Sagecreek Bible Church Al Albano

Hermeneutics (Bible Study Methods) Fall 2021

Introduction To Hermeneutics

As Christians all of us are responsible for evaluating what we are taught by our teachers. This means we need to develop basic skills to personally interpret the Bible, and to do that we need a common, agreed upon method of biblical interpretation. We achieve this by adhering to certain rules or what we call hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is a scientific method of interpretation applied to any specific text to determine its meaning. It is scientific because it is observable, repeatable, and demonstrable. Related to the Bible, hermeneutics is a set of rules for its interpretation. In other words, hermeneutics is s rulebook for interpretation. Concerning God’s word, think of it this way: hermeneutics is to the Bible what a rule book is to a game—you cannot play any game properly or legitimately without a set rules or rulebook. We often use the phrase “everyone needs to play by the same rules.” It is no different with the Bible. A common set of rules will enable us as Christians to have a common, shared, and agreed upon understating of the book that determines, shapes, and guides our faith—a faith that is now 2,000 years old.

The seriousness of gaining a proper hermeneutic cannot be understated. But to say that hermeneutics only deals with what we believe, is to miss the point of hermeneutics completely. Hermeneutics ultimately governs everything we do individually as Christians and everything we do as churches. Concerning individuals, a proper interpretation of Scripture is necessary if we are to live biblically—that is to act biblically, speak biblically, and think biblically, which is what we are all called to do as long as God has us here on this earth. This is the stated daily goal of every believer—to be like Christ. But we cannot live biblically unless we interpret Scripture properly. And we cannot interpret Scripture properly unless we have skills to do that. We cannot, therefore, as our beloved Presbyterian brothers and sisters, according to the Westminster Confession of Faith, have stated, “glorify God and enjoy Him forever,” if we do not live biblically.

But hermeneutics also determines how individual churches conduct themselves. The overarching reason as to why there are countless Christian denominations and independent churches is because there are differing hermeneutics—disagreements in understanding among brothers and sisters as to what the Bible says about the church, what it is, how it is to conduct its worship, and how it is to conduct itself in the world. But beyond this, hermeneutics, or heretical hermeneutics is why cults are born. Extreme errors in hermeneutics have led to a denial of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the Trinity, the depravity of man, the deity of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, and a host of other orthodox Christian doctrines. So again, the importance of a proper hermeneutic cannot be understated.

Hermeneutics, then, is our rule book for interpreting the Bible. So what are the basic rules that the church has adopted and attempted to adhere to over that past 2,000 years?

Rules For Biblical Interpretation

There are many rules for interpreting the Bible, but we will only look at the basic rules or what we call general rules. There are also special rules for biblical interpretation that can be discussed later. Special rules apply to different genres or types of biblical literature such as poetry, prophecy and apocalyptic literature, parables, legal, types and other genres. But general rules are for interpreting any and every portion of Scripture.

But looking at the actual rules in hermeneutics, we break the process down into three main steps: observation, interpretation, and application. And this is one of our most important points: do not bypass any one of these steps. Too many pastors and teachers, as well as individual Christians, are guilty of breaking this cardinal rule.

For example, too many of us begin with interpretation without observing what the passage actually says. This cannot be overstated: we must begin with observing the text to determine what it *says*. We cannot interpret any portion of the Bible without knowing what it says. There is a vast difference between what a passage *says* and what a passage *means*. “God so loved the world” is what John 3:16 says. But this is what the text says, it is not what it means. To jump immediately to an interpretation such as “God loves the world so much, the world of all the people who have ever been born . . .” is not what the text means because it cannot be derived from what the text says. The text says “God loved;” past tense, not present tense. The word “world” also cannot automatically be interpreted as “all the people who have ever been born,” because this is theological bias, not interpretation. The phrase “God loved” must be interpreted according to the context. To start with a theological rather than contextual interpretation, which is almost always a result of poor observation or no observation at all, will only yield an erroneous interpretation.

