

Appendix IV — Different Methods to Approaching Scripture

THE PROPER WAY TO APPROACH SCRIPTURE

The question is often asked, “How can there be so many different Christian denominations if there is only one Bible?” The answer lies primarily in the different methods people use to approach Scripture. There are different presuppositions that people begin with, and those presuppositions influence the way people understand the Scriptures. For example, if you have the presupposition that opera is boring, when you go to an opera for the first time that presupposition makes it more likely you will find it boring than if you had a neutral opinion to begin with.

Presuppositions can be beneficial. If your doctor knows that you have a history of heart attacks in your family, he can use the presupposition that you are a likely candidate for a heart attack to help you take preventative measures *before* you actually experience a heart attack. However, presuppositions can also be a hindrance to clear communication and clear thinking. If a general would cling to the presupposition that his enemy will only attack by ground, his troops would not, most likely, be ready for an aerial assault.

It is impossible to approach Scripture with no presuppositions. For example, if you were asked the question, “Is the Bible God’s inspired Word?” you would need to answer yes or no. And the way you answer immediately reveals certain presuppositions you will make about the Bible. If the Bible is God’s Word, then we are obliged to uphold all of it. If the Bible is nothing but moral writings of godly men, then we are not bound to follow anything it says.

We maintain that the only presuppositions that are proper are ones which are based on what the Bible itself tells us. For example, the Bible tells us that it is not just a collection of moral advice written by godly men. Rather, the Bible is God’s own Word that he gave us through the prophets and apostles by the miracle of verbal inspiration.

We also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20,21)

That is going to influence the presuppositions we have. Since we believe the Holy Spirit conveyed exactly what he wanted to say through the biblical writers, we also believe that the Bible contains no mistakes or contradictions. We believe that even if portions of the Bible contradict the laws of science (such as miracles) they are still true. We assume that the people who are spoken of in Scripture really lived and did the things described. We believe that we should understand a passage literally unless the context makes it clear it’s intended to be understood figuratively (poetical writing, for example). We believe that if something taught in the Bible defies human reason (such as the Trinity) it is still true. We believe that God’s Word is clear and complete in explaining the plan of salvation. This approach to the Scriptures is sometimes called the “literal method.” It is also known as the “historical-grammatical” method. It *is not* the way all churches or denominations approach Scripture, however.

IMPROPER WAYS OF APPROACHING SCRIPTURE

Throughout the history of the church, people have fallen into the temptation of using human reason to superimpose their interpretation of God’s Word over the plain, literal sense of the text. The earliest example would be the “Allegorical Method.” An allegory is a story in which people and things have a symbolic meaning, like a fable. This method was learned by the early Christians from heathen philosophers who would use the allegorical method to find the hidden meaning of ancient myths. This method was adopted by

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the Jewish scholar Philo, who lived from 20B.C. to about A.D.42. Philo used the allegorical method to explain away everything in the Old Testament that he considered “unworthy of God” or uncomplimentary to the great heroes of faith. Origin (A.D. 182-251), using the allegorical method, taught that the trees in the garden of Eden were really angels, and the 318 armed servants of Abraham symbolized the crucified Christ.

If it weren’t so tragic, we might find such an approach to Scripture almost comical. But it illustrates how two people using the same Bible can come up with a wildly different interpretations. The allegorical method is an example of elevating human reason above the simple message of Scripture. The result is that the Scriptures become incoherent. If the Bible means angels when it speaks of trees, or if it foretells of Christ’s crucifixion when it says Abraham had 318 servants, then the reader cannot ever hope to understand what the Scriptures say.

Such abuse of the Bible still occurs today. Perhaps the most popular method of approaching the Scriptures today is known as the “Historical-Critical Method.” “Historical” refers to the belief that the writers of the Bible generally reflected the views and opinions of their own historical period. If that were the case, we would then “critically” examine the Scriptures to determine what is factual and what is just a remnant of ancient myth, hence the name “historical-critical.” Paul Tillich, a former professor of theology of Harvard and major proponent of the Historical-Critical method, describes it this way:

“In itself, the term historical criticism means nothing more than historical research. Every historical research criticizes its sources, separating what has more probability from that which has less or is altogether improbable... [Historical criticism’s] ideal is to reach a high degree of probability, but in many cases this is impossible.
(Tillich, *Systematic Theology*)

For example, the historical-critic might look at the Genesis account of the flood and, since it seems to be a scientific impossibility, determine it is nothing more than an ancient myth which worked its way through history by being incorporated into religious tradition. The miracles of Jesus are likely just fables. The repetition of the creation account in Genesis 1 & 2 might be evidence that there is another author to that book than just Moses. More than that, the creation account is nothing more than a symbolic rendering of the steps of evolution. When Paul calls homosexuality a sin, he was only talking about homosexual relationships between men and boys. The historical-critic will not accept that Jesus said everything which the Gospels attribute to him. Rather they will examine the text and then pick and choose what they believe Jesus “certainly said,” what he “possibly said,” and what he “undoubtedly didn’t say.” Even Jesus’ suffering, death, and bodily resurrection might just be myth to the historical-critic. The passion of Christ might be nothing more than a story which parents could use to teach children how to stand up to adversity. Consider the following example taken from a book which utilizes the historical-critical method to explain the Scriptures.

*No record exists of any Jewish court ever condemning anyone as a messianic pretender. Perhaps the Jewish trial before the Sanhedrin was invented by the early church as an anti-Semitic polemic. (Spivey and Smith, *Anatomy of the New Testament*)*

“No record exists.” It’s clear, the author of that book doesn’t consider the Gospels a “reliable source.” Like the allegorical method, the historical-critical method robs the Scripture of all its value. If the Bible is largely myth and stories, or if it is only a reflection of the human author’s value system, then it’s content and message are no more divine — no more powerful — than Aesop’s Fables or even Mother Goose.

There are, of course, varying degrees to which this method is practiced. But again, it illustrates the way people using the same Bible can come up with different interpretations. We must emphasize that the existence of different denominations and religions does not point to a faulty or ineffective Word. Rather, they point to the sinfulness that lives in the human heart. They point to the way that we are tempted to elevate our ways above God’s ways, our intellect above his Word.

May God send his Holy Spirit to us so that we might accept his Word to be what it claims to be — “not...the word of men, but...the word of God” (1 Thess. 2:13). May we then approach it as such!