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Hermeneutics

Source Materials:

“Hermeneutics: the Science and Art of Biblical Interpretation”

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“A Syllabus of Studies in Hermeneutics”, Rollin Thomas Chafer

HERM003

adapted for Grace Notes training by Warren Doud

Grace Notes

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Hermeneutics

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Lesson 5 - The Protestant System Of Hermeneutics - Introduction

The Divine Inspiration of Scripture is the foundation from which we begin, for “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (2Tim 3:16-17). The Protestant Approach to Hermeneutics recognizes that the Bible must be understood as absolute truth including all the miracles. This adds new depth to common words such faith, love, redemption and salvation because not only are concepts presented but facts are given to validate the concepts.

Also at the core of “How to Study the Bible” is acceptance of the fact that the Bible has been inspired by God in its entirety. This is called verbal-plenary inspiration indicating that every part of the Bible has been inspired by God.

To correctly interpret God’s Word first requires that the individual is a Believer in the Lord Jesus Christ because, “a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:14-16).” The second requirement for correct interpretation of God’s Word is directly related to one’s relationship with the Holy Spirit, because it is His function to “guide us into all truth (John 16:13).” The third requirement is an intellectual honesty that consistently and eagerly uses the tools that God has given us to learn His Word. We are instructed to, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15).”

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The goal of interpretation is always to be love. All goals in life are supposed to revolve around what the Lord Jesus Christ Himself called the "Two Greatest Commandments." In Mark 12:28-31, the text reports, "And one of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." The Apostle Paul gave his teaching objective in 1 Tim 1:5 which says, "the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

The intent of this love-guided teaching should be to promote the Spiritual growth of the Believer in the Lord Jesus. This principle is clearly taught in Ephesians 4:11-16, that says, "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves, and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."

Interpretation must be tested with the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. In 1 Timothy 6:3-5, Paul says, "If anyone advocates a different doctrine, and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain."

Axioms of General Hermeneutics (Rollin Chafer)

An axiom is a self-evident truth. Although this is the primary definition of the lexicographers, it cannot be said that all fundamental principles of the various sciences are at once self-evident, and therefore at first sight axiomatic in character. Some essential principles become clearly axiomatic to the student only after an understanding of the background and general field in which the principle is operative has been gained. This is generally true of various sciences, therefore we may expect to find it true also in the science of Biblical interpretation; for here, moreover, an element intrudes itself which is not found in any other science. The natural man cannot see the spiritual things of the divine revelation. The principles which all regenerate men readily recognize as the axioms of the faith, unbelievers are unable to understand or accept.

The axioms related to language as a medium for the expression of thought, secular and sacred, are so simple it seems to the student a waste of time to consider them; and yet, simple and self-evident as they are, they are so frequently violated or disregarded by scholars that heed must be given to them as the foundations of hermeneutics are laid.

Practically all writers on hermeneutics now and then refer to the simple and fundamental

principles governing the use of language without formally announcing them as axioms. Dr. Clinton Lockhart, however, in his *Principles of Interpretation* devotes a chapter to axioms, listing fifteen. I have selected seven of these as representative and on which some comments and quotations may be made. The order followed by the author is changed to suit this condensed treatment.

Axiom 1. *The true object of speech is the impartation of thought.*

This lays “the foundation of all hermeneutics.” The objective true is important; for in the face of the fact that much speech is innocent of thought it still remains true that the impartation of thought is the true object of speech. Many believe that the Book of Revelation cannot be understood, yet the Apostle used understandable language and familiar Biblical symbols to convey definite thoughts which may be understood in their true meaning under right methods of study. The habit of many interpreters of setting aside what the author really says, replacing it with what they want him to say and what he does not say, must be ruled out as a legitimate procedure in Hermeneutics.

Axiom 2. *Language is a reliable medium of communication.*

This axiom calls for the presupposition that the language employed be grammatically correct, clear in statement, accurately expressing the thought to be communicated to others. If these precautions are complied with, the writer has a right to expect that his thought committed to writing will be understood as he intends to have it understood. The unethical practice by some interpreters of reading into the author’s words foreign meanings, and thus perverting the sense as the writer communicated it, is all too common with Biblical interpreters. I remember an article by a theologian in which he gave it as his opinion that the word *new* should be interpolated before the word *Jerusalem* throughout the Old Testament text

because of his aversion to the prophecies concerning the literal City of Jerusalem, located in the earthly Holy Land, at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea which occupies a definite area of the surface of this literal earth on which the writers were sojourning. The honest interpreter will respect the writer’s confidence in the language he uses to express his thought. Without such confidence legal papers would not stand in court, and no will and testament would have validity. Further, it would not be possible for God to give through the sacred writers an accurate revelation of His mind and heart concerning His eternal purposes and plan for His creatures.

