

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (17-12-2002 Framsdén Baptist Church)

Psalm 119:105 (part iv)
Additional reading: Psalm 119:137-152

Interpretation of the Bible

Introduction

We continue looking at important things that must be considered when interpreting the Word of God. These are useful things for us all to be aware of, whether we are in the position of explaining Scripture to others, or for guidance about our own private study.

In this study, we are going to consider some controversial issues of interpretation. This is not for the sake of being provocative, but the aim is to make you think and understand others, even when you do not agree with them.

Progressive revelation to be noted

Men only gradually understand the will of God. God gradually revealed Himself and His purposes. The climax of that revelation was the coming of His Son into the world. **The Word became flesh** (John 1:14). **God having spoken at different times and in different ways by prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son** (Hebrews 1:1).

Only gradually did God's requirements receive recognition from men. Hence the presence in the Old Testament of slavery, polygamy, divorce and blood revenge. These things are not to be taken as God's perfect will. God's revelation takes men up at the stage where it finds them. Rather than changing them at a stroke, God bears patiently with old situation, which is often very evil, and gradually introduces new values to change and soften mankind.

Revelation is responsible only for the new elements which it introduces. "An eye for an eye" (Exodus 21:24) was an improvement on the situation where men formerly took both eyes. "One tooth for one tooth" improves on the situation where a whole row of teeth was knocked out for one tooth. A bill of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1) was necessary as a curb to the hasty decisions about divorce. Cities of revenge were instituted to limit blood revenge. Ceremonial law about sacrifices and priesthood and ritual are now abolished in Christ, c.f. the whole argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

Civil Law for ancient Israel, which was an ancient Eastern agricultural society, is not relevant to us today, though the underlying principles of fairness, kindness and justice are still valid today. "Distinguish and times, and you harmonize the Scriptures" (Augustine).

Compare Scripture with Scripture

Note the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments. “The New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed” or “New is in Old latent; Old is in New patent.” The foundation of New Testament truths is prepared for in the teaching of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is about preparation; the New Testament is about fulfilment. So we can interpret the obscure in the Old Testament by the clear in the New Testament. The Old Testament is partial and incomplete; the New Testament is perfect and final.

Never use one Scripture to contradict another. For example, do not use the parable of the shrewd but unjust manager (Luke 16:1-15) to advocate dishonesty. Remember the truth is many-sided. Christ is variously portrayed as the Lamb, the Shepherd and the Lion. Important to recognise all sides of the truth even though we may not be able to reconcile them, e.g. the doctrines of election and predestination.

When discussing the latter issue, Spurgeon writes, “My love of consistency with my own doctrinal view is not great enough to allow me knowingly to alter a single text of Scripture... who am I that I should be everlastingly consistent? The main thing is not to be inconsistent with the Word of God.” He also referred to another preacher who “explains the text by explaining it away. He applies grammatical gun powder to it and explodes it by way of expounding it.”

Some remaining problems

There is agreement among evangelical Christians who take the Bible as the supreme authority about the meaning of much of the Bible, e.g. great truths about God, the person of Christ, His atoning death, new birth, the future destiny of men. There is also agreement about Christian character and conduct, service to God and service to others. But there are still differences that remain. It is not possible to be black and white about every detail.

Regarding Genesis 1:5, there are differences in interpretation of the Creation Story. On the Book of Revelations there are the differing views of Preterists, Historicists, Futurists and Idealists. Concerning the 1000-year reign of Christ, there are the a-millennialists, post-millennialists, pre-millennialists and dispensationalists, with their differing interpretations. The problems arise over what is to be taken literally and what spiritually. Even those who boast that they take the teaching of the Bible literally about the future and Christ’s second coming have to concede that some points do not stand up to literal reading, e.g. the seven hills on which the woman sits (Revelation 17:9). Some of the Old Testament prophecies about Christ were fulfilled to the very letter, but when were His ears bored, when did He sink in deep waters, when did dogs surround Him and strong bulls encircle Him, to which some prophecies refer? Has He still to suffer further humiliation?

Again, the prophets had to use words and ideas which were meaningful to the first readers. There has to be transformation of Old Testament prophecies from one period to another in interpretation. Controversy rages over what is literal and what is to be spiritualized and interpreted in terms meaningful to the modern world though retaining underlying truths.

More problems arise over the spiritual gifts, especially prophecy, tongues and healings. The Charismatics say these gifts are indeed for today, but others will say these gifts are no longer needed because the Canon of Scripture is complete, and they were only needed to vindicate the Gospel at the beginning.

The issue of Baptism also divides – is it for believers, or believers and their children? Some will point to the parallel between circumcision and baptism. Circumcision was administered in the first generation to believers, i.e. adults, and thereafter to their children. This view was held by some of the most Godly and theologically able scholars and ministers from Reformation times. The question really is how far is the Old Covenant to be the pattern for the New Covenant, or how far new elements are now to be introduced. Is baptism meant to parallel circumcision at all? And to what degree are the Old Testament covenant people of God the same as the New Testament covenant people of God?

