

Inspiration and Philosophy of Interpretation

Hermeneutics Pt.1

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Introduction:

The technical name for this class is “Hermeneutics.” That comes from the Greek word *hermeneuo*, which means “to interpret.” That is why the Greeks called the interpreter of the gods by the name *Hermes*. In Acts 14 Paul and Barnabas miraculously healed a lame man...

Act 14:11-12 When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, "The gods have come down to us in human form!" 12 Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker.

Hermeneuo means “to interpret.” It is the root of the word used for the gift of interpretation. And that same word is used in Luke 24:27.

Luke 24:27 And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Jesus interpreted the Old Testament for them. So Hermeneutics is simply the science of how to interpret language.

If you are intimidated by the term hermeneutics, don't be. You are an expert at it. You have been doing it all your life – even before you learned how to talk you knew could interpret language to some extent. You use hermeneutics every time anyone communicates to you in any way. It happens any time a listener figures out what a speaker or writer is communicating.

All we are doing in this class is showing you how to take the skills you already have and apply them to the Bible.

Nothing is more important

It is hard to overstate the importance of the study of hermeneutics. If your Creator has given you a message, what could possibly be more important than finding out what He said, and what He meant by what He said? Plus, if you know how to correctly interpret what you read in the Bible, you have access to all the truth you need – everything that God has revealed that is important. However, if you do not know how to interpret correctly, you are in the worst possible kind of danger.

Nothing will harm your soul more than theological error.

Nothing will harm your family more than theological error.

Nothing will harm your church more than theological error.

Nothing will hinder the work of the Kingdom of God like theological error.

That is why Jesus warned so often and so strongly against being deceived. Interpretation is both an art and a science. I will teach the basic science in this class – the logical, orderly system of rules governing the use of language. But it is also an art – an acquired skill that increases with practice. One thing that we can say about the fact that there are so many different interpretations of the Bible is that God does not magically reveal to everyone the meaning of the Bible. The correct meaning is something that takes hard, diligent work to uncover.

Only One Meaning

How many times have you shown someone something from Scripture only to have them reject what you have said with this excuse: “That’s just *your* interpretation”? What they are saying is that what you have said carries no authority for them, since they don’t interpret the Bible to mean what you say it means. Many people reject Christianity altogether, using the excuse that there are so many different interpretations of the Bible.

There is so much disagreement, and such a vast array of theological differences, that the Bible must not have one certain interpretation. There are so many different views, wouldn't it be arbitrary to just pick one? People have heard Christians argue passionately from the Bible for one view, and other Christians argue passionately from the Bible for the opposite view, and they conclude that the Bible can be made to say whatever you want it to say.

The reason they develop different interpretations isn't because the passage says one thing one day and a different thing the next day. And it is not that the passage says one thing to one person and something else to another person. The reason they come up with contradictory interpretations is because they are using different methods of interpreting. So the real question is, "How do we know which method is best?" Since different methods can arrive at opposite conclusions and produce contradictory doctrines, it is essential that we determine which method is correct at the very outset. This class will give you the skills needed to...

- * understand for yourself what Bible passages mean
- * identify common interpretive errors & protect yourself from being led astray or deceived.
- * draw out spiritual nourishment from Scripture.

These principles will help you at every level of Bible study. However there are some things we will cover that have to do with detailed study that is beyond the scope of what many of you have the time or resources to do. It is still valuable, however, for you to learn the principles. It will make you a better judge of which Bible teachers are reliable, because you can get a sense by listening to them if they follow these principles.

Meaning comes from the author

If you want to know how to figure out what a passage in the Bible means, the place to begin is with the word "meaning." What does the word "meaning" mean? (I am always amazed at how hard it is very often to define simple words that we use every day. This is one of those – it's not easy to think of a definition, is it?) The definition of *meaning* is as follows: "Meaning is the intended message of a communication." In the past 40 years or so there has been a debate in academia over where meaning comes from. In the case of written communication is it the reader who determines the meaning? Or the text itself? Or the Writer?

The popular approach today is to say meaning is determined by the reader. Whatever meaning you the reader assign to a written document is what that document means to you. It might mean something else for someone else. So the same text can have multiple meanings – even contradictory meanings. That is part of the postmodern thinking of our day.

That is why highly educated judges can see things in the Constitution of the United States that no one has ever seen before and that the framers of the Constitution never dreamed of. To them the meaning comes from themselves, not the document itself or from the writers. And liberal Bible scholars take the same approach with the Bible. Whatever a verse means to you is valid for you, and no one can say it is right or wrong, because meaning comes from the reader.