Another example of bypassing our steps in hermeneutics is jumping right to application without observation or interpretation. When some believers are asked what a passage means, they immediately state an application of the passage rather than its meaning. For example, when asked what John 3:16 means, some have said it means we are to tell people that God sent Christ to die for their sins. Now we all know that this is what we are to do based on John 3:16; but this is not the interpretation of John 3:16, it is the application.

So let us look at some basic rules for biblical interpretation:

Observation

Rule #1: Observe with a formal equivalent translation

If the goal of Bible interpretation is accuracy (which it is), then we need to work with the best possible translation we have in our own native language. To achieve this, we should use a formal equivalent or a word-for-word translation, not a paraphrase. There are four major formal equivalent translations available for this: King James, New King James, New American Standard Bible (NASB), and English Standard Version (ESV).

Dynamic equivalent translations or paraphrase Bibles are not word-for-word translations. These would include The Living Bible, The Message, The New Living Translation, the NIV, and many others.

Rule #2: Observe with accuracy

This might sound obvious but observe the actual words of the passage. Too often we are much too vague in what we observe. For example, looking at the word “so” in John 3:16, we often see “so much” when, in fact, this is not what it says. It says “so” as in “in the same way,” pointing back to the previous two verses which refer to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. What it says, then, is “God, *in the same way,* loved the world . . .” This small, seemingly insignificant error has caused countless misinterpretations of John 3:16.

Rule #3: Observe the grammar

In an in-depth study of God’s word, every part of speech in a passage should be identified and interpreted, but at a minimum we need to identify pronouns and who or what they refer to. For example, when reading an Old Testament prophet like Jeremiah, in any given chapter both God and the prophet might be speaking. When this occurs, we need to know who is speaking when so we can properly understand and interpret the passage, otherwise confusion and misinterpretation will occur. To avoid a misunderstanding as to who is speaking, the translators have used quotation marks when God begins to speak but leave them out when the prophet begins to speak.

It is also important to note who is present and who is absent in a certain scene or account. For example, in the Upper Room Discourse in John 14-17, Judas is no longer present, having left the Upper Room at the end of chapter 13. In chapters 14-17 Jesus is only addressing the remaining eleven disciples. This is extremely important to know when interpreting these chapters.

Interpretation

Rule #1: Interpret according to surrounding context

To interpret any passage we must interpret a complete thought, not a partial one. A single sentence is not a complete thought. We need at least a paragraph to form a complete thought. Too often we interpret verses (or sentences or partial sentences) without looking at them in their context (a full paragraph and many times even beyond). This has resulted in numerous misinterpretations of.

For example, if you see a headline of an article, “A Star Is Born,” how would you interpret that headline or sentence? How would you know how to interpret it if all you had was this one phrase? You would not be able to interpret it with any certainty. You would need more context to accurately determine its meaning. Is the star a literal star in the cosmos, or is it a rising star in country music, professional sports, or the movie or TV industries? What context would you need? You would need other information from in the article describing its context.

If in the article you see the following: “A star is born when atoms of light elements are squeezed under enough pressure for their nuclei to undergo fusion,” what can you conclude?[[1]](#footnote-1) You would conclude with certainty that a literal star has been born in the cosmos. If, on the other hand you see the following: “After last night’s performance on The Voice, Cam Anthony, a 19-year-old singer from Philadelphia, won the competition,” what would you conclude? You would conclude with certainty that a metaphorical star has been born in the music industry. But you could never determine the true meaning of the headline without more context. So the smallest unit of thought is not a phrase, verse, or sentence, it is a paragraph.

