

LESSON 21 – THE NEW HERMENEUTIC

I. What is the new hermeneutic?

A. Those promoting change among churches of Christ disguise their efforts by urging fresh, responsible exegesis and the need to interpret the Bible correctly.

1. They argue that we have misinterpreted the Bible by; using faulty hermeneutical methods as a result of which we have arrived at wrong doctrinal conclusion.
2. They conclude that we need to discard the old hermeneutic and employ a new one.
3. Those who urge the need for a new hermeneutic among churches of Christ are extremely vague when it comes to identifying and defining what they mean by the "new hermeneutic."

B. Most of their effort has been spent criticizing the "old hermeneutic" and the shortcomings that they deem it to have.

1. The old or traditional hermeneutic criticized is the approach that Biblical teaching is established by command, example, and necessary inference.
2. The search for a new hermeneutic is not the result of Bible study as much as it is of the desire to express dissatisfaction with the status quo and to undermine the past.
3. If a new hermeneutic is needed today to understand the Bible and live the Christian life, then those who have preceded us and died did so without understanding the Bible.
4. If, on the other hand, those using the old hermeneutic were able to understand the Bible enough to be saved, then what need is there for a new hermeneutic?

II. There are several specific concepts common among the advocates of a new hermeneutic which, for the most part, address the alleged shortcomings that they perceive,

A. The old hermeneutic is rationalistic, forensic, and too dependent upon logic, human reason, and inference.

1. One says, "I believe it is extremely dangerous to elevate human reasoning to the level of God's command."
2. Additionally he wrote, "There is no doctrine more potentially dangerous. . . than elevating necessary inference and approved examples to the status of God's commands."
3. One wonders if he arrived at these conclusions by the human reasoning that he so deplors.
4. Their entire case rests upon what they perceive to be logical argumentation, deduction, and implication, the very qualities that they allege to be fatal defects in the old hermeneutic.
5. In actuality, everyone reasons from the Bible.
 - a) The cure, if a cure is needed, is not to reject reason, but to promote correct reasoning.
 - b) The Bible itself repeatedly urges the use of sound reasoning in arriving at its teaching. (Isa. 1:18; 1 Thess. 5:21; 1 John 4:1; Acts 17:2-3; 18:26; 26:25.)
 - c) Jesus Himself expected readers to understand the authority and teaching of the implications of scripture. (See section below on "Implication.")

B. The old hermeneutic relies too much on reason because, they allege, it arose in the Enlightenment, the days of John Locke, and was perpetuated by Alexander Campbell.

1. However, we are to reason correctly about the teaching of scripture not because of what Locke or Campbell said or did, but because of what God Himself said in Scripture.

2. The proponents of the new hermeneutic assume that if there is any link between Campbell and Locke and rational thought, it automatically follows that a hermeneutic that employs induction and reason must be wrong.

3. However, as we shall see Jesus' own hermeneutic depended on inductive reasoning, and it might just be that men have used it and continue to use it due to their assessment of Scripture.

4. What matters is whether human beings in any historical period can go to Scripture and, without a lot of "scholarly expertise," ascertain how God would have them to conduct themselves.

C. From whence does this logophobia (fear of logic) arise?

1. Aversion to logic throughout history has been closely associated with a desire to be relieved of the confining nature of God's word.

2. The new hermeneutic is rooted in subjectivity and relativism in its approach to Scripture.

3. It seeks to give man more say in his religious pursuits, while attributing such subjective inclination to the Holy Spirit.

D. It is not coincidental that the new hermeneutic's advocates frequently speak of "freedom" and "unity."

1. They speak of the need for dispensing with the old wineskins to make room for the new wine.

2. They speak of the need for a hermeneutic that will cause Scripture to be "more relevant," help "in getting closer to God and each other," be "more palatable to an age that denigrates authoritarianism," and be able to "relate to people where they live" without being "insensitive and impersonal."

3. They say that we need a hermeneutic that begins with God, not Scripture, that focuses on the actions of God rather than the

rules of logic and results, and that seeks the “heart of God” and “God’s desire” – not just the “instructions of God.”

4. They say that we should focus on content, not outer forms and emphasize meaning and motive rather than “doing acts correctly.”

