

Explaining Hermeneutics: A Commentary

by Norman L. Geisler

Commentary on Article I

This first article affirms that the authority of Scripture cannot be separated from the authority of God. Whatever the Bible affirms, God affirms. And what the Bible affirms (or denies), it affirms (or denies) with the very authority of God. Such authority is normative for all believers; it is the canon or rule of God.

This divine authority of Old Testament Scripture was confirmed by Christ Himself on numerous occasions (cf. Matt. 5:17-18; Luke 24:44; John 10:34-35). And what our Lord confirmed as to the divine authority of the Old Testament, He promised also for the New Testament (John 14:16; 16:13).

The Denial points out that one cannot reject the divine authority of Scripture without thereby impugning the authority of Christ, who attested Scripture's divine authority. Thus it is wrong to claim one can accept the full authority of Christ without acknowledging the complete authority of Scripture.

Commentary on Article II

Here an analogy is drawn between Christ and Scripture. Both Christ and Scripture have dual aspects of divinity and humanity, indivisibly united in one expression. Both Christ and Scripture were conceived by an act of the Holy Spirit. Both involve the use of fallible human agents. But both produced a theanthropic result; one a sinless person and the other an errorless book. However, like all analogies, there is a difference. Christ is one person uniting two natures whereas Scripture is one written expression uniting two authors (God and man). This difference notwithstanding, the strength of the likeness in the analogy points to the inseparable unity between divine and human dimensions of Scripture so that one aspect cannot be in error while the other is not.

The Denial is directed at a contemporary tendency to separate the human aspects of Scripture from the divine and allow for error in the former. By contrast the framers of this article believe that the human form of Scripture can no more be found in error than Christ could be found in sin. That is to say, the Word of God (i.e., the Bible) is as necessarily perfect in its human manifestation as was the Son of God in His human form.

Commentary on Article III

This Affirmation follows the teaching of Christ that He is the central theme of Scripture (Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39; Heb. 10:7). This is to say that focus on the person and work of Christ runs throughout the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. To be sure there are other and tangential topics, but the person and work of Jesus Christ are central.

In view of the focus of Scripture on Christ, the Denial stresses a hermeneutical obligation to make this Christocentric message clear in the expounding of Scripture. As other articles (cf. Article XV) emphasize the "literal" interpretation of Scripture, this article is no license for allegorization and unwarranted typology which see Christ portrayed in every detail of Old Testament proclamation. The article simply points to the centrality of Christ's mission in the unfolding of God's revelation to man.

Neither is there any thought in this article of making the role of Christ more ultimate than that of the Father. What is in view here is the focus of Scripture and not the ultimate source or object of the whole plan of redemption.

Commentary on Article IV

Here stress is laid on the fact that the Holy Spirit not only is the source of Scripture, but also works to produce faith in Scripture He has inspired. Without this ministry of the Holy Spirit, belief in the truth of Scripture would not occur.

The Denial is directed at those alleged "revelations" which some claim to have but which are contrary to Scripture. No matter how sincere or genuinely felt, no dream, vision, or supposed revelation which

contradicts Scripture ever comes from the Holy Spirit. For the utterances of the Holy Spirit are all harmonious and non-contradictory (see Article XX).

Commentary on Article V

The design of this article is to indicate that the ministry of the Holy Spirit extends beyond the inspiration of Scripture to its very application to the lives of the believer. Just as no one calls Jesus Lord except by the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12:3), so no one can appropriate the message of Scripture to his life apart from the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.

The Denial stresses the truth that the natural man does not receive the spiritual message of Scripture. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit there is no welcome for its truth in an unregenerate heart.

This does not imply that a non-Christian is unable to understand the meaning of any Scripture. It means that whatever he may perceive of the message of Scripture, that without the Holy Spirit's work he will not welcome the message in his heart.

Commentary on Article VI

Since hermeneutics is concerned with understanding the truth of Scripture, attention is directed here to the nature of truth. Several significant affirmations are made about the nature of truth.

First, in contrast to contemporary relativism it is declared that truth is absolute. Second, as opposed to subjectivism it is acknowledged that truth is objective. Finally, in opposition to existential and pragmatic views of truth, this article affirms that truth is what corresponds to reality. This same point was made in the "Chicago Statement on Inerrancy" (1978) in Article XIII and the commentary on it.

