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Hermeneutics
Protestant Principles Parsed
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Chapter One

An Introduction to Interpretation

WARS HAVE BEEN FOUGHT because someone misinterpreted Scripture. Some have suggested that every world war fought in the modern era was fought on the basis of a misinterpretation of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and after looking at the evidence I’m inclined to agree. Every doctrinal difference between the orthodox Christian faith and cults is rooted in differences in interpretations of Scripture. Differences between the Christian denominations arise from their differences of opinion about how Scripture should be interpreted. Much of the confusion and controversy that divides believers within their respective fellowships is caused by carelessness in interpreting the Scripture. Interpreting is the work of getting at what God has said in His Word. This is important because mankind generally does not live by bread alone, but by every word of God, and because believers especially depend entirely upon His word every day of their lives. It’s not hard to appreciate how important this study is to every Christian and especially to any who aspire to teach the Word of God to others.
In this introductory lesson to interpretation I discuss some of the myths about interpretation, and provide a simple overview of what are commonly called the ten laws of interpretation. Later, we will examine these generally accepted laws in the light of Biblical principles of interpretation.

Overview of interpretation myths

Many myths have developed about the Bible and particularly about how it is to be interpreted. Some of these myths follow:

*The Bible has Many Interpretations:*

We should not confuse interpretation with application. The Scripture has only one interpretation, but a passage of Scripture might have many different applications.

Sometimes well meaning Bible teachers use Scripture out of context. When this is done, it causes confusion and has been the source of much false teaching. It is possible for Scripture to have several applications, but it is important to make certain these various applications are all consistent with the text’s primary interpretation.

*The Bible Means Whatever Anyone Reading it Thinks it Means at the Time:*

This idea comes from liberal theologians who teach that the inspiration of Scripture is experienced by the believer as they read it.

Abstract Art (end of nineteenth century) reflected a popular mood to break away from objectivity and explore meaning from a subjective point of view. This mood took hold in liberal Seminaries in the early 20th century and produced Barth (b. 1886, d. 1968), and Brunner (b. 1889, d. 1966), leaders of the Neo-Orthodox movement. These men taught that the Bible is the Word of God, but not the words of God. Furthermore, they said the Scripture only becomes the word
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of God to the individual as he reads it. Abstract Art in its most obscure form leaves interpretation to the subjective eye of the viewer. It makes the viewer the authority determining the meaning of the art for himself, without regard to what the artist might have been attempting to convey. With Scripture, this view makes the reader the authority over what the Bible says without regard for what the Divine Author was actually saying with His words. While most see this as a convenient way for the Abstract artist to dodge responsibility for the message of his art, when it comes to Scripture, this is only a trick of Satan to make the Bible say objectively nothing and subjectively anything. It is an effort to put man in God’s throne.

*Only Greek and Hebrew Scholars are Qualified to Interpret the Bible*

But God expects every man to hear His word and obey it (Revelation 1:3; Romans 10:14-16). God will judge us by His words (John 12:48). And Jesus said God has revealed His word to babes and hidden it from the wise. He calls His word milk (I Peter 2:2).

Those who believe this usually deny the doctrine of preservation.

*The Bible is a Book of Myths:*

Wherever the Bible is at odds with science or “Modern thought,” Rudolph Bultmann will tell us the Bible is a myth.

Rudolph Karl Bultmann (b. 1884; d. 1976) was a Lutheran theologian who served as professor of New Testament at Marburg. Some might consider Bultmann’s view of the New Testament complex. In truth, it is simple. Bultmann essentially said the events of Jesus’ life described in the Gospels are not to be taken as history, but rather as teaching theology in story form. He insisted so strongly that we must not approach the Gospels as historical records he was criticized
for virtually denying the historicity of the Gospel accounts. His concern was that modern man would miss the message of the Gospel he considered was hidden in the mythology of the stories used in ancient times to convey that message. Bultmann essentially denied verbal inspiration, and insinuated that many of the stories of Jesus recorded in the Gospels were myths.

_The Bible is a Mystical Book:_

Another common error with regard to Bible interpretation is the idea that it is all allegorical, or symbolical and it requires special interpretation. The idea is that the plain sense of the Scripture is only the surface meaning. A deeper, truer meaning was to be discovered beneath the surface of the words. While it is true that the Bible employs some figures of speech, symbolism, and even a few allegories, it is far from true that the Bible requires any special methods of interpretation to understand its message.

Generally an allegory is understood to be a fictional story that is used to illustrate some truth. (However, actual history can be used as an allegory (Galatians 4:24)). The word is used loosely for any symbolic representation in literature or art. It became popular in the beginning of the third century, in Egypt, to regard all of Scripture as allegorical. The School of Alexandria, Egypt promulgated this approach to Biblical interpretation. It was an adaptation of then current Greek hermeneutic principles, which were developed to resolve the tension between the religious and philosophical traditions of their poets, Hesiod and Homer. Homer and Hesiod were revered almost as much as we revere the Bible. But, clearly, there were aspects of that literature’s religious tradition that were immoral, according to later standards in Greek culture. In order to keep this literature from falling into disfavor and being rejected altogether, Greek teachers suggested all the objectionable aspects of the literature were allegorical. This
became a popular hermeneutical principle. In Egypt some Christians wanted to make Christianity appeal to the Greek intelligentsia so they adopted their hermeneutical principles, and allegorism came with it. People like Clement of Alexandria and his most famous student, Origen, popularized allegorism as a part of Hermeneutico-Sacra (This means Sacred Hermeneutics, or Biblical Interpretation).

Proper interpretation requires knowledge of the customs and historical setting of each book:

For the amount of real difference having such knowledge makes in one’s ability to understand the message of the Bible, it is hardly worth the agonizing hours of study required to gain this slight edge.

As we shall see in later pages the apostles did not interpret the Old Testament Scripture strictly within the limits of a book’s historical setting, nor do they demonstrate any dependence upon knowledge of ancient social customs prevalent at the time a portion of Scripture was written. It is obvious they viewed the Scripture as contemporary. Those who believe this myth seem to deny that God wrote the book, and that He had all of the world for all time in view when He did it. The few instances, which we shall study later, where such information actually proves helpful, are so relatively insignificant they are hardly worth the space we intend to give them in this study. This is called the Historico-critical method and it became popular in the early 19th century. This is not to say such study is not interesting, or valuable. It is to say there is nothing lacking in Scripture to get at what God is saying in it. The Bible student is not dependent upon profane history to understand the divine revelation.]

