

CHAPTER III

Understanding the Scriptures Telically

A Clear Understanding of the Holy Spirit's *Telos* in Scriptural Passages Appropriate to Both the Problem and the Solution

Note well, the *telos* (or purpose) of a passage should be central to everything that is done in counseling; that means that it is the vital factor even in the selection of the passage *as appropriate* to the problem at hand.

The *telic* side of exegesis has been either ignored, underplayed, or unknown by many pastors. Sadly this fact is all too apparent to those who have studied this question in the history of preaching. If any one fact is evident, it is this: preachers, good Christian men who meant well, nevertheless have persisted in using the Scriptures for their own purposes rather than for the purposes for which they were given. Often because blissfully unaware of the Holy Spirit's intention in placing a passage where it occurs, they have generated the most incredible interpretations and dogmas and have given some of the most horrendous advice, all in the name of God. Fortunately, on the other hand, in God's providence much truth has been preached from passages that say nothing about it! And all that may be said about the vital place that *telic* exegesis must play in preaching pertains with equal force to the use of the Scriptures in Christian counseling.

I have spoken already about the importance of authority in counseling.¹ Authority arises from knowing

¹But see also Jay Adams, *Shepherding God's Flock*, Vol. II, pp. 14, 105ff.

that what the counselor says truly comes from God. That cannot be known unless the counselor shows the counselee that the directive, warning, or promise about which he is speaking comes from the Scriptures. The authority will be lacking unless (a) the counselor knows the *telos* of the passage, (b) uses it for the same purpose as that for which the Holy Spirit gave it, and (c) demonstrates to the counselee that this is in truth its purpose and meaning. Because the matter under discussion is of such vital importance, I shall linger for a while over each of those necessary elements in establishing scriptural authority for one's counsel. With Paul, the counselor must be able to say in good conscience, "For I do not, like so many, peddle an adulterated message of God" (II Cor. 2:17).

(a) The counselor must know the *telos* of every passage that he uses in counseling. It is not enough to understand the grammatical-historical, biblical-theological or systematic, and rhetorical aspects of a passage. These are essential, and I should be the last one to say anything to undermine such work, for each of these elements plays a vital part in biblical exegesis. Indeed, without their assistance often it is impossible either to discover the *telos* or to be sure even when one has done so. Yet it is possible to have all of these matters in mind in exegesis and still *misuse* a portion of Scripture in preaching or counseling. Thus, the story of the Seeking Father and the Pouting Elder Brother instead becomes the Parable of the Prodigal Son; the two commandments to love God and neighbor are psychologized by those who want to add to them a third commandment, "love yourself," which they then make basic to the other two, in spite of the fact that this is a thought repugnant to the entire Bible, and the clear statement of Christ that he is speaking of *two* commandments only: "On these *two* commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

(b) The counselor must know the *purpose* of the passage; that is, he must know what God intended to do to the reader (warn, encourage, motivate, ec.) with those words. Then, he must make God's purpose his own in the application of the passage to human needs. But to do this he must develop an exegetical conscience by which he determines never to use a passage for any purpose other than that purpose, or those purposes for which God gave it (often, of course, there are sub *tele* involved in a larger telic unit). This determination will make him faithful not only as an interpreter, but also in his *use* of the Scriptures.

It was at this point that some Puritan preachers and commentators set Protestantism back several generations. They abandoned the superior method used by Calvin which focused upon telic matters in the text. Instead, it became their practice to discuss lengthy questions from the whole corpus of systematic theology as these had any bearing upon a word or phrase, no matter how remote that connection might be. Contextually there was no warrant for this practice; and, indeed, it often obscured important contextual connections and distracted one from the main purpose and proper use of the passage. No wonder many of their commentaries were interminable. And to these doctrinal discussions some of them often appended a series of "improvements" or "uses" of the text. Under such rubrics every sort of tenuous and sometimes moralizing relationship of the passage to life was explored. The passage was wrung dry.

God's words must be used to achieve God's purposes. Obviously, therefore, flip-and-point methods of using the Scriptures are taboo, since they ignore telic considerations. Along with such techniques we must reject Bible prescription methods in which the counselor in effect tears out a page of Scripture and hands it to the counselee

without explanation as the remedy for his problem.² For all of the understanding of it that he has, it might have been scrawled in a Latin that can be translated only by a pharmacist! All of which leads to the third point.

(c) The Scriptures must be "opened" (i.e., "explained," cf. Luke 24:32) if counselors would have the hearts of their counselees to burn within them like those of the disciples who walked the Emmaus road with Christ. When *He* is disclosed to them as the subject of "all" of the Scriptures, moralizing will disappear, irrelevant material will evaporate and the *telos* of the passage will find its proper place in Christ.