Rule #2: Interpret according to single meaning

Single meaning refers to how many meanings a word, phrase, verse, or passage has in any given use. It is common to hear a pastor, teacher, or individual Christian say that a passage has more than one meaning. But this is giving the Bible less accuracy than we give books, articles, and other literature we read today. None of us would ever communicate to others by email, text, letter, or ordinary conversation, wanting them to interpret our words with more than one meaning or in any other way than the one way we meant. As individuals, we want to be clearly understood whenever we communicate, so we strive to be as accurate as possible. Since God is the author of Scripture, He is the most accurate communicator. Because of His nature, He has to be perfect in His communication, so we should always expect Him to be. If, for some reason, we do not understand what He says, it is not because He was unclear when He gave us His word; it is because we are less than able for some reason to understand Him. But concerning single meaning, it is the most accurate means of communication. Interpreting according to double meaning can only confuse the reader or listener when the Bible is read or taught.

Using the example of John 3:3, Jesus says, “unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” The word “again” (a;nwqen) has two possible meanings in the original language—“again” and “above.” But in the context, it can have only one meaning. Jesus did not mean that Nicodemus had to be both born again and born from above, even though both might be true; He only meant one of the two meanings. Since Nicodemus questioned Jesus as to whether it was possible to enter a second time into his mother’s womb, Nicodemus understood Jesus to mean “again” or a second time. Jesus also referred to two different births “that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (6) and “**t**hat which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Jesus was clearly referring to be born “again” a second time. So according to the context “again” would be the single meaning of a;nwqen...

In reference to double meaning of Scripture, we can also mention double reference of prophecy. Some believe there are some Old Testament prophecies that had a double reference, one in the prophet’s day and another far into the future. Others believe there is only one meaning of any Old Testament prophecy. There are good men on both sides of this issue, but as been said above, a double reference can only bring obscurity, not clarity to the meaning of a passage. Some have said that if Scripture has more than one meaning, it has no meaning at all. Another problem with double reference in prophecy is there is not a way to know when to apply it and when not to. Hypothetically, one can make a double reference to any passage one chooses to. So agreement, even among those who hold to double reference interpretation is virtually impossible.

This point might sound trivial, but if we are striving for accuracy, we must be as accurate as possible. If we teach more than one meaning in any given passage, we are not only opening up the possibility or even probability for confusing those who hear us; we are teaching them that there is no one single, objective meaning in any given passage.

Rule #3: Interpret according to non-preconceptions

When interpreting the Bible, preconceptions are theological biases. A preconception occurs when we come to a passage interpreting it according to what we want it mean rather than what it actually means. Every pastor, teacher, and individual Christian is guilty of this at some point and in varying degrees; it cannot be helped. But the goal in Bible interpretation is to remove as much preconception as possible when we interpret any passage. The goal, although we can never achieve it, is to come to each passage with our minds as a blank slate, as if we have never read the Bible or this passage before. If we all followed this rule, we would be much more accurate in our interpretations, as well as be much more in agreement with each other.

Where do preconceptions come from? They come from parents, friends, relatives, pastors, teachers, and even our own study from passages we have previously interpreted. In many cases, without even realizing it, we do not interpret a passage, we simply mimic or mouth what we have previously been taught. This is not biblical interpretation; it is biblical indoctrination.

We should learn from the Bereans who were new believers. We are told in Acts 17:11, “These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.” These believers actually checked the Scriptures to see if what they were being taught by the apostle Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy was accurate! Some of us rarely or ever question what we are taught from those we highly respect. We are always to highly respect those who God places over us, but we are also told to evaluate their teaching for accuracy. If we do not question, and simply accept what we are taught without searching the Scriptures to “see whether these things are so,” we will more likely approach our own study with preconceptions.

Using the example again of John 3:16, this verse is not only frequently misinterpreted outside of its context, but even more so with preconceptions. Countless people have brought their theological biases to this passage, and they let their theology interpret the passage rather than letting proper hermeneutics interpret it. Both Arminians and Calvinists have used this passage to advance their theological position. Arminians say that God sent Christ to save every person whereas Calvinists say that God sent Christ to save the elect. But a careful look at the verse does not lend itself to either position if it is interpreted correctly. If you want to prove either position, you will have to go to other passages to do it, but not this one.