Etymology is an essential science to interpretation:

Etymology is the study of the history of words. Some go so far as to say that a word in Scripture can be interpreted
correctly simply by studying its root meaning. This usually takes the form of becoming too dependent upon Greek and Hebrew dictionaries. However, neither should we suppose all one needs is an English dictionary to interpret every word in the Bible. The careful student will find the most useful study to get at the meaning of a word used in the Bible is to examine how it is used in Scripture. This should be supported by use of Webster’s 1828 dictionary of the English language. Such study will satisfy any need for accurate interpretation of the King James Bible. Those sufficiently familiar with the Hebrew and Greek languages, or who have at least enough knowledge to properly use the language tools available, may gain additional insights interesting to the student and to his hearers. I will discuss the usefulness of knowledge in the original languages in another place. Suffice it here to say any honest student can access the meaning of the inspired text with a proper knowledge of the English language, a study of how a word is used in the KJV with the assistance of a Webster’s 1828 dictionary of the English language.

Try looking up *let*. The Old English meaning is no longer listed. It is opposite to what it means to us today. However, in the Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language you will find the archaic meaning presented along with the meaning we find in current use.

*Literal means no words are to be interpreted as figurative:*

This is a misunderstanding of the literalist position on Scripture interpretation. The controversy is between those who desire us to view all Scripture as allegorical, metaphorical, and/or figurative. In reaction against this false idea, we argue that we believe the Bible is to be taken literally. The word literal means “according to the letter … real; not figurative or metaphorical” (Webster’s 1828). The message of the Bible is not a metaphor, or an allegory, or a figure, even though the Bible sometimes employs these devices in
communicating it’s message. Allow me, therefore, to offer a special use of the word literal as we mean it when we say we take the Bible literally. By literal we mean according to the obvious meaning within the context of the literature before us. We mean not according to human imagination or fancy, but according to the literature we are studying. We mean the message of the Bible is literal even if metaphors, or figures, or allegories are used to present it.

Jesus said, “I am the vine, ye are the branches… ” (John 15:5). The literal meaning could never be that Jesus is a grape vine and we are grape branches. According to the understanding of literal interpretation given above such an interpretation would not be literal because it would not take into account the context of the statement in the literature where it is found. The literature in which this statement is found abundantly testifies to both the humanity and the deity of Jesus. His form was that of the Son of Man, not a grape vine. He moved about the earth on two feet once even walking on water. He was not planted in some vineyard somewhere. The context (the whole Bible) of the statement requires us to understand He is using figurative language. The only truly literal interpretation, in this case, would recognize the words vine and branches were employed as figures. The message of Jesus, however, is to be taken literally. We are indeed connected to Him in such a manner that whatever fruit we will bring forth that will be accepted by the Father must come from the life force of Jesus Himself working in and through us. That is the literal truth that is taught by the figures of speech Jesus used in John 15.]

**Overview of the Ten Basic Laws of Interpretation**

Below, we will overview the ten laws of interpretation. We will examine them later.
1. The Law of Actual Meaning:

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense.

Dr. Ramm apparently has trouble believing the fires of hell are literal because that does not make sense to him. He suggests Jesus used the analogy of fire because that is language men could understand. I speak to this more fully later, but you can see how this Protestant principle can be abused. It makes Scripture ultimately subordinate to the carnal rationalizing mind of men which is vulnerable to spiritual irrationality.

2. The Law of Contextual Mention:

Every Scripture must be interpreted in its context. Context primarily has to do with the rule that the message of the entire passage determines the message of the individual verse or sense of the words in the passage. When this includes information about who is talking and to whom, and when, and where and so on, all of this becomes important for consideration in the interpretation of the verse. We do not mean by this that one must have knowledge of the manners and customs of the day in which it was written before one can derive an authoritative interpretation.

My views concerning this law are a shade different from the traditional statement of this law. While I strongly agree that a passage must be interpreted consistently with the immediate context of the passage and book, and the broader context of Scripture, I do not believe there is anything lacking in Scripture for understanding what God is saying in it. Some stress the importance of historical context to the point their interpretations become dependent upon secular, or profane historians. Interpreters of Scripture must never subordinate the inspired text to the uninspired writings of historians or scientists. It is assumed by this student that any historical
information necessary to interpretation will be found in the Scripture. This is not to say knowledge of history or science provided by historians is never useful, or helpful, especially in illustrating, or otherwise elucidating the message of Scripture. I am saying that everything necessary to getting at the meaning of what God is saying is contained within the inspired text.

3. The Law of First Mention:

We may expect the first mention of a subject or truth to forecast its treatment throughout the Scripture.

4. The Law of Full Mention:

We may expect a full mention or complete treatment of every subject vitally connected with basic doctrines and consecrated living.

5. The Law of Progressive Mention:

From the first mention of a subject to the last mention there is a progress of revelation.

6. The Law of Comparative Mention:

To compare Scripture with Scripture is vital to understanding everything about a given truth.

7. The Law of Illustration:

For most truths, God gives at least one classic illustration to carry the truth home to the heart and mind of the reader.

8. The Law of Double Reference: The law of double reference is the principle of associating similar ideas which are usually separated from one another by long periods of time, but which may be blended into a single picture initially and in which a historically past event may illustrate a future prophetic event.

9. The Law of the Master Key:

Christ Himself is the Master Key to understanding the
Scriptures, for He is the supreme subject in fact, symbol, history and prophecy of all the Word of God.

This law has been abused in cases like Proverbs 8, where Christ is seen as Wisdom personified. Here is an example, too, of allegorical interpretation that ignores so many important details when “discovering the greater truth behind the words.” For example, did none of the interpreters who insist the passage speaks of Jesus notice that Wisdom personified is female? The “Son” of God does not manifest Himself as a woman. And did none of them ever pay attention to the fact that she represents her love as conditional upon being loved. She says she loves only those who love her. These are only a few; there are many more reasons Wisdom personified in Proverbs chapter eight is not our blessed Saviour.

10. The Law of Personal Application: Always search the Scripture devotionally to find and learn truths and teachings that can be applied and appropriated personally to your own life.

End of Introduction to Interpretation
Hermeneutics is a word used to identify the science of interpreting literature. The Bible is, after all, literature and it should be interpreted the same way any literature is interpreted. But the Bible is not mere literature. It is divine revelation, and therefore its interpreters approach their task with certain presuppositions about the Bible that distinguish hermeneutica-sacra from either general or even special hermeneutics. The following summary overview of these presuppositions is necessary as providing the only proper foundation upon which to build a Biblical approach to interpretation.

Inspiration:

This doctrine answers the question of origin; i.e., “Where does the Bible come from?” Like no other literature in this world, the Bible is a book from God. God is its author (II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:21).
Inerrancy:

This doctrine answers the question of character. Like no other literature in this world, the Bible is infallible; i.e., absolutely accurate and authoritative in all that it says.

Preservation:

This doctrine answers the question, “Do we now have the inspired, inerrant Word of God?” Like no other literature in the world, the Bible has been preserved (Matthew 24:35; 5:17ff).

The student should study these doctrines as a prerequisite to a study of Hermeneutics. If you have not done so, you should read my book titled A Biblical Approach to Preservation.

While we interpret the Bible as we would interpret other literature, we do not accept any hermeneutical principle that is inconsistent with inspiration, inerrancy or preservation.

Requirements for Interpreting the Bible

There are at least three fundamental requirements for properly interpreting the Bible.

