

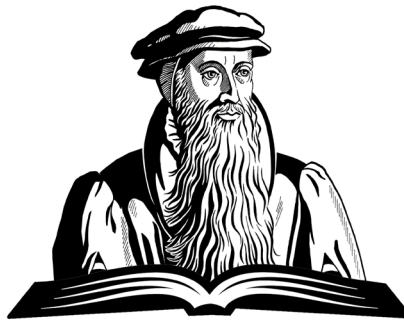
Video Lecture Series

HERMENEUTICS

*Principles of Scripture
Interpretation*

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Lecture 3
SENSE



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of Higher Education

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HERMENEUTICS

Principles of Scripture Interpretation

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Lecture 3

Sense

Human language requires clarity and coherence to be intelligible. Making random sounds, or using a string of words disconnected from their recognized meaning leads to confusion. We express our thoughts and intentions by employing well-defined words, and putting them together into an order that makes sense to others. When you do that well, people will understand you. They may say to you, “I see your point.”

What is true of language in general is also true regarding the inspired words of Holy Scripture. As we saw in the previous lecture, the Bible is God’s revelation to man. It makes known to us infallible truth from the mind of God. It is communication from God. He intends for us, by his grace, to comprehend what he has revealed. The principles for interpreting Scripture assist us in understanding the meaning of God’s Word. And one of the things we need to understand early on in our study is that *there is only one meaning in any given passage of Scripture*.

We read in 2 Peter, chapter 1, verses 20 and 21, “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. 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.” When Peter writes that “no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation,” he is not prohibiting private, or individual men, from interpreting Scripture. The Bible clearly teaches us that we must all do that. It is warning that men must not interpret Scripture according to their own minds, or out of their own heads, making their private views to be the meaning of the Scripture. We must seek the Lord’s help, who shows us the true Sense of the Bible, from the Bible itself, thereby leading us to the understanding of God’s mind and meaning in the passage. Since God himself is the author of the Word, as we see in the very next verse, in verse 21, he is the best interpreter of its meaning. So we’re asking, What does God say? and, What does God mean by what he says?

In this third lecture, we will consider our first Biblical principle for interpreting Scripture. And you will notice how this principle builds on the foundational doctrines we addressed in the previous lecture. The first principle is that *there is only one true Sense or meaning to any Biblical passage*. So there are not multiple meanings. Departing from this principle will lead to a deviation from true doctrine, ending in erroneous misinterpretation. This is clearly stated in *Westminster*

Confession of Faith, chapter 1, paragraph 9, where we read, “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full Sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.” Actually, we learn two principles in this paragraph of the *Westminster Confession*. First, that the true Sense of any Scripture is not many, but one, which we will explore in this lecture. Second, that we must also always compare Scripture with Scripture in our interpretation. And that we’ll consider in the next or fourth lecture.

And so, we’ll begin in this lecture by stating and explaining briefly our first principle. The principle is that *there is only one true Sense or meaning of any Scripture*. When God speaks, we are to accept the single, definite meaning he intends to reveal to us. There is no place for intruding our own multiple meanings into the text, or propagating arbitrary interpretations of a passage. We are to “receive with meekness the engrafted word,” as James 1, verse 21 says.

You can see this illustrated in Nehemiah 8. Ezra and the Levites built a pulpit of wood and read from the law of God before the gathered congregation. The purpose was to enable the people to understand the meaning of what God had written. Notice the language of Nehemiah 8, verse 8, “So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the Sense, and caused them to understand the reading.” They gave the Sense, the single Sense or meaning, and caused the people to understand.

You see the same thing illustrated in the Lord’s own ministry. In Luke, chapter 4, verses 17 to 22, Jesus went into the synagogue, and they handed him the book of Isaiah, which he opened and read. Then we read in verses 20 to 22, “And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth.” Jesus opened the Bible, read it, and explained the Sense or meaning of what he had read from the Scriptures.

No Scripture can have two or more meanings that are truly different from each other, or subordinate to one another. Well, why is that the case? And what is the Biblical reason for it? Well, we’ll seek to answer those questions briefly.

First of all, the veracity of God necessitates this principle. God is absolute truth. You’ll remember the words of our Lord, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” It is impossible for the Lord to send a mixed signal or a confused message. He cannot give revelation that misleads his people or promotes falsehood. This would be contrary to his law, which is a revelation of his character. In Exodus 20, verse 16, the 9th Commandment teaches us, “Thou shalt not bear false witness.” And as we read in Titus 1:2, God himself cannot lie.

Secondly, as we saw in the last lecture, the unity of God’s truth and the clarity of Scripture also require a single Sense of any passage. All divine revelation must be rational in order to be understood. And God has communicated to us as moral, rational creatures who bear his image. We’re created to think God’s thoughts after him, as we see in Isaiah 55, and 2 Corinthians 10, and elsewhere.

