

Of The Private Interpretation Of Scripture Exegesis and Eisegesis.

The following lecturer was presented by R.C. Sproul and he said:

Have you ever had anybody, after you've recited a passage from Scripture, or given your views on what you thought the meaning of a particular passage of Scripture was, have you ever had anybody after that situation just sort of look at you and dismiss all of your statements by one simple statement?

They look at you and they say, "Well, that's your interpretation."

I've certainly had that done to me on many occasions, and I've often asked myself, what do people mean when they say that -- that's your interpretation? "Well that's just your interpretation." That's the dismissal. I've heard many times, and I suspect you have, too, from people, and I -- as I asked a moment ago, what do people have in mind when they say, "That's your interpretation?"

I thought about it, and I thought, well maybe they're just pointing out the obvious -- I'm the one who just gave the interpretation of the Scripture -- but surely they wouldn't be wasting everybody's time by just pointing out something that everybody knew already, that it was my interpretation.

There must be more to it than that, and maybe what it is a veiled rebuttal by getting to the bottom line as quickly as possible to refute what I've just said by a simple little equation, the simplest of all kinds of syllogism.

The idea that's unspoken would be this: everything that David Clarke (R.C. Sproul) interprets is wrong. Since David Clarke (R.C. Sproul) interpreted this passage, the only conclusion we can come to is what? It is wrong.

But I don't think people are being that unkind or that nasty when they say, "That's your interpretation," and just by putting it at your doorstep there for saying that it's wrong, because obviously, anything that you touch would turn to error. I doubt that. But I tell you what terrifies me., I'm afraid that so often what people mean when they dismiss what is said lightly by, "That's your interpretation," is "Well that's your interpretation. You read it one way, I look at it another way, and a third party over here

reads it still a third way.

And these three may be mutually exclusive, they may contradict each other, but that's all right because the Bible is a matter of individual subjective interpretation. Whatever it means to you is fine."

Like I say, if that's what people have in mind, it terrifies me for this reason: because then it becomes a slogan for what we call subjectivism, where the meaning of the Word of God becomes tied to whoever's interpreting.

That's what Luther was so afraid of, that the Bible might become a wax nose that would be shaped and formed and molded according to the pride and the prejudice of whoever was studying it and whoever was reading it.

If we let that happen, dear friends, then the Bible's authority collapses, its truth has been relativized, and the Word of God is slain. But you say, "Wait a minute, Mr Clarke You mentioned before (in the first lecture) that a very important principle coming out of the protestant reformation was the principle of the perspicuity -- that is, the clarity of the Bible. Wasn't there even a more basic principle in the reformation, namely the principle and the right of private interpretation of the Bible?"

Yes, indeed, the principle of private interpretation was one of the most precious legacies that we have from the protestant reformation. It's a principle incidentally that we tend to take for granted. If you were sitting in your home reading the Bible in your own language, you may assume that that's a freedom and a privilege that is easily achieved, but the blood of the martyrs has flown through the streets of Europe to make that possible, because in the sixteenth century, one of the most important things that Martin Luther did when the reformation was started was to translate the Bible into the vernacular, into the German language, which was the first time it had been accomplished, and that created a hue and cry and protest throughout the Roman Catholic Church that brought all of the power of the church to bear to stop the printing presses from releasing copies of the Bible in native languages.

And some protestants look at that today and they say, how evil must Rome have been to have sought to suppress the publication of the Bible in native languages, but ladies and gentlemen, it's not all that simple.

You go back and you read the history and you see that men and women were tortured, they were torn apart on the rack, they were burned at the stake for daring to translate the Bible into English or into German or into some other language, and you say, how ghastly must the Roman Church have been.

Not so, not so. Let's take a little exercise in best-case analysis. Why do you suppose the Roman Church took such a strong stand against, translating the Bible into the languages so that the people could read it on their own?

Well if we were just looking at this from a prejudicial viewpoint, we would say well maybe that was the great cover-up scandal of all time, that they didn't want the people to know how far the church had departed from the biblical truth.

I don't think that was the main reason at all. As the princes of the Roman Catholic Church said, "If we put the Bible in the hands of unskilled laymen, without the magisterium of the church, without the teaching office of the church to govern and guide and protect people from erroneous understandings of the Scripture, we're going to open a floodgate of iniquity.

And they even predicted that, that would cause a multitude of different Christian denominations, each one claiming the Bible as the truth.