The interpreter must have the right Spirit:

Seducing spirits teach doctrines of devils and prey upon the fleshly lusts of Bible students to subvert them into error (I Timothy 4:1-3; Romans 16:18; Titus 3:11). We need Jesus to teach us by His Spirit. When on this earth, Jesus taught His disciples. He opened “their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45). Before He left, He promised He would give them the Holy Spirit to be their teacher (John 16:13). He gives us this same Holy Spirit when we receive Him as our Saviour (Acts 2:38; John 1:11-12; 3:6; Romans 8:9). Without the Holy Spirit, we cannot hope to discern the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 2:15ff).
The interpreter must have the right Scriptures:

The right Spirit (the Holy Spirit) will lead us to truth (John 16:13). Jesus said, “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). The Bible is the words of God; it is the Scriptures (II Timothy 3:16). The right Spirit will lead us to the right Bible.

Scripture teaches us to try the spirits (1John 4:1). We are given instruction how to distinguish the seducing spirit from the Holy Spirit in 1Timothy 4:1-3; “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats…” (Emphasis added) In this passage we see two clear marks that identify those who are following these seducing spirits and teaching doctrines of devils. While these are not the only marks identifying false teachers, it is interesting that the Spirit mentions these specifically in connection with apostasy. One is that they will forbid to marry, and the other is that they will command to abstain from meats.

It just so happens that the source manuscripts for most of today’s popular versions come from a religious organization that is characterized by these “marks.” From a Biblicist’s viewpoint, this is sufficient reason to turn away from all versions of the Scripture premised upon Siniaticus or Vaticanus, both associated with the Roman Catholic Church (Romans 16:17-18). The Spirit will lead sincere believers to Bibles which come from the Antioch text; i.e., Textus Receptus.

Most modern Bible versions ascribe to Satan a title that belongs exclusively to Jesus Christ. Open your Bible to Isaiah 14:9-15. The passage is obviously about Satan. Every version that identifies Satan as day–star, Daystar, Day Star, morning star, or star of the morning, is ascribing to Satan a title that belongs exclusively to Jesus Christ:
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“We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts” (II Peter 1:19).

In the context of II Peter 1:19, the expression day star is a reference to Jesus Christ.

“I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, and the bright and morning star” (Revelation 22:16). (Jesus identifies Himself as the morning star.)

The Authorized Version says, “How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!”

The Hebrew word that in Isaiah 14:12 is translated Lucifer is found only once in Scripture. This word cannot be found in any literature outside of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is a proper noun made from a Hebrew verb that means to howl (Strong No. 3213). It is pronounced heylel (Strong No. 1966). It sounds similar to another Hebrew word, halel (Strong No. 1984). Halel means praise. Heylel means to howl. Because of the similarity in the sound of these words, some think heylel is a modification of halel. The idea, in that case, is that the being that God created to be His praise was demoted and became a howling one.

We know that Satan was at one time the praise of God (Ezekiel 28:12-15). However, because of his pride, he was cast down, and became the howling, or yelling one. In the passage of Isaiah where he is given this unique name, he is seen howling against God in the anguish of his anger and shame. It’s a fitting name for Satan. In this same passage, he is also identified as son of the morning, because he shouted together with the “sons of God” at the dawn of creation (Job 38:7).

Where does the word Lucifer come from? The translators
of the Authorized Version had no English word to translate this unique Hebrew expression. They could not translate it howl, because that would miss the point. The verb to howl was altered to make it a proper name for Satan. It was a term uniquely identifiable with Satan. For this reason, the translators decided to use another word then in common use that had come to be uniquely identified as a proper name for Satan. That word is Lucifer.

In Strong’s concordance, the meaning you will find ascribed to the Hebrew word translated Lucifer comes entirely from an assumption about the Latin word Lucifer, which they say signifies shining. This is the basis for including the word star in their translation. The problem with this theory is that there is nothing to support it. Indeed, there is nothing at all in the Hebrew of Isaiah 14 that refers to a star (Strong No. 3556, kowkab). It is important to understand that the Hebrew word for star is found nowhere in the passage. In other words, there is no justification for translating anything in Isaiah 14 as morning star, and the assumption that heylel is a modification of the word halel is pure conjecture. As I pointed out, the etymology of the word heylel connects it to the Hebrew verb that means to howl.

In other words, there is no justification for ascribing to Satan, God’s enemy, a title the Bible gives exclusively to Jesus Christ, God’s Son.

How did such a thing occur and why do so many accept these versions? The simple answer is this, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6).

*The interpreter himself must have a right spirit:*

A right spirit makes an obedient servant. Daniel was considered a man who had an excellent spirit [Daniel 5:12; 6:3). None of God’s choice servants received greater revelations or had greater insight into the Scripture than Daniel. David
enjoyed profound revelations from God, and keen insight into the will and ways of God. We may believe he was accustomed to communing with God with a right spirit since he felt the loss of that communion so keenly when he backslid (Psalm 51:10). Man has a spirit (I Thessalonians 5:23; Genesis 45:27; Exodus 35:21; 1Chronicles 5:26; and etc.). Man’s spirit is distinct from God’s spirit (Romans 8:16). There is some distinction between man’s spirit and his soul, but it is impossible to discern it without God’s word (Hebrews 4:12). The human spirit functions as the candle of the Lord, searching the inward parts of the belly (Proverbs 20:27). In other words, it is used by God to expose the inward selfishness of man’s being (his conscience—Romans 2:15). It is the point of communion, or contact, between God and man (Roman 8:16). Our spirit must be right with God’s Spirit or we will not be open to His teaching ministry (John 16:13; Ephesians 4:30-31). This requires a humble, or contrite spirit, broken from self will and surrendered to God’s control (Isaiah 57:15; Psalm 51:10).

Notice the relationship between spirit and mind (Ephesians 4:23; Romans 8:27). There is the spirit of our mind, and the mind of the Spirit. When we mind the things of the Spirit, we walk after the Spirit, and when we mind the things of the flesh, we walk after the flesh (Romans 8:5). God expressed His mind into His Word by His Spirit (II Timothy 3:16). When we set our mind upon the words of God, our mind engages God’s mind. As we surrender our mind to the mind of the LORD, His Spirit is drawn into communion with our spirit. It is in this communion with the Holy Ghost that we are guided to the truth God has revealed in the “scriptures of truth” (Daniel 10:21).

Jesus taught us that we must be in obedience to His will to know, that is, to understand His doctrine (John 7:17).
Roots of False Hermeneutical Principles

The Bible student needs to be able to identify false hermeneutical principles and one way to do this is to be familiar with the roots of false principles. Some commonly accepted principles of interpretation are unacceptable in hermeneutica-sacra. These three are selected for particular mention, first, because they represent the roots of false hermeneutical principles, and second because they allow us to sweep through the history of hermeneutics in three grand strokes.

