HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND EVANGELISM

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Diversities in Christian theological systems and differences in the teachings and emphases of various Christian groups may be ultimately traced to different methods of interpretation of the Bible. All Christian teachers, preachers, and theologians claim to base their knowledge on the Scripture, but one's presuppositions and methodology of exegesis determine what one "sees" in the text. Theological problems are basically hermeneutical problems. Hence the importance of the theme that is dealt with here.

The relationship between biblical interpretation and evangelism is almost solely the question of the right methods of interpretation by which a biblical theology of evangelism may be developed. Their relationship is not peculiar or different from the relationship between biblical interpretation and any other area of Christian theology and life. Therefore the discussion of this paper will primarily concern itself with proper methods of interpretation.

A concept of evangelism that is biblically founded is supremely concerned with the question of what the biblical record really teaches us about the nature of the evangelistic task entrusted to the Christian Church by its Lord, and what is the real content of the "evangel" or God's news for man. Essentially the same is the task of biblical hermeneutics, namely, to bring out the relevance of the message of the Bible for modern man by certain proper and valid principles of study of the Bible. The foundations of evangelism are not based on the desperate condition of the world and its crying needs, nor on the concern for others and missionary zeal of the church, but rather on the written Word of God, its authority, verdicts, and message. Evangelism is an empty notion if we cannot determine what the Bible does say to us. A right theology of evangelism can be developed only by a right way of "handling the Word of Truth."

The Bible is a mine of riches which was never exhausted by the church's scholarship and study through the last centuries. The more it is investigated and the better it is studied, the richer and newer are the treasures that are found in it. It seems sometimes to hide certain knowledge from the Church for many years and all of a sudden open up new understanding of the Truth with revolutionary effects. Many Old Testament passages were little understood by men during Old Testament times. Biblical scholars and "doctors of the law" during New Testament times spent much of their life time in full-time study and exposition of the Scripture, but concerning them St. Paul remarked, "For until this very day at the reading of the Old Covenant the same veil remains unlifted" (II Cor. 3:14). The Middle Ages had giants in

biblical scholarship and outstanding theologians who produced numerous volumes of works interpreting the Scripture, but it was not until the Reformation period that many of the biblical foundational truths were rediscovered. Twentieth-century biblical scholarship gave new light on the developments of the writings and the message of the Bible, but today we feel that we stand at the threshold of a new age of biblical studies. The church seems to rediscover the Word from time to time and the understanding of its message is fresh and dynamic every time.

1. *Certain inadequate methods of interpretation*

For some considerable time we have seen the development of different methods of biblical interpretation, some of them adequate and most helpful, some not. We may note a few major examples of improper and inadequate methods of interpretation which lead to a false understanding of the teaching of the Scripture.

a. *Allegorical method* — this method of interpretation is based on the assumption that the real message of a biblical passage is not its obvious or natural meaning but rather something hidden and mystical. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is an example of allegory. This method of study was applied to Greek myths by ancient Greek thinkers, particularly the Stoics. It was later used by Philo and the Alexandrian Jews to show the superiority of the Jewish Scripture over Greek philosophies, and to harmonize the two wherever desirable.

The early Christians exegetes used this method, especially in their controversy with the Jews to prove that the true hidden meanings of the Old Testament passages are fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Clement of Alexandria spoke of five meanings or senses of any Scripture passage, namely: the historical sense or the actual event as recorded; the doctrinal sense which is the obvious theological teaching; the prophetic sense, that is to say, the predictive and typological meaning; the philosophical sense, that is the cosmic or psychological values; and finally, the mystical sense which is the deeper spiritual meaning.

Origen, Clement's great successor, following the analogy of the threefold nature of man, said that each text has three senses: literal sense, compared to man's body and useful for the simple man; moral sense, compared to man's soul and useful for one growing in Christ; and spiritual or mystical sense, compared to the spirit of man and useful for the "perfect man." He held that if the Old Testament is studied only in the literal sense, Christians would be no better than Jews. To give an example of his use of this method, interpreting Joshua chapter two, he considered the spies as the forerunners of Christ, Rahab as representing the publicans and sinners, the scarlet thread signifying the blood of Christ, Rahab's house as the Church, etc., Origen's methods of allegorical interpretation influenced the church for several centuries after him.

The allegorical method was the single major principle of interpretation used by the church during the Middle Ages. While the literal interpretation was not abandoned, both the Old Testament and the New Testament were explained and taught through the allegorical approach to support the many traditions and doctrines of the Roman Church.

Typological interpretation is different from the use of allegory in this, that in typology no foreign meaning, a meaning which is not originally there, is supplied to a passage. In allegory, there is complete freedom in spiritualizing, and one can read into a passage almost anything one wants, while in typology the interpretation is bound to the historical sense of the passage.

