

**CPC's Seminar on Bible Interpretation:
Introduction Part 1
Preston Graham Jr.**

Introduction: Why A Seminar on Bible Interpretation?

- **Christ's Warnings to those who would teach or who would sit under teaching:**

Christ warns against assuming the position of a teacher without due caution,

James 3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Christ tells us to watch carefully lest false teachers bring harm to the church,

2Pet. 2:1-2 But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves. Even so, many will follow their licentious ways, and because of these teachers the way of truth will be maligned.

2John 1:10 Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching;

Christ commands that those who do teach false doctrine be removed from teaching,

Titus 1:11 they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what it is not right to teach.

Christ warns us that the last days will be characterized not only by "false teaching" but also a natural affinity for it so as to take all possible precautions against it,

2Tim. 4:3 For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires,

1Tim. 4:1 now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons,

Christ warns us that many will want to be teachers who may not be qualified,

1Tim. 1:7 desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make assertions.

Christ explicitly commands that those who do teach be teachers of "sound doctrine"

Titus 2:1 But as for you, teach what is consistent with sound doctrine.

Christ commands that teachers are to be measured by the "standards" of sound doctrine,

2Tim. 1:13 Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus,

Christ intends for the ministry of "teaching" to be passed on through the succession of apostolic faith

2Tim. 2:2 and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well.

Summary:

A low view of the functions of the ministry will naturally carry with it a low conception of the training necessary for it... A high view of the functions of the ministry on evangelical lines inevitably produces a high conception of the training which is needed to prepare men for the exercise of these high functions... for here we have, of course, an infinitely higher conception-- as merely an enthusiastic Christian eager to do work for Christ... we might as well seek recruits for the ministry among the capable young fellows about town, zeal their highest spiritual attainment. B. B. Warfield

- **Responsibilities of Every Christian To examine the teachings of our day in the light of the Scripture:**

That very night the believers sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea; and when they arrived, they went to the Jewish synagogue. These Jews were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing. Acts 17:10-12

LC #160

What is required of those that hear the Word preached?

It is required of those that hear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.

- **For the Love of God's Word Unto Salvation**

Psa. 119:15 *I will meditate on your precepts,
and fix my eyes on your ways.*

16 *I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word...*

27 *Make me understand the way of your precepts,
and I will meditate on your wondrous works.*

97 *Oh, how I love your law!
It is my meditation all day long.*

98 *Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,
for it is always with me.*

99 *I have more understanding than all my teachers,
for your decrees are my meditation.*

100 *I understand more than the aged,
for I keep your precepts....*

103 *How sweet are your words to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

104 *Through your precepts I get understanding;
therefore I hate every false way.*

105 *Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.*

Why did the Psalmist Love the Word?

My soul languishes for your salvation; I hope in your word. Psa. 119:81

- c.f. John 1:7-9, 3:19ff

“Sir, Bring us to Jesus!”

(Engraved into the Old Wooden Pulpit in a Presbyterian Church, Pitts. PA)

Michael Horton's, *Knowing What You're Looking For In The Bible*)

- *What are some ways that “study Bibles” and “Bible Studies” could mislead us?*
- *Why is it important to read the Bible as a “single Story?”*
- *What are the major elements of the “single Story”*
 - *Narrative of saving events*
 - *Christ-centered telos (purposeful focus, or “ends) of redemptive history.*
 - *Unity of Bible in a “promise-fulfillment” pattern*
- *In short, according to Jesus even, what does the Scripture Ultimate testify to?*
 - *John 5:40,*
 - *Luke 24:27ff,*
 - *Heb 1:1-4*

Note: The prevalence of Moralism in Interpretation (vs. Christ centered justification and sanctification). C..f “On Moralistic Interpretation of Scripture”, Michael Williams (2000)

Summary: All of scripture ultimately wants to point us to Christ... it is a redemptive oriented revelation, not....

- a. We see it in the strategy of Peter—Act 2

- b. We see it in the strategy of Paul—Acts 13, 17 etc.
- c. We see it in the teachings of the NT—Heb. 1
- d. We see it in the approach taken by Jesus himself in Luke 24
- e. We see it in the book of Revelations, as the end or ultimate “purpose” of revelation is shown forth using OT images to direct us to the exalted Christ of the present and future...

