

## GENRE & INTERPRETATION

- I. Definition: Genre: a category of . . . literary composition characterized by a particular style, form or content. (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*)

The observation and significance of literary genre is crucial in valid interpretation of literature in general and Scripture in particular. Different types of literature must be interpreted differently.

- II. Types of Genre: In Scripture there are three circles of genre, each encompassing a successively larger scale.

- A. Figures of speech. Figures of speech are common to all literature and speech, so common in fact we often do not recognize them as such. While there are a myriad of types of figures of speech (as an examination of Bullinger's *Figures of Speech in the Bible* will show) we will mention just a few here.

- 1 . Simile e.g. "the glory of the Lord was *like* a consuming fire. (Ex 24:17)
2. metaphor : "Ephraim is a cake." (Hosea 7:8)
3. hyperbole: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose the World itself could not contain the books that would be written." (John 21:25)
4. Other figures: ellipsis, paradox, irony, synecdoche, zeugma, euphemism, brachyology, litotes, meiosis, oxymoron, personification, paronomasia, metonymy.

- B. Special literary expression

1. parables
2. allegories
3. fables
4. myths
5. riddles

- C. Broad literary genre

1. historical narrative
2. dramatic epic
3. didactic
- 4 . poetry

## 5. wisdom literature

- III. Intrinsic genre: In addition to the broad and narrow types of genre noted above there is additional another different type of genre which interpreters call *intrinsic genre*. Intrinsic genre is unique to each piece of literature, in that it is a distillation of the message of any piece of literature into a concise statement or paragraph which is applicable *only* to that piece of literature

E.D. Hirsch observes concerning the concept of intrinsic genre:

. . . it is obvious that not only understanding but also speaking must be governed and constituted by a sense of the whole utterance. How does a speaker manage to put one word after another unless his choices and usages are governed by a controlling conception? There must be some kind of overarching notion which controls the temporal sequence of speech, and this controlling notion of the speaker, like that of the interpreter must embrace a system of expectations. For the words that are to be said are not yet present before the speaker's mind, and the words he has said have gone by. (*Validity in Interpretation*, 78)

What Hirsch is saying here that there is for the speaker/writer a controlling conception/idea *which can be discovered and verbalized*. This controlling conception involves a *basic concept* the writer is trying to communicate. For the interpreter to understand the author he must proceed under the same system of expectations. That is to say, the interpreter first perceives the meaning of a piece of literature as belonging to a particular type. It is within the framework of this type of literature that the interpreter organizes the particulars of the passage into a coherent pattern of understanding. This coherent pattern of understanding then refines and particularizes the piece of literature under consideration.

According to Hirsch "intrinsic genre *is that sense of the whole by means of which an interpreter can correctly understand any part in its determinacy*. (Hirsch, 86)

From the perspective of the interpreter genre is heuristic (i.e. approximate). Unlike heuristic tools in other disciplines however, genre cannot be discarded once it has served its function. Rather, it is at this point that the interpreter enters the hermeneutical circle. The parts of a piece of literature can only be understood in relation to the whole. Paradoxically, the whole can only be understood in relation to its constituent parts. The process of determining genre is, for the interpreter, a spiral. As he comes to a text, he brings certain expectations. In the process of examining the text these expectations are either confirmed, modified or overthrown completely. Clues in the text will cause the interpreter to "guess" at the controlling meaning of the text. Closer examination of the details will enable the interpreter to "polish" his understanding until finally (ideally) he has grasped the meaning the author was trying to communicate in his work. When this occurs we have what Anthony Thistleton calls "a fusion of the `two horizons'"(the author's and the interpreter's), or what Bally calls the *dedoublement de la personnalit e*

Thus discovering the intrinsic genre of a text is the *sine qua non* of accurate interpretation. It is the refined, sharpened and honed intrinsic genre statement that will serve as the tool for determining all the meanings of a particular piece of literature.

