

RESURRECTION OPC – ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL
Hermeneutics: How to Read the Bible

WEEK 3 | MAY 8, 2016

Introduction & Acknowledgement

In our first session, we looked at an overall approach to reading Scripture modeled on the analogy of a compass. The goal of the compass is that we read Scripture *contextually, grammatically, theologically, and doxologically*.

In our last session, we looked at how the Bible has been read historically by Jewish rabbis, by early and medieval Christians, during the Reformation, and in the post-Reformation period. From this history, we learned both lessons to emulate and errors to avoid – and touched briefly on how these lessons are expressed in the first chapter of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. To read the Bible rightly involves *grammar, historical context, and redemptive history*: the Bible is the Word of God written *through* men, *unfolded and clarified* through history.

As we continue, we will continue to follow closely the lectures of Dr. Benjamin Shaw, based on Louis Berkhof's *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*. Today we focus on *grammar* – the words of Scripture.

The Word of God in the Languages of Men

“The Bible is in human language, but it’s not human opinion.” (Dr. Timothy Keller)

Living Oracles & Living Languages

- According to Scripture itself, we are to regard its words as the very words of God:
 - “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple...” (*Psalm 19.7; cf. Deuteronomy 32.47*)
 - “Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.” (*Proverbs 30.5*)
 - “This is the one who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him at Mount Sinai, and with our fathers. He received living oracles to give to us.” (*Acts 7.38; cf. Hebrews 4.12*)
- At the same time, the Scriptures were given in human languages that bear all the qualities of real languages:
 - “But both biblical Hebrew and New Testament Greek were ordinary languages. Hebrew and Greek were spoken by people in the home and in the marketplace. Those things that are characteristic of all languages are characteristic as well of Hebrew and Greek.” (*Shaw*)
 - Words have *semantic range* – the same word can have a variety of meanings
 - Words are subject to *semantic development* – the same word can change its meaning over time
– words can acquire special meaning as technical terms

The Nature of Words

- The *etymology* (origin or original meaning) of a word is not always as helpful as it may seem:
 - The English word ‘prevent’ originates with the Latin *prae* (before) + *venire* (come).
 - In the 1600s, it still had this meaning: “For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep.” (1 Th 4.15)
 - Yet in the 400 years since, ‘prevent’ has come to mean “to stop, to inhibit, to keep from happening”
 - Thus modern translations (ESV, NIV, NASB, NKJV) use ‘precede’ in 1 Thessalonians 4.15.
- When a word is *relatively rare*, it can be difficult to ascertain its meaning:
 - In Genesis 6.14, God commands Noah to build an ark of ‘gopher’ wood. This is the only occurrence of the word in all of known Hebrew literature. ‘Cypress’ (NIV) is just an educated guess based on a proposed emendation to the original text. Nobody is really sure.
- Words can also take on special meanings as *technical terms*:
 - ‘Synagogue’ originally meant “gathering place,” and is used in the Greek OT to refer to a gathering of waters (Gen 1.9) or stones (Job 8.17). Yet by the time of the NT, it meant specifically a place of worship.
 - ‘Lord’ (*kurios*) sometimes has a generic sense (Mk 12.9, Lk 12.43, Jn 4.11 – ‘owner,’ ‘master,’ or ‘sir’). But it was used throughout the Greek OT to translate ‘YHWH,’ and is used to refer to God (Mt 1.20) and Jesus (Jn 20.18). “It is fair, then to conclude that in the common title ‘the Lord Jesus Christ’ in the New Testament, we are to understand that Jesus Christ is the YHWH of the Old Testament.” (*Shaw*)