There is an innate resemblance between the type and the antitype; type is a "prophetic symbol" which contains promise of a greater fulfillment which is to take place at a later time. We may use typology to the extent justified by the biblical use of it. Our approach ought to be a treatment of the whole and not of details. For example, while the tabernacle may lend itself to a typological explanation, the details of the tabernacle do not. Also, we should not base any fundamental doctrines on typological interpretation.

The basic weakness of allegorical method is that each passage is understood to have several meanings, the literal meaning being the least valuable one. The obvious surface meaning is treated only as the shell that surrounds the truth.

Allegorism brings chaos in biblical study, as each one can bring upon the text the wildest possible explanations according to his ingenuity and imagination. Objectivity of the Word of God is destroyed, and any type of ideas may be read into a text.

Many evangelical expositors delight in this type of fantasy — interpretation rather than obediently studying the text with teachableness, patience, and humility.

b. *Letterism* — the Rabbinic School that gradually developed after Ezra, while it removed idol worship from the Jewish nation, developed a new form of idolatry, namely, the worship of the "letter of the law." Some of its leading exegetes, such as Akiba, held that, as hammering of fire produces many sparks, every word of the Scripture and every letter of each word have many meanings which should be brought out. Hidden special meanings were sought for each word and syllable. They held that a mystical meaning lay in every letter and every "horn of the letter." If a letter was larger or smaller than the rest, inverted or suspended, repeated or omitted, some special meaning was given to it.

In this dominant method of exegesis there was a tendency to worship the very script of the Scripture. A type of hyperliteralism somewhat similar to this is seen in certain circles of the Christian Church today. Undue significance is given to the very script of the Bible and elaborate meanings unwarranted by the context of the text are attributed to it. This tends to develop a form of biblioatry and unhealthy dogmatism. This is based, moreover, on a false view of the inspiration of the Bible.

c. *"Eisegesis"* — often people come to the Scripture with preconceived ideas and doctrines rather than with an open mind, thus arbitrary interpretations are forced on the Scripture. Study of the Scripture for several centuries of Roman supremacy was dominated and shaped by church traditions and dogmas. The church through its official exegetes, whose interpretation alone was accepted, tried to conform the Scripture to the doctrines of the church.

The danger of making the text a servant of the interpretation is a common danger. Eisegesis of the text, or reading into it ideas not there, is seen in various forms. Particular doctrines and distinctive teachings of certain denominations are often based on questionable interpretation of certain unclear and secondary texts taken out of their contexts. In such cases interpretation is placed at the service of denominational doctrines.

How often in pulpit preaching, also, we find that the text is used only as a springboard to preach one's own ideas, subjective experience, and certain petty doctrines. A text is chosen from the Bible purely for its namesake, and the preaching is not subjected to what the text actually says.

Another form of this type of approach is found in the modern existential interpretation which holds that the New Testament taken at its face value is meaningless for modern man, because its images, thought forms, and concepts are restricted to New Testament times. It needs to be "demythologized" to be made relevant. The Bible has to be studied "in conversation with God," and revelation should re-occur in the reader himself. The Bible becomes authoritative to one insofar as it communicates God's claim on him and "Christ event" happens in him. One does not understand history by standing aloof. These emphases, made clear by Bultmann and developed by his followers, raise serious questions with regard to the objective validity of the revelation of God. Interpretation is to be considered as true only if it agrees with truth as understood in one's self-understanding.

Approach to the Scripture with already formulated presuppositions is seen in an extreme manner in the rationalistic interpretation of the Bible. Rejecting the supernatural, the Bible is viewed as representing at best the highest thoughts of the ancient religions. With the refusal to accept the biblical accounts at their face value, a naturalistic and rationalistic interpretation is given to the text whereby it ceases to be God's Word for man.

It is true that none can come to the Bible with absolutely no presuppositions and with a mind devoid of any other influences. When we come to the text with reverence and belief that it is the Word of God, already we come to it in a certain frame of mind. But this type of presupposition is found validated by the text itself, when it is closely studied.

2. *Basic principles of interpretation*

Now we may examine certain fundamental and cardinal principles of interpretation which are basic to biblically-founded preaching and evangelism as well as to the development of evangelical theology.

a. *The right attitude to Scripture* — an interpreter should have the right approach to Scripture. When he comes to the Word he is at the same time both a "spectator" and a "hearer." As a spectator he objectively studies the text, taking into account the findings of the critical studies, the meaning of the words, historical contexts, etc., but "as a hearer" he comes to the Word with faith and commitment. He takes for granted the supreme authority of the Bible and its character as

the revelation of God, and commits himself to its message. He studies it with expectancy and receptiveness.