But how does one discover the *telos* of any passage? (1) By studying with the *telic* goal in mind (one rarely finds what he does not seek), and in that search (2) by looking for *telic* cues. Often these cues are overt; but some are more evident than others. Some *telic* statements have to do with the *whole* of the Scriptures, as for example when Paul wrote that the Scriptures have two purposes: "to make one wise unto salvation" and to "teach, convict, correct, and train in righteousness" (II Tim. 3:15-16). Thus any given passage primarily will have either an evangelis-

²Not that God in His wise providence cannot use His Word even when given in this form. Ordinarily what is meant by handing out Scripture verses like prescriptions is that the Bible is used in a magical manner, much more like a talisman than a divine Revelation. The Bible passage (like a prescription) is supposed to effect results whether understood by the recipient or not. All such usage is itself unbiblical and must be rejected. But Jim, a physician friend of mine, objects to the rejection of the image of the prescription. "Instead of stressing the aspects just mentioned," he observes, "why not focus upon the positive (highly instructive) aspects of the comparison, like the need for careful diagnosis, the need for a thorough knowledge of medicines and their effects, etc., all of which have to do with *care* by the doctor, or in your case by the counselor?" He has a point! If we take Jim's word to heart, we shall note the essential differences between counseling and the writing of medical prescriptions, and end up with *both* the ideas of care on the part of the counselor and understanding and commitment by the counselee.

tic or edificational goal. In Luke 24:27, Christ referred to Himself as the subject of "all of the Scriptures," which is perhaps the most basic and comprehensive *telos* of all. Christ Himself is the Savior and Head of His church who has made salvation and Christian growth a reality. The Christian counselor, therefore, must see Christ in every passage that he uses and introduce the counselee to Him there. This means that he may never use the Scriptures moralistically or humanistically. But, while never forgetting this redemptive base, he also must select passages because of their particular *telic* emphases, beginning broadly by dividing Bible books and counseling portions, according to their major emphases, into the two main purposes mentioned above: evangelism and edification.

John's gospel and first epistle provide the most obvious sorts of *telic* notes: the first was "written. . . that you may believe," and the second "written to you who believe. . . that you may know." Is there any wonder then that verses like John 1:12; 3:16; 3:36; 5:24; 14:1-6 and many others have been used so frequently by the Spirit of God to bring men to belief? After all, the Gospel of John, we are clearly told, was written for this very purpose. Likewise one should turn to the first epistle when counseling with a believer who lacks assurance of salvation. This is particularly necessary when counseling those who today similarly are plagued with a new kind of legalistic Gnosticism that teaches that only a small group of persons has a right to assurance. Characteristically, such preachers use I John not to bring assurance but to destroy what they believe to be false assurance. God's purpose in the book is positive, theirs negative.³

Portions of biblical books are devoted to different

³A frequently observed problem of preachers is that of using a passage that has a positive *telos* negatively.

purposes. When the writer of Hebrews says, "Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about Christ, let us press on. . ." (6:1), he is giving the reader a *telic* cue to a shift in emphasis (all, of course, within the scope of the broader *telos* or *tele* for which the book of Hebrews was written). Ephesians 1-3 cannot be separated from Ephesians 4-6, since the two sections are hinged together by that crucial "therefore" in Ephesians 4:1 which shows that the doctrine taught in the first half has vital implications for the practical Christian living enjoined in the second half. Yet, it is important for the counselor to know that the latter portion of Ephesians shows *how* Christians, as members of Christ's redeemed body (the theme of the former), can learn to function together in love and unity.

Phrases like "Brethren, I would not have you to be ignorant concerning. . ." (I Thess. 4:13); "Wherefore, comfort one another with these words" (I Thess. 4:18); "I have written. . . to encourage you and to testify that this is the true grace of God" (I Peter 5:12); "I wish, therefore, always to remind you of these matters. . ." (II Peter 1:12,13); "I am writing you to arouse your pure minds by way of remembrance" (II Peter 3:1); "I found it necessary to write you appealing that you vigorously defend the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3); "prescribe and teach these things" (I Tim. 4:11); "remind them of these things and solemnly charge them in the presence of God. . ." (II Tim. 2:14) are just a few of the many *telic* cues by which the counselor can be guided infallibly in determining the Holy Spirit's intentions in any given passage of the Scriptures.

Even when *telic* cues do not appear overtly, the *telic* quest still must be carried on. And this quest may be pursued successfully, for although the *tele* may not always be as apparent as in the New Testament examples mentioned above, they may be found by looking for *telic*

thrusts and emphases. Thus, for example, there are few overt *telic* cues in Philippians, but the student who seeks to discover the main *tele* behind the writing of that book will have little trouble uncovering such purposes as (a) Paul's desire to thank the Philippians for their gift, (b) his concern to explain the working of God's providence in his imprisonment, (c) his interest in healing the division in the Philippian church, and (d) his wish to calm their fears about Epaphroditus.

"The *telic* note is important, I can see, for establishing authority in counseling and thus assuring both the counselor and counselee that the analysis of his problem and the solutions offered are well founded, but how does this work in actual practice?" you may ask. This important question leads naturally into a discussion of the third factor.