

D5 - The Hermeneutic - Presuppositions (part 1)

How to Study the Bible

Presuppositions:

We come to study the Bible with these necessary presuppositions (or “pre-understandings”):

1. We believe that the Bible, the collection of 66 books given to us by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:7-14; 2 Tim 3:16), is God's written revelation to man (2 Peter 1:20-21). We teach that the Scriptures constitute the only infallible rule of faith and practice (Matthew 24:35; John 10:35; 16:12-13; 17:17; 1 Corinthians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Peter 1:20-21).
2. We believe that the Word of God is an objective, propositional revelation (1 Thessalonians 2:13; John 17:17; 1 Corinthians 2:13), God-breathed in every word (2 Timothy 3:16), absolutely inerrant in the original documents, and infallible from the opening chapters of Genesis which present creation in six literal days (Genesis 1:31; Exodus 31:17) to the closing chapters of Revelation which detail the return, reign, and eternal rule of Jesus Christ (Revelation 19-22).
3. We believe that the Holy Spirit superintended the human authors so that, through their individual personalities and writing styles, they recorded God's Word to man (2 Peter 1:20-21) without error in whole or in part (Psalm 19:7-9; 2 Timothy 3:16).
 - ➔ **Consider the role of the Holy Spirit in Authoring Scripture.** The Spirit of Truth brought forth the four Gospel accounts, Jn 14:16-17, 26. The Spirit of Truth brought forth the apostles' testimony in Acts and their NT epistles, Jn 15:26-27. The Spirit of Truth brought forth “what is to come” in Revelation, Jn 16:12-13. We have “all the truth” (Jn 16:13) the Holy Spirit intended to provide us.
 - ➔ **Consider the awareness the apostles had in authoring Scripture.** Peter knew Paul was writing Scripture, 2 Pt 3:14-16. Paul knew he was writing Scripture, 1 Co 2:1-16; 2 Tm 3:10-17. Peter knew he was writing Scripture, 2 Pt 3:1-2.
4. We believe that, whereas there may be several applications of any given passage of Scripture, there is but one true interpretation of that passage. Thus, the meaning of a Biblical text is a fixed historical reality, rooted in the historical, unchangeable intentions of its divine and human authors. The meaning of Scripture is to be found when a Spirit-indwelt believer diligently applies the literal-grammatical-historical method of interpretation (see definitions below). Apart from the Holy Spirit's work in the reader of Scripture, the reader will not be able to appropriately understand and respond to the Word of God (Psalm 119:18; Hebrews 4:2; 2 Cor 3:14-16, 4:4-6). It is the responsibility of believers to ascertain carefully the true

intent and meaning of Scripture, recognizing that proper application is binding on all generations. Yet the truth of Scripture stands in judgment of men; never do men stand in judgment of it (John 3:19-21; 17:14).

- ➔ What do we mean by “literal?” “Literal” refers to the normal usage of words or language. Bible texts should be studied in view of the normal use of language. How is the word, phrase, clause, or section normally understood? (See the definitions section below for further explanation.)
- ➔ What do we mean by “grammatical?” “Grammatical” refers to the rules of grammar. Parts of speech and grammatical constructions must be observed and analyzed following the rules of grammar. Meaning is revealed through these rules.
- ➔ What do we mean by “historical?” “Historical” refers to the historical context or setting. What cultural, biographical, political, religious, or social circumstances were influencing what is said in the text?
- ➔ The proper application of this literal-grammatical-historical method of interpretation in the study of Scripture forms the “controlling line of authority” for the meaning of the biblical text. This controlling line of authority for the meaning of the text is rooted in the text itself, and not outside the text someplace else (one’s theological system, or imagination, etc.).

5. We believe that the Scriptures center particularly on the glory of God in the Lord Jesus Christ and, when properly understood, lead to Him (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39; 17:2-3; 18:28; 26:22-23; 28:23). The Word of God is first and foremost the revelation of God, and the believer’s relationship with God in this life depends primarily on his pursuit of God through His words. (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11).

Some Important Definitions:

Hermeneutics - a set of rules for understanding texts.

Exegesis (from the Greek - “to draw out” or “to explain”) - applying the rules for understanding texts to derive the meaning in the texts. It is the application of hermeneutics. It is the process by which the meaning of a passage is drawn out of the text. The very idea of exegesis calls for a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic. (This may require you to step out of your comfort zone as you study. The hard work you put into your study will only strengthen your understanding of the meaning of God’s Word.)

Eisegesis - the errant practice of reading foreign meanings into a text.

Meaning - the truth intention of the author. The author alone gets to determine the meaning of his own words.

Interpretation - an understanding of the truth intention of the author.