The ministry of women – another thorny debate. **I do not permit a woman to teach or have authority over a man but to be in silence** (1 Timothy 2:12). The New Testament allows for lady deacons but not lady elders. Yet some Christian organizations, like Faith Mission, have lady preachers, and some are extensively used. Scripture also has references to women praying and prophesying in Acts 2:17; 21:9; 1 Corinthians 11:5, though they would not exercise authority over a man in a church organisation situation. Women who pray and prophesy would say people can still prophesy today, not in the sense of conveying new divine truth in a unique way, but in a secondary way, giving insight into Scripture and its meaning and application to the present world – very like our kind of preaching.

Some combine the two, allowing women to preach as part of a team as long as led by a man who takes final responsibility for what is said, and women do not exercise authority over men. There is a special problem about missionaries. No one seems to enquire too closely if ladies preach and teach men on the mission field. Do we allow them to do on the mission field what we do not allow them to do in churches? Why these double standards?

So we have these controversial areas. It is important not to dismiss those who differ from us as knaves or fools, or imagine we have nothing to learn from them, as long as they are real believers and are concerned to accept the supreme authority of the Bible.

Learn to distinguish between the Word of God and our interpretation of the Word of God. There may never be, this side of heaven, perfect agreement on every detail of the Bible. There are things that we cannot say are black and white. There are elements of mystery in all doctrine. We ought not be ashamed to say there are some things for which we do not have an answer. **We see in a mirror dimly** (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Note that we actually agree with one another on a great deal more than we disagree on. We need to humbly learn from one another and keep praying for more light. Since the issues that divide are not great central issues about Christ and His salvation, and are therefore secondary, we can give one another liberty of conscience.

Keep close to sound principles of interpretation. Always come to the Bible with a humble, open spirit, asking God to break through our cultural defences to challenge and change us. “The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from His Word” (Robinson). Always beware of minds made up and closed. “Open your mind before you open your mouth.” Do not come to the Scripture hearing what you want to hear, confirming your prejudices.

Practical importance of establishing sound principles of Bible interpretations

The deeper our conviction that we are handling the very Word of God, the more serious and painstaking we should be in our work. Unless we interpret correctly, we shall never understand it properly and therefore our lives will be impoverished spiritually. So concern for right principles is not an end in itself. These matters are important because of the nature of the book, its claims and issues for time and eternity, which hang on the reception or rejection of its message.

“There is a living God. He has spoken in the Bible. He means what He has said and will do all He has promised” (Hudson Taylor). Therefore we should have an overwhelming concern for true and correct interpretation to discover what He has actually said in His Word.

It affects us in three areas of our lives.

- (a) Our relationship with God. Man’s chief end is to glorify God. We were created and then recreated in Christ to this end. Worship is our response to the truth God has made known. It is the Word of God which evokes this worship. Hence the Word of God has a central and indispensable place in public and private worship. Also, by means of the Word, we have fellowship with God. **He rewards those who earnestly seek Him** (Hebrews 11:6). He is the living God who speaks in and through the written word. The Bible is a present means of communion with God. Through His Word men know God’s will. Our daily life is full of decisions, great and small, and the Word of God is indispensable because it provides principles for decision and action. Therefore correct and adequate interpretation of Scripture deepens our relationship with God and also increases our usefulness to Him.
- (b) Living out our Christian life. Scripture contains the main guiding principles for Christians living. The Lord Jesus lived in obedience to the Word of God. “It is written...” was His guideline. What was essential for our Redeemer is also essential for the redeemed. **If you love me, you will obey what I command** (John 14:15). The Christian’s dearest ambition is to live according to Scripture, in personal and social righteousness. The will of God in the Word of God, for the people of God, relates to the whole of our lives. It is vital to discover these principles and apply them if we are fully to use Scripture as a guide for right conduct. Need for constant return and fresh reformation according to the Word of God. Too often we can be satisfied with traditional interpretation and attitude. Need to search Scripture daily to see if these things are really so. Are we not guilty of being inclined to by-pass some areas of Scripture, not because they are irrelevant to the 21st century, but because they are not really convenient for us to observe them? Therefore, while we read

them, we do not exactly investigate them as thoroughly as we might do because of the possible consequences.

- (c) More effective in communicating the Word to others. People are looking for bread, and not stones. One of the great needs of the hour is for those who will expound the Word of God in a simple, relevant way, which is well illustrated and attractively presented. And above all, presented in the power of the Holy Spirit. Need for the Word to come alive for preacher and hearer alike. Only by this means will men be won, the people of God built up and able to give a reason for the hope within them (1 Peter 3:15).

God has spoken about Himself, His saving purpose, issues of life and death, right relationship with Him, living a life which pleases Him in private, in church and among society. Our response is crucial, and of eternal consequences.

Therefore we need to understand the Word. "This is why reading of Scripture bears fruit with such a few people today, because scarcely one in a hundred is found who will gladly submit himself to its teaching" (John Calvin). James says we are to be doers of the Word, and not just hearers (James 1:22). Jesus says we need to build our house on the rock of the Word, and not the sand of our own ideas (Matthew 7:24-27).

We must constantly ask about what God is saying to us through a passage of Scripture. We need to distinguish between direct utterances and historical incidents, between examples of good and evil, and pay supreme attention to the teaching and work of Christ.