

How to Interpret the Bible

LESSON 6: THE ROLE OF HUMAN REASON IN INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

- 1.) The right way: using reason as a servant of Scripture
- 2.) The wrong way: putting reason above Scripture

INTRODUCTION

Reason is a great gift of God, yet it is also the source of all doctrinal errors. Martin Luther maintained these two truths side by side. Reason, rightly applied to the words of Scripture, will help us understand what God is teaching us, but when we use our reason to interject our own thoughts into Scripture, it will inevitably pervert Scripture's meaning.

In today's lesson we will examine how we should and should not use reason when we interpret the Bible.

I. The Right Way: Using Reason as a Servant of Scripture

The following is a summary of what we have studied so far in this course. What role does reason play in each principle?

- 1.) We read Scripture in faith, with a firm trust in the inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture, while keeping Christ at the center of our interpretation.
- 2.) We strive to let Scripture interpret Scripture. If you are having difficulty with a section of Scripture, consult other sections that speak to the same topic or contain background material that illuminates the passages you are studying.
- 3.) Unless Scripture itself leads us to do otherwise, we interpret words in their simple, literal meaning. The Bible itself will indicate when it is speaking figuratively. Strive to gain the single fundamental meaning of the section you are reading.
- 4.) We read Scripture in its historical context. Some statements are made to certain people at certain times. We must determine whether the passage at hand applies to all people at all times or only some at some times.
- 5.) Apply sound rules of logic to your interpretation by reading Scripture with the same simplicity and honesty with which you would approach and understand any other work of literature. Ask the Lord to give you his Holy Spirit and bless your efforts to think logically about Scripture.

Reason is a gift of God, which he wants us to use to interpret Scripture. When reason lets Scripture interpret Scripture, it is being used as God intended.

II. The Wrong Way: Putting Reason Above Scripture

The following are illustrations of some of the wrong ways reason is often used to interpret Scripture. These examples are representative of arguments used today's religious world that are having a tremendous impact on the way people view and interpret the Bible. What rules of proper biblical interpretation are being broken in each example?

1.) Since scientific evidence points to a world that is billions of years old and the majority of the scientific community has concluded that the evolutionary model provides the best framework for understanding the origins and development of organic life, it follows that the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 must be symbolic descriptions of God's working over the course of billions of years through the process of natural selection.

2.) Theological scholars have studied the ancient texts of the Bible and found that various sections of the first five books of Moses each have unique characteristics and emphases (e.g. different names for God, vocabulary, sentence constructions), and therefore could well have been written by different authors. For example, the creation account in Genesis 1 exclusively uses the name Elohim for God, but Genesis 2 exclusively uses the name Yahweh Elohim. Given these differences, it's likely that various authors wrote documents which were later pieced together by an unknown scholar.

3.) An article in a local newspaper claimed that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were not judged and destroyed by God because of their homosexuality but because of their inhospitality to strangers. They argue that the men surrounded Lot's house and simply asked to "know" the identities of the strangers inside. They make their case on the fact that the Hebrew literally says, "Bring out them out to us, and we will know them."

4.) In Luther's day the "reformed" party refused to believe that Jesus' body and blood were present in the Lord's Supper. That idea seemed unreasonable to them, so they denied it.

5.) The Seventh Day Adventist Church teaches that since the Third Commandment says we should keep the Sabbath Day holy, a Christian is sinning by not worshiping on Saturday.

6.) Some in the church would like to erase any distinction between men and women. To support their position they quote Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." According to this group, this passage proves there are no such role distinctions.

7.) Linguists have studied certain words in the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (much of which were written by Solomon circa 950 BC) and compared them to nonbiblical sources and found these to contain several "loan-words" from Aramaic (a sister-language to Hebrew, spoken in Babylon), which did not become the common language of the Jews until after the Babylonian captivity, some 400 years later. Therefore, they argue that these books could not have been written by Solomon.

8.) Your friend has just come home from a Bible study on Revelation 20. He says, “You Lutherans don’t believe what the Bible says. You claim to take it literally, but you don’t. The Bible says Christ will reign for one thousand years, and I take the Bible to mean exactly that.”

1.) How do we know if reason has gone beyond its rightful use?

2.) Describe in your own words how reason should be used in Scripture interpretation.

SUMMARY

Reason is used improperly when it brings something into the text that is used to obscure it’s simple, fundamental meaning. The proper use of reason draws out the meaning of the text by using sound methods of interpretation.

Next Week: New Study God: the Ultimate Humanitarian