

# Hermeneutics

## Week 1 – The Basics and Hermeneutical Journey

**Introduction:** The Study of Hermeneutics is important because the Bible is being read by people all over the world and has subsisted for the last few thousand years. In it are dealt with the greatest issues and truths that can be known. Duvall and Hays put it this way, “People read it because it is an important book, dealing with the big issues of life—God, eternal life, death, love, sin, and morals. People read it because they believe that in the Bible, God speaks to them through written words. The Bible encourages us, lifts our spirits, comforts us, guides us, chides us, builds us up, gives us hope, and brings us close to the living God.”<sup>1</sup>

### I. History of Hermeneutics

1. Hermeneutics has worked in different ways over time.
  - “Bible students over the centuries have taken various approaches to the Scriptures: literal, allegorical, traditional, rationalistic, and subjective.”<sup>2</sup>
2. Not because God's word changed, but because what man believed or understood about the Bible, the world, and biblical times changed.
  - A. This divergence in understanding and explanation of hermeneutics isn't new to Christianity.
    - i. In Judaism, The earliest followers heard the word of the Lord and seemed to understand. However, throughout Jewish history, there were a few times where the Israelites seemed to lose accessibility or knowledge of their own Scriptures.
    - ii. In the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, it was necessary for the Israelites not only to hear the word but to have its meaning explained.
      - 1) According to Zuck, this could not only explain the meaning but also do so from Hebrew to Aramaic.<sup>3</sup>
      - 2) This re-focus on the word would be extended and renewed even up to and through the times of Jesus.
    - iii. By the time of Jesus, there were two major interpretational streams. Those are the houses of Shammai and Hillel.
      - 1) Hillel focused heavily on love and humility, but he had 7 rules for interpreting.
        - a) The first has to do with inferences from the less to the more important and vice versa.
        - b) The second is inference by analogy.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, [\*Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible\*](#), Fourth Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

- c) The third is “constructing a family,” that is, where a group of passages has a resemblance in contents, the group is regarded as having a common character derived from the meaning of the principal passage of the group. Thus, what is not explicit in any one of the passages may be interpreted in the light of the principal passage.
  - d) The fourth is the same as the third but is limited to two passages.
  - e) The fifth rule was based on a relation between the General and the Particular.
  - f) The sixth was exposition by means of another similar passage.
  - g) The seventh was a deduction from the context.<sup>4</sup>
- 2) Shammai in comparison, was very rigid in interpretation
- † **Nehemiah 8:8** – *So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.*

- B. Early church fathers, especially in the Alexandrian area, tended toward an allegorical kind of theory.
- i. Some more notable proponents of these ideals would be people like Origen and, at times, Augustine.
  - ii. “Allegorizing is searching for a hidden or a secret meaning underlying but remote from and unrelated in reality to the more obvious meaning of a text. In other words, the literal reading is a sort of code, which needs to be deciphered to determine the more significant and hidden meaning. In this approach, the literal is superficial; the allegorical is the true meaning.”<sup>5</sup>
  - iii. Some may challenge those who struggle with allegorizing scripture by saying well Paul allegorized scripture.

<i>Allegorizing</i>	<i>Paul’s Allegory</i>
1. The historical meaning is insignificant (if even true).	1. The historical meaning is significant and true.
2. The “deeper” meaning is the true meaning.	2. Parallels are drawn to make a point.
3. The “deeper” meaning is the “exposition” of the record.	3. Paul did not say the allegory was the “exposition” of Genesis 16.