Axiom 3. *Usage determines the meaning of words.*

Students of the history of the growth of any language have no difficulty in accepting this axiom. Through usage words may in time change radically in meaning or become obsolete. On the subject of word usage in the New Testament Cellérier says,¹ “The more perfect revelation of God’s will, as given in the New Testament, necessitated a more perfect usage of language. The thought and affections of men were to be drawn into new channels, hence it was necessary for language to follow wherever thought and affection led. Thus resulted the creating of new words, or, more frequently, the giving of new significations to the words then in usage. This powerful influence made itself felt throughout the New Testament and modified, still more, the language of the Greek Fathers.” He lists, for example, fifty-two Greek words which were invested with special meaning through usage. It is quite necessary that the interpreter take into account meanings which grow out of special as well as common usage.

Axiom 4. *The function of a word depends on its association with other words.*

¹ *Man. d’Her.* tr. p. 85.

Perhaps no axiom related to language is more important for the interpreter than this one. Lockhart cites the word *top*, indicating eight distinct meanings, each governed by the use of other words in association with it. No other fundamental principle related to hermeneutics is more often violated than this one by ignoring the qualifying words chosen by the Holy Spirit to distinguish the use of a word in varying contexts. The interpreter who argues that the word “gospel” means “good news” and therefore wherever the word occurs it means one and the same thing regardless of the qualifying words (kingdom, grace, everlasting, etc.) would be discredited as a literary interpreter of Shakespeare should he employ the same method. His standing as a literary critic would be seriously lowered. Are the secular classics worthy to be treated more seriously than the inspired Word of God? To fail under this axiom to make distinctions where the qualifying words in the context demand such distinctions is comparable to claiming that the word “top” always means the same thing, whether the context refers to the *top* of the house or a toy spinning on the sidewalk.

Axiom 5. The true object of interpretation is to apprehend the exact thought of the author.

After considering the foregoing axioms related to language itself it is important to consider the object of the interpretation of thoughts expressed by language. If language is a reliable medium of thought and men have conscientiously committed their thoughts to language, it should be the first care of the interpreter to learn the exact thought of the writings under examination. The moment the interpreter injects his own thoughts in the place of those expressed by an author, he ceases to be an interpreter and becomes a collaborator. If this intrusion is forced upon a secular writer without his consent a serious infringement of the ethics of writing occurs. When one essays this role with the Spirit Author of the Word of God something far worse

than the violation of mere ethics is involved. On this axiom Lockhart comments as follows: “The interpreter is not responsible for the thought, whether it be true or false, consistent or inconsistent, good or bad doctrine. His only province is to apprehend the precise thought imparted by the author’s words, and leave the author responsible for the character of his thought.”

Axiom 6. Truth must accord with truth; and statements of truth apparently discrepant can be harmonized if the facts are known.

Seeming discrepancies in all classes of true evidence may be harmonized if the pertinent facts are made known. It is proven by experience in courts of law, general investigations, and in solving apparent discrepancies in the Bible.

Axiom 7. An assertion of truth necessarily excludes that to which it is essentially opposed and no more.

On this Lockhart says: “A proposition purporting to set forth a truth must not be supposed to exclude everything as false that it does not contain; but it must exclude everything that is in opposition to it. For example, when Jesus says, ‘The truth shall make you free’ (John 8:32), he does not exclude his own statement, ‘If therefore the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed’ (v. 36). The latter does not oppose the former. The truth and the Son are not mutually exclusive.”

To those selections from Lockhart’s chapter² on the axioms of Hermeneutics the following from Cellèrier is also added:

Axiom 8. One cannot interpret without understanding that which he interprets.

This is a self-evident truth. Now, to understand the thought of another is so to conceive it in one’s own mind as to be able to reproduce it to

² Clinton Lockhart, Ph.D., LL.D., *Principles of Interpretation*. p. 18ff.

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others *without change or modification*" (italics mine).

The attentive reader cannot escape certain conclusions which must be adopted if the truth of these axioms is accepted. Not only is the language of a properly worded and constructed statement a reliable means of communicating thought, and men may confidently commit their thoughts to such language, but the interpreter has no right to change that meaning by any method of interpretation which changes the plain intent of the writer. The "spiritualizing" method of Bible interpretation not only seeks to introduce a meaning in the text which the plain intent of the writer does not warrant, but the system is defended on that very ground. The strong implication is that the modern interpreter knows the mind of God more fully than the inspired writers did. This is hardly defensible, even on the grounds of common sense and logic.

Exercises for HERM003

1. What is the foundation of the Protestant system of Hermeneutics? Why?
2. What are three personal requirements for the interpretation of Scripture?
3. What should be the objective of all interpretation and why?
4. What should our teaching promote and why?
5. What is the standard we are to use to test interpretation?