

HENRY BULLINGER AND THE EXPOSITION OF SCRIPTURE

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Introduction

One of the most beneficial aspects of the Swiss Reformation was the introduction of regular public Bible studies. Attended by pastors, theology teachers, students and members of the public, these studies took the form of “warm, pastoral lectures” (Hollweg). Their purpose was to expound Scripture and draw from it basic Christian doctrines and principles of conduct. From 1525, Ulrich Zwingli supervised such meetings from Mondays to Thursdays in the Great Minster at Zurich, while between 1523 and 1529 Henry Bullinger organised similar sessions in Kappel. The latter’s extensive training programme made the newly Reformed venue a veritable miniature theological school. Later, it became a model for both English Puritan “prophesyings” or lectures and for numerous Reformed seminaries throughout Europe.

Though it is by no means certain, some remarks of Bullinger’s to his audience suggest that his classic *Decades*, or five sets of ten sermons on leading theological topics, were delivered at these gatherings.

As the written Word of God is the divinely-ordained means of reforming His Church, Bullinger deliberately devotes his first sermon to its authority. The Bible, he says, contains “the full doctrine of godliness,” and is therefore all-sufficient for faith and practice.

His second sermon outlines the right way to respond to that Word; that is, with reverence, prayer for light and guidance, and a single-minded aim at God-glorifying obedience.

Bullinger’s third sermon focuses on how to interpret the Word. In laying down five principles of interpretation, he points us to the path we should all tread whenever we study the Word of God. Let us attend to his teaching.

A Defence of Biblical Exposition

In view of contemporary opposition to what he calls “my doctrine of the Word of God,” Bullinger prefaces these principles with a defence of ministerial Biblical exposition. From the Romish side came the cavil that Scripture “is of itself so dark that it cannot be read with any profit at all.” [Albertus Pighius’s view]. From the Antinomian Libertine side [not expressly named by him] came the opposite view: that “the Word plainly delivered by God to mankind doth stand in need of no exposition.” Rather, each reader should “choose to himself such a sense as” he “shall be persuaded in himself to be most convenient.” Steering a middle course between these two extremes, Bullinger launches into a gentle, reasoned defence of the truth that “the Scriptures ought always to be expounded.” Acceptance of this truth, he trusts, will remove “the impediments which drive men from the reading of the Word of God,” and make “the reading and hearing” of it “both wholesome and fruitful.”

The First Argument

The first argument Bullinger uses to prove that it is “God’s will . . . to have His Word understood” is that Holy Scripture is written in plain, common language. The writings of both prophets and apostles present the “high and everlasting wisdom” of God in “common proverbs, similitudes, parables, comparisons . . . narrations, examples” and similar forms of speech, so that even the uneducated may understand them.

There is, he concedes, “some darkness in the Scriptures,” arising chiefly from the peculiar idioms of the original Bible languages, “but that difficulty may easily be helped by study, diligence, faith and . . . skilful interpreters.” In truth, the Scriptures are “difficult or obscure” only to men’s “malicious or corrupted wills,” not to “zealous and godly readers and

hearers." Paul does not blame the Word of God for men's failure to understand it, but "the unprofitable hearers." Scripture itself is not darkness, but light (Psalm 119:105). Besides, since "all men agree" that every disputed question or controversy should be "ended and determined by the Scriptures," those self-same Scriptures must be "evident, plain and most assuredly certain."

The Second Argument

Bullinger's second argument is also drawn from Scripture itself. "God Himself," having spoken to Moses for forty days on the mount, moved him both to write down and expound His revealed will to the congregation of Israel for forty years. Moses' writings, therefore, are for the most part "commentaries on God's commandments." Then came "the prophets, who, interpreting the law of Moses, did apply it to the times, places and men of their age, and left to us that follow their sermons as plain expositions of God's law." An outstanding example is provided by Ezra and the Levites: "he read out of the book, and the Levites instructed the people in the law, and the people stood in their place, and they [the Levites] read in the book of the law distinctly, expounding the sense, and causing them to understand the reading" (Nehemiah 8). "Mark here by the way, my brethren, that the lawful and holy ministers of the Church of God did not only read the Word of God, but did also expound it."

When our Lord Jesus Christ came to earth, He neither abrogated nor condemned the practice. Rather, "as a true Prophet and heavenly Doctor" [or Teacher], He instructed "the people of His Church in the doctrine of the new Testament." Both in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:16-21) and on the Emmaus road (Luke 24:15-27) He expounded the Scriptures concerning Himself.

"The apostles," following their Lord's example, "did themselves also expound the Word of God." Peter expounded part of Psalm 16 (Acts 2:25-31) and Philip part of Isaiah 53 (Acts 8:30-38). As for Paul, whoever says that he "doth not everywhere interpret the Holy Scripture, he hath neither read nor seen" his "deeds" or "writings." Here ends Bullinger's reply to the Romanists.

The Libertines [and Anabaptists] who "would not have the ministers of the Word and churches to declare the Scriptures in open and solemn audience, neither to apply them to the places, times, states and persons" are guilty of seeking some other end "than the honour due unto God." By their evil lives and talk, they plainly "tread under foot all discipline and rebuking of sin, and so [wish] to offend freely without punishment."

