Obstacles

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Hermeneutics: How to Read and Understand the Bible

Obstacles to Understanding

I. Slavish literalism is one of the easiest and surest ways to heresy in interpreting the Scriptures.
   A. Many have made wooden literalism either their chief rule or only rule of interpretation.
   B. Literalism is advertised and promoted with various good words to deceive the simple.
   C. Some say, “The Bible means what it says and says what it means.”
   D. Some say, “Make sure you know what the Bible says before you try to find out what the Bible means.”
   E. Some say, “If we don’t use primary definitions for each word, we could end up with 14,356,692,381,404 permutations and combinations of interpretation.
   F. Some say, “We speak when the Bible speaks, and we are silent when the Bible is silent.”
   G. While these statements may have some little merit if carefully defined and qualified, there is a dangerous conceit and naiveté about them that disdains recognizing context, Scriptural divisions, figures of speech, etc.
   H. C.I. Scofield was a great master of this heretical school of Bible interpretation, and many of the adherents of the literal school are his disciples, directly or indirectly. Obviously, he needed a literal hermeneutic to promote Jewish fables of a latter day restoration of Israel and forecast the details of World War He was capable of dividing kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven; and he also divided the day of Christ and the day of the Lord. Believe it!
   I. Those who make a great ballyhoo over primary definitions often modify their slavery to such meanings by several exceptions, as they know the method is fraught with danger.
   J. Do not use primary definitions when … the text says to use a secondary sense.
   K. Do not use primary definitions when … they will create a contradiction.
   L. Do not use primary definitions when … they will create an absurdity.
   M. Consider this reasoning carefully. Though they cry loudly that primary definitions are the chief rule, or the only rule, of hermeneutics, their own definition of the rule implies that at least our first three rules are more important than their chief one. For it is impossible to determine whether the three exceptions apply or not to a passage without first …
   N. Reconciling it to the rest of the Bible,
   O. Considering its context, and
   P. Comparing it with related passages.
   Q. These three restrictions are the first rules of interpretation in this study.

R. Most of you learned by the second grade it was wise to ask for a word to be used in a sentence before spelling it. We understood then that context determines words and their definitions. Consider the word “board.” Context dictates whether it means a piece of wood, daily meal provision, a group of persons having managerial powers, a device for posting notices, a flat surface for playing games, getting on a boat or ship, the hard cover of a book, etc., etc.

S. The primary definitions of words like “salvation,” which means to be delivered, is of exceeding little help, since the sense of the deliverance is determined by other rules.

T. The emphasis of reading and using “primary definitions” is to quit before interpretation. With undue emphasis on the dictionary, we are precluded or discouraged from using the other rules that truly help us find the sense of words rather than their mere sound.

U. The Bible often uses secondary senses of words or concepts – knowing the difference is crucial to understanding (Matt 9:24; 16:12; 26:61). When we say often, we mean it. The Bible is a spiritual book and therefore uses physical words like “flesh,” “death,” “life,” and others to communicate spiritual information. It most likely has more secondary senses than any other book written except for manifestly esoteric writings.

V. The Bible assumes readers know common meanings (Matt 22:45; Heb 8:13; 12:26-27).

W. To read the primary definitions of a dictionary into Nehemiah 8:8 due to the words “the sense,” is at best pitiful, and at worst damnable.

X. “Primary definitions” (as some call them) are commonly understood meanings of words. Dictionaries do not determine these meanings: common people using words determine their meanings, which is why dictionaries are always obsolete. Language is always changing. If primary definitions are commonly understood by common people, and the people heard the reading (8:3), then they had no need for any priest or Levite to give them word definitions. Every one of them had known that “sense” of the reading since childhood.

Y. It is entertaining to think of Ezra reading and giving “the sense” in such a way to Deuteronomy 23:18. They think he would have said, “Now the primary definition of dog is ‘The simple word.'” If he was a little more honest than most of them, he would have added, “A quadruped of the genus Canis, of which wild species or forms are found in various parts of the world, and numerous races or breeds, varying greatly in size, shape, and colour, occur in a domesticated or semi-domesticated state in almost all countries.'” What a stupid waste of time! The actual sense of this word is determined by context (23:17), which shows that it intends a male sex pervert, or a sodomite. And such a definition is not even in the O.E.D., the most exhaustive source on the English language.

