

Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Introduction

The train engineer said: “I have lost everything. We are off the rails.” As his train approached the Potters Bar rail station on the 10th May, 2002 he felt a sudden jolt and then the train derailed resulting in loss of life for 7 passengers and life changing injuries for another 70 people. All had been normal on the journey from London’s Kings Cross station to Kings Lynn, Norfolk but that suddenly changed as the train left the track and carriage followed.

The high-speed train, travelling at around 100mph, crashed into a bridge as the rear car flipped across two platforms and wedged beneath the canopy of the station’s roof.

The incident shook the town and the events leading up to the tragedy were subject to intense scrutiny during the years that followed.

It wasn’t until 2010 that the families involved began to find out the reasons why the train crashed. After a thorough investigation of the accident, the cause of the derailment was found to be due to neglect of proper maintenance of the track leading to catastrophic failure.

The consistent, literal, historical-grammatical interpretation of the Bible is the sure, solid and safe track that leads to a sound understanding of God’s Word. Neglecting those principles of interpretation will lead to error and invite disaster.

Paul told Timothy, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15).” It is critical that we handle God’s Word accurately. That begins with how we interpret the Bible. If we get that wrong, we are in danger of going off track.



As students of God’s Word, we need some principles and guidelines that will help us obtain objectivity in our interpretation of Scripture.

When discussing passages in the Bible, people might say, “That’s just your interpretation!” Unfortunately, this statement often implies that there is no “correct” interpretation. This claim is typical of the world that we live in. It denies the possibility of objective interpretation. What they are really saying is, “I don’t agree with your interpretation of the Bible, and since no one really knows for sure what it means anyway, let’s just drop this discussion.”

This attitude cannot be an option for the student of God’s Word. Objective interpretation of God’s Word means discovering the meaning of the text. To settle for anything less is to be satisfied with something other than the actual Word of God. We will never have definitive answers for every puzzling text in the Bible. Yet, we should diligently seek to understand the intended meaning of each passage of Scripture.

The Purpose of Language

The purpose of language is to enable effective communication between intelligent beings. Language was given by God for the purpose of being able to communicate with man. God is the originator of language. He needed a way to convey His message to mankind. God (being all-wise and all-loving) originated language to communicate all that was in His mind to us. It’s only logical that He would expect people to understand it in its literal, normal, and plain sense.

Paul Lee Tan explains, “The literal method . . . is based on the assumption that the words of Scripture can be trusted. It assumes that since God intends His revelation to be understood, divine revelation must be written based on regular rules of human communication.¹”

God does not use language to play mind-games with us. The Word of God was not written in some special language or special code that needs to be deciphered in order to unlock some deeper meaning that is embedded in the words of the text. Since language was created by God for the purpose of conveying His message to mankind, then we must view the language of the Bible as sufficient to accomplish that purpose.

¹ Tan, Paul Lee *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Assurance Publishers, 1974), p. 29.

Too often the mindset of many today is that no one can really know for sure what the text of Scripture means. This philosophy contradicts God's very purpose for giving to us the gift of language. What God intends to communicate through His written Word can be known. But we need a set of principles to guide us so that we are not led astray by our own biases or cultural perspective.

The Importance of Objectivity

Unless a consistent system of interpretation is followed, all hope of objectivity is lost. If the correct principles of interpretation are not followed, there would be no limit to the number of interpretations that men would dream up.

Without a consistent method of interpretation there is a danger that Christians feel the right to go through Scripture selecting the promises they want, like choosing food from a buffet in a restaurant, selecting favorites and leaving ones not liked. In other words, Christians go through selecting some promises and leaving others—selecting promises of blessing but rejecting promises of judgment!