Now hopefully we can all immediately see the folly of that view. If the meaning comes from me, what do I need the Bible for? If the meaning comes from me then nothing comes from the Bible, and I don't need the Bible because I am the source of meaning. If I am the source of meaning then it doesn't matter if I am reading the Bible or a cereal box.

Like most postmodern arguments that is very easy to disprove because it is self-refuting. It is self-refuting because the people who use that argument want you to interpret their words in accordance with what they intend to say – not according to your own meaning that you assign to it. For example, suppose you are a student in a university and your literature professor gives a lecture saying, "The meaning of the Bible or the Constitution or any other communication is determined by the reader (or listener), not the author. So it means whatever you decide it means." So you sit through the lectures all semester, and then the time comes to take the final exam. And there is a question on the final: "The meaning of a communication comes from..."

- The speaker
- The words themselves
- The listener

And you pick A – the opposite of what he has been teaching all semester. So he calls you up to his desk and says, "Why did you put A? Weren't you listening in class all semester?" And you say, "Yes, I was listening. You said that meaning is always determined by the listener. Whatever it means to you is what it

means for you. So I decided that when you said the answer is A, what the means to me is that the answer is C.” And he says, “Well then, you fail.” And you say, “To me that means I pass.”

You see, in order to even argue for their view, they have to assume the opposite of their view. In order to even write a book or make an argument that meaning does not come from the speaker, they have to require you to think that meaning does come from the author for as long as you are reading their book or listening to their lecture.

Southern Seminary (the flagship seminary for the Southern Baptist Convention) was overrun by liberal professors who were teaching this approach to interpreting the Bible. And when Al Mohler took over as president of that seminary, he fired all of them. And I heard that they came to him to complain and said, “You can’t fire us – that’s a violation of our contract!” To which he replied – “Oh it’s OK, because that’s not what your contract means to me.” I don’t know if that really happened, but it illustrates the point.

So meaning does not come from the reader. But that still leaves two possibilities. Does it come from the author or does it reside in the words themselves? There are many who say, “Whatever the text of the Bible says is what it means. The intentions of the writer are irrelevant. The only thing that matters is the words as they stand.” It is like a chess board in the middle of a chess game. The state of the game is determined by where the pieces are on the board. How they got there doesn’t really matter – it just matters where they are. And this view says it is the same with the Bible. Whatever the words mean, that is the meaning, and the thoughts in the mind of the writer are beside the point.

And many Christians take that approach to interpreting the Bible.

Matthew 10:8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.

The point to that and says, “See, we have the authority to drive out demons and perform all kinds of miracles.” And if you try to talk to them about the context, and the fact that that promise was given to the Apostles specifically at a particular time for a particular purpose they will say, “I don’t care about any of that. I just know it says we are commanded to do those things – period.” They don’t care about what Jesus meant or what Matthew meant when He wrote it down, because they don’t think of meaning as coming from the writer, but from the words themselves.

So which is it? Is the meaning in the text itself or in the original writers? That question is actually easy to answer if you understand the nature of communication and the definition of the word *meaning*. Communication occurs when one party takes an idea, encodes it in some way, and then the other party decodes that message. And that message is the meaning. (Remember – the definition of meaning is the message intended by the author of the communication.) If someone sees you drop something on the floor, and they have thoughts in their mind about the fact that you acted in a clumsy way, and then they decide to communicate that thought to you, step one is to encode the thought. They can’t just transfer the thought from their brain directly to yours, so they have to put it into some kind of code that you can decipher. They could use gestures, sign language, emotional sounds, facial expressions, etc. But they decide on spoken words. So they say, “Nice going, Ace!”

Now, the sound of those words comes into your ears and your brain checks the meaning of each of the words and you make an effort to interpret those words. According to the dictionary the literal meaning of “nice going ace” is that you did such a good job that you can be described as an ace. If you interpret the words to mean that, have you interpreted it correctly? No. Why? Because the only correct meaning is the thought that the communicator was trying to convey. The meaning is not in the words themselves; it is in the intention of the author.

So the meaning is not *determined* by the text; it is only *conveyed* by the text. When we say “What does that verse mean?” we are not really speaking with precision. The verse does not mean anything. It only conveys a meaning. The text is just ink. It doesn’t have a brain. It cannot generate meaning. It is just a tool used by someone who does have a brain who could generate meaning and communicate that to you. When they write books for their view, they get want you to get their point.

