



Hermeneutical compass

I. Introduction

Hazard to avoid:

1. Reading into the text.
2. Misreading the text. John 14:6 – I am the way x I am a way. Psalm 37:4 – Delight yourself in the Lord; and he will give you the desires of your heart x He will give you the desires of your heart
3. Distorting the text. I have seen people twisting it to make it say what they wanted- 2Peter 3:16 - it is one thing to have difficulty with interpreting them, and still another thing to distort them – which the Lord will not leave without judgment.
4. Contradicting the text (Satan did in the garden of Eden), subjectivism, relativism, overconfidence etc.

That is why every Christian needs some basic skills in Bible interpretation, more so Christian workers.

The word hermeneutics is used in two ways:

1. describing the whole process of Biblical interpretation, here we use it in this sense
2. describing the second step of Biblical interpretation after Exegesis = original intended meaning. What did it mean for them at that time? Hermeneutics in this sense = seeking the contemporary relevance of the ancient text. What does it mean for us today?

If I was to give thing that influences the most how do we interpret the Bible, I would say it is mainly about HOW DO YOU SEE THE BIBLE: Is it with or without errors? Is it inspired and how exactly is it inspired? Ideas and concepts or every word? We will later see how much is our interpretation connected with our view of Scriptures.

„Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart.“ (Psalm 119:34. NIV). It is impossible to apply the Word without first understanding it.

Every book of Scripture has a message, and that message can be understood. (2Tim3:16). It has purpose, meaning. It is not a giant riddle. God wants us to understand it.

Yet very often, two people look at the same text and come up with two very different, sometime even opposing interpretations. Can they both be correct? Not if laws of logic apply to Scriptures. Hendricks: "Meaning is not our subjective thoughts read into the text". Interpretation is a process of "recreation". We attempt to stand in the author's shoes and re-create his experience."

Illustration: In **Observation** (main question "**what do I see?**") we lay foundations and then we move to Interpretation (main question "**what does it mean?**") to develop the superstructure. In Observation we excavate, in Interpretation we erect. Buildings are always determined by their foundations.

II. Why do we need interpretation?

Why we can't just read it and do it? The reason is that there are some barriers between us and biblical writers. Time and distance created them and we need to deal with them.

1. Language barriers
2. Cultural barriers
3. Literary barriers – different genres
4. Communication barriers – infinite God communicates to finite

III. Schools of Biblical Interpretation

1. **The Allegorical Schools of Interpretation** teaches that beneath each verse of scripture (beneath the obvious) is the "real" meaning of the passage. Hidden in each sentence or statement is a symbolic spiritual meaning.

This method of interpretation was rejected by all of the Reformers, who but argued that allegorical or symbolic passages were only contained in clearly defined contexts, such as the Book of Revelation.

2. **The Devotional Schools of Interpretation** emphasizes the edifying aspects of the scriptures and their interpretation, with the goal of developing one's spiritual life.

This method often advocated the reading of the scriptures as a means of obtaining a mystical experience.

3. **The Liberal Schools of Interpretation.** Theological liberalism is prevalent today. Liberal theologians do not accept the Bible as the infallible Word of God and reject the verbal inspiration of the Bible.
4. **The Literal Schools of Interpretation** (grammatico-historical). The literal method of interpreting the Bible is to accept the literal rendering of each sentence unless by virtue of the nature of the sentence or phrase or a clause within the sentence renders it impossible. For instance, figures of speech or fables of allegories do not admit to being of a literal interpretation.

The spirit of literal interpretation is that we should be satisfied with the literal interpretation of a text unless very substantial reasons can be given for advancing beyond the literal meaning.



This is the approach we are taking here at this training. Why?

- a. When the New Testament writers refer to the Old Testament scriptures, they interpret those passages literally.
- b. The writings of the earliest Church Fathers (Ignatius of Antioch, Ireneaus, and Justin Martyr) indicate that they took Scripture literally, unless the context clearly lead against it.

IV. The Principles of Biblical Interpretation

There are certain principles that will help us to accurately handle the Word of Truth. These principles are embedded in the Scriptures itself. We do not need to go beyond the boundaries of the Bible to discover these laws and maxims that are used to determine the meaning of Scripture.