Allegorism:

The literal meaning of a text is meaningless to the allegorist. He wants to find the meaning beyond the words. How did allegorism become part of Biblical Interpretation?

Hesiod and Homer (8th and 10th centuries respectively) wrote what became the historical, philosophical and religious “bible” of Greek culture. But many Greek thinkers began to object to the immorality of the Homeric gods. Essentially, the idea was that much of behavior that Hesiod and Homer ascribed to the gods was unworthy of them; and on that ground the works were under threat of rejection. To salvage this historical and philosophical tradition of the Greeks, teachers turned to a method of interpretation that allowed them to ignore the text’s literal meaning and contrive new meanings. This method of interpretation is called allegorism. It became a standard hermeneutical principle among intellectuals in Alexandria, Egypt. That is important because Alexandria became a “seat of learning,” and because Jewish and Christian philosophy was greatly influenced there.

Galatians 4:24 uses the word allegory with reference to the birth of Isaac and Ishmael. This is very different from what the pagans did in their allegorization of myths. The Holy Spirit uses an actual historical event as an allegory to some spiritual truth. When the Spirit wrote by inspiration the story
of the life of Abraham, He was not “speaking allegorically.” He was speaking the literal truth. The event happened exactly as the Spirit said in the Scriptures. In fact, the Bible says God orchestrated the historical event intending that it would provide spiritual truth to those of us upon whom the ends of the word are come (I Corinthians 10:11). It is one thing to say that God ordained that these historical events should be recorded in Scripture to serve as an allegory of spiritual truth; but it is something else to say that God was using a fable to present spiritual truth. Allegorical interpretation of Scripture never denies the literal facts of the Scriptures so interpreted; and further, such interpreting must be verifiable by the testimony of Scripture. In other words, one may not invent spiritual truth by allegorizing Bible stories. He may, however, find in Bible stories illustrations of Spiritual truths that are verified by the balance of Scriptures.

Philo (20 B.C.- A.D. 54) was first to apply the principles of allegorism to the Old Testament. Origen (A.D. 185-254) was the predominant force popularizing allegorism for New Testament interpretation.

**Rationalism:**

During the Reformation, Reformers argued with Papists about whether or not the Pope was Vicar of Christ. During the Age of Reason (1564-1648) the argument turned to whether there is any God at all. The Age of Reason might be better called the age of skepticism. But whatever it is called, Hobbes, Spinoza, Descartes, Kant and others popularized the idea that reason, not revelation, is the path to truth. This had the effect of rejecting whatever the Bible said which was apparently out of step with the consensus of the intelligentsia. All the supernatural aspects of Biblical record were categorically dismissed.

At the heart of the church’s struggle with rationalism was the issue of authority. And the two potentates who vied
for power were reason and revelation. The battle between reason and revelation cut deep wounds into traditional approaches in hermeneutica-sacra. The doctrine of inspiration was shamelessly assaulted. Many professional theologians succumbed to the popular wave and either gave up on the doctrine of inspiration altogether, or attempted to redefine it in harmony with vogue views.

_Historico-Critical Method:_

Eighteenth century rationalism naturally led to an emphasis on the human element in the Bible; for example, emphasis on human authorship, date of writing, historical background, and so on. But the most insidious work of the historico-critical method (a term used here in a qualified sense to identify the hermeneutical principles advanced by Semler) was to presume to distinguish what in the Bible was Scripture and what was merely human. German theological professor, Johann Salomo Semler (b. 1725; d. 1791) is called the father of German rationalism. He believed that any portion of the Bible text that did not to him appear “profitable” was therefore not inspired. Semler cut out eight entire books of the Bible because they were not, in his opinion, profitable.

**Comments to conclude part two**

It would not be appropriate to leave this discussion of false hermeneutical principles without clarifying that in every age there always remained a remnant of believers who adhered unwaveringly to Biblical principles of hermeneutics.

**End of First Things**
Chapter Three

Right Principles

You are learning how to interpret your Bible. You are learning how to identify right principles of interpretation from wrong ones. In your last lesson you studied requirements for interpreting the Bible and roots of false hermeneutical principles. In this lesson you will study right hermeneutical principles.

In certain applications, a rule can be found to violate the principle it was designed to serve. Consider the rule, “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense”—a commonly accepted law (rule) of interpretation. It’s a good law. It serves a sound principle: the Bible is God’s revelation of Himself to man in man’s language. But suppose the law was applied to Isaiah 7:14—“Behold, a virgin shall conceive…” You might not see a problem with this today. But imagine applying the rule 700 years before the prophecy was fulfilled. Does expectation of a virgin birth really make common sense? One might use this rule to justify seeking some other sense on the ground that the plain sense
makes no common sense. This would be an abuse of that good law. But the point, hopefully made, is that mechanical rules can frustrate good principles. So we think in terms of principles of hermeneutics, not mechanical rules.

What is a principle of hermeneutics?

A. Berkeley Mickelsen offers a helpful definition: “Principles of hermeneutics are precepts which express or describe the various ways followed by interpreters to get at meaning. They are statements of procedure.”

We will examine the subject as follows: hermeneutical principles given by Biblical precept, hermeneutical principles illustrated by the example of the New Testament, hermeneutical principles illustrated by the fulfillment of prophecy, and a summary of right hermeneutical principles.

Hermeneutical principles given by Biblical precept

Earlier I introduced three presuppositions about the Bible that serve as guiding truths by which all principles of hermeneutics must be tested. These are inspiration, inerrancy and preservation. The following adds to this list.

1. The Scripture is of no private interpretation.

Peter presents this as the first thing we are to know with regard to the Scripture—it is not of any private interpretation (II Peter 1:20). The reason is given in II Peter 1:21, “For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.” Scripture is not interpreted to serve the interests of the will of man. It is interpreted to serve the interests of the will of God. Much error has been taught because self-will interfered with the Bible student’s interpretation of the Scripture (Titus 3:10-11; Romans 16:17-18).

2. The Bible is not interpreted by human imagination.
An active imagination tends to add to what the Scripture says. An unbelieving one tends to take from it. The Bible makes it clear that the Scripture is not the product of man’s imagination, and it is not to be interpreted by it (Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:5; Revelation 22:18,19).

3. The Bible is to be interpreted by the Bible and within the bounds of perfect consistency with itself.

“Scripture interprets Scripture,” cried the Reformers. The Holy Spirit teaches this principle in Isaiah 28:10, “For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little and there a little.” One precept must be measured against all other precepts; each line of truth must be measured against all other lines of truth. Interpretations that do not measure up with other accepted interpretations suggest one or more of the interpretations are incorrect.

Hermeneutical principles illustrated by the example of the New Testament

Our New Testament provides an inspired interpretation of the Old. It is the Holy Spirit’s commentary on the Old Testament (Hebrews 1:1,2). We can learn how properly to interpret Scripture by examining how Jesus and the Apostles interpreted the Old Testament.

