



# Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 7 – HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION  
LESSON 139 – HISTORICAL FALLACIES

*EXEGETICAL FALLACIES (SECOND EDITION)* – DA CARSON

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# The Influence of the New Hermeneutic

- ▶ The Bible contains a lot of historical data; and where finite, fallen human beings struggle with history, there will be historical fallacies found.
- ▶ Exegesis involves sustained thought and argumentation; and where is such strained thought, there also will be find presuppositional fallacies.
- ▶ Until a few decades ago, hermeneutics was largely understood to be the art or science of interpretation. The “new hermeneutic” introduces the idea that the interpreter already brings along a certain amount of cultural, linguistic, and ethical baggage when he approaches the text.
- ▶ This produces a theory that argues that a text has many meanings, none of them objectively true, and all of them valid or invalid according to their effect on the interpreter. This is absolute relativism and self-contradictory.

# Distanciation

- ▶ The new hermeneutic has forced us to recognize that distanciation is an important part of coming to grips with any text: the interpreter must distance his own horizon of understanding from that of the text.
- ▶ A Christian, who was also a fisherman, proved that applying his understanding to the text actually did not help with the interpretation of it at all. FF Bruce tells the story about when this fisherman taught that when the disciples failed to catch any fish after fishing all night (John 21:3), that the real problem was the James and John were in the boat. Since they were known as the “sons of thunder”. Any fisherman knows that thunder or loud noises will drive fish away. So obviously, the fish fled from the fishermen trying to catch them, because they were the noisy sons of thunder.

# World View Confusion

- ▶ We have already covered a similar problem when we looked last week at the world view problem. If we limit our understanding of the text to just what our own personal world view brings to the table, so to speak, then we cannot see the truth no matter how hard we stare at the words.
- ▶ We must be aware of our limitations and our presuppositions when we approach the text so that we do not read them into the text. Our opinions and even our understanding must be bent to fit what Scripture says, not the other way around.

# Radical Hermeneutics

- ▶ More recently, the “new hermeneutic” has been replaced by the “radical hermeneutic.” This brings about the processes of deconstruction. Reject anything modern and a postmodernist will argue that there are no secure foundations and all methods are themselves theory laden. The result is that there is no authoritative meaning in the text. There are instead many meanings depending on the interpreters identity, community, and history.
- ▶ The most obvious of these fallacies is reading one’s own personal theology into the text. When a cherished point of personal theology is challenged we must be willing to test everything and not merely or quickly refuse to examine our beliefs.

# There Will Be Bias

- ▶ We cannot read the text without bias, and it is a fallacy to think that it can be done. We must rather discern what our prejudices are and make allowances for them; and meanwhile we should learn all the historical theology that we can.
- ▶ One example of relying on theological tradition can be demonstrated in the writings of Zane Hodges. His interpretive method, that he explains in order to uphold his point, is an interpretive methodology that has never been used by anyone before him in all of church history. The result is that he teaches a 2-step salvation, wherein we are saved when we accept Jesus as Savior, and further saved when we also accept Him as Lord.

# The Bible has a Story Line

- ▶ Because so many interpreters do not hold to the belief that there is an omniscient God who actually stands behind all of the Bible, they feel free to read parts of it in ways that are deliberately set against other parts. This has produced notions such as the Song of Solomon being pornographic and James and Paul disagreeing about the nature of faith and works when it comes to justification.
- ▶ Christians who have a high view of Scripture, a commitment to truth because they serve a God who knows all truth perfectly, and who recognize that although in our finiteness and sinfulness we may not know truth absolutely or perfectly but nevertheless truly, will not want to go down these paths – we want to know how the Bible fits together so that we may be able to trace the story line from the creation and fall through great redemptive-historical appointments to the consummation in a new heaven and earth.

# Social Agendas

- ▶ The current social agenda is taken as the assumed reality to which the text is made to conform. For example, Elizabeth Castelli argues that when Paul urged believers to imitate and follow him (1 Cor. 1:11), this urging inherently was a political move that privileges a certain view of reality and marginalizes others who disagree. This causes divisions and disadvantages.
- ▶ This of course presupposes that God has no inclination to demand that His image bearers live a certain way, and not in other ways.
- ▶ Historical reconstruction results then when we impose today's social agendas on historical Scripture.

# Causation and Motivation

- ▶ Fallacies of causation are faulty explanations of the causes of historical events. Just because event B happened after event A that does not mean that event A caused event B.
- ▶ It is a fallacy to mistake correlation for cause, to put the effect before the cause, or to reduce complexity to simplicity or diversity to uniformity in causal explanations.
- ▶ Motivational fallacies are a special kind of causal explanations in which the effect is an intelligent act and the cause is the thought behind it. It proves to be the worst attempt to psychoanalyze one or more of the participants in a past event, without having access to the patient beyond fragmentary records of the event.

# Conceptual Parallelomania

- ▶ This is a conceptual counterpart to the verbal parallelomania from the first lesson. This shows up especially in the writings of those who have specialized in psychology, sociology, and philosophy, but who have no more than a shallow, Sunday school understanding of the Scriptures. Everything they read automatically falls into the category of their specialty and therefore they think that they have a much firmer grasp of Scripture than they actually do.

# Concluding Reflections

- ▶ 1. Problems related to literary genre. Parables, proverbs, and allegories must be treated as what they are and not confused with one other, or other genres.
- ▶ 2. Problems related to the New Testament use of the Old. Some of this involves typology, and sometimes we must be careful to note whether the Old Testament context must be brought over into the New in order to understand the usage.
- ▶ 3. Arguments from silence. Some of this comes from putting things into the text that just are not there, and at other times it involves a fallacy of thinking that because Jesus did not directly address a subject then we cannot possible deduce His will in the matter.

# Concluding Reflections

- ▶ 4. Problems related to juxtapositions of texts. We must be careful when trying to link verses together. For example, the Arian heresy sprang from linking John 10:30 and John 17:20-23 – “I and the Father are one...I pray that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.” Hence there is one God and no diversity as seen in the doctrine of the Trinity, which would require that there be 3 gods.
- ▶ 5. Problems related to statistical arguments. Trying to determine meaning based on the number of times a word is used is a methodological fallacy.
- ▶ 6. The rise of structuralism. Finding and relying on patterns...everywhere.

# Concluding Reflections

- ▶ 7. Problems of distinguishing the figurative and the literal.
- ▶ Conclusion: A little self-doubt about our ability to interpret the Scriptures will do no harm and may do a great deal of good. We will be more open to learn and correct our mistakes. But too much will shackle and stifle us with deep insecurities and make us so much aware of methods that we may overlook the message.
- ▶ Gradually we will build up our exegetical skills by evenhanded study and reverent, prayerful determination to become like the workman who correctly handles the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15).
- ▶ Above all, we must approach the Scripture diligently and with a great dependence upon the Spirit of truth who will lead us into all truth (John 16:13).