And most people understand that intuitively. It is only the academic eggheads whose great education has taken a toll on their common sense who can’t understand it. And actually – even they live as though meaning comes from the author, not the reader. Even the liberals – or activist judges, if they sign a contract saying they will pay \$2000 in exchange for the worker building them a deck, if they pay the money and no work is done on

the deck, and the worker says, “You know, to me the meaning of that contract is that you pay me and I do nothing” – not even an activist judge or liberal seminary professor would appreciate that.

So, all that to tell you something that you have understood since you were a child. If you want to interpret something you need to discern what thoughts the author was trying to convey. This whole time since we started you have been sitting there trying to discern one thing – what is Darrell Ferguson trying to say? What does he mean by what he is saying?”

The Nature of Inspiration

But you might be thinking, “OK – so who is the author of the Bible? Is it God, or the human writer?”

To answer that question you need to understand the nature of inspiration. Inspiration is the method God used to get His thoughts onto the pages of Scripture. He did not pick up a pen and write them Himself – He used human beings. And yet,

2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed.

That short little sentence forms the foundation of what we know about the nature of Scripture (and it is also the basis of my entire approach to ministry. It is why I am committed to expository preaching). Every word of Scripture came out of the mouth of God. In fact, Jesus went so far as to say that it is all God’s Word even down to the letter – even down to the tiniest part of a character.

Luke 16:16-17 It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.

The liberals say the Bible has errors in certain areas such as history or science, but it is generally reliable with regard to spiritual issues. But we believe the Bible is inerrant – without error in anything it affirms or denies. We know this is true, because every word is breathed out of the mouth of God, and God does not breathe out error. The Scriptures = God’s Word, therefore what is written = the exact thoughts of God.

How did God do it?

2Peter 1:20-21 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation.

Literally “**No prophecy of Scripture comes to be by one’s own interpretation.**”¹ It is not that the prophets had a vision or dream or sign, and then they just came up with their own interpretation. Both the revelation and the interpretation (the writer’s “take” on it) are from God.

21 For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The word **origin** is the same word as **carried along**. Literally **prophecy was never carried along by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit**. So how did it work exactly? Was it through dictation, or does God teach the principle to the writer, and then allow the writer to communicate that principle in his own words? Answer: There are some cases of dictation in the Bible. They are called oracles. They are mostly in the Prophets. When you read a section where God is speaking in the first person – that is an oracle. But what about the rest of Scripture?

1 Corinthians 2:12-14 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. 13This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

¹ For a very persuasive argument for the NIV translation as opposed to the “no private interpretation.” View, see Bauckham (WBC).

So the ideas expressed are not just dictation. God actually taught the concept to the writer, who then explained it in the Bible in his own words. So whatever the point is that the writer was trying to make = the point that God is communicating to you, and nothing else. Therefore the goal of hermeneutics is to determine what thought the human writer was trying to communicate to the original readers, nothing else.

Scripture cannot mean what it never meant. The meaning is determined by the author, and so whatever the author meant when he wrote it is the only thing it means and the only thing it will ever mean. If you come up with an interpretation of some passage, ask yourself, “Is this the idea that the writer was trying to convey to the original readers?” If not, then the interpretation is wrong.

Normal use of language

Now, when I say that you are already an expert on hermeneutics because you have been interpreting language all your life, that might bring up another objection. You might be thinking, Isn’t the Bible different? Sure, I know how to interpret newspaper articles and books and people talking to me, but isn’t the Bible different?

It is different in authority, but not in the nature of communication. A minute ago I said people come up with different interpretations because they use different methods. If everyone used the same method, and did not make mistakes in the use of that method, they would all come up with exactly the same interpretation of every passage in the Bible. And I am not going to go through a survey of all the various methods in this class, because this is not a class on how not to interpret the Bible. All I am going to do is give you an argument for what I believe is the correct method.

I believe the correct method is what scholars refer to as the “grammatico-historical” exegetical method.² That is a seminary phrase. If you want you can memorize that phrase, or you can just use my phrase for the same thing. My way of referring to this method is this technical phrase that I coined myself: I call it, “The normal use of language” method. The grammatico-historical exegetical method is simply this – interpret language in the normal way, and you’ve got it.

