

The Mind and Interpretation

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Introduction

The Mind: God's Masterful Creation

God created our minds so that He may be glorified by and through His entire creation. But what is the best way in which we can use our minds to glorify God? Is there one way to use our mind that is better or more preferred by God than another? As long as we use our mind and think with sincerity and a humble and contrite heart, can there be a worshipful sacrifice that is greater than another? No. True and perfect worship and praise given to God is so bestowed merely when the Christian ponders God's creation. And can we count the ways in which God's creation can be pondered? They are innumerable and endless.

Sensitivity in Interpretation

God has made the human mind and it is a very complex and powerful tool. A greater understanding and sensitivity to the functions of our mind will aid in understanding why we approach reality in particular ways. Therefore, I set forth a brief evaluation of the sensitivity and complexity with which the mind operates in order to further reflect the needed sensitivity that we must employ in interpretation and our inevitable participation in such a process. *For the purpose of this work, interpretation can be viewed broadly as the perception and comprehension of reality.*

Inclusion of Extra Biblical Disciplines

A fundamental premise of those who approach interpretation with sensitivity is that of recognizing the benefit of extra biblical disciplines in aiding Scriptural study and knowledge. A Christian psychiatrist or psychologist, philosopher and linguist can aid in understanding Scriptural revelation to the degree of an Old or New Testament seminary professor or a preacher; each understands reality; each understands God's creation and general revelation in a distinct light. Therefore, each has been given understanding by God through his given profession, which can of course illumine reality and God's revelation.

Moises Silva writes, "Disturbing too is the fact that even conservative scholars in our day sometimes give much higher priority to individualism than to corporate responsibility. The idea of pursuing truth "wherever it may lead us" becomes a pious but misconceived motto, for truth rarely if ever manifests itself in isolation."¹ He further writes that, "In spite of...qualifications, we can state unequivocally that modern biblical scholarship has helped to open up the meaning of innumerable passages of Scripture, sometimes in very dramatic ways."²

Descriptive and Prescriptive Analysis

Defining Descriptive and Prescriptive Analysis

At the end of my last work, I briefly explained descriptive and prescriptive analysis. During my evaluation of the present-day general framework by which Scripture is interpreted, I realized that it is more suitable at this time to focus on descriptive rather than prescriptive analysis involving interpretation. This is in part because descriptive analysis has been much less emphasized but is equally important and influential in our understanding of Scripture and our personhood. Furthermore, Scripture in many ways gives foundation to descriptive analysis. The authors of Scripture not only told us in certain ways what reality was (defined reality for us) and how to live, but also described their situations and their state of mind. They often wrote about their motivations and attitudes and the disposition of others; they also used various techniques in order to describe their surroundings.

After reading several books about interpretation, the need for a heightened emphasis concerning descriptive analysis became increasingly apparent. Descriptive analysis explains what the reader is doing as he thinks and interprets reality, including Scripture. Descriptive analysis explains how the mind and faculties are used in interpreting Scripture, clarifies the nature of knowledge and meaning and elucidates the ways in which we receive, comprehend and use information. It describes *how* interpretation occurs. On the other hand, prescriptive analysis explains the rules, devices and principles the student should use in interpreting Scripture.

Broadly speaking, descriptive analysis concerns that which happens inside the Christian, in his mind and even heart as he interprets; prescriptive analysis primarily concerns that which happens outside the Christian, in his use and approach to rules and external tools. (I do not overlook the fact that the Holy Spirit has been an integral aspect of prescriptive analysis. But the Holy Spirit greatly influences descriptive analysis as well. Scripture posits the Holy Spirit as being deeply involved in how we think and reason. The basis of obedience to Christ is rooted in how we think.) Ultimately, a focus on descriptive analysis will not only inform us of that which happens when we interpret but will ultimately provide instruction on how we *should* interpret Scripture.

The Equality of the Two Disciplines

The need to evaluate the basics of human thought equals in importance the need to study exegetical principles. Perception and comprehension are as intricate to the exegetical process as the lexicon. Writings in interpretation must render such a balance.

Descriptive and prescriptive analyses are both needed in interpretation. Our mind comprehends, retains and recalls information in in-depth ways. Also, the nature of meaning, knowledge and communication require the exegete to study not only what the concordance says but also how his mind receives and understands what the concordance says. The nature of meaning, knowledge and language are greatly influential in interpretation, affecting both descriptive and prescriptive analysis.

