

Article

Dirk Philips' Letter and Spirit: An Anabaptist Contribution to Reformation Hermeneutics

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Abstract: Dirk Philips provides an explanation of how a Christian should interpret Scripture in his *Enchiridion*. Such chapters as “The Sending of Preachers and Teachers,” “The Tabernacle of Moses,” and “Of Spiritual Restitution” provide the clearest picture for students of this Anabaptist hermeneutic, a hermeneutic which interprets all of Scripture through the dichotomy of the letter and the Spirit, united in their central theme, Christ and the Church, a reading that can only be found through a hermeneutic of obedience.

Keywords: Dirk Philips; hermeneutic; obedience; interpretation; scripture; Anabaptist

1. Introduction

Dirk Philips remains a lesser known theological figure of the Reformation, overshadowed even within the Anabaptist movement by Menno Simons. This is a pity because Philips provides perhaps the most systematic explication of an Anabaptist hermeneutic of the Scriptures. Becoming an Anabaptist in 1533 at the age of 29, he lived another 35 years preaching and teaching in that tradition in Northern Germany and the Low Countries, a remarkably long time considering the dangers of persecution. In his *Enchiridion*, a compilation of his works collected and edited by him before his death, Philips presents not only a treasure trove of examples of how he uses the Bible to support his arguments, but he goes even further to explain in detail how a Christian should handle the Holy Word. As students can see particularly in his chapters “The Sending of Preachers and Teachers,” “The Tabernacle of Moses,” and “Of Spiritual Restitution,” this hermeneutic reads all of Scripture to center on Christ and the Church, a reading established in the dichotomy of the letter and the Spirit of the text through a hermeneutic of obedience.

2. Letter and Spirit

On the most fundamental level, Dirk Philips argues that the Scriptures can be read for the meaning of the letter, as presented in the Old Testament, and the meaning of the Spirit, as presented in the New Testament. The letter represents what one might call the historical reading. This reading views the events portrayed in the Old Testament as historical events recorded by men through the work of the Holy Spirit. This reading is true, so far as it goes. Philips would be the last to deny that God created the heavens and the earth, that Moses parted the Red Sea, or that Solomon built the temple. However, this reading for the meaning of the letter is insufficient. It sees the types and figures without perceiving their object, the shadow but not the person. According to Philips, “Christ Jesus is the spirit and the substance of all the types and figures that have passed away, the end and fulfillment of the law of types, figures and shadows, but the beginning of the true substance and completeness... and all shadows and figures are fulfilled in him” [1]. “Therefore,” Philips concludes, “all things are changed in Christ and are transfigured and made new by him, that is, changed from the letter to the Spirit, from the carnal to the real, from the old to the new, from the figure into the true abiding substance...

from the transitory to the eternal and heavenly” ([1], p. 325). The truth of the letter reading is not denied, but it is not what brings life, and it is not the lasting and eternal. That is only found in the Spirit reading, a reading that sees the symbolic and figurative reality of the Old Testament pointing forward to Christ and the Church.

2.1. *The Letter of the Law and the Spirit of Christ*

As students of the Reformation will see, Philips is neither the first nor the last to use Paul’s words in II Corinthians 3 that the letter kills but the Spirit brings life as a broader framework to interpret Scripture. Philips argues that this division of letter and Spirit is between the Old and New Testaments:

The Anabaptists approached this expression from II Corinthians 3 in a quite different way. They followed Augustine in assuming that the primary point at issue in the discussion of this chapter was the relation between the Old and New Covenants. Thus when Paul said “the letter kills” he was referring primarily, if not exclusively, to the Old Testament and the letter of the Law there. He cannot have meant the New Testament writings or any literal observance of them because the New Testament letter does not kill but the words of Christ bring life [2].

The letter of the events of the Old Testament, although true, need to be reinterpreted by the Spirit in order to understand their greater meaning in light of Christ and the Church. As Ben Ollenburger points out, this claim is not so much the result of exegetical work as it is a basic hermeneutical assumption: “One of the pre-understandings of the Anabaptists which separated them from their environment was their sharp distinction between the Old and New Testaments. We call this a pre-understanding because it stands as a principle of exegesis, not a result of exegesis” [3]. This divide, and the spiritualizing interpretation that attends it, was fundamental to Philips’s hermeneutical work, and it helps to explain how he can sound to students at times like a hyper-literalist (when discussing paedobaptism in the New Testament) and at other moments like an uninhibited allegorist (when portraying Samson and Delilah as a prefiguration of Christ and his bride, the Church). His guiding hermeneutic allowed for both concrete, literal interpretations as well as spiritual allegorizing, as long as the former were interpretations of the New Testament and the latter of the Old [4].

2.2. *A Hermeneutic of Obedience*

But how does one read not only the letter but the Spirit of the Old Testament so as to understand the spiritual meaning therein? Philips gives a simple answer—you do not, the Spirit reveals it to you: “But now the figures of the old testament [sic] must be carefully examined and be understood, not according to human opinion, but just as they came from, were spoken and given by God through the Holy Spirit, so also must they, by the same Spirit, be revealed, taught and explained (2 Pet. 1:21)” ([1], p. 259). Only the Holy Spirit can teach the spiritual meaning, the deeper, fuller meaning of the Scriptures. The preacher merely passes on what he himself has been taught: “[T]he ministers of Christ, the teachers and leaders of his church, must have the Holy Ghost, by whom they must, first and above all things, be well instructed in the word of God” ([1], p. 180).

