



UNDERSTANDING SCHOOLS OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

TO: LEGISLATORS

FROM: PASTOR RALPH DROLLINGER 661-803-7970 24/7/365

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Have you ever had someone respond to your biblical understanding of a matter with, “Well that’s a matter of your own interpretation.” How did you respond?

How should you respond? This study will provide the answer. I typically respond with, “What school of biblical interpretation do you subscribe to?” Such a question often earns a blank response.

How one interprets Scripture will largely determine their worldview, or it could be that one’s worldview largely determines how one interprets Scripture? Regardless of which is true, understanding the five leading schools of biblical interpretation is an important study, not only to better understand your own beliefs, but another’s interpretive approach – and how it affects their policy positions.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In my years of ministry, I have discovered that most people do not realize there are differing schools of biblical interpretation. In this study I will attempt to flesh out today's major hermeneutical camps. Hermeneutics comprises the art and science of scriptural interpretation. Why do we need to know about this? Because the way one interprets Scripture often relates to the justification of their worldview and the ensuing construct of policy formation. This study is foundational to ascertaining why people think the way they do.

Hermeneutics determines the methods, techniques, rules and principles which will best serve to arrive at the proper interpretation – authorial intent – of any part of the Bible. “What does the Bible mean when it says this?” is the vital question hermeneutics answers. Just as we need a proper interpretation of the United States Constitution, we need a learned discipline in order to be effective and congruous in discovering what each biblical author means by what he or she is saying.

The background of the word *hermeneutics* is quite interesting. Hermes was the Greek god who allegedly interpreted the message of the gods to mortals. Lest one think the word or idea of interpretation is a purely secular thought, the word is used in Luke 24:27 by Christ.

And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.

The English word **explained** in this passage is the Greek word *hermeneuo* meaning “to interpret.” It comes from the compound term *diermeneuo*.

Christ, the greatest interpreter or master of hermeneutics, is talking to the two disciples on the Emmaus Road. As He interprets from the Old Testament the things concerning Himself, their hearts burn within them (v. 32).

And they said to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?"

This passage illustrates a profound introductory point: If the Spirit-led believer uses proper hermeneutics sensitively and correctly as Christ did, this can lead to vital life-changing and policy changing results. Conversely, to misinterpret Scripture is to divest it of its self-proclaiming power per Hebrews 4:12:

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Hermeneutics is therefore a very important subject. One's hermeneutic will determine their worldview, and their world view may determine their hermeneutic. What follows is an evaluation of the five leading schools of hermeneutics. I will try to simplify and summarize this as best I can for quick and easy consumption. Can you spot which hermeneutic a fellow legislator may be incorporating as the basis for their policy positions?

II. THE ALLEGORICAL SCHOOL

A. INTRODUCTION

The allegorical method regards the literal, grammatical, historical sense of a passage as a mere starting point for discovering the hidden meaning which is deemed to be deeper, more profound, and more spiritual than the face-value meaning of the passage. Michaelson states in his analysis of this school that beneath the letter or the obvious is the real meaning: “What the original writer (of Scripture) is trying to say is ignored. *What the interpreter wants to say* becomes the only important factor.”¹ “Allegorizing is like a fog which at first



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renders objects indistinct and then finally blots them out altogether.”² It is accurate to say of this method that “imagination replaces observation.”³

B. HISTORY

There are many historic schools that are allegorical in nature: Greek, Jewish, Patristic (early church fathers), and Catholic. Philo (20 BC to A.D. 54), sought to give Scripture charm for unbelieving minds by discarding literal details that proved offensive by simply allegorizing those texts.

Later, Christians applied Philo’s principles to their own times. Some Patristic allegorists include Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Augustine.

C. EVALUATION

1. It is subjective; each man is a law unto himself.
2. It is rationalistic; the Scriptures are manipulated to suit man’s reason.
3. It obscures Scripture by imposing eisegesis in place of exegesis.

D. SUMMARY

Allegorists have distorted plain passages by reading in meanings that have no valid connection with the obvious, literal sense. The interpreter deems himself authoritative versus the author. It is imposition in place of exposition. Does the Bible really say what the interpreter thinks it says?