The Denial makes it evident that views which redefine an error to mean what "misleads," rather than what is a mistake, must be rejected. This redefinition of the word "error" is both contrary to Scripture and to common sense. In Scripture the word error is used of unintentional acts (Lev. 4:2) as well as intentional ones. Also, in common parlance a statement is in error if it is a factual mistake, even if there was no intention to mislead anyone by it. So to suggest that the Bible contains mistakes, but that these are not errors so long as they do not mislead, is contrary to both Scripture and ordinary usage.

By this subtle redefinition of error to mean only what misleads but not what misrepresents, some have tried to maintain that the Bible is wholly true (in that it never misleads) and yet that it may have some mistakes in it. This position is emphatically rejected by the confessors of this document.

Commentary on Article VII

The Affirmation here is directed at those who claim a "double" or "deeper" meaning to Scripture than that expressed by the authors. It stresses the unity and fixity of meaning as opposed to those who find multiple and pliable meanings. What a passage means is fixed by the author and is not subject to change by readers. This does not imply that further revelation on the subject cannot help one come to a fuller understanding, but simply that the meaning given in a text is not changed because additional truth is revealed subsequently.

Meaning is also definite in that there are defined limits by virtue of the author's expressed meaning in the given linguistic form and cultural context. Meaning is determined by an author; it is discovered by the readers.

The Denial adds the clarification that simply because Scripture has one meaning does not imply that its messages cannot be applied to a variety of individuals or situations. While the interpretation is one, the applications can be many.

Commentary on Article VIII

In view of the tendency of many to relativize the message of the Bible by accommodating it to changing cultural situations, this Affirmation proclaims the universality of biblical teachings. There are commands which transcend all cultural barriers and are binding on all men everywhere. To be sure, some biblical

injunctions are directed to specific situations, but even these are normative to the particular situation(s) to which they speak. However, there are commands in Scripture which speak universally to the human situation and are not bound to particular cultures or situations.

The Denial addresses the basis of the distinction between universal and particular situations. It denies that the grounds of this distinction are relative or purely cultural. It further denies the legitimacy of relativizing biblical absolutes by reducing them to purely cultural mandates.

The meaning of this article is that whatever the biblical text means is binding. And what is meant to be universally binding should not be relegated to particular situations any more than what is meant to apply only to particular circumstances should be promulgated as universally applicable.

There is an attempt here to strike a balance between command and culture by recognizing that a command transcends culture, even though it speaks to and is expressed in a particular culture. Thus while the situation (or circumstances) may help us to discover the right course of action, the situation never determines what is right. God's laws are not situationally determined.

Commentary on Article IX

The primary thrust of this Affirmation is definitional. It desires to clarify the meaning of the term hermeneutics by indicating that it includes not only perception of the declared meaning of a text but also an understanding of the implications that text has for one's life. Thus, hermeneutics is more than biblical exegesis. It is not only the science that leads forth the meaning of a passage but also that which enables one (by the Holy Spirit) to understand the spiritual implications the truth(s) of this passage has for Christian living.

The Denial notes that the meaning of a passage is not derived from or dictated by the interpreter. Rather, meaning comes from the author who wrote it. Thus the reader's understanding has no hermeneutically definitive role. Readers must listen to the meaning of a text and not attempt to legislate it. Of course, the meaning listened to should be applied to the reader's life. But the need or desire for specific application should not color the interpretation of a passage.

Commentary on Article X

This Affirmation is a logical literary extension of Article II which acknowledges the humanity of Scripture. The Bible is God's Word, but it is written in human words; thus, revelation is "verbal." Revelation is "propositional" (Article II) because it expresses certain propositional truth. Some prefer to call it "sentential" because the truth is expressed in sentences. Whatever the term—verbal, propositional, or sentential—the Bible is a human book which uses normal literary forms. These include parables, satire, irony, hyperbole, metaphor, simile, poetry, and even allegory (e.g., Ezek. 16-17). As an expression in finite, human language, the Bible has certain limitations in a similar way that Christ as a man had certain limitations. This means that God adapted Himself through human language so that His eternal truth could be understood by man in a temporal world.

