BELIEVERS' FELLOWSHIP

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#3—Interpreting the Bible—Part II[1]

Some Lessons from History

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A few days ago I was channel surfing while on an exercise bike and saw a great illustration of the need for systematic theology. There was a man sitting at a piano with a woman sitting in a chair next to him. He said, "We need to be evangelizing, winning souls. Forget that theology stuff. That just divides. We need to be giving people the gospel and winning them for Christ." The woman was in total agreement.

I began to think about how unbiblical and dangerous this belief is. I wanted to ask the pianist one question: which gospel do you want to give people? Would it be

- The prosperity gospel—come to Christ and he'll make you wealthy? or
- The happiness gospel—accept Christ and you'll have a happy life? or
- The tongues gospel—speak in tongues and we'll know you're saved and God accepts you? or
- The healing gospel—have enough faith and God will heal you (never mind if you're saved or not)? or
- The Galatian gospel—have faith plus keep the law and you'll be saved? or
- The baptismal regeneration gospel—have faith and be baptized and you'll be saved? or
- The Lordship gospel—have faith in Jesus and take him as lord of your life and you'll be saved? or
- The sacramental gospel—keep the sacraments of the Episcopal or Catholic church and you'll go to heaven? or
- The biblical gospel of faith alone—put your trust in a savior who died on the cross for sinners, of which you are one?

Each of these is a theological position. The pianist probably had in mind which gospel he would prefer. But what he didn't realize was that in doing so he would already have made a theological decision—unless he really didn't care which gospel people heard. Theology is important!

In our first two studies we have seen the meaning and need for systematic theology and have begun to look at approaches to handling Scripture, emphasizing that every Christian should be a careful and independent interpreter of the Bible. We turn now to some lessons from history that will help us in our preparation to do systematic theology.

1. Usefulness of the past

It is valuable for anyone who works in a discipline or field of study to know something of the history of that field. How have earlier researchers, teachers and scholars approached it? What kinds of conclusions have been drawn? What kind of evidence have they acknowledged as acceptable? When have they followed lines of investigation that have led to dead ends? Where have they fallen into error that was later corrected by others?

For example, every scientist must know the history of science, since it provides principles for establishing scientific methodology and its use. One can learn about the failures of earlier scientists, as well as their great discoveries. And, if there is enough documentation, one can learn why they succeeded or failed, and follow the methodology that led to positive results. The same is true for the student of the Bible.

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Before we turn to look at the history of the interpretation of the Bible, it will be valuable to lay down a working premise that will be developed more fully later in this study. It is this: The best system for interpreting the Bible is one that gets the most information from Scripture—that is, one that does not leave gaps and yet does not make one part contradict or dominate another. Some of the reasons for this premise are: (1) God intends for us to understand Scripture; (2) the Bible does not contradict itself; (3) it is to be read as any other normal book and taken at face value.

One way to learn how important these things are is to see how this premise and reasons for it have been missed by some in the history of the interpretation of Scripture. Simply stated, the Christian should know enough of the history of approaches to the Bible to profit by the errors and discoveries of the past. Such understanding will not only help in avoiding errors and guarding against carelessness, but it will also enable us to avoid narrowness in our own interpretation, for we will see that others have discovered truth, too.

2. Ancient Jewish interpretation

The beginning of conscious biblical interpretation is usually assigned to the period of Ezra (445 B.C.), who is described as "a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6). Further, in 7:11 he is said to be a priest. He apparently studied the law, taught it, and assisted people in applying it. Many consider Ezra to be the first of the significant Jewish interpreters, as well as the founder of the Jewish school that approached the Scriptures with extreme literal interpretation. In a certain sense their principles were good, as in the case of the rule that a word must be interpreted in light of the sentence it appears in, and sentences in their contexts.[2] But they often failed to adhere to their own rules and emphasized minor points to the detriment of what was essential. This was due to the skewed belief that even the letters of Scripture had significance. This preoccupation with graphic symbols themselves led to extensive attempts to see word plays and connections. A. Berkley Mickelsen describes a typical error:

