

The Challenge

Group Discussion Series

**Challenging the Contemporary
Presuppositions of the American Church**

Session 1

How Should We Interpret Our Bibles?

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Session 1: How Should We Interpret Our Bibles?

There isn't a bigger elephant in the Sunday school room or the sanctuary than the issue of Bible interpretation. The reason for this follows: the method of interpretation that comes natural to us is assumed; we live in a world that is interpreted by words.

This gets into an area of study called *hermeneutics* (the theory of interpretation), and the two primary theories thereof are exegesis and eisegesis. These are big theological words that the average Protestant is not supposed to know. This is because the Protestant interpretation of the Scriptures is based on authority.

We will get to exegesis and eisegesis, but the crux of the issue is authority. The Reformers came from Romanism and clearly, their interpretive construct was based on authority; i.e., the average parishioner was not free to interpret the Bible and follow it according to one's own conscience:

Rightfully and nobly did the Protestant Reformers claim religious liberty for themselves; but they resolutely refused to concede it to others. [1]

The very foundation of Protestant interpretation is based on authority; that is, the leaders dictate meaning. Therefore, traditionally, the need for Protestants in general to understand interpretive principles would be unnecessary, and as a result, Protestantism functions that way till this very day. In the early days of the Reformation, private interpretation was outlawed [2]; in our day, education regarding the tools needed to interpret the Bible are merely excluded.

This fact brings us to an interesting word, “orthodoxy.” Traditionally, this word is associated with “truth” as a synonym. This is not the case at all. Orthodoxy is the authority of truth based on counsels of any given sect. [3] The opinions of these counsels regarding the meaning of “truth” are known as “creeds” and “confessions.” These are “truths” (actually, opinions concerning the meaning of any given subject) repackaged for those who have limited understanding, and usually recited and learned through *catechisms* [4].

Authority Versus Individual Interpretation

Hence, Protestant interpretation is based on authority and not individual interpretation. The structure of this interpretive process is orthodoxy formed through counsels, distributed by creeds/confessions, and practiced through catechisms. In Europe and early Colonial America, it was a matter of civil law, in our day the process is tempered by the freedom to choose your own orthodoxy, but it is still orthodoxy. Once a typical American parishioner chooses who they want to believe, they will follow that leader as an authority. A like tendency caused the Apostle Paul to confront the believers at Corinth (1COR 3:1-9).

Of course, the authoritative method of interpretation is at the root of every cult. Traditionally, when people seek to find God, they begin by finding an authority that they are comfortable with. This is why many people prefer authoritative interpretation in a free society: it allows them to choose their own general truth while leaving the hard task of thinking to others. The Apostle Paul said this would be particularly problematic in the last days (2TIM 4:3-5).

The visible authority structure within the church is known as “church polity” or church government. [5] Again, the whole construct is based on authority. If authority is the interpretive prism, roles in the church are going to be seen as positions of authority rather than gifts. When Christ ministered here on earth, disciples were free to follow Him or not follow Him under their own free volition (JN 6:66-69). Christ made it clear to the disciples that their roles in the kingdom were not that of authority (Matthew 20:20-28).

The word “office” inserted in the English translations when associated with “bishop” or “deacon” were added in to the translations and do not appear in the Greek manuscripts while in other places these roles are spoken of as gifts (EPH 4:11-16). We have been given authority to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom on earth, but that is a vertical authority and not horizontal. Those who protest the *gift* idea versus the *authority* idea often cite the following text:

Hebrews 13:17 – Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

The word for “obey” in this verse is ὀδαβὴ (peithô) which means to persuade by argument. The word “submit” is ὑδαβὴ (hypeikô) which means “to surrender.” Here is the best rendering according to a heavy paraphrase:

Be persuaded by your leaders’ arguments from Scripture and don’t be stubborn in regard to the truth for this is no advantage to your own spiritual wellbeing. Besides, they have to give an account for how they led you, and let that account be a joyful recital to the Lord rather than a sorrowful report.

Why is this important? Because every person is personally culpable before God for following the truth, not men. Paul was an apostle, yet the Bereans verified what he taught according to their own understanding of Scripture (Acts 17:11). Paul told the Corinthians that he should only be followed as he followed Christ (1COR 11:1). Every individual will stand before God to give an account of the sum and substance of their own lives, not who they followed among mortals.