III. THE LITERAL SCHOOL

A. INTRODUCTION

Better and more completely known as the Grammatical-Historical-Normative school of interpretation, herein the meaning of Scripture is deemed to be the basic, customary, socially acknowledged designation of the terms used at the time they were penned. The literal sense is the basic

meaning that is supported by the grammatical and historical factors of the same time period.

This school is not characterized by letterism, or a wooden literalism.⁴ Rather, it allows for the author to utilize figures of speech, such as parables, metaphors, hyperbole, irony, euphemisms, paronomasia, proverbs, personification, oxymorons, etc. In Latin this is referred to as *usus loquendi*, the semantics within a speech culture. Ramm in his classic textbook on Hermeneutics calls this “the literal stratum of language.” Again, the Literal school of hermeneutics recognizes the existence of such communication devices.

B. HISTORY

Ezra, the Jews of Palestine and Christ. Chrysostom. Luther and Calvin. Ezra in particular is the first OT example of this hermeneutical usage. One may remember our studies from the Book of Nehemiah in years past: The Jews had been exiled in Babylonia and had lost their native tongue; they were now speaking Aramaic. Ezra therefore assembled the Hebrew people and explained the real intended meaning of the OT Hebrew text to them. Later, it was the exegetical (lit. “to exit from”) approach to interpretation that set the stage for the Reformation, as Calvin and Luther explicated what was actually in the Greek New Testament (which had recently become available to the common man via the invention of the printing press).

C. EVALUATION

1. This is the usual secular practice of the interpretation of literature. (A Supreme Court Justice who applies this approach to constitutional interpretation is known as an “Originalist”, versus an “Activist” who reads his or her views into the document).

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2. A large part of the Bible makes sense this way.

3. Exercises a control on the imagination. Creates a discipline to discover objective authorial intent, versus subjective conjecture.

D. SUMMARY

“That is the true method of interpretation which puts Scripture alongside of Scripture in a right and proper way.”⁵ “It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.”⁶

IV. THE DEVOTIONAL SCHOOL**A. INTRODUCTION**

This view regards the Bible as a rich book primarily given to nourish the spiritual life of the believer. Emphasis is placed on the edifying aspect of Scripture as it relates to immediate application.

B. HISTORY

Medieval mystics. Pietists, Puritans, Wesley, Matthew Henry, Quakers. F.B. Meyer, A.W. Tozer. To develop one, the Pietism movement was a reaction to cold, stale, dead doctrine in the late 1600’s and early 1700’s centered in reaction to German Lutheranism.

C. EVALUATION

1. In essence it seeks application which is essential.

2. There are dangers in abuse; therefore there must be a balance between the whole of Scripture and isolated application. Abuses include allegorizing, excessive typology, and neglect of prior doctrinal bases and/or the context of the applicable passage. In

simplicity one can “parachute in on a passage” without regard for context, thereby possibly misinterpreting the authorial meaning.

D. SUMMARY

These writers tend to pass over technical problems, difficult passages and doctrinal emphases in exchange for the applicable, devotional thought that furthers godliness in the life of the individual. Devotional hermeneutics tends to underemphasize scholarship for gain of a quickly digestible, sweet edifying idea.

Stemming from this approach to God’s Word, the door is open to eisogetical, typological interpretations. A typology “differs from a symbol or an allegory. It is a representation of an actual, historical reference. Often it relates to analogous fulfillment in Christ of OT stories and parallels. This was a very popular approach to interpretation in the Middle Ages.”⁷ Conversely, worthy of consideration here is what Paul said in Acts 20:27: “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.” Paul got Scripture right. So should we.

Similar to the athlete who habitually consumes candy bars alone for quick energy instead of eating a balanced, high-protein diet, an approach which glosses over difficult passages and issues does not benefit one over the long-haul, neither in personal edification or in policy formation.

V. THE LIBERAL SCHOOL**A. INTRODUCTION**

Typically, the one who poses the retort, “But that’s a matter of your own interpretation” subscribes to this camp.