<sup>4</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 29.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

4. Everything in the Old Testament may be allegorized.	4. When Paul allegorized, he said he was doing so. <sup>6</sup>
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- C.** The Middle Ages tended to continue this kind of hermeneutic with primary commentaries used from the early Latin fathers. There were eventual beginnings of change back towards a more literal interpretation again.
- i. Gregory the Great (540-604), “when talking about the book of Job, said, “the 3 friends are heretics, Job’s 7 sons are the 12 Apostles, the 7,000 sheep are innocent thoughts, the 3,000 camels are vain notions, the 500 pair of oxen are virtues, and the 500 donkeys are lustful inclinations.”<sup>7</sup>
  - ii. Rashi (1040–1105) was a Jewish literalist of the Middle Ages, who had a great influence on Jewish and Christian interpretations by his emphasis on Hebrew grammar and syntax. He wrote commentaries on all the Old Testament except Job and Chronicles. He stated that “the literal must stand no matter what that might mean for the traditional.”<sup>8</sup>
  - iii. John Wycliffe (1330-1384), “proposed several rules for Bible interpretation: (a) obtain a reliable text, (b) understand Scripture’s logic, (c) compare parts of Scripture with each other, (d) maintain a humble, seeking attitude so that the Holy Spirit can instruct (*The Truth of Holy Scripture*, 1377, pp. 194–205). Stressing the grammatical, historical interpretation of Scripture, Wycliffe wrote that “all things necessary in Scripture are contained in its proper literal and historical senses.”<sup>9</sup>
- D.** Around the time of the Reformation
- i. In the Reformation the Bible became the sole authority for belief and practice.
  - ii. The Reformers built on the literal approach of the Antiochene school and the Victorines.
  - iii. The Reformation was a time of social and ecclesiastical upheaval but, it was basically a hermeneutical reformation, a reformation in reference to the approach to the Bible.<sup>10</sup>
  - iv. “Martin Luther (1483–1546) wrote, “When I was a monk, I was an expert in allegories. I allegorized everything. But after lecturing on the Epistles of the

<sup>6</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 46.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Romans I came to have knowledge of Christ. For therein I saw that Christ is no allegory and I learned to know what Christ is.”<sup>11</sup>

- v. John Calvin (1509-1564), stressed the Christological nature of Scripture, the grammatical, historical method, exegesis rather than eisegesis (letting the text speak for itself rather than reading into the text what isn't there), the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit, and a balanced approach to typology.<sup>12</sup>
- E. Post reformation dealt with competing concepts of Pietism, Rationalism, Developmentalism, Liberalism, and fundamentalism.
  - i. Pietism - emerged as a reaction against nominal faith in German Lutheranism, emphasizing personal faith and the experience of God's grace in the believer's heart. The movement stressed heart religion, personal holiness, and a holistic Christian lifestyle
  - ii. Rationalism – Assigns undue authority to reason in matters of religion It appears in various forms, from denying supernatural revelation entirely to maintaining that revealed truths are comprehensible and demonstrable by human reason.<sup>13</sup>
  - iii. Developmentalism – this idea posited that theologies grow over time. Catholics often use this kind of thinking to defend assertions that are extrabiblical.
  - iv. Liberalism - rooted in the conviction that Christian theology must align with modern science and that faith must pass the tests of reason and experience rather than rest on authority alone.<sup>14</sup>
  - v. Fundamentalism – sought to affirm the fundamentals of the faith as the basis for functional Christianity including

## II. Foundations of Hermeneutics

### 1. Helpful definitions<sup>15</sup>

- A. Hermeneutics – Is the system by which one interprets the scripture and is often described as both an art and a science.
- B. Exegesis - The determination of the meaning of the biblical text in its historical and literary contexts.
- C. Homiletics - The science (principles) and art (task) by which the meaning and relevance of the biblical text are communicated in a preaching situation.
- D. Pedagogy - The science (principles) and art (task) by which the meaning and relevance of the biblical text are communicated in a teaching situation.

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<sup>11</sup> Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 1:34.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, ed. Marshall Shelley (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 462-463.

