

Analyzing Errors Of Interpretation

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Chapter -- I Errors Of Interpretation

To anyone experienced in Christian Apologetics or Polemics, it is obvious that a large proportion of the questions and problems raised against the Bible stem from improper interpretation.

Interpretation is a normal part of human life. Without a sufficiently accurate interpretation of what our family, friends, teachers, or the media say, no one can survive for long. But the very fact that we communicate well with all these people, and they with us, shows that we are following common rules of interpretation in our lives. The same principles apply to the Bible also, but many times people overlook these principles. This might be accidental or deliberate, but the result is that a lot of questions are unnecessarily and unfairly raised against the Bible.

In the case of the Bible, the common rules of interpretation are supplemented with additional rules derived from the Bible and theology. This makes misinterpretation of the Bible even more difficult, yet errors continue to plague Bible interpretation. This surprises many. On the other hand, some are not even aware that errors of interpretation exist. All this is because many are ignorant not only about Hermeneutics, but also about the probable causes of interpretive errors.

In this chapter we will look at common causes that give rise to errors of interpretation. Though there are hundreds of types of errors of interpretation, they can be grouped into a few general categories. These are:

- 1-Errors Related To Prejudices And Biases**
- 2-Errors Related To Meaning And Perception**
- 3-Errors Related To Collection And Integration**

We will discuss each one of them in detail, and will illustrate some of the varieties of errors in each group.

Errors Related To Prejudices And Biases

No human is all-knowing. In fact man's knowledge is very limited. Therefore, he cannot interpret accurately in areas for which he does not have sufficient background information. Further, almost every person has some prejudices and biases. When all these work together, the result is errors resulting from prejudices and biases.

The errors of prejudices and biases are compounded because of a number of reasons. First, many who interpret the Bible are not born again. This is because more and more unsaved people are occupying positions as Pastors, Teachers, and even Seminary professors. Recently I read the story of a person who was employed with the American Bible Society for almost three decades. He was a translation consultant, a job involving transmission of the Bible into numerous languages. What was shocking that this man was a "freethinker", which is another name for an atheist !

When people like that occupy positions of authority in spiritual world, distortion of interpretation is inevitable. Further, even among believers the number of superficial

faith like Sola Scriptura (Bible Alone), Sola Fide (Faith Alone), Sola Gratia (Grace Alone), and Solus Christus (Christ Alone), they are people who have compromised with one or more of these doctrines. Consequently, their interpretations now correspond to their biases. All these biases show in many ways and some of them are:

BASIC HUMAN TENDENCY IS TO DISTORT: The basic human tendency is to distort the word of God, that is true even among believers. This is due to the ever-present influence of the world, the flesh, and the devil. When God revealed His future plans to Joseph even his parents found it difficult to believe. Furious with the message, his brethren went one step further and even tried to nullify what God had predicted. The same is our tendency today, specially in matters that we do not like. We prefer to distort and oppose God's message if it does not suit our biases, prejudices, and tastes.

When the Sadducees approached Jesus with a seemingly difficult problem, Jesus replied in Matthew 22:29 "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God". The Sadducees were the rationalists of their time, and thus they were biased against God and Revelation. Consequently they misinterpreted the Bible due to their bias. Peter says the same thing when in 2 Peter 3:16 he says about Pauline Epistles, "As also in all [his] epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as [they do] also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction". It must be noticed that though some things in the Scriptures are hard to understand, the distortion is not because of this difficulty, but rather because these people are unstable and away from divine wisdom.

The only solution is to go back to sound hermeneutics, with full dependence upon the Holy Spirit, and without even an iota of human ideas.

BASIC HUMAN TENDENCY IS TO DISBELIEVE: Divine Revelation is totally at variance with human thinking. This is one reason why the invitation for receiving Salvation through the simple act of belief is rejected by many. Like Namaan, they would be happy to cross seven seas for getting a reward, but when the same thing is offered as a gift they are not ready to believe it. Most of them are not even willing to give it a try.

