

MIDLANDS WEST ZAMBIA CONFERENCE
PERSONAL MINISTRIES DEPARTMENT
Lay Preachers Seminar Notes

Introduction to Biblical Interpretation by Pastor Mike Notulu

Biblical interpretation is often referred to as Hermeneutics. It is an enterprise whose chief concern is to ascertain the meaning of what God has said in scripture. Effective biblical preaching and sound doctrinal teachings all depend on the enterprise of biblical hermeneutics. There are three broad categories of biblical interpretation. The first of these is the allegorical method which has been championed by the Catholic Church with its legendary church leaders throughout the life of the Christian church. Allegorical interpretation “believes that beneath the obvious reading is the real meaning of the passage.”¹ It understands all passages of scripture to be metaphoric in nature and hence interpretation involves seeking the hidden meaning the text. Allegorical interpretation led the church to reserve biblical interpretation to the initiated clergy.

It was Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin and John Knox who challenged this trend in biblical interpretation in 16th century because of the many distortions and manipulations that were brought about by the allegorical method. After about a thousand years of unchallenged usage, Luther and his colleagues steered in a desirable, hermeneutical revolution which paved the way for the Historical grammatical method of interpretation, which became the preferred hermeneutical approach of the Protestants.

The Historical grammatical method of interpretation been accepted by the Seventh day Adventist church as the only admissible way of arriving at the correct meaning of a passage of scripture.² In Adventist circles, it has been defined as “the attempt to understand the meaning of biblical data using methodological considerations arising from Scripture alone” with the objective of arriving at the meaning God intended to convey. William Miller has been cited as one pioneer who followed in the steps of the reformers in using the Historical grammatical method of interpretation.³ Ellen White, strongly recommended the same method or principles used by Miller in interpretation the bible.⁴ In the recent past some scholars have been trying to merge the historical grammatical and the historical critical

¹ Bernard Ramm *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Text book of Hermeneutics* Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Books 1970, 24.

² Leading Seventh day Adventist Leaders and scholars agree that this is the method which the church should embrace. See, Ellen G *White Review and Herald Nov 25, 1884*; Samuel Korateng Pipim *Receiving the word: How new approaches to the Bible Impact our faith and lifestyle, Berean books 1996, 73*; Gerhard F. *Biblical Interpretation Today*. Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1985.

³ P Gerard Damsteegt *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist Message and Mission* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University press, 1977), 17.

⁴ Ellen G White, *Review and Herald Nov. 25, 1884*; Hasel, Gerhard F. “Biblical Interpretation Today.” Washington, D.C.: Biblical Research Institute, 1985.

method of interpretation (The third method of interpretation) ; however in 1986 the Annual Council of SDAs voted to accept the report of the Methods of Bible Study Committee, which rejected the use of the historical-critical later and stick with former.⁵

Principles of Biblical interpretation within The Historical Grammatical method framework

1. The literal Interpretation principle

This is the first principle within the scope of the historical grammatical method of interpretation. It takes every word in a given a passage at its primary usual meaning, unless facts of the immediate context, studied in light of related passages indicate otherwise. Someone concisely explained this principle as follows “When the plain sense of scripture makes sense seek no other sense.”

2. The Context principle

The word context here refers to the literary environment of your passage. It may include verses that occur before and after the passage you are studying. Theologians like to think of context as being in two categories. The first is the narrow context which is the paragraph or entire chapter in which your passage occurs. The second is the wider context, which is described as the entire book or even the entire corpus of literature written by the author of the passage you are studying. For example, 1Tim 4:4 says that “For every creature of God *is* good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving.” If this passage is read in isolation, it seems to indicate that a person can eat any creature without refusal because it is good. However reading it in its proper context suggests otherwise as vs. 5 shows “For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.” The last verse is the immediate context, which in turn points to the wider context found in Lev 11, where creatures are sanctified (set apart) by the word of God for human consumption. The narrow context helps the interpreter to get the authors complete thought unit in a given passage, while the wider context clarifies the authors understanding of that subject elsewhere in scripture.

3. The Scripture Interprets Scripture Principle

This is one of the most widely cited principles among seventh day Adventist lay people. However safety in biblical interpretation does not end with merely citing this principle. There are several denominations that claim to adhere to this principle but have occasioned very unfortunate interpretations and teachings. In a bid to avoid abusing or misapplying this principle Seventh day Adventists have been urged⁶ to follow two guiding axioms outlined below:

⁵ Raoul Dederen *Hand Book of Seventh day Adventist Theology* (Silver Spring, Maryland: Review & Herald Publishing Association 2000), 113-116.

⁶ *Ibid* (113-116)

- a) To legitimately use one passage to interpret another, the context of the two passages must be the same.
- b) The plain/clear passage must be used to guide our understanding of the less clear passage.

4. Progressive Revelation Principle.

The bible student is here expected to understand that God did not reveal all truths at one time. The truths of God's word came to us through long progressive process. This helps the interpreter understand that the knowledge God even among the Israelite was not full and complete even with the torah in their hands. For example, it took several revelations on the part of God, for Israelites to understand that God does not sanction divorce.

5. One interpretation Principle

This Principle asserts that every verse in the bible has but one correct interpretation, although that verse may have several applications. For example, the creation narratives of Gen 1 cannot mean, that creation of the earth occurred in seven literal days and at the same time mean that it took several thousands of years to complete creation.

6. The Harmony of Scripture Principle

No part of the bible may be interpreted so as to contradict another part of scripture. Here the Seventh day Adventist interpreter presupposes inerrancy and harmony of scripture as a necessary result of a perfect creator. This principle is informed further by the understanding that beyond the human author, there is God (The Holy Spirit) the ultimate author who inspired the sapiens to record his message in a non conflicting manner.

7. The Genre Principle

Ellen White remarked that "the books of the Bible present a wide contrast in style, as well as a diversity in the nature of the subjects unfolded. Different forms of expression are employed by different writers"⁷ The bible student is here required to consider the literary genre of the passage he is studying in an attempt to get to the meaning the author intended to pass across. Some genres of the bible may not be interpreted literally and thus require careful application of the principles of interpretation. Some the genres we have in the bible are as follows: Poetry which is mainly found in the psalms and wisdom writings and the prophets. History, which covers the largest chunk of the old testament and the new testament. Gospels, which are the first four books of the New Testament, they cover the biography of Jesus and history. Then there is the apocalyptic genre, which is partly covered in the gospels and more fully in the book of Daniel and revelation.

8. The Grammatical Principle

⁷ Ellen G. White *Great Controversy* Silver Spring, Maryland: Review and Herald, 1911.

This is concerned with meanings of the words used in the passage of study and assigning each word its due weight. It may include analyzing sentence structures, how words change their forms (morphology), sounds, and sometimes their meanings (semantics), based on context and use in a sentence. Words sometimes change based on the words around them and the relationship they have to the other words. Morphology is the study of word forms; semantics is the study of word meanings

9. Historical Background principle

A number of considerations are made under this principle. The author, audience and date of composition are given relevant consideration. Another important factor is the need to locate the passage in its religio-political, cultural and geographical settings. White endorsed this principle when she remarked that “an understanding of the customs of those who lived in Bible times, of the location and time of events, is practical knowledge; for it aids in making clear the figures of the Bible and in bringing out the force of Christ's lessons.”⁸ When properly done, the historical backgrounds afford the bible student a better appreciation of the various biblical narratives. Some of the historical backgrounds are found in scripture, while others are not.

⁸ Ellen G White “Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students”
<https://ellenwhiteaudio.org/counsels-to-parents-teachers-and-students/> (Accessed on 16/07/19)