In 1960, there were listed in the United States of America, in the directory of religion, two thousand different protestant denominations. I don't know how many there are now, but in 1960, two thousand of them. There was the Church of the Ladder up to Heaven Number One and the Church of the Ladder up to Heaven Number Two, which split from the Church of the Ladder up to Heaven Number One over an issue and dispute of biblical interpretation, and all of these different denominations claim the Scripture as their source of truth.

That's what Rome was afraid of. Rome was afraid that the body of Christ would be fragmented and fractured and that heresy would run wild if you gave people the right of private interpretation and of translating the Bible into their own native language. They were pretty accurate in their forecasting, and they said we will use corporal punishment, physical force,

torture chambers, which were commonplace in that day. If necessary, we'll harm every joint of the human body if we can preserve people's souls from eternal torment in hell.

If you want to understand the inquisition, you have to understand that it took place at a time when people actually believed in hell, and that souls could go there, which is not where many of the churches are today.

But I'm not here to praise Rome. I stand with Luther. I agree in the private -- principle of private interpretation and of translating the Bible into the vernacular, but I want to stress that Rome was not just being obstreperous when she cautioned against the dangers of private interpretation.

It could indeed loose a floodgate of iniquity, and in many cases, it did unleash a floodgate of iniquity. And Luther himself agonized over this point. He said, "I know what people who are unskilled and untrained and irresponsible can do with the Bible if they rip it of its context, if they distort the meaning of Scripture. But again, for the sake of that simple clear message that the whole world could hear the Gospel of Christ that is so desperately needed," he said, "if this opens up the floodgates of iniquity, so let it be. So vital is the truth of the Gospel for the nations." But it's a price that we've had to pay, and when you get everybody disagreeing with everybody else and you want to keep peace, one way to do it is to embrace **subjectivism** and **relativism** and say, well it's all relative anyway. It doesn't really matter. You interpret your way, you interpret your way, and if they clash, if they conflict, that's okay, peace, peace.

That's Neville Chamberlain's approach to biblical truth. Peace may be accomplished for a season that way, but truth is slain in the streets.

The first principle of biblical interpretation is this, and this principle may scandalize you, it may infuriate you as soon as you hear it come from my lips. I should beg for a minute's indulgence, ask you to hear me out, and be careful now so that we understand what we're saying and that you'll follow the distinctions because I'm going to make a very fine distinction here in a moment. Here's the principle: There is only one correct meaning of any biblical text. Let me say it again, principle number one,

There is only one correct meaning of any biblical text.

"He's a monomaniac," I can hear them saying, you know, "He's got this

one-wayism, this narrow rigid brittle mentality.”

No, what I’m saying is there’s only one correct meaning, but there may be a multitude of applications, and the significance of a passage may be virtually beyond bounds.

Let me see if I can tell a story that will illustrate what I’m talking about. I know of a professor, I believe he’s in Dallas Seminary, who works with these young men who are involved in Christian education and pastoral training, and in the first day of his course, he gives them an assignment. He said, “Tomorrow I want you to go and I want you to take this one verse of Scripture,” and he assigns them one verse, one sentence of Scripture. He says, “I want you to write down on a piece of paper fifty things that you learned from this one verse of Scripture,” and there is this groan that exudes throughout the classroom, and the students go back and they’re muttering under their breath and they get out their list and they try to find out one or two or three things that they learn from this verse. Maybe they can quickly rush down to six or seven, and then they’re stymied and they go and they knock on their neighbor’s door and they say, what have you discovered in this verse that I haven’t found, and they start comparing notes. And pretty soon, the whole dormitory’s up there trying to come up with fifty things that they learned from Scripture, and they’re going on it three and four in the morning. Finally, the next morning they come to class, they’re bleary eyed, and they turn in their assignments where they turn in fifty things they learned from one sentence of Holy Scripture. And the professor said, “Good job, that’s terrific.” He said, “Now my assignment for tomorrow is find fifty more.”

An invaluable lesson is conveyed that the Bible, is a treasury of truth. We have little books that help us in writing and in literature, and in English, we call them thesaurus, Roget’s Thesaurus, for example, and the word thesaurus means a “treasury.” Well the ultimate thesaurus is Scripture and it is a treasure of meaning and application -- I mean a treasury of significance and application in every single verse. Each verse is pregnant with significance for our lives, and the professor could have gone on every day till next Tuesday and the Tuesday after that assigning fifty more and fifty more, and the most brilliant student would not have exhausted the possible significances and possible applications from each of those verses. But dear friends, there’s only one correct meaning.