The Interdependence of Prescriptive and Descriptive Analysis

Descriptive and prescriptive analyses are interdependent. Perception and comprehension are the basic actions required for reading and interpretation. The multiplicities of actions that occur within the human critically influence and shape his response to reality. Reality and the actions external to the human affect the way in which the human engages in comprehension and understanding, the way in which he responds and handles reality. The human is a unified whole, and it is that whole being which always interacts with external reality. This interaction is called life. The Bible, particularly Paul, affirms the connectedness between the mind and body and posits the Christian life as being a constant interaction between the mind and internal aspects of the human and the reality that is external to him.

The Mind and Reality

Reality Defined

It is important to examine our concept of reality. Although reality can be defined broadly, that which is real in many ways varies from person to person. The way in which we view reality influences the way in which we live and act. There must be an increased sensitivity to the manner in which we perceive and understand information. This is because our minds interpret reality in order to function and are influenced, at times subtly, by each aspect of reality which is encountered. The Bible is an aspect of our reality. God should be the predominating influence of our reality, a message the Bible declares clearly and regularly.

Our reality is a representation of everything we know and our environment in which we exist, both material and immaterial. Our reality is not composed only of our possessions, family and religious beliefs. Reality is the composition of everything we have ever encountered. Reality has been unevenly characterized by material reality. Reality needs to be equally characterized by that which is immaterial, such as unforgettable experiences, hurts, pains, fears, struggles, comforts and joys. In interpreting Scripture, Christians are influenced not as much by their possessions per se or job but rather by how life affects him. Biblical interpretation is the Christian's way of getting closer to God and getting through life.

Reality and Interpretation

We interpret the Bible within reality, as we exist. So as we interpret, we never leave reality; we make sense of Scripture in the similar fashion in which we comprehend other aspects of reality. Interpretation is not an out-of-body experience. Interpretation is not performed in a vacuum or in a situation of emptiness apart from our dynamic and influential mind. We bring our entire selves to Scripture. We interpret in the context of our reality; but more importantly, we live within the influence and unending affect of our minds interaction with reality. Reality is the undeniable point-of-reference.

The Mind and Text

A Text Defined

A text is any platform in which information is presented. So a text is anything we encounter. Words transcribed or ink on a page is not the only text encountered. This is because our mind treats the words on a page in the same way it treats any information encountered. The mind interprets it. Our cluttered desks in the office are texts; our bountiful dinner tables are texts; movies are texts; human non-verbal communication present texts; all of these are texts because the mind must interpret each of these situations. The mind must interact with reality and the basis of interaction is interpretation.

The Text as a Medium

When the mind is presented with a sentence or a photo or any text, it engages in many processes in order to succeed in comprehension. As stated earlier, our minds are assertive and dynamic devices that take a hands-on approach to information. So the correspondence between the mind and the surrounding world is based on a textual medium, a presentation of information. Comprehension, understanding and belief are therefore based on our minds ability to interpret reality through textual mediums (information presented in reality). The Bible is an example of a text. The Bible presents information in reality and based on our interpretation of this matter, we are better able to understand God, the world and ourselves.

Biblical Examples

For example, the Gospels reflect 4 distinct accounts of Jesus' life as interpreted by the disciples. I John 1:1 states, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." The disciples interpreted Jesus' life based on their interaction with Him, their interaction with reality.

From Moses through the Apostle John in Revelation, each biblical author interpreted reality in recording Scripture. Moses most likely wrote Genesis while he and the Israelites were in the wilderness. He wrote Genesis to teach and encourage the Israelites before entrance into Canaan. The Israelites were to read Genesis and be reminded of the control, power and promises of their Creator God. Therefore, Genesis as a Biblical text was to provide linkage between the

Israelites minds and the reality of their Creator; Genesis was to inform and remind them of their purpose and needs. This would increase and improve the Israelites understanding and response to their present and future situations.

In Ephesians 5, Paul writes that Christian's are to be 'imitators' of God. Regardless of the meaning one draws from 'imitation', the basis of imitation is interpretation. Therefore, a life in accord with Christ's will does not necessarily involve as much "what would Christ do" but rather how do *we* interpret what he did and said in the context of our reality.