John 3:16 gives us a very clear reason as to why God sent His Son into the world—it was to *keep believers from perishing and instead give them eternal life*. It says nothing less than this and nothing more. To say the verse means more than this is eisegesis not exegesis, that is, reading into the passage what is not there, and not taking out of it what it actually says.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Rule #4: Interpret according to an analytical approach

When interpreting the Bible, an analytical approach must be used to ensure a proper, consistent, accurate interpretation. This is the scientific approach which will yield the greatest accuracy. It begins with a normal or literal method of interpretation. We do not approach the Bible mystically, spiritually, or allegorically, as a book to be interpreted unlike any other book. Although it is a unique book and is divinely inspired in its original autographs, we are to read and interpret the words as we would read and interpret the newspaper, cookbook, auto manual, medical report, or novel—normally or literally. This does not mean the Bible does not use metaphors or figures of speech. It incorporates these methods of language just like we do today. But when we see these literary devices used, we need to interpret them normally as we would today when we see them.

In any normal or literal interpretive method, it also includes historical, grammatical, cultural, and literary methods of interpretation. The historical method places the passage in its original historical setting. Our goal in all of our biblical interpretation is not to bring the Bible up to today’s settings and standards, which is common in most dynamic equivalent Bible translations and many churches today, but to take us back to the original historical setting. The events in the Bible took place thousands of years ago and are far removed from our modern day. The Bible must be interpreted in its historical context, not today’s context.

The grammatical method of interpretation determines meanings and arrangements of words. But words, as with history, cannot be understood according to today’s standards; they must be understood as they were in their original setting. What a particular word meant several thousand years ago may not be what it means today. The arrangement of words in a sentence is also important, particularly in the letters of the New Testament. Here words are arranged largely for emphasis. This is one reason why a formal equivalent translation is should be used in interpretation.

The cultural method helps us understand what life was like when the text was written. People live differently in various cultures today. How much more differently did they live several thousand years ago in various cultures. This is why biblical encyclopedias, dictionaries, or customs and cultures references, are valuable to properly interpret biblical passages.

The literary method of studying the Bible is vastly important. It helps us determine the structure of Bible books so we can see how the author arranged his material. This benefits us in determining the author’s thought process and argument in his book for the exhortations and applications he desires. Bible authors used several literary devices to communicate their thought process and outline that aid us in understanding both the overall and smaller portions of a Bible book.

The literary approach can be easily observed in books like Genesis, Job, Proverbs, Malachi, Matthew,[[3]](#footnote-3) the book of Acts, I Corinthians, and Revelation. This approach is used in all other books of the Bible, but are not as readily apparent as in the previously mentioned books.

The analytical approach is crucial to the study of any biblical passage. Sadly, it is one of the most overlooked rules in biblical interpretation. So, unless we know the history, grammar, culture, and literary structure of a particular book and passage, it is virtually impossible to understand what a passage means in any particular context.

Application

Rule #1: Apply according to the intended application of the author

There is a saying among evangelical Christians: One interpretation but many applications. But how many applications did a biblical author have in mind when he wrote what he wrote? Anyone who writes to communicate, especially to communicate something important or urgent (and we can agree that what the authors of Scripture wrote was important and, in many cases, urgent) intends a single application of their writing. So whenever we interpret the meaning of a passage, we need to seek the intended application of the author.

For example, when John wrote his Gospel, he told us why he included only eight of the countless miracles Jesus did during His ministry. In other words, he wrote these miracles for a very specific purpose or application. He said in John 20:30-31, “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” John included these miracles, then, for people to believe who Jesus Christ was and is so that they might be saved. So when we study this book, we are to apply it as John applied it—for the purpose of evangelism. Does this mean we cannot use the book for other objectives? Of course not. We can use the book to formulate doctrines and build theologies, which we can and must do. We can also derive a multitude of principles from the book. But the application of Jesus’ miracles in John’s Gospel is to see people saved, and this is the application we should convey in our teaching and preaching to our audience. To miss this point is to miss John’s intended purpose and application.