The Exegesis and Eisegesis of Hermeneutics

The theological word for the science of biblical interpretation is *hermeneutics*. The first consideration of hermeneutics must be exegesis and eisegesis. Exegesis draws conclusions from written text depending on the grammatical meaning and arrangement of words. Eisegesis approaches the text with an interpretive prism. One who uses the exegetical approach will even approach the text to learn how the text itself should be interpreted. Eisegesis assumes one must approach the text with a proper presupposition in order to properly understand it.

Therefore, this takes us right back to the basic question of authority versus the freedom of individual interpretation. Eisegesis will approach the text with a prescribed method of interpretation while exegesis will look for the best way to interpret the text from the text itself. The interpretive prism for eisegesis comes from an authority. The common contention from those of the authority camp is that everybody approaches the Bible with presuppositions, and this is unavoidable; so, it is important to use the right interpretive prism. Since we are supposedly incapable of approaching the Bible objectively, we should bow to their authority in regard to the proper interpretive prism.

Historical-Grammatical Versus Historical Redemptive: The Elephant in the Room

Eisegesis and exegesis really boils down to authority versus individualism, and so does the two major methods of interpretation in the church: *historical-grammatical* method and the *historical-redemptive* method. This is where we get into discussion about the elephant in the room. These two devices of interpretation yield completely different results. When we sit under any given teacher, he/she will be using one of these hermeneutics. The two different approaches will sound the same because each uses all of the familiar terms, “gospel,” “justification,” etc., but the terms mean different things in each construct. This is the elephant in the sanctuary and the Sunday school room that no one is talking about.

As suggested by the terms themselves, one interprets the Bible grammatically, and the other interprets the Bible through a Redemptive prism. The latter seems perfectly reasonable: “Isn’t the Bible primarily about Redemption?” The former would judge that assertion by a grammatical evaluation of the text. In other words, conclusions are drawn by the arrangement of words, their meaning, and what those words meant to people in that historical context. This is exegesis.

The redemptive method presupposes that the Bible is a gospel narrative about the works and personhood of Christ. It presupposes that this is the dominate theme of the Bible and everything else in the Bible is secondary and points back to Christ. For example, biblical commands aren’t really meant for us to obey, but rather illustrate the works that Christ has accomplished for us and illustrative of what we are unable to do. This bypasses the normal grammatical interpretation of an imperative expectation, and interprets it as a finished work that God in fact does not want us to do. This is assumed because of the redemptive presupposition. As Neo-Calvinist Paul David Tripp has said, biblical commands must be seen in their “gospel context.” [6]

The Gospel Transformation Study Bible and the Redemptive-Historical Gospel

Dr. Kathleen Nielson, in a promotional video for the *Gospel Transformation* study Bible, stated that the historical-redemptive theme is not imposed on the text, “it’s actually in there!” This, we by no means deny, but are the works of Christ and His personhood something that every verse in the Bible points to? Nielson, like many from the redemptive-historical camp, use the grammatical approach to determine that something is in the text, and then make that an authoritative interpretive prism.

I have talked face to face with pastors who use this hermeneutic. As one stated to me, “You might have to cover multiple chapters in one sermon in order to see the Christocentric theme God is showing you at the time.” Others are even more direct:

At this time, resist the temptation to utilize subsequent passages to validate the meaning or to move out from the immediate context. Remembering that all exegesis must finally be a Christocentric exegesis.

Look for Christ even if He isn’t there directly. It is better to see Christ in a text even if He isn’t, than to miss Him where He is. [7]

Again, we see that a “Christocentric exegesis,” something that is in the text grammatically, becomes the authoritative eisegesis. And this elephant is a big one, because interpreting the Bible this way is intrinsically tied to the gospel that comes part and parcel with the redemptive method. The historical-redemptive method is a tool for enabling the believer to live by faith alone in their Christian walk. The historical-redemptive method is actually a gospel in and of itself. To interpret the Bible grammatically is to conclude that God actually wants us to exert our own will in response to commands in the Bible. To proponents of the redemptive-historical method, this is works salvation because Christ is not obeying for us in our Christian life. This is what the Reformation motto, “Christ for us” means. The Neo-Calvinist John Piper has stated it this way,

“[Christ] 100% for us.” [8] Piper has also said that “necessary sanctification” comes from faith alone in the Christian life (Ibid).

