

A Brief Consideration of Errors of Interpretation

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Introduction

Errors abound at every turn in the world today, given the proliferation of varied interpretations on same or similar things. In a predominantly post-modern thinking world, this is hardly surprising. What is however disturbing is the fact that post-modern relative thinking has invaded the Christian Church as well. It appears to have found a fertile ground, breeding superstition and indeed, spawning spurious hermeneutical methods, much like was the case prior to the Protestant Reformation. It is frightening how Christians differ on the interpretation and application of the same portion or text of scripture. Various hermeneutical approaches are used, each claiming to be equally legitimate, authentic, valid and God honouring! While some approach exegesis from an allegorical method, others insist exclusively on the literal approach. Both these are extremes because due regard should be given to genre as well. D.A Carson realised these errors and addressed them in his most informative book "*Exegetical fallacies*". Bloomberg et al have done a commendable work well worth a diligent study. Drs Philip C. Johnson and Cherian Sannesh have equally done some impressive work on this matter too in several of their potent publications. In this paper however, we basically highlight some basic interpretive fallacies, their roots (very briefly) and possible effects. It is hoped that using Johari window perspective, we shall spot our blind spots and peradventure make amends. Very well then, we kick-start our consideration hence.

Errors of interpretation

Errors arise from a faulty collection/collation of information, interpretation and analysis of the same. Some of these errors are deliberate while others are accidental and unintended. The interpreter must therefore make much of the tools they use to collate as well as interpretation. Below are some of the common errors and their source(s):

1. Errors related to prejudice and biases: The errors arise from a defective or faulty mindset or world view. The interpreter uses their background orientation lenses to interpret a given scenario. For instance, if I have

judged John as inefficient in the past, I will not give him urgent tasks no matter how he improves his competencies unless there is consistent tangible evidence. The problem here is that past assignments have affected my judgement and thus I draw up wrong conclusions when in fact John has so improved to even surpass my favourite/preferred subordinate. We all have specific leanings every day which may affect our judgement about issues in life. No one is immune from such bias or prejudice. The ideal is to remain objective as much as possible. Some of these tendencies manifest in the following ways:

- a. Basic human tendency to distort: humans have great difficulty remaining objective since the fall. They either over or under state a situation. Exaggeration seems more appealing to many and thus give a false picture. The human heart naturally opposes what is against its preferences or biases.
- b. Basic tendency to disbelief: The Human heart since the fall is inclined towards disbelief due to sins' deceitfulness. Men love darkness rather than light. Man's preference for darkness is well documented in scripture and evident in everyday life, hence the incessant attacks on the faith. It is difficult for a person to receive the free gift of salvation but would like to "work" for it in some way.
- c. Basic tendency to rebellion: A darkened heart is also a heart that is hostile to God. It cannot submit to God's law nor can it do so (Romans 8:5-10). The unregenerate heart prefers to do evil in the cover of darkness which things are even shameful to mention. Evangelical obedience marks a regenerate heart unlike the opposite. Even believers, if in a declined spiritual state can be rebellious at times and thus distort or misinterpret scripture.
- d. Lack or limited Theological/Biblical background: Those that would interpret the Bible may not even have what it takes to interpret the entire holy writ. They may know parts of the Bible but not the entire campus of scripture and thus are prone to misinterpretation. Their theological orientation is thus defective and will deliver wrong results. Others try to interpret the Bible without due regard to the Biblical background and why certain things happened the way they did. Using mere natural human reasoning will not do. These are spiritual matters. If they sought to discover the authorial intent, things would perhaps be different.
- e. Low spiritual maturity: Some believers may genuinely be regenerate but still mere infants in Christ. A novice is easily misled or may not possess sufficient depth to explain things properly and clearly. It is by constant use that people become proficient at using the sword of the spirit (Hebrews 5:13-14).

- f. Influence of Philosophies: others are influenced by the world views of the times. Dockery and Thornbury well highlight this idea as do William L. Craig and Norman L. Geisler. Their world is thus impaired or affected to the extent that they may perceive and explain things in a wrong or different way than what the natural context is saying. For example, if you are feminist, you will certainly find the Bible restrictive and gender “imbalanced”!
 - g. Imbalance between cause/commitment: Apart from the philosophical aberrations that intrude into some one’s interpretation of scripture there are other things that come into play. People usually veer towards their preferences, pick and chose what best suits their taste or inclination. For example, if one prefers not to eat scavengers, they will master all the passages in scripture that talk against eating such while exalting those that seem to favour their position. Another example is those that are crazy about miracles, demons or tongues, in short, Charismata. In every passage, they look out for this phenomenon and high light them. The same happens to those that are heavily dogmatic, they look out for what supports their view. I once preached at a particular church from 1 Chronicles 12:32 about the “men of Issachar” where my main point was strategic thinking. The Church leaders’ summary at the end of the sermon bordered on giving money, food etc. to the church! We all have our unfettered inclinations.
2. Errors related to meaning and perception: Closely connected to point 1 above, our interpretation of the world around us is largely affected by our world view, values or hind orientation. Thus, we interpret everything using those lenses and thus read into statements, pictures, circumstance things that may not be there or author intended at all. For instance, if I believe that a Christian can lose their salvation, I will look for evidence to that effect and use it to interpret the whole Bible that way. In every statement, there is absolute and contextual meaning and thus people should take heed to this as they interpret. The following errors are common:
- a. Ignorance about the nature of the passage: Statements must be carefully interpreted as they were originally meant to be i.e. the sense and intent of the author should be explored and explained accordingly. If something is meant to be negative, then do not attempt to force it to be positive. That would be a violation of interpretation principles. The consequences might be grave along the way.
 - b. Right and wrong keys: At times, certain “keys” are applied wrongly leading to wrong conclusions. If for instance, a passage talks about the nation of Israel as applied to the “spiritual Israel” and vice versa, then potential problems occur if not properly handled. Granted, Covenant