5. They say that we should approach interpretation, not as “rational animals,” but as “story-telling animals.”

E. These choices are false dilemmas.

1. They are similar to the false dilemma often posed between grace and works, Christ versus the church, or the man versus the plan.

2. The Bible teaches that we get close to God with rules and through rules.

3. We can’t love Jesus without his law. (John 14:15.)

4. We must give attention to content and forms, meaning/motive and actions.

5. We come to know God through proper logic, reasoning, and interpretation.

6. If the “story-telling” is not rational, who will comprehend what is being taught?

F. The spirit of the new hermeneutic is right in step with the mood that has prevailed in our society at least since the 60’s – a “do your own thing,” “believe what you want,” “don’t condemn anyone else,” “what’s right for you may not be right for me” mentality.

1. Such a mentality finds it easy to brand previous hermeneutical practices as a “legalistic” and “cognitive approach to scripture” in which “obedience to the commands of scripture became the dominant metaphor or way of seeing Christianity.”

2. Saul demonstrated the same mentality when he failed to fully comply with God's instructions. 1 Samuel 15. Despite expressed good motives – to sacrifice to God while getting along with the people – Samuel declared God's view, "Behold to obey is better than sacrifice. (v. 22).
3. Solomon pronounced obedience to be "the whole of man." Ecclesiastes 12:13.
4. Paul said there were only two directions in life – "sin unto death" or "obedience unto righteousness." Romans 6:16.
5. Jesus is the "author of eternal salvation unto all that obey him." Hebrews 5:9.

G. The "new hermeneutic" minimizes external forms in deference to internal mindset; the disdain for logic is accompanied by a call for more emotion in religious practice.

III. The hermeneutical triad – command, example, necessary inference.

A. While these are time honored and well understood principles for Biblical interpretation, some have suggested that it would be perhaps clearer to use the terms "direct statement, accounts of actions, and implication."

1. Direct Statements.
 - a) No less than eleven types of direct statements occur in the scripture – declarative, imperative, interrogative, hortatory, and conditional.
 - b) The issue is what relevance do direct statements have for people living today.
2. Accounts of action.
 - a) An account of action is the Bible's account of what some person(s) did or said.

b) The hermeneutical issue is which of these accounts of action serve as “examples” for people living today?

3. Implication.

a) In a sense everything that the Bible teaches to people today is by implication since it was written to people who lived at different times and places.

b) You and I must infer that the Bible speaks to us today in addition to its original recipients.

B. What is an “implication”?

1. An implication is that which gives rise to an inference.

2. In logic it would be stated, “If A, then B” – that is to say that if A is true then B must be true.

a) Put another way, if a Bible statement implies an additional statement, it is impossible for the Bible statement to be true and the statement inferred from the Bible statement to be false.

b) Illustration: “If Jack is taller than Sam and Sam is taller than Joe, then Jack is taller than Joe by implication.”

3. The Bible clearly demonstrates that God intended for us to recognize the function of implication.

a) When Ananias told Saul to be baptized to wash away his sins (Acts 22:16), the honest reader will infer that Saul had not yet been forgiven of his sins.

b) When Paul wrote that the Colossians had been delivered from darkness and translated into the kingdom (Colossians 1:13), the reader might incorrectly infer that the kingdom is yet future, but logic demands the inference that the kingdom was in existence at that time because Colossians 1:13 so implies.

4. Jesus' use of implication.

a) In Matthew 22 the Sadducees posed to Jesus a situation in which a woman's husband died leaving her childless. According to Deuteronomy 25 she then married in succession her husband's seven brothers, each leaving her childless. Having set the stage they then asked Jesus a question designed to elicit from him support for their belief that there is no resurrection.

b) Jesus first used example – the angels in heaven neither marry nor give in marriage, and so we shall be in the afterlife. Thus, the angels serve as a binding (authoritative) example so far as our marital status in the afterlife is concerned.

c) Having disposed of their argument, Jesus then addresses the broader issue of the afterlife or resurrection.

(1) To make his point he relies on one passage from the Old Testament – “But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken unto you by God. . . .”

(a) Notice that Jesus says that this Old Testament passage was spoken unto them, but in context it was said to Moses centuries earlier.