Thirdly, the nature of human language necessitates a single Sense. Comprehension would be impossible if a given word had multiple meanings in the same exact context. It would be absurd if the phrase, “He went up the hill” meant what it says, as well as meant, “He rolled down a tree,” or “The flower is red,” or “Please take out the trash,” all in the same context. No, Jesus said, in Matthew 5, verse 37, “Let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.”

But secondly, we must clarify some misunderstandings that sometimes arise from this principle. We'll seek to remove some common misconceptions. As we've seen, the Sense of Scripture is not manifold, but one. Many passages of Scripture, however, have a complex meaning. Nevertheless, this only makes up that one and full Sense intended by the Holy Ghost. So we'll explore these points in greater detail later in the course, but for now we need to show the connection to this principle of the single Sense of any Scripture.

First of all, some Old Testament prophecies have several steps of fulfillment. In other words, prophecy can be fulfilled partially in successive events. So for example, there are Old Testament prophecies that unfold in the Jewish nation, and in the Christian church, and in the heavenly state. For example, the Lord promises and prophesies of Abraham's seed. And in the Old Testament, that seems rather clear. It's very obvious that that prophecy is being unfolded in what follows within Abraham's descendents. But then we move from the Old Testament to the New Testament, and you can go, for example, to Galatians 3, and we read, "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham" (verse 7). It goes on, "That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ" (verse 14). And at the end of the chapter, "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (verse 29). And so we see the prophecy regarding Abraham's seed is blossoming. And in the New Testament, we recognize that it comes to include Gentile believers, not just those that we saw as Abraham's immediate descendents in the Old Testament. And then, of course, we can go from the days of the New Testament, to heaven itself. You'll note the language of Revelation 21, which is describing heaven, and how it incorporates language that was first given to Abraham, showing the fulfillment of that promise and prophecy in the ultimate state of glory, in heaven itself. So the point is here that there is one Sense to any passage, one meaning of any passage, but that doesn't rule out the fact that the full meaning of that passage may include, in the case of prophecies, multiple instances of the development of the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Secondly, some passages contain typology, where one thing is a type, or a symbol, or a picture of another thing. Now this does not involve a double Sense or a double meaning. Instead, we're to identify what is being described, and how God is using that to typify something greater. Distinguishing between the two allows you to see the one meaning being communicated. So to mention just a few examples, in the Old Testament, we have the Pascal lamb, we have the brazen serpent that was lifted up, we have the rock in the wilderness. All of these typified, or pointed forward to the Lord Jesus Christ, as the New Testament makes perfectly clear. First Corinthians 5, verse 7, Jesus is described as the paschal lamb. In John 12, we're told he is what was pictured in the brazen serpent that was lifted up. In 1 Corinthians 10, we're told that Christ was that rock in the wilderness. And so again, you see that the single Sense of Scripture is not compromised by recognizing types or pictures that the Lord uses to point forward from one thing to a greater thing.

Thirdly, we must recognize that the knowledge of the human authors does not always exhaust the Sense or meaning of the passage. So we read in 1 Peter, chapter 1, verse 10 to 12, "Of which salvation the prophets have inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow. Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven; which things the angels desire to look into." So the prophets foretold of the grace to be revealed under the gospel, which often came through dark shadows and

obscurity. And so the prophets were left to search diligently into the things that would be made clear in the light of New Testament fulfillment. It's interesting, you'll notice that even the angels desired to investigate these mysteries, to peer into them. And so the full meaning of the passage includes the intention of the Holy Spirit himself.

Fourthly, the single Sense of Scripture is completely compatible with what we call "good and necessary consequences" that flow from what a passage says. Notice what *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1, paragraph 6 says regarding this. We read, "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." So good and necessary consequences are as equally binding as those statements expressly taught in Scripture. Now, why? Why would that be the case? Because legitimate consequences only bring out the full meaning of the words of a Bible passage. The conclusions that we deduce from Scripture, however, must be both good and necessary. They're good when they are of divine origin, inescapably contained in the meaning that is conveyed by the words of the text. They're necessary when they are inevitable, plainly seen, beyond dispute, without having to be proved by refined or remote arguments.

But perhaps it would be clearer to illustrate this from the Bible itself. In Matthew 22, verses 31 and 32, Jesus says, "But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living." So Jesus quotes a passage of Scripture, and then proves the doctrine of the resurrection of the body to the Sadducees, by showing the good and necessary consequence that must be deduced from that passage. We see Paul doing the same in Acts 17. Other examples could be given. And so good and necessary consequence is also in keeping with the one true Sense or meaning of any passage.

Fifthly, we need to make one more important distinction. Although there is only one proper Sense or meaning in any Scripture, there can be many applications drawn from a text. So applications refers to the impact of a passage on our life—how it should change our thinking, and speaking, and behavior, and what we're to do in response to the truths revealed to us. We understand the single Sense of a passage by asking the question, "What does this text mean?" Only after we understand the meaning of the text can we then ask the question, "What are the practical implications for my life?" And multiple applications can arise from the single meaning of a passage. So we sing in Psalm 139, verse 2, "Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off." Well, it's fairly simple to understand the meaning or Sense of this verse. We're taught that the living and true God knows and sees all things, both our external actions, and our internal thoughts.

