

The Reformers' Hermeneutic: Grammatical, Historical, and Christ-Centred

It is widely recognized that the formal principle underlying the Reformation was nothing other than *sola scriptura*: the reformers' diehard commitment to the other great *solas* was an effect arising from their desire to be guided by the scriptures alone. The exegesis and interpretation of the Bible was the one great means by which the war against Roman corruption was waged; which is almost the same thing as saying that the battle was basically a hermeneutical struggle. In light of these observations, one could say that the key event marking the beginning of the Reformation occurred, not in 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his theses to the church door in Wittenberg; but two years prior to that, when he rejected Origen's four-layered hermeneutic in favour of what he called the grammatical-historical sense. This one interpretive decision was the seed-idea from which would soon spring up all the fruits of the most massive recovery of doctrinal purity in the history of the Church. We would do well to learn from this: our ongoing struggle to be always reforming, always contending for the faith which was once delivered to the saints, is essentially a process of bringing every doctrine under the scrutiny of scripture. And in order to have the confidence that we are doing so legitimately, we must give much effort to being hermeneutically sound. Hermeneutics is the battlefield on which the war is won or lost.

If it is indeed the case that the recovery of a grammatical-historical hermeneutic was the formal principle underlying the Reformation, then we ought to be highly interested in what exactly Luther (and the other Reformers) intended by the expression. If Luther's hermeneutic was so effective in preserving the purity of the gospel in his day, then we may, with some reason, assume that it would benefit us in the gospel-battles of our day. Most, if not all, evangelicals today would certainly affirm that they are laboring with the grammatical-historical hermeneutic of the Reformation – but do they mean by this term everything that Luther meant by it? In many cases, one would have to assume that they do not; because it is often the case that a basically un-Christian reading of much of the Old Testament in particular is supported by means of a 'literal,' grammatical, historical hermeneutic. For Luther, the grammatical-historical hermeneutic was simply the interpretation of scripture that 'drives home Christ.' As he once expressed it,

'He who would read the Bible must simply take heed that he does not err, for the Scripture may permit itself to be stretched and led, but let no one lead it according to his own inclinations but let him lead it to its source, that is, the cross of Christ. Then he will surely strike the centre.'

To read the scriptures with a grammatical-historical sense is nothing other than to read them with Christ at the centre.

What exactly do I mean when I say that many evangelicals demonstrate 'a basically un-Christian

reading of much of the Old Testament'? Simply put, I mean they employ a hermeneutic that does not have as its goal to trace every verse to its ultimate reference point: the cross of Christ. All of creation, history, and reality was designed for the purpose of the unveiling and glorification of the triune God, by means of the work of redemption accomplished by the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. The Bible is simply the book that tells us how to see Christ and his cross at the center of everything. It tells us who God is by showing us the person and work of Christ, who alone reveals the invisible God. If we do not intentionally ask ourselves, 'How may I see Christ more clearly by this passage?' in our reading of every verse of scripture, then we are not operating under the guidance of Luther's grammatical-historical hermeneutic. If we would follow in the steps of the reformers, we must realize that a literal reading of scriptures does not mean a naturalistic reading. A naturalistic reading says that the full extent of meaning in the account of Moses striking the rock is apprehended in understanding the historical event. The literal reading, in the Christ-centered sense of the Reformation, recognizes that this historical account is meaningless to us until we understand how the God of history was using it to reveal Christ to his people. The naturalistic reading of the Song of Solomon is content with the observation that it speaks of the marital-bliss of Solomon and his wife; the literal reading of the reformers recognizes that it has ultimately to do with the marital bliss between Christ and his bride, the Church. And so we could continue, citing example after example from the Old Testament.

But how was it that this shift came about in the commonly perceived meaning of the term 'historical-grammatical sense' from the reformers' day to our own? In a word: the rise of academic liberalism. The reformers were contending for the truth in a society in which the supernatural world was as definitely accepted as the natural world. They had no need to demonstrate that the Bible was a spiritual book, given by God to teach us spiritual truths, that is, truths about Christ and the cross – everyone accepted that much. They were contending instead with a hermeneutic that essentially allowed one to draw from any text whatever spiritual significance he liked – if he had the authority of the Church behind him. But the Enlightenment so radically changed the face of society, that it was soon thereafter no longer sufficient to speak of a 'literal' hermeneutic: one also had to make clear that this literal hermeneutic had as its object a thoroughly spiritual and Christ-centered corpus of writings. The basic intent of the liberal theologians subsequent to the Enlightenment was to downplay the supernatural; hence, their reading of the scriptures emphasized the human authors and human historical settings entirely apart from the God who was governing all. And, although the thoroughgoing naturalism of the liberals was soundly defeated by many evangelical scholars, some of its emphases seem to have seeped into the very idea of a grammatical-historical hermeneutic, where they continue to exert a deadening influence on much of evangelical scholarship even today.

Three specific ways in which, I would contend, the modern conception of a literal hermeneutic has been colored by the Enlightenment, are, first, the maximized emphasis on the human authors of scriptures (together with the corresponding de-emphasis of the divine author); second, the naturalizing of the hermeneutic, so that it intends to discover what a natural man, upon an acquaintance with the natural setting, would immediately understand about a text; and third, the resultant fragmentation of the bible, so that it reads less like one unified, coherent story about a promised Redeemer and how he actually came in human history and accomplished his work – and more like a handful of loosely related sacred documents, with various purposes, intentions, and themes.

Our task as modern reformers has much to do with the recovery of the Christ-centered element of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic. If we would let our *sola scriptura* lead us to *solus christus*, then we must be willing to battle against the modern corruption of one of the reformers' most precious legacies – a literal hermeneutic. To that end, I would submit the following six reasons why any hermeneutic which does not see Christ at the center of every

verse of scripture does not do justice to the Reformed worldview.

1. A naturalistic hermeneutic effectively denies God's ultimate authorship of the bible, by giving practical precedence to human authorial intent.
 2. A naturalistic hermeneutic undercuts the typological significance that often inheres in the one story that God is telling in the bible (see Galatians 4:21-31, for example).
 3. A naturalistic hermeneutic does not allow for Paul's assertion that a natural man cannot know the spiritual things which the Holy Spirit teaches in the Bible – that is, the things about Jesus Christ and him crucified (I Corinthians 2).
 4. A naturalistic hermeneutic is at odds with the clear example of the New Testament authors and apostles as they interpret the Old Testament (cf. Peter's sermon in Acts 2, Paul's interpretations in Romans 4 and Galatians 4, James' citing of Amos 9 during the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, the various Old Testament usages in Hebrews, etc.).
 5. A naturalistic hermeneutic disallows a fully-orbed operation of the analogy of faith principle of the Reformation, by its insistence that every text demands a reading 'on its own terms'.
 6. A naturalistic hermeneutic does not allow for everything to have its ultimate reference point in Christ, and is in direct opposition to Ephesians 1:10, Colossians 1:16-18, and Christ's own teachings in John 5:39, Luke 24:25-27.
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