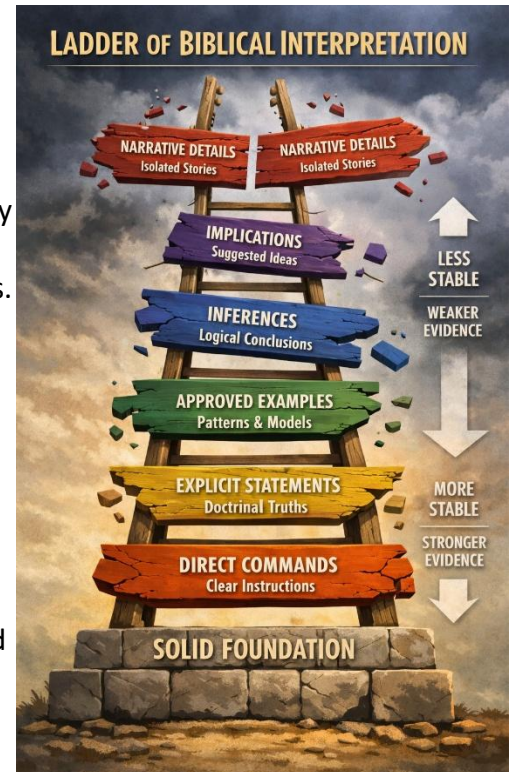
<sup>15</sup> Zuck, Basic Bible Interpretation, 20.

- E. Exposition -The communication of the meaning of the text along with its relevance to present-day hearers.
  - F. Accurate interpretation of the word (Hermeneutics), draws out the meaning of the text in its original contexts (Exegesis), and gives a viable basis for preaching (Homiletics) the truth of the Word of God and teaching it (Pedagogy) to others in a way that leaves the story not just in the past, but addresses its relevance for today (Exposition).
2. The Bible is God's Word
- † **Hebrews 1:1-2** – *God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets,<sup>2</sup> Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds;*
  - † **2 Peter 1:19-21** – *We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts:<sup>20</sup> Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation.<sup>21</sup> For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.*
3. God can communicate clearly and functionally
- † **Exodus 4:10-12** – *And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.<sup>11</sup> And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord?<sup>12</sup> Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.*
- A. Use a normal interpretation of scripture.
  - B. Understand that normal language includes taking people at their word, assuming people say what they mean, while allowing for the use of idioms, poetry, analogy, and metaphor. To ignore or abuse these is to intentionally not understand scripture.
  - C. According to Ray Lubeck Nearly 44% of the Bible is narrative, 33% is poetry, and 23% is discourse.<sup>16</sup>
4. God was speaking to a particular audience
- A. God's words must be read first in their original context
5. All of God's word is profitable for all time
- A. We cannot, as Marcion, the ancient heretic, suggested, get rid of the Old Testament or its connection to its original writers.<sup>17</sup>
  - † **2 Timothy 3:16-17** – *All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:<sup>17</sup> That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.*

<sup>16</sup> Ray Lubeck, *Reading the Bible for a Change: Understanding and Responding to God's Word* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2023), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 75–76.