Truth is not contradictory. The Word of God is consistent. It functions in harmony, and if I interpret a portion of Scripture in a way that contradicts how you interpret that portion of Scripture, we know something at the outset that's very important, and that is that one of us, at least, is wrong.

If your interpretation contradicts mine, one of us, at least, is wrong. We may both be wrong and a third party may come down and say, "A pox on both of your houses," and show us where we both made a mistake, and we both should change our minds. We both can be wrong, one of us might be wrong and one of us might be right, but if they are contradictory, they cannot both be right. Why? What's the working principle?

The working principle here is: the truth is not contradictory. Now it used to be if I would make a statement like that in a classroom, people would just say, well of course truth isn't contradictory. That's certainly true; we don't have to labor that point. I can't do it anymore. We're living in a culture that has gone so far to embrace relativism that there are people who actually believe the truth, real truth can be contradictory. I think of a well-known theologian who made the statement earlier on in this century that not only can truth be contradictory, but he said real truth, ultimate truth, high and holy theological truth is often contradictory because it is so high, so lofty, so marvellous that it goes beyond our human capacity for logic and reason, and that divine truth not only may be contradictory, it often is. In fact, he went so far in rhapsodizing and celebrating this feature of Christianity as to say that the contradiction is the very hallmark of truth.

Now if all that theologian wanted to do was to point out that there is much truth in Scripture, that is too high and holy for our rational categories to comprehend, if all he was trying to say is that sometimes God's ways are so mysterious to us that we cannot put them in a box and dissect them and analyze them logically, or that we could not create out of the basis of our own human intellect the riches of divine truth, if that's all he meant to say, then who would demur? But he said more than that. You see, it's one thing to say that the truth of Christ goes beyond reason, which it certainly does, but it's another thing to say that it goes against it.

Let's look at the idea that truth, that -- excuse me, contradiction is the hallmark of truth. A contradiction, it's not just an irony or a twisted meaning or even a paradox, which is an apparent contradiction that under closer scrutiny yields its resolution. We're talking of real contradiction,

you see, where both ends mutually exclude the other one. There is a god; there is no god. Those two statements are contradictory; they cannot both be true. Yeah, I've had a woman say to me on one occasion, oh yes, "If you believe in God and you find it meaningful in your life to believe in God, then for you, God is true. I don't believe in God and God's not meaningful to me, so for me, there is no God." I said, "Wait a minute. We're not talking about the same thing." I said, "The God that I'm talking about, that I'm affirming, is a God who exists whether you believe in Him or not, and if there is no such God, all my praying, all my singing, all my preaching is not going to conjure Him up, and if there is such a God, your disbelief cannot destroy Him." We're talking about objective truth, not subjective preferences, not what you want to be true or what works for you or what makes you feel good. But you see, that's the kind of culture we're living in today that tells us that whatever feels good for me is true or that works for me is true without a regard to reality. More than that, there really is someone out there, apart from me.

All right, now let's go back -- the contradiction is the hallmark of truth. Let's apply it to the opening chapters of the Bible. God says to His creation, "Adam and Eve," He said, "If you eat of this tree, you will die." Now let's translate that just for a second into logic: If you eat, you will die; if A, then B will inevitably follow. A few minutes later, Satan comes, and in his serpentine seduction, he comes to the creatures and he says to them, "Did God say you can't eat," and all of that, and then Satan goes on to say, "You will not die, but you will become as gods." God said if you eat, you die, Satan says if you eat you will not die. That is a direct contradiction, not just a mystery, not just a paradox. That's a contradiction. Now let's analyze it. If contradiction is the hallmark of truth, then Adam's thinking -- he's a sharp thinker. He doesn't have to work through all the problems of the fall that muddle the head that we do. Adam's pristine, pure. He's very sharp; he's very bright. He understands reasoning very acutely and so he says, "Hmm, God says, if A, then B. Satan says if A, then non-B." That's a contradiction; that's a contradiction. Adam recognizes a contradiction, but then he's working on the theologian's principle that the contradiction is the hallmark of a truth; what would his irresistible conclusion be? If contradiction's the hallmark of the truth, then he's going to reason like this: This is a contradiction that Satan has uttered, the contradiction's the hallmark of the truth. That means what Satan is saying must be a hallmark of the truth. He must be representing the truth. If God is truth, Satan's representative, I can go ahead and eat. In that case, the failure to eat of

the tree would have been a sin, and the fall would not have been a fall; it would have been a great leap forward in human history.

