Biblical Interpretation and Hermeneutics

Biblical Interpretation and the Early Church

In early Church fathers grappled with how to rightly interpret Scripture in the face of heretical movements that twisted God's Word to support false teaching. From the first century forward, Christian leaders developed principled approaches to biblical interpretation that would preserve orthodox faith and combat error.

The Rule of Faith (First and Second Centuries)

The earliest Christians approached Scripture with what they called "the Rule of Faith" (regula fidei), a summary of apostolic teaching passed down from the apostles themselves. This rule functioned as an interpretive grid through which Scripture was read and understood.

Irenaeus of Lyon's (140-202 AD), who learned from Polycarp, who sat under the Apostle John, argued that true doctrine must come from apostolic tradition preserved in Scripture, not secret knowledge or novel interpretations. Against the Gnostics who alleged Scripture beyond recognition, Irenaeus insisted that Scripture must be interpreted according to the "Rule of Truth" received from the apostles.

In his masterwork "Against Heresies," Irenaeus wrote, "We have learned from others the plan of our salvation, then from those through whom the Gospel has come down to us, which they did at some time proclaim in public, and, at a later period, by the will of God, handed down to us in the Scriptures." For Irenaeus, Scripture was the "pillar and ground" of faith, the standard against which all teaching must be measured.

Christological Hermeneutics

The early Church read all of Scripture through the lens of Christ. Irenaeus insisted: "If one carefully reads the Scriptures, he will find there the word of Christ. He is indeed the hidden treasure in the field. The Bible indeed contains in the Scriptures of Christ." This Christocentric approach means the Old Testament was rarely between Scripture and God's people.

The Alexandrian and Antiochene Schools (Third & Fourth Centuries)

By the third-fourth century, two major schools of interpretation had emerged in the Church.

The Alexandrian School, led by Origen (c. 185-254 AD), emphasized allegorical interpretation. Origen believed Scripture contained multiple layers of meaning: literal, moral, and spiritual. He wrote that "the Scriptures were composed by the Spirit of God and that there has not only a meaning that is manifest but another meaning that is hidden as far as most people are concerned." While this method could yield rich spiritual insights, it also opened the door to interpretations not supported by leading Scripture.

The Antiochene School emphasized literal historical interpretation, insisting that the plain meaning of the text should predominate. This Antiochene recognized the historical reality of biblical events and sought to understand what the original authors intended their audiences to grasp.

Tertullian and Scriptural Clarity (Late Second/Early Third Century)

Tertullian (c. 155-220 AD) strongly defended Scripture's clarity and sufficiency against heretical teachers who claimed Scripture was too difficult for ordinary people to understand without their interpretations. He argued that diversity of doctrine is found, then, then, more the corrupters both of the Scriptures and the faith. Tertullian also regarded as existing" (Prescription Against Heretics 38). Tertullian insisted that authentic Christianity maintains fidelity to the apostolic testimony preserved in Scripture.

The early Church's hermeneutical principle arose not from abstract speculation but from the practical need to distinguish truth from error. Facing both external persecution and internal heresy, Christians clung to Scripture as their anchor, seeking to understand the gospel the Rule of Faith and always through the lens of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection.

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century represented a decisive return not only to biblical authority but to sound biblical interpretation. The Reformers rejected the allegorical excesses of the Middle Ages and insisted on the grammatical-historical method: understanding Scripture according to the normal meaning of words in their contexts.

Biblical Interpretation and the Reformation

Martin Luther and the Grammatical-Historical Method

Martin Luther (1483-1546) emphasized clarity and allegorical interpretation in his early years as an Augustinian monk but later rejected it forcefully. Luther insisted that the interpreter should seek the literal meaning of the passage and understand words within their contexts.

Luther demonstrated the allegorical approach in strong words:

> "Allegories are empty speculations and as it were the husks of Holy Scripture."
> Preface to the Old Testament, 1545

"Allegories is to juggle the Scripture."
Lectures on Genesis, 1535

> "The Scripture is to be retained in their simplest meaning even possible and is to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids."
> Lectures on Galatians, 1531 and 1535

"Allegories are unknown, absurd, inventions, wisdom, dust, rags."

Luther wrote that the Scripture "are to be retained in their simplest meaning even possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids."

Luther's Emphasis on Clarity (Perspicuity)

Luther believed Scripture's essential message is clear enough that ordinary believers can understand it without requiring the Church's magisterium to interpret for them. He wrote: "The Scriptures are the manger in which Christ lies." Yet Luther, of theology and practice must be measured against the standard of God's written Word, and the Word speaks clearly in these allegorically humble and powerful.

As the Diet of Worms (1521), Luther's famous stand exemplified his hermeneutical commitment. "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other. My conscience is captive to the Word of God."

Luther's Law and Authorial Intent

John Calvin's (1509-1564) periodical commentary, theological grounding for the Reformation's hermeneutical approach. Calvin argued that each text has one essential meaning to be discovered through careful study of the original languages, historical context, and grammatical structure.