Z. If Scripture is a collection of words that simply requires a dictionary to interpret it, then the gift of the ministry (Rom 12:6-7), the work of the Spirit (Eph 1:17-18), the blessing of wisdom (James 1:5), the work of Ezra (Ezra 7:6), the prayer of David (Ps 119:18), the division of concepts (II Tim 2:15), and every other help of interpretation prescribed in the Bible is superfluous and vain. Instead of seeking knowledge at the lips of ministers, the saints of God simply need to buy a dictionary. With their two holy books, knowledge is easily available for all.

AA. Scripture teaches us that divisions must be made in arriving at “the sense” of the Bible (II Chron 19:10; II Tim 2:15). And if ministers do not rightly divide beyond “primary definitions,” then they shall

be shamed by their ridiculous interpretations of verses. Consider the foolish interpretations of such men in the explanations already given of II Cor 6:13; II Tim 1:13; 4:2; Rev 7:9; etc.

AB. Once the dictionary is exalted to a position equal or above the context and other proper determinants of meaning, we enter a whole new field of controversy. Which dictionary is the best? the most spiritual? the most reliable? the most dependable to give the interpretation we want? the most complex to let us choose whatever etymology or definition we need? What actually is a "primary definition"? What emphasis should we give the ancestral Egyptian etymology of a word? Is the American spelling as spiritual as the British spelling? Would we fellowship a minister who only used a Webster's? Why not substitute the word's definition in the inspired text, even if it does violate the grammar?

AC. Those who worship at the altar of "primary definitions" will squeal long and loud, if you ever press them with their own rule. Ask them to kiss their congregation (Rom 16:16). Ask them to pray as the Lord commanded (Luke 11:1-4). Ask them what instrument they use to beat their children, and where do they apply it (Prov 10:13; 22:15; 26:3; etc.). Ask them what definition number they have to go to for "primary meanings" as a definition of "sense" (Neh 8:8). Ask them to interpret Ecclesiastes 10:4 with primary definitions. Ask them how highly they should emphasize the rule of interpretation found in II Peter 1:20.

II. Idolatrous worship of the "originals" is another popular and destructive obstacle to learning.

A. This heresy claims – read it in almost any confession of "faith" – that only the "original manuscripts" are inspired by God and to be consulted for determining true faith and practice. It takes only a little thinking to realize that such men have effectively neutered any opposition, since no one, not even an apostle, ever saw the originals.

B. Beyond the issues of manuscript evidence, original inspiration, textual criticism, and other diversions, many argue that knowledge of Hebrew and Greek can shed profound light on the Scriptures. This claim is purely the hocus-pocus of a trade group (textual critics and seminary professors) attempting to justify its existence with a science falsely so called. Consider their two most well known claims:

C. These liars claim: The word "wine" in the King James Version is inaccurate, as any passage approving its use is speaking of unfermented grape juice, which is easily seen in the Hebrew or Greek.

D. This argument is the drivel and twaddle of teetotalers, who, finding the Bible full of commendations for wine, must corrupt the Scriptures.

E. Since "wine" has never meant grape juice in English, we must wonder why the translators used the specific word for the alcoholic beverage.

F. When we consider their claim directly, we find that each use of "wine" with a context indicates an intoxicating beverage i.e. Gen 9:21; 19:33; Jer 23:9; Luke 10:34; Eph 5:18; I Tim 5:23; Titus 1:7; 2:3; I Pet 4:3.

G. We also find that the same Hebrew or Greek word is used for both passages commending its usage and passages condemning its usage. Consider that Melchizedek's wine (Gen 14:18) was the same as Noah's (Gen 9:21) and Lot's (Gen 19:33). Consider that David (II Sam 6:19) and Esther (Esther 5:6)

used the wine not to be seen (Prov 23:31). Consider that Solomon urged (Ecc 9:7) and Abigail gave (I Sam 25:18) the wine that mocks (Prov 20:1). And the Lord Christ (John 2:3) and Timothy (I Tim 5:23) used the wine Paul avoided (Rom 14:21).

H. These liars also claim: A profound and significant exchange occurred between Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-17, based on the difference between the two Greek words Jesus used for love – agape and phileo, which English readers miss.

I. While moving sermons have been preached from this text and these words, it is no evidence or proof that Jesus or Peter understood any difference in these words.