When God told Abraham and Sarai that they would have a child of their own, they disbelieved God -- even after hearing Him face to face. When an angel of the Lord spoke to Zachariah, he did not believe though what he witnessed was a miracle. When the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus to his brethren so that this resurrection might convict them, Abraham replied that if they do not believe the word of God, they would not believe anything. In other words, the basic disbelief in the heart of people forces them to ignore the message of God. The result is only distortion when they express their views about this message.

BASIC HUMAN TENDENCY OF REBELLION: The unbeliever lives a life of continuous rebellion against God, because he is controlled by his flesh. But even after salvation, many people spend greater amount of time under the flesh rather than under the control of the Spirit. Consequently, even such believers manifest the same basic rebellion that is seen in the lives of unbelievers.

Since the flesh (sin nature) rebels against God, the reproof and instruction of the word of God are not very pleasing to them. Consequently these people try to distort the Scriptures. Jonah is a good example. As a Jew he was horrified when God asked him to preach the gospel to Assyrians who were the most degenerate enemies of Jews at that time. This rebellion forced him to question God's will and commands repeatedly. The same thing can be seen when rebellious believers interpret the Bible.

A GOOD NUMBER OF PEOPLE LACK THEOLOGICAL OR BIBLICAL BACKGROUND: The message of the Bible is vastly different from the best human wisdom. It is also at

total variance from the greatest man-made religious treatises. Consequently, a certain minimum Biblical background is essential for perceiving the truth of the message of the Bible.

When a person approaches the Bible from his own human background, many divine pronouncements look like a big joke to them. In Genesis 19 we notice the history of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction. Lot's daughters were married to men of Sodom. These men had already seen the way in which the Lord blinded the wicked men of Sodom. It was after all this that "And Lot went out, and spake unto his sons in law, which married his daughters, and said, Up, get you out of this place; for the LORD will destroy this city. But he seemed as one that mocked unto his sons in law" (Verse 14). Obviously, to the depraved mind of people of Sodom, the divine plan looked like a big joke, and they just laughed it away. The word of God was challenged, mocked, and rejected due to their human background.

A GOOD NUMBER OF PEOPLE LACK SPIRITUAL MATURITY: Just as a certain amount of mental maturity is essential before a person can understand many of the human activities, a certain minimum amount of spiritual maturity is essential before a person can understand the Word of God.

In the Bible there is a whole range of doctrines, ranging from the simple milk to the solid meat. Many of the more serious doctrines cannot be understood without a certain basic minimum amount of maturity. That is why Paul says in Hebrews 5:11 that "Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing". Obviously, when a believer dull of hearing tries to understand (or tries to teach) these tougher doctrines, he is bound to present it according to his simplistic understanding. The result would be a distortion of doctrine.

INFLUENCE OF PHILOSOPHIES: Almost none of us likes to abandon our philosophical biases. When such philosophies become very strong, they distort Bible interpretations. Thus there are many who interpret the Bible in the light of Feminism, Syncretism, Pluralism, Radicalism, Evolutionism, Humanism, Rationalism, etc.

The Feminist is able to see only masculine bias and prejudice in the Bible. The Syncretist and the Pluralist sees only a one-world religion in the Bible. The Evolutionist is quick to see a "gap" in Genesis. Alternately, he is able to see Genesis 1-10 only as poetry, though it is written in straight Hebrew prose. The end result of all kinds of philosophical prejudice is error.

In essence, though the Bible is often very clear about its statements, people misinterpret it because of their prejudices and biases. These prejudices and biases are created by their basic human tendencies to distort, disbelieve, rebellion, lack of biblical background, and lack of spiritual maturity.

The solution is not to heed to their distortions, but to show where they have erred. In addition, the whole counsel of the Word of God should be declared to them. The Bible itself is the best defense and offense against distortion, because according to Hebrews 4:12 "the word of God [is] quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and [is] a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart".