theology and dispensationalism are often at daggers drawn over the matter of Israel and the Church, one needs to know the 'what and when' of the right use of terms and meanings. For instance, OT Israel is asked to conquer and obliterate some nations as they inherit Canaan, should this hold true for the Church today? Can the Church get rid of people? Of course, not but due care in interpretation is essential. Alternatively, has the Church replaced Israel in the New Covenant or not? If so, to what extent? This is certainly an emotive subject betraying theological hermeneutical bias.

- c. Human limitations: To be human is to have limitations. The human mind can only go so far in capacities. Knowledge for instance increases with time as one invests in reading and hard study. Depending on our background orientation, training and world view, each of us has some blind spots only 'highlight-able' by others. The Johari window model is handy here.
 - d. Multiple meanings: Some words have more than one meaning depending of the context used. Thus, it is very easy for crafty fellows to distort things or even genuinely get lost or confused.
 - e. Inability to perceive divine actions: Some actions depicted in the Bible by God are hard to understand or fully decipher. Some appear harsh while others appear too good to be true. In one passage, God sends a heathen nation to punish the children of God while in another the heathen are seriously routed for being Godless. Salvation itself is a sovereign act of God whereby he saves whom he will and at whatever time he pleases. This puzzles the natural mind.
 - f. The mysterious character of biblical doctrines: The scripture is spiritual in nature and thus spiritually discerned. The natural mind finds many doctrines hard to comprehend if not offensive.
 - g. Linguistic limitations: Languages have limitations and can be used differently in different contexts. For example, the word "faith" has different meanings in different contexts of the scripture.
3. Errors related to collection and integration: At times, errors are committed at the collection and interpretation stage in surveys or research. Errors also occur when interpreting a text from one dialect to another e.g. from Greek to English. Some compound Greek words may not have exact equivalents in English. This forces translators/interpreters to come up with a compromise or the closest equivalent. In the process, some aspects are lost. For instance, in I John 2:1-3, we find the words "expiation" or "propitiation" interpreted as "atoning sacrifice" by different English Bible versions. Each of these words (i.e. expiation or propitiation) has its own

emphasis leaving out other equally important aspects of Jesus' work on the Cross. The Greek etymological word however may not have that problem. Another aspect worth mentioning is that truth and particular doctrines are scattered all over the scripture and not localised in one central place. That is why someone must have a wide campus of it (scripture) to be balanced in its interpretation. We high light some common interpretation areas in that regard:

- a. Ignoring some and emphasising other portions: some passages, as hinted at earlier, are more appealing than others. This is so because some resonate more with our preferences than others. Thus, the human heart has a propensity to gravitate towards those and neglect others, if not oppose them. For instance, the passages that emphasize God's absolute sovereignty of affairs of the world are least liked by the proud human heart,
- b. Progressive nature of Revelation: Biblical Revelation was progressive until the canon of scripture was complete. In interpreting any passage, bear in mind the period in which that revelation too place. This helps avoiding misinterpretations. Vos makes much of the issue of progressive revelation.
- c. Progressive nature of human interpretation: Though Biblical revelation is now complete, the human heart still needs to understand fully the teachings of scripture. Knowledge is progressive for humans, not God, thus errors are bound to arise if due care is not administered.
- d. The sufficient/Total distinction: God's written word is sufficient for life and Godliness. All we need to know is embedded in the word, including what is not explicitly stated. These unstated items such as smoking are dealt with by way of principle rather than direct prescription.
- e. Emotionalism and denominationalism: People have very deep attachment to their cause or party. Similarly, Christians have their loyalties to their denominations and set of teachings, at times even eclipsing what the Bible clearly teaches. Others are so hooked to their emotion cranking to the extent that reason is suspended in preference to the 'feel good' theology. This position often leads to biasness.

There are certainly plenty other sources of error but in our discourse, we limited our focus on errors of interpretation. For a deeper holistic consideration of hermeneutics, we recommend the land mark volume "*Hermeneutics*" by Bloomberg and others. It's a great read, tackling about any area of hermeneutics.

Conclusion

Due to various preferences and biasness, people often interpret scripture or indeed any given passage under the influence of their back-ground orientation. In this matter of Bible interpretation, we should call no man master, as the old divines used to say. No matter how learned or articulate, let us stick to the Solas (sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia & sola Christus) alluded to elsewhere in our writings.

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