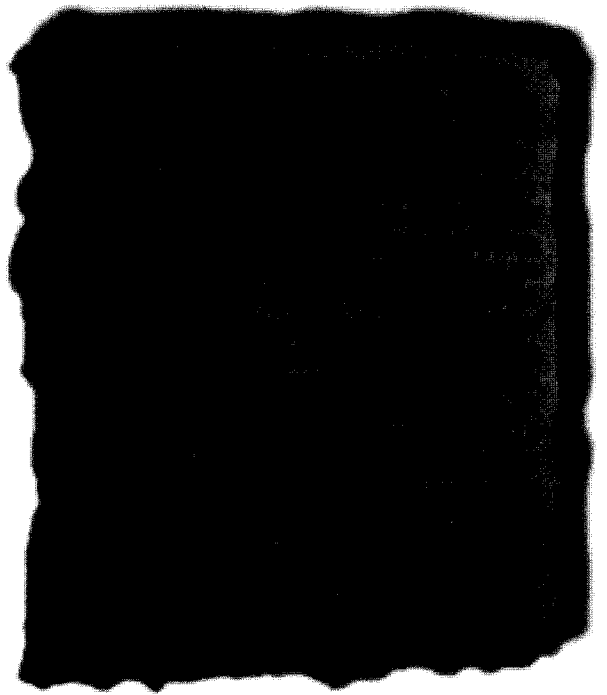


Must I Learn How to Interpret the Bible?



By D. A. Carson

Hermeneutics is the art and science of interpretation; biblical hermeneutics is the art and science of interpreting the Bible. At the time of the Reformation, debates over interpretation played an enormously important role. These were debates over *interpretation*, not just over *interpretations*. In other words, the Reformers disagreed with their opponents not only over what this or that passage meant, but over the nature of interpretation, the locus of authority in interpretation, the role of the church and of the Spirit in interpretation, and much more.

During the last half-century, so many developments have taken place in the realm of hermeneutics that it would take a very long article even to sketch them in lightly. Sad to say, nowadays many scholars are more interested in the challenges of the discipline of hermeneutics itself, than in the Bible that hermeneutics should help us handle more responsibly. Ironically, there are still some people who think that there is something slightly sleazy about interpretation. Without being crass enough to say so, they secretly harbor the opinion that what others offer are interpretations, but what they offer is just what the Bible says.

Carl F. H. Henry is fond of saying that there are two kinds of presuppositionalists: those who admit it and

those who don't. We might adapt his analysis to our topic: There are two kinds of practitioners of hermeneutics: those who admit it and those who don't.

The fact of the matter is that every time we find something in the Bible (whether it is there or not!), we have interpreted the Bible. There are good interpretations and there are bad interpretations, but there is no escape from interpretation.

This is not the place to lay out foundational principles, or to wrestle with the "new hermeneutic" and with "radical hermeneutics." [For more information and bibliography on these topics, and especially their relation to postmodernism and how to respond to it, see my book *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, esp. chapters 2-3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).] I shall focus instead on one "simple" problem, one with which every serious Bible reader is occasionally confronted. What parts of the Bible are binding mandates for us, and what parts are not?

"Greet one another with a holy kiss": the French do it, Arab believers do it, but by and large we do not. Are we therefore unbiblical? Jesus tells his disciples that they should wash one another's feet (Jn 13:14), yet most of us have never done so. Why do we "disobey" that plain injunction, yet obey his injunction regarding the Lord's Table? If we find reasons to be flexible about

the “holy kiss,” how flexible may we be in other domains? May we replace the bread and wine at the Lord’s Supper with yams and goat’s milk if we are in a village church in Papua, New Guinea? If not, why not? And what about the broader questions circulating among theologians regarding the continuing *legal* force of law set down under the Mosaic covenant? *Should* we as a nation, on the assumption that God graciously grants widespread revival and reformation, pass laws to execute adulterers by stoning? If not, why not? Is the injunction for women to keep silent in the church absolute (1 Cor 14:33-36)? If not, why not? Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born again if he is to enter the kingdom; he tells the rich young man that he is to sell all that he has and give it to the poor. Why do we make the former demand absolute for all persons, and apparently fudge a little on the second?

