Rule 8: Figures of Speech

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Hermeneutics: How to Read and Understand the Bible

RULE #8: Learn the Basic Figures of Speech.

I. The Bible has many figures of speech, which requires learning or reviewing the various forms.
   A. What is a figure of speech? A use of words in other than their ordinary sense, place, manner, or arrangement, and intending other than their straightforward, literal meaning. A figure of speech is a designed and legitimate departure from the laws of language, in order to emphasize what is said.
   B. Why use figures of speech? They add beauty, variety, and force to a composition. They are for the purpose of emphasis. Therefore, we cannot ignore or neglect them.
   C. The real sense and truth are found in the figure, not in the bare, literal word meanings.
   D. Ignoring figures of speech has led to great errors, as some take the literal figuratively and others take the figurative literally. It is absolutely important that we understand these figures and learn to recognize and understand them. Lord, open our eyes to see.
   E. The Holy Spirit chose the words we read in the Bible, so we are wickedly foolish to despise or minimize the figures He chose for our learning (I Cor 2:13; II Pet 1:21).
   F. So much for those who swear devotion to the Buddha of literalism and primary definitions, while kneeling over the trapdoor of false interpretations and heresy. C.I. Scofield and his slavish followers are dead in the water with much of the Bible.
   G. We should have a simple approach to identifying and interpreting figures of speech.
      1. We conclude we have a figure when a literal approach results in absurdity.
      2. We then must determine which figure is being used and the proper sense of it.
      3. We determine what the Spirit's sense in the text is by His use of the figure.
      4. We then convert the figure into literal language to identify the precise meaning.

II. **Simile** is a figure of speech that draws comparison by correspondence or resemblance.
   A. It is most always identified by the use of the comparative words "like" or "as."
   B. It is hardly a figure of speech (see above), since its words are to be taken quite literally.
   C. Your objective is to determine what aspect of the comparison makes the intended point.
   D. Similes state a resemblance directly; metaphors actually transfer the representation.
   E. "He is like a bull in a china shop," "He is as mad as a hornet," "He is as proud as a peacock," and "He moves like a snail" are common examples of similes.
   F. Consider – the bull is not being referenced for strength, weight, appetite, or lust. What?
   G. Simple Bible examples can be found in Psalm 17:8; 102:6; 131:2; Isaiah 1:9; 53:6; Matthew 7:24-27; 9:36; 10:16; 23:27; I Peter 1:24; 2:25.

H. Consider an extended simile – similitude – Jesus used describing hearers (Mat 7:24-27).

I. The word “like” occurs 581 times and “as” 2872 times, so there are very many similes.

J. Intelligent communication is the ability to make comparisons that educate the hearer.

III. **Metaphor** is a figure of speech that makes a comparison by actual representation.

A. It is clearly a figure of speech, since the comparison is not stated directly, but implied.

B. The comparison is transferred from the comparative objective to the subject object.

C. A metaphor boldly declares one thing IS another thing, even though it is not that thing.

D. “He is like a clumsy ox” is a simile. But “He is a clumsy ox” is a metaphor.

E. “I am a rock; I am an island” are two simple metaphors from Paul Simon’s famous song.

F. Extended metaphors can be called parables, allegories, or apologues (Gal 4:21-31).

G. Bible examples are Deut 4:20; Ps 23:1; 84:11; Mat 5:13-14; John 6:35; 8:12; 10:9; 15:5.

H. Consider the great heresies by missing the metaphor in the words, “This is my body.”

IV. **Hypocatastasis** is a figure of speech where the comparison is by implication; it is only implied.

A. “You are like a beast” is a simile; “You are a beast” is a metaphor; but “Beast!” is a hypocatastasis, since the subject of the comparison is only implied.

B. Bible examples are Psalm 22:16; Matthew 15:13; 15:26; 16:6; John 2:19; Acts 20:29.

C. Consider the force and propriety of the hypocatastasis Jesus used in Matthew 16:23. From a blessing of revelation to a satanic thought, Peter was totally dependent on Jesus.

V. **Metonymy** is a figure of speech where an attribute or something closely related is substituted for the thing itself.

1. It is the substitution of one noun for another based on a relationship the two have.
2. When we say “step on the gas,” we are substituting the substance controlled by the accelerator for the accelerator itself. We do not intend anyone to stand on a gas can.
3. When we say, “He really used his head,” we are substituting the location of his brain for his brain itself. We are not intending anyone to understand the literal use of his skull.
4. “Wine is a mocker,” “the rod gives wisdom,” and “the tongue is a fire” are examples of the cause substituted for the effect (Prov 20:1; 29:15; James 3:6). Missing the figure has caused many to presume falsely that wine itself is a mocker, when only its abuse mocks.
5. Consider also Lev 19:32; Deut 17:6; II King 4:40; Prov 12:15,18,19; 15:3; Isaiah 2:4; Amos 4:6; Matt 16:19; Luke 16:29; Rom 13:4; I Cor 10:21.

