Principles of sound Bible exposition

Introduction

In his book *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, Bernard Ramm says:

> *"That God has spoken in Holy Scripture is the very heart of our faith and without this certainty we would be left to the relativity and dubiousness of human knowledge...The result of an erratic hermeneutics is that the Bible has been made the source of confusion rather than light."*

Edward White, in his book *Inspiration*, makes the following statement:

> *"There is no folly, no God-dishonouring theology, no iniquity, no sacerdotal puerility for which chapter and verse may not be cited by an enslaved intelligence. And under these circumstances it is impossible to express in adequate terms the importance of correct estimate and exposition if the Bible."*

The application of sound principles of Bible exposition is necessary to clear up doctrinal differences and to curb the confusion being created by the many subjective utterances that are so prevalent in the church today.

What does Scripture say about doctrine?

> *"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers"* (1Tim.4:16).

> *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth"* (2Tim.2:15).

A believer should be able to give a logical explanation of what he believes:

> *"Always be ready to give a logical defence to any one who asks you to account for the hope that is in you..."* (1Pet.3:15, Amplified Bible).

Wrong doctrine is dangerous.

> *"If anyone does hurt to God's temple or corrupts it with false doctrine or destroys it, God will do hurt to him"* (1Cor.3:17, Amplified Bible).

> *"A little leaven, a slight inclination to error, or a few false teachers, leavens the whole lump, perverts the whole conception of faith and misleads the whole church"* (Gal. 5:7-9, Amplified Bible).

Knowledge of Scripture enables one to discern error.

> *"Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God"* (Matt.22:29).
>
> *"...my people are destroyed from lack of knowledge"* (Hos. 4:6).

It is said that you can prove anything from the Bible. It is not true if one allows Scripture to explain Scripture.

Principles of sound Bible exposition

1. In order to understand the Bible correctly, **the text, the context and the wider context** must be taken into consideration. Most heresies originate because ideas are based on isolated texts taken out of context. A text taken out of context becomes a pretext.

i. The most important context that must be taken into consideration is the context of the Old and the New Testament.
The New Testament does not start at Matt.1:1, or with the birth of Christ, but at the moment of Christ's death on the cross, for the Bible explains that a testament does not come into effect until the death of the testator:

> *"In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living"* (Heb.9:16-17, NIV).
>
> *" For where a testament is, there must of necessity be the death of him that made it. For a testament is of force where there hath been death: for it doth never avail while he that made it liveth"* (Heb.9:16-17,KJV).

Everything written in Scripture before the death of Christ cannot automatically be applied to New Testament doctrine. Before His death Jesus said to His disciples:

> *"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth"* (Joh.16:12-14).

After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the apostles had a clearer understanding of New Testament truth, and what was revealed to them is preserved for us in their epistles.

ii. The historical and cultural context.

Some parts of Scripture refer to specific historical and cultural circumstances and cannot at whim be applied to modern day situations. The popular use of 2 Chronicles 7:14 is an example of such misapplication and an example of a text taken out of context and which is then erroneously applied to a modern country:

> *"if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

The context will show that the land that is referred to is Israel and because they are in a unique covenant relationship with God, the text cannot be applied to any other nation. The spiritual principle though, in this, or in any other scripture, can be applied, but then the application of the "land" in 2 Chronicles 7:14 must figuratively refer, not to a physical land or government, but to the life of believers.

2. One correct meaning.

Those of us who accept the fact that the Bible is the inspired Word of God believe that God gave us His Word, not to confuse us, but to guide us; therefore we believe that a certain section of Scripture can have only one correct meaning and that it is the meaning God intended when He inspired His Word. Although it can be applied differently, it can have only one meaning. Scripture must be interpreted literally, except where the context indicates that it must be understood figuratively, e.g.

> *"...let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; they will sing before the Lord..."*(Ps.96:12-13).

If the ordinary meaning makes sense, look for no other sense.

3. The principle of harmony.

No part of Scripture may be interpreted in such a way that it contradicts any other part of Scripture. Where there seems to be a contradiction, it is usually the result of using a poor translation of the original languages, or a faulty interpretation on our part. Scripture must always be allowed to explain or confirm Scripture. Apparent contradictions must be solved or explained, otherwise the inerrancy of the Word of God can be questioned. In the case of difficult parts in the Bible to understand, it would be unwise to rely on one interpretation only. Theological speaking, it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel; there is hardly a topic in the Bible which has not already been thoroughly researched. It would be unwise to form an opinion before all interpretations have objectively been investigated.

4. Descriptive or prescriptive?

One must make a distinction between what is descriptive and what is prescriptive in Scripture. Serious heresy can originate when certain descriptive parts of Scripture are taken to be prescriptive – does it for example mean that because God spoke through Balaam's donkey that we are commanded to keep donkeys in our backyards in case God wants to speak to us in the same way? (Num.22).

5. Parables

Parables are stories that Jesus told that were based on everyday situations that occurred in His day. He told them with the purpose of conveying an important lesson and in order to interpret them correctly, one must not try and deduct a theological principle from all the finer details of the narrative. **It is the main lesson that is of importance**. Deducting doctrinal

principles from the finer details can sometimes be very misleading. So for instance, the main message in the parable of the judge in Luke 18:1-4 is to teach that one must not give up and not lose heart. To attach meaning to the finer details can lead to the assumption that God can be compared to an unrighteous judge.

5. The principle of the authority of Jesus.

Why are the words of Jesus so authoritative? – they are authoritative because He was sent by the Father who instructed Him what to say:

> *"For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it"* (Joh.12:49).
>
> *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets...but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..."* (Heb.1:1).

Thus, when you hear Jesus, you hear what God has to say!
Jesus declared His own authority:

> *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples.. teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you"*(Matt.28:18-19).

The authority of Jesus exceeds that of any other prophet or person who ever lived and also exceeds the authority of any church creed. Jesus did not say that we should go and teach what Calvyn, Armenius, the pope, or any church teaches; He said we had to teach everything He taught!

6. The authority of the letters written by the apostles.

The New Testament epistles have authority because they were written by the apostles who had received direct revelation from God. So for instance the apostle John wrote:

> *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us"* (John 1:1-3).

Paul could also state:

> *"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you..."* (1 Cor.11:23).

The authority of *"it is written"* (Matt.4:4) is furthermore confirmed by Paul when he warned believers to *"... not go beyond what is written*" (1 Cor.4:6).
If what you believe is not based on the teachings of Jesus or on the writings of the apostles, it is not New Testament doctrine.

Conclusion

The fact that there are so many contradicting doctrines in Christianity is not so much a theological problem as it is an authoritative problem – someone does not want to accept the authority of *"it is written"* to settle an argument; human philosophy and opinion carries more weight than what is proclaimed in Scripture. The indoctrinations of denominations have great influence on what people believe. So for instance when Scripture states: *"Watch your life and doctrine closely"* (1 Tim.4:16), it does not refer to the doctrine of any denomination or church group, but to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

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