

Law and Promise Reading of the Scriptures

Colleagues,

Today's post and the ones coming in the next two weeks constitute the full text of a monograph by Dr. Harry J. Duffey, titled: "Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures." Harry's one sentence self-description goes like this: "Harry Duffey is a Crossings-junkie from its earliest days here in St. Louis and whose teaching interest has moved from engineering to theology."

His description of the monograph goes like this:

"Ed Schroeder has posted many papers on Thursday Theology that apply Law/Promise hermeneutics to specific topics and happenings. This paper (Introduction to Law/Promise Reading of the Scriptures) has taken parts of those postings which are generic to understanding Law/Promise hermeneutics and woven them with historical information taken from the time between the end of the Apostolic Age to the Protestant Reformation. The goal is to have a pamphlet that gives beginning Bible students the definitions and foundation for understanding the Law/Gospel interpretation of the New Testament."

Harry has parsed his paper into three segments for ThTh posting. Part one comes your way today. D.v., parts 2 and 3 will follow on June 16 and June 23. His e-address is <hjduffey at aol dot com>

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures

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“. . . handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you . . . so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” Luke 1:1-4

Introduction

For decades, a common approach to introducing children to the Bible is through Bible stories taught in Sunday school. Both the Old and New Testaments are fragmented into stories for use in one-hour lessons that are intended to tell a complete story with a beginning and end. Hundreds of such lessons are available in printed format, with pictures and student activities, from various publishers. The Old Testament stories usually end with some type of moral or ethical conclusion. In some stories—for

example, Noah's Ark—the story images may become the lasting impression for the children. The Jesus lessons are from the New Testament stories, the most popular being those of the Christmas and Easter seasons.

If at the end of their Sunday school experience the children have in their core memories John 3:16, the melody of "Jesus Loves Me" with the first line memorized, and a memory of a friendly experience, then the Sunday school has done its job.

Near their age for completion of elementary school, in most denominations, the students enter the church's confirmation class. The confirmands study the commandments, creeds, Lord's Prayer, and sacraments from a New Testament perspective. Very little is mentioned about the Old Testament other than in reference to the Ten Commandments.

After confirmation, Bible studies become a hit-or-miss affair depending on the young person's attendance in a Bible class. People who come to faith or are attracted to church as an adult may read Bible text only during church services from the printed programs.

An obvious approach to increase Biblical knowledge, strengthen faith, and even introduce Christianity to young people and adults is to study the Bible. But how? The Bible is a thick book, not a quick read. Handing a Bible to a person, of any age, with the instruction, "you should read this," or "this has the answers to all your problems," or any other simple instruction, can, after a short endeavor, end their interest in Bible study. Why? If the reader begins at the beginning of Genesis, and stays with the text, the Bible can read as incomplete biology and geology (as is so often portrayed in the media). If the reader begins in the middle of the Bible, it may appear to be a book of proverbs. And if the reader starts at the end of the Bible with

the intention of learning how the book ends, the imagery may cause him or her to think of the Bible as science fiction written for a movie with spectacular special effects. This example is perhaps extreme, but an in-depth study of the early Biblical scholars shows that incoherent approaches to the Bible are nothing new. For example, Origen (c.185-254) wrote multiple and layered interpretations of the Scriptures which can cause as much confusion as the above example.

This paper is an attempt to bring beginning Bible students “up to the speed” necessary to make a smooth transition from a Sunday school understanding (or less) of the Scriptures to a what-does-this-mean study of the various books of the New Testament by viewing the New Testament through the lens of God’s Law and Promise/Gospel. Sufficient background information is given to enable the reader to understand the origin for this reading of the New Testament. This paper is not a defense for a Law/Promise reading of the Bible; it is a short description of the recovery of this reading of the Bible. The “restoration” of Law and Gospel to its rightful position in understanding the Scriptures may be a better word choice than recovery. The theme of Law and Gospel had not gone unnoticed in the history of the medieval church. It simply was NOT the central theme and above all other themes. The medieval Roman Church controlled the message and would use interpretations that served a purpose at a given time, but the interpretation may be repudiated at a later date on the basis that it was just the writer’s opinion and not the church’s official position.

Three words that are often used in the history of this recovery require definition. The religious movement away from the Roman Church that occurred in Germany during the first half of the sixteenth century is historically referred to as the “Reformation,” and the participants that led the movement as “Reformers.” A third term emerged in 1529 when a large group of

German rulers signed a petition to protest Emperor Charles V's decree for suppression of religious practices not in agreement with the Roman Church. The decree was not enforced and the protesters became known as "Protestants." Today, any adherent to a Christian church not affiliated with the Roman Church may be referred to as a Protestant.

The Reformers based their interpretation on one source, the Bible. Their written statements, which witness to their interpretation, are included in this text for study; the words "Law and Promise (Gospel)" are detailed as the reader moves through the paper. The availability of a study Bible will help the reader follow the Biblical texts as they are referred to in this work.

Many parts of the works of Prof. Edward Schroeder have been copied into this paper. Since there are so many of them, they are not shown in quotes. The reader can access at <www.crossings.org> his complete papers, which number in the hundreds.

The Question

Luther's gift (1534) to Germany in that era we call the "Reformation" was translating the Bible—the whole thing, all 66 books—into normal, everyday speech.[endnote #1] Hence, every one of his fellow Germans, if they had learned to read, could read the Bible. Even while working on that task—he worked on it for almost 20 years—there was conflict in the church in his day about HOW to read (interpret) the Bible. That was true even about HOW to read the Latin translations of the Scriptures that were standard texts for 1,000 years in the church before Luther's time.