The Mind and Word

Introduction

I have read various works that have employed prescriptive formats and they have reached much success by communicating the need to reassess biblical interpretation and by providing a refreshing and distinct perspective on biblical understanding. Interestingly, some of these works did not address interpretation directly. But in certain ways, each aspect of reality makes us confront our beliefs and conceptions of the entirety of God's revelation. (This is the foundation of the hermeneutical spiral.) An evaluation of words and reality facilitates an understanding of the complexity and interdependency in which our mind operates.

Definition of Word

To the mind, words are not merely letters in a particular sequence. Words are ideas and messages. Words are communicative devices, mediums to reality and platforms for interaction. Words are always loaded bits of information, information about the writer, reader and text. This is in part because the mind treats words as data that is to be perceived and understood, and not merely as an object composed of letters.

Furthermore, words are chosen and so are backed by purpose and desire, the writer's intention; words are also backed by the writer's knowledge and hence are used to communicate what he knows and the manner in which he knows it. The reader, based on his own purpose and knowledge, interprets words. (Silva writes that, "The needs of the pastor in the pulpit ought not to be set aside when doing biblical exegesis."³ The text cannot be rightly interpreted for the people unless the current situation of the audience is in focus. Biblical understanding is increased when we bring our needs and desires to the text and allow God to use them as He sees fit.) Words form and shape the text making it cogent and understandable.

Therefore, when the Bible reader seeks to understand God, he does not seek to understand the words *per se*, i.e. why the "G" is in front of the "d" or why the word is 3 letters instead of 4. He seeks to understand the purpose, meaning and relevance of the word and hence the reason for its existence in the context in which it is present.

The Activity of Word

The human mind personifies words meaning the human mind attaches reality (not necessarily authenticity) to words in order to understand them. For this to occur, the mind uses previously realized thoughts and impressions to comprehend and understand new or restated ideas. The mind places the word inside its realm of comprehension, its sphere of influence, and this action is far from the theoretical processes of word sequence or numbering.

A large portion of that which our mind attaches to words is the information previously understood which relates to the new words and knowledge we encounter. Also, our mind attaches various ideas and significance to words in order to ensure further comprehension and association for the present and in the future. This activity is necessary in order for the mind to learn and process new information. Words present us not merely with letters in a sequence but

with the idea of something, an aspect of reality. This is why we pay attention to them. Words remind us that we exist. Words are ideas because they are extensions of meaning and desire.

Biblical Examples

In reading the following verses, we are able to realize that words are ideas and extensions of meaning and desire. The mind uses words in many ways. Words influence the mind in every aspect of existence. Proverbs 12:25 states, “Heaviness in the heart of a man makes it stoop; but a good *word* makes it glad.” Proverbs 15:1 states, “A soft answer turns away wrath; but a grievous *word* stirs up anger.” Where words are comprehended, of course the mind is present also. In the above two verses, the mind interpreted the words that were stated; the mind handled the words and used them in various ways. In these two verses, it is evident how the mind is never neutral to any words. Perception is interpretation. The mind must always respond to words. The inevitable response of the mind to words is a foundation of human existence.

Ecclesiastes 8:4 states, “For the king's *word* hath power; and who may say unto him, what doest thou?” We also realize that words have power. The mind is not neutral in large part because language is not neutral. Language is power; and power is used for its respective purposes. So besides other reasons, the mind does not exhibit neutrality because 1) it must always emote-texts demand response and 2) because the mind's use of language is always backed by purpose.

The Mind and Concept

Introduction

As the topic of interpretation is broad beyond degree, so also are our wide-ranging perceptions, thoughts and ideas used in interpretation. They are innumerable and immeasurable. We are influenced in ways that are both known and unknown. For example, we are influenced unknowingly by music, advertising, and relationships with others and even by God. For instance in Genesis, God hardened Pharaoh's heart but Pharaoh remained oblivious to God's actions. We have only begun to innumerate the factors and ways in which are minds are influenced. The factors and qualities of our existence do influence, direct and shape us in many ways. Through our development, we continually expand and utilize reality in ways that aid in understanding and existing in the world.

Definition of Concept

A concept can be defined as a general idea formed in the mind, something conceived in the mind such as a plan, a design, a mental image or a thought.⁴ A concept is the presentation of an idea, an aspect of reality. There is continuing discussion regarding how our conception of reality influences the way in which we understanding information, but there is no doubt as to the significant influence of such a relationship. For example, “car” includes the concepts of speed, force and mobility.

