

Figures of Speech in Scriptures

(by Bob Pulliam)

Many people never really think about the fact that there are figures of speech in the Bible. In fact, few of us really think about them in our everyday use of language. They actually fill our speech every day, and we should not be surprised to find a great number of them in the Bible. Here are some of the more common examples in scripture:

The Simile...

In Matthew 3:16 we read, "He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove." The words *like a* tell us that the Spirit was not a dove, but *similar* to a dove. This is a *simile*. It likens one thing to another. It is also seen in Matthew 23:27, where Jesus likened the Scribes and Pharisees to whitewashed sepulchers.

Metaphor...

The *metaphor* is a very simple figure of speech to recognize. But when it is not recognized properly it causes doctrinal error. The metaphor represents one thing as something else. It differs from a *simile* in that the simile only makes them similar. The metaphor speaks of them as being the same. For example, Jesus told the Pharisees to "Go and tell that fox..." (Lk 13:31f). The one intended by Jesus was Herod, a human being. But He spoke of Herod as if he were actually a fox. Jesus told the disciples, "Ye are the salt of the earth" (Mt 5:13). Not *like* salt... He said they were the salt. Jesus also said, "I am the door of the sheep" (Jn 10:7). Jesus was not a literal door. But He made a powerful point about Him being the point of access for the sheep.

A doctrinal error arises by ignoring a figure of speech in Matthew 26:26-28. There we read:

"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body.' Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.'"

Now some would take this to mean that the bread and cup were the literal flesh and blood of Jesus. But why ignore the natural metaphor here? Especially when *that* concept of Jesus' words are not understood and taught later in the epistles. Quite the contrary. Paul restated the words of Jesus by inspiration and pointed out the purpose for these emblems (I Cor 11:24f). It was not to literally ingest the body and blood of Jesus. It was a memorial. "This do in remembrance of Me." Can we miss the purpose of the emblems in that statement? It is important to recognize metaphors in scripture.

Metonymy...

This is the use of one name or object for another. We use it today, although most of us never think of the technical term for it. Someone might say, "I read Shakespeare last night." Did William Shakespeare come back to life and have readable text on his body? We understand the speaker as meaning the works of Shakespeare. Jewish speakers and writers did the same thing with Moses and the prophets. In Luke 16 Abraham spoke of hearing Moses and the prophets. The had been dead for many years. Did he not mean to say, hear the writings of Moses and the prophets. James spoke of preaching and reading Moses in

Acts 15:21. Paul said that "Moses is read" (II Cor 3:15). In II Corinthians 3:15, we find Paul using the word Spirit in place of the new covenant that was given by the Spirit. In Matthew 10:34 Jesus used the word sword in place of the violence that is caused by the sword.

Synecdoche...

There's a mouthful. The synecdoche (sin-neck-doe-key) puts just a portion in place of the whole, or puts the whole for a part. It would be like having a list that you are referring to frequently in speaking to someone, and only using the first (or most important) item in the list to keep from repeating the whole list.

Luke tells about Philip teaching the Ethiopian in Acts 8. We are told that Philip "preached Jesus to him." (v35) Did he only tell him about Jesus and nothing else? We know that he told him more, because as they traveled down the road, the Ethiopian said, "See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?" (v36) Preaching Jesus included teaching on baptism. But it only says that he preached Jesus. Paul told the Romans that he served God in his spirit (Rom 1:9). Did he only serve God with his spirit, or with his body also? Many times people in the Bible are told to believe on Jesus to be saved. Is that all they need to do? I know of no one who teaches that. At the very least, you'll hear preachers tell people to pray a prayer of faith. Of course, they don't have the picture straight on how a person is saved as revealed in the New Testament. Nowhere after Jesus' death do we find an alien sinner being saved by simply praying to the Lord.

Hyperbole...

That's a fancy word for "exaggeration to make a point." Oriental cultures used this figure much more often than we do. The Israelites spoke of themselves as being like grasshoppers before the sons of Anak (Num 13:33). When we find that their height was only on the order of ten feet tall, we know that this was an exaggeration to make their point (their fear was their point). People want to take John's words quite literally when he wrote, "And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen." (Jn 21:25) Even if Jesus had stayed busy 24 hours a day for three years, and every act was written out, they would not literally fill the world. John is using a hyperbole to make a point. His point is that Jesus did an awful lot more than what he had recorded in his gospel.

Conclusion...

Many other figures of speech can be found in scripture. The fable, parable, proverb, personification, sarcasm, etc... It is important to realize that figures of speech do exist in the Bible, and that if they are missed, we can misconstrue an author's words.