Words in Context

- In interpreting the words of the Bible, we follow the rules of *usus loquendi* (use in speaking)
- The most basic rule is that words generally have one meaning in any one context:
 - In some contexts, the Greek word *sarx* ('flesh') refers simply to the physical body (1Cor 15.39).
 - In other contexts, it refers to the "animal aspect" of man – our physicality (Rom 9.8)
 - Other places, it clearly refers to the sinful aspects of human nature (Rom 7.14)
 - Yet *only one of these definitions fits in any one of these passages* – this is the general rule.
- However, sometimes the Bible deliberately uses words in a 'loaded' sense – multiple meanings in one use:
 - The Greek word *anōthen* can mean 'again' or "from above."
 - In John 3.3, this word is used in a way that probably intends both senses – regeneration by the Spirit.
- There are also times when the Bible uses multiple meanings in multiple occurrences in one context:
 - Example: "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel..." (*Romans 9.6*)
 - The 1st occurrence refers to the ethnic nation, whereas the 2nd refers to the trans-ethnic "Israel of God" – those people from every nation who are God's people through faith (cf. Gal 3.7, 6.16)

Understanding the Words of Scripture

- Sometimes, a word or expression is defined by the Author in the immediate context:
 - "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, [=] equipped for every good work." (*2 Timothy 3.16-17*)
 - "But solid food is for the mature, [=] for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." (*Hebrews 5.14*)
- Other times, the subject and predicate of a sentence mutually define each other:
 - "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt [*mōrainō*], how shall its saltiness be restored?" (*Mt 5.13a*)
 - The verb *mōrainō* can mean "lost its taste" or "become foolish" (cf. Rom 1.22).
 - Yet here, the clear use of the verb to say something about 'salt' shows us the former sense is in view.
- The meaning of biblical words or expressions is also clarified through use of parallelism:
 - 'Parallelism' is when later words/expressions *develop, intensify, or contrast to* earlier expressions.
 - "...he has prepared for him his deadly weapons, making his [=] arrows fiery shafts." (*Psalms 7.13*)
- Outside of the immediate context, biblical words/expressions are clarified through parallel passages:
 - Such parallel passages may be *verbal* – the same word/expression occurring:
 - 2 Samuel 8.18 states that "David's sons were priests." But how, since they were of the tribe of Judah?
 - 1 Chronicles 18.17 explains: "David's sons were the chief officials in the service of the king."
 - This teaches us that *cohen* (2Sam 8.18) may refer to non-priests outside of the Aaronic priesthood.
 - Other parallel passages are based on parallel *facts* or *teaching*:
 - Matthew 8.5-13 records an instance of a centurion approaching Jesus and pleading for his servant.
 - The parallel account in Luke 7.1-10 gives a fuller picture: there were actually two conversations, and both took place using intermediaries – ie, the centurion never spoke directly to Jesus.
 - "The two accounts are not contradictory. Matthew has shortened his account. This also teaches us something that appears commonly in the Bible: That is, someone is said to do something if they do it themselves, or if they see to it that it is done. Thus, Matthew is right. The centurion did speak with Jesus, twice. The first conversation was through the Jewish elders, and the second was through his friends." (*Shaw*)

Literary Devices

- The Bible deliberately makes use of figurative (non-literal) language. Common types include:
 - Metaphor – a comparison stated as a fact – "the LORD is my rock" (*Psalms 18.2*)
 - Anthropomorphism – using human bodily metaphors for God – "the greatness of your arm" (*Exodus 15.16*)
 - Anthropopathism – ascribing human feelings to God – "the LORD was sorry" (*Genesis 6.6*):
 - "God's plan and his purposes are perfect, but when men make plans, and they turn out badly, we feel grief. The purpose of this language is to show us that God is accessible to us, that he not far from us. But it is figurative language. God neither grieves nor regrets." (*Shaw*)
 - Metonymy – referring to an object/concept using a related object/concept (*Luke 16.29, Acts 7.8*)
 - Synecdoche – using a part to refer to the whole – "by the sweat of your face" (*Genesis 3.19*)
- To identify figurative language, we pay attention to *genre* and *context*. "If you cannot, however, determine if the language is literal or figurative it may well be time to call on the aid of some reliable commentaries. There is always more wisdom in a multitude of counselors." (*Shaw*)