Ultimately, to Direct us to Christ’s Lordship In Salvation:

From a Biblical point of view, the purpose of interpretation must be to receive and respond properly to the word of God... His word is truly inescapable. God's communication to us always displays his Lordship. That is, it displays his authority, his control, and his presence... Within a Christian framework, the law, the world, and the self go together. God has authority over all, God controls all, God is present in all. Vern Poythress

I. The Problem: A Growing Crisis In Bible Interpretation:

2Tim. 3:1 You must understand this, that in the last days distressing times will come. 2 For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant,... 14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, 15 and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

2Cor. 10:2 I ask that when I am present I need not show boldness by daring to oppose those who think we are acting according to human standards. 3 Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; 4 for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments 5 and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ.

• **Popular Trends In Bible Interpretation (The Sociology Of Crisis)**

1. Individualism: "It's all a matter of a person's own, *private* Interpretation"

The revivalist of the Second Great Awakening... argued (as the secularists had a century earlier) that his revelation was not properly mediated by either tradition or theology; it came directly to each individual through personal experience. As a result, the individual became the arbiter of what the Bible did and did not say. The new evangelical coalition attached little importance to the aid of the past or even the present community of interpreters in matters of biblical interpretation. External authorities were jettisoned and divine authority was internalized-- a strategy not altogether different from that of the Enlightenment.

Rick Lints, *Fabric of Theology*

Compare:

1Tim. 3:15 if I am delayed, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.

Eph.4:11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; 12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: 13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

2. Populism (Democratization): "The *common* sense of the majority is right"

In America the principal mediator of God's voice has not been state, church, council, confession, ethnic group, university college or seminary; it has been quite simply, the people... the impulse to rework Christianity into forms that were unmistakably popular... and democratic in at least three

respects: it was audience centered, intellectually open to all, and organizationally pluralistic and innovative.

Nathan Hatch, "Evangelicalism as a Democratic Movement"

A curious effect of this emphasis on the subjective leading of the Spirit was the growth in power of the "popular popes" of evangelicalism. Though highly individualistic in their approach to salvation and populist in their biblical interpretation, populist Bible teachers and preachers served to draw people together into a mass movement largely through the strength of their personal popularity. As Mark Noll puts it, "Evangelical interpretation assigned first place to popular approval.

Rick Lints, *Fabric* p. 35

Compare:

Matt. 7:13 "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. 14 For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Matt. 22:14 For many are called, but few are chosen.

3. Anti-Intellectualism: "All I need is my Bible"

By thus admitting the sovereignty of the audience, evangelicals, knowingly or not, undercut the structure that could support critical theological thinking of the level of a Jonathan Edwards or a John Wesley. Not only did theology proper recede in importance before the task of proclaiming the gospel; the new ground rules for theology, opening it to all, meant that the measure of theology would be its acceptability in the marketplace of ideas. This meant that uncomfortable complexity would be flattened out, that issues would be resolved by a simple choice of alternatives, and that in many cases the fine distinctions from which truth alone can emerge were lost in the din of ideological battle.

Nathan Hatch

Expecting that great freedom of thought would generate great ideas, he found instead that Americans easily became "slaves of slogans. Expecting to find priests, he found politicians."

N. Hatch about Tocqueville

Compare:

Rom. 12:2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.

2Cor. 10:5 Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;

- **Underlying Roots: Enlightenment Agenda Exposed (The Philosophy of Crisis)**

1. Historical-Criticism (HC):

Pertains to the historicity of the events recorded in the Bible and a resulting conclusion about the credibility of certain portions of text in the Bible Post enlightenment skepticism regarding the actuality of the miraculous events in the Bible has called into question the veracity of the Biblical record itself.