This, however, merely raises a new question for many students. How can one know what is taught by the Holy Spirit and what is human opinion, either in one’s own reading or in the teaching of others? Philips is again aware of the question and seeks to answer it. The origin of an interpretation, human or divine, is evidenced in the person’s life:

From these and similar passages of holy scripture it is easy to recognize the true teachers, especially so far as the true doctrine is concerned, namely if they teach the word of God rightly, whereby they seek the glory of God and the salvation of men, if they are spiritually minded, if they have renounced all earthly and perishable things . . . if they love God above all else and carry on his work without deceit and hypocrisy ([1], pp. 181–12).

Philips stresses that these external evidences demonstrate that the person is obedient to God and therefore is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Only in such a case can the Word of God be rightly understood and taught. As he notes later, “The holy scripture shows that a true teacher must bear fruit; for where the word of God is implanted in the human heart and proclaimed in the power of the Spirit, it must, according to its nature, be effective, active and fruitful” ([1], p. 184). The obedient life testifies to the power of the Spirit since it is its natural result, and only with the power of the Spirit can the Scriptures be known in their Spirit as well as their letter.

This behavior is contrasted to those who are not indwelt by the Spirit, and who thus cannot hope to rightly teach the Word:

Since, then, an ungodly man cannot teach aright, and he is really an ungodly man who transgresses and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, as John says (2 John 1:9), it follows incontrovertibly that no one can teach God’s word aright unless he himself abides in Christ and in his doctrine. But no one may understand the doctrine of Christ, much less abide therein, except through the Holy Ghost; and no one has the Holy Ghost but those who are no longer carnally minded, but spiritually minded... Therefore whoever has not died unto sin, and does not live unto righteousness, has not the Spirit of God. But whoever has not the Spirit of God does not comprehend the word of God, and cannot discern spiritual things ([1], pp. 183–34).

For Philips, the obedient life, which is also the work of the Spirit, is inseparable from a right understanding of the Word of God, which must be understood spiritually, not merely in its letter. The division of letter and Spirit therefore leads to a hermeneutic of obedience, where obedience is a necessary prerequisite to understanding.

3. A Spiritual Reading

Philips does not end his hermeneutical discussion with this prerequisite. He wishes to go further and provide an example of a reading of the Old Testament that reveals the Spirit and not merely the letter of the text. He does so in both the history of the Old Testament as well as through its objects.

3.1. *History as Symbol*

Philips takes up the history of the Old Testament in order to show that, when read by the Spirit, it symbolically points toward Christ and the Church. He begins with creation, saying, “In the first place, in Christ Jesus has been restored the creation of heaven and earth; for God has made new heavens, namely, the believers, in whom God dwells... [and] the new earth, that is, the hearts of Christians, into which the seed of the word of God has been sown (Matt. 13:8)” ([1], p. 326). The creation story is not denied, but a deeper meaning of the heavens, the sun, and the earth is given for the edification of Christians.

Similarly, the union of Adam and Eve takes on a new spiritual meaning: “Moreover, the symbolical wedlock between Adam and Eve is also spiritually restored in Christ Jesus; for he is the second and new Adam, and his bride who has been taken from his side... is the spiritual Eve, the mother of all believing Christians” ([1], p. 329). As one can see, Philips borrows heavily from New Testament explanations of Old Testament symbols, seeking to maintain an apostolic interpretation.

According to Philips, “Christ is the true, spiritual Noah, the preacher of righteousness, and the members of his household are the children of God (Matt. 12:49)... he has hereby also built an ark, that is, the holy Christian church for the protection and preservation of all believing souls” ([1], p. 330). Obviously, for Philips, a running theme in each of these narratives is Christ, but it is noteworthy to also observe the Church, here explicitly in the ark, but also earlier represented in the obedient children of the second Adam, the second Eve, and the heavens of creation. Philips is presenting a reading that places Christ as symbolically at the center of each story, but Christ is almost always accompanied by his Church.

As he continues his spiritualized reading of Old Testament history, he takes up Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the two covenants seen in the two wives, Sarah and Hagar, and of course, the description of Melchisedec. Jesus is also the true Jacob, the true Joseph, the true Moses, the paschal lamb, and the pillar of fire and clouds, David and Solomon. Even less noble figures like Samson are taken up:

This figure [Samson] is spiritually fulfilled in Christ, for he is the true Nazarene, the holy son of the Most High..., and the Judge of the Israel of God, who took unto himself the heathen and choose therefrom a church and gathered it by the preaching of the gospel... He overcame the young lion, the adversary of Christians, that is, Satan... with the jawbone of an ass, that is, with the uneducated apostles, who in the eyes of the world were as stupid as asses, he vanquished the uncircumcised of heart ([1], pp. 346–47).