J. Without resorting to classical Greek literature to compare the usage of the two words, it is difficult to see any great difference in their meaning by the Spirit's use – they both mean love and affection.

K. Compare the following verses and see if they are not actually synonyms: Heb 12:6 and Rev 3:19; John 3:35 and John 5:20; I Cor 16:22 and II Cor 5:14; John 11:5 and John 11:36; John 20:2 and John 21:7.

L. It is impossible to use the "original manuscripts" with any degree of integrity.

M. Those who place such confidence in the "original manuscripts" deny that God providentially preserves translations, but they simultaneously assume that God does providentially preserve copies. The best we have in any Greek New Testament is a copy of a copy of a copy of a copy. . . . The "originals" were never put in a book at any time in any place, contrary to naive worshippers, who crawl to the altars of manuscript evidence and textual criticism to light candles.

N. While the "original manuscripts" are always spoken of as a singular source of unbiased truth straight from the finger of God, the truth is that every such dreamer must choose from at least 27 different Greek New Testaments existing today. Is that improvement? Is the Textus Receptus or Nestle's the "original"? Or is it Tischendorf's third edition (he made eight different attempts at least)? Erasmus's second edition? Or Stephen's fourth? Or the New World Greek text?

O. Once you flip a penny enough times to figure out which Hebrew or Greek text you will use, then you must start flipping all over again to determine which lexicons you will use to guess at the word meanings of two dead languages.

P. While these devotees of Greek and Hebrew accuse us of blind faith in believing God can providentially preserve translations, they themselves must exercise at least as much faith to believe we have God's canon in sixty-six books, without any assistance from them or their professors. Give God the glory!

Q. Since none of these men really know much about the Greek of Paul's generation, they must waste incredible amounts of time reading Greek classical literature in order to try and determine word meanings in a dead language. This becomes painfully inconsistent with their knowledge that the N.T. was written in koine Greek rather than classical Greek.

R. Using Greek or Hebrew to try to understand our English Bible is like an American trying to assist his understanding of an English repair manual for his Toyota by studying one written in Japanese, when he doesn't have much more than a clue about the Japanese language. It is actually worse, since the Hebrew and Greek the Scriptures were written in have no existing standard.

S. In this matter of the "originals," believers must place their faith in one of two beings – either a man

dedicated to the wisdom of this world who believes it his right to question and alter the Word of God … or God Himself as the Preserver of His Scriptures in the English language, substantiated by accuracy and fruit.

T. This heresy is nothing more than a restoration of the priest craft of the Dark Ages, when the priests of Rome (until the 1960s) performed all Masses in Latin and forbid the people to read the Bible. Today it is pastors and professors, who tell their people that without knowledge of Hebrew and Greek they cannot know the Scriptures with confidence. God forbid!

U. This whole matter of manuscript evidence and textual criticism is science falsely so called and the profitless vanity of those God will destroy (I Cor 1:18-20; 3:18-20; I Tim 6:20). Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer (textual critic)?

V. No man in the Bible ever read from the originals, referred to the originals, or recommended the originals for other saints to rely on. When men read and studied the Scriptures, they studied copies of copies, translations of copies, and copies of translations (Acts 8:27-28; 17:11; II Tim 3:15).

III. Some few – an obvious one or two – have tried to give II Timothy 1:13 a hermeneutical value.

A. One has claimed that the "form of sound words" refers to the arrangement of words on a printed page i.e. left and right justified printing; and another has claimed that they emphasize the grammatical construction of the words together in sentences.

B. While neither view gives much meaning to the text and should hardly bother a true student of the Scriptures, it is just such travesties of interpretation that this study is designed to eliminate.

