



## Responding To “Well That’s How You Interpret The Bible”

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**H**as anyone ever responded to your biblically based reasoning with, “Well that’s your interpretation of the Bible.” How do you respond to that? How should respond? I usually say something like, “So then, what school of biblical interpretation do you subscribe to?” If you ask that question you’ll probably get a blank stare: “What do you mean by that?” Which makes my point....

We all need to be clearheaded and educated when it comes to our understanding of hermeneutical presuppositions. It is a critical, but often underemphasized subject today. As people get older their worldview largely predetermines their approach to interpreting Scripture. Therefore, understanding the five major schools of scriptural interpretation is important in order to effectively and objectively evaluate not only what scriptural hermeneutic you subscribe to, but what interpretive approach your colleagues are using (knowingly or unknowingly) as they live out their lives and formulate public policy. Candidly, most people do not realize there are differing schools of biblical interpretation.

This study will help familiarize you with hermeneutics.

### Weekly Bible Study During Session

Wednesday Mornings 8:00 AM Sharp. Capitol Building Family Room H324  
Hot Breakfast Served.

Robert Aderholt, *Alabama*  
Michele Bachmann, *Minnesota*  
Spencer Bachus, *Alabama*  
Marsha Blackburn, *Tennessee*  
Jim Bridenstine, *Oklahoma*  
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Cathy McMorris Rogers, *Washington*  
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Tim Scott, *South Carolina*  
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### INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics determines the methods, techniques, rules and principles that will best serve one to arrive at the proper interpretation – *the authorial intent* – of any part of the Bible. “What does the Bible mean by what it says?” is the vital question hermeneutics answers. Just as there is proper and improper exegesis of the United States Constitution, there must be a learned discipline in order to be effective and congruous in discovering what the author(s) of any document meant by what they said. We begin from the premise that there can be only one true meaning: the author’s intended meaning.

The background of the word *hermeneutics* is rooted in Greek mythology, where Hermes was the god who interpreted the messages of the other gods to mortals. Lest one think interpretation is a purely secular concept, the word is used in Luke 24:27 by Christ....

***And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.***

The English word **explained** in this passage is the Greek word *hermeneuo* meaning “to interpret.” It comes from the compound term *diermeneuo*.

Christ, the greatest interpreter or master of hermeneutics to ever live, is talking to the two disciples on the Emmaus Road. As He interprets from the Old Testament the things concerning Himself, their hearts burn within them (v. 32).

***And they said to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?”***

This passage serves to illustrate a profound introductory point: proper hermeneutics, used sensitively by the Spirit-filled and Spirit-led believer,

as Christ did, can lead to vital life-changing and policy changing results in the lives of those with whom one comes in contact, both in a personal sense and on the Floor. It is the Spirit-led believer who can best explain the Word and apply its intended meaning to his or her colleagues! Conversely, to misinterpret Scripture is to neuter it of its self-proclaiming power, per Hebrews 4:12:

***For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.***

Hermeneutics is therefore a very important subject. Again, as people age, unfortunately due to the fallen nature of man, their worldview will largely determine their hermeneutic (versus the other way around, cf. John 3:20). What follows is an evaluation of the five leading schools of hermeneutics. I will try to make this as painless as possible.

### **CAN YOU SPOT WHICH HERMENEUTIC A FELLOW LEGISLATOR MAY BE INCORPORATING TO JUSTIFY THEIR LIFE’S ACTIONS AND/OR POLICY POSITIONS?**

Of the five schools we will consider, the first is the proper school of Hermeneutics: This is the one that provides *objective* justice to the author. The four that follow (if you can stomach reading through all of them) are *subjective* methods that allow the interpreter to in some way foist his or her interpretive meaning onto the author. Each of these four schools enables the interpreter to have as much power, if not more, than the author when it comes to declaring the meaning. A modern day illustration of this is (increasingly) provided by the US Supreme Court Justices in their interpretation of the meaning of the US Constitution. Those justices who engage in interpretive license craftily



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label the Constitution as a “fluid” document. As such they are termed “Activist” interpreters. To the contrary are those justices who are known as “Originalists.” They practice an objective discipline to seek the authorial intent of that which was written.

**THE ACTIVISTS ARROGATE  
AUTHORITY TO THEMSELVES ABOVE  
THE AUTHORS WHO IN ESSENCE  
BECOME THEIR SERVANTS,  
WHILE THE ORIGINALISTS REMAIN  
THE ORATORS OF THE AUTHORITY OF  
THE AUTHORS**

The former can make an author say whatever they want whereas the latter are constrained by authorial intent.

### I. THE GRAMMATICAL-HISTORICAL-NORMATIVE SCHOOL

#### A. INTRODUCTION

In this discipline of interpretation the meaning of Scripture is deemed to be the basic, customary, socially acknowledged designation of the terms used at the time they were penned. The literal sense of the document is derived from the basic meaning of the words in the context of their otherwise usage in the time they were written, i.e. how were these words used at the time of writing and what is their historical context?

One must quickly add here what this interpretive school is not: It is not characterized by letterism, or a wooden literalism.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it allows for the author to utilize figures of speech, such as parables, metaphors, hyperbole, irony, euphemisms, paronomasia (plays on words), proverbs, personification, oxymorons, etc. In Latin this is referred to as *usus loquendi*, which is a capsulation of the idea of the use of semantics within a speech culture. Ramm in his classic textbook on *Hermeneutics* calls this “the literal stratum of language.” Again, the Grammatical-Historical-

Normