

Some thoughts on ‘Hermeneutics’

In a previous issue titled ‘*How To ‘Study’ The Bible*’, (*Diakrisis (Australia)*/Sept/Oct/2006) we dealt with the basics of ‘Hermeneutics’, especially in the form of ‘word studies’. The word ‘Hermeneutics’ refers to the science and art of the principles of interpretation. Interpretation is simply ‘*rightly dividing the word of God*’, (2Tim.2:15). To do this accurately involves ‘*study*’ and being a ‘*workman*’, (2Tim.2:15). This leads to sound ‘*exegesis*’ - the explanation of what the Biblical author originally meant. It is from such that we gain ‘*application*’ for our daily lives.

The Problem:

Sadly, today many want to cut short the ‘hard yards’ involved in rightly dividing the word, exegeting and study, and simply move straight to ‘what does the Holy Spirit have for ME’. The ‘what it means for me’ is the character of ‘*devotional*’ studies that many Christians admit they engage in for a few minutes each day. Most of the ‘*study*’ and the ‘*work*’ is usually done by the author of the ‘*devotional*’! Although there is nothing wrong with ‘*devotionals*’ in and of themselves as a secondary source of reading, today it is fast *replacing* personal, serious Bible *reading* and *study*.

Most Christians today do not know how to ‘*study*’ and ‘*interpret*’ a passage of Scripture. This is why it is increasingly common to see verses wrenched out of their context and applied to some theological position which actually may not be present in the verse at all.

The fact that the biblical languages were couched in cultures that are at times quite different to our modern understanding, should cause us to research the text to ascertain what is the *original* meaning of the authors words within the culture and the language of the day. With ‘*difficult*’ texts, this can often be a demanding process.

We are living in a ‘*post modern*’ age and a fast food mentality at that. This is causing many Christians to think that they can ‘*study*’ by simply reading the surface of the text. That may suffice for some passages but for many more passages, deeper research is needed. Basic ‘*Hermeneutics*’ can, and should be, taught at the level of the local church! Asking the ‘*who*’, ‘*what*’ ‘*where*’ and ‘*why*’ of the text is one thing, but it is important to use the tools and resources to dig out as much information as is necessary to answer these vital questions. It behoves Christians to have at least a concise ‘*library*’ of these ‘*tools*’. All of these can now be easily accessed on computer and are often free of charge!

Many will here protest against ‘*intellectualism*’. But this is too often a strawman argument against real ‘*study*’. If this studious approach to scripture is ‘*intellectualism*’ then forget any doctrinal studies; forget the theological writings and works of Jonathan Edwards, Spurgeon, Luther, Whitefield, the Puritans and the many other ‘*intellectuals*’ who ‘*laboured in the word and doctrine*’, (1Tim.5:17). In the meantime, Christians are fast becoming fodder for the ear-tickling TV evangelists, the faith healers and the sickly Arminian waffling of the ‘*God loves you*’ gospel. If we are not reading our Bibles and ‘*studying*’ as ‘*workmen*’, then how are we ever going to discern the signs of the times?

I know many Christians who have never read their Bibles from cover to cover. How can one possibly have a full orb view of God’s salvation plan for mankind or have anything but a truncated Gospel, if we have not read the Old

Testament and its very *foundations* for Christ and the Gospel? Many heresies and extremes can often be traced back to such a lack of studying the Bible *as a whole*.

‘Context, Context!’:

One of the first and most important principles in interpretation is ‘*context*’. Two areas must be considered here: the historical context and the context of the text itself. ‘*Out of context*’ teaching today is rampant. How often do we hear such scriptures as Joshua 24:15 (‘*choose you this day whom you will serve*’) applied to evangelism, when the context clearly is referring to Israelite *believers* who had turned to idolatry? The context is not salvation at all, but *idolatry* as the verses to follow show clearly!

How often do we hear Revelation 3:20 (‘*I stand at the door, and knock*’) used for the pleadings of the Lord to the unsaved, when in fact it is a warning to a *church*! The misuse here in these scriptures would be corrected if the hermeneutical question ‘*who is the passage speaking to*’ was asked and answered correctly.

Understanding the context may also involve another important principle - *scripture interprets scripture*. For example, any doctrine of the ‘*Perseverance of the Saints*’ must be proved by first studying *all* the passages that speak about this topic and then at least exegeting the few that appear to ‘*contradict*’ it. We must allow the obvious and clear scriptures to speak to the not so clear (eg. Hebrews 6).^{*} No doctrine can be formed from just one passage. For example, the Mormons teach a ‘*Baptism for the dead*’ from 1Corinthians 15:29 when so many other passages would speak against baptism for the deceased.

It is helpful to group and summarise the various contexts of any topic. This means searching out the word or topic as used throughout scripture - this is time consuming but immensely rewarding in the end! We in this ministry regularly do this on important topics and then file, store and improve the information as it comes up for future study.

Grammar is also important in interpretation. Grammar describes the laws of language that tie the parts together in the text. *Semantics* looks at the meaning of individual words as each functions in the sentence. *Syntax* studies the configuration of the sentence units and the way the message as a whole can speak in differing cultural contexts.

But overall the reader must allow the *context* to make the final grammatical decision. In fact, too much time can be spent in researching the grammar, Greek and cultural aspects, instead of the actual context itself. Some words such as ‘*church*’ (‘*ekklesia*’) may have differing meanings *dependent on the various contexts*. The word ‘*ekklesia*’ may be interpreted variously as an ‘*assembly*’, ‘*the body of Christ*’, a ‘*community*’ of believers, or as ‘*the bride of Christ*’...

Sometimes we can miss the ‘*whole*’ of the context by focusing too much on the ‘*parts*’. The issue of meat offered to idols in 1Corinthians 8-10 is linked to the principle of the ‘*stumbling block*’ (8:7-13); and foot washing is linked to *servanthood*. The veils and headcovering in 1Corinthians 11 is linked to the *headship* of a woman under a man who is under Christ.

By separating the cultural practice of the command from the principle, we can reapply it today - for example, greeting

one another with Christian love and commitment, but not necessarily with a 'holy kiss', (Rom.16:16; 1Cor.16:20...).

However, some contexts are not culturally relevant as such. Homosexuality is an absolute and a moral issue. There are simply no options today that would limit the absolute of this word. So it is not a culturally-relative matter.

Context is very important. An example of where this is so is in the word 'sarx, ('flesh'), a word often translated literally in some versions. However, this one word can be used in many different ways: Matthew 24:22, '**no flesh be saved**' (no person); John 1:14, '**the Word was made flesh**' (became a human being); Romans 9:8, '**children of the flesh**' (children of natural birth); Hebrews 5:7, '**days of his flesh**' (his earthly life), Romans 8:13, '**live after the flesh**' (sinful nature); Jude 7, '**going after strange flesh**' (sexual immorality). The English word *flesh* cannot adequately express all these divergent uses. *The surrounding context often determines the meaning of the word.*

Another example is 'Sanctification' which usually has a meaning of a *process* throughout our Christian lives. But in some places the meaning refers to a moment in time (Romans 6 or 1Corinthians 1:2). This is why some have the doctrine of Sanctification as 'positional' as well as 'progressive' depending on the *varying context*.

Some people look up a word in Greek and assume that is the only or every meaning. This error, called by some '*the Root Fallacy*', assumes that the root of the word is the meaning in all its various cognate forms. An example of this is the word '*apostasia*' in 2Thessalonians 2:3. This noun comes from a root verb '*aphistemi*' which some have falsely construed to be a 'rapture' because the root word can be seen to be a 'standing apart from' or a 'departure'.** But one cannot say the cognate verb always determines the meaning of the noun. Greek derivatives do not necessarily always carry the same precise meaning of the root words. The meanings and connotations of a New Testament word are determined primarily from the immediate context itself and to a lesser extent where the same word is used elsewhere including from the Old Testament (Septuagint).