The primary method of HC: As stated by Maier, "as long as one makes analogous classification a precondition for acceptance, much in the word of the Bible remains without foundation." (Maier. p.16)

2. New Hermeneutic (NH):

Whether the "NH" of Hans-Georg Gadamer, or the common "HC" practices of everyday Christians that "that are unencumbered by a concern for the author's original intention." (Hirsch. p.246) Gadamer's impetus rests primarily in a skepticism concerning the possibility of objective historical knowledge. In reference to Gadamer, E.D. Hirsch notes in his book, *Validity in Interpretation*, "If an interpreter cannot overcome the distorting perspective of his own historicity, no matter how hard he tries, then it follows that "one understands differently when one understands at all." (Hirsch. p.252.)

In view of the historicity of our being, the rehabilitation of (a text's) original conditions is a futile undertaking. What is rehabilitated from an alien past is not the original. In its continued alienation it has a merely secondary existence."

(Hans-Georg Gadamer quoted by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, [New Haven: Yale University Press; 1967 p. 247] from his personal translation of Georg Hans Gadamar, *Truth and Method* p. 159)

The primary method of the NH: Like the HC method, an analogy is made between the present and the past yet for the very different purpose of expanding a historical text rather than to reducing it. In other words, by a "fusion of horizons", the present perspective of the interpreter is allowed to act upon a historical text in such a way as to expand and even change an author's intended meaning. As Gadamer states, "The real meaning of a text as it addresses itself to an interpreter... is always codetermined by the historical situation of the interpreter. (Quoted by Hirsch. p.253 from *Truth and Method*.)

- **Growing Skepticism**

- Concerning the Reliability of Scripture

- Historical Reliability

To be fair, much of the Bible is not systematically evil but just plain weird, as you would expect of a chaotically cobbled-together anthology of disjointed documents, composed, revised, translated, distorted and 'improved' by hundreds of anonymous authors, editors and copyists, unknown to us and mostly unknown to each other, spanning nine centuries.
Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*

- Canonical Reliability

Two Christianities, Two Scriptures: Which is True?

the recent recovery of the original Gnostic compositions, has provided the wedge to challenge the traditional canon, and with it, the traditional construction of Christian identity... The implicit argument embedded in much scholarly and popular work is that historic orthodox Christianity is little more than a power-hungry conspiracy.

Timothy Luke Johnson

- Concerning the Sufficiency of Scripture

A confusion in Calvin's day:

Why, then, does Chrysostom admonish us to reject all who, under the pretense of the Spirit, lead us away from the simple doctrine of the gospel-- the Spirit having been promised not to reveal a new doctrine, but to impress the truth of the gospel on our minds... "

We are assailed by two sects, which seem to differ most widely from each other. For what similitude is there in appearance between the Pope and the Anabaptist? That when they both] boast extravagantly of the Spirit, the tendency certainly is to sink and bury the Word of God, that they may make room for their own falsehoods.

(On Reform, p.92 & 93), *Selections ...* Ed. Dillenberger)

No less a confusion today:

c.f. "Dripping Like A Leaky Faucet", Scott Oliphint, *Reformation* Sept. 2012, (pre-seminar reading)

- Concerning the Perspicuity of Scripture—Interpretation Issues

The confusion and proliferation of answers that evangelicals are giving, all from the same Bible are disconcerting to students. So the quickest and safest way out of this uncertainty and confusion is to resort to religious experience. Again, this in nothing

new. The history of liberalism documents it, and evangelicals are reliving it in their own experience.

Scott Hafeman

In different terms, there is a shift from a concern with "what the Bible states" to "what God is telling *me*..." The coming generation, then, is less demanding in its expectations of the Bible. Beyond this, however, there is a marked tendency toward "hermeneutical subjectivism" (the neo-orthodox impulse)... James Hunter

A Response to Historical Criticism (HC) and New Hermeneutic (NH):

Against the Enlightenment conception of God as being contained to outside our universe in activity-- if He even exists at all-- Mark Noll notes how the Christian faith affirms that "God is not just the creator and passive sustainer of the world, but also that His energy is the source of the world's energy and His will the foundation of its existence."¹ (Noll,p.398) As further noted by Noll:

Christians like Malebranche, Berkeley and Edwards postulated a deity who filled the universe he had created, who activated the minds he had made in his own image, who brooded over the world with constant love as well as distant power. This is the sort of Christianity that can rescue Historical knowledge. (Noll, p.399)