> Unfortunately, although the rabbis did apply these rules, they also utilized such practices as substituting one letter for another, forming new words, assigning a numerical value to words, etc. In Genesis 2:7 the Hebrew word "and he [The Lord] formed" has two yods (smallest Hebrew letter, equivalent to English "y") in the unpointed Hebrew text. In Rabbinic Hebrew the word impulse (*yetzer*) is a noun from the same root as "to form." Hence, the rabbis deduce that because of the two yods in Genesis 2:7—the first letter of the words "to form" and "impulse"—God created two impulses in man, a good impulse and a bad one! This makes us smile, but it at least shows that these interpreters carefully observed what was written. Unfortunately, instead of using their ingenuity to clarify the precise meaning conveyed by the language, they looked for "deeper hidden meaning."[3]

The lesson to be gained from this is to avoid exalting the very letters and words of the Bible, otherwise the result will be that we miss the message. Words, including the letters they are composed of, have meaning only in connection with other words, all of which are found in historical contexts, that is, in real life situations, as recorded in the Bible.

3. Allegorical interpretation

Over the centuries the method of interpretation known as allegorical interpretation has appeared in various schools and under different guises. Its common thread, however, is an approach to the text that attempts to look beneath the obvious meaning to a "deeper" or "more real" meaning. Thus a text is interpreted without

[2] Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1956), 46.
[3] A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 24.

serious regard for the grammatical elements that are visible on the surface and apart from its historical connections. Although in this approach a text has more than one meaning, it is the less obvious meaning that is more important, is assumed to be intended by God, and often, under this approach, can be understood only by those with special insight. After all (so the approach goes), it *does* take extra wisdom or spirituality to be able to see beyond the surface into what is of greater significance for life.

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is an allegory. However, with Bunyan the surface is to be entertaining, while the subsurface meaning is to be related to life. With the Bible the surface is actually tied to history and cannot be ignored. We are not to look beneath the surface unless there is warrant for doing so (for example, the tree in Dan. 4 has evident reference to Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom, and the text actually tells us that). This is not the same as typological interpretation, where both levels are real and important and historical.

Allegorical interpretation was practiced extensively by the Greek philosophers and historians in their treatment of secular and sacred Greek texts. Schools at Alexandria, Egypt, given to the preservation of the Greek classics, exercised profound influence on Jewish interpreters who labored there in the interpretation of Old Testament texts.

The most prominent Jewish allegorist was Philo (ca. 20 B.C.-54 A.D.). For him those who could see only literal meaning were at an immature level of understanding. Only those who achieved maturity were able to enter into allegorical interpretation. For example, in Philo's view the biblical account of Abram's journey to Palestine is really intended to portray the story of a stoic philosopher who leaves Chaldea, which signifies "understanding by the senses." Upon becoming Abraham he enters into the condition of being a truly enlightened philosopher. His marriage to Sarah really signifies the philosopher's acquisition of abstract wisdom.[4]

Surprisingly there was actually methodology in this, since for Philo the presence of synonyms in a text was a clue that an allegorical meaning was to be looked for. But it was permissible to explain words while ignoring the punctuation found in sentences.

Allegorism did not remain outside the sphere of Christian interpretation of the biblical texts. Origen of Alexandria and Caesarea, who lived from 185 to 254 A.D., although recognized as one of the great early scholars of the Church, often brought the allegorical approach to texts that did not lend themselves to easy interpretation. Thus he views Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as the entry of the Word of God into the soul.[5] Subsequent interpreters were influenced by allegorical methodology, among them Augustine (354-430). This church father justified such an approach by appeal to 2 Cor. 3:6: "The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." He understood this to mean that the spiritual or allegorical interpretation discovers the real meaning of the Bible; the literal interpretation brings spiritual bondage. However, Augustine was not consistent in his use of allegorical interpretation.

4. The Reformers

This brief sketch must omit many details of the history of interpretation through the centuries. There were, however, many who laid foundations for methodology that is used today. And it is with the Reformers that we begin to see the conscious formulations of approaches to Scripture that we often employ today without thinking about their ancestry.

[4] Ramm, 28.
[5] F. F. Bruce, "The History of New Testament Study," in *New Testament Interpretation*, ed. I Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977,) 25.