Calvin wrote in the preface of his commentary on Romans: "It is the duty business of an interpreter to let the author say what he has meant, or at least what he is thought to have meant. The office of an interpreter is to disclose the grammatical-historical method, insists that meaning resides in the text as intended by the author, not in the interpreter's subjective feelings or creative imagination.

Calvin's Theological Principle: Scripture Interprets Scripture

Calvin emphasized that difficult passages should be interpreted in light of clearer passages. He rejected the Catholic practice of allowing church tradition to determine meaning and instead insisted that Scripture is its own best interpreter. The Holy Spirit who inspired Scripture also illuminates believers to understand it, but this illumination always works through the inspired text, not apart from it.

Calvin similarly rejected allegorical interpretation. He called them "frivolous games" and accused Origen and other allegorists of "torturing scripture, to twist poetic notions, from the true sense."

The Reformers' Legacy

Both Luther and Calvin, trained for law during their formative years, applied the hermeneutical principles necessary to interpret legal documents to Scripture. They recognized that words have stable meanings within historical contexts, that authors intend to communicate specific truths, and that interpreters be understood according to normal rules of language and grammar.

The Reformers' insistence on the grammatical-historical method rescued the Church from centuries of interpretation confusion. Their conviction that Scripture is God's authoritative Word led them to translate the Bible into vernacular languages, preach expository sermons, and establish a church life rooted in biblical education.

Biblical Interpretation and Mainstream Protestantism

Reformed (Calvinistic) Churches

Contemporary Reformed churches maintain the Reformation's commitment to the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. This approach, also called literal interpretation, seeks to understand the words of Scripture in their normal, natural, and contextual meanings within context.

According to Rolland McCune, "In this method, interpretation consists in finding the meaning of words according to grammar, syntax, and literary setting and in correlation with the rest of Scripture. In this normal or plain interpretation, the Bible is best allowed to speak for itself."

The Reformed interpretation regarding authorial intent is summarized in the phrase "sensus literalis." The Biblical text has an objective meaning grounded in authorial intent that must be discovered, not created, by the interpreter.

For John Piper, faithful interpretation requires both grammatical rigor and spiritual humility. "Our good, sinful grammatical arguments for what the text means outweighs every sanctified insight we have had over the meaning."

D. A. Carson has written extensively on hermeneutics, warning against both allegorical excess and modern approaches that deny objective meaning in the text. Carson emphasizes that while historical and cultural background is sometimes necessary to understand Scripture accurately, the Bible's central message remains clear.

Charismatic Churches

Charismatic and Pentecostal churches likewise affirm the grammatical-historical method while emphasizing the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in interpretation and application.

Sam Storms, a Reformed charismatic, provides comprehensive hermeneutical principles that balance Spirit dependence with rigorous exegesis. Storms teaches that it is both the privilege and responsibility of every Christian to interpret the Bible for himself/herself. This principle of private interpretation, based on the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, was articulated by Martin Luther in the 16th century.

Both Luther and Calvin, recognized that interpretation requires awareness of our subjective biases. "Interpreting the Bible is not to be compared to a man looking into a kitchen[], but to a life-in-love-fulfilled looking at another life in love."

Storms teaches three key hermeneutical principles:

1. The goal of the interpretation is to reproduce the sense or meaning which the biblical author intended for his original audience.

2. A text of Scripture can mean but one thing or the connection/context in which it is found, namely, what the author intended.

3. Each text is to be interpreted according to its literal sense," meaning "the meaning of a text is to be determined by the normal or accepted standards and rules of grammar, speech, syntax, and context.

For Storms, as for other Reformed charismatics, the grammatical-historical method does not diminish the Spirit's role but rather honors it. The Holy Spirit speaks through the text he inspired; therefore, rigorous exegesis and Spirit-dependent prayer work hand-in-hand.

Shared Commitments on Natural Hermeneutics

Whether Reformed or Charismatic, evangelical Christians in the West unite around the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. Both traditions reject allegorical excess, affirm that texts have objective meanings rooted in authorial intent, and insist that interpretation must be grounded in careful study of grammar, syntax, and historical context.

The differences emerge primarily in how each tradition applies Scripture, particularly regarding spiritual gifts and the Spirit's ongoing work. Both agree that faithful interpretation begins with discovering what the original author intended his original audience to understand, and both submit their interpretations to the authority of Scripture itself.

This shared hermeneutical foundation provides common ground for partnership in the gospel despite differences on secondary matters.

The Bible itself provides guidance on how to rightly interpret and apply God's Word.

Biblical Passages on Interpreting Scripture

Scripture's Clarity and Accessibility

Psalm 119:105

"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

Psalm 119:130

"The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple."

2 Timothy 3:15

"From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

The Need for Diligent Study

2 Timothy 2:15

"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth."

Acts 17:11

"Now Berean Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so."