The Problem of Preunderstanding

Our preunderstanding affects how we interpret God's Word. Preunderstanding includes what we understand, believe, or assume to be true before we study the Bible. Like a lens, we see everything through our preunderstanding. Many claim that our preunderstanding so warps our view that we can never be totally objective as we attempt to interpret God's Word. However, if this were true then it would defeat the very purpose of the God-given gift of language. Objectivity is possible. Without objectivity, communication would be impossible. There would be no way to know whether we had correctly understood what was said. In fact, those who claim that objectivity is impossible, make the assumption that others have the ability to objectively understand their very claim. It is possible, at least in part, to have an objective view of God's Word. While we need to recognize that our preunderstanding can affect how we view God's Word, it does not mean that it is impossible to be objective. We need to be aware of our preunderstanding in order to guard against incorrect interpretation. And we need to yield our preunderstanding to the truth of God's Word in order to correct our faulty ideas or beliefs.

The Reality of Absolute Truth

Some will argue that there is no such thing as absolute truth. They can often be heard saying, “that may be true for you, but it is not true for me.” Or they might say, “what is true for one culture is not necessarily true for another culture.” However, truth is the same for everyone, everywhere and at all times. If someone tells you that there is no such thing as absolute truth, just ask him one question: “Is that absolutely true?” If he says “yes”, then he has contradicted his own argument. If he says “no”, then he opens the door for the possibility of absolute truth to exist. His contention that absolute truth does not exist is a self-defeating argument.

Since absolute truth is a reality, you can expect to find absolute truth when you read the Bible. In fact, the absolute truth found in Scripture will change the way you think and change what you believe. God’s Word does correct our faulty ideas and beliefs; therefore it is imperative that we yield our preunderstanding to the authority of God’s written revelation.

Paul wrote, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, *for correction*, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).”

As we bring our preunderstanding into subjection to the inspired Scripture, it will bring about correction in our thinking.

The Law of Non-contradiction

An important aspect of absolute truth is the law of non-contradiction. This law is a rule of logic that says, “A statement cannot be both true and false in the same sense at the same time.” For example, I could say, “I am here.” That statement is either true or false. It cannot be both true and false at the same time. The law of non-contradiction is an aspect of our preunderstanding which is universal. It is the same for everyone, everywhere and at all times. Without it there would be no way to tell the difference between what’s true and what’s false. The law of non-contradiction helps to make communication between people possible. When people communicate, it must be on the basis of the universality of truth, or communication is not possible.

The Goal of Objective Interpretation

Some aspects of our preunderstanding are universal. This makes communication possible between people. Because truth is universal, it is possible to discover truth in God's Word. However, there are also aspects of our preunderstanding which are unique to us as individuals. Some aspects of our preunderstanding are also unique to us as members of a particular culture. These present potential pitfalls as we seek to understand the truth of God's Word. In spite of these challenges, we know that "the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12)." God's Word can change the way we think and can change our lives. Good principles of interpretation can uncover the truths of God's Word which is able to mold us into the image of Christ.

The Meaning of Literal Interpretation

What do we mean by "literal" interpretation?

Paul Lee Tan explains: "Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usage of its language."²

In other words, every word is given the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether used in writing, speaking, or thinking. This method has also been called "normal" interpretation. The literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It has also been called "plain" interpretation.

The literal principle does recognize figures of speech. Symbols, figures of speech, and types are all interpreted plainly in this method. These are not contrary to literal interpretation. In fact, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.

Literal interpretation results in accepting the text of Scripture at its face value. Based on the philosophy that God originated language for the purpose of communicating His

² Tan, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

message to man and that He intended man to understand that message, literal interpretation seeks to interpret that message plainly.

David L. Cooper explained the meaning of literal interpretation: “When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”³

If one does not use the plain, normal, or literal method of interpretation, all objectivity is lost. What check would there be on the variety of interpretations which man’s imagination could produce if there were not an objective standard which the literal principle provides? To try to see meaning other than the normal one would result in as many interpretations as there are people interpreting.

The Meaning of Historical Interpretation

Scripture must be studied in light of its historical context. We must consider the times in which the passage was written, as well as the circumstances and conditions. Was the passage you are studying written in the Old or New Testament? Which dispensation was it written in? Who was the author? Knowing the historical context is vital to understanding the meaning!

For example, in the book of Revelation we read, “To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: ‘I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth (Rev 3:14-16).’”

What does it mean to be hot, cold and lukewarm? Does hot, cold and lukewarm refer to degrees of spiritual fervor?