1. Samples of how Jesus interpreted the Old Testament follow:

Matthew 4:1-10 Jesus defeated Satan’s misinterpretations of Scripture by quoting other Scriptures that clarified the meaning and application of those quoted by Satan. Jesus gives us the example of interpreting Scripture with Scripture, and not by isolated texts.

Matthew 5:21-48 Jesus reveals greater depth of application to the law than was generally understood by his hearers.
He showed that God’s prohibitions were not only violated physically, but by man’s spirit too. He interpreted the Old Testament laws to apply to both the physical and spiritual aspects of man. Once, when explaining to the disciples how to interpret His own words, He taught them to distinguish between a physical and spiritual application of His words (John 6:53-65).

Matthew 15:3-9 Jesus interpreted the law within the context of the law, not in the context of man’s traditions.

Matthew 12:38-45, 21:42-44 and etc. Jesus interprets Old Testament Scripture as speaking of Him. What is significant is that the portions given here would not necessarily be understood by Old Testament saints as having any particular reference to Messiah, especially the reference to Jonah. But Jesus saw Himself being spoken of in these passages. The New Testament is filled with evidence that Jesus is the key to understanding the message of the Old Testament.

Matthew 22:29-33 Jesus shows us that He interpreted the Old Testament Scriptures by giving careful attention to every word. In verse thirty-two He quotes from Exodus 3:6. Jesus makes an important doctrinal point concerning the resurrection on the weight of one little two-letter word in the reference. The one word is am. Our Lord interpreted the Old Testament giving close attention to the individual words of Scripture, resting important doctrinal interpretations upon the tenses of verbs.

Matthew 22:41-46 Jesus practiced the principle of Isaiah 28:10, “precept upon precept, line upon line.” From passages like II Samuel 7:13-16, Jeremiah 23:5 (and others), the Jews believed their Messiah would come as king of the Jews from the lineage of David. They were correct. But they failed to compare Scripture with Scripture. They failed to measure line upon line. For they neglected to measure their interpretation of Scripture concerning the Messiah’s lineage
with what the Scripture said concerning His deity (Psalm 110:1).

2. Samples of how the apostles interpreted the Old Testament follow:

Acts 2:25-31 Peter interpreted Psalm 16:8-11 as a prophecy of Jesus’ resurrection. The prophecy is couched in a Psalm of David, which when read does not at first seem to be prophetic. However, as one approaches the conclusion of the Psalm the language takes a turn and becomes clearly prophetic: “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.” The key expression is Holy One. David was not the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah 1:4; 5:19, 24; 10:17, 20; 12:6; 17:7; 29:19, 23; 30:11, 12, 15; 31:1; 37:23; 40:25; 41:14, 16, 20; 45:11; Job 6:10; Psalm 71:22; 78:41; 89:18-19, to cite a few, all point to Christ as the Holy One (see Mark 1:24). The Holy One of Israel is the Messiah. Passages like the above infer that all the Old Testament can be expected to point to Christ. Many have adopted it as a principle that Jesus is the key to understanding the Scriptures (John 5:39). But more important to our immediate point is the fact that Peter observed that the expression in this Psalm meant he should apply it beyond David, to Christ Jesus the Lord.

I Corinthians 3:9-20 Paul puts together excerpts from Psalms 5:9 and Isaiah 59 in this quotation of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is interpreted as one book, and passages from different places in the Scripture can be linked together to present a truth.

I Corinthians 3:19 “Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law.” Paul was arguing that specific aspects of the Law were addressed to a specific limited audience. Audience is an important question when interpreting Scripture.
I Corinthians 10:11 in this place Paul makes it clear all that was written in the Old Testament has very special meaning and application to all New Testament believers: “Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.” This means every thing that happened to them was intended by God to provide examples for us to learn from. It means that when these things were written down by the Holy Ghost through holy men of God (II Peter 1:21) He had very especially in mind those of us who believe on Him during these last days (Hebrews 1:1:2; see also I Peter 1:20). This principle is reiterated in Romans 15:4, “For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.”

Romans 9:6-33 Paul offers several examples of interpretation in this passage. Paul interpreted the history of Abraham as having doctrinal significance. The point being made in Romans 9:6-33 is that, “They are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” Its doctrinal significance is that salvation is by God’s gracious promise, not lineage. To make his point he refers to the fact that Ishmael, although a son of Abraham, was not of Israel because the Scripture says, “In Isaac shall thy seed be called.” Paul uses the actual history as illustration and evidence of God’s intent to insure redemption was premised on promise, not as though the story was invented as an allegory of the doctrine.

gathered Scriptures from various places and assembled them together to support a doctrinal truth.

Before we leave the discussion of how the apostles interpreted the Old Testament, something needs to be said about alleged interpretive alteration of the Old Testament by the apostles, especially by the apostle Paul. Often the flak takes aim at dummy targets. When someone construes the language of Paul, “Wherefore, come out from among them” (II Corinthians 6:17) as being an adapted alteration of Isaiah 52:11-12, “go ye out of the midst of her;” we are talking about flaky flak indeed.

First, Paul possessed apostolic gifts and authority, which means his rephrase of the Scripture was inspired by the Holy Spirit. Does anyone argue that the Holy Spirit may not rephrase Himself?

Second, the content of either phrase says the same thing. There is no alteration of the message.

Third, the Holy Spirit, by Paul, was not necessarily formally quoting Isaiah, but simply restating through Paul what He earlier said through Isaiah.

Finally, if anyone will presume to assume Paul interpolates his own private interpretations into his allusions to the Old Testament in his writings, let him acknowledge that the things Paul wrote are the commandments of the Lord (I Corinthians 14:37).

Hermeneutical Principles Illustrated by the Example of How Prophecy has been Fulfilled in History

Should the Bible be taken literally? History records show that every fulfilled prophecy of the Old Testament was fulfilled literally, never symbolically, or figuratively. What follows are two samples of prophecies which might cause even the most strict literalist to wonder if there was a symbolical
interpretation to the Scriptures, but which when fulfilled in Christ showed they were to be taken literally after all.

1. Consider the passages that prophesied Messiah’s point of origin.

Was He to come from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2)? Or was He to come from Egypt (Hosea 11:1)? But the Old Testament also said He would be called a Nazarene (Isaiah 11:1). Where would Israel expect to look for their Messiah’s appearing? It is possible an allegorist would find some symbolic significance in the meaning of the words Bethlehem, Egypt, and Branch; i.e., Nazarene. Then he would offer a profound interpretation concerning the origin of Messiah on earth. And then he would have missed the Saviour altogether, because when Jesus came He was born in Bethlehem (Luke 2), was taken to Egypt and later called out (Matthew 2:13-22), and settled in Nazareth from whence He went forth to seek and to save that which was lost (Matthew 2:23). All of these prophecies were fulfilled literally.

2. Consider the prophecy concerning Jesus’ virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14).

Earlier, we noted how difficult it would be for mere common sense to accept the notion of a virgin birth. It’s not hard to picture some student allegorizing the passage into meaningless abstraction. But what does the New Testament tell us about how the verse should have been interpreted? The prophecy was fulfilled literally.