Obviously, I have raised enough questions for a dissertation or two. What follows in this article is not a comprehensive key to answering all difficult interpretive questions, but some preliminary guidelines to sorting such matters out. The apostolic number of points are not put into any order of importance.

(1) As conscientiously as possible, seek the balance of Scripture, and avoid succumbing to historical and theological disjunctions.

Liberals have often provided us with nasty disjunctions: Jesus or Paul, the charismatic community or the “early catholic” church, and so forth. Protestants sometimes drop a wedge between Paul’s faith apart from works (Rom 3:28) and James’ faith and works (Jas 2:4); others absolutize Galatians 3:28 as if it were the controlling passage on all matters to do with women, and spend countless hours explaining away 1 Timothy 2:12 (or the reverse!).

Historically, many Reformed Baptists in England between the middle of the eighteenth century and the middle of the twentieth so emphasized God’s sovereign grace in election that they became uncomfortable with general declarations of the Gospel. Unbelievers should not be told to repent and believe the Gospel: how could that be, since they are dead in trespasses and sin, and may not in any case belong to the elect? They should rather be encouraged to examine themselves to see if they have within themselves any of the first signs of the Spirit’s work, any conviction of sin, any stirrings of shame. On the face of it, this is a long way from the Bible, but thousands of churches thought

it was the hallmark of faithfulness. What has gone wrong, of course, is that the balance of Scripture has been lost. One element of Biblical truth has been elevated to a position where it is allowed to destroy or domesticate some other element of Biblical truth.

In fact, the “balance of Scripture” is not an easy thing to maintain, in part because there are different kinds of balance in Scripture. For example, there is the balance of diverse responsibilities laid on us (e.g. praying, being reliable at work, being a biblically faithful spouse and parent, evangelizing a neighbor, taking an orphan or widow under our wing, and so forth): these amount to balancing priorities within the limits of time and energy. There is the balance of Scripture’s emphases as established by observing their relation to the Bible’s central plot-line; there is also the balance of truths which we cannot at this point ultimately reconcile, but which we can easily distort if we do not listen carefully to the text (e.g. Jesus is both God and man; God is both the transcendent sovereign and yet personal; the elect alone are saved, and yet in some sense God loves horrible rebels so much that Jesus weeps over Jerusalem and God cries, “Turn, turn, why will you die? For the LORD has no pleasure in the death of the wicked.”). In each case, a slightly different kind of Biblical balance comes into play, but there is no escaping the fact that Biblical balance is what we need.

(2) Recognize that the antithetical nature of certain parts of the Bible, not least some of Jesus’ preaching, is a rhetorical device, not an absolute. The context must decide where this is the case.

Of course, there are absolute antitheses in Scripture that must not be watered down in any way. For example, the disjunctions between the curses and the blessings in Deuteronomy 27-28 are not mutually delimiting: the conduct that calls down the curses of God and the conduct that wins his approval stand in opposite camps, and must not be intermingled or diluted. But on the other hand, when eight centuries before Christ, God says, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6), the sacrificial system of the Mosaic covenant is not thereby being destroyed. Rather, the Hebrew antithesis is a pointed way of saying, “If push comes to shove, mercy is more

important than sacrifice. Whatever you do, you must not rank the marks of formal religion in this case, burnt offerings and other mandated ritual sacrifices with fundamental acknowledgment of God, or confuse the extent to which God cherishes compassion and mercy with the firmness with which he demands the observance of the formalities of the sacrificial system.”

Similarly, when Jesus insists that if anyone is to become his disciple, he must hate his parents (Lk 14:26), we must not think Jesus is sanctioning raw hatred of family members. What is at issue is that the claims of Jesus are more urgent and binding than even the most precious and prized human relationships (as the parallel in Mt 10:37 makes clear).

