

I. Introduction

The principle of the harmony of Scripture (or, Scripture interprets Scripture): “no part of Scripture can be interpreted in such a way as to render it in conflict with what is clearly taught elsewhere in Scripture” (RC Sproul).

Waymeyer: “Although this foundational principle is agreed upon by all who believe that the Bible is truly the Word of God, there is disagreement on the question of what role the harmony of faith should play in the exegetical process.”

KEY QUESTION: Should the harmony of faith be used:

- *during* exegesis to *inform* one’s interpretation?

OR

- *subsequent* to exegesis to *double-check* one’s interpretation?

In Other Words:

Should it be used as *an exegetical tool* or a *post-exegetical check*?

II. The Harmony of Faith as an Exegetical Tool

The most common approach to the harmony of faith is to use it during the process of exegesis in order to inform one’s interpretation of the passage under consideration. This is often described as “letting Scripture interpret Scripture.” Proponents of this approach suggest that the harmony of faith be applied in at least three ways:

- Interpret every passage in light of Scripture as a whole.**
- Interpret every passage in light of parallel passages.**
- Interpret unclear passages in the light of clear passages.**

¹ Notes compiled from The Master’s Seminary and Matt Waymeyer Hermeneutics course, *Grasping God’s Word* (Duvall and Hays), and *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Roy Zuck).

THE WEAKNESSES OF THIS APPROACH:

Waymeyer: “Although using the harmony of faith during the exegetical process will inevitably steer the interpreter away from an incorrect interpretation at times, the weaknesses of this approach are significant and outweigh the strengths.”

These include the following:

- **It can give the interpreter a false sense of security that he is objectively honoring the authority of God’s Word.**

One of the reasons that the harmony of faith appeals to many interpreters as an exegetical tool is that it seems to honor the authority of God’s Word and undergird the doctrine of *sola scriptura* by letting Scripture act as its own interpreter. This is reflected in the words of McCartney and Clayton, who state that the maxim *Scripture interprets Scripture* “is simply to say that God determines the meaning of His own words.” For this reason, some have referred to the harmony of faith as an “objective court of appeals” in which God Himself interprets what is written in Scripture.

This, however, is hardly an accurate reflection of what takes place when the harmony of faith is used as an exegetical tool. After all, it is still the interpreter (and not God) who does the actual interpretation, and it is still the interpreter (and not God) who decides which passages should be used to interpret other passages. A strong element of subjectivity in this process can neither be avoided nor denied.

For example, it is said that the clear passages should be used to interpret the obscure passages, but who determines which passages are clear and which are obscure? For the Calvinist, Romans 8:31-39 is clear and Hebrews 6:4-6 is obscure, but for the Arminian just the opposite is true. One interpreter insists that “the clearer, more general proclamation of Galatians 3:28 rightly serves as a foundation principle against which the more obscure text of 1 Timothy 2:8-15 can be interpreted” (Ronald Pierce), but others would disagree.

Similarly, if the interpreter comes to passage A and decides to interpret it with passages B and C, one might legitimately ask why he chose these passages instead of passages D and E. Regardless of the answer, in the final analysis it must be admitted that the interpreter himself – and not God – is the one who makes this decision. Therefore, to say that Scripture is interpreting Scripture – and therefore that God is determining the meaning of

His own words—is a naïve assessment which may give the interpreter a false sense that he is objectively honoring the authority of the Word.

- **It tends to lead to eisegesis in which the meaning of one passage is read into another.**

Even though advocates of using the harmony of faith as an exegetical tool seek to guard against this, it is impossible to deny that this approach inevitably leads to reading meaning into a text that is not inherent in the text itself. For when one passage is used to inform the meaning of another, it often brings with it meaning that is nowhere to be found in the original passage under consideration. For a clear example of this, see Appendix 1: “Free Grace Theology and Matthew 7:21-23.”

- **It tends to shield the interpreter from much-needed doctrinal correction and refinement.**

No interpreter is beyond the need of doctrinal correction and refinement. The use of the harmony of faith in the exegetical process, however, tends to prevent the interpreter from receiving this correction and refinement. In other words, when the interpreter deliberately steers himself away from an interpretation of the text that contradicts his theological position—and does so in the name of the harmony of faith—he may be suppressing the unique contribution made by the passage and thereby insulating himself from truth which would challenge his doctrinal beliefs.

