

Applied Hermeneutics

There is only one Meaning of a Biblical Text:

The Bible is God's book. And because it is God's book, He also determines its meaning. And He has already done this when He inspired people through the Holy Spirit to write down exactly what He wanted to reveal to us humans about Himself, about us and about His eternal counsel. This means that the meaning of the Bible was already determined and fixed when the text was written down, so that every Bible text says today exactly what God intended to say at that time.

I want to start with the goal of interpretation by arguing that there is only one valid interpretation of the Bible: namely, that which God intended to communicate at the time of writing. That God always had a clear intention is evident from Isaiah 55:8-11:

⁸ "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:8-11 NIV)

Here God compares his word to the precipitation that falls from heaven and then returns to heaven by the power of the sun's rays. It never returns until it has fulfilled the purpose for which God sent it. God sends rain to water the earth so that man can eat and live. Likewise, God's word was sent to bring about what God wants and bring about what God intended. Since God's thoughts are not our thoughts, how dare we interpret His word subjectively or as we see fit? When we read the Scriptures, we must strive to discern God's intention at that time. Only then can we apply His word to our lives as God intended.

In 2 Peter 3:15-16 we have another passage of Scripture that emphasizes the goal of interpretation:

¹⁵ Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. ¹⁶ He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2Pet. 3:15-16 NIV)

The apostle Peter shares with us here some very important features of Paul's writings:

- Paul writes according to the wisdom he received from God.
- Paul writes like this in all his letters.
- Paul's letters contain some things that are difficult to understand.
- There are some ignorant and unstable people who twist what Paul wrote to their own destruction.
- Paul's writings are holy writings.

Here we see that Paul wrote with the wisdom given to him by God. For this purpose, his letters are equated with the Holy Scriptures. Peter emphasizes that some people twisted Paul's letters so that they

said something false. So the word of God can be misinterpreted so that even a false doctrine is taught. Peter did not write here that Paul was a bad communicator. He merely said that the **content** of Paul's letters is difficult to grasp. Peter said that Paul writes the same way in all his letters. Peter's point here is that Paul made an effort in his letters to make truths concerning the salvation of people understandable. If we want to understand Paul's letters, we must make a mental effort to follow his train of thought.

The emphasis in Paul's letters is to make clear the grace of God in saving Jews as well as Gentiles. Some aspects of the doctrine of grace are difficult to grasp because we humans have preconceived notions about God and His work. I want to emphasize here, using 2 Peter 3:15-16, that every text has a meaning intended by God that can be twisted to one's own destruction.

According to Peter, Paul wrote with the wisdom of God. What wisdom, then, is it when we interpret the letters of the apostles to our own liking and do not bother to follow their train of thought?

As Christians who approach the Pauline writings, we must be like bloodhounds following the trail of a rabbit. Where the rabbit goes, we go too. We follow it around trees, across pastures, up hills and through streams. Where Paul goes, we go too. That's the only way we can make sure we don't twist his writings. Peter tells us that Paul wrote according to the wisdom God had given him. What kind of "wisdom" is it, when we refuse to follow Paul's reasoning when reading the Bible? We must force ourselves to stop looking for pious tidbits and finally begin to understand how the writers of Scripture applied God's wisdom to everyday problems in local communities.

Another Bible passage from Acts tells us to look for God's intended meaning of the text:

¹⁰ As soon as it was night, the believers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue. ¹¹ Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:10-11 NIV)

Here we see that the Jews in Berea tested Paul's doctrinal teachings with the Scriptures. From this we can see that the Scriptures represent objective truth and not a hidden meaning determined subjectively by the work of the Holy Spirit. For if Paul's teaching, which he supported with the Old Testament, was a spiritualization of the Old Testament, then the Jews in Berea would not have been able to objectively test his teaching against the Old Testament.

A good interpretation is always easy to test with Scripture because it is plausible. It flows out of the text. Paul interpreted the Old Testament literally and the Jews could check his interpretation because of that. They could not see God's purpose beforehand because they were blinded by a one-sided picture of the covenant with Abraham and by a one-sided picture of the Messiah. In other words, they had "theological blinders" that led them to a wrong understanding of God's plan. The apostles' task among the Jews was to break down these "theological blinders" so that they could recognize Jesus as the Messiah and understand God's purposes among the nations.