Sometimes the apparent antithesis is formed by comparing utterances from two distant passages. On the one hand, Jesus insists that the praying of his followers should not be like the babbling of the pagans who think they are heard because of their many words (Mt 6:7). On the other hand, Jesus can elsewhere tell a parable with the pointed lesson that his disciples should pray perseveringly and not give up (Lk 18:1-8). Yet, if we were to suppose that the formal clash between the two injunctions is more than superficial, we would be betraying not only our ignorance of Jesus’ preaching style, but also our insensitivity to pastoral demands. The first injunction is vital against those who think they can wheedle things out of God by their interminable prayers; the second is vital against those whose spiritual commitments are so shallow that their mumbled one-liners constitute the whole of their prayer life.

(3) Be cautious about absolutizing what is said or commanded only once.

The reason is not that God must say things more than once for them to be true or binding. The reason, rather, is that if something is said only once it is easily misunderstood or misapplied. When something is repeated on several occasions and in slightly different contexts, readers will enjoy a better grasp of what is meant and what is at stake.

That is why the famous “baptism for the dead” passage (1 Cor 15:29) is not unpacked at length and made a major plank in, say, the *Heidelberg Catechism* or the *Westminster Confession*. Over forty interpretations of that passage have been offered in the history of the church. Mormons are quite sure what it means, of course, but the reason why they are sure is because they are reading it in the context of other books that

they claim are inspired and authoritative.

This principle also underlies one of the reasons why most Christians do not view Christ’s command to wash one another’s feet as a third sacrament or ordinance. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are certainly treated more than once, and there is ample evidence that the early church observed both, but neither can be said about foot washing. But there is more to be said.

(4) Carefully examine the biblical rationale for any saying or command.

The purpose of this counsel is not to suggest that if you cannot discern the rationale you should flout the command. It is to insist that God is neither arbitrary nor whimsical, and by and large he provides reasons and structures of thought behind the truths he discloses and the demands he makes. Trying to uncover this rationale can be a help in understanding what is of the essence of what God is saying, and what is the peculiar cultural expression of it.

Before I give a couple of examples, it is important to recognize that all of Scripture is culturally bound. For a start, it is given in human languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek) and languages are a cultural phenomenon. Nor are the words God speaks to be thought of as, say, generic Greek. Rather, they belong to the Greek of the Hellenistic period (it isn’t Homeric Greek or Attic Greek or modern Greek). Indeed, this Greek changes somewhat from writer to writer (Paul does not always use words the same way that Matthew does) and from genre to genre (apocalyptic does not sound exactly like an epistle). None of this should frighten us. It is part of the glory of our great God that he has accommodated himself to human speech, which is necessarily time-bound and therefore changing. Despite some postmodern philosophers, this does not jeopardize God’s capacity for speaking truth. It does mean that we finite human beings shall never know truth exhaustively (that would require omniscience), but there is no reason why we cannot know some truth truly. Nevertheless, all such truth as God discloses to us in words comes dressed in cultural forms. Careful and godly interpretation does not mean stripping away such forms to find absolute truth beneath, for that is not possible: we can never escape our finiteness. It does mean understanding those cultural forms and by God’s grace discovering the truth that God has disclosed through them.

So when God commands people to rend their clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, are these precise actions so much of the essence of repentance

that there is no true repentance without them? When Paul tells us to greet one another with a holy kiss, does he mean that there is no true Christian greeting without such a kiss?

When we examine the rationale for these actions, and ask whether or not ashes and kissing are integratively related to God's revelation, we see the way forward. There is no theology of kissing; there is a theology of mutual love and committed fellowship among the members of the church. There is no theology of sackcloth and ashes; there is a theology of repentance that demands both radical sorrow and profound change.

If this reasoning is right, it has a bearing on both foot washing and on head-coverings. Apart from the fact that foot washing appears only once in the New Testament as something commanded by the Lord, the act itself is theologically tied, in John 13, to the urgent need for humility among God's people, and to the cross. Similarly, there is no theology of head-coverings, but there is a profound and recurrent theology of that of which the head-coverings were a first-century Corinthian expression: the proper relationships between men and women, between husbands and wives.

(5) Carefully observe that the formal universality of proverbs and of proverbial sayings is only rarely an absolute universality. If proverbs are treated as statutes or case law, major interpretive and pastoral errors will inevitably ensue.