Many interpreters read this verse as if it says: I know your *heart*, that you are neither cold nor hot. But that is to read these verses through the lens of our own culture.

³ David L. Cooper, *The World’s Greatest Library: Graphically Illustrated* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1970), p. 11.

The key to understanding this passage is in understanding its historical context. Laodicea was only six miles south of Hierapolis and eleven miles west of Colossae. These three cities were the most important of all in the Lycus Valley. Laodicea itself lacked a natural water supply and was dependent on its neighbors for this vital resource.

Hierapolis had a natural mineral laden hot springs that was known for its medicinal purposes. The word “hot” refers to the well-known medicinal waters of Hierapolis, whose “hot springs” reached 95 degrees.

Today you can find the archaeological remains of an aqueduct system that would have carried cold water from Colossae to Laodicea. By the time the water had traveled the eleven miles to Laodicea it would no longer be cold. The people in Laodicea would have been keenly aware of the nauseating effect of drinking from that source. The word “cold”, on the other hand, points to the refreshing waters of Colossae.

Robert Mounce wrote, “The church is not being called to task for its spiritual temperature but for the barrenness of its works.”⁴

The church in Laodicea was providing neither refreshment for the spiritually weary (portrayed through the imagery of “cold” water from Colossae), nor healing for the spiritually sick (portrayed through the imagery of “hot” water from Hierapolis). The church was simply ineffective and thus distasteful to the Lord.

Knowing the historical setting in which John wrote the book of Revelation makes a huge difference in how this text is interpreted.

The Meaning of Grammatical Interpretation

The meaning of the words in the passage of Scripture should be studied. This involves considering how words are used in their context and the resultant meaning. It may also involve considering the etymology and history of the words being studied. The grammar, or relationship of the words to each other, must also be considered.

⁴ Mounce Robert H., *The Book of Revelation*, Vol 27, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998. 110.

The importance of grammar in the process of interpretation can be seen in the book of Ephesians. Paul wrote, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and *this* is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8).”

Theologians have argued that the demonstrative pronoun “this” refers to faith or grace. But the grammar of the text does not allow for such an interpretation. Harold Hoehner explains:

Much debate has centered around the demonstrative pronoun “this” (*touto*). Though some think it refers back to “grace” and others to “faith,” neither of these suggestions is really valid because the demonstrative pronoun is neuter whereas “grace” and “faith” are feminine. Also, to refer back to either of these words specifically seems to be redundant. Rather the neuter *touto*, as is common, refers to the preceding phrase or clause. (In Eph. 1:15 and 3:1 *touto*, “this,” refers back to the preceding section.) Thus it refers back to the *concept* of salvation (2:4–8a), whose basis is grace and means is faith. This salvation does not have its source in man (it is “not from yourselves”), but rather, its source is God’s grace for “it is the gift of God.”⁵

Knowing the grammatical construction that Paul used is key to understanding this text.

The Importance of Context

When it comes to Bible interpretation, context is king! Interpreting a verse apart from its context is like trying to analyze a painting by looking at only a single square inch of the canvas. It would be like trying to evaluate a piece of music by listening to a few short notes. The context is absolutely critical to properly interpreting Scripture.

Both immediate context and remote context must be considered. That means comparing Scripture with Scripture as well as the study of the immediate context. No verse of Scripture can be divorced from the verses around it nor from the rest of the Bible.

In language, words gain their meaning from context. A given word may have different meanings in different contexts. For example, a mother might ask her son getting out of

⁵ Hoehner, Harold W. “Ephesians.” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck. Vol. 2. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985. 624. Print.

the bathtub, “are you clean?” In other words, have you washed off all of the dirt? In contrast, a police officer might ask a known drug addict, “are you clean?” In this context, the officer wants to know if the known drug addict is free from drugs.

When determining the meaning of a word, you must consider its immediate context. How is the word used in that verse? Its near context must also be considered. How is the word used elsewhere in that passage or book of the Bible? Also consider its distant context. How did that author use the word in other books of the Bible? How did other authors use it in the Bible? It can also be helpful to consider its root meaning and origin. Considering its cultural usage in non-Biblical writings may also be helpful.

