

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

Basic Principles and Questions of Gender.

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Establishing and defining principles that help the interpreter understand accurately the meaning of the biblical text is critical to ascertaining properly the teaching of Scripture regarding gender relationships in Christ. This science is called *biblical hermeneutics*. The term is used here in the classical sense to speak of "principles that serve to ascertain the meaning of verbal statements."¹ Such principles should prevent us from reading into a passage what it does not contain, as well as ensure that a satisfactory approximation to its full meaning is attained.² In the classical view, *exegesis* is the term for applying hermeneutical principles to particular texts. Hermeneutics then relates to exegesis as rhetoric relates to the composition of a discourse or the art of cabinetmaking relates to the construction of wooden furniture. The task of this chapter is to show how following valid hermeneutical principles will aid in the proper understanding of the passages relevant to the gender discussion.

Before proceeding, it is of great importance to emphasize that we acknowledge God as the primary author of Scripture. The search for "authorial intent," which is paramount to hermeneutics in general, may not in biblical hermeneutics disre-

Another understanding of the word *hermeneutics* made its appearance in the twentieth century. Here *exegesis* refers to the search for the meaning of a statement in the original setting, while *hermeneutics* attempts to evaluate its impact at the present time and in the circumstances of the reader or hearer. In that sense, *exegesis* would absorb a part of the hermeneutical task, and hermeneutics proper would involve an application of the text to a different time and location. While acknowledging that this too is part of the appropriate task of theology, I use the term *hermeneutics* in the classic sense. A similar effort is made in connection with a translation into another language, but interpretation does not entail the space limitation that a translation must observe (*hermeneueō* means "to translate" as well as "to interpret").

gard the divine intent. The divine intent of the text is at times elucidated in other Scriptures and always undergirds the human writers' intent. The use made of earlier Scripture by later Scripture, particularly the Old Testament by the New, bears witness that the meaning perceived by the human writers does not necessarily exhaust the full meaning of a text. The fact that the New Testament interpretation of the Old had its origin in the teaching of Jesus himself (Mt 5; Lk 24) strongly suggests the possibility that a divine meaning might transcend the evident intention of the human author.³

This chapter, then, will set forth six foundational hermeneutical principles—principles on which all evangelicals would agree—and will show by illustration how they might apply to texts in the contemporary gender debate.

Literal or Figurative Meanings

In a certain sense we need to take the Scripture "to the letter," for "not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear" (Mt 5:18). This indicates that anything in Scripture is authoritative, but not that the writers have altogether avoided figures of speech, for in some respects even our ordinary vocabulary is constellated with figurative meaning.⁴ For instance, etymologically the word *window* derives from a conflation of words for *wind* and *eye*. Or think of phrases such as "the eyes of your heart" (Eph 1:18). Likewise God is often represented in anthropomorphic form, as in the "the LORD's arm" (Num 11:23 NIV) or "the LORD came down to see the city" (Gen 11:5). Since the ultimate nature of God is incomprehensible to humans, God's being and actions are often represented by images drawn from human experience. This would include ascribing gender to God, who is "Spirit" (not having human flesh with sexuality). Of course when God the Son becomes incarnate, he takes on human male sexuality.

One particularly significant example is the representation of marriage as reflecting the union of God with his people. A key (figurative of course) verse in this respect is Genesis 2:24, which applies in the first place to human wedlock but is quoted in Ephesians 5:31-32 as describing not only the unity of humans in the marriage commitment but also the climactic unity of Christ and the church (cf. "the wedding supper of the Lamb" in Rev 19:5-10; 21:9). In this respect, God's people are always viewed as the bride, whether it be Israel as married to Yahweh or

³ Caiaphas's statement in John 11:50-52 illustrates the possible existence of a *sensus plenior*.

⁴ For a conspectus of such passages in Scripture, see Walter Elwell, *Topical Analysis of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1991), pp. 34-38.

the church as united with Christ. The city of Jerusalem (feminine in both Hebrew and Greek) becomes a symbol for God's people and is finally seen as the epitome of the elect (Gal 4:25-26; Rev 21:1-7). Here the use of the feminine, far from being demeaning, is a title of magnificence for women, since it lifts up humanity to a position of unity with God. Inversely, the gravity of adultery and prostitution accentuates the importance of the marriage union in God's eyes. The prostitute is typically depicted as female to contrast with the elect bride. As such, the prophets present her as the delinquent (though this is certainly not an accusation to which males are immune).

