

Epistles: Hermeneutics

What is Hermeneutics?

- The study of interpretation
- The art of bringing the meaning of text from its original context (exegesis) into our modern one
- “What does this mean for us?”

The Practice of Hermeneutics

- We all do it
- But we are selective in how we do it:
 - 2 Timothy 4:13: Who does this text apply to & how?
 - 1 Timothy 5:19: Who does this text apply to & how?
 - 1 Timothy 5:23: Who does this text apply to & how?

Selective Interpretation

- We often write off texts that don't fit into our societal norm as cultural
 - Ex.) Women wearing head coverings in worship (1 Cor. 11:6)
- We also try to skirt around or explain away texts that seem to stand in opposition to our theological heritage, church tradition, or existential concerns
 - Examples: Arminianism (Rom. 8:30) & Calvinism (2 Peter 2:20-22); Infant baptism (Mark 16:16) & Believers' Baptism (1 Cor. 1:16; 7:14)
- We flat out ignore some texts that make us uncomfortable
 - Ex.) Miracles by believers (John 14:12)

Hermeneutical Rules

- Rule 1: “A text cannot mean now what I couldn't mean then”
- Rule 2: Where we share comparable particulars (i.e. similar life situations) with the original audience, God's word to us is the same as it was to them.
 - This requires good exegesis on our part

Hermeneutical Problems

Extended Application

- Taking the original context and extending it to other arenas (both similar and dissimilar) to come up with new applications
 - Ex.) 1 Corinthians 3:16-17
 - Original meaning: The local church
 - Principle: Whatever God sets apart by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is sacred, and to set to destroy such a thing would bring one under the judgment of God
 - Extended application: The individual believer's body

- Implications: Lack of physical care of one's body will lead to judgment
 - Compare to 1 Cor. 6:19-20; No mention of judgment
- When there are comparable situations and particulars, God's Word to us should be limited to its original intent.

Particulars that are NOT Comparable

- Deals with texts that:
 - Speak to original audience issues that for the most part are without modern counterparts
 - Ex. Food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8-10)
 - Or speak to problems that could happen in the modern setting, but are highly unlikely to occur
 - Ex. People wanting to force circumcision on Gentile Christians (Gal. 6:12)
- Steps to take:
 - **Step 1:** Do careful exegesis to see what was being said to the original audience and to determine the principle that is being articulated
 - **Step 2:** Apply the principle to situations that are genuinely comparable situations
- **Example:** Food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8-10)
 - At a pagan temple: Forbidden
 - From the market or at someone else's home: Acceptable
 - *Stumbling-block principle:* Something that a believer feels can be done in good conscience and that, by their action or persuasion, they try to induce another believer, who cannot do so in good conscience
 - Not merely offends them, but causes them to emulate behavior and therefore fall into sin
 - Applications?
 - Alcohol? Smoking?

Cultural Relativism

- Since Epistles are occasional documents, conditioned by the language and culture of the 1st century, which spoke to specific issues in the first-century church
- And since many of the specific situations in the Epistles are so completely conditioned by their first-century setting that all recognize that they have no personal application as God's Word for today, except perhaps by deriving principles from them (i.e. Timothy bringing Paul's cloak)
- And since other texts are also thoroughly conditioned by their first-century settings, but the Word contained in them can be "translated" into new but comparable settings
- Is it not possible that still other texts, although they appear to have comparable particulars, are also conditioned by their first-century setting and need to be translated into new settings, or simply left in the first century?
 - In other words: Can't we just say that any text that has a cultural component to it, must be tossed out for modern Christians (Ex. Women in ministry & homosexuality)

- Answer: No
 - We can't throw out texts that are difficult
 - But we also can't adopt 1st-century culture
 - No culture is perfect
 - We must do careful exegesis

Steps for determining Culturally Relative texts

- **Step 1:** Determine the core message of the Bible and what is dependent on or peripheral to it
 - **Core:** The fallenness of humanity, redemption through Christ's death & resurrection, the consummation of that redemption by Christ's return
 - **Non-core:** holy kiss, women's head coverings, charismatic gifts, etc.
- **Step 2:** Distinguish between what the NT sees as inherently moral and what is not
 - **Moral issues:** Sexual immorality, adultery, idolatry, drunkenness, homosexual practice, thievery, greed, etc. (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10)
 - Sins regardless of culture
 - **Non-moral issues:** Foot-washing, holy kiss, eating marketplace idol food, women's head coverings, Paul's personal preference for celibacy, women teaching in the church
 - All have a cultural element that makes them appropriate or inappropriate, determined by the cultural setting
- **Step 3:** Make note of where the NT has a uniform and consistent witness and where it reflects differences
 - **Uniform:** Love as a Christian's basic ethical response, a non-retaliation personal ethic, the wrongness of strife, hatred, murder, stealing, practicing homosexuality, drunkenness, & sexual immorality of all kinds
 - **Not Uniform:** women's ministries in the Church (Rom. 16:1-2, 7, 16:3), the political evaluation of Rome (Rom. 13:1-5; 1 Peter 2:13-14; and Rev. 13-18), the retention of wealth (Luke 12:33; 18:22; 1 Tim. 6:17-19), eating food offered to idols (1 Cor. 10:23-29; Acts 15:29; Rev. 2:14, 20)
- **Step 4:** Distinguish within the NT between principle and specific application
 - **Principle:** Modesty, Distracting from God's glory in worship
 - **Specific:** Dress, Head coverings
- **Step 5:** Determine cultural options open to the NT writers
 - If there was only one option, compared to several
 - **Single-option:** Speaks to how to act within this single-option society
 - Slavery, women's roles
 - **Multiple-option:** Speaks to which option is valid
 - Homosexuality
- **Step 6:** Keep alert to cultural differences between the 1st and 21st century that may not be immediately obvious
 - Ex. Women's education status, governmental types (i.e. Empire vs. Representative Democracy)

- **Step 7:** Practice charity towards others who may disagree over these issues and have open lines of discussion
 - “In Essentials, unity; in non-essentials; liberty; in a all things; charity.” –Augustine of Hippo

Task Theology

- Developing a theological framework from the Epistles
- Cautions:
 1. NT writers often have underlying theological assumptions that we are not fully aware of
 - Ex. 1 Cor. 6:2-3 (Judging angels)
 - We must be content with what we can know vs. what we *want* to know
 2. Because they are occasional documents, Epistles are not intended to answer our questions, but rather the questions posed by their original audience
 - This does not mean that those texts have nothing to say to us, but rather that we have to let the text answer the questions it was intended to