IMBALANCE BETWEEN CAUSE/COMMITMENT: Bible mentions many causes and expects believers to demonstrate an appropriate commitment to it. For example, the cause of orphans, widows, and strangers is mentioned repeatedly in the Law. The Israelites were expected to manifest commitment appropriate to this cause. In the same way causes ranging from care of the helpless believer, to guarding one's purity are commanded in the Bible.

Obviously, not all causes are of equal priority, and consequently not all commitments are of the same priority. Some causes and commitment to them are placed on the highest level, while others are ranked lower. The believer is expected to understand the relative importance of the cause and exhibit a commitment proportional to it. Depending upon a person's perception, four different kinds of situations can arise, as shown below:

Low Cause, Low Commitment
High Cause, High Commitment
Low Cause, High Commitment
High Cause, Low Commitment

In the first two cases the level of the cause and commitment match, and that is how it ought to be. In the last two cases there is a mismatch between the level of the cause and that of the commitment. People with such misplaced sense of value are bound to misinterpret the Bible to fit in with their preconceived views, and the result would be error.

For example, a person who places high priority on the externals might be more concerned about passages dealing with clothing, facial expression, hairstyles, and food while he ignores Biblical statements related to purity of heart and life. The result would be an imbalanced interpretation and erroneous theology.

Chapter – 2

Errors Related To Meaning And Perception

The meaning of a statement has two parts: the absolute meaning, and the contextual meaning. The absolute meaning is determined with the help of vocabulary and grammar, while the contextual meaning is obtained by considering the historical, sociological, and cultural, and the textual context.

Without having both the meanings at hand it is often difficult to understand the precise message of the Bible. For example, in Songs of Solomon, the shepherd addresses his beloved as his "sister". While a dictionary is sufficient to find out the meaning of this word, it does not make any sense to the modern reader. Once the contexts mentioned above are considered it becomes clear that the word "Sister" had many usages for them. One of them was a term of endearment used for one's wife.

Thus if the meaning of the passage is not perceived properly, it can lead to many types of errors. Some of these are:

IGNORANCE ABOUT THE NATURE OF A PASSAGE: The nature of a statement plays an important role in interpreting and applying its meaning. Statements can be of many types such as Concrete/Abstract, General/Specific, Affirmation/Negative, etc. Thus what is specific would create problems if interpreted as general, and what is negative would create problems if it is interpreted as affirmation.

Many statements about Israel and the Church are specific to these groups. If they are generalized to include other groups also, the result would be catastrophic.

RIGHT AND WRONG KEYS: There are many keys to understand the message of a particular passage. Thus, God's dealings with Israel can be explained only if several factors governing the choice of Israel are taken into considerations. Thus these factors are the right key to understand those passages, and any other factors would act only as wrong keys.

Similarly, when passages related only to the Church are applied to Israel, or passages related only to Israel are applied to the Church, errors are bound to arise. A study of dispensations also makes it clear that the correct key is essential to understand a given passage correctly. When that is not done, or when the wrong key is used, errors are bound to arise.

HUMAN LIMITATIONS: The Bible is a communication from the infinite God to the finite man. Consequently, some difficulties of perception and understanding are bound to occur on man's side. This difficulty is compounded by many other factors that add to our limitations of perception.

Depending upon our upbringing and training, each one of us has our blind spots, logical, perceptual, linguistic, comprehensional, and doctrinal limitations. Consider the example of multiple reports of the same event, as often recorded in the four gospels. A person who is exposed to newspapers knows that faithful multiple reports of the same event cannot often be reconciled with each other. This is not because of problems with reporting, but due to problems of integration. Similar limitations force a lot of people to misinterpret the Bible, though others find no serious problem with the same passages.

Doctrines related to divine discipline, and the command to pray (even though God already knows all that we need), can often be understood only after one lives as a loving and concerned father or mother for several years. A bachelor cannot usually get the same depth of perception into these things.

Further, many people attempt to explain or understand more than that which is actually possible for the finite man. Thus all such attempts by the finite intelligence are bound to face problems, and often the solution that is offered would be an erroneous interpretation.