A Summary of Right Hermeneutical Principles

Hermeneutical principles learned from Biblical precept, example of the New Testament and the example of fulfilled prophecy (see above) will be summarized into a list of nine principles.

1. The principle of allegiance:
The Bible is to be interpreted according to God’s will and not our own (II Peter 1:20,21). Our allegiance must not be committed to the traditions of men, but to the Word of God.

2. *The principle of purity:*

The Bible is to be interpreted with nothing added and nothing subtracted (Deuteronomy 4:2; Proverbs 30:5; Revelation 22:18,19).

3. *The principle of consistency:*

Each interpretation must be consistent with all other interpretations (Isaiah 28:10).

4. *The principle of Scripture with Scripture:*

Interpretations of any passage of Scripture are premised upon and tested by other passages of Scripture (Matthew 4:1-10; 15:3-9; 22:41-46).

5. *The principle of dual application:*

Some passages of Scripture have a physical and a spiritual application; some have only a spiritual or a physical application (John 6:53-65).

6. *The grammar matters principle:*

Grammar is important in interpretation and should be given careful attention (Matthew 22:29-33).

7. *The principle of audience:*

To whom a passage is addressed is an important consideration in interpretation (I Corinthians 3:9-20).

8. *The principle of multiple application:*

The Scripture has one interpretation, but it can have many applications: e.g., doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness (II Timothy 3:16; Romans 9:6-33; Romans 15:4; I Corinthians 10:6,11).

9. *The literal principle:*
The Bible is to be interpreted literally (Isaiah 7:14).

Comments to conclude Right Principles

The three major presuppositions given in the introduction along with the above nine Biblical principles provide the Biblicist with the means to, “Try the spirits to see if they be of God,” with regards to hermeneutical principles.

End of Right Principles
You have learned what God requires for interpreting the Bible: the right Spirit; i.e., the Holy Spirit, the right Scriptures; i.e., the K.J.V., and the right spirit; i.e., a student with a spirit right with God. You have learned the roots of false hermeneutical principles and you have learned right, Biblical hermeneutical principles. Congratulations, you are obeying the Scripture, which says “study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (II Timothy 2:15).

Remember the three presuppositions that provide guidelines for our study of interpretation: the doctrines of inspiration, inerrancy and preservation. You should become sufficiently familiar with these doctrines so that you can quote their definitions and defend your position on each one. Additionally, you should memorize the nine Biblical principles of interpretation. The nine Biblical principles together with the three presuppositions provide you with everything you need
to evaluate any interpretation of Scripture to see if it is reliable.

Reevaluating popular conservative principles of interpretation In this lesson we are going to apply what we have learned. We will evaluate the conservative principles of interpretation that are generally accepted by Christian theologians to see if their principles are trustworthy. We will find that some conservative principles are not consistent with Biblical ones. In other cases we will discover that the principle itself is appropriate, but its use is inconsistent with Biblical principles and presuppositions of hermeneutica-sacra.

Ramm, Chafer, Mickelsen, Berkhof, and Towns—all these men have advanced viable conservative hermeneutical principles which deserve consideration. However, I think it is sufficient for us to examine specifically the hermeneutics set forth in Ramm’s book Protestant Biblical Interpretation. Ramm’s text was chosen for the following reasons:

1. It provides a comprehensive overview of all the principles touched upon by most of the authors named above.

2. It has served as a text and as a primary source for many writers on the subject.

3. Ramm’s statement in his prologue: “The author has endeavored to present that system of hermeneutics which most generally characterizes conservative Protestantism. In pursuit of this goal we have not defended any specific school of thought within Protestantism.”

Dr. Ramm’s text, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, takes a historical tact. That is, his book treats the subject with less critical analysis than others. His objective is to present historical protestant interpretation methods. Dr. Ramm offers a summary of the three broad principles of historic Protestant method. This he follows with the eleven general (he calls them “perspective”) principles, and then he offers six spe-
cific ones.

**Three Historic Protestant Principles:**

**Literal:**

Ramm defends the literal approach very well; in fact this writer finds it difficult to applaud and type at the same time. Dr. Ramm’s views concerning the literal method of interpretation are in harmony with Biblical principle number nine: the literal principle. He makes the point that the literalist does not deny that figurative, typological and/or symbolical language is used in the Bible. He says, “To interpret literally (in this sense) is nothing more or less than interpreting words and sentences in their normal, usual, customary proper designation.”

When Dr. Ramm says, “The literal method is the necessary check upon the imagination of men,” he strikes a chord in perfect harmony with Biblical principle number two: the principle of purity.

**Cultural:**

Geography, history, and ancient social customs—Dr. Ramm believes all of these must be reckoned in interpretation. Reckoned with, perhaps; but it is decidedly a mistake to attach too much importance to background in hermeneutics. It is a mistake to give the impression that the student must be conversant with manners and customs of ancient times outside of what is given in the context of the Scripture. By “too much importance,” I mean that statements such as follows are exaggerations of the import of background: “The background and history of the Jewish people must therefore be understood before one can truly comprehend the meaning of the New Testament.” (Dr. Borland, General Introduction to the New Testament, p.13). It’s important here to make it clear this writer does not suggest such study has no value. Only that it’s often overrated, and it is certainly not essential.
The lack of historical setting given in much of the Holy Spirit’s book suggests its relative unimportance to the author—God; and what cultural background is “essential” for understanding the text is in the text.

Sometimes an emphasis on the importance of background has led interpreters down fruitless paths. It can expose a sanctified mind to vanity, inflating the carnal mind with extraneous information that can make an otherwise effective teacher seem supercilious. It can introduce error into your teaching because what background information is available outside the Scripture is often ambiguous at best and at worst false. Premising interpretations on ambiguous, often contradictory and controversial theories about dates, geography and customs can have the effect of unfairly compromising the authority of the message, even if it artificially pumps up the authority of the messenger.

No one is suggesting Bible students hide their eyes from historical facts; but we certainly should not allow human theories to have any controlling influence over our interpretations of Scripture. Nor am I saying such study cannot sometimes help elucidate some passages of Scripture. I am saying, however, that such extraneous historical footnotes might be interesting for the purpose of presentation but they are never essential to interpretation. Such topics are better suited to homiletics, not hermeneutics.

Biblical principles two, three and four, which together require contextual interpretation, will satisfy any need for cultural background necessary to interpret the message of Scripture.

*Critical:*

Ramm explains what he means as follows: “By critical we mean that any interpretation of Scripture must have adequate justification.” It is heartily agreed; no interpretation should
be accepted that has no grounds to support it. But choosing authorities should be done carefully.

Dr. Ramm suggests historical, lexical, grammatical, theological, cultural, and geographical justifications for an interpretation as being included in the critical principle. He argues that to accurately interpret the meaning of the words one must give attention to grammar. This conforms to principle number six: grammar matters. But there are important qualifications to keep in mind when justifying interpretations on the grounds of historical, lexical, theological, cultural, and geographical authority (the historical, cultural and geographical issues have already received comment).