Concepts facilitate the human desire to understand reality. Concepts are employed as a means to an end, a trajectory that enables a human to understand reality. They are ways of thinking about reality, frames of reference and dispositions. Concepts are both embedded from birth, as Scripture speaks of good and evil (Gen.3:22), and learned during life, as Scripture speaks of wisdom, understanding and the fear of God (Pro. 2:1-5).

Our “conceptions” are our thoughts about a subject that are critical and employed in order to understand existence. Hence, in certain ways our conceptions are the building blocks for the development and understanding of each aspect of our existence. Therefore, to deal with our

conceptions means not only to examine our beliefs, but also importantly to evaluate our reasons for those beliefs, opinions and practices.

Biblical Example

The Bible is filled with concepts. In fact, our understanding of Scripture and Biblical context is dependent on the meaning of the concepts Scripture presents for discernment. Genesis 1:1 states, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” What concepts does Moses present? “Beginning”, “God”, “created”...the verse is filled with concepts. These concepts are intertwined and dependent; this is in part obvious because these words are used intelligently together in a sentence.

The Mind and Dependence

Introduction

In the same way that our body reflects dependence in operation and activity, so does our mind. Similarly, in the way that our mind displays dependence on its various functions, reality also exhibits dependence. God’s creation is interwoven to display intelligent design. As the moon reflects the sun’s light, so does reality reflect a dependence on God. God has created our minds with a similar trait of interdependency.

Dependence and Difference

Our minds reflect their dependency in many ways, one way being differentiation. The mind would be unable to understand information if not for the differences in reality. This is in large part because the mind learns not only from what something is (traits, characteristics, etc.), but also from what that thing is not. So in certain ways, the mind could not function unless there was difference. Identification is based on differentiation. The mind is dependent on diversity and differentiation in reality.

Biblical Example

Paul illustrates the importance of differentiation in reality in Ephesians 4:11-13 and 16. He explains that the essence of unity is diversity and difference.

The Mind and Interdependence

The mind reflects the interdependence of its functions in various ways. One way in which the mind displays interdependence is in its conceptions of reality.

Biblical Examples

Moses writes in Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Genesis 1:1 informs us that the concepts “beginning” and “God” were associated in some way in Moses mind. The idea that there was once a beginning influences our conception of God as much as the idea of God influences and shapes our conception of beginning. “Beginning” is shaped by Moses’ understanding of who God is. Also, Moses’ understanding of God is shaped by the quality and characteristics of the beginning of existence and what it means for such a beginning to be initiated.

In other words, Moses believed that God was powerful because he believed creation was ex nihilo (out of nothing). So Moses believed a certain way about God based on creation. However, Moses also believed a certain way about creation based on God. He believed creation was good and beautiful based on the glory and perfection of its Maker. Therefore Moses, based on relationships and interdependent in reality, was able to encourage the Israelites as he wrote Genesis for them in the Wilderness. We reason from Scripture in similar fashion.

We see further example of the extensiveness and dependence of the mind in the book of Ecclesiastes. Solomon evaluated humanity and other aspects of reality. As Solomon evaluated reality, it is interesting that he, as we, could not consider only one aspect of existence. Each aspect of our existence and reality is interdependent and intertwined. Hence, if one considers laughter and play, one must also consider sorrow and pain; if one evaluates time in its temporality, one must evaluate time in its eternity; if one assesses the meaning of humanity, one must assess the meaning of God; if one considers folly, one must also consider wisdom.

The Mind and Information Evaluation

There are various ways in which our minds handle and process information. Fundamentally, the mind processes information by joining new information to previous knowledge related to similar subjects. In this way, our concepts are formed, expanded and reproduced. “The understanding of a given statement is always based on something prior, of two sorts—a preliminary knowledge of human beings, a preliminary knowledge of the subject matter...”⁵ Below, I evaluate some ways in which the mind develops concepts.

Weighing (for Importance and Value)

There are various ways in which we evaluate information. In weighing information, we assume a hierarchical approach. Information is encountered and weighed for its importance and value. The importance and value placed on new information is dictated in large part by our previous conceptions. As we weigh information, our scale of importance, that tool which we use in discerning the value of information, becomes more defined. The judgment of what is important and valuable in our lives involves the relationship and interaction of our preferences and desires with external reality. An assessment of what is important and valuable is an assessment of our beliefs and thoughts about information we have encountered.