And the reason I believe that is the correct method is very simple – there is no reasonable alternative. If God did not follow the normal rules of language, how could we possibly know what He meant? God spoke to us by giving us a written document – the Bible. In the writing of that document, if God used anything other than the normal use of language, then we can forget about ever knowing what the Bible means. How would we know? For example, if the word “yes” doesn’t mean “yes,” how are we to know what it means? It might mean “purple” or “rocks” or “hell” or “cantaloupe” – who’s to say? If this method I am suggesting isn’t the right method, how could we possibly know what method of interpretation to use? And once we came up with one, how could we know if it was correct?

We have to assume that God communicated in order to be understood. If He did not intend to be understood, then it is not communication. So we know for sure that God’s goal in communication was to be successful in communication, and success in communication is when the meaning received by the reader corresponds to the meaning sent by the author. When the thought the reader gets is identical to the thought the writer was trying to send, the writer has succeeded in communicating that thought.

Perspicuity

If this assumption is incorrect, and God did not communicate in order to be understood, then there is no point in reading the Bible at all. We might as well throw it in the trash. But if God did communicate in order to be understood, that has some wonderful implications for us. It means it is possible for us understand what He meant. That is a very important point to keep in mind, because the modern trend among evangelicals who write on hermeneutics is to focus on human limitations regarding interpretation. What they’re saying is that we are so biased and so limited in our knowledge that we can never know for sure what a passage means. They say that everyone brings as their presuppositions and assumptions and biases to the text, and there is no way around that. They call this, “The hermeneutics of humility.” And that sounds great, right? Certainly we should be humble enough to acknowledge that we might be wrong about something.

² In chapter 4 of his excellent book *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, Walter Kaiser has argued that a more accurate description would be “syntactical-theological” rather than “grammatico-historical” (pp.87ff)

But the hermeneutics of humility goes beyond that, and really is not humble at all – it is arrogant. The hermeneutics of humility does not just say, “I might be wrong” on a particular difficult passage. It says, “It’s impossible for us to know for sure we are right” about almost anything in the Bible. And the reason I say that is arrogant is because it assumes God is incapable of overcoming our limitations when He communicates to us.

They are focusing completely on human limitations and forgetting about the divine side. They are so consumed with human inability to understand that they forget about divine ability to teach. Do we, as human beings have difficulty setting aside our presuppositions and biases and looking at the text objectively? Of course. But is that difficulty so great that it cannot be overcome even by the Holy Spirit? Of course not. 1 Corinthians 2:12 says **we may understand what God has freely given us**, not we may tentatively theorize regarding what God may have given us. Is it possible to be unbiased and objective in studying the Bible? Or better yet, to be biased toward the truth? Yes, for four reasons:

1. God’s ability to communicate successfully
2. God’s purpose in special revelation cannot be thwarted
3. The Holy Spirit is capable of restraining human bias
4. The Church has enjoyed remarkable unity on the essentials of the Gospel throughout the centuries

God is capable of making Himself clear and has done so in the Bible. That is known as the doctrine of the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture. Are there some obscure and difficult texts in the Bible? Of course. But the main things are the plain things and the plain things are the main things. The fundamental doctrines of the gospel are crystal clear.

What about when the Bible itself seems to use bad hermeneutics?

OBJECTION: Many conservative evangelicals who have a high regard for Scripture would object at this point.

“What about times when the New Testament draws a meaning from an Old Testament passage that clearly was not intended by the Old Testament writer?”

We will cover this when we get into prophecy, but for now, there are two possibilities:

#1 This never really happens. In each case where it appears to happen, there is another explanation. (my view)

#2 It does happen, but when it does, it is not that the new meaning was there in that text all those thousands of years and then suddenly revealed. Rather, the Old Testament passage meant only what it meant to the original readers, and the New Testament writer is actually giving new revelation, and attaching it to that passage. That is, they are borrowing some wording from the Old Testament to make a new point.

Either way, our responsibility is the same: to use the normal rules of language to determine the most natural meaning conveyed by the words on the page. And to the degree you are certain that you have done that, you can be certain that your interpretation is correct. If someone rejects your argument on some theological point by saying, “That’s just your interpretation,” you can respond by asking, “Is my interpretation incorrect?” That question itself might come as a shock to the person, because so many people think of Bible interpretation as a matter of opinion rather than something that can be correct or incorrect. And if you ever run into someone who rejects Christianity because of all the conflicting interpretations, you can point out that the truth is, among those who interpret the Bible according to the normal use of language, there has been amazing agreement over the centuries on all of the major points of Scripture. If they point to the fact that there are so many denominations, you can point out that the theological differences between the denominations are on secondary issues. But among evangelical Christians, there is 100 percent agreement on the central issues of Christianity.