

Hermeneutics: the Art and Science of Biblical Interpretation

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Outline

- Definition of “hermeneutics”
- The need for hermeneutics
- Approaches to Biblical interpretation
- Interpreting normal communications
- Methods of hermeneutics

What is “Hermeneutics”?

- Hermeneutics is the *art* and *science* of Biblical interpretation.
 - It is a *science* because it has rules that can be classified into an orderly system.
 - It is an *art* because the rules cannot always be rigidly applied.

Why Do We Need It?

What if you wrote this email to a friend, and it was found 2,000 years later:

“Dude, that final floored me. Let’s go to Spanky’s and get hammered tonight.”

Suppose the future reader doesn’t understand:

- college culture, circa AD 2000
- our choice of words
- the English language!

Why Do We Need It?

- Our understanding of what we hear or read is usually automatic and unconscious.
- When we read Scripture, however, there are significant blocks to a correct understanding:
 - historical gap
 - cultural gap
 - linguistic gap
 - philosophical (world view) gap

Various Approaches to Interpretation

- *Letterism* – hidden meanings in low-level details of text.
- *Literal* – easily understood by the masses.
- *Allegorical* – the true meaning of Scripture is beyond the literal meaning.
- *Liberalism* – use of human reason to determine which parts of Scripture are true.
- *Neo-orthodoxy* – revelation from God occurs in reader's mind, not in the text.
- *Post-modernism* – text can be completely freed from its human authors.

Interpreting Normal Communication

- When you write or say something, do you have a specific meaning in mind?
- If you say something in a room with 10 people, and they all understand something different, whose meaning is correct?
- Do Biblical authors have a message for us?
- Do Biblical authors constrain themselves to our forms of communication in order to be understood?

Methods of Hermeneutics

- Historical-Cultural analysis
- Contextual analysis
- Lexical-Syntactical analysis
- Theological analysis
- Special literary forms

Historical-Cultural Analysis

- What were the general historical circumstances?
- What cultural norms add meaning to given actions?
- What was the spiritual disposition of the original audience?
- What was the author's purpose in writing?

Examples ...

- Jonah not wanting to preach at Ninevah
- Abraham's covenant (Gen 15:9-21)
- Hosea's marriage & redemption of a prostitute
- "... it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, ..." (Luke 1:3)

Contextual Analysis

- What are the major blocks of material and how do they fit together as a whole?
- How does the passage contribute to the author's flow of argument?
- Is the passage descriptive or prescriptive?
- What is the teaching focus versus incidental details?
- Who is being addressed?

Lexical-Syntactical Analysis

- What are the connecting words that show the author's progression of thought?
- What do the key individual words mean?
 - Determine range of possible meanings.
 - Determine the single meaning of this instance.
- What effect does the syntax have?

Examples ...

- “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, ...” (Romans 12:1)
- Six “days” of creation in Genesis 1
- “And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, ...” (1 Tim 2:12)

Theological Analysis

- How does this passage fit into the total pattern of God's revelation?
- What is the pattern of God's revelation?
- What theological knowledge was available to the original audience?

Special Literary Forms

Does the passage use a literary form that requires special attention?

- Simile
- Metaphor
- Proverb
- Parable
- Allegory
- Poetry
- Prophecy
- Apocalyptic literature
- Types

Examples ...

- “The kingdom of heaven is like ...”
- “I am the bread of life.” (John 6:35)
- Parable (???) of Lazarus
- 1/3 of Old Testament is prophecy
- The book of Revelation

Summary

- A message has one correct meaning: that of the author!
- Reading the Bible requires that we overcome the gaps of time, culture, language, and world view.
- There is a systematic way to approach interpretation of the Bible, which will result in a better understanding.