MULTIPLE MEANINGS: Many words have multiple meanings, and only the context makes the precise meaning clear. Many people, unfortunately, are in the habit of interpreting a statement only in the light of the predominant meaning of a given word. Thus when they hear about Salvation, Justification, or Filling of the Spirit, they force an interpretation upon the passage.

Salvation is used in several ways in the Bible. It might refer to salvation from the condemnation of sin, but it might also refer to experiential sanctification. Only the context makes the meaning clear, and unless this is done, careless interpretation of words with multiple meanings **can** give rise to errors.

INABILITY TO PERCEIVE DIVINE ACTIONS: When the finite man looks at the actions of the divine, he is perplexed by many things. For example, he feels that for similar actions God punishes different individuals differently. One individual speaks a lie, and he is dead. Another one commits adultery and murder, yet is let off without any seeming punishment. On encountering these kinds of problems people are quick to judge that God is unfair.

What most such people overlook is the fact that man is able to see only certain immediately visible actions, whereas God is able to see the past, present, and future. He is also cognizant of what has been, and will be, passing through the heart of the individuals involved. No finite human can understand such things. Thus in haste they come to conclusions and deductions that are erroneous.

THE MYSTERY CHARACTERISTICS OF DOCTRINES: Many Bible doctrines are totally different from everyday human thinking. This difference becomes pronounced in the New Testament period. For example man thinks of salvation through works whereas Bible speaks of salvation as an unmerited gift.

Many of the New Testament doctrines were kept as mysteries even at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. A clear revelation on these subjects has come only after Pentecost. Further, only a believer filled with the spirit, having a transformed mind (Rom. 12:1-2) can understand many of these subjects. They are a mystery for outsiders, and even the insiders need the right frame of mind to understand these things. Thus if anyone (specially an unregenerate or uncommitted person) tries to understand these doctrines, the result would be only error.

LINGUISTIC LIMITATIONS: Human languages are very powerful and flexible. Yet they are quite limited when describing the person and work of God. Thus when a human tries to probe the inner details of certain information in the Bible, he might find it very difficult to comprehend or express those ideas.

When the words "son", "generation" and "proceeds" are used for Jesus Christ, and when the word "flesh" is used for the old sin nature, difficulties are bound to arise due to linguistic limitations.

Further, many human words such as "repent" are used in connection with the divine. At the same time, these words might have connotations that are not applicable to the divine. The interpreter must clearly distinguish the meanings which are applicable, and which are not, when a certain term is used to describe the divine. No words are sufficient to describe God and His actions totally or accurately, and errors are bound to arise if this is not kept in mind.

Chapter -- 3

Errors Related To Collection And Integration

The Bible is a massive book, and it discusses numerous subjects. However, the discussion on a given subject are not all in one place. Often the information is scattered all over the Bible. Further, these discussions of the same subject are often presented in different contexts, cultures, and even in different idioms. Thus the Bible cannot be treated like a textbook or encyclopedia which is divided into various subjects.

Since information related to the same subject is scattered so widely, an interpreter has to collect all this information, sift them, then arrange them, and then deduce the correct information. This is a difficult task, and many interpreters are not willing to take pains sufficient for doing a proper job. The result is often an incomplete picture or a skewed interpretation.

Some errors related to collection and interpretation of information are as follows:

IGNORING SOME AND EMPHASIZING OTHER PORTIONS: Almost everyone has his own biases and pet philosophies, and it affects the way they interpret a given passage. In addition, these biases and pet theories force some people to totally disregard those passages that go against their biases. On the other hand, they gladly pick up and harp upon those verses that seem to go along with their biases. This distorts the process of collection and interpretation, and the net result is error.

Another trick used by proponents of pet philosophies is to take all verses into consideration, but to interpret statements unfavorable to them in such a way as to conform to their pet theories. A good example would be the teaching on Limited Atonement. According to this philosophy, Christ died only for the church. When numerous statements related to Christ's death for the whole world are brought to their attention, they insist that these verses should be interpreted according to their philosophy. The same is the method used for arguing that some people are fixed by God

for salvation, and others are fixed by God for damnation into hell fire.