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Interpretation

1 Corinthians 2:14-15

"Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given to the God, and we speak of these things not in words in human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."

John 14:26

"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

1 John 2:27

"But the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come."

Christ as the Key to Scripture

Luke 24:27

"And beginning with Moses and all of the Prophets, he [Jesus] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."

John 5:39-40

"Christ, to which we listen. "Thou are my words alone! I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures."

John 5:46

"For search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me."

Testing All Teaching Against Scripture

1 Thessalonians 5:21

"But test everything; hold fast what is good."

1 John 4:1

"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Isaiah 8:20

"To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn."

The Danger of Misinterpretation

2 Peter 3:16

"There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures."

2 Peter 1:20-21

"Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

Scripture's Purpose and Goal

2 Timothy 3:16

"Per whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

1 Corinthians 10:11

"Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come."

Official Position of Legacy Church

Our Commitment: The Grammatical-Historical Method

Legacy Church ascribes to the Grammatical-Historical method of interpretation of the Bible. This method, championed by the Reformers and maintained by faithful Christian theologians throughout the centuries, understands the words of Scripture in their normal, natural, and contextual meaning within the context. This method searches for the intended meaning of the biblical author.

As Dr. Mark D. Yarbrough writes, "In this method, interpretation consists in finding the meaning of words according to grammar, syntax, and colored setting and in correlation with the rest of Scripture. In this normal or plain interpretation, the Bible is best allowed to speak for itself."

In short, we wish to find out what the author meant their original hearers to understand. We then work through the grammar of appropriating that to our life. In other words: What did it mean to them, and how does that translate to us today?

Our Commitment: Context is King

We recognize that context is crucial to proper interpretation. Laughing at a joke is appropriate. Laughing at a joke during a funeral may not be appropriate. Knowing the context is key to being able to interpret anything, including the entire Holy Bible. Understanding the Scripture's authorial intent has been interpreted by the original audience is an important step in being able to properly apply the truth to our lives today.

Our Commitment: Study Groups

We see no reason to suggest that every story, poem, or verse only has significance as we consider the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? No, of course not. However we believe the life and death of Jesus is the very center of all historical truth. The Old Testament prophesies the coming of Jesus, and the New Testament teaches us wholistically about the nature of what Jesus did. Every passage in the Bible belongs in the story that Book is fulfillment in Christ.

Our Commitment: Prayer with Prayer

We start with prayer, and we end with prayer, and make sure prayer permeates every step along the way in our interpretation of the Bible. Prayer is the fuel that powers our journey of study and application of the Word. Prayer is the tool we use to be interested in mentoring our online biblical hermeneutics correctly. We depend on the Holy Spirit to illuminate our minds and embrace our hearts.

Practical Applications in Legacy Church

Given our commitment to faithful biblical interpretation, we establish these guidelines for our church:

1. Expository Preaching	Our preaching will be text-driven, explaining and applying Scripture to its context. We will not use the Bible as a proof-text for our own ideas but will faithfully expose what God has said.
2. Bible Study Training	We provide resources and training to equip our members to study hermeneutical principles. We offer Bible study guides, online courses, and group workshops that teach sound biblical interpretation.
3. Accountability in Teaching	Our elders and teachers are committed to sound doctrine based on careful biblical interpretation. We hold each other accountable to biblical truth and address false teaching when it arises, always using our interpretation against biblical truth.
4. Humble Dialogue	While we hold convictions firmly, we recognize we can misunderstand Scripture. We seek truth humbly, willing to be corrected by Scripture and by brothers and sisters in Christ. We distinguish between matters of the Impressions (the gospel) and matters where godly Christians may disagree.
5. Christocentric Reading	We read all of Scripture through the lens of Christ. We understand that the Old Testament anticipates Christ, the Gospels reveal Christ, the Acts and Epistles proclaim Christ, and Revelation consummates all things in Christ.
6. Scripture Memory and Meditation	Following Psalm 119:15 ("I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you"), we encourage hiding God's Word in our hearts through memorization and meditation.
7. Letting Modern Prophecy	As continuationists, we believe God still speaks through prophecy, dreams, and inspiration, but these never carry the same authority as Scripture and must always be tested against it. The Bible is the sole infallible rule of faith and practice for the church.

Conclusion: A Natural Discipline

Bible interpretation is not a dry academic discipline but a sacred discipline. God has spoken, and His words matter. The eternal destiny of souls, the health of the Church, and the glory of God's name depend on faithful handling of His Word.

We at Legacy Church commit ourselves to the grammatical-historical method: reading Scripture carefully, prayerfully, and humbly, always seeking to discover what God intended to communicate through His inspired authors. We reject allegorical excess, while recognizing the rich typology and symbolism that Scripture itself employs. We submit to the authority of God's Word, allowing it to shape our thinking, correct our errors, and transform our lives.

As the Apostle Paul charged Timothy, we too charge ourselves: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).