Rule #2: Apply according to precept or principle

In applying the Bible to our lives for practical living, there are basically two forms of application: application by precept and application by principle. When we study the New Testament, particularly the New Testament letters, it is fairly easy to apply much of what is written. For example, when Paul commanded the church in 1 Corinthians 10:14, “My beloved, flee from idolatry,” or in Ephesians 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,” we do not have to wonder how to apply that. We just do what it says. That is the application. It is application by precept or command; and the New Testament is filled with countless examples of these.

But when we read much of the Old Testament, the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation, we are not looking for application by precept as much as application by principle. This is true especially in the Law where we find so many enigmatic or puzzling passages. For example, in Numbers 5:11-31 God said for a jealous husband suspecting his wife of unfaithfulness to bring his wife before the priest, and then He gave at least 10 commands:

1. Have the husband bring a tenth of an ephah of barely meal for an offering; have the priest stand her before the Lord
2. Take water in an earthen vessel and mix it with dust from the tabernacle floor to make it bitter water
3. Uncover the woman’s head
4. Put the offering in her hand
5. Put her under oath saying “the LORD make you a curse and an oath among your people, when the LORD makes your thigh rot and your belly swell; and may this water that causes the curse go into your stomach, and make your belly swell and your thigh rot”
6. Write the curses in a book
7. Scrape them off into the bitter water in the vessel
8. Take the offering from the woman and burn it on the altar
9. Then make the woman drink the bitter water
10. Then wait to see if her belly swelled from the bitter water; if it did she was guilty of adultery, if it did not she was innocent.

So after you have observed the passage, and you have interpreted the passage, how in the world do you apply this passage to the 21st century church or to a 21st century Christian? We are told in 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” Jesus even said in Matthew 4:4, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every* word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” So how is this Scripture profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, and how does this Scripture help you live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God?

This is where you have to apply the passage, not by precept or command but by principle. This was a precept to Israel, but it is not a precept to the church, because, according to Romans 6:14, “You are not under law but under grace.” So if we are to apply this passage by principle, how do we apply it? What is the principle in this passage, first of all, to Israel?

The overall principle here is God’s holiness, but more particularly God wanted marriages to be pure for the sake of keeping marital purity in His believing community in Israel. Marriages did not only affect individual families in Israel, they affected the whole community; and if there was a breech in the marriage covenant, it was to be called out and the guilty person disciplined and the innocent person vindicated. This was to show that God took faithfulness in marriages seriously among his people.

So based on the principle God was teaching Israel by what is to us a bizarre passage, what is the application for us today? The principle for us is the same: God wants marital faithfulness in His believing community so the community will stay pure; and if there is a breech in the marriage covenant, it is to be called out and the guilty person is to be disciplined and the innocent person vindicated. This is why Jesus gave the church Matthew 18:15-21 and church discipline.

We have to note here (and this is extremely important), that although God’s *precepts* might be limited to a particular dispensation among His people as with the law in Israel, His *principles* are always timeless. So if we can find the principles behind the precepts, particularly in the Old Testament, we can apply them in any dispensation to any of God’s people.

So recapping what we have learned, we need to take the interpretation of God’s word seriously so that we can live biblically. We can do this by properly understanding the Bible. Understanding is achieved by properly observing, interpreting, and applying a passage according to the rules of hermeneutics.

1. In layman’s terms, this means when enormous clouds of gas light-years in diameter collapse under their own gravity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The proper interpretation of John 3:16 is that as God lifted up the serpent in the wilderness and all who believed in His command to look in faith on that serpent were delivered from perishing physically, so in the same way God sent His Son into the world and lifted Him up on a cross to keep all who believe in Him from perishing eternally. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A good example of a smaller context literary approach is found in the Sermon on the Mount. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)