A Lesson for the Reformed

The duty of publicly expounding Scripture has a lesson for the Reformed, too. "All the ministers of the Church must beware" of following their own whims, corrupting the Scriptures "by their wrong interpretations." In Ezekiel's day, the Lord severely rebuked such false interpreters. (Ezekiel 34:18-19). This is "a sore offence . . . which the Lord according to His justice punisheth most sharply." We who are "the interpreters of God's Holy Word, and faithful ministers of the Church of Christ," must be diligent "to keep the Scriptures sound and perfect, and to teach the people of Christ the Word of God sincerely; made plain, I mean, and not corrupted or darkened by foolish and wrong expositions of our own invention."

It is fundamental to all right understanding that we do not expound Holy Scripture "after our own fantasies, but according to the mind and meaning of Him by whom the Scriptures were revealed," namely, the Holy Spirit. (2 Peter 1:20-21). "Therefore the true and proper sense of God's Word must be taken out of the Scriptures themselves, and not be forcibly thrust upon the Scriptures."

Having laid this foundation, Bullinger devotes the rest of his sermon to setting out five rules for the true "interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, or the exposition of the Word of God."

First Rule: Expound Scripture according to the Received Articles of our Faith

For this rule, Bullinger invokes the authority of the apostle Paul, who "would have the exposition of the Scriptures to agree fitly and in every point proportionally with our

faith” (Romans 12.6; 2 Corinthians 4.13; 13.8). [In Reformed circles, this rule is known as “the analogy of faith”].

For example, we must not deduce from John 14.28 “The Father is greater than I” – “any inequality in the Godhead betwixt the Father and the Son,” for that interpretation would clash with the uniform teaching of Scripture on the Trinity. Neither should we infer from Hebrews 6.4-6 that “repentance is to be denied to them that fall: for the catholic faith is this, that . . . a full pardon of all sins is promised to all men which turn to the Lord.” Nor should we expound the words: “This is my body” (Matthew 26:26) “transubstantially,” but rather “sacramentally.” Nor from 1 Corinthians 15:50 should we believe that “the nature and substance of our bodies” will not inherit the kingdom of heaven, but should stick to the article of our faith: “I believe the resurrection of the body.” The text refers to our “affections and infirmities,” not our actual bodies.

Second Rule: Expound Scripture consistently with Love for God and our Neighbour

Citing first our Lord’s teaching in Matthew 22:37-40, then Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine* to this effect, Bullinger reminds us to “take heed that our interpretations do not tend to the overthrow of love, but to the furtherance and commendation of it to all men.”

Third Rule: Expound Scripture according to its Context

In words almost identical to those of Miles Coverdale, Bullinger urges us to “mark upon what occasion everything is spoken, what goeth before, what followeth after, at what season, in what order, and of what person anything is spoken.” It is by noting their context that “examples and parables” are rightly expounded. Unless we diligently observe this rule, we are bound to “err very much out of the right way.” It was by observing the precise time of Abraham’s justification that the apostle Paul “did thereby conclude that Abraham was justified neither by circumcision nor yet by the law” (Romans 4; Galatians 3). Again, when our Lord ordered Peter to sheath his sword (Matthew 26:52), He addressed him as an apostle, not as a civil magistrate, for the latter must wield the sword to avenge evil doers (Romans 13:4).

Fourth Rule: Expound darker passages by clearer ones, and fewer passages by more numerous ones

Our Lord’s saying: “The Father is greater than I” (John 14.28) must be read in the light of the more numerous testimonies to His equality with the Father, as well as His express statement: “My Father and I are all one” (John 10:30). Also, James’ single teaching on justification (James 2:21,24) must not be set against the many instances of Paul’s teaching. In short, as Peter says, we must attend to the whole of Scripture, which shines in a dark place, till the day of perfect knowledge dawns, and the day star arises in our hearts. (2 Peter 1:19).

Tertullian, adds Bullinger, spells out this principle in a notable passage, which he proceeds to quote: “they are heretics, and not men of the right faith, which draw some odd things out of the Scriptures to their own purpose, not having any respect to the rest; but do by that means pick out unto themselves a certain few testimonies which they would have altogether to be believed, the whole Scripture in the mean season gainsaying it: because indeed the fewer places must be understood according to the meaning of the more in number” (*Adv. Prax. cap. 20*).

Fifth Rule: Expound with Zeal for God's Glory and Earnest Prayer for His Holy Spirit

“And finally, the most effectual rule of all by which to expound the Word of God, is a heart that loveth God and His glory, not puffed up with pride, nor desirous of vain-glory . . . but which doth continually pray to God for His Holy Spirit; that, as by Him the Scripture was revealed and inspired, so also by the same Spirit it may be expounded to the glory of God and safeguard of the faithful. Let the mind of the interpreter be set on fire with zeal to advance virtue and with hatred of wickedness, even to the suppressing thereof.” In pursuit of this goal, we must never give place to “that subtle sophister the devil,” nor tolerate anyone’s “wisdom” that argues “directly against the Word of God.” If

we follow this rule, we may not always hit the nail on the head, but we shall be preserved from condemning “error” as “heresy,” and we shall be thankful for any expositor who sheds light on our own defective understandings.

Conclusion

In the light of these Biblical rules, concludes Bullinger, “there is no cause for any man, by reason of a few difficulties, to despair of attaining to a true understanding of the Scriptures.” As “the Word of God is a rule for all men and ages to lead their lives by, therefore ought it by interpretation to be applied to all ages and men of all sorts.”

Finally, Bullinger summarises his defence of Biblical exposition and his five rules of interpretation, praying that the Lord “will vouchsafe to illuminate our minds, that God’s Name may in all things be glorified. For His is the glory, honour and dominion, for ever and ever. Amen.”