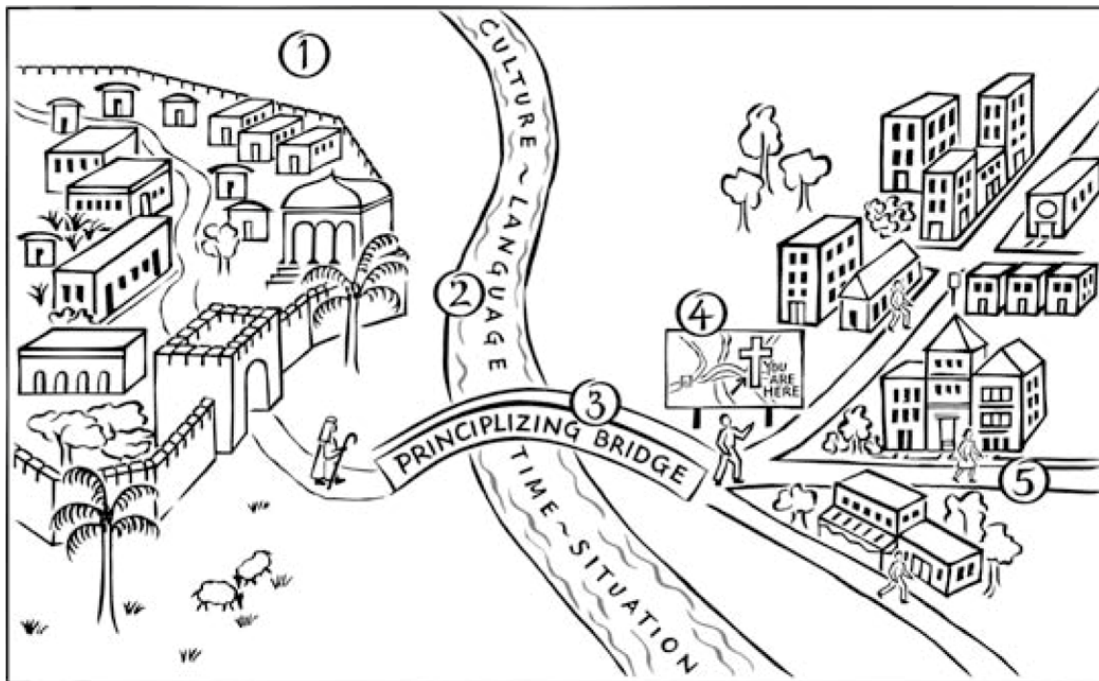
6. The Holy Spirit is required to properly interpret, obey, and enjoy the scriptures.
- A. This does not mean someone cannot follow the flow of an argument at times in the Bible, even if they are an unbeliever.
- † **Proverbs 1:7** – *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.*
- † **Proverbs 10:8** – *The wise in heart will receive commandments: but a prating fool shall fall.*
- B. It means their predisposition to disbelieve what is said will cause them to functionally fail to understand holistically and accept God as he presents Himself.
- † **1 Corinthians 2:13-14** – *Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.<sup>14</sup> But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*
7. The Spirit grows our understanding over time
- † **Philippians 1:9** – *And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment;*
8. Recognize your own finitude.
- A. If you are the first person to come up with an idea 2000 years into its study, you are probably wrong.
- B. Although we do have the Spirit of God, God made us – to live in community and allowed us to be in community – with many other Christians through history.
- C. We come to the scripture with our own preconceptions. We must be sure we minimize importing meaning and ideas from today that would be foreign to the reader's understanding.
9. Truth is gleaned from the Bible in several ways.
- A. Direct Commands – Imperatives
- B. Explicit statements – propositions
- C. Approved Examples – Patterns or Models
- D. Inference – Logical Conclusions
- E. Implication – meaning suggested but not directly stated
- F. Descriptions – Narratives
- G. Theological Theme – Keeps in mind big picture truths.
10. Doctrines should not be based on only 1 or 2 verses.
11. Use clearer passages on the same topic to help explain the more difficult ones.



### III. The Hermeneutical Journey

1. **Step 1:** Grasp the text in their town. What did the text mean to the original audience?
- A. This is highly observational and requires observing what the text says.
- B. It requires you to have some understanding of the speaker, the people, and the time.
- C. It also helps to understand what type of Literary Genre you are dealing with.

2. **Step 2:** Measure the width of the river to cross. What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?
  - A. Historical Context
  - B. cultural context
  - C. Language difference
  - D. Time
3. **Step 3:** Cross the principlizing bridge. What is the theological principle in this text?
  - A. What principles being addressed transcend time and culture?
  - B. How different in the current culture from the one we are studying?
4. **Step 4:** Consult the biblical map. How does our theological principle fit with the rest of the Bible?
  - A. Where does the text land in the Bible?
  - B. How can it be squared with what the Bible says elsewhere?
  - C. Context starts at the passage and moves outward (Forward and Back)
5. **Step 5:** Grasp the text in our town. How should individual Christians today live out the theological principles? <sup>18</sup>
  - A. Using the principles you have extrapolated, determine how those can be applied to people. These can be general or specific.
  - B. The more specific one gets, the more exclusive that truth seems to other people.
  - C. This is why the current audience matters in the choice of application.



**Conclusion:** In our class this term, we will practice the process and principles of Hermeneutics. As you open up your textbook, I hope you find the information helpful, the process fruitful, your understanding growing and your walk with the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>18</sup> Duvall and Hays, *Grasping God's Word*, 32.

### Bibliography

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