Prescriptive or Descriptive Texts

It is important in the hermeneutical process to distinguish what in Scripture is *prescriptive*, embodying God's commandment to us, and what is *descriptive*, relating events or attitudes that may or may not be desirable. It is true that at times what someone has done is presented as exemplary (e.g., Jn 13:15; 15:12; 1 Cor 11:1; Eph 5:1; Heb 13:7). Yet it is imperative to recognize that certain practices in both Testaments are merely *described*, or serve as the cultural background of the activity even of some who were God's children, without implying that we should conform to these practices.

Surely Lot's dedication to the custom of protecting his guests, while admirable in principle, took a form that can hardly be commended when he offered his virgin daughters to be ravished by strangers (Gen 19). Similarly, though the patriarchal society in the Old Testament serves as a background of much of Israel's history, this does not imply a divinely sanctioned order that must be observed universally for all time. Indeed, it should be noted in this regard, and over against many patriarchalists, that patriarchy is never *prescribed* in either Testament. Thus Paul's descriptive analogy between Adam's priority in creation and Eve's priority in sin in I Timothy 2:13-14—even though it is used to support the ad hoc prescription in I Timothy 2:12—seems to fall far short of being theologically prescriptive or determinative.⁵

In this respect, it is important to recognize that God's judgment on Eve and her

⁵ Despite how often this is asserted in the literature, it has no other biblical support as a *theological dictum for all time*. The primary point of the analogy is that the woman, who was created second, was first to yield to the deception of Satan. And this seems to be happening again in Ephesus (cf. I Tim 4:1-3; 5:13-15). It is noteworthy that when Paul deals with the origin of sin in the human race, he does not mention Eve at all (Rom 5:12). One simply cannot make universal gender statements on the basis of ad hoc descriptions that are used to serve other points.

daughters ("and he [the man] shall rule over you [the woman]," Gen 3:16) is not a prescriptive mandate that men ought to observe in order to do God's will. Rather, the phrase is a description of what was going to occur in human history, a prophecy fulfilled millions of times in the oppression of women throughout the world. Likewise, it is certainly appropriate to seek to ease the pain of childbirth and to lighten the burden of male labor, which are also part of God's judgment on Adam and Eve's sin (Gen 3:17-19).

This principle likewise applies to Ephesians 5:21-33, where Paul describes the husband as "head" (*kephalē*). Although the wife's submission to her husband in the Greco-Roman household was prescriptive within that cultural context, husbands are never instructed in the Bible to "exercise authority over," "provide leadership for" or "be responsible for" their wives. Paul's description of male authority in the ancient Greco-Roman household does not attain to a prescription for all times. And if some would argue that such is there by implication, it must be stated strongly that implication is not prescription. However, the passage does clearly prescribe for the husband Christlike behavior of love and sacrifice toward his wife.⁶

Individual, Collective and Universal References

When we are in the presence of a clearly prescriptive passage, sound hermeneutics demands that we ascertain to whom the prescription applies. Distinctions must be made between *individual*, *collective* and *universal* references. For example, Jesus' healing of the sick and demonized was both descriptive and prescriptive in the Gospel records, in that the Twelve and Seventy-two were sent out to heal the sick as part of Jesus' mission (Mt 10:8; Lk 10:9). But Jesus' command to the blind man, "Go, wash in the Pool of Siloam" (Jn 9:6), does not constitute a *universal* mandate, not even a mandate for all blind people who seek healing. Rather, it applies to a particular person in a particular context. By contrast, the commandment "You shall not murder" (Ex 20:13) concerns every human being, as the context of the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-17) makes clear, as does the relevant text in Genesis 9:1-7, not to mention Jesus' own extension of it in Matthew 5:21-22.

A proper interpretation demands that the scope of reference be carefully ascertained. Concerning I Timothy 2:9-15, for example, there is a question whether Paul is speaking to/about women in general or to married women specifically. The

⁶See further the exegetical and hermeneutical discussion of this passage in chapter eleven in this volume.

word *gynē* can mean "woman" or "wife." On the one hand, the context with its reference to Adam and Eve, as well as to the bearing of children (I Tim 2:15), appears to favor "wife." Yet the activities mentioned in I Timothy 2:8-11 could apply to men and women in general in a Christian assembly. Moreover, Paul seems to be writing with understanding of a specific background to a particular set of problems in the church of Ephesus.⁷ So one must be careful not to jump to immediate conclusions about the nature and scope of the commands given here.