In this way, the principle of interpreting every passage “in light of Scripture as a whole” can end up meaning: “Interpret every passage *in light of my doctrinal beliefs*.” In this approach, the theological system of the interpreter becomes the lens through which he reads the Bible, and therefore he tends to see in Scripture only what he already believes. As Daniel Fuller writes, “So long as the exegesis of biblical passages is conducted by such harmony-of-faith hermeneutics, it would be difficult for systematic theology to be nourished and corrected by exegetical considerations from the biblical text.”

The danger here is even greater for those who single out certain parts of Scripture as the norm by which other parts are to be interpreted in the name of the harmony of faith. This approach is reflected in the words of W. Ward Gasque, who opposes the traditional understanding of the role of women in the church, writing: “Galatians 3:28 is the necessary theological starting place for any discussion on the role of women in the church.... Other texts must not be used to undermine this fundamental theological affirmation.” In taking this approach, the interpreter may be shutting himself off from that which he

most needs to learn and ensuring that he continues in the error he currently embraces.

- **If often denies the adequacy of a passage to communicate effectively on its own.**

If it is absolutely essential for the interpreter to read a given passage of Scripture in the light of other passages, the implication is that the initial passage is not able to communicate effectively on its own. (The exception here would be if the biblical author is clearly building upon what Walter Kaiser refers to as “antecedent theology” – see below for more on this.)

For example, if Galatians 3 cannot be understood apart from the informing role of Romans 4, what does this say about the text of Galatians 3? Were Paul’s readers left in the dark until they were able to access his epistle to the Romans? If the key to the meaning in Galatians 3 is found in Romans 4, can it be said that Paul communicated effectively to the Galatians who were desperately in need of his instruction? If Mark 8:34 needs to be understood in the light of Romans 6:1-13, were the original hearers of Jesus left in the dark regarding how exactly to “come after” Him because they lacked the Pauline teaching of Romans 6? If the Gospel of John is the “key” to understanding the Synoptic Gospels, was Luke unable to accomplish his purpose of communicating to Theophilus “the exact truth about the things [he had] been taught” (Luke 1:4)? If Exodus through Deuteronomy must be understood in terms of Paul’s view of the law, was the nation of Israel left with an inaccurate understanding of what God had communicated to them through Moses?

A given passage may not be immediately clear, and much diligence and study may be needed to yield a correct interpretation. But nonetheless, God was able to communicate effectively through His chosen instruments to meet the spiritual needs of His people at given times throughout the progress of revelation. The way in which the harmony of faith is used should reflect this reality.

- **It often serves as a replacement for some or all of the exegetical process.**

As Robert Thomas observes, using the harmony of faith as an exegetical tool can become a scapegoat for cramped schedules that don’t allow adequate time to diligently study a given passage of Scripture: “We are so prone to fall back on our own systems for the answer and thereby short-change the investigative process. In doing so we rob ourselves of valuable discoveries that could greatly enhance [our understanding] of Scripture.”

It is difficult enough for the interpreter of Scripture to remain diligent without the temptation to gravitate toward an approach in which the harmony of faith “is substituted to provide sufficient evidence for a certain interpretation of a passage” (H. Wayne Johnson). Whether or not it is deliberate, the search for a “clearer” passage may often serve as an excuse to forego the painstaking process of clarifying the meaning of an “unclear” passage through the grammatical-historical method of interpretation.

III. The Harmony of Faith as a Post-Exegetical Check

This entails using the harmony of faith as a final consideration in which the interpreter asks: “Is it impossible to harmonize this interpretation with the clear and unified teaching elsewhere in Scripture?”

If the answer is “Yes,” then the interpreter must “return for further study and weighing of exegetical evidence to the passage which stands alone as contradictory” (Thomas).

If the answer is “No,” then the interpretation is allowed to stand and no other texts are brought to bear upon it. With this approach, the value of the harmony of faith is seen to be negative (i.e., vetoing a possible interpretation after exegesis is completed) rather than positive (i.e., letting other passages actually inform the text under consideration during the process of exegesis).

THE STRENGTHS OF THIS APPROACH:

- **It effectively guards the interpreter from interpretations that contradict the teaching of Scripture elsewhere in the Bible.**

In other words, using the harmony of faith as a post-exegetical check successfully achieves the primary purpose of the harmony of faith as originally intended – “No part of Scripture may be interpreted in such a way as to bring it into contradiction with another part of Scripture.” In this way, this second approach retains the primary strength of the first approach while avoiding most of its weaknesses.