You see, good friends, without a clear-cut understanding of a contradiction, there is no human way to discern the difference between Christ and antichrist, between godliness and ungodliness, between righteousness and unrighteousness, between truth and falsehood. Biblically, the contradiction is not the hallmark of the truth; it is the hallmark of the lie. That's why, even as uncomfortable as we become when we disagree, because we want peace; we want harmony; we want fellowship. When we're dealing with the Word of God, we have to understand that when those disagreements come, if we're really understanding each other, and if there really does exist a difference of opinion, somebody's wrong.

And let's not take the cheap way out by short-circuiting the problem at the expense of the integrity of God.

God doesn't speak with a forked tongue. His word is truth; it is not contradiction. It may not be relativized. There is only one accurate correct meaning of Scripture; many applications, many nuances of significance, but one correct meaning. Now, so it's important to understand that the principle of private interpretation is not a principle upon which is to be established subjectivism or relativism.

That was not clearly understood even in the sixteenth century after Luther set down his principle of private interpretation -- and remember the circumstances of that, where he got in trouble with the Roman Catholic Church over the issue of justification by faith alone, and he got in debates, and they said, "Well Martin, how can you disagree with what the church council back here said?" And he said, "Well church councils can make mistakes. I'm trying to read what Paul says here, and it seems to me that Paul is saying justification by faith alone." And the princes of the church said, "Yes, Luther, it seems to you that Paul is teaching justification by faith alone, but the church has declared here that that's not what he was teaching." And Paul -- and Luther said, "Well maybe the church made a mistake." "The church made a mistake? A church council made a mistake? How can a church council make a mistake?" Luther said, "Well they're human beings just like us. They're not infallible." "But look here, the pope has" -- and Luther said, "Well maybe the pope can err too." And they say,

“Luther, how arrogant that you would set yourself up against church and council.” And you know what Luther said? When he was called upon to recant, he said,

“Unless I am convinced by sacred Scripture, or by every reason, I can’t recant because my mind, my conscience is held captive by the Word of God, so in the final analysis, well, I have to go by what I understand the Bible to say at that moment.”

You see, the right of private interpretation was born in the church. Luther challenged the church’s exclusive right to interpret the Scripture infallibly, and the church responded to that in the counter-reformation and at the Council of Trent that says it said no man has any right to distort the Scriptures. Amen. We agree with the Roman Catholic Church a hundred percent.

Luther said, “We have the right to interpret it differently from how the church has, but we never have the right to distort it.” That is to say the right of private interpretation carries with it the responsibility of correct interpretation; the right of private interpretation carries with it the responsibility of correct interpretation.

Sure, I can study the Bible on my own and I can interpret it on my own and it is theoretically possible that I can understand it in a way that for everybody else in the church has missed for two thousand years, but that’s very unlikely. It’s very unlikely; that’s why it’s wise to consult the interpretation of the church, to consult the best commentaries, to consult what other minds have garnered, because it’s very possible that I can learn from others.

Luther did that, but it was as he studied the great giants of the past, Augustine and others, Augustine was telling him what he was rereading again in the sixteenth century that somehow had got lost in between. So it wasn’t that Luther just on his own out of the blue invented justification by faith alone, but we should be humble enough as we come to the text of Scripture to seek the mind of the church, to seek the mind of the scholars, to seek the mind of the commentaries lest we become guilty of a kind of private interpretation that turns the Bible into the waxed nose. The difference is this: we have two technical terms in biblical studies that we

need to learn.

One is exegesis; the other is eisegesis. They both come from Greek verbs: “ex.” We see it in the exit sign, we see it in a lot of words. “Ex” means “out of” or “from.”

The science of exegesis is coming to the text and drawing out of the text -- ex, out of the text -- what is actually in the text.

Eisegesis, E-I-S comes from the Greek word, “eis,” which means into. Eisegesis is when I come to the text and read into the text something that isn’t there at all.

That’s what distorts Scripture: reading into the text something that isn’t there, or even drawing out of the text something that is not legitimately drawn from the text. But we have to be careful to learn how to read what’s there and how to handle what’s there.

This is one of RC Sproul’s (Now deceased) studies one concrete practical rules that will help us guard ourselves from eisegesis and make us more skilled at exegesis so that we can honor the integrity of the Word of God.