But we can derive a wide array of applications from this, both for the believer's comfort, and for the believer's holiness. So if the Lord sees our uprising, and our sitting down, and knows our thoughts afar off, this is a great comfort to us. So he can see all of the fears that we have, all of the struggles that we're facing, the temptations, the trials that we are shouldering, and so on. He sees it all. He knows it all. He can read our thoughts and the anxieties that swell up within us, and so on. It's a great comfort to know that the Lord sees and knows all—that he's in fact with us.

We could say more on that point. It also speaks to the applications to the believer's holiness. Because if the Lord sees our rising up and lying down, if he knows our thoughts afar off, then we best be careful about where we go, what we do, and what we think. This teaches us the fear of the Lord, that we need holy thoughts. That though our friends and family and others can't see what

we're thinking, the Lord can see it, and therefore, we're to watch our thoughts, and we're to walk in holiness before the Lord. This leads us to the application of repenting of our unbelief. How often we think, Oh, the Lord is far away, and the Lord doesn't know or see, and the Lord doesn't care, and so on. This is unbelief, and this passage teaches us to repent of that, to repent of our pride. It also teaches us to grow in faith, confidence in the Lord, drawing upon his promises, thinking upon who he is, crying out to him, and it teaches us humility. We're to walk low before him. Well, we could easily list dozens of applications, really, from this one text. And so the Sense or meaning of a passage is singular, it's one, and yet we can derive multiple, many, many, many applications from that passage.

Well, thirdly, there are dangers to guard against in interpreting Scripture. Now, the Scriptures provide light. We sing in Psalm 119, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (verse 105). And elsewhere in that Psalm, "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple" (verse 130). But there are many who twist Scripture in order to spread darkness. This principle regarding the single Sense of any Scripture is a common point of divergence between heretical cults and orthodox Christianity. Though we cannot cover all the groups who reject this principle, we'll consider a few examples to illustrate our point.

First of all, there was a man named Emanuel Swedenborg. He was a heretic, and the founder of a cult called The New Church. He claimed that God came to him and made him a messenger of new revelation, which rejected the doctrines of the Trinity, the atonement of Christ, and many other cardinal doctrines. But underneath all of this was his claim that the church had destroyed the original meaning of the Scriptures. Instead, he advocated a fourfold Sense of Scripture. So rather than the single Sense we've learned in this lecture, he said, "Well, there's fourfold Sense to every passage." And he used this false principle of interpretation to promote his grievous errors. So that's one example.

A second example is Mary Baker Eddy, who began the Christian Scientist cult. She built an entirely new system of doctrine which displaced the Scriptures altogether, and she pursued this by rejecting the Biblical principles for interpreting Scripture. Instead, she turned the Bible into one giant allegory, so that she could make it mean whatever she desired.

Thirdly, we should take note of Karl Barth, the German theologian, who championed what became known as neo-orthodoxy. He taught that the Word of God was contained in the Bible, but not identical with the Bible. So Scripture could contain various errors in history, and science, and so on. He taught that the Bible only becomes the living Word of God when a person has an encounter with the divine Logos, through the medium of the Scriptures. Well, this removes the objective study of the Scriptures altogether and replaces it with our subjective experience. This too undermines what we've been hearing in this lecture.

Well then, fourthly, there's another error that touches closer to home in many Bible-believing evangelical churches. You may hear a person say, "This is what this passage means to me." Well, that's foolish, because that's very different from saying, "This is what this passage means." You see, it's meaning is not person-relative. The meaning is not derived from or dependent on anything in us. This error ignores the Sense of a passage, and reads into it a different meaning that the person applies to their own individual circumstances. This is especially seen in some believer's quest for God's guidance. Now, we can appreciate this. We want to know the will of God, we want to walk with the Lord, we want to know how he would have us to live, and so on. But the problem is, they may use the language of a passage in a way that is not the intended meaning of the passage, and which is torn from its context.

Well, to use an obviously ridiculous example, a person can read Philippians 4:13, which says, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me,” and then conclude that God is telling them that they can memorize an encyclopedia in one sitting. That’s not what the passage means. It’s not at all what’s conveyed or intended in those words. And as we will learn later in this module, we have to consider the context in which a verse comes, amongst other things. But in this lecture, we’re concerned about the one Sense or meaning of any given passage. So we can’t tear the language of Scripture out of its context and then give it a meaning that God has not placed in it.

Well, you can see how this first principle, which is that there is only one true *Sense* to any Scripture, protects the believer from many errors in interpreting the Bible. Well, in this lecture, we’ve explored our first principle of Scripture interpretation, *there is only one true meaning of any Scripture*. In the next lecture, we’ll consider another, closely-related, principle of interpretation, namely, that we must always *Compare Scripture with Scripture*.