

Interpreting Scripture

1. Hermeneutics – the art and science of interpreting scripture.

- The study of the approaches needed to bring the true meaning of an ancient canonical writing to the consciousness of the present-day interpreter or reader so that he/she may hopefully discern, hear, and heed the word of God.
- The end purpose is obedience: Hear and obey the word of the Lord

2. Why have Baptists historically been so poor at hermeneutics?

- Because of the widespread mistrust of formal theological education among many Southern Baptist Churches in the late 19th to mid 20th century.
- Priesthood of the Believer, autonomy of the local church; no Pope to tell us, no denomination
- Pastors were seldom received theological education, and many churches preferred it that way.
- Therefore, churches received teaching from the Pastor that reflected his best effort at learning. Sometimes they got it right, sometimes they did not. Example: slavery.

3. What is the goal of hermeneutics?

- To avoid subjectivism: distorting the objective meaning of a text to suit our own interests.
- Subjectivism takes place when the truth of the text is not merely applied to the subject, but when it is absolutely determined by the subject.
- We want to arrive at the objective meaning of scripture and avoid the pitfalls of distortion by letting our interpretations be governed by subjectivism.
- What are some things in your life that might skew the way you interpret scripture?
 - Gender, social class, education, what papa said, political views, age, on and on
- Exegesis: to explain what scripture says, literally “to guide out of.”
 - Careful and detailed examination of all aspects of a Biblical text by use of the original language of that text.
 - To exegete scripture is to get out of the words the meaning that is there, no more and no less.
- Avoid eisegesis: reading into the text something that isn’t there at all.
- Interpretation: effort to derive the meaning of the text, both for its author and original recipients and for Christians today.
- Subjectivism not only produces error and distortion, but it breeds arrogance as well and hurts people. To believe what I believe simply because I believe it or to argue that my opinion is true simply because it is my opinion is the epitome of arrogance.
 - We Baptists are bad at this because we do not like to be told what to think or believe, even from the word of God!
 - If we have arrived at a bad interpretation of a text we will then apply it in a way God did not intend and we will hurt people.
- I respect your heritage and views, they are important. But before we go about applying a text to real life situations, I’m going to want to know how much work you have done to get at the real meaning of that text. It takes work, hard work.
- I do the hard work of study; the Spirit does the supernatural work of illumination.
- Once we do the hard work of arriving at the meaning of a text, we trust the Holy Spirit to give us insight into the application of the text for us today, so we can apply or obey it.

4. How can we get at the true meaning of a text? Most use the Historical-Critical method of interpretation.

- Seeks to interpret a text in light of language, grammar, syntax, history of the author and recipients, type of literature, use of words in the ancient world, and so on.
- To see the text, so far as possible, in the light of its total context and situation.

Truths to keep in mind:

- Biblical interpretation should begin in the strange ancient world of the Bible, not in the traditions of later Christianity or the experience of present-day Christians.
- Biblical interpretation needs to be in a context.
 - Preceding and succeeding verses and chapters
 - Otherwise like listening to one half of a phone conversation
- A text has only one meaning – that which was intended by the author.
 - Can have multiple applications.
- The historical revelation of God recorded in the Bible was situational; that is, God addressed Himself to human beings in their personal, social, geographical, and chronological settings.
 - Scripture is the product of God dealing with certain people at a certain time and place. We look for **timeless principles** that will apply to us today, and trust the Spirit to guide us.
 - “Progressive revelation” – God’s self-disclosure was conditioned on His awareness of the condition of human beings, especially of the Israelites, and His willingness to disclose Himself meaningfully and redemptively to human beings (Israelites) in their situations.
 - They didn’t get complete revelation all at once.
 - Must distinguish between:
 - God’s will, ultimate ideal, fully revealed truth; and
 - Man’s imperfect perception of or response/obedience to the divine truth
 - Example – Matthew 19:3-12, Jesus and Moses on divorce.
- In the Biblical record of a historically mediated revelation of God distinction must be made between the passing and the permanent, between the culturally restricted and universally applicable.
 - We distinguish between the ceremonial and civil law found in the Pentateuch and the moral law. Which one is passing and which one is permanent?
 - We do the same thing with our ordinances – i.e. footwashing
 - In attempting to understand what is cultural and passing, keep in mind that the creation ordinances are indicators of timeless, transcultural principles.
- Scripture is to be its own interpreter.
 - No part of Scripture can be interpreted in such a way as to render it in conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture.
 - Faith: Scripture is consistent and coherent.
 - The implicit is to be interpreted by the explicit. The obscure is
 - Differentiate between a descriptive text and prescriptive text.