Literal - the most simple, direct, and ordinary meaning of phrases and sentences (Terry, 203). The plain sense of the word, phrase or sentence. A literal interpretation does not automatically exclude figurative or metaphorical usages of words. Literal also does not imply a strict “woodenness” to a word, phrase or sentence so that it has no flexibility in meaning whatsoever from one context to another. A literal reading of a text is a “normal” reading of a text. “A normal reading means statements are assumed to be literal unless it is evident the author was using a figure of speech. For example, when Jesus said, “I am the door,” we do not

conclude that Jesus is made of wood and has hinges. We naturally understand that our Lord was using imagery. Our minds examine the literal meaning, find it unlikely, and accept it as a figure of speech. We should note that even when interpreting figures of speech it is good policy to begin with the literal. What is a door? What purpose does a door serve? Having asked that, then we ask: What was Jesus trying to communicate by comparing Himself to a door? The literal function of a door suggests the meaning of the figure: Jesus is the gateway to eternal life" (James, 6).

Wrong Ways to Interpret Scripture:

To determine if an interpretation of Scripture is faithful to the author's intended meaning of that passage, ask yourself this important question (credited to Dr. Don Carson): ***"Where is the controlling line of authority in that interpretation?"*** The authority that determines what an author means is located in the author's actual words and arrangement of them in a particular context. That's the way it always has been. And that's the way we like it as authors of our own words every day. We do not want our interpreters to define our words or find our meaning by leaving our words and looking outside our words someplace else. And the context in which we authored our words matters and should not be changed or ignored. When any of this happens, the controlling line of authority for what we mean is moved outside our words and original context and is determined by something else, not us.

And so, wrong ways to interpret Scripture are easily identified by this question: ***"Where is the controlling line of authority in that interpretation?"*** Is the meaning under consideration restricted to the Scripture's words and the context or is it determined by something else outside the words of the Author? (The following is an adaptation from Dr. Joel James' material, "How to Study the Bible".)

Wrong way #1: The allegorical method (spiritualizing the text). An allegorical or spiritualizing of a text is when the people, the events and other details of the text have hidden or symbolic meanings. Imaginative associations are made between the mind or experience of the interpreter and the words of the text. The controlling line of authority for the meaning of the text is not found in the words of the text or in the context in which they were spoken, but rather in the mind and imagination of the interpreter. Consider this example:

"For example, one church father interpreted the parable of the good Samaritan by making the following associations: The traveler who was attacked represents a person seeking salvation. The robbers represent Satan. Naturally, the good Samaritan is Christ. The oil and wine the Samaritan administered to the injured man's wounds picture the Holy Spirit and forgiveness. The donkey is the gospel because it was the vehicle that carried the injured man to the inn (the church), where the man recovered."

Ask yourself the question again: Where is the controlling line of authority for the meaning of the parable of the good Samaritan found? It is not located in the actual words of the biblical text but rather in the imagination of the interpreter. Jesus' intent with the parable in the particular context it arose is actually lost and obscured. With the parable, Jesus was answering a specific question: "Who is my neighbor (that I am to love)?" But that specific context is completely ignored. And what gets all the attention is the church father's fanciful, not-readily-apparent meaning derived from his own imagination.

Wrong way #2: The "What it means to me" method. The most common or familiar version of this wrong method usually is preceded by the words, "What this passage means to me is. . ." God's intent in the actual words of

the text are not the concern. What prompted the historical and theological context for those words is not relevant in the moment for one who says this. All that matters is how that passage strikes the reader in his moment. Especially when the passage is not carefully studied, the reader's intuitive, unstudied response determines the meaning for that passage - not the words themselves or original context.

Where is the controlling line of authority for the meaning of the text? Again, it is not located in the actual words of the text nor in the context, but rather in whatever idea exists in the interpreter's head.

If anyone did to our own words what these two wrong methods of interpreting do to God's word, we'd be up in arms! What if someone used their fanciful imagination to determine what you meant by words you wrote in an email? Can you imagine your child saying to you after reading your "to do list" for them, "What your list means to me is. . . ." The normal rules of language and how an author communicates is utterly abandoned. We can easily identify the wrong ways of interpreting words by the fact that they locate the authority for determining meaning OUTSIDE the very words under consideration and the original context.

Then what is the right way to interpret Scripture? What is the right way to determine the meaning of any collection of words?

The Right Way to Interpret Scripture:

The right way to interpret the Bible is to read it as carefully and normally as possible, which means that the controlling line of authority that determines the meaning of the words is found within the words themselves in the given context. We must let the Scripture mean what it means based on what the words say in its setting. Interpretation is not a magical or mysterious process, but one that is more simple, careful and normal.

That is not to say that we do not need any help from God as we interpret His word. Just the opposite is true. Without the new birth in Christ and His help and guidance, we are certain to miss His intended meaning in His words.

The Literal-Grammatical-Historical Interpretation of Scripture:

What we have just described above as the best way to interpret Scripture and is formally known as "the literal-grammatical-historical interpretation" method of interpreting Scripture. Please look back at our definition of "literal" on page 4 to refresh your memory of what it means and does not mean. By "literal" we mean the normal sense of the words. By "grammatical" we mean that parts of speech and grammatical arrangements of words must be observed and analyzed. And by "historical" we simply mean the context in which the words were written (the cultural, biographical, political, social circumstances influencing the author and his meaning). When all three of these are taken into careful consideration, the meaning in the author's words most plainly comes forth.