Peripheral Versus Central Doctrines

Some elements of our faith or duty are more basic to our understanding of our doctrine or life, while others are more peripheral. Jesus made this point in emphasizing the importance of spiritual purity over ceremonial cleanliness (Mk 7:1-21) and again in denouncing the scribes and Pharisees who insisted on minute tithing of spice but "neglected the more important matters of the law" (Mt 23:23).

Thus, for example, although certainly not peripheral, the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ is less central in the Christian faith than that of his substitutionary atonement. The former surely has a strong foundation in Scripture: prophetically (Is 7:14), historically (Mt 1:18-24; Lk 1:26-38) and theologically (Gal 4:4; Heb 7:26-28). Moreover, it is affirmed in the great creeds of church history. But it does not have the *centrality* of the atonement, which is foreshadowed in the Old Testament sacrifices, reasserted by the prophets (Is 53), celebrated in the Psalms (Ps 40:6-9; cf. Heb 10:1-10), proclaimed as central in the teaching of Jesus (Mk 10:45; Jn 12:27) and in the apostolic presentation (Rom 3:21-26; 5:11; I Cor 2:2; Gal 6:14; Heb 2:14-18, etc.).

When this principle is applied to gender issues related to church leadership, it is of some interest that many patriarchalists affirm the gifting of women for ministry of various kinds but are resistant to women's holding positions of leadership in the official structures of the church. On this matter, one would think that Spirit gifting, which receives considerable attention in the New Testament with regard to the ministry of the body of Christ to itself and in the world (Rom 8:3-8; I Cor 12-14; etc.), would be more central than "church order." This is especially so since there is *no prescriptive passage* that dictates the structures or nature of church order.

⁷To the extent these can be ascertained, as well as the meaning and scope of his words; see the full discussion in chapter twelve in this volume.

Church order was undoubtedly assumed; but the lack of prescriptive instruction about it suggests that it is a more peripheral consideration than ministry itself.⁸

Fragmentary Versus Canonical Interpretations

Another major rule of hermeneutics is that a proper interpretation must be appropriate to the context in which the passage in question is found. This is a safeguard against what is called "proof-texting," that is, lifting a passage from its context and thus incurring the danger of misunderstanding and misapplying it.

The immediate context involves the nearest verses before and after the text, but regard must also be given to the chapter in question, and then to the book in which it is found, and to the observable position of the author of that book (when known). For the Bible, even when proper attention is given to the human author, this is not enough, for the ultimate author is the God who inspired the whole Scripture so as to constitute it the "Word of God." This means that no interpretation is truly acceptable which results in a contradiction between one part of Scripture and another part. Scripture is the best guide for interpreting any portion of it; or to put it differently, we interpret in keeping with the "analogy of faith." As Bruce Demarest puts it so well, "The exegete will . . . bear in mind that interpretation must not contravene what is taught elsewhere in Scripture and that, in unfolding the meaning of a text, other inspired Scripture may help clarify the specific intention of the biblical writer."⁹

This is another hermeneutical principle on which all would tend to agree. At issue again is *praxis*, both (1) the application of some texts in light of others when the evidence presents itself ambiguously and (2) the grounds for preferring one set of texts over against the others. Some, for example, forbid women to teach men on the basis of I Timothy 2:11-12 but in so doing are dismissive of the evidence that stands on the other side (see chapter six above). Others, on the basis of I Corinthians 14:34-35, either disallow women to speak at all in a church gathering or severely limit what speaking is allowed. But to do so they must reject not only the surrounding context of I Corinthians 14 but also the evidence of I Corinthians 11:4-5, not to mention much else in the New Testament.

The Situation of Those Being Addressed or Represented

It is important to recognize that the Scripture was addressed at first to people in

⁸For a fuller discussion of this issue, see chapter fourteen in this volume.

⁹Bruce Demarest, "Analogy of Faith," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2001), p. 58.

ancient Near Eastern (Old Testament) and Greco-Roman (New Testament) cultures with habits and needs that are not identical to those of believers today. We must understand scriptural statements in terms of the situation of the people addressed or represented. That some people would make "an opening in the roof" in order to lower a paralytic into the presence of Jesus (Mk 2:1-12) does not make good sense in terms of Western architecture. The repeated command to "greet one another with a holy kiss" reflects a culture in which that was the ordinary way of greeting family and friends.