1. We should first interpret sound words. Sound. In full accordance with fact, reason, or good sense; founded on true or well-established grounds; free from error, fallacy, or logical defect; good, strong, valid.
    a. Sound words are good, strong, valid, true, right, proven, established, honest, etc.
    b. Scripture uses "sound" for doctrine (I Tim 1:10; Tit 1:9; 2:1; II Tim 4:3).
    c. Scripture uses "sound" for the godly speech of another minister (Tit 2:8).
    d. Other verses use "good" (I Tim 4:6) and "wholesome" (I Tim 6:3) as synonyms.
2. We should next interpret the form of a thing. The form of a thing intends (1) its shape and appearance, (2) its likeness or resemblance, (3) its particular character or nature, or (4) its orderly arrangement of parts.
    a. Consider "another form" (Mark 16:12), the form of God and of a servant (Phil 2:6-7), the form of knowledge (Rom 2:20), the form of doctrine (Rom 6:17), and the form of godliness (II Tim 3:5). The use in Mark must be given definition one; the uses in Philippians 2:7 and II Timothy 3:5 definition two; and the other New Testament references definition three.
    b. When definition three is used, you should be able to delete "form" from the sentence and not change the meaning. For instance, Romans 2:20 would read, "which hast knowledge and truth in the law."
    c. The word "form" in this context must be a word of emphasis meaning the particular character, nature, structure, or constitution of sound words. Paul could have said, "Hold fast sound words," but he didn't want Timothy to repeat or mimic him verbatim! The

inspired text emphasizes Timothy's consideration of the nature and character of sound words that he had heard from Paul, which kind of words he was to use himself.

d. This text is the same ministerial advice as I Timothy 6:3 and Titus 2:1,8.

IV. Some have tried to give Romans 12:6 a hermeneutical role. They claim that this verse teaches the interpretation of Scripture must be (1) in proportion with the rest of Scripture or (2) in agreement with "the analogy of the faith" or the complete Divine revelation.

A. While the point of agreement may be true (rule #1), it is not taught in this place.

B. In order to make this interpretation, they must change "proportion" to "analogy" and "faith" to "the faith." With these changes made, they propose that the gift of prophecy was the duty of interpretation or teaching the Scriptures. Therefore, when interpreting Scripture the Bible teacher should interpret according to the analogy of the faith, or in other words, his interpretation of any particular passage should reconcile with the whole. We agree with the point, but we deny the interpretation.

C. The supernatural gift of prophecy in this passage should be distinguished from the natural gift of teaching (12:7). The gift of prophecy involved inspiration (I Cor 12:10; 13:2), while the gift of teaching involved study (I Tim 4:13-16; II Tim 2:15).

D. The context is of spiritual gifts and not rules of interpretation (Romans 12:3-8).

E. Since the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets (I Cor 14:32), Paul was here exhorting those with the gift of prophecy to use it to the extent of their faith.

F. Compare this interpretation and application with Peter's exhortation (I Pet 4:10-11).

V. Some suggest ignoring the italics of the King James Version to promote understanding.

A. The King James translators used italics to indicate every word they inserted as a result of the interpolation process of translation. Since no two languages are capable of word for word translation, they honestly indicated where they inserted English words to complete the sense of the passage translated.

B. Since there is no translation without many interpolated words, there must be either italics in all translations or men hiding their interpolated words while railing on the KJV.

C. An important passage to consider under this point is II Samuel 21:19. Since there is not an "original" or translation around with the proper words in this text, we can thank God for providentially adding "the brother of" in the King James Version. God used the translators knowledge of I Chronicles 20:5 to properly translate this text.

D. The Lord Jesus Christ argued important doctrine from a single, two-letter italicized word from the Old Testament of the King James Version.

1. Jesus argued doctrine from the present tense verb to be, am, in Matthew 22:31-33.
2. If you check out the source word of this argument, it is in italics (Exodus 3:6).
3. The English of a King James Bible is superior to modern English or Greek texts.

VI. Some form a definition of a word, and then substitute it for that word in Scripture.

A. In an effort to thwart the Campbellites in Acts 2:38, some have substituted "the One Anointed" for

"Christ" in this verse. With a convenient transposition of these words, they then teach that baptism is in the name of Jesus Who is the One anointed for the remission of sins. Thus they preserve the "in order to obtain" sense of "for" in this text, and they neatly avoid the arguments of the Church of Christ.

1. Why give the Campbellites their usage of "for" when we have Mark 1:40-44?
2. Since "Jesus Christ" is a noun in this verse, it is invalid to substitute the participial adjective "anointed" in its place grammatically. God inspired the verse to have "for" modify the baptism as taught plainly elsewhere (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3) and not the noun Jesus Christ.

B. In an effort to embellish Romans 2:29, some have substituted "Jewishness" for the word "praise," since according to them the word Judah means praise (Genesis 49:8).
   1. It appears that this fudging of words is due to the difficulty of accepting the use of the preposition "of" in a sense other than subjective-genitive.
   2. God's regeneration apart from race gives us great cause for the praise of God.

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