VI. **Synecdoche** is a figure of speech where a part is substituted for the whole or the whole is substituted for a part. It is a figure of substitution.

A. What do we mean when we say, “All hands on deck”? “I like your wheels”?

B. There are many different types of synecdoche, and the Bible has a very large number of them; but we shall limit our survey here to a few examples.

C. Bible examples are Gen 12:5; Psalm 7:16; Pro 20:30; Luke 11:42; Phil 3:19; I Tim 6:10.

D. Consider a text like Genesis 4:4. Some have waxed eloquent about Abel and the fat of animals used

under Moses' law, but it should not take much to see the synecdoche here for the fattest of his flock. Abel brought some of the fattest and best of his firstlings to the Lord. Read Genesis 45:18 in this same sense.

VII. **Hyperbole** is a figure of speech consisting in exaggerated or extravagant speech used to create a strong impression and not intended to be understood literally.
   A. When we say, "You scared me to death," we exaggerate our fright. "I could eat a horse," "You're as slow as a snail," and "That is as old as the hills," are further examples of hyperbole. The exaggeration is obvious enough that wise readers are not confused.
   B. The cities of Canaan were not literally "walled up to heaven" (Deut 1:28), and the Amalekites and Midianites did not have numberless camels (Judges 7:12).
   C. David did not literally make his bed swim with tears (Ps 6:6). Do you believe it?
   D. "The world itself could not contain the books" exaggerates the amount of material John humbly admits he did not include in his gospel (John 21:25).
   E. Revelation 7:9 should not be used to calculate the minimum number of the redeemed by calculating the counting ability of Methusaleh.
   F. Consider also Genesis 13:16; Joshua 11:4; II Samuel 1:23; I Kings 18:10; Psalm 107:26; 119:136; Jeremiah 15:8; Matthew 7:3-5; John 3:26; John 12:19.

VIII. **Irony** is a figure of speech using words to express something other than, and especially the opposite of, the literal meaning.
   A. When a parent says to a drunken teenager, "Go ahead and ruin your life with alcohol," he is actually expressing very strong opposition to such a thing.
   B. I wonder how much the primary definitions of the words in an irony mean?
   C. Consider several examples that are easy to detect (Judges 10:14; II Samuel 6:20; I Kings 18:27; 22:15; Job 12:1-2; Ezekiel 20:39; Matthew 22:16; 26:45; 27:29; I Cor 4:8,10; II Cor 12:13).
   D. Consider several examples less well known (Gen 3:22; Eccl 11:9; I Corinthians 6:3-4).

IX. **Ellipsis** is the intentional omission of words to add beauty, brevity, and force to sentences.
   A. The missing words are supplied from the context or the nature of the subject considered.
   B. The missing words are not left out by accident, nor does their omission cause confusion.
   C. Find the ellipsis: Sherri loves music more than I. Does Sherri love music more than she loves me? Or does Sherri love music more than I love music?
   D. Bible examples include "God of" (Ps 24:6), "good" (Pr 18:22), "rich" (Pr 19:1), "that is surety" (Pr 20:16), "it is a snare" (Pr 20:25), "is … to be chosen" (Pr 22:1), "ordinary food … wine" (Matt 11:18-19), "gave the loaves" (Matt 14:19), "to Jerusalem … at Jerusalem" (Acts 18:22), "do mind" (Rom 8:5), "in the faith … only" (Rom 14:2), "in order to be saved" (Gal 5:2), "at a time" (I Tim 3:2).
   E. Galatians 5:4 is a very controversial passage, as many use it to teach losing your salvation. But it contains several ellipses. "Christ is become of no SAVING effect unto you, whosoever of you FALSELY THINK YOU are justified by the law; ye are fallen from THE RIGHT UNDERSTANDING OF grace."
   F. Galatians 5:17 is not teaching the inability of the regenerate man to do good. It is teaching the

constant conflict that makes obedience a struggle. Note the ellipsis to help the sense. “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would OTHERWISE DO OR DO EASILY WITHOUT CONFLICT.”

G. A very controversial passage, I Corinthians 15:29, is solved with an ellipsis in both the first and third phrases of the verse. The Mormons take this single text for their manmade doctrine of baptism by proxy for dead relatives. “Else what shall they do which are baptized for THE RESURRECTION OF the dead, if the dead rise not at all? why are they then baptized for THE RESURRECTION OF the dead?
   1. We know that the context of the text is absolutely and strongly the resurrection.
   2. We know baptism is a figure of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (I Peter 3:21).
   3. We know Paul’s practical argument here, so we supply the words for the sense.
   4. The middle clause demands that the outer clauses be implying the resurrection.
   5. Scripture is silent of teaching or implying baptism for the souls of the dead.
   6. We know that ellipsis is a figure of speech in the Bible by numerous examples.