(b) Yet Jesus expected His hearers to infer that what God has said to Moses also had application to them (and by implication also to us today).

(2) Next Jesus quotes from Exodus 3:6 – “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

(a) In context these words were spoken by God to identify Himself to Moses at the burning bush.

(b) In Exodus 3:14-16 these same words were used in helping Moses know how to answer the children of Israel when they ask Moses who had sent him.

(3) Thus, these words in context have the explicit purpose of showing divine identity.

(a) However, Jesus focuses on an implication of the passage which God intended for readers to infer: if God continued to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Moses' day when, in fact, they had been dead for centuries, then Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had continued existence beyond the grave.

(b) In case they had missed it, Jesus concluded, "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."

d) In John 8 Jesus' reasoning concluded with the claim, "Before Abraham was, I am." The Jews correctly inferred what Jesus was implying – that He was claiming to be God.

(e) In John chapter 10 Jesus went so far as to say that even if his hearers chose to reject the explicit statements that he uttered, they ought to accept His claim to deity on the basis of His actions because His actions implied deity (John 10:38).

IV. Has this "hermeneutical triad" been "our" hermeneutic, not used or recognized by any other persons or groups?

A. First, the traditional hermeneutic is neither more nor less than a simple description of the body of Biblical material – the Bible is

composed of direct statements, accounts of action, and implications made by that explicit material.

1. But the question remains – which of these direct statements, accounts of action, and implied teachings are binding upon us today?
2. The answer to this question is not to call for a “new hermeneutic” which, on the contemporary scene, tends to degenerate into subjectivism.
3. The answer is to persist in an honest and humble pursuit of biblical interpretation despite the fact that these principles of hermeneutics may not always be properly applied.
4. The fact that the prominent hermeneutical practices of Jesus’ day were those used by the scribes, lawyers, and Pharisees was no justification for abandoning a sound, sensible, reasonable comprehension of God’s word.

B. Jesus’ hermeneutical procedures consisted of:

1. A heavy reliance upon scriptural quotation;
2. A keen use of the principles of logic and sound reasoning;
3. A recognition of what the Hebrew scriptures taught implicitly as well as explicitly; and
4. A view of written revelation as objective, absolute, propositional, and verbally inspired.
5. Jesus never made an argument that was not both valid and sound.

V. The correct procedure in coming to an understanding of the teaching of Scripture is to gather all of the relevant data concerning the direct statements, accounts of action, and implied statements.

A. This includes grammatical, lexical, syntactical, analogical, and historical information, as well as attention to literary genre.

B. Once all data pertaining to the Bible's explicit and implicit teaching has been gathered, the interpreter must then draw only those conclusions that are warranted by the data.

VI. Churches of Christ in this age are facing the same aversion to logic that has typified American culture for a half century or more.

A. Like the Athenian philosophers who had embraced Stoicism and the teachings of Epicurus, who "spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing" (Acts 17:21), so today academia thrives on a process which constantly generates new information.

1. Change is the name of the game.
2. The fashionable views and popular positions of today will soon fall into disrepute and become the object of ridicule by the smug, condescending intellectuals of tomorrow.

B. Among most institutions of higher learning the operative presupposition is that there really is no such thing as propositional truth.

1. Absolute truth is now considered to be an aberration of the simplistic Judaeo-Christian ethic that once dominated western civilization.
2. Truth is considered to be "fluid"; what is considered to be true today may not be true tomorrow.

C. Out of this social milieu have emerged the currents and trends that are operative within churches of Christ today.

1. Underlying these trends is the philosophical interface of essentially three foundational principles: subjectivism, agnosticism, and misology (hatred of logic).
2. The current confusion over hermeneutics that is permeating select sectors of the church is embedded in this philosophical matrix.

D. May we not deteriorate to the mindset of the student who spent several literally sleepless days and nights poring over the essence of Cartesian philosophy. In attempting to distill the thought of this renowned philosopher of doubt, the student actually reached a point where he began to doubt his own existence. In this state of confusion and bewilderment, he approached his professor and asked, “Tell me, good doctor, do I exist?” to which his professor replied, “Who wants to know?”