The Old Testament commandments concerning pure and impure foods (Lev 11) were given to Israel as a religious discipline and undoubtedly had some benefits for hygiene given the climate of the ancient Near East and the cooking methods at that time. But they were superseded by divine mandate after the coming of Christ (Mk 7:19; Rom 14:13-17; I Tim 4:1-5). Cultural differences demand of us a double shift: we must ascertain the principles at the root of cultural mandates made in antiquity in order to perceive their significance in relation to our own time and place; and we must beware lest we present as divine mandate what may be only a cultural feature of some part of our own Christian environment (which has happened all too often in crosscultural witness).

The task of discerning what is simply cultural and what is perennially mandatory in the Christian ethos is undoubtedly very delicate, and mistakes have often been made in this domain. Similarly, it is not always easy to perceive the cultural aspect of some biblical injunctions. Too often well-meaning people have viewed as mandatory what was a culturally couched form of an ethical precept, while others have perhaps glibly eliminated as cultural some aspect of a commandment with deep moral significance.

This aspect of the discussion has a considerable impact in relation to the legitimate place and action of women in the home, in society at large and in the church. We need to recognize that the books of the Bible were written at times and in places where the oppression of women was especially grievous. We must also note that the biblical revelation was more generous to women than the practice of surrounding nations¹⁰ (and, alas, often of Christian communities throughout church history!). The great problem for Christianity is not that biblical egalitarians have been carried away by their desire to emulate secular feminism. Rather, the problem appears to be that Bible-believing people have permitted themselves to fall below

¹⁰For details, see chapters five and twenty-two in this volume.

Conclusion

It appears to be a sad reality that most of the differences between patriarchalists and egalitarians in the present gender debate are hermeneutically based, if one includes exegesis as a dimension of hermeneutics. It is hoped that by the articulation of these basic hermeneutical principles—on which most people on both sides of the debate would agree—a more genuine dialogue might develop on both sides, with much less heat and acrimony. What I have tried to set forth in brief in this essay, then, are some fundamental principles of biblical hermeneutics, so that first of all we might recognize areas of basic agreement. At the same time, I have offered brief descriptions of how these basic principles might apply from an egalitarian perspective to various texts that hold central place in this ongoing debate. A fuller application of these principles to the basic texts and issues may be found in the biblical and theological chapters in this volume.

biblical standards because they were unduly influenced by surrounding societies in which oppression prevailed in spite of centuries of Christian witness.

First Corinthians 11:3-16 deals with the significance of a "head covering" for women while they are praying and prophesying in the gathered church. The significance of a head covering appears to be a cultural factor that is quite diverse in various times and places. Indeed, because of the diverse nature of Corinth itself—a Roman colony situated at the center of the Greek world—it is nearly impossible to know for certain what would have been normal for Corinthian culture as such. In the contemporary Western world such head coverings (whatever they were in fact) have little to no social significance. Thus this is rightly understood to be a cultural issue and a matter of personal choice for a believer today.

Moreover, this passage probably does not relate to a "headship"¹¹ of any man in relation to any woman but to the relationship of husband and wife within the home, in relation to the reputation of Christian women. It is therefore of some interest that evangelical patriarchalists almost to a person reject altogether the one clear *prescription* in this passage (1 Cor 11:6, that women must have their heads covered when praying and prophesying). Yet at the same time they wish to use the passage as theological evidence for the subordination of women to men in the church and home—to the point that some will even argue for eternal subordination within the ontological Trinity¹² in order to make this lesser point.

In 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 we have a case of a fairly evidential *ad hoc* prescription. If the passage is authentic, as most believe,¹³ Paul surely did not intend to mandate total silence, since he permits women to pray and prophesy in church (1 Cor 11), and congregational singing and response do not appear to be forbidden to women in this passage. Instead Paul seems to be forbidding an activity that carried cultural shame—women's speaking publicly to men other than their husbands—thus bringing disrepute on the gathering of believers for worship. In principle Paul's concern to avoid cultural disrepute would apply today to both men and women, though in Corinth at this time it was clearly specifically applicable to the women involved.

¹¹In this book we do not use *headship* to mean "leadership" (as patriarchalists have trained people to do) but to refer to whatever meaning is intended in a given text.

¹²See note 2 in chapter nineteen in this volume and Kevin Giles's refutation of this perspective.

¹³See especially the discussion in chapter nine in this volume.