This is the method of interpretation that we hope everyone who hears us speak uses to determine the meaning in our own words. The following principles and rules will help you to apply the literal-grammatical-historical method of interpreting to the biblical text you're studying.

Principles for Interpreting Scripture (and for controlling ourselves):

This might be surprising to consider, but interpreting Scripture involves self-control as much as it does following good rules for interpretation. When we study God's Word, there seem to be endless temptations in our minds to run from the words on the page before us to other ideas we've heard or learned before, concepts taught in a book we read, our own experience, maybe even other Bible passages, etc. The next thing we know, we are making decisions about what the passage means, but we left those words on the page long ago and arrived at a foreign destination that may not resemble the passage we originally considered.

What would you think of someone doing that to your own words in a love letter you wrote to your spouse? They started with your words, but then perhaps they were reminded of a scene in a movie that really impacted them and so they ran with that idea about love, and so forth. Finally, where they end up may actually have very little to do with your original words of love for your spouse (all while they are holding your letter in their hands)! It would be right for you to say to that person - "Control yourself with my words! Please don't run off somewhere else to get at the meaning of my words!"

And we must extend to God the same courtesy whose words and meaning outlast all others! Above all we should control ourselves with His words. To do that well, we should put some guidelines before us and around us that will help restrain us so that we don't quickly leave His words on the page we're studying to get to other interesting ideas in our heads. The guidelines or rules or principles below can help restrain us as we consider our great God and Savior's words to us.

1. Prayerfully Position Yourself under the God of the Word!

The following "sample prayer" reflects the kind of heart-attitude believers should have toward the reading and studying of word of God. Hopefully it also serves as an example of a desire for self-control before the God of the word.

Heavenly Father,

I intend this time in Your Word to be a prayerful expression of worship of You, desire for You, love for You, need of You, and dependence on You. Your word tells me that as God You are set apart from Your creation in holiness. You are also high above all things and Sovereign in Your reign over all things, including my life. Yet how tenderly you stoop toward Your creatures to show love and compassion and countless kindnesses. Your perfect provision sustains all that You have made and glorifies Your great name. You are worthy to be worshiped and I desire to see more of You in Your word! My pursuit of You through Your word and prayer is only possible through Your Son Jesus Christ, who is my Savior. So I approach You through Him, my Substitute and High Priest - the One whom I love but have not yet seen. His death in my place has secured for me this place before Your throne to express my need to You. So...

"Why have I prayerfully come before You with my Bible open?"

I have Your Word open before me because You have revealed Yourself there more clearly than any other place and I long to know You better. I desire to see You in all Your glory in the pages before me. I

simply and humbly draw near to You to study You. Nearness to You through these pages of Scripture is my good.

I also have Your Word open before me because I need to learn more of the nature of my sin and fallenness before You, so that I might better understand what danger I truly was in and what dangers still lurk within me through my indwelling sin. I need to see both the sin that provoked Your righteous wrath toward Your Son and Your grace that moved You to act as Savior toward me in Jesus. If I do not fight to have Scripture's view of my sin today, I will easily be duped by sin's deception and become unaware of or indifferent to sin's nearness to me. I then will be vulnerable to sin's entanglements. Sin at that point can then become familiar, even tolerable to me. Finally, sin can then become a delight to me. Before I know it I will be in a position of weakness with sin. I will be in the fight of my life to be free from its entanglements, or may even no longer desire to be free from its entanglements. If I do nothing today concerning my view of sin, my view of sin will only grow dangerously cloudy.

And Your Word is open before me so that I might undergird my life again today with Your saving heart and motive in the gospel of Your Son, who overcame the penalty of my sin and the power of my sin to enslave me. I am here to rehearse Your bedrock promises in the gospel to my soul. There are treasures in the gospel of Jesus that I have yet to discover in my own life and I long to find them and be nourished by them. If I stagger today under the weight of my sin, the gospel will buoy me and provide me the gospel rest I need. And if I'm in a moment of gospel growth and success, rehearsing the gospel will lead me to humbly acknowledge that all the credit and praise goes to You.

Finally, I have Your Word open before me to study what righteousness and holiness of life looks like for one who has been made into a new creature in Christ. In the new man You have created not only a desire for obedience but also a Spirit-dependent equipping within. I need to consistently feed those new God-given desires in my new condition so that they grow. I also need to continuously express my dependence upon the Holy Spirit in this fight for obedience. If I do not study this righteousness and holiness of life and what the blessings of obedience are, I should not expect my desire for obedience to grow. Indwelling sin will do everything possible to quench that desire. By Your grace and power, as I see holiness of life placed in front of me in the commands of Scripture, I will increasingly align my life and behavior with what pleases You.

I desire my heart and mind to be full of You because of what these pages reveal to me about You in all Your greatness. I long for You to spill out of me into my home and wherever You lead me today. All who come into contact with me today must interact with a one whose heart has drawn near to You and is striving to obey You. Their best hope for salvation or for growth in the gospel will come from one who has searched for You in Your Word and gazed upon Your Son in the gospel and who walks by Your Spirit.

In Christ's name I pray,
Amen.