Hermeneutics

A STUDY IN HERMENEUTICS

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Historical-grammatical Bible interpretation, or hermeneutics, is another precious inheritance from the fathers of our Lutheran church in the 1500s. Then, over the following three centuries, this methodology went under a cloud due to the enervating influence of dogmatism, pietism, and traditionalism. About a century ago, it was recovered in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod chiefly in connection with questions over the Scripture-intended meaning of the expression “proportion (or analogy) of faith” (see The Wauwatosa Gospel I, NPH, 1997, pp. 221-268) as well as with the more familiar and still current debate over the nature of church and ministry. Application of the historical-grammatical method at the time liberated the synod from the position of a then sister synod which, lacking both a historical consciousness and a fresh approach to Scripture, reserved a genuine church and ministry to the local congregation and its pastor. Armed with the recovered hermeneutics, its heirs did not have to resort to roundabout ways and logical gymnastics, especially when war and the draft arrived in the early 1940s, to secure deferrals from military service for their ministers of the Word not serving in a local parish pastorate. Consistent with their theology of church and ministry as had been clarified several decades earlier, they with clear conscience could designate all servants of the Word, whether parish pastors or teachers at their institutions of learning or clergymen holding full-time synodical offices, as ministers of the gospel without artificially arranging for them to be called to a local congregation as associate parish pastors.

The liberating historical-grammatical method of Bible interpretation seems to have gone under a cloud among us within the past two generations. Among some in our circles, it has even aroused suspicion as bordering on historical-critical hermeneutics. Nothing could be further from the truth. Historical-critical methodology is laced through and through with human reasoning corrosive to God-given faith. In its continuing speculations about biblical truth, it never finds or could find that Spirit-gifted truth. In Goethe’s verse,

Ich sag’ es dir, ein Kerl der spekuliert
ist wie ein Tier auf duerrer Heide
von einem boesen Geist im Kreis herumgefuehrt und rings umher liegt schoene gruene Weide.

[I say, a man who speculates
Is like a beast caught in the sand
Led by an evil spirit, he walks in circles
While all around lies fertile pastureland.]

Faust I,6,1830

Historical-critical hermeneutics questions the miraculous, questions the mystery of inspiration, questions the deity of Christ, and with its questioning lays an axe at the foundation of Scripture’s essence, its raison d’être: the gospel of Christ. Ultimately, this method is a reprise of mankind’s first sin of pride. It exalts human reason above God’s Word. If it grants any validity at all to Christianity, historical-critical methodology levels it to that natural religion of the world most appealing to mankind. People are saved by living good lives.
Historical-grammatical hermeneutics, contrariwise, comes to Scripture with gospel-born faith which, from Scripture's proclamation of Christ, is persuaded that the Bible is God's Word in all of its parts. In this faith it then seeks to understand Scripture's words and sentences, but not in isolation of the vocabulary, as if dictionary and grammar are enough to get at meaning. As one of our sainted professors of theology wrote three generations ago, the Bible writers are also subject to the normal human limitations of observation, research, historical recording, and literary accomplishment, without setting down anything that is contrary to the sub-stance or RES of Scripture. Thus they need to be read and understood not only with an eye on the bare words and the grammar, but also on the historical setting, on the time, the place, and the circumstances of their writing.

The historical-grammatical method, furthermore, is sensitive to Luther's counsel that to understand correctly what is being said, one must know the reason for saying it. As Luther observed, unless a person knows what people are talking about (the RES of the matter), one will not be able to make sense of the words (vocabulary and grammar) that people use in talking about it. To illustrate this truth, the following illustration from Martin Franzmann's lectures on hermeneutics will be helpful. Imagine overhearing a stranger tell his partner, “Let’s take care of the pigs.” What does the man mean? One can't be sure from concentrating only on the bare words and the grammar. The context or social setting is equally vital for getting at what the man is talking about. In their normal use, the ordinary definition of “pigs” could fail to reveal the intention of the man’s words. We may have to know something about the speaker. Is he a farmer? Or does he work in an iron foundry? Or is he an underworld character? The cited words could have been spoken by any one of these three men and with three totally different meanings. The setting, the contemporary culture, and the thought world: all of it is involved to get at a proper understanding of words and sentences. This applies to Scripture as to other literature. Expertise in the Bible languages of Hebrew and Greek together with the ecclesiastical language of our Lutheran forefathers in Germany certainly is a vital part of our educational training in theology. At all costs, we must continue to preserve it, guard it from slow erosion, and cherish it as a precious heritage. However, we must also guard against that pedantry with words which so often lies at the root of contention over precise meanings of terms in their original language. To quote again a past professor of theology, “Speech and language do not consist only of words. They are spirit and life, which cannot be confined within the narrow limits of grammar and the dictionary” (A Commentary on Galatians and Paul's Rhapsody in Christ: A Commentary on Ephesians, NPH, 2000, p. 75).