Therefore, according to proponents of the redemptive model, a historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture necessarily leads to works salvation and making what we do in the Christian life “the ground of our justification” (Ibid). For all practical purposes, Paul David Tripp has stated such:

....and the Bible does call us to change the way we think about things. But this approach again omits the person and work of Christ as Savior. Instead, it reduces our relationship to Christ to “think his thoughts” and “act the way Jesus would act.” [9]

Here, Tripp concedes that the Bible can be interpreted grammatically, “and the Bible does call us to change the way we think about things.” Grammatically, one assumes the commandments are to us and that we are called to do them. Again, Tripp clearly recognizes this fact. But what does he say the results are?

But this approach again omits the person and work of Christ as Savior.

What happens if we “omit” Christ as “Savior”? Clearly, Tripp is stating that if we interpret the Bible literally and obey it, we are circumventing Christ’s salvific work. Much more than mere semantics are at stake here. The elephant in the room is absolutely huge! This is about the gospel.*

The historical-redemptive method of interpretation is all the rage in contemporary Christianity. Projects and programs that promote this method of interpretation and target all age groups abound. Almost all Christian publishers are on board with the historical-redemptive hermeneutic. The latest project that has been unveiled towards this endeavor is Crossway Publishers’ *The Gospel Transformation Bible*. It will be available 10/19/13.

The subtitle is, “Christ in all of Scripture, Grace for all of Life.” This is typical of those who promote this method of interpretation and its gospel. Christians will assume that the title only pertains to justification by faith alone, but it doesn’t. “Transformation” or *change* has to do with the Christian life, and in the subtitle, “Grace” replaces “gospel” to veil the real crux of this doctrine. Basically, it teaches that Christians are transformed by continually revisiting the same gospel that saved them. Not only that, we keep ourselves saved by doing such. This is what is behind the Neo-Calvinist mantra, “We must preach the gospel to ourselves every day.” John Piper has said that the question is not only how one gets saved, but how one must use the same gospel that saved him/her to keep themselves saved. [10] Piper has also said that we must “see” the same gospel that saved us over and over again as a requirement to enter heaven. [11]

Note: This is what’s so critical about the Reformed historical-redemptive interpretative model according to many Calvinists, it enables us to fulfill what is “required of us” to enter heaven (Ibid). In essence, once saved, how we read our Bible determines whether we keep our salvation or not. So therefore, those who promote *The Gospel Transformation Bible* actually see it as a resource for maintaining one’s salvation.

*Another example of this is Pastor Rick Holland’s assertion that at times “bad grammar makes good theology.” And, “The rules of grammar are intended to be guardrails for communication. But sometimes they prevent it.” [16]

The “Gospel-Driven” Life

The question that is invariably raised is, “How do proponents of the historical-redemptive model explain obedience and the Christian life?” Primarily, they say Christians must “experience” obedience, but must not be the ones who perform it in the Christian life. By revisiting the gospel afresh, the works of Christ are “manifested” in our lives. When this happens, the obedience is experienced by a willing, joyful spirit. As we use the historical-redemptive model to see how sinful we are (a deeper realization of our sin, the realization that originally saved us), and thereby gaining a greater appreciation for what Jesus did for us, we experience “vivification.” This is some sort of joyful rebirth. Proponents of this hermeneutic, primarily those of Reformed theology, refer to this as “mortification and vivification.” A “daily dying and rising,” a “living out of our baptism.” [12] [13]

The Origin of the Historical-Redemptive Hermeneutic

Where did this hermeneutic originate? Even though Martin Luther's 95 Theses launched the Reformation, the framework of the Reformation's doctrine and gospel was articulated by Martin Luther six months later. Essentially, Luther's Heidelberg Disputation to the Augustinian Order in 1518 is the heart and soul of the Reformation. Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion is a greatly expanded treatise of Luther's framework. However, every fundamental element of Reformation doctrine can be found in Luther's Disputation, and this by no means excludes the historical-redemptive hermeneutic. [14]