The interpreter submits himself to the Bible as the authoritative Word of God. He believes that God "inspired" in a special manner certain select men of the Old Testament and the New Testament periods so that they were capable of receiving and communicating God's Word for man through the framework of their own mind and in the context of their life-situations. God, using their knowledge and language as media, uttered his words as authoritative in all matters of faith for all times and binding upon all men. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II Tim. 3:16-17).

The interpreter believes in the sufficiency of the written Word to guide him in things pertaining to salvation: nothing is to be added or subtracted. He comes to it without the mediatorship of any church or human authority, but believing that with the inward witness and illumination of the Holy Spirit he can understand the Word of God. This is not to say that he will know everything in the Scripture, but that the Scripture can be sufficiently clear to him to serve as "a lamp to his feet and a light to his path."

Only the Holy Spirit, the author of the Word of God, can make it understood to us. Therefore, the reformers considered "faith and prayer" as the first main principle of interpretation. It is said that Thomas Aquinas used to fast and pray when he struggled with the exegesis of difficult passages.

One should also be teachable and ready to be corrected. When the Scripture is not clear there should be a willingness to admit our limitations. An old Rabbinic admonition says, "Teach your tongue to say, 'I do not know'." If we are willing to admit that none of us can expect a knowledge beyond what is clearly taught in the Bible, we would avoid many theological controversies.

As evangelical interpreters of the Bible we may admit that, though our method may seem to be unscientific, our hermeneutics is controlled by our view of, and attitude to, the Scripture, while our attitude to the Scripture is formulated by the teaching of the Scripture itself which we do not understand apart from clear investigation of it. Further study of the Scripture strengthens and confirms our doctrine of Scripture. Thus our hermeneutics and our doctrine of Scripture are, as it were, in some form of dialogical relationship.

b. *Literal sense* — the real meaning of a Scripture passage is its obvious and normal meaning. Perhaps about one hundred Old Testament events are alluded to in the New Testament, and in doing so their historicity is taken for granted, and no hidden or mystical interpretation is ascribed to them. So also the numerous Old Testament quotations in the New Testament are, by and large, understood and used in their obvious and clear sense. This principle of the New Testament writers of preferring the literal sense of the Scripture passages should be the basic principle in our interpretative method.

An abundance of metaphors, symbolisms, and poetic expressions

is used in the Bible. Also, different types of literature are found in it. But the natural meaning of these is obvious. Even in a figurative speech as "Lion of Judah" or "Sword coming out of the Lord's mouth," its obvious meaning is what is to be understood as its "literal" meaning. Whatever the writers originally meant or intended to say is the literal sense.

The primary task of the interpreter is to discover what the Scripture accounts meant to the writer and to those for whom they were written. The real meaning of the text is to be found in the grammatical sense of the text in the framework of the style of the particular literature and in the context of the life and times of the writer. Literal sense is the meaning originally intended by him. Imposing upon a text a meaning other than its natural meaning is to do injustice to the text.

In the attempt to find the real meaning of a passage we must remember the fundamental principles of the primacy of the original languages, viewing translations as only second best. Etymological study of the words and phrases on the basis of comparative linguistics and grammatical, syntaxical studies, are basic to interpretation. Also passages should be treated by their literary types, many of which are found in the Bible, namely, poetic, narrative, legal, dramatic, figurative, prophetic, illustrative, biographical, etc., and interpretation should treat each on the basis of its style. For example, in dealing with Old Testament prophecies one ought to make a distinction between the "form" of a prophecy and its "content" or message. While the content of the messanic prophecies finds its fulfillment in Christ, the "form" in which it was presented was superseded and made invalid in its literal sense.

Or again, in the interpretation of a parable one must give attention to the one central truth it signifies and not try to find spiritual meaning for all its details. All parables of Jesus deal with one great subject, namely the Kingdom of God, and interpretation of each should be in harmony with Christ's teachings in general.

c. *Historical and cultural context* — there is an analogy between the Bible and Christ. Christ is both perfect God and perfect man, and so also the written Word is genuinely human while it is genuinely divine in its entirety. When God spoke through men, he spoke through their languages and their frame of mind. Otherwise God's words would not have been intelligible to them. The writers of the biblical books wrote their works to be understood by people of their times. In being inspired, the individuality of the writers was not in any way canceled or even weakened, while God overruled them to keep their utterance from error. Necessarily the Word of God came to man in a mold or form tied up to some particular period of history.

So our study of the Scripture should exegete or lead out the original meaning of the text. For this the interpreter should transpose himself to the times and life-situations of the writers, and try to stand in their shoes. He should understand their historical, cultural, and religious conditions. He should study what their words and phrases meant to them and to their contemporaries.