Compare these two sayings of Jesus: (a) "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Mt 12:30). (b) "...for whoever is not against us is for us" (Mk 9:40; cf. Lk 9:50). As has often been noted, the sayings are not contradictory if the first is uttered to indifferent people against themselves, and the second to the disciples about others whose zeal outstrips their knowledge. But the two statements are certainly difficult to reconcile if each is taken absolutely, without thinking through such matters.

Or consider two adjacent proverbs in Proverbs 26: (a) "Do not answer a fool according to his folly..." (26:4), or (b) "Answer a fool according to his folly..." (26:5). If these are statutes or examples of case law, there is unavoidable contradiction. On the other hand,

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We acknowledge then that men are indebted to revelation in the matter of Natural Religion but this is no reason why we should not also use our reason here. Revelation was given us not to hinder the exercise of our reasoning powers but to aid and assist them. 'Tis by reason that we must judge whether that Revelation really be so; 'Tis by reason that we must judge of the meaning of what is revealed; and it is by Reason that we must guard against any impious, inconsistent or absurd interpretation of that revelation. As the best things may be abused, so when we lay aside the exercise of reason, Revelation becomes the tool of low Superstition or of wild fanaticism; man is best prepared for the study and practice of the revealed Religion who has previously acquired just sentiments of the Natural.

Thomas Reid, *Lectures on Natural Theology* (1780).

the second line of each proverb provides enough of a rationale that we glimpse what we should have seen anyway: proverbs are not statutes. They are distilled wisdom, frequently put into pungent, aphoristic forms that demand reflection, or that describe effects in society at large (but not necessarily in every individual), or that demand consideration of just how and when they apply.

Let us spell out these two proverbs again, this time with the second line included in each case: (a) "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself." (b) "Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes." Side by side as they are, these two proverbs demand reflection on when is the part of prudence to refrain from answering fools, lest we be dragged down to their level, and when it is the part of wisdom to offer a sharp, "foolish" rejoinder that has the effect of pricking the pretensions of the fool. The text does not spell this out explicitly, but if the rationales of the two cases are kept in mind, we will have a solid principle of discrimination.

So when a well-known parachurch organization keeps quoting "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" as if it were case law, what are we to think?

This proverbial utterance must not be stripped of its force: it is a powerful incentive to responsible, God-fearing, child-rearing. Nevertheless, it is a proverb; it is not a covenantal promise. Nor does it specify at what point the children will be brought into line. Of course, many children from Christian homes go astray because the parents really have been very foolish or unbiblical or downright sinful; but many of us have witnessed the burdens of unnecessary guilt and shame borne by really godly parents when their grown

children are, say, 40 years of age and demonstrably unconverted.

(6) The application of some themes and subjects must be handled with special care, not only because of their intrinsic complexity, but also because of essential shifts in social structures between Biblical times and our own day.

“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves” (Rom 13:1-2). Some Christians have reasoned from this passage that we must always submit to the governing authorities, except in matters of conscience before God (Acts 4:19). Even then, we “submit” to the authorities by patiently bearing the sanctions they impose on us in this fallen world. Other Christians have reasoned from this passage that since Paul goes on to say that the purpose of rulers is to uphold justice (Rom 13:3-4), then if rulers are no longer upholding justice, the time may come when righteous

people should oppose them, and even, if necessary, overthrow them. The issues are exceedingly complex, and were thought through in some detail by the Reformers.

But there is of course a new wrinkle added to the fabric of debate when one moves from a totalitarian regime, or from an oligarchy, or from a view of government bound up with an inherited monarchy, to some form of democracy. This is not to elevate democracy to heights it must not occupy. It is to say, rather, that in theory at least, a democracy allows you to “overthrow” a government without violence or bloodshed. And if the causes of justice cannot do so, it is because the country as a whole has slid into a miasma that lacks the will, courage, and vision to do what it has the power to do. What, precisely, are the Christian’s responsibilities in that case (whatever your view of the meaning of Romans 13 in its own context)?

In other words, new social structures beyond anything Paul could have imagined, though they cannot overturn what he said, may force us to see that the valid application demands that we bring into the discussion some considerations he could not have foreseen. It is a great comfort, and epistemologically important, to remember that God did foresee them but that does not itself reduce the hermeneutical responsibilities we have. ♣

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