Error is introduced when a person insists that statements in the Bible should be interpreted in the light of certain extrabiblical philosophies. The correct procedure would be to compare scripture with scripture and come to right deductions. All philosophies should then be evaluated in the light of these biblical deductions, and not the other way round.

PROGRESSIVE NATURE OF REVELATION: Though we now have the complete Bible in our hands, this was not always the situation. Biblical revelation started being written down in parts in the Old Testament era. The New Testament makes it very clear that such revelation was progressive in nature, and it came to a completion only with the incarnation of Jesus and the arrival of the Church age.

Consequently, many doctrines which have found full expression in the New Testament were either veiled, or were known only partially in the Old Testament. This progressive nature of revelation requires that a given doctrinal passage be interpreted only in the light of revelation available up to that time. When this is not done, errors are bound to arise.

PROGRESSIVE NATURE OF HUMAN PERCEPTION: Revelation from God was progressive, and the fullness came only in the New Testament. Thus many of the Bible doctrines were not clearly or fully known in the Old Testament. Though the progressive revelation has now come to its final form, our understanding of doctrine continues to be progressive.

A look at the history of Christian doctrine would immediately reveal that the first four to five centuries were periods when a large number of heretical teachers rose up and many of them confused the Christians because the understanding of doctrine was at a primitive level. However, starting from this period, and continuing through Protestant Reformation, our understanding of doctrine has progressively been increasing. However, our perception and understanding would never be complete in this life. Consequently, there will always be some errors of interpretation.

These errors are compounded in the case of people who try to interpret doctrinal passages without first studying the understanding that has been gained during all these years. This is why this the history of Christian doctrine, (Historical Theology), is taught as an essential subject in many evangelical theological seminaries.

THE SUFFICIENT/TOTAL DISTINCTION: God's revelation is "sufficient" for doctrine, reproof, correction, and for instruction in righteousness. However, it is neither exhaustive nor total, because exhaustive/total information would require a Bible running into thousands of volumes (John 21:25). Even if information were given so exhaustively, humans would still be able to raise doubts on subjects that are not addressed there.

Instead of providing TOTAL information, the thrust of the Bible is to provide SUFFICIENT information to humans. When people try to use the Bible to gain total information, they often go into speculation and the making of hypotheses. This would obviously lead them into all kinds of errors. Thus questions related to the salvation of infants, details about guardian angels, details about many such subjects have to be kept within available information. Else, the result would be error.

EMOTIONALISM AND DENOMINATION LOYALTIES: Emotionalism and denominational loyalties often introduced serious biases into Bible interpretation. What is worse, this often forces people to collect only that information from the Bible that suits their prejudices. The rest of the statements are often ignored.

For example, for many Brethren people Ornaments is an emotional issue. For many Pentecostal the subject of tongues, and for the Episcopalian church people the hierarchical church system is a sensitive issue. Thus there is every possibility that they would fail to collect and integrate the whole subject, because this might hurt some of their pet interpretations.

Consequently, many Brethren people take up only a maximum of a dozen verses and pretend to speak authoritatively on this subject. Most of them do not even know that there are close to 500 references in the Bible related to ornaments, gold, silver, precious stones, and decoration. In this way emotionalism and denominational loyalties often hinder people from collecting and integrating information. One should not be surprised if this gives rise to problems of interpretation.

Summary

Principles of Bible interpretations are not radically different from principles of interpreting normal prose and poetry. (The only exception is prophecy, but that is not our concern here). In spite of this many people manage to misinterpret the Bible. This is due to their prejudices, problems related to perception, and due to their inability to integrate the Biblical data.

Though the above three problems manifest themselves in numerous ways, an understanding of the three basic causes would go a long way in facing problems created by faulty Bible interpretation.

We Stand By The Following Assertions,
Denying Even A Single One Of Which
Renders A Person A Heretic:

Sola Scriptura (Bible Alone)

Sola Fide (Faith Alone)

Sola Gratia (Grace Alone)

Solus Christus (Christ Alone)

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