X. **Euphemism** is the use of good or acceptable words for bad or offensive things or subjects.
   A. We use them all the time i.e. “collateral damage” for killing civilians, “sanitation engineer” for trash collector, “revenue enhancement” for tax increase, and so forth.
   B. They are chosen to be less shocking and more acceptable, especially in intimate matters.
   C. But we should never use them to lessen or whitewash sin, as is common today i.e. “an affair” for adultery, “abortion” for baby murder or infanticide, “partying” for fornication, “euthanasia” for parent murder or patricide, “gay” for sodomite, “hyperactive kid” for disobedient child, or “independent thinker” for a froward scorner.
   D. Bible examples include Genesis 4:1; 15:15; 18:11; 24:2; 26:8; 31:35; Exodus 21:10; Numbers 5:22; Deut 21:14; 23:13; 25:11; Judges 3:24; I Samuel 5:9; 24:3; II Samuel 16:21-22; 18:32; I Kings 2:6; Psalm 78:66; Eccl 12:5; Isaiah 3:17; 7:20; Ezekiel 16:25-26; 23:20; Daniel 5:6; Matt 1:25; I Cor 7:1-5; 11:30; I Tim 5:17; Heb 13:4; Jude 1:7.

XI. **Dysphemism** (opposite of euphemism) uses harsh/offensive words instead of pleasant or acceptable ones.
   A. This is crude speech expressing passion or vulgarity or used to make a strong argument.
   B. Compare “water closet” or “crap-house” for toilet – euphemism or dysphemism.
   C. Bible examples include I Sam 25:22; II Kings 18:27; Psalm 50:22; 58:6; Prov 30:17; Ezek 23:3; Mal 2:3; Matt 5:29-30; Phil 3:8 (contrast Deut 23:13).

XII. **Anthropomorphisms** give physical attributes to God, which graphically present His character.
   A. These are metaphors, but they are special comparisons teaching us God’s nature.
   B. Psalm 17:8 describes God hiding us under His wings, as a mother hen cares for chicks.
   C. Other Bible examples, among many, are II Chron 16:9; Job 4:9; Ps 36:7; 91:4; Is 62:8.

XIII. **Personification** is where an abstraction or spiritual concept or thing is given personal traits.
   A. Solomon creates Lady Wisdom in Proverbs to compete with the strange woman.

B. He follows this plan for chapters (1:20-33; 2:4; 3:15-18; 4:5-13; 8:1-36; 9:1-5).

C. Missing the personification causes many to hallucinate about eternal sonship from the language of Proverbs 8:22-31, where abstract wisdom only is found.

D. Rome and the Catholic Church are personified as a woman, as is the church elsewhere.

XIV. **Parable** is an extended simile or metaphor with the comparison vague enough to make it dark.

A. Parables are not earthly stories with heavenly meanings for the simple to learn the truth.

B. Parables are metaphors hiding truth from all but the wise (Ps 49:4; 78:2; Matt 13:1-23).

C. The key in a parable is to identify the object of the lesson and avoid confusing details.

1. The Good Samaritan simply answered the question, "Who is my neighbor?"
2. It is not an allegorical presentation of the gospel i.e. the two pence are not the Old and New Testaments provided for the recovered sinner at the local church!
3. It is not a lesson on how to pick up hitchhikers on the interstate for witnessing.
4. The Prodigal Son simply condemned the self-righteousness of the Pharisees.
5. It is not a lesson on how parents ought to go running to take back rebel children.
6. The lesson is in the attitude of the older son, not the profligacy of the younger.
7. The Parable of the Sower told hearers of three careless and one noble response.
8. It is not a lesson for how to plow your fields and rid them of noxious hindrances.
9. Nor is it a lesson on which grounds are regenerate and which are unregenerate.
10. The Parable of the Unjust Steward exhorted for spiritual goals above natural.
11. It is not a lesson that stealing, fraud, and embezzlement are approved at times.
12. It is not a lesson for ministers to be financially adept in case they lose a church.

XV. Consider the importance of finding the figure of speech in the crucial words "This is my body."

A. These words, from I Corinthians 11:24, have been wrested by various denominations to justify their interpretation of the doctrine there.

B. Remember that millions have given their lives based on how they interpreted this text.

C. The Catholics are literalists. They deny any figure of speech here. When the magical words "This is my body" are spoken ("hoc est corpus meum" in Latin), the bread actually becomes the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus Christ through the damnable heresy of transubstantiation.

D. The Lutherans see synecdoche. The figure of speech is in the word "body." It is part of the body and bread combination that exists in the consecrated wafer by the damnable heresy of consubstantiation.

E. The Presbyterians see metonymy. The figure of speech is in the word "body." Christ's use of "body" is to be associated with the real offer of Himself spiritually and really and indeed in the sacrament.

F. The truth is a metaphor. The figure of speech is not in the word "body" but in the word "is." It is a comparison by representation. The bread represents the body of Jesus Christ.

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