This view holds that human intellect is adequate in itself to select between what is acceptable and what is erroneous in Scripture. This school of



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interpretation reasons that the Bible can be true only when it harmonizes with man's reason. The final seat of authority is therefore in man. The final arbitrator of truth therefore is not God's objective revelation, but man's subjective authorization.

Unfortunately there are about 35 "Christian" denominations that subscribe to this hermeneutic. Nationally and internationally The National Council of Churches and The World Council of Churches hold to this interpretive approach.

The essence of liberal biblical interpretation is that human intellect is adequate in itself to select between what is true and false in the Bible. The Bible can only be true when it harmonizes with man's independent reasoning. Hence, "The final and supreme authority is transferred from God to the throne-room of the human mind."⁸

B. HISTORY

Systems of men such as Hobbs and Spinoza. F.C. Baur and Tübingen School of Criticism. Albert Schweitzer and J.M. Robinson on the quest for the historical Jesus. Many others in early America, such as H.E. Fosdick.

C. EVALUATION

1. It is rationalistic.
2. Inspiration and the supernatural are both redefined. Since the mind of man cannot explain miracles for instance, the miracles of the Bible must therefore be discounted.
3. The presupposition of human accommodation reduces, redefines or erases much Bible doctrine.

D. SUMMARY

The Scripture states that the mind of man is tainted by sin, and is less than perfect. With a liberal hermeneutic man quickly and arrogantly becomes

the judge of Scripture, instead of Scripture being the judge of man.

VI. THE NEO-ORTHODOX SCHOOL

A. INTRODUCTION

Neo-Orthodoxy is an interpretive approach which denies propositional revelation and employs the premise that the Bible is only infallible pointing back to when revelation occurred or forward to when it can occur subjectively: "when God speaks to you through it." Neo-orthodoxy states: the Bible has instrumental authority because it is an instrument pointing to Christ, but it does not have inherent authority.

B. HISTORY

Karl Barth. Since its founding, Neo-orthodoxy has now splintered into several movements: Brunner...Niebuhr.

C. EVALUATION

1. Denies the Bible *is* the Word of God; claims it *becomes* the Word of God when God speaks to a man and he responds.
2. Only that part of the Bible that witnesses to Christ is binding, and the seat of authority for deciding this is in man's mind and his feelings.
3. Many Bible episodes are treated mythologically, i.e. as teaching serious theological principles but not as having literally occurred.

D. SUMMARY

In essence, this school ends up destroying objective spiritual experience because it is based on (by their own undoing) an unworthy, unreliable book. Keep in mind that both liberal and neo-orthodoxy were founded on supposedly biblically-contradictory



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archeological and scientific evidence as it appeared several hundred years ago. These respective disciplines and their discoveries have thence validated biblical accuracy time and time again. Accordingly the human-authority basis of these interpretive approaches is formulated – from and on – myopic and now outdated research. (Such a stand-alone statement begs for several detailing Bible studies in the future 😊).

VII. CONCLUSION

The Grammatical, Historical, Normative school of hermeneutics should be the thinking person's choice. It allows the Bible to be both innocent until proven guilty as well as what follows from that proposition: a declarative and objective book versus a refutable and subjective one. This approach – one of giving the benefit of the doubt to the integrity of the author(s) is the usual practice of interpreting secular literature (both ancient and modern). It is the only school with a controlling force over eisegesis – man's imagination foisted onto the Bible.

When a friend/fellow legislator quips, “that is a matter of your own interpretation” ask what hermeneutical school they subscribe to – and then be prepared to debate the aforementioned merits, or lack thereof – assuming they don't respond with a blank stare.

¹ Mickelsen, A.B. *Interpreting the Bible*, pp. 28

[emphasis supplied]

² Ibid, p. 37

³ Rosscup, James E. Unpublished *Hermeneutics Syllabus* (Rev. April, 1999). A large part of this study has stemmed and is quoted from this godly man's work.

⁴ Ramm, Bernard *Protestant Biblical*

Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) p. 123-127

⁵ Luther, Works, Philadelphia Edition, Vol. III. P. 334

⁶ Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, Preface

⁷ Grenz, Guretzki and Nordling *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downer Grover: Inter Varsity Press, 1999) p. 117

⁸ Rosscup, p. 41