In Matthew 24:13 Jesus said, “But he who endures to the end shall be *saved*.” In this context, what does it mean to be saved? Many Calvinists use this as a proof text for their doctrine of perseverance of the saints. But is this really speaking of eternal salvation?

In verse 9 Jesus said, “Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake.” In the context, Jesus is speaking of enduring to the end of the tribulation and avoiding physical death.

Hal Haller explains:

During the Tribulation only believers who “**endure to the end**” will be delivered, not from hell, but from physical death (cf. use of **saved** in v 22). Endurance under trial is never a means to salvation from the penalty of sin for that would entail human merit (Eph 2:8–9). The passage does not assert that a believer must endure to the end of his life to remain saved or to prove he is regenerate. Salvation cannot be lost (John 6:37, 39; 10:28–29; Eph 4:30), and assurance rests on the promises of God and Jesus Christ, not on performance under severe trial (1 John 5:13).⁶

The Holman Christian Standard Bible correctly brings out the meaning of saved in light of the context of Matthew 24: “But the one who endures to the end will be *delivered*.”

Context is critical in understanding the meaning of the Biblical text.

⁶ Haller, Hal M., Jr. “The Gospel according to Matthew.” *The Grace New Testament Commentary*. Ed. Robert N. Wilkin. Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010. 110. Print.

The Singleness of Meaning

The single sense of meaning in Scripture is a component of the consistent, literal, historical-grammatical method of interpretation. The authors of God's Word wrote with a single meaning in mind.

The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy stated it this way, "We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application."⁷

Applications from any given text may be many, but the interpretation of that text has a single meaning that has come from the author.

Unfortunately, many textbooks on hermeneutics today blur the lines between interpretation and application. Robert Thomas warned:

The incorporation of application ... into the hermeneutical process leads inevitably to multiple meanings for a single passage. Almost every recent work on hermeneutics advocates merging the two disciplines of interpretation and application which were formerly kept quite distinct. With that policy advocated, the transformation of some of the many applications into multiple interpretations is inescapable.⁸

Clark Pinnock exemplifies this dangerous trend. He wrote, "The meaning of the Bible is not static and locked up in the past but is something living and active."⁹ In speaking about "the event of Jesus Christ," Pinnock also wrote, "To read it properly, we have to go beyond the historical descriptions and consider the extension of the story into the present and future."¹⁰

The ramifications to such an approach to Biblical interpretation are ominous for our culture in general and the body of Jesus Christ in particular. Gary Gilley explains the significance of denying the principle of single meaning:

⁷ "The Chicago Statements," Accessed on 7/22/2021 at <http://defendinginerrancy.com/chicago-statements/>.

⁸ Robert Thomas, *The Principle of Single Meaning*; TMSJ | Volume 29, Number 1 (Spring 2018) Accessed on 8/132/2021 at <https://tms.edu/msj/the-principle-of-single-meaning/>

⁹ Clark Pinnock, "Biblical Texts— Past and Future Meanings," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 34/2 (Fall 1999):140.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 139

A frequent criticism of literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutics is that it is nothing more than a white, male approach to interpretation. The idea is that the Bible has been interpreted through a white, male grid, which results in a Christianity of white males from the Western hemisphere. To rectify this supposed distortion of Christianity, white supremacy in hermeneutics needs to be supplemented, if not overthrown, by women hermeneutics, black hermeneutics, African hermeneutics, South American hermeneutics, and on and on. If this approach gains traction (and it seems to be doing so: for example, *Christianity Today's* 2020 book of the year is *Reading While Black*), it will radically and tragically change how Scripture is interpreted in profound ways.

