

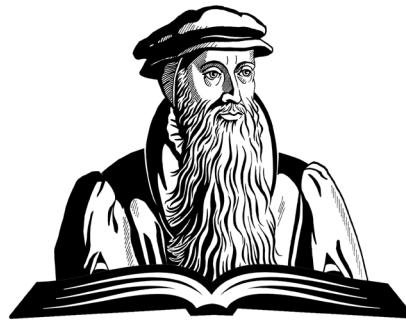
Video Lecture Series

HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 2 **FOUNDATION**



The John Knox Institute
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Lecture 2

Foundation

The foundation of a building constitutes one of the most important parts of any structure. We may tend to forget about the foundation, because it is not seen. We see the walls, roof, doors, windows, and other features, some of which can make the building beautiful. But the foundation underneath everything provides stability to the whole structure. If the builders lay a poor foundation, and they're hurried to focus on the parts people would see, then the whole structure would collapse and come to ruin.

Likewise, in approaching the study of the principles for interpreting Scripture, we must begin with understanding the foundation underneath that pursuit. We must begin with understanding the kind of book we're seeking to interpret. Without a firm concept of the nature of the Bible, we will be led into the possibility of many errors, and our attempt to interpret Scripture could collapse and come to ruin. The Holy Scriptures are set aside from every other category of literature as the very Word of God. We read in 2 Timothy 3, verses 16 and 17, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." In this chapter, Paul warns Timothy about the character and activity of enemies who would oppose the truth of God. He exhorts his spiritual son to continue in the things he had been taught in the Holy Scriptures from his infancy. Well, why? Why should Timothy persevere in holding fast to these truths? Because the Scriptures are the words that God himself has spoken. We cling to the Lord, in part, by clinging to his Word. Jesus said that his sheep would hear the voice of their shepherd and follow him. The Bible alone thoroughly equips us with all that we need for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism, answer #3 says, "The scriptures teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man."

In this second lecture, we will explore what makes the Bible so unique and special, by seeing what the Bible says about itself. This will guide us and prepare the way for then learning the individual principles God provides for how to interpret his own Word. We will consider, first of all, the doctrines of Scripture, and then turn to spell out how these truths or doctrines influence our interpretation.

So first of all, we need to consider truths undergirding our interpretation. To conceal something is to hide it, whereas to reveal it means to expose or to make something known. In the Bible, revelation refers to God's unveiling and making known his truths to creatures such as ourselves. He takes what would otherwise be hidden from us and graciously condescends to show it to us. He's not silent. He opens up and discloses to us the knowledge of himself and the way of salvation. If we wish to know him, we must rely on what he tells us of himself. In the Bible, God provides us with special revelation of all that we are to believe and do, all that we need for life and godliness in this world. This is the only source for a person to come to know God as Savior and Redeemer. Romans 1, verse 16 says that "The gospel...is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." The revelation of God in his Word is complete and perfect, without any additions of new revelation, as we see in the opening verses of the book of Hebrews.

Our interest in this lecture relates to what we know about the nature of the Bible, and the influence that that has on how we interpret it. So we'll note a few things about what the Bible teaches regarding itself.

First of all, we see that the Bible must be understood as the inspired Word of God. "Inspired" means "God-breathed." Just we expel breath from our mouths, so ultimately God himself is speaking in the Scriptures. In other words, every word in the Scriptures originates from God and proceeds from the mouth of God. So we rightly speak of the Bible as the voice of God, and as the Word of God. The Lord inspired prophets and apostles to write the Scriptures, but they were never only the words or thoughts of men. Second Peter 1, verse 21 says, "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." And again, in 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 13, "When ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God." So God is the ultimate source of every word, every letter in the Bible. Theologians speak of the "plenary verbal inspiration" of the Scriptures. Now these words carry a weight of importance. The word "plenary" means "something that is extended to all parts equally." So the inspiration of God's Word is full, and complete, and absolute—it's carried all the way through every part of the Bible. For example, Jesus said, in Matthew 5, verse 18, "For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled." A "jot" and a "tittle" are the smallest letter in the alphabet, and even the smallest stroke of a letter. And so, inspiration applies to the whole of God's Word. But we also call it plenary "verbal" inspiration, so "verbal"—it was given in written words. It's propositional. Inspiration extends to the words, and letters, the syllables themselves. Proverbs 22, verses 20 and 21 says, "Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge, that I might make thee know the certainty of the words of truth." Among other things, God provided Scripture in written words for their permanent preservation, and for the world's enduring benefit.

