messianic order of things, the situation which is described in the Isaiah chapters. Into their midst came Jesus, who was Spirit-equipped (Lk. 3: 22; Is. 42: 1, 11: 2, 61: 1), well-pleased of the Father (Mt. 3: 17; Is. 42: 1), preaching the gospel of the kingdom (Mt. 4: 23; Is. 61: 1). Moreover, He had already confirmed the fulfilment of Isaiah 61: 1ff. by His reading in the synagogue (Lk. 4: 16ff.). So Jesus told them that the conditions promised in Isaiah would

now begin to be fulfilled. To the disciples the 'poor' would mean the 'poor' in Isaiah. (The 'poor' was a synonym for the remnant; the humble poor became distinguished as the line in which faithfulness to the Lord was maintained and true spiritual religion developed. Cf. Is. 11: 1 and 61: 1.) Those who 'mourn' are those who bewail the fact that God's righteousness is not manifest in the land. (Cf. Is. 60: 20, 61: 2b-3a.) The meek is a parallel term to the poor, and they shall inherit the earth or land. (Cf. Is. 60: 21.) The righteousness which is hungered and thirsted for would seem to have little to do with imputed righteousness. So the beatitudes are not primarily commands, but the gospel of the kingdom. This was good news: that with the coming of Messiah there would take place the great reversal. Because Jesus had come, the blessings of Isaiah would be fulfilled.