Although Martin Luther (1483-1546) is well known for his battles with Rome, his formulations of fruitful approaches to Scripture were at least as important as, and certainly were part and parcel of, his actions as a reformer. Abandoning earlier approaches that sought multiple meanings in texts, Luther stressed the natural sense of words as indicated by grammar.[6] He assumed that the Bible was understandable and could be approached by all. This went hand in hand with his insistence that each individual must respond to the biblical presentation of justification by faith alone. Thus each believer has the right to interpret the Bible for himself. In so doing he is to be dependent on the Holy Spirit for illumination. Luther also saw that the Old Testament is essential for understanding the New Testament, and that the Church is based on Scripture, not Scripture on the Church. The teaching of justification by faith is a key to understanding the whole Bible, and those parts that convey that message more clearly are to be used to aid in the interpretation of those that are problematic. Insistence on the value of reading the Scriptures in the original languages bolstered Luther's concern for the grammatical and historical details of the text.[7]

John Calvin (1509-1564) continued Luther's emphasis on the centrality of the Christ-event to approaches to the Bible and likewise rejected allegorical methodology.[8] Although he is perhaps known primarily as a theologian, he wrote many fine commentaries and wrestled with details of interpretation. It is safe to say that he was a good theologian because he knew his Bible well and was a good interpreter. He stressed the importance of grammar and history in approaching texts, as well as the indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in guiding the interpreter. His understanding of progressive revelation was linked with an appreciation of the manner in which in which the Old Testament is unfolded in the New Testament. Later in this series we will discuss the relation between theology and interpreting by context. Calvin clearly had an appreciation of this connection, for he attempted to carry out his interpretation on the basis of understanding of the whole book in which a text was found, as well as all of Scripture. This anticipates the contemporary findings of communications and linguistics scholars who describe messages as encodings whose parts can be understood only by referring at least to some degree to the neighboring constituents. In other words, elements of a message are carried in more than one place, and the interpreter must be alert to the appearance of clues coming in various forms and found in various locations.

In stressing the need to pay attention to grammar, history, and context, individuals such as Calvin and Luther played a significant role in enabling interpreters to approach the Bible with objectivity. Observing these important elements of Scripture, which are present because the Bible is a genuine book, set in real human times, enables us to avoid those aberrations and excesses that cloud the meaning of Scripture. We face the danger, however, of obscuring it ourselves whenever we do not take the necessary steps to interpret according to grammar, history, and context, for then we are free to impose on the text any interpretation that strikes our fancy. Many do that today in a manner that is not far from classical allegorism.

It is safe to say that it is a necessary basic assumption of biblical interpretation that attention to the plain meaning of the text is the door to healthy understanding of the Bible. Many excesses beyond the ones that have been mentioned here have arisen quite easily when this principle has been neglected. The importance of understanding this lesson of history, as well as many others, is expressed in this statement by the nineteenth century textual critic Alexander Souter: "It can never cease to be of moment to the real lover of Scripture what was thought of its meaning by any patient investigator in any country or in any age."[9] So, the successful interpreter will

(1) avoid exalting the letters or form of Scripture over the meaning of words in contexts and avoid other forms of over-literalism;

[6] Bruce, 31.
[7] Bruce, 31.
[8] Bruce, 32.
[9] Alexander Souter, *The Earliest Latin Commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 7.

(2) be dependent on the Holy Spirit and not on a church to lead in understanding the Bible;
(3) allow the Bible to speak of Christ, making necessary connections between the Old Testament and New Testament, with alertness to progressive revelation.

We set forth in the first section of this study a working premise that stresses the need to get the most from Scripture while at the same time not making one part contradict or dominate another. The history of interpretation of the Bible (although our treatment has necessarily been brief) provides us with illustrations of how some have failed to meet this. They have allowed contradictions to stand in the interest of getting information from passages or have made certain truths dominant over others. Good theology rests on allowing the text to speak for itself.

Study questions

1. How do *you* decide what gospel you will present to people?

2. What difference does it make what gospel is presented? What are the possible outcomes?

3. Give an example from a field of work or study that you are familiar with that shows the need to be aware of what has happened in the field's history.

4. What are some key problems with applying allegorism to the biblical text?

5. Certainly Luther and Calvin did not come to *all* the right conclusions in interpreting the Bible and formulating their theologies. What are the implications for this?