Despite the obvious fact of the limitations of any finite linguistic expression, the Denial is quick to point out that these limits do not render Scripture an inadequate means of communicating God's truth. For while there is a divine adaptation (via language) to humanity there is no accommodation to human error. Error is not essential to human nature. Christ was human and yet He did not err. Adam was human before he erred. So simply because the Bible is written in human language does not mean it must err. In fact, when God uses human language there is a supernatural guarantee that it will not be in error.

Commentary on Article XI

Simply because the truth of Scripture was conveyed by God in the original writings does not mean that it cannot be translated into another language. This article affirms the translatability of God's truth into other cultures. It affirms that since truth is transcendent (see Article XX) it is not culture-bound. Hence the truth of God expressed in a first-century culture is not limited to that culture. For the nature of truth is not limited to any particular medium through which it is expressed.

The Denial notes that since meaning is not inextricably tied to a given culture it can be adequately expressed in another culture. Thus the message of Scripture need not be relativized by translation. What is expressed can be the same even though how it is expressed differs.

Commentary on Article XII

Whereas the previous article treated the matter of the translatability of divine truth, this article speaks to the adequacy of translations. Obviously not every expression in another language will appropriately convey the meaning of Scripture. In view of this, caution is urged that the translators remain faithful to the truth of the Scripture being translated by the proper choice of the words used to translate it.

This article treats the matter of “functional” equivalence. Often there is no actual or literal equivalence between expressions in one language and a word-for-word translation into another language. What is expressed (meaning) is the same but how it is expressed (the words) is different. Hence a different construction can be used to convey the same meaning.

The Denial urges sensitivity to cultural matters so that the same truth may be conveyed, even though different terms are being used. Without this awareness missionary activity can be severely hampered.

Commentary on Article XIII

The awareness of what kind of literature one is interpreting is essential to a correct understanding of the text. A correct genre judgment should be made to ensure correct understanding. A parable, for example, should not be treated like a chronicle, nor should poetry be interpreted as though it were a straightforward narrative. Each passage has its own genre, and the interpreter should be cognizant of the specific kind of literature it is as he attempts to interpret it. Without genre recognition an interpreter can be misled in his understanding of the passage. For example, when the prophet speaks of “trees clapping their hands” (Isa. 55:12) one could assume a kind of animism unless he recognized that this is poetry and not prose.

The Denial is directed at an illegitimate use of genre criticism by some who deny the truth of passages which are presented as factual. Some, for instance, take Adam to be a myth, whereas in Scripture he is presented as a real person. Others take Jonah to be an allegory when he is presented as a historical person and so referred to by Christ (Matt. 12:40-42). This Denial is an appropriate and timely warning not to use genre criticism as a cloak for rejecting the truth of Scripture.

Commentary on Article XIV

This article combines the emphases of Articles VI and XIII. While acknowledging the legitimacy of literary forms, this article insists that any record of events presented in Scripture must correspond to historical fact. That is, no reported event, discourse, or saying should be considered imaginary.

The Denial is even more clear than the Affirmation. It stresses that any discourse, saying, or event reported in Scripture must actually have occurred. This means that any hermeneutic or form of biblical criticism which claims that something was invented by the author must be rejected. This does not mean that a parable must be understood to represent historical facts, since a parable does not (by its very genre) purport to report an event or saying but simply to illustrate a point.

Commentary on Article XV

The literal sense of Scripture is strongly affirmed here. To be sure the English word literal carries some problematic connotations with it. Hence the words normal and grammatical-historical are used to explain what is meant. The literal sense is also designated by the more descriptive title grammatical-historical sense. This means the correct interpretation is the one which discovers the meaning of the text in its grammatical forms and in the historical, cultural context in which the text is expressed.

The Denial warns against attributing to Scripture any meaning not based in a literal understanding, such as mythological or allegorical interpretations. This should not be understood as eliminating typology or designated allegory or other literary forms which include figures of speech (see Articles X, XIII, and XIV).