Historical-grammatical hermeneutics, then, besides investigating vocabulary and grammar, seeks to discover the meaning and intention of Scripture’s words and passages not only in their immediate context of biblical chapter and book, but also, as the particular situation may require, in the wider context of the writer’s person, of the times when he lived, and of the thought world in which he moved. This, as need dictates, may require familiarity also with contemporary history and culture outside the Bible. In summary, “It always remains true that you can understand nothing, and also no one, except in the context of the time and the cultural presuppositions of the time” (The Wauwatosa Theology, III, p. 509).

On this point, someone, venting sharp disagreement, will be quick to cite the familiar Reformation principle of sola scriptura and will declare, in Luther's well-known phrase, that the Bible interprets itself, even going beyond Luther to assert that the Bible in all of its parts is self-explanatory. Such appeals that make sola scriptura applicable to all Scripture are another egregious case of unfamiliarity with history. Sola scriptura was not intended as a hermeneutical principle that should be raised to the nth degree and applied to every word, sentence, chapter, and book in the Bible. Rather, the principle arose in radical opposition to a tradition-bound and logic-laced theology that dominated Bible interpretation before the Reformation. From his well-known discovery in the Black Cloister of justification by faith alone, Luther realized, in the first place, that theological education at the universities had been excessively influenced by centuries of past religious
thought as if its being always so said and thought and taught made it right. In the second place, it had become almost axiomatic among pre-Reformation professors of theology that much Bible teaching could be demonstrated and supported by human logic. Personal and protracted experience with this kind of hermeneutics strengthened Luther in the conviction that his predecessors, in their search for the truth, had obfuscated Scripture's RES and raison d'être. He came to see that these teachers were blindsided by an idea that the Bible without the church's traditions and the assistance of God-given logical reasoning was insufficient to safeguard the truth and preserve the church from error. In this historical context Luther insisted on sola scriptura. In all matters that pertain to Scripture's reason for existence, sola scriptura is a precious, comforting truth. Scripture is perfectly adequate, without extra-biblical assistance, to interpret itself for achieving its God-given purpose of “teaching [law and Gospel], rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

It cannot be stressed too often that one must know also the history, the history, the history to come to a correct understanding of sola scriptura so as not to randomly apply it beyond Luther's original intention, make a catch-all mantra out of it, and thus misuse and abuse it. When historical understanding is absent, one lapses into a legalism that declares the Reformation principle applicable to every chapter, verse, and word in Scripture. As was stated from The Wauwatosa Theology above, “It always remains true that you can understand nothing, and also no one, except in the context of the time and the cultural presuppositions of the time.” To be faulted by historically uninformed dilettantes for relying too much on history to resolve the meaning and intention of otherwise obscure Bible passages and words is nothing less than inexcusable.

A study of Jan van Eyck's 1434 portrait of the Arnolfini marriage on display in London's National Gallery [Figure 1, page 10] will serve to make the point about time contexts and cultural presuppositions. The painting is not a literally precise replication of the wedding event as a camera would have recorded it. This, however, does not render the painting any less true respecting the message that the artist desired to convey with his work. It is full of the unusual. How strange that the couple should be shown in a bedroom and surrounded by trivia that, to the uninstructed, seem to have no meaning. Why the little dog? Why the pieces of fruit scattered in the window and the flowering shrub outside the window? Why the pair of clogs on the floor? Why, in broad daylight, the single lighted candle in the chandelier? Why, in elegant calligraphy, the inscription on the wall above the mirror, which states that “Jan van Eyck was here,” and is supported by a reflection of the artist and another witness in the mirror? Why the carved statuette of St. Margaret on the left corner of the high-backed chair to the right of the bed, and why the small brush suspended from the chair? Why are the ten segments of the mirror frame ornamented with medallions depicting episodes from the passion of Christ? And why is it a convex mirror? There are good reasons for all the adjuncts and oddities in this remarkable wedding scene. They were quite intelligible to educated viewers in the 15th century but, except for the inscription and medallioned mirror, are lost to modern spectators unfamiliar with its symbolism. We need not be here detained with an explanation of their meaning. It is enough to know that all of them are relevant to a Christian marriage. They enhance its meaning, and thus they become immensely important to the painting's message as intended by the artist. Its RES is incomplete, even abortive, if the historical dimension is unknown or brushed aside.