Derived from the fundamental belief in a Sovereign God who is active in the universe, Noll argues that there are four basic Christian beliefs which together rescue a working confidence in historical knowledge. (Noll. p.299-405) Together, they remove the epistemological bias of present experience in the task of understanding historical texts. They could be described as the four pillars resting upon the Sovereignty of God that support a Biblical cosmology or an open system universe. As these are applied to Biblical Interpretation, the following four observations can be made:

1. An open system universe affirms that "the divine creation and sustaining of the world is the foundation for epistemological confidence of whatever sort." (Ibid. p.399) There is a correspondence between our minds and God's mind such that it is possible to gain true knowledge as God intended it in the revelation of Scripture.
2. An open system universe can affirm the doctrine of the fall such that "the resultant depravity of human nature suggests that the human moral condition obscures vision, presumably for historical as well as moral reasoning." (Noll. p.401) Therefore, there is no guarantee for a perfect knowledge of the original intent of Scripture due to the fall and the repercussion of sin upon human thought. However, given #1 above, just because the Bible reader cannot have an infallible knowledge of the Biblical intention, it does not follow that he cannot know anything about it either? Yet this second observation points to the wisdom in a "corporate" reading of scripture rather than an individualistic reading-- thus the wisdom of a confessional "tradition." Furthermore, it points to the wisdom of the ongoing history of interpretation-- while we believe that new is not necessarily better in the interpretive endeavor, we also believe in the possibility of progress in interpretation. Thus, a "history of interpretation" that piggy backs on previous wisdom while seeking to expand upon it.
3. An open system universe can affirm that writing history or interpreting an ancient text "from the point of view of a particular culture becomes not only inescapable, but also divinely ordained and good. A modified "Relativism", in other words, has a divine sanction." (Noll. p.401) It is true that to get at an ancient text, one must look through the lens of his/her cultural and historical particularities. However, the skepticism that is usually associated with

¹"Traditional Christianity and the Possibility of Historical Knowledge", *Christian Scholar's Review*, Volume XIX Number 4, 1990, p.388-406

this subjective reality is rendered unfounded given an open system universe and the belief in a benevolent, sovereign God who is active in history. What's to say, then, that the historical distance is necessarily harmful to objective understanding? In the case of eye vision, for instance, the optician might construct a series of lenses which together promote sound and proper vision in the patient. The lens actually corrects, not distorts the vision. What is to say that the lens of historical and cultural dimensions, constructed by a sovereign God working in history, might not serve to correct an understanding of the past rather than inhibit it. Whose to say that the historical and cultural distance might not provide the needed perspective to understand the significance of an author's intended meaning rather than preventing one from understanding the author? In other words, the skepticism itself is what ought to be questioned if one holds to an open system universe. Skepticism, that is, that functions as an *a priori* presupposition to interpreting historical texts. Therefore, we should study the bible as within its cultural/historical context yet without diminishing the divine sanction of the authority of scripture.

4. An open system universe and a Biblical understanding of the cosmos means that the "recognition that it is God who brings about belief is the source not of despair, but of hope." (Noll. p.405) The stress in the Bible is that even the ability to believe rests upon God's activity of revelation. (1 Cor.6-16) God must alter our frame of reference before we are eager to come to God and know His mind. (Jn.6:37) Yet this is a source of hope in that my own epistemological frailties can be overcome through the divine intervention of a Sovereign and benevolent God who is there. While there is a certain degree of knowledge accessible in the natural laws and order of creation, there is the anticipation of revelation by God's special grace that begins to overcome the limitations imposed by our fallen state. We therefore must assume "revelation" as this has happened in the text of scripture by the Holy Spirit, but we must pray for illumination" as this is necessary so as to change our affections so as to really "hear" the word speak to us.

Summary:

When it comes to our approach to Bible hermeneutics, it is sometimes easy to forget the obvious. But if scripture IS a communication from God to us, it is not to obscure His will for us and our salvation but to clarify it; it is not to diminish God's sovereignty over us but to expand it; it is not to blunt God's glory but to amplify it. Any theory or practice in the interpretation of scripture that denies the obvious refutes it's own usefulness in this endeavor. Vern Poythress