First, supremacy must be given to the authority of grammar above all the others. Grammar has to do with language and God used language to communicate to us His written revelation. By choosing language as the vehicle through which God reveals Himself to man, He anointed language as His spokesman.

Does someone say, “But He reveals Himself through history too”? Agreed! The Scripture is a written record of God’s revelation of Himself to man in history. But otherwise history only reveals God as it is interpreted by this written revelation, the Bible. History does not interpret the Bible; the Bible interprets history.

Second, dependence upon lexical authority to justify interpretations implies that God did not preserve His Word through translation. There are bad copies, and there are bad translations. Nonetheless, the Lord has preserved His word through the Textus Receptus to the Authorized Version. This is presupposition number three.

Lest I be misunderstood, I remind you that I’m not saying there is no value in such study. Its relative value is, however, subordinate to a grammatical study of the English text in the
K.J.V.

Third, theological justification to support interpretations can lead us into the trap of allowing the traditions of men to unduly shape our interpretations of the Scripture. For example, Ramm suggests one might appeal to the general teachings of Calvin to justify an interpretation. If Calvin’s conclusions are Scriptural, why appeal to Calvin; why not appeal directly to Scripture? This principle threatens to frustrate Biblical principle number four: Scripture with Scripture. Of course it’s appropriate to consider what Spirit filled, seasoned soldiers of the Word have discerned in their studies; but once again I caution the student to choose his “authorities” carefully, always zealously subordinating the commentary to the Scripture. I recommend to the reader my book, The Calvin Complex as an example of this exercise.

Eleven General Principles

The priority of the original languages:

Dr. Ramm gives the following concerning this principle: “The purpose of this principle is neither to confine the study of the Bible to the students of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek nor to discourage the average Christian from reading his Bible.” But if such a principle has that effect, what does it matter if it was not the purpose? Our presupposition regarding the preservation of Scripture draws our shoulder back from giving priority to the original languages; but it does not disallow consideration of them. Study of the original languages helps us identify the preserved text.

But giving to the original languages an arbitrary authority in interpretation can be dangerous, if for no other reason, because very few, if any really ever master the original languages. If we encourage the average Christian to have confidence in the A.V. then we should demonstrate our own confidence in the text by avoiding giving the false impression that
it requires knowledge of Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic to truly understand its message. This does not mean we should not draw insights from such study and use them in our teaching and preaching. Bible students would do well to be very wary of any interpretation they derive from such a study that runs counter to the plain reading of the English text in the KJV.

*The principle of accommodation of revelation:*

“God accommodated His revelation to man’s ability to understand it; i.e., the Bible is a book from God to man using man’s language to communicate God’s message.” This is a self-evident fact and in itself does no injustice to either our presuppositions or Biblical principles. However, Dr. Ramm applies the principle as follows: “Judgment is spoken of in terms of fire because pain from burning is the most intense known in common experience. The gnawing worm is the fitting analogy for the pain that is steady, remorseless and inescapable.” (Ramm’s text, page 110)

How does this affect the way one preaches on the subject of hell? Doesn’t this attitude tend to compromise the heat of hell’s fires? Doesn’t it tend to make the Bible preacher quibble about analogy, and figures, and the “accommodation principle” when what he should be saying, “Unless you are saved from God’s wrath, you will burn in the fires of hell”?

It’s productive of nothing but the advance of evil to blunt the force of any doctrine by some pretense of a special enlightenment. There is no justification for the assumption that Jesus was using analogy to accommodate this dreadful spiritual message to the simple understanding of the human mind. Nothing in the text—nothing in the full context of Scripture—nothing but the vanity of a puffed up mind provides any basis for this assumption.

Modern preachers might say, “The Bible’s language on hell is an effort to accommodate our crude understanding by
trying to explain this judgment to us in terms we can comprehend.” But Jesus said, “The rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes being in torments, … and he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame” (Luke16:19ff). That Jesus did not preach on this subject the way most modern preachers do should be enough to convince you that Ramm has betrayed us on this point.

Perhaps the reason Ramm leaves the principle of literal interpretation when it comes to hell is because it doesn’t agree with what he considers to be common sense. Berkhof makes an important statement about the dangers of such superficial abandonment of the literal principle: (See Berkhof’s text, page 85)

“There is an old and oft-repeated Hermeneutical rule, that the words should be understood in their literal sense, unless such literal interpretation involves a manifest contradiction or absurdity. It should be observed, however, that in practice this becomes merely an appeal to every man’s rational judgment. What seems absurd or improbable to one, may be regarded as perfectly simple and self-consistent by another.”

The accommodation principle as applied by Ramm is dangerously presumptuous. Neither he, nor any other living person can know if hell’s fires are literal or if Jesus was employing analogy in His descriptions of it. All of God’s prophecies have been fulfilled literally: Biblical principle number nine. It is presumptuous to imagine Jesus’ prophecies concerning hell are going to be fulfilled otherwise.

*Progressive revelation:*

“From the first mention of a subject to the last time it is mentioned in the Bible, there is an unfolding, by stages, of more and more information leading to a full revelation from God on the subject.” Ramm offers the example of the Ser-
mon on the Mount. It is a good one. Jesus makes it clear in this sermon that He does not intend to supersede the law, but to fulfill it. His message was not to be construed as different from the law, but as a more full revelation of it. And indeed, it is. This principle violates none of the nine Biblical principles and is in harmony with our three presuppositions.

The principle of historical propriety:

“An interpretation of Scripture must be in harmony with the historical setting at the time the Scripture was written.” I resist the insinuation in this statement that before we can be certain our interpretations are correct we must labor extensively in the study of histories written by profane men. What is needed to ascertain what God said is in what God has said. But I might not demur further on this point except that when we read Ramm’s explanation of what he means by it we find there is tension between this principle and the Biblical principles set forth in this study.

Ramm offers three examples of how adherence to the principle of historical propriety would help interpreters. In two of them, the historical setting offers no information that significantly influences our interpretation of the passage in question. In one example, Ramm presume knowledge about the historical setting not available in the Scripture.

“Genesis 4:1 is interpreted by some to suggest Eve thought Seth was the redeemer promised in Genesis 3:15.” Ramm infers that if the principle of historical propriety were applied interpreters would see that this is incorrect. Why? Because historically it is not probable that Eve would have understood Genesis 3:15 to be about Messiah. How does Ramm know what Eve knew? Does he presume to know that God said no more to Adam and Eve than what is recorded in the first chapters of Genesis? It would seem manifestly obvious that God had many conversations with our first parents that are not recorded in the pages of Scripture (Genesis 3:8). Be-
sides, Ramm offers two much better arguments to disprove the fanciful interpretation: context and grammar. As a matter of fact, the argument from history is as fanciful as the misinterpretation it is used to defeat.