In matters beyond its RES, the Bible is not totally self-interpretative. To understand what the writer intended, Scripture at times needs the assistance of extra-biblical context and, in some cases as with 1 Cor. 15:29, not even such context clarifies the statement. Without knowledge of contemporary Greek manners,
particularly the sequestered status of married women in that culture, a proper understanding of 1 Cor. 11:6 misses the mark. And why Paul’s urgent warning at the close of his first letter to Timothy that his young colleague “turn away from gnostics (knowledge) falsely so called”? Why is some insight into the Gnostic heresy, not found in Scripture, vital for understanding the gravity of Paul’s warning as well as for throwing light on much else which Paul treats in this letter, for example (1 Tim. 2:15), that “women will be kept safe through childbirth, if they continue in faith, love, and holiness with propriety”? Without historical knowledge, how are references and allusions in John’s letters to the seven churches in Asia (Rev. 2 and 3) to be explained? The difficulties and obscurities in these letters are largely resolved in a fine example of historical-grammatical scholarship by Pastor soon to become NWC Professor Alexander Sitz in a 1923 conference paper published in the Lutheran Theological Quarterly.

How interpretations and applications of Bible passages may radically differ according to the presence or absence of historical insight may be illustrated from a closer look at 2 John 10,11. Minus historical context, the passage could be and has been used as a stern warning not to consort with anyone out of step with correct Bible teaching. Some knowledge of the times when the passage was written, however, will modify such extremism and such misunderstanding of the author’s intent in penning these words. John is here warning against itinerant missionaries of the day who relied on people’s hospitality for their bread and board. If these men are peddling false teaching, John’s fellow believers should realize that more than their kind Christian hospitality is at stake. In this social context, they are aiding and abetting such teachers in the dissemination of their insidious message and thus are sharing in the wicked work. Given today’s cultural presuppositions, the John passage would be grossly misused as if it were a blanket stricture against entertaining a Methodist, Mormon, or Muslim at one’s home. The passage gains even greater significance when one recalls that Gnostic teaching had begun to insinuate itself among the Christian congregations in Asia where Paul, Timothy, and John labored.

In summary, then, and as previously stated, historical-grammatical hermeneutics is concerned not only with vocabulary and grammar but also with the historical setting of words and passages, with the writer’s person and intent of writing, and with the place and circumstances of writing. Recognizing that speech and language do not consist only of words, it is guided by the principle that one can understand no one and nothing except in the context of the time and the intellectual or cultural presuppositions of the time.

At the beginning of this essay, a judgment was put forward that historical-grammatical hermeneutics, having run full and free in the early 1900s, seems to have gone under a cloud within the past half century. To give readers opportunity to test for themselves whether such judgment is valid or invalid, this essay concludes with synopses from two published expositions of the much-debated passage in Rom.16:17,18. Both studies were written by graduates of our theological seminary whose graduations were separated from each other by 35 years. No more need be added. Readers should not be influenced by the identity of the writers, nor by the synodical offices they held or did not hold, nor by deference to parochial tradition. The content of the writing should remain the sole criterion. Thus readers will be spared the distractions that get in the way of making an objective appraisal as to which of the two interpretations is more faithful, which less faithful, to genuine historical-grammatical hermeneutics. It goes without saying that these presentations, being synopses, lack the force of the pristine full-length expositions. They, nevertheless, ought to be adequate for coming to the suggested evaluation.

**Interpretation 1**

To understand the warning in Rom. 16:17,18, one need not review the entire letter to the Romans. Its sixteenth chapter, with greetings to brothers and sisters in the fellowship of faith, warns these
fellow Christians to keep a sharp lookout for anyone who threatens to obstruct that bond of unity
with false teaching. Not only does this break down such unity, but it also sets obstacles or death
traps in the way of believers and could result in complete loss of faith.

Examining the individual words and expressions in the passage, the verb “urge” in its original Greek
conveys a sense of urgency and loving concern. The Greek particle de, not reproduced in translation,
is a linking word that connects the verb to what follows. The infinitive “to watch out” means “to be
on the lookout for.” Between the pronoun “those” and the verbs “causing” and “putting in your
way” (a single participle, “making,” in Greek), are the two objects of these verbs. The first,
“divisions,” describes the dissensions that result from doctrinal errors taught by the troublemakers.
The second of the objects, “obstacles,” has the meaning of death traps or stumbling blocks, false
teachings that cause Christians, without their realizing it, to stray from or even lose their faith.