The foundational principle behind biblical hermeneutics is that the reader is attempting to understand the meaning of the divine and human authors of the biblical text. Our task is to determine the original meaning intended by the Holy Spirit as He superintended and guided human instruments to pen the Word of God. Once the meaning to the initial audience is determined, the reader is ready for application. Applications can be many and can vary according to culture, circumstances, background, and so forth, but there is only one authorial intent in each text. However, the CRT [Critical Race Theory] approach, grounded in postmodern thinking, is to allow the text to be controlled by the reader, rather than the author. The text can take on a variety of meanings depending on the social condition, cultural background, ethnic identity, or gender of the reader. The Scriptures, interpreted with this methodology, no longer have a single meaning but have as many meanings as there are readers. Thus, in attempting to make the Bible less white, and Christianity less Western, the Bible has been deconstructed and rendered essentially meaningless. All interpretation lies in the eyes and mind of the readers, not in the Author and His intended meaning.¹¹

The fact is that meaning cannot be found in the interpreter. Meaning must be grounded in the author. Only the author knows what he wanted to communicate. Only by understanding the author's meaning can we conclude that we have the message that he intended to

¹¹ Gary Gilley, Racism and Critical Race Theory Part 3, Biblical Investigation; Accessed on 8/132/2021 at <https://tottministries.org/racism-and-critical-race-theory-part-3-biblical-investigation/>

communicate. Only after determining the author's meaning can we make any kind of meaningful application to our lives.

The Importance of Consistency

It has been previously stated that language was given by God for the purpose of being able to communicate to man all that was in His mind. This He has done by inspiring perhaps 40 human authors from diverse cultures and backgrounds over a period of 1500 years to record His complete message, the Word of God, both accurately and the way language is normally used. Because God is loving and desires all people to know Him and walk in the light of His Word, it is reasonable to conclude that God would expect people to understand His Word in its literal, normal, and plain sense.

The Scriptures are preserved for us in the Old and New Testament and presented in various literary forms, including the history of both Israel and the Church, writings of poetry and wisdom, prophecy fulfilled in history or yet to be fulfilled in end times, gospels which focus on the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, as well as letters to the churches. The Scriptures also contain similes and parables, metaphors and allegories, types, and other figures of speech; nevertheless, "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God," and God's intended meaning is never to be determined by subjectivism or man's preunderstanding and theological bias. Figures of speech depend on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. When Christ said, "I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7), He was clearly using the purpose of a literal door to show that He alone was the entrance or the way to God.

Every part of Scripture in every literary form in which it is presented is to be understood in its literal, normal, and plain sense as God intended in order for it to be "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16).

Being consistent in the application of a literal hermeneutic is as important as being correct in applying a literal hermeneutic. Serious errors in understanding occur if a literal hermeneutic is applied selectively to areas of soteriology, and either selectively or not at all, to areas of ecclesiology and eschatology. Only the application of a consistent literal hermeneutic gives us assurance that our interpretation of God's Word will be what God intended to communicate, unmixed with human theories and speculation.

Conclusion

Objectively understanding the intent of the author is our goal in Bible interpretation. How is this done? It can only be accomplished by taking the words of Scripture at face value. It is done through the consideration of the grammatical (according to the rules of grammar), historical (consistent with the historical setting of the passage), and contextual (in accord with its context) method of interpretation.

The goal of consistent, literal, historical-grammatical interpretation is to discern the author's intended meaning to his target audience. We need to consciously separate the author's meaning (interpretation) from the significance for today (application). We need to first ask, "What did the author mean?" Only after that question has been asked and answered should we ask, "What does this mean to me?" Unfortunately, many people skip the first question and jump immediately to the second question.

We can discover the author's intended meaning by 1) piecing together the world that he lived in (historical interpretation); 2) studying the entire discourse (literary section) to obtain the context; and 3) considering the grammatical issues within the text.

Recommended Resources

- *An Introduction To Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics* by Mal Couch
- *Basic Bible Interpretation—A Practical Guide To Discovering Biblical Truths* by Roy B. Zuck
- *Biblical Hermeneutics—A Treatise on the Interpretation of The Old and New Testaments* by Milton S. Terry
- *Evangelical Hermeneutics—The New Versus the Old* by Robert L. Thomas
- *Hermeneutics—Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* by Henry A. Virkler
- *Let the Text Speak* by Grant Hawley
- *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* by Bernard Ramm
- *The Guts of Grace* by Grant Hawley
- *The Interpretation of Prophecy* by Paul Lee Tan