Commentary on Article XVI

Implied here is an approval of legitimate techniques of “lower criticism” or “textual criticism.” It is proper to use critical techniques in order to discover the true text of Scripture, that is, the one which represents the original one given by the biblical authors.

Whereas critical methodology can be used to establish which of the texts are copies of the inspired original, it is illegitimate to use critical methods to call into question whether something in the original text is true. In other words, proper “lower criticism” is valid but negative “higher criticism” which rejects truths of Scripture is invalid.

Commentary on Article XVII

Two points are made in the Affirmation, the unity of Scripture and its self-interpreting ability. Since the former is treated elsewhere (Article XXI), we will comment on the latter here. Not only is the Bible always correct in interpreting itself (see Article XVIII), but it is the “best interpreter” of itself.

Another point made here is that comparing Scripture with Scripture is an excellent help to an interpreter. For one passage sheds light on another. Hence the first commentary the interpreter should consult on a passage is what the rest of Scripture may say on that text.

The Denial warns against the assumption that an understanding of one passage can lead the interpreter to reject the teaching of another passage. One passage may help him better comprehend another but it will never contradict another.

This last part of the Denial is particularly directed to those who believe the New Testament writers misinterpret the Old Testament, or that they attribute meaning to an Old Testament text not expressed by the author of that text. While it is acknowledged that there is sometimes a wide range of application for a text, this article affirms that the interpretation of a biblical text by another biblical writer is always within the confines of the meaning of the first text.

Commentary on Article XVIII

This Affirmation was perhaps the most difficult to word. The first part of the Affirmation builds on Article VII which declared that Scripture has only one meaning, and simply adds that whenever the Bible comments on another passage of Scripture it does so correctly. That is, the Bible never misinterprets itself. It always correctly understands the meaning of the passage it comments on (see Article XVII). For example, that Paul misinterprets Moses is to say that Paul erred. This view is emphatically rejected in favor of the inerrancy of all Scripture.

The problem in the second statement of the Affirmation revolves around whether God intended more by a passage of Scripture than the human author did. Put in this way, evangelical scholars are divided on the issue, even though there is unity on the question of “single meaning.” Some believe that this single meaning may be fuller than the purview of the human author, since God had far more in view than did the prophet when he wrote it. The wording here is an attempt to include reference to the fulfillment of a prophecy (of which God was obviously aware when He inspired it) as part of the single meaning which God and the prophet shared. However, the prophet may not have been conscious of the full implications of this meaning when he wrote it.

The way around the difficulty was to note that there is only one meaning to a passage which both God and the prophet affirmed, but that this meaning may not always be fully “evidenced” until the prophecy is fulfilled. Furthermore, God, and not necessarily the prophets, was fully aware of the fuller implications that would be manifested in the fulfillment of this single meaning.

It is important to preserve single meaning without denying that God had more in mind than the prophet did. A distinction needs to be made, then, between what God was conscious of concerning an affirmation (which, in view of His foreknowledge and omniscience, was far more) and what He and the prophet actually expressed in the passage. The Denial makes this point clear by noting that biblical authors were not always fully aware of the implications of their own affirmations.

Commentary on Article XIX

The question of pre-understanding is a crucial one in contemporary hermeneutics. The careful wording of the Affirmation does not discuss the issue of whether one should approach Scripture with a particular pre-understanding, but simply which kinds of preunderstanding one has are legitimate. This question is answered by affirming that only those pre-understandings which are compatible with the teaching of Scripture are legitimate. In fact, the statement goes further and demands that all pre-understanding be subject to “correction” by the teaching of Scripture.

The point of this article is to avoid interpreting Scripture through an alien grid or filter which obscures or negates its true message. For it acknowledges that one's preunderstanding will affect his understanding of a text. Hence to avoid misinterpreting Scripture one must be careful to examine his own presuppositions in the light of Scripture.

Commentary on Article XX

What is in view here is not so much the nature of truth (which is treated in Article VI), but the consistency and coherence of truth.

This is directed at those views which consider truth paradoxical or contradictory. This article declares that a proper hermeneutics avoids contradictions, since God never affirms as true two propositions, one of which is logically the opposite of the other.