The goal of interpretation summarized:

Our goal in interpretation has been well summarized by Christian Andresen:

The goal of exegesis is to grasp the "meaning" of the biblical text. Students of the Bible apply the principles of hermeneutics through the process of exegesis to figure out the meaning of the text. What, then, is the "meaning?" The meaning is what the author intended to convey through words and grammar. That is, the "meaning" is synonymous with the author's intention. During the process of exegesis, the student must ask himself the following two questions:

- "What did the author intend by his words?"
- "How did the original readers understand what the author intended to convey to them?"

Henry Virkler, quoting E. D. Hirsch, Jr, presents the problem of meaning well if we reject authorial intent as a controlling factor in interpretation:

When critics deliberately turned away from the original author, they themselves took his place [as the determiner of meaning], which inevitably led to the theoretical confusions we so often find today. Where once there was only one author [i.e., a determiner of meaning], today there are suddenly a multitude of them, each claiming the same authority as his successor. By excluding the original author as the determiner of meaning, one thereby also rejected the only compelling normative principle that gave validity to an interpretation. ... For if the meaning of the text is not that intended by the author, then there is no interpretation that agrees with the meaning of the text, because the text cannot have a definite and determinable meaning.

Hirsch's argument is clear. If every opinion about the text is a valid interpretation, then every interpretation is correct, even if they contradict each other. I was once riding on a train and got into a conversation with a professor. He said that any text can have multiple meanings. I asked him what protection we have from the Constitution if the meaning of the Constitution can be interpreted differently at any time than it was originally intended by the authors. He was still not convinced. So, I used the following tactic in conversation.

I told him, "I am very glad that you finally agree with my point of view on interpretation." He replied, "But I have not accepted your view. I reject it!" I replied, "Yes, you do. You have my view of things. For I have chosen to interpret your words in a way that is consistent with my own beliefs." I wish I could picture his facial expression here. His mouth opened, then closed. A light came on for him. Suddenly it was clear to him that his principles for interpretation must apply not only to ancient documents, but also to the present. Then I asked him, "If you don't want your words to be twisted by others, how dare you twist the words of dead people? In your case, you are still alive and can correct misinterpretations of your words. But in the case of dead people, they no longer have that prerogative. It is evil to interpret the words of another, living or dead, differently than he meant them."

So, we can't even communicate with each other if our words have multiple meanings. The world would be chaotic if we humans were not able to communicate accurately with each other. Christian Andresen gets to the heart of my argument:

Since the "meaning" of the text corresponds to what the author intended the passage in question to convey (not what the interpreter wishes the text to say), there is only one meaning for each passage - namely, the meaning intended by the author. This is called the principle of "single meaning." In other words, the meaning of a biblical text does not change from interpreter to interpreter, from culture to culture, from generation to generation. The meaning remains constant, it is timeless and bound to Scripture. Ideas or suppositions that there are "multiple

meanings" or even "hidden meanings" in Scripture (things that were unknown even to the original author) are to be strictly rejected.

Since each passage in Scripture has only one meaning, objectivity in interpretation must be at the top of every interpreter's list of priorities. One must pay close attention to what the author actually intended his words to convey, not what one thinks the text should say. Preconceived doctrines must be subordinate to Scripture.

The student of the Bible arrives at an accurate interpretation when he is able to align his understanding with that of the inspired author at the time of writing.

Here we have the first and most important principle of hermeneutics: a text can never mean today what it could not have meant at the time of writing. If we are to make an effort to understand the meaning of a text of Scripture, then God's intended message must be our goal.

But with this we have emphasized only part of the goal of interpretation. The reason we want to understand God's Word correctly is so that we can obey it out of love for God. For James emphasizes that it is not the hearers of the Word of God who are blessed, but those who understand and apply it:

²⁵ But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it-- not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it-- they will be blessed in what they do. (Jas. 1:25 NIV)