The principle of ignorance:

“There are passages for which there is no commonly agreed upon interpretation.” With this principle, as others, the problem is not with the principle itself so much as with its application. Ramm says Lindsay has, “put his finger on the cause” of obscurity in certain passages. He quotes Lindsay, saying,

“‘The obscurity of ancient documents is far more frequently occasioned by our ignorance of multitudes of things, then so familiarly known, that a passing allusion only was needed to present a vivid picture, than any difficulties connected with the language itself.’” (Ramm’s text, page 115)

But this suggests the Scriptures are incomplete.

Presupposing that Scripture is inspired, that God is its author, that God is omniscient, that the Scripture is whole lacking nothing necessary to communicate God’s message to man, one wonders how God could be so careless.

Certainly there are passages that baffle even the most able interpreters. But what is the reason for this? Is it not what Jesus explained to His disciples about the occasional obscurity of His own words (Matthew 13:10-17)? Or perhaps it is obscure now because the matter is sealed for a time to be revealed later, as is the case with the dispensation of the Gentiles (I Corinthians 2:7; Romans 16:25). Maybe it is something that fits the category of the “dark sayings” of the wise (Proverbs 1:5-6). And maybe it’s best to exercise the principle of ignorance and say, frankly, we do not know.

The principle of differentiating interpretation from application:
“A passage of Scripture has only one interpretation; but the moral principles of a passage are capable of many applications.” Ramm faithfully represents this principle making certain the reader understands the primary interpretation of the Scripture is always the governor of any application. This principle agrees well with principle number eight: the principle of multiple applications. It conforms to all other Biblical principles and is in harmony with all our presuppositions.

The checking principle:

“We must check our interpretations with available literature.” Dr. Ramm recommends we check our interpretations with secular studies when the passage touches matters of science or history. We are sent to the great creeds to check our doctrinal interpretations. And we are encouraged to check our work with the great exegetical works of the past. The Dr. is careful to warn us, however, not to be slavishly conforming to these resources. With that qualification in mind, the checking principle checks out well. But something must be said about using secular sources to confirm interpretations of sacred Scripture. Who has not noticed the sometimes subtle and sometimes bold antichrist bias in science and history?

The principle of induction:

“Induction in exegesis means that the Scripture is allowed to speak for itself.” Here is an excellent principle. It is in agreement with principle number one: the principle of allegiance. It also agrees with principle number two: the principle of purity.

The principle of preference for the clearest interpretation:

When two or more interpretations suggest themselves to the interpreter, this rule says, “Choose the clear over the obscure.” This principle does not seem to agitate any tension between itself and the presuppositions and Biblical principles presented in this study, on the surface. Underneath, as it
is presented in Ramm’s text, we think it offers to the powers of human reason a license to arbitrate a private interpretation. Our presuppositions and Biblical principles do not recommend we give our human rationalizations the final word over interpretation. If it ever comes to this, to a mere rational choice, we can be certain the question is either moot, or begs application of the ignorance principle. But the corollary to this principle, given by Ramm as, “Obscure passages must give right of way to clear passages,” agrees with Biblical principle number four: Scripture with Scripture. One very clear, bright shining passage can illuminate the dark corners of many other obscure passages.

The principle of the unity of the sense of Scripture:

“Scriptures have only one meaning.” This principle is consistent with our presuppositions about the Bible and does not violate any of the nine Biblical principles. Dr. Ramm makes reference to Dr. Berkhof’s book Principles of Biblical Interpretation, pp. 57-60. Therefore, we will divert our attention to that good work for discussion on this point. Dr. Berkhof emphasizes the importance of this principle as follows:

“This fundamental principle must be placed emphatically in the foreground, in opposition to the tendency, revealed in history and persisting in some quarters even up to the present time, to accept a manifold sense,—a tendency that makes any science of Hermeneutics impossible, and opens wide the door for all kinds of arbitrary interpretations.” (Berkhof’s text, page 57)

Dr. Berkhof provides solid basis for the principle. These are summarized below:

The veracity of God: “A really truthful man would not consciously resort to the use of ambiguous language,” and it is certain God would not.

The purpose of God’s revelation: “It is utterly inconceivable that He should have provided man with a dubious rev-
eration, since this would defeat the very purpose which He sought to realize.”

The necessary congruity between the revelation of the logos in the mind of man and His revelation in nature and in Scripture: “It would mean that the truth of the Bible could not be investigated by logical methods, nor intellectually comprehended.”

The character of human language: “It is absolutely foreign to the character of … language that a word should have two, three, or even more significations in the same connection. If this were so, all communication among men would be utterly impossible.”

Dr. Berkhof offers safeguards against misunderstanding this principle on pages 58-60 of his book, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*.

The principle of the analogy of faith: Scripture is its own interpreter. The only concern one might have with regard to this principle is the possibility one would subordinate the interpretation of Scripture to church dogma rather than church dogma to correct interpretation of Scripture. Essentially, this principle is expressed in the third and fourth Biblical principles: third, the principle of consistency; and, fourth, the principle of Scripture with Scripture.

**Six specific principles:**

*The principle of the study of words:*

Biblical principle number six instructs us that grammar matters. A study of words falls into the category of this principle.

*The principle of grammatical interpretation:*

Ramm distinguishes between the study of words (etymology, usus loquendi, and so on) from the study of sentenc-
es; i.e., grammar. But under this point he says, “First of all, much of that which has been said of words applies to grammar.” He also points out that when one speaks of grammar one speaks of verbs, nouns, gerunds, adjectives, and so on — these are all words. Finally, it is a common and a commonly big mistake to interpret a word outside of its context. So we consider these together under the principle of grammar matters: Biblical principle number six.

*The principle of contextual interpretation:*

Biblical principles two, three and four serve to keep the interpreter within the bounds of the context of Scripture.

*The principle of interpreting according to literary mold:*

The apparent form of the Scripture suggests the chosen frame within which God chose to reveal His message. This is part of context and should be considered a viable factor in interpreting the passage under study. Biblical principles two, three and four are served by this principle.

*The principle of interpretation by proper cross-references:*

Dr. Ramm’s information under this heading serves the fourth Biblical principle: Scripture with Scripture. Cross-referencing is certainly one of the most helpful and important tools of the interpreter.

*The principle of interpretation of figurative language:*

Berkhof offers some good instruction for interpreting figurative language. Biblical principle number five is served by this information.

**Comments to conclude Protestant Principles Parsed**

Traditional Protestant interpretation principles are not always in harmony with a Biblicist’s perspective on Biblical interpretation. If the presuppositions of this author are correct, and if the principles drawn from the Bible as outlined
herein are accurate, it is clear we need to review our hermeneutical approaches with the aim of bringing them under the authority of Scripture, not vice-versa.

Once again, I encourage the student to memorize the presuppositions and Biblical principles given in this study of interpretation. They will guide you when struggling with a difficult passage and they will safeguard you from dangerous misinterpretations of Scripture by false teachers.

End of Protestant Principles Parsed
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