Further, this Affirmation recognizes that not all truth is in the Bible (though all that is affirmed in the Bible is true). God has revealed Himself in nature and history as well as in Scripture. However, since God is the ultimate Author of all truth, there can be no contradiction between truths of Scripture and the true teachings of science and history.

Although only the Bible is the nonnative and infallible rule for doctrine and practice, nevertheless what one learns from sources outside Scripture can occasion a reexamination and reinterpretation of Scripture. For example, some have taught the world to be square because the Bible refers to “the four comers of the earth” (Isa. 11:12). But scientific knowledge of the spherical nature of the globe leads to a correction of this faulty interpretation. Other clarifications of our understanding of the biblical text are possible through the study of the social sciences.

However, whatever prompting and clarifying of Scripture that extra-biblical studies may provide, the final authority for what the Bible teaches rests in the text of Scripture itself and not in anything outside it (except in God Himself). The Denial makes clear this priority of the teaching of God's scriptural revelation over anything outside it.

Commentary on Article XXI

This article continues the discussion of the previous article by noting the harmony of God's general revelation (outside Scripture) and His special revelation in Scripture. It is acknowledged by all, that certain interpretations of Scripture and some opinions of scientists will contradict each other. However, it is insisted here that the truth of Scripture and the facts of science never contradict each other. “Genuine” science will always be in accord with Scripture. Science, however, based on naturalistic presuppositions will inevitably come in conflict with the supernatural truths of Scripture.

Far from denying a healthy interchange between scientific theory and biblical interpretation, the framers of this statement welcome such. Indeed, it is acknowledged (in article XX) that the exegete can learn from the scientist. What is denied is that we should accept scientific views that contradict Scripture or that they should be given an authority above Scripture.

Commentary on Article XXII

Since the historicity and the scientific accuracy of the early chapters of the Bible have come under severe attack it is important to apply the “literal” hermeneutic espoused (Article XV) to this question. The result was recognition of the factual nature of the account of the creation of the universe, all living things, the

special creation of man, the Fall, and the Flood. These accounts are all factual, that is, they are about space-time events which actually happened as reported in the book of Genesis (see Article XIV).

The article left open the question of the age of the earth on which there is no unanimity among evangelicals and which was beyond the purview of this conference. There was, however, complete agreement on denying that Genesis is mythological or unhistorical. Likewise, the use of the term “creation” was meant to exclude the belief in macroevolution, whether of the atheistic or theistic varieties.

Commentary on Article XXIII

Traditionally this teaching is called the “perspicuity” of Scripture. By this is meant that the central message of Scripture is clear, especially what the Bible says about salvation from sin.

The Denial disassociates this claim from the belief that everything in Scripture is clear or that all teachings are equally clear or equally relevant to the Bible's central saving message. It is obvious to any honest interpreter that the meaning of some passages of Scripture is obscure. It is equally evident that the truth of some passages is not directly relevant to the overall plan of salvation.

Commentary on Article XXIV

This article attempts to avoid two extremes. First, it affirms that one is not dependent on biblical “experts” for his understanding of the basic truths of Scripture. Were this not true, then a significant aspect of the priesthood of all believers would be destroyed. For if the understanding of the laity is contingent on the teaching of experts, then Protestant interpretive experts will have replaced the teaching magisterium of Catholic priests with a kind of teaching magisterium of Protestant scholars.

On the other hand, biblical scholars do play a significant role in the lay understanding of Scripture. Even the very tools (Bible, dictionaries, concordances, etc.) used by laypersons to interpret Scripture were produced by scholars. And when it comes to more technical and precise understanding of specific Scripture the work of experts is more than helpful. Hence the implied exhortation in the denial to avail oneself of the fruit of scholarship is well taken.

Commentary on Article XXV

This final article declares that good preaching should be based in good hermeneutics. The exposition of Scripture is not to be treated in isolation from the proclamation of Scripture. In preaching the preacher should faithfully expound the Word of God. Anything short of a correct exposition of God's written Word is pronounced insufficient.

Indeed, the Denial declares that there is no message from God apart from Scripture. This was understood not to contradict the fact that there is a general revelation (affirmed in Article XXI) but simply to note that the only inspired and infallible writing from which the preacher can and must preach is the Bible.