Context is crucial to understanding and thus interpreting a text. It virtually makes the meaning! Again, the primary meaning of a word is not always the actual meaning in context. For example, the word '*redeem*' has a primary meaning of 'to buy back' but in some contexts this is literally an impossible meaning and it rather takes on a meaning of 'to make the most of the time we have', as in Ephesians 5:15 and Collosians 4:5. Secondary meanings are specific meanings that often share an aspect of the primary sense but occur only in some contexts.

One of the most difficult and precarious areas in interpretation is in the area of *Prophecy*. Many prophecies have a *dual or multiple* outlook and although they speak of future events which may not have occurred yet, they may also speak of events which have already occurred as shown in the same passage. For example, in Acts 1:16-19, Judas betrayal of Jesus is quoted from Psalm 41:5-13. This passage actually has a primary context referring to a man named Ahithopel who being a close friend of David, betrayed him.

Context can be read with biased vision. We need to be careful of reading in our own cultural or traditional bias. Most denominations have a theological bias or an emphasis on some doctrine or doctrines that are 'read into' some texts. Hence 'proof-texts' abound and the hermeneutical

system becomes a shotgun approach using certain verses to prove a position. The Seventh Day Adventists are masters at this, systematically putting verses together on top of each other to prove that Saturday is the only day we must rest and worship and that keeping Sunday is an error. But a look at each individual text will soon see that they each alone do not teach the final premise taught by them on this issue.

Yet in other situations, readers flatly refuse to accept what a scripture text *obviously* says and begin semantic gymnastics to resolve the emotional or logical issue they have in their own *human* minds. For example, when the Bible says '**No man can come to me, except the Father which has sent me draw him...**' (Jn.6:44) - it means what it says!: 'no man' and 'no man can come'. God must '*draw*' before any 'decision' or 'will' is involved. It never ceases to astonish us how some authors contort this scripture (and their minds) to a 'free will' eisegesis which has man playing a part in this salvation by grace.

Many Christians also place far too much importance on 'Confessions' (such as the 'Westminster Confession of Faith'), which, although often valuable documents, are not the inspired, inerrant Word of God; but merely, at best, a summary of the position held by a group of churches. Such Confessions were often a product of their time or served as a refutation of some error.

Finally, any who preach or teach the word of God, whether it be in a home group, Sunday school or in the pulpit, must do the 'hard yards' in researching and exegeting the passage. This will enable the preacher to better understand what the original author originally meant *before* making the 'applications' to his audience. Many of today's teaching sermons are filled with cute stories, illustrations and anecdotes that barely resemble what the passage of scripture being used actually says. Sermon preparation therefore must be an exercise in digging and searching out the authors original meaning, working from the 'whole' to the 'parts' and then from the 'parts' back to the 'whole'.

Objective or Subjective Hermeneutics?:

The tendency today is to read modern issues back into the text, and a purely subjective approach follows. We are convinced that interpretation must be first *objective* and rigidly *factual* before any 'application' is derived from the text. The meaning of a text is constant and objective, whereas its significance and application may subjectively vary for different readers.

Let the text speak for itself first. Today we have this mentality: 'what does this text say to you'? The switch here is from the text to the *individual*; from objective exegesis to *subjective* eisegesis. This post-modernist trend steers many away from the author's meaning.

We must allow good hermeneutical principles to shape our exegesis and to control our tendency to read our prejudices into the text. Truth is objective by nature before it is felt. The subjectivity of today's eisegesis must be brought under control lest truth be abandoned.

'Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth', (2Tim.2:15).

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* See our article *Diakrisis (Australia)* July/Aug/2004 by Mike Claydon; and sermon CD '*God's Impossibilities*' by Terry Arnold.

** See *Diakrisis (Australia)* Nov/Dec/2007 P.3.