There is a vast cultural and historical difference between biblical times and our own day. The biblical period itself spans several centuries

of great differences and diversities. But today we have numerous data of knowledge coming from many periods of history, throwing much light upon the biblical accounts and languages.

When our understanding of God's Word exceeds the original historical meaning of the text, it should only be a development of the meaning which is already there and application of it to a contemporary situation, in the context of the teaching of the Scripture at large. Therefore it is not adding multiple meaning or imposing a new sense to a text, but rather a drawing out and applying the message in a passage making clear its relevance to a given situation.

d. *Principle of the unity of the Bible* — though the Bible was written during a period of several centuries of greatly diverse circumstances and by many authors, there is a deep harmony and unity among all its books. This is because they all come from one Divine Mind. Therefore a passage which is not clear may be understood in the light of the main ideas of the Bible, or by comparing it with another passage where the question may be dealt with more fully. A later passage may throw light on an earlier passage, and the New Testament may be used to interpret the Old. This is possible because there is a historical development and progress in God's revelation and man's understanding of it.

Because of the unity of the Bible, one passage should not be so interpreted as to contradict the meaning of another passage or be in disharmony with the general biblical emphases. The Word of God is consistent with itself.

The unity of the Bible further means that our main doctrines and theology should be based on the primary and important teachings of the Bible rather than on obscure passages and incidental statements. The Bible is not a source book for proof texts, or a flat ocean beach from which pebbles may be picked up at random. Rather it is to be used as a major work of the mind, every detail understood in the context of the major "thesis" or message of the Bible.

In conclusion, two points of particular interest may be noted where the same underlying principles govern an evangelical biblical interpretation and a theology of evangelism.

First, concept of the sovereignty of God and the authority of his Word. Basic to evangelical hermeneutics is the acceptance of the final authority of the Bible as the Word of God. The interpreter is not the master of the text, and in his "conversation" with the text the Word of God masters him, and he finds the authority of the Word binding on him.

So also evangelism is based on the sovereign plan of God and all the authority under heaven and on earth that is given by him. We are under orders, and not to evangelize is to disregard the authority of the Lord and his Word. We are commissioned by one who has absolute right over us and whose authority is over all the world, all men, and all areas of the life of man. The scope of evangelism should cover all the spheres of the sovereignty of God on earth. It is the authority of the Lord and his sovereignty that fills the evangelist with confidence, courage, and hope in his work.

Second, understanding the nature of God's revelation. One's belief about the place of the biblical records in the concept of God's special

revelation determines one's hermeneutical method. For example, the Barthian school would hold that the Scripture bears witness to Christ, the true revelation, and that the hermeneutic task basically is to inquire of each text what does it speak about Christ. To the existential school, the "Christ event," the Word of God, should be experienced by the believers. Faith is not based on historical facts nor on any written words. The importance of Scripture is that through it God "acts" in one who studies it.

Perhaps, the most dominant theory today regarding God's revelation is that God reveals himself through his redemptive acts, the climax of which is the death of Jesus Christ. The place of Scripture is that it bears witness to God's revelatory deeds.

We should say however, that while it is undoubtedly true that God reveals himself through his mighty deeds, the acts of God are meaningless unless God through "spoken" words interprets the significance of his deeds. The so-called redemptive acts in themselves say nothing. A band of slaves escaping from Egypt, the tiny insignificant nation of Israel struggling to survive while always being trodden down by great nations, an unfortunate carpenter from Nazareth getting into trouble with the leaders of the Jews and getting himself crucified: such accounts in themselves taken at their pure scientific historical value say nothing about the great God of the Bible except disprove the audacious claims of the Bible for the God of Israel and his son Jesus Christ.

Moreover, there are major parts of the Bible which come outside the sphere of history, such as most of the Psalms and the book of Proverbs. Also, how can the acts of God apart from revealing the nature of God in some general way speak in particular on some specific truths? Further, the biblical accounts themselves in both Old and New Testaments give central importance to God's communication through spoken words as the real revelation of God's will in these accounts.

All the above representative attitudes to the Bible in contemporary theologies reject the authority of the Bible as God's Word, and they lead to improper methods of interpretation.

One's concept of God's revelation is equally determinative in one's theology of evangelism. The idea of evangelism that denies the possibility of God speaking to communicate his will, has nothing authoritative to proclaim. Unless what is proclaimed is assured as "Thus says the Lord," it carries no power and creates no conviction. No doubt an evangelist should be keenly interested in what God does in history and should be deeply concerned with the development of human conditions and the establishment of justice, if he knows anything of Christian love. But if he has an inadequate understanding of God's revelation and his Word for the contemporary man as seen in the Scripture, he stands on false foundations. A right theology of evangelism is always based on a right view of Scripture.