Principle #1: The Literal Interpretation Principle

We take the Bible at face value. We generally take everyday things in life as literal or at face value. This is a common sense approach.

The golden rule of interpretation is: "When the plain sense of the Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense." Therefore, take every word at its primary, usual meaning, unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and fundamental truths, clearly indicate otherwise.

Example: Song of Solomon – for years, interpreters have said it is an allegory of relationship between Christ and His Church. This is not what it was for the original readers. It was written centuries before Christ, it is a poem with very definite lyric form that needs to be read according to the conventions of that genre. There is a simpler, more "common sense" interpretation: the book celebrates erotic love in marriage as God intended it to be.

When do we use symbolic or figurative interpretation?

- a. When the passage tells you so – for example whenever we come across dreams and visions (Joseph's dream in Gen 37)
- b. When literal meaning is impossible or absurd. Use sanctified common sense. Rev 1:16 – two edged sword sticking literally out of the Lord's mouth? Psalm 1:3 – tree, the wicked are like chaff that the wind blows away
- c. When literal meaning would involve something immoral – John 6:53 – 55 Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."
- d. When it is obvious figure of speech. Common euphemisms and idioms – Psalm 21:6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf...My wife has a green thumb. Do I mean that Danka's thumb turned green and she can't make it look like the other fingers?
- e. When literal interpretation goes contrary to the context and scope of the passage (Rev 5- Jesus is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, general character and style of the book (mainly poetic and prophetic books), plan and purpose of the author. Psalm 1: 3 "He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers." Does it guarantee prosperity to



every faithful believer? Hardly, David is in Ps 1 and the rest of his Psalms concerned about our walk with God rather than financial prosperity. It does make sense to say that he describes the quality of a person's outcome, not the quantity of blessings he enjoys.

- f. When literal interpretation involves a contradiction of other Scripture or in doctrine. Although Bible sometimes presents us a paradox, it never presents us a contradiction. Mark 10:25 "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Does it mean there is no salvation for the rich? It can not mean that, it would be against the rest of Scripture and nature of salvation.

Principle #2: The Contextual Principle

D.A. Carson: "A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text." By "proof text," of course, Carson means the abuse of a single verse or phrase taken out of context to "prove" a particular view. The word "text" is derived from the Latin word, which means to "weave." The context is that which accompanies the text. The Word of God is a perfect unit. The scriptures cannot be broken; they all hang together, a perfect unity. We must look and consider the verses immediately before, after, and around the passage. We must consider the book of the Bible and the section of the Bible in which the passage occurs. The Bible must be interpreted within the framework of the Bible. Most problems in interpretation can be solved if we look at context. It is like to climb up the tree and look around. Several kinds of context:

- a. Literary **The Grammatical Principle**

The Bible was originally written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. While we have several highly accurate translations, all translation involves a certain amount of interpretation on the part of the translator. Thus, the study of word meanings, grammar, and syntax of the original languages is important for a proper understanding of Scripture.

The Genre Principle. Genre is a literary term having to do with the category or "genus" of literature under consideration. Proper interpretation must take the general literary category of any given passage into consideration. Are we dealing with poetry or prose? Are we dealing with history or prophecy? It is important that when we interpret the Word of God, we understand as much as possible the author's intent. For example, if the author is writing history - the genre of the Pentateuch of Moses - it would not be proper to interpret a single reference (such as the speech of Balaam's ass) as a poetic personification, unless a variety of contextual markers compelled us to do so.

Exposition – the Epistles

Narrative and biography – Genesis, gospels

Parables – a brief tale that illustrates a moral principle

Poetry - Psalms

The Proverbs and wisdom literature – Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes

Prophecy and apocalyptic Revelation - Eschatology and Prophecy



b. Historical **The Historical Background Principle**

The Bible was composed in a specific culture at a particular point in time. While they are universal in application, the truths in the Bible can most fully be realized only when taking the surrounding culture and history into account. For example, when Jesus is called “the first fruits” (1 Corinthians 15:20), we may have some understanding of this title from the Old Testament, but a study of Jewish religious practice in the first century can provide a deeper understanding of why Paul chose **this** title in **this** passage, as opposed to another title with the same general meaning of “first.”

c. Cultural

d. Geographic

e. Theological **The Progressive Revelation Principle**

The Word of God is to be understood from the Old Testament to the New Testament as a flower unfolding its petals to the morning sun. God initiated revelation, but He did not reveal His truths all at one time. It was a long and progressive process. Therefore, we must take into account the then-current state of revelation to properly understand a particular passage. For example, an interpretation of a passage in Genesis which assumed a fully delineated view of the “new Covenant” would not be sound. As the saying goes, “The Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.”