Biblical Examples

Throughout Ecclesiastes, Solomon evaluates the value and importance of various aspects of reality. Solomon was *weighing* the importance of various aspects of reality in comparison with others. Ultimately, as chapter 12 expounds, Solomon was weighing his existence in relation to the existence of God.

In Psalms 1, David weighs fear and obedience to God against sinful behavior. In Scripture, Biblical characters regularly assess reality and weigh its various aspects for importance and value. By weighing various aspects of reality, both Solomon and David revealed and reestablished certain understandings about God, themselves and the world around them.

Associating (for Relevance and Influence)

We also *associate* or relate aspects of information for relevance or influence upon one another. In associating information, we relate various aspects of reality ultimately that we may better assess our lives and our purpose therein. “...relations are important for what they can explain: meaningful contrasts and permitted or forbidden combinations.”⁶

“Association” is performed during interpretation because we join multiple meanings and concepts. Both interpretation and learning essentially occur at each point in which reality is observed. Association is basic to these actions. Not only do we perform association in order to learn but also to live. The mind naturally engages in association in order to exist; association is the foundation of vitality and life. For example, association is performed in order to cross a street or breathe or eat; we must be able to associate information such as speed, force and velocity, or air and suffocation, or sustenance, hunger and life.

Biblical Example

For example, in the story of Esau and Jacob (Gen. 27), Isaac was fooled by Jacob. Isaac felt his son's artificial goat hair to understand his identity. Isaac had to relate to his son in order to determine his identity. The mind performs a similar process. As it encounters reality, it makes connections between what it (the mind) possesses as knowledge (Esau-the hairy son, Jacob-the smooth son) and that object in reality it seeks to know (the identity of the son).

Orienting (for Decision and Response)

The mind must make decisions. We must go beyond weighing and associating in order to live. There must be a forward progress. Weighing and associating must have some goal, some end or culmination. This forward progress is called orientation. We finally conclude each momentary encounter with reality by *orienting or deciding* on the necessary action based on our weighing and associating of concepts. In orienting, we respond to reality based on what we understand and how we have been influenced.

I use the word "orientation" primarily instead of "decision" because the process of perception and comprehension is: 1) a way of life and inherent to life. This end or culmination is so strong and enduring to reality that it mirrors more than simply a decision. Furthermore, I choose "orientation" because 2) when we make decisions, we do so in a way in which we continually orient or reorient and reprogram our senses, motivations and desires.

Orientation is Reorientation

Orientation is really a process of reorientation due not only to the way in which we "weigh" and "associate" concepts but more importantly because perception and comprehension are ways of re-experiencing that which we have already encountered and dealt with previously. Our minds interpret reality in a manner in which our thoughts and beliefs are reconfirmed. As we interact with reality, we in a sense revisit and reestablish previous thoughts and beliefs. Therefore, the basis of understanding and interpretation is a meeting of the past with the present.

Biblical Example

Moses writes in Deuteronomy 6:2 that the generations of Israel are to teach their descendents the law of God and to fear and obey Him. Moses writes, "...so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live..." Moses writes in Deuteronomy 31:10, "At the end of every seven years...read this law before them in their hearing." At various points in Scripture, God engages in ways to reorient his people in devotion and service to Him.

Conclusion

The mind engages in complex operations in order to perceive and comprehend information. Reality is a text in that it is composed of information that the human must interpret in order to exist. Interpretation and life are the interaction between the human and other aspects of reality. God has created and enabled the mind to understand and relate to its surroundings. God has made us interpreters; and it is through our interpretations that we gain Godly understanding. Therefore, we should be more descriptive in our pursuits, for it does match in illumination the efforts in prescriptive analysis.

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¹ Moises Silva, “Has The Church Misread the Bible” in V. Phillips Long, Vern Poythress, Tremper Longman III, Richard Muller and Moises Silva (Editor), *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (Zondervan, 1996), 74.

² *Ibid.*, 70.

³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴ www.cgcc.cc.or.us/library/lib-instruction/define-terms.htm

⁵ F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, H. Kimmerle (editor), trans. J. Forstman (AARTT 1; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 59 and 113.

⁶ David Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 14.