But we can add two more doctrines to this idea of inspiration—two more words. The first word is the word "inerrancy." Inerrancy means there are no errors in the Scriptures. Notice how Paul demonstrates this in Galatians 3, verse 16, where he builds his whole doctrinal point on the fact that an Old Testament word was given in the singular form, rather than the plural form. He says, "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ." And so, inerrancy extends to every detail. Every part of the Bible is without error. We also have the word "infallibility." Infallibility means that God's Word is reliable, that it's sure, that it's unchangeable. That it's never wrong, indeed, that it cannot fail. Now this must be so, because God is the author, and God is truth itself. He's incapable

of inspiring falsehood, or speaking anything that is untrustworthy. So the first thing that we learn about the Bible is that it's the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God.

But then, secondly, it comes to us with divine authority. The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 4 says, "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; and therefore it is to be received, because it is the word of God." So the Bible has divine authority because its author is the Holy Spirit, who is God himself. Consequently, the Scriptures speak to us with the authority of God. First Corinthians 2, verses 12 and 13, we read, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual." And so, as we see in Hebrews 4, verse 12, the Bible, the sword of the Holy Spirit, is living and powerful, it's "sharper than any twoedged sword," and it always has the final word on everything to which it speaks. No outside source or no new information can supplant what God himself has said to us in his Word. The divine authority of Scripture extends over the opinions and traditions of men, over the decrees of councils, over antiquity, and over private judgments. Even into the details of theological controversy, we should be resorting to the Scriptures as having divine authority.

A third aspect of Scripture is its clarity. Again we can turn to the Westminster Confession, in chapter 1, paragraph 7, it says, "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them." And so we see that Scripture is clear. It's perspicuous, in reference to everything that is necessary for us to know for our salvation. The main message of the Bible, the gospel, can be readily seen and understood, even by a child. Most people can understand much of the Bible. The Scripture is clear in itself, as light, the light of God's Word. Where it is unclear, the fault is with us, rather than with God. Our sinful minds can be darkened. And for the unregenerate, the Scripture is always unclear, and always unprofitable. For the believer, Scripture may be more or less clear, requiring careful interpretation at times by employing the principles that we'll be learning in this course.

So the Scriptures are not equally clear in every part, or in relation to every doctrine. There are also what the Bible calls "mysteries," and what the Bible calls "deep things," as well as a difference between "milk" and "meat." Even Peter found some of Paul's writings difficult to understand, as you see in 2 Peter 3, verses 15 and 16. For that reason, God's ordained pastors and teachers to assist the Lord's people in understanding the Scriptures, as we see in Ephesians 4, and verse 11 and following. And while we ought to profit from the Lord's provision of faithful pastors, we must still test that teaching with the Scriptures themselves. If we compromise the clarity of Scripture, or deny the sufficiency of Scripture, then we endanger or negate the authority of Scripture. And all of that is going to lead to misinterpreting Scripture.

Another area that we learn about in reference to God's Word is "the sufficiency of Scripture." The Bible alone, and all of the Bible, is what God has given to us as our standard. Westminster Confession, chapter 1, paragraph 6 says, "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any

time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.” In other words, the Bible is sufficient in itself.

The sufficiency of Scripture teaches that all we need for faith and practice is found in the Bible. That’s what makes us wise for salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s sufficient to make us complete and thoroughly equipped for every good work. It’s sufficient for anything else that we need to direct us in knowing or serving God in life, and if we’re looking outside of the Scripture, that will threaten the sufficiency of Scripture. This principle explains why the manner of the true worship of God has always stood at the heart of what it means to be a Biblical Christian.

Next, we need to recognize that the Scriptures are Christ-centered. The primary focus of the Bible is on the person and work of Jesus Christ. The centrality of Christ in the whole of Scriptures can never be lost—2 Corinthians 1, verse 20, “For all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen.” The whole Bible points to Christ, and has its explanation and fulfillment in him. And Jesus himself said, in John 5, verse 39, “Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.” When Jesus met the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we read in Luke 24, verse 27, and verse 44, “And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” He goes on later, “These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.” If you’re interested in exploring this whole matter of what it means to interpret the Scriptures accurately, you need to recognize that Christ is at the center of the Scriptures.

Now, the material that we’ve been touching on here with reference to the doctrine of Holy Scripture is covered in far greater depth in Module 1 of the Systematic Theology series on the John Knox Institute website, johnknoxinstitute.org. So if you’re interested in exploring further some of the points that we’ve touched on in this lecture, I would encourage you to consider that material.

But that brings us to our second point—the implications of all of this for interpreting Scripture. Now that we have heard a little about the nature of the Bible, how does that influence the way in which we will interpret it? So let’s consider a few implications that flow from these truths. We’ll consider briefly why we must build our approach to Biblical interpretation upon this solid and indispensable foundation.