Principle #3: The Scripture Interprets Scripture Principle

We may rest assured that God did not reveal an important doctrine in a single, ambiguous passage. All essential doctrines are fully and clearly explained - either in the immediate context, or somewhere else in the Bible. This principle is best illustrated by what is known as “topical Bible study.” There are two essential ‘rules’ for applying this principle: 1) The context of the two passages must be the same; and 2) The plain passage must be used to guide our interpretation of a less clear passage - not the other way around! Reformers called it the Analogy of Faith.

Principle #4: The Accommodation Principle

The Bible is to be interpreted in view of the fact that it is an **accommodation of Divine truths to human minds**: God the infinite communicating with man the finite. The Bible was written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The Bible was also created in space, in time, and in history so that man could understand it. The truths of God made contact with the human mind at a common point, the Bible, to make God (and, indeed, all of reality) knowable. We must be careful, then, not to push accommodating language about God and His nature to literal extremes. God does not have feathers and wings (e.g., Psalms 17:8); nor is He our literal Father in the same sense our earthly father is.



Principle #5: The One Interpretation Principle

Every verse in the Bible has only one interpretation, although that verse may have many applications. The one correct interpretation is that which mirrors the intent of the inspired author.

Principle #6: The Harmony of Scripture Principle

No part of the Bible may be interpreted so as to contradict another part of the Bible. We presuppose the inerrancy and harmony of Scripture as a necessary result of a perfect Creator God revealing Himself perfectly to Mankind. Proper application of hermeneutical principles will resolve apparent conflicts.

Again, most of these principles show, that there is a close connection between our view of the origin and nature of the Bible and our interpretation of it. Is means something if we see it as inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God, and means something else, if we see it differently.

V. Is it for me or just for the original reader?

1. Common sense hermeneutics: 2Tim 4:13 is a clear command yet none of us felt called by the Holy Spirit to travel Troas and pick-up Paul's cloak from Carpus' house. Yet in the same letter, 2Tim2:3 says "Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus" and we have no question it is for us when we face difficulties.
2. There are cases "in between" those clear situations and it is not so easy and quick to discern if it for us today. 1Tim 5:23 – stop drinking water only, use a little wine and 2Tim 3:14 – 16 continue in the Word are both instructions for Timothy, but the first one causes a lot of controversy among Christians (it was not alcohol, it was a juice, water was not safe as it is today etc.). Often times, our culture, our church tradition and our theological commitments tend to dictate our interpretation. Just two rules here:
 - a. The most basic one is that the text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his readers. This at least limits the range of possible interpretations. (1Tim 5:23 could not mean it was a grape juice, the process of making it was not known at that time.).
 - b. The second rule says Whenever we share comparable particulars (specific life situations) with the first century setting (OT setting), God's Word for us is the same as the God's Word for them. We must first do a careful reconstruction of their situation to make sure that our situation is similar to theirs.
3. How do I know which of God's promises are for me?
 - a. Is it a general promise (for all believers at all times) or specific (limited to time period or recipients)? Which one is Psalm 1:3? [Philippians 4:7](#), "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This promise is made to all believers who, refusing to worry, bring their requests to God (v. 8)



- b. Promises are often conditional. Look for the word “if” in the context.
- c. God gives us promises to help us better submit to His will and trust Him. A promise does not make God bend to our will.
- d. Do not assume to know precisely when, where, or how the promise will be fulfilled in your life.

WARNING!! Interpretation can become an end in and of itself (most people who study the Bible begin here and stop here). It has never been intended to be that. The goal is not understanding, but transformation. The Word of God does not bear fruit when it is understood, only when it is applied.

Imagine you plow the field, drop the seed, tend the plants, pull out the weeds, wait for rain and right at the time of the harvest, you walk away to a different field. You have prepared for a rich harvest, but you may starve to death spiritually without application.

