



Systematic Theology

A study of the major doctrines of Scripture

TOPIC 7 – HERMENEUTICS: BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION
LESSON 126 – THE UNITY OF THE SENSE OF SCRIPTURE

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION – LOUIS BERKHOF, PGS. 53-60
KNOWING SCRIPTURE – RC SPROUL

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Unity and Diversity in the Scriptures

- ▶ “The various books of the Bible constitute an *organic unity*.” – Berkhof
- ▶ The unity of Scripture is not merely a mechanical one, consisting of different parts that were prepared with a view to their mutual correlation, like the parts of a watch, that were finally collected in one volume.
- ▶ The Bible is not to be compared to a building, constructed according to the plans and specifications of an architect, but instead can be compared to a tree (organic), the product of progressive growth.
- ▶ The Bible was not made, but grew, and the composition of several books marks the stages of its development.
- ▶ It is the product of a single Mind, the embodiment of a single fruitful principle, branching out in various directions as it grew.

Unity and Diversity in the Scriptures

- ▶ The Bible is Living and Active – Heb. 4:12 For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.
- ▶ Not Able to be Chained – 2 Tim. 2:8 Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, 9 for which I suffer trouble as an evildoer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained.
- ▶ Infallible, inerrant, sufficient, perspicuous...

Unity and Diversity in the Scriptures

- ▶ Inspiration proves that there is one primary author of Scripture – the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16-17).
- ▶ The content of the Bible, while demonstrating great variety, also reveals a wonderful unity. All the books of the Bible have as their binding center Jesus Christ. They all relate to the work of redemption and to the founding of God's Kingdom, with Christ as King.
- ▶ The progressive character of God's revelation is also an effective proof of its unity. The Scripture reveals the development of a single divine thought with several subdivisions – the grace of God in Christ for the redemption of sinners.

Unity and Diversity in the Scriptures

- ▶ The collective quotations of Scripture also point to its unity, New Testament writers often illustrate or support some particular truth by quoting from several Old Testament books and thereby reveal their conviction that these are of equal divine authority. Romans 3:10-18, for example, is a compound quotation that combines several different passages from different books to make one point.
- ▶ Sometimes the New Testament writers in quoting from the Old Testament occasionally alter a passage to **apply** them in a sense that is not apparent in the Old Testament.

Unity and Diversity in the Scriptures

- ▶ Alongside the unity of Scripture there is also great diversity and we must keep these distinctions in mind when interpreting Scripture:
- ▶ 1. There is a distinction between the Old and New Testaments particularly regarding content, form, and language.
- ▶ 2. There is a distinction between the various books of the Bible. The Spirit employed prophets and apostles and others with their personal idiosyncrasies, natural talents, and their acquired knowledge in an organic way – this naturally gives rise to diversity. Each author gives his writing a definite stamp with his thoughts and expressed in a characteristic style.
- ▶ 3. There is a distinction between the fundamental forms of God's revelation. There are historical narratives (facts), didactical discourses (teaching), prophecy, and poetry.

The Unity of the Sense of Scripture

- ▶ It is of the greatest importance to understand at the outset that Scripture has but a single sense, and is therefore susceptible to a scientific and logical investigation. This fundamental principle must be placed emphatically in the foreground, in opposition to the tendency, revealed in history and persisting even in the present day, to accept a manifold sense – a tendency that makes any scientific approach to hermeneutics impossible and opens wide the door for all kinds of arbitrary interpretations.
- ▶ The delusion respecting a multiple sense originated largely in a misunderstanding of some of the important features of Scripture, such as its figurative language, its mysterious and incomprehensible elements, its symbolical facts, its prophecies with double or triple fulfillment, and its type of coming realities yet in the future.

The Unity of the Sense of Scripture

- ▶ It must be maintained that Scripture, no matter how many meanings the separate words may have, has but one proper sense.
- ▶ We believe in the veracity of God – that is, He has not given us His Word to mislead us! He is always truthful (Titus 1:2).
- ▶ God reveals His will and the way of salvation to men in order to glorify Himself in the redemption of sinners. He has always had in mind a glorious and gracious end so it is utterly inconceivable that He would provide a dubious revelation. That would defeat His own purposes.
- ▶ All revelation, in order to be understood, must be rational. And it would be the height of inconsistency to think that God had revealed Himself in a reasonable manner in nature but not in Scripture, which is His most perfect revelation.

The Unity of the Sense of Scripture

- ▶ The truth of the Bible can be investigated by logical methods and intellectually comprehended. The true impact of this revelation can only be accomplished by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit, but the sense of Scripture can be plainly seen by anyone.
- ▶ The logic of the human mind is naturally reflected in the language that is used by man. It is absolutely foreign to the character of this language that a word should have two, three, or even more significations (meanings) in the same connection (context). If this were not so, all communication among men would be impossible.

The Unity of the Sense of Scripture

- ▶ Safeguards against misunderstanding this principle:
- ▶ 1. It is necessary to distinguish between the real sense of a passage of Scripture and the sense ascribed to it by various interpreters. The fact that many interpret a passage differently does not disprove the unity of the sense of Scripture, but the fallenness of the human mind.
- ▶ 2. The distinction should also be kept in mind between the proper sense of a passage and the different ways in which it may be applied. A different application does not mean a different meaning, but only a different use for that meaning in particular circumstances.

The Unity of the Sense of Scripture

- ▶ Safeguards against misunderstanding this principle:
- ▶ 3. It is of great importance to understand the differences between the literal and the mystical sense and to understand that together they do not constitute a double sense. Several passages may have a literal meaning that also symbolizes something else – for example types and shadows. In such cases, the mystical or symbolic sense is based on a proper understanding of the literal.
- ▶ 4. A careful distinction must be made between a double fulfillment of prophecy and a double sense. Some prophecies are fulfilled in several successive facts or events. In such cases, the earlier fulfillments are partial and provide a type of the final fulfillment yet to come.

The Unity of the Sense of Scripture

- ▶ Is it permissible to speak of a “deeper meaning of Scripture?”
- ▶ YES! But it is necessary to guard against misunderstanding.
- ▶ Properly understood, the deeper meaning of Scripture does not constitute a different sense. The deeper meaning is always based on the literal and proper sense of a passage. But the real meaning of Scripture does not always lie on the surface.
- ▶ Many Old Testament types pointed ultimately to the New Testament realities; many prophecies found their final fulfillment in Jesus; no matter how often they had obtained partial fulfillment there was still a deeper meaning to be discovered.

Next Lesson

- ▶ Lesson 127 - The Style and General Characteristics of Scripture