- **It minimizes the amount of subjectivity in the exegetical process.**

As Thomas observes, this approach reduces to a minimum “the danger of imposing on a passage a meaning that God or the human writer never intended to be there. When a passage is allowed to speak for itself, our

understanding of Scripture will be much richer through each part's being allowed to speak for itself. The limitations imposed by personal considerations will have been drastically reduced." As Daniel Fuller asks: "How else can the principle of *sola scriptura* be realized unless we seek to remain silent and let each biblical writer speak for himself, in his own terms?"

Even H. Wayne Johnson, who argues against using the harmony of faith as a post-exegetical check, recognizes this advantage: "There are certainly benefits to be realized from this type of approach. Most obviously, grammatico-historical exegesis is taken seriously and allowed to produce results that in theory may conflict with the existing harmony of faith. Exegesis is delivered from slavery to systematic theology and prevailing understandings of the harmony of faith. The harmony of faith can no longer dictate exegetical method or act as a substitute for exegesis. Doctrinal affirmations must be demonstrated based upon valid exegetical method. In theory, Scripture is allowed to speak with full authority to our limited understanding of Biblical revelation."

- **It drives the interpreter to greater diligence in the exegetical process.**

As Daniel Fuller observes, "When we cannot quickly escape from passages running counter to our theological presuppositions by an harmony-of-faith procedure, then we are driven to hear out a biblical writer with an intensity that is not otherwise possible." In this way, using the harmony of faith as a post-exegetical check tends to drive the interpreter to be more diligent in his study of God's Word.

THE OBVIOUS QUESTION: When *is* it appropriate to consult other passages of Scripture during the process of exegesis?

- Consult the immediate context of the passage under consideration.
- Consult the use of individual words as they are used in other passages.
- Consult the use of grammatical constructions as they are used in other passages.

- Consult the “antecedent theology” of the passage under consideration (Kaiser).
 - The use of technical terms
 - Direct references to previous events
 - Indirect allusions to previous events
 - Direct or indirect citations of antecedent Scripture
 - References to the divine covenants of Scripture

First, the interpreter must consult the immediate context of the passage he is studying. This certainly involves looking to other passages, especially the one just prior to the passage under consideration.

Second, as Thomas notes, “It is . . . perfectly legitimate and even necessary to study individual words and grammatical constructions in various passages where they occur. Without this resource the interpreter would be helpless. This is how he derives information for use in the grammatico-historical method. But this is far different from transferring the total teaching of one passage to another passage which seems to be similar” (Thomas, “Introduction to Exegesis,” 22). It is also far different from interpreting one passage in the light of another.

Third, as Kaiser argues, when the interpreter comes across (1) technical terms, (2) direct references or indirect allusions to a previous event in the progress of revelation, (3) direct or indirect citations of quotations from antecedent Scripture, or (4) references to covenants in the text under consideration, it is valid to look to the corresponding texts that are chronologically antecedent to that text (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching* [Grand Rapids:

Baker, 1981], 137). For example, if the interpreter is studying Matthew 24:15 and seeking to understand the phrase “the abomination of desolation,” it is perfectly valid for him to refer back to Daniel 9:27, 11:31, and 12:11 during the exegetical process (cf. Johnson, “Premillennialism Introduced: Hermeneutics,” 19).

As Kaiser notes elsewhere, “we would require that this antecedent theology be made an issue in the exegesis of a passage only when the target text specifically quoted, clearly alluded to, or openly utilized that theological principle from an earlier text as an illustration or in some other overt manner” (Kaiser, “Evangelical Hermeneutics,” 176; emphasis added). This will safeguard against importing meaning not intended by the author of the text under consideration. Incidentally, while this writer affirms Kaiser’s approach, he is not comfortable with his designation “the harmony of antecedent Scripture,” for it doesn’t seem to reflect adequately the narrow scope within which Kaiser intends it to function.

Example:

Question: How are we to understand Romans 3:28 and James 2:24?

Romans 3:28 For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

James 2:24 You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

Is James saying that one can only be in right standing with God through works and faith? Is Paul saying the exact opposite?

Answer: Context is key. What was James’ context? Professing believers arguing that a transformed life is not essential to evidence genuine salvation.

What was Paul’s? To emphasize the point that works are not efficacious to accomplish justification. Rather, justification is a declaration of righteousness by the grace of God through the Person and finished work of Christ.