As for the phrase “contrary to the teaching you have learned,” it has been questioned whether these
words modify the nouns “divisions” and “obstacles” or whether they modify the participle “making
in Greek and rendered in translation as “cause” and “put in the way.” If the phrase were to modify
the participle(s), Paul is warning the Romans to be on guard against anyone who, contrary to what
they have learned (about getting along with one another in brotherly harmony), causes divisions and
puts obstacles in the way by his or her loveless behavior. On the other hand, if the phrase modifies
the nouns, its meaning would be that the divisions and obstacles are in conflict with the teaching or
doctrine that the Romans received.

To understand “contrary to the teaching” as modifying the nouns is the better interpretation. Thus
this entire passage is an urgent warning against errorists who are peddling false teaching. They are to
be avoided. “They serve their own appetites.” This is figurative language. It means that these
teachers, by spreading error, are following the impulses of their own human thinking.

Interpretation 2

To get at the meaning of Romans 16:17,18, one must follow the letter’s train of thought from the
twelfth chapter to the end. If this passage is disconnected from the foregoing, it becomes a kind of
postscript or afterthought and then intends to be a warning against false teaching in general. But
everywhere else in this letter there is no specific reference to false teachers. And since Paul’s letters
consistently demonstrate a beautiful unity of thought, it seems questionable to regard this passage as
an afterthought injected into the last chapter out of the clear blue.

The expression, “I urge you, brothers,” occurs three times in the last five chapters. We meet it first
at the beginning of chapter 12, then again in 15:30, and now here in chapter 16, a threefold appeal to
bind these concluding chapters into a unity. And it is not unlikely that the expression in chapter 16
was already in Paul’s mind as he launched into this second and practical part of his letter to the
Romans.

Here Paul is not building up a case for Christians to separate themselves from other Christians. His
concern is for unity. There were plenty of flesh-motivated incentives for division in the Roman
congregation, particularly between Jewish and gentile Christians. Hence Paul’s exposition of the
doctrine of election in chapter 11. There he illustrated how Jews and Gentiles had unwittingly served
one another in God’s work of their salvation. So Paul is yearning for a spirit of harmonious self-
sacrifice (12:1) at Rome, unlike the disharmony he had just experienced in Corinth. The entire twelfth
chapter of Romans sings this song of sanctification and peace. The same melody spills over into
chapter 13: submit to the government; submit to one another. Chapter 14 takes the tune one key
higher. In what is perhaps the most difficult surrender of self-will and personal gospel liberty, Paul
here counsels submission to the weak, who are still caught in that slavish subservience to dietary laws
and traditions from which Christ set them free. For the sake of these fellow Christians weak in faith, exercise your Christian liberty by not exercising it. The entire fourteenth chapter breathes Jesus’ high priestly prayer (John 17), that his disciples be of one mind and heart, doing what leads to peace and mutual edification.

Paul’s irenic mood continues unabated in chapter 15 as he prays for unity of the Spirit between Jewish and gentile Christians and pleads that they accept one another as Christ accepted them. Indeed, emulation of Christ is the key to Christian unity and harmony. The chapter closes with Paul’s second “I urge you, brothers,” now an appeal that the Romans pray for unity with the saints at Jerusalem, whither his travels are about to take him.

Paul’s entreaties for Christian like-mindedness at Rome continue unabated in the final chapter of the letter. His salutations to personally known brothers and sisters in the faith demonstrate again his dominant aim in all of these chapters, namely, to bond congregation members, Jews and Gentiles, into a single unity. He does not want this unity shattered by ruthless hands and voices who with their self-serving desires of the flesh and their loveless lifestyles create dissensions in the congregation at large and put obstacles in the path of the weak Christians.

Viewed in its entire five chapter context, Paul’s message in Rom. 16:17,18, therefore, seems most naturally to say:

I urge you, fellow Christians, to be on guard against those who, contrary to the godly wisdom and caring concern for others which you have been taught, are causing divisions and scandals by a lifestyle that caters to their fleshly instincts. Avoid them. They are serving not our Lord Jesus but their own belly, their self-interested bents of body and mind.

The Readers May Judge

The two interpretations lie before the reader for judgment. Which of the two reflects the kind of Bible interpretation taught our students of theology in the early 1900s? This is not a doctrinal issue, as if the one interpretation or the other is false doctrine. Here the issue is hermeneutical. It’s a matter of understanding and then applying Bible passages as the writer intended. It’s a matter of using Scripture correctly. As Luther said, to understand what is being said, one must know the reason for saying it. So which interpretation of Rom. 16:17,18 gets at Paul’s reason for writing these words? That is the aim of, and is properly achieved by, bona fide historical-grammatical hermeneutics.
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