



Faith & Glory Tabernacle

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HERMENEUTICS – HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

- Our approach in interpreting the Bible will determine our theology and doctrine. It must be the task of the Bible student to avoid reading to the Bible, but we must read from the Bible. This means; we must allow the Bible to speak what it aims to address rather than what we want it to address.
- If your method is flawed, your conclusions will be faulty. If we are to “correctly handle the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15), we must learn and apply correct principles of interpretation.
- Hermeneutics deals with the principles and procedures of interpreting the Bible correctly and consistently. We provide you with this short study of hermeneutics so that you can interpret the Bible correctly and can grow in the Lord as you would enjoy going through your Bible.
- Please remember that our theology and our teaching can never be better than our hermeneutics. Putting it differently; our hermeneutics decides our theology and teaching.

THE GOAL OF INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

- When we study the Bible, we hope to discover what the author communicated to the original readers through the text, and then to determine how that meaning is still relevant to us today. Thus, the goal of interpretation is to discover the author-intended meaning.
- We must discover what message the author wanted to communicate through the text to his original readers.
- The most common error is to substitute the reader-response meaning; the meaning which we (modern readers) see when we read the text as if it were addressed directly to us.
- The books of the Bible were written for us, but not to us. They are a message from God for us, then to us, but that message is channelled through other people in different circumstances. We receive the message indirectly, as it is refracted through the original readers.
- Only when we know what the text meant to the original audience can we know what it means for us. The author-intended meaning is a single-sense

interpretation. Each word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph has one meaning in its original context.

- No utterance can have two different meanings at the same time. Although a passage has only one correct interpretation, it may convey many principles which apply to an infinite number of situations. Thus, while we have one meaning, we can have many applications.

To move from the author-intended meaning to a valid response, we must pass through three stages: (a) interpretation; (b) principles; and (c) applications.

- Interpretation refers to the message the original author conveyed to his original readers.
- Principles are universal truths drawn from the original message; they apply to any people of any time in any place.
- Applications are ways in which the universal principles can be applied to specific people or circumstances today.

LITERAL INTERPRETATION

Broadly speaking, there are two main approaches to interpretation; literal and allegorical.

- **ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION:** is a process in which we spiritualise the text, taking it and its details to mean something totally unrelated to what the author intended (that is, taking the text out of its context)

John MacArthur offers this example of how one preacher spiritualised the book of Nehemiah: Jerusalem's walls were in ruin and that speaks of the broken down walls of the human personality. Nehemiah represents the Holy Spirit, who comes to rebuild the walls of human personality, when he got to the king's pool (Neh. 2:14), he said this meant the baptism in the Holy Spirit; and from there he went on to teach the importance of speaking in tongues (MacArthur 1992:108).

- Allegorising robs the Bible of any authoritative meaning. When we allegorise or spiritualise, the meaning no longer comes from the Bible, but from the interpreter. You must avoid this kind of interpretation at all costs.
- Allegory imposes random interpretations upon the text. There can be no correct interpretation, no definite meaning for any passage of Scripture, because each reader is allowed to decide for himself what things symbolise. There remains no way to decide what the Bible teaches, because we are allowing the Bible to mean whatever we choose to make it mean. This becomes reading to the Bible than from the Bible.

- Literal interpretation: is the opposite of allegorical interpretation. To interpret literally is to take words at face value, to interpret them in just the same way we would interpret any other written words. We interpret literally when we mean just what he says.

LITERAL INTERPRETATION is thus the common, natural, normal way of interpreting words. Literal interpretation must not be confused with wooden literalism, slavishly taking every tiny detail literally.

- Normal speech and writing make use of all sorts of figures of speech. When the writer uses figurative language to make his point, we need to recognise that he is speaking figuratively. Literal interpretation takes figurative language, figuratively.

For example, when John describes a vision of Jesus with eyes like a flame of fire, feet like fine brass, and a sharp sword coming out of his mouth, he is using word pictures to describe what Jesus is like, not what he looks like (see Rev. 1:12-16). If we were to treat this as a physical description of Jesus' looks, we would be taking figurative language literally. John seems to be saying Jesus is all seeing and all knowing (eyes like a flame of fire), solid and immovable (feet like fine brass), and his word is irresistible (a sharp, two-edged sword in his mouth).

Since these figurative meanings are part of John's intended point, we are taking him at face value rather than spiritualising his vision (that is, imposing meanings the author did not intend upon the text) when we interpret it this way.

THE STEPS IN INTERPRETATION

The Bible is an ancient text. We are separated from it by various gaps - culture, language, time, and history. To understand an ancient text's meaning for its original readers and its significance for us today, we need to apply three stages of analysis.

OBSERVATION: What does the text say?

- The first step is to read the text repeatedly and make careful observations of what it says.
- The process is read, observe, and make notes. As you read, you will use five question words: who? What? When? Where? How?

INTERPRETATION: What did the text mean?

- The second step is to determine what the text meant to its original readers.
- Now you apply the sixth question word to your observation: why?
- What a biblical text means to us can never be different from what it meant to its original readers. How we apply it in our modern context may differ, but the basic meaning of the text cannot change.
- In the interpretation step, we try to place ourselves in the original readers' situation and imagine how they would have understood the text.

APPLICATION: What does the text mean?

- The last step is to discover what significance the text has for us today.
- Here we are converting the historical, time bound message it conveyed to its original readers into universal, timeless principles and seeking ways to apply those principles to specific modern situations.

By way of illustration, let's consider Judges 7 and work through the three steps.

- **WHAT DOES THE TEXT SAY?** The Lord had sent Gideon to fight the Midianites. He started with 30,000 men, but God said he had too many, so Gideon allowed all those who were afraid to go home. Then he had 10,000 men. He still had too many, so he sent home those who got down on their knees to drink water. With the remaining 300 men, Gideon defeated the Midianites.
- **WHAT DID THE TEXT MEAN?** Why did God want Gideon to reduce the size of his army to 300 men? He wanted everyone to know he saved the Israelites, not their own strength. That is the point; the message the author intends the reader to receive from the passage. The author's intended meaning was not that they should not be fearful or that they should be alert to danger when they drink water. The point was that when God's people repent and cry out to him for help, he alone is able to save them from any enemy.
- **WHAT DOES THE TEXT MEAN?** One timeless principle we learn from this story is that we should trust in the power of the Lord to deliver us from danger; we should not rely solely on our own strength. Another principle is that God wants people to recognise his work. We should be careful to give him the credit for what He does.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The interpreter's task, then, is to discover the one meaning the original author intended to convey to his original readers, and then translate it into timeless principles which we can apply to our circumstances.

- To achieve this goal, we must interpret literally, that is, we must take the Bible at face value and allow it to mean exactly what its author intended. We employ three major steps to achieve this goal: *observation* (what does the text say?), *interpretation* (what did it mean to the original readers?), and *application* (what does it mean for us today?).
- How we interpret the Bible determines our theology, because the methods we use predict the conclusions we reach. Without good methods, we cannot have good theology. Without good theology, our ministries of preaching, teaching, counselling, and leading suffer.

Therefore, all the effort we invest to become skilled interpreters is worth it.

ENJOY YOUR BIBLE STUDY!