The primary theme of Luther's Disputation is known as *The Theology of the Cross*. It was comprised of the *glory story* and the *cross story*. Luther believed that salvation must be maintained by an incessant emptying of self. One's focus must be OUTWARD only. Any semblance of an inward look was the "glory story." The outward focus on Christ and His works, and nothing about us whatsoever is the "cross story." A beginning focus on the cross saves us, and a continued focus on the *cross story* keeps us saved the same way we were originally saved: by faith alone. *Sola Fide* also pertains to the Christian walk/life. The historical-redemptive model came from Luther's Theology of the Cross.

Luther believed the outward focus and utter eradication of self leads to a subjective power displayed by the Holy Spirit that we experience. However, we are not to be concerned with it because there is no way for us to distinguish between our own efforts and those of the Spirit. [15] Mortification and vivification can be ascertained in Theses' 16 and 17 of the Disputation.

Conclusion

Never have Christians been so oblivious to such a critical issue. What we believe about the gospel and how we convey it to the world is at stake. Every Sunday in America, historical-grammatical parents deliver their children to historical-redemptive teachers while clueless in regard to the ramifications. This reality actually creates mixed families and marriages via two different gospels. One spouse buys into sanctification by faith alone while the other one doesn't. Eventually, you have a mixed marriage.

The issue with these two hermeneutics is not a matter of semantics and preference—these are two different gospels. This issue is the elephant in the sanctuary and the Sunday school room.

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ENDNOTES

1. Nabu Public Domain Reprints: *The Principles of the Westminster Standards Persecuting*; William Marshall, D.D., Coupar – Angus. Edinburgh, William Oliphant & Co. 1873, p. 13.
2. Ibid., pp. 19-22, 28.
3. Bruce Overton: *MacMillan's Modern Dictionary*; The Macmillan Co. New York 1943.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid. designated as synonymous with “politic” : the science of government.
6. Paul David Tripp: *How People Change*; Punch press 2006, p. 26.
7. The Biblical Theological Study Center: *A Christo-Presuppositional Approach to the Entire Scriptures*; Max Strange. Online source: <http://goo.gl/5sGjP>).
8. John Piper: Desiring God .org blog: Video, *If you had 2 minutes with the Pope, what would you say?*
9. Paul David Tripp: *How People Change*; Punch press 2006, p. 27.
10. John Piper: Desiring God .org blog; *How Does The Gospel Save Believers? Part 2.* August 23, 1998 Bethlehem Baptist Church.
11. Ibid, Part 3.
12. Michael Horton: *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims On the Way*; Zondervan 2011, p. 661.

13. Paul Washer: *The Gospel Call and True Conversion*; Part 1, Chapter 1, heading – *The Essential Characteristics Of Genuine Repentance*, subheading – *Continuing and Deepening Work of Repentance*.
14. In its fundamental elements. It was not referred to as the historical-redemptive hermeneutic for many years afterward.
15. Heidelberg Disputation: Theses 24.
16. Rick Holland: *Uneclising The Son*; Kress Biblical Resources 2011, p. 39.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does *orthodoxy* mean ?
2. What are *confessions* and *creeds* ?
3. What are *catechisms* ?
4. What is the study of *hermeneutics* ?
5. What is the difference between exegesis and eisegesis ?
6. What is the difference between historical-redemptive and historical-grammatical methods ?
7. Do you think the difference between these two methods effect the outcome of our Christian walk?
8. According to Reformed theory, what does the historical-redemptive method enable us to do?
9. In what ways can these two different methods of interpretation effect relationships?
10. Are these methods, for all practical purposes, salvific?
11. Discuss the possible relationship of these two methods to works salvation.
12. Which method of interpretation do you think comes naturally?
13. Why do you think theology is not taught in the churches ?
14. What are the ramifications of seeing redemption in every Bible verse?
15. Do you think the Reformers taught that we could lose our salvation? And if we can lose our salvation, does that speak to the issue of works salvation?

