

Smoky Mountain Bible Institute

Biblical Studies 109, Hermeneutics

Before discussing church bodies, we must consider a number of issues which define and explain the positions that different church bodies hold. The first and largest divide falls in the area of biblical interpretation. So let's dive into the exciting topic of Hermeneutics.

"That is your interpretation..." Such is often the response I get when I try to share God's truth with others. It is frustrating to get this response when you try to tell someone about God's truth as you have come to understand it through the help of your family, church and especially the Holy Spirit. When people reject God's truth you can't help but feel a little rejected yourself. In an effort to assist you in this endeavor, let's briefly touch on two topics: Hermeneutics and Evangelism. These two words sometimes elicit reactions of confusion and/or fear among most Christians. Let's first deal with confusion, so we do not need to run in fear.

Hermeneutics is the branch of knowledge that deals with interpretation of the Bible. When you are discussing the "living out" of faith with your neighbor, you may be using different methods of biblical interpretation, which will mean you will reach different conclusions. Using the metaphor of leaves on a tree, your discussion about a leaf may be confusing because you may be picturing an oak leaf while your neighbor is thinking of a maple leaf. The "leaves" or conclusions are different because they come from completely different trees. It is the same with biblical interpretation. While there are many methods or lenses out there through which people look at God's word, they all fit into one of two categories: magisterial or ministerial. (I know, two more big words to define, but be patient as I explain how these lead to very different applications and conclusions about the unchangeable truth of God's word.)

Magisterial hermeneutics appeal to human reason over God's word. The "Historical Critical" method is the main one in this category. The conclusions that this method derives are based on the preconceived notions of those using it. In other words, if God's word says something they do not like or agree with, then they simply use this method to say "I know what it says, but it cannot mean that, so I'll find a different approach which will produce a result which seems good to me". This method puts all the authority in human reason, above the revealed truth of God's word. Most liberal biblical scholars, atheists, and agnostics interpret scripture using methods that fall into this category. What they have in common is the idolatry of the human mind over God's revealed truth. This method leads to a misapplication of biblical principles or just outright denial of any biblical authority at all. If your ultimate authority is the human mind, then you (being a human) can hold the rights of one individual over and above the rights of someone else defined as less than individuals (e.g. those of other races, the opposite sex, those not yet born, those with a lifestyle you do not like, or those with a quality of life you arbitrarily decide is not worth the status of individual with protected rights.) Even those who claim that God's word is wrong because it condemns their lifestyle.

Those holding to a magisterial hermeneutic also have the freedom to depart from God's word completely and make new rules for themselves and society. To declare "anyone can be a pastor" is to say that call, training, ability, and gender have no bearing on who should fill the role even if scripture says otherwise. To declare "marriage is for any consenting adults at all" is to say that chastity, monogamy, heterosexuality, and fidelity are the products of a manipulative, medieval, patriarchal society, and that the oppressive cultural norms of the past are invalid. To declare "only God can forgive sins" is to say that God's biblical directive to the church through Peter to forgive sins (Mt 16:19; 18:15-20; Jn 20:22-23; Rv 1:18) does not mean what it says. To declare "baptism and the Lord's Supper are acts of obedience" is to say that it is not logical that water and word can save or that bread and wine can be flesh and blood. Many "conservative" Christians would agree with scripture on most of the things in this paragraph but each of them is an example of an appeal to reason over scripture, and this is what leads to error.

I am afraid we have run out of space for this month, so we will pick up our discussion next month with the ministerial approach. Until then have a blessed Easter season.

In Christ,
Pastor Portier