People took sides about what were the right way and wrong way to read the Bible. Isn't there only one "right" way to read the

Bible? Isn't it to read it just as it is and take the words for what they simply say? "The Bible says it. Doesn't that settle it?" No, it doesn't. People read the Bible with different glasses—even if they have perfect eyesight. Without the right glasses, you can miss the main message, the Good News that came with Jesus. The differences between the Christian denominations of our time are rooted in different ways of reading the Bible. And nowadays the same disagreement about what the Bible really says exists inside almost every denomination.

It was exactly the same in Jesus' day. Most of his debates, yes, his conflicts with the religious leaders of his time, were about how to read the Bible. In those days the Bible consisted only of what we nowadays call the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures.

Over and over again Jesus and his critics are arguing about the Bible, what it "really" says. On one of the occasions, described in Matt 9:13, Jesus simply tells them "go and learn what this means" and quotes Hosea 6:6. Again, in Matt 12:7, Jesus says, "If you had known what these words mean," and again quotes Hosea 6:6. His critics did indeed know this Bible text—could doubtless recite it by heart. But, Jesus says, "You don't know what it means." In other words, "You're reading it wrong. You're using the wrong glasses. So when you quote it to support your critique of me, that does not settle it. "

Luther's greater gift to the Reformation was Biblical interpretation. Indeed, interpretation became a focal issue in the Protestant Reformation. The use of the word "interpretation" is used in its common understanding; it does not mean that the interpreter has identified a code that unravels hidden secrets in the text. The reader must be aware that Biblical theology is embodied in literary forms that vary among the more than thirty manuscript authors. The text is presented in the literary forms of parables, poetry, psalms, chronicles, proverbs, narratives,

epistles, allegories, metaphors, images, and more.

Robert W. Bertram [en#2] focused our attention on the Law/Promise reading of the Scriptures when he wrote, “[I]t is impossible to ask how Scripture is to be interpreted without constantly asking how people are to be saved. Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology.” These are two big words, hermeneutics and soteriology. In simple words, how you read the Bible (hermeneutics) is always linked to how you think people get saved (soteriology).

Bertram’s statement presupposes that the Bible reader believes (or has a “feeling”) that there is meaning to the idea that there is a God and that humankind has (or can have) a relationship with that God. Additionally, Bertram assumes this relationship is accurately presented in the Old and New Testaments. If a person believes that a God-humankind relationship is just foolishness, then any Biblical interpretation describing that relationship is obviously foolishness. There are secular readings of the Bible for studies in various areas such as Hebrew poetry, ancient Semitic languages, Greek language usage, epic literature, legal and moral codes, and the like. Secular readings, though valuable, are not the topic of this study.

So taking Bertram’s statement as your own idea, and with the certainty of the things you have been taught and your self-certainty of reason, what would you think if someone said, “I believe in the Bible, that it is the 100% inspired, inerrant word of God. I accept every word in it and live according to it.” What is that person suggesting as the way people get saved?

You should ponder your answer and return to it after reading the complete paper.

Beginnings

Pages numbering in the tens of thousands have been written on Biblical interpretations. This short brochure is simply giving the reader a quick entry into a specific Biblical interpretation, namely, Law and Promise. A continuous, though narrow, path is laid from the first century to the fifteenth century, allowing you to follow a marked trail directly to the Law/Promise interpretation. After a fast journey along this path, you are encouraged to make excursions, at leisure, into some of those thousands of pages to widen the trail and add depth to your Biblical knowledge and background to the interpretations.

Approximately three-fourths of the Bible's pages consists of the Old Testament; the remaining one-fourth is the New Testament. The New Testament, the Jesus story, is a collection of 27 different writings that include the life and teachings of Jesus, the activities of the apostles, and letters to various groups. The original manuscripts were all written as separate documents and in Greek. Although all the Mediterranean world was ruled by Rome, the language of the Empire was for the most part Greek.

By the end of the Apostolic age (c. 100 AD), the authors and eyewitnesses to the events of these manuscripts had died; there were Christian churches in over 40 places along the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, all in countries under the rule of the Roman Empire. These churches formed a 2,500-mile arc from Italy through Turkey to Libya, Rome through Antioch to Cyrene. By 100 AD the word "Christian" was a familiar word.

The language of Rome, Latin, spread eastward among the churches of those areas. During the second and third centuries, the Greek New Testament was translated into Latin. These translations, called the Old Latin Bible, were used until Jerome's [en#3]

Latin translation, called the Vulgate, became the standard of the medieval church. Latin had replaced Greek and became the official language of the church by the fourth century.

Until Gutenberg's invention of the movable-type printing press in 1454, all Bibles were hand copied. The required ability to read Latin and the cost of a Bible made personal ownership a rarity. Most people would see a Bible only on Sunday and only if the congregation was rich enough to own one. The medieval church held that the Scriptures were under ecclesiastical control and only the clergy had the authority to interpret them.

Christ had founded the Church in the first century. During the next fourteen centuries of church activities, the clear understanding of Biblical Law and Gospel was diminished as other priorities grew. The theology taught in universities and monasteries was a mixture of veiled, mystic theology and church tradition. The reader needs only to study a small portion of the major theological text used in the medieval universities, "Sentences" by Peter Lombard (which was in use at the time of the Reformation), to understand why Biblical Law and Gospel played a very small part in medieval church teachings.

"The law says, Do this! And it is never done, whereas the Gospel says, Believe in this one, and everything is already done."
Martin Luther, 1518

[Parts 2 and 3 to follow in the postings for the next two weeks.]