First of all, since the Bible is God’s inspired Word, it is perfect, and without the possibility of a single error. This truth eliminates several possibilities when interpreting a text of Scripture. God cannot lie. He cannot ever contradict himself. Therefore, when we have two passages that seem to contradict each other, we know that that is impossible. The problem lies with us. And so we must dig deeper in our study to discover the right interpretation that shows how the two passages are actually consistent with each other. So for example, Paul says, in Galatians and Romans, that the believer is justified by faith alone, and not by works. But then James 2 says that we are justified by works and not by faith alone. Well, on the surface, this is an apparent contradiction, but we know that it cannot be a true contradiction. Now you’ll learn more details about this specific question regarding Paul and James in Systematic Theology. But in brief, the principles of interpretation that we’ll be learning in this course enable us to resolve the problem.

So for now, the answer is this: Paul is addressing legalism, in those that desire to be declared righteous by their own obedience to the law, which undermines the gospel. James is addressing a different matter. He’s addressing licentiousness, in those that say they believe but have no fruit of saving faith, which also undermines the gospel. Paul confronts dead works; James confronts dead faith. Paul is speaking to the declarative aspect of the believer’s justification. James speaks to the

demonstrative aspect of justification. The simple point to note right now is that inspiration, inerrancy, and divine authority undergird how we will interpret the Scripture. So among other things, it rules out the possibility of any contradictions. We know for certain that there will be consistency in the accurate interpretation of Scripture.

Secondly, some will contend that the Bible is written for simple souls, and all of Scripture can be equally understood by everyone. Now we've already seen that's not true. We saw that there are deep mysteries in the Bible. Even Peter found some of Paul's writings difficult to understand. Well, how does this influence our interpretation? Well, as we will explore in more detail in a future lecture, this teaches us to interpret unclear passages, or less clear passages, in light of clear passages, comparing Scripture with Scripture, one text with another. So, for example, some of the prophetic passages may be difficult for us to understand, but we can use the more clear teaching elsewhere in the Bible to cast light on what is difficult for us to understand. Likewise, we may be reading a narrative portion of the Old Testament and be inclined to draw certain doctrines or moral lessons from it, but we need to test those conclusions by comparing them to what we read in the law, or epistles, or other portions which lay out simple instruction, to insure that our ideas that we're drawing from the narrative portions, actually conform to what the Scripture says elsewhere. This idea of understanding the clarity of Scripture influences the principles of interpretation that we're going to be learning, and how to employ them.

Thirdly, since the Bible is fully sufficient, nothing outside the Bible can undermine what is in the Bible. This is true in all parts of Scripture, including things that pertain to science and history. Man's unaided reason, or scientific investigations, or archeological and historical studies will never uncover faults in Scripture. In fact, ultimately, those pursuits can only confirm Scripture. At one point in history, unbelieving scholars attacked the Bible because they said there was absolutely no evidence of the Hittites in the historical record. This left the true believer unfazed, as the problem was clearly an inadequacy with the scholars, not the Bible. And sure enough, with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, they uncovered massive evidence that confirmed exactly what God taught in the Bible. The same is true with regards to science. We can rule out with perfect confidence the fable of evolution, which teaches that man descends from monkeys and evolved over millions of years. We should not twist the Scriptures to conform to unbelieving scientists. God tells us that he created Adam and Eve directly himself, and that the universe came into existence in the space of six normal days. Now, after over a century of protesting to the contrary, scientists are watching the theory of evolution crumble under the weight of scientific evidence which disproves it. Again, the simple point is that these foundational truths influence our approach to Scripture and undergird our interpretation of Scripture.

Fourthly, we saw that the Scriptures are Christ-centered, so in our interpretation of Scripture, we are taught to expect that the revelation of Christ is to be found everywhere throughout the Bible. And so, when we turn to Abraham, and him offering his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, it shouldn't surprise us to discover that this shows us something of Christ. Or in the life of Joseph, we see things about the Lord Jesus Christ being revealed. And how much more during Moses' day that all of the Old Testament ceremonial worship—the sacrifices, and altar, and sprinkling of blood, and the tabernacle and temple—all these things are filled with imagery of Jesus Christ. This is why the whole book of Acts speaks of preaching Christ, and it is why Paul insists that we must preach Christ and him crucified. God reveals himself in the person of Christ, from Genesis to Revelation. So as we interpret Scripture, we are to keep our eye on how and where various passages of Scripture show us the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Well, in this lecture, we have laid a solid foundation in understanding the nature of the Bible, which will inform and guide us in how we interpret the Bible. In the remainder of this module, we'll begin to explore the specific principles, one by one, that God provides for interpreting Scripture, and consider how we can apply them. So in the next two lectures—the third and fourth lectures—we will consider the first two most fundamental principles of all of Biblical interpretation.