Philips even makes an effort to weave in unflattering elements from the Old Testament, like the heathen bride, so as to symbolically foreshadow the spiritual fulfillment of these stories. He concludes by saying:

From all this it is evident that all things are restored and shall be repeated, spiritually, in Christ Jesus and in the time of his dominion until the time of his coming and appearing, as the apostle says (I Peter 1:5; Acts 3:20). Therefore we need not expect any other restitution or repetition of all things in any other than in a spiritual sense in Christ Jesus who is the Alpha and Omega ([1], p. 362).

The political dimensions of this passage can be made clear to students by pointing out that Philips, in addition to expressing a particular biblical hermeneutic, is also addressing what he perceives to be a contemporary misreading of scripture. In the passage above, Philips is challenging the Anabaptist rebels of Münster, who had in 1534 overthrown their princes in order to bring about a theocracy in the style of the Old Testament. According to Philips, using the Old Testament to justify such behavior fails to appreciate the spiritual meaning of the Old Testament and sees only the letter of the Law. The time for establishing theocracies is over, Philips argues, and we are to understand such happenings in the Old Testament for their spiritual rather than their literal meanings. Thus, he concludes, “All that the prophets have prophesied and declared regarding [...] the restitution of all things must be thus understood and be changed from the letter to the Spirit” ([1], p. 363).

3.2. *Objects as Symbol*

Philips also takes up the objects contained in these Old Testament histories for spiritual reinterpretation, most notably the tabernacle of Moses. The tabernacle serves Philips’ hermeneutical purpose both as a symbol to be spiritually understood in terms of the New Testament as well as a symbolic representation of the division between letter and Spirit embodied in the two testaments. The tabernacle of Moses prefigures the entirety of Scripture, and in its division between Law and gospel, letter and Spirit, it prefigures the whole interpretive work Philips believes is essential to a correct understanding. It is important to note that he does not pit Law against gospel, but explicitly states that they are in agreement when rightly read, just as the letter and the Spirit, which he has identified with them, are also ultimately in agreement. The letter of the Law may end, but its Spirit continues and points to the fullness of the New Testament revelation.

In addition to this larger symbolism, Philips argues that everything within the tabernacle was figurative both for that time and for the future: “All God’s dealings with Moses, from the tabernacle or tent and its preparation, equipment and adornment, was figurative, to the time of the Law, which was present, and to the time of grace and truth which was to come and which appeared by Jesus Christ” ([1], p. 344). The repetitive sacrifices symbolized the incompleteness of the Law. The yearly entrance of the high priest into the holy of holies pointed to Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice. The Levites typified the Old Testament while the high priest typified Christ. The cherubim which covered the mercy seat represented the two testaments, both pointing to Christ. Every figure eventually results in a Christological foreshadowing, most often with an ecclesiological accompaniment.

3.3. Christ and His Church

Douglas Shantz proposes that as Christ is the central motif in interpretation for Luther, so ecclesiology is for Dirk Philips. According to Schantz, “Gerhard Ebeling and Walter Loewenich have both emphasized the Christocentric focus of Luther’s use of Scripture. In contrast, Dirk’s central hermeneutic principle was ‘ecclesiocentric,’ focusing on the Body of Christ, the church. This theme ran through both testaments” [5]. However, a careful reading of Philips’s instructions on hermeneutics suggests a more nuanced stance. Christ is so central to the figures and images of the Old Testament in Philips’s readings. Every story and every object can be traced to him and is spiritually fulfilled by him. I would agree that Philips does emphasize the Church’s place in these images as well, but never outside of the context of the Church’s relationship to Christ. They are always paired together, Christ and his bride. Every one of Philips’s spiritual readings of the Old Testament include Christ. Many include the Church, but the Church is never symbolized without Christ also being symbolized in the same story or image.

This dual focus is important in that it helps reveal not only how Philips thinks one should read Scripture but also because it reveals his understanding of the close relationship between Christ and the Church. One cannot be a part of the Church without being a follower of Christ, and one cannot follow Christ apart from the Church.

4. Conclusions

Dirk Philips’s hermeneutic interprets all of Scripture through the dichotomy of the letter and the Spirit, united in their central theme, Christ and the Church, a reading that can only be found through a hermeneutic of obedience. His entire treatment of Scripture hinges upon the concept of the letter and the Spirit. The Old Testament is the letter, prefiguring what is to come in the Spirit, Christ and the Church as revealed by the New Testament. The Old Testament must therefore be spiritually and allegorically interpreted in light of this higher, fuller, and clearer revelation. The New Testament does not require an allegorical interpretation because it speaks of the spiritual reality plainly in Christ. The Holy Spirit is key to understanding the spiritual realities of both Testaments, whether spoken of plainly, as in the New, or in figures, as in the Old. The necessity of the Spirit in interpretation leads Philips to develop a hermeneutic of obedience, since no one can possess the Spirit if he does not abide in Christ, and to abide in Christ is to obey his commands. Therefore, the life of the interpreter plays a key role in validating his interpretation. While this hermeneutic is unfamiliar to most students, its complexity and power demonstrates the significant, if often forgotten, contribution of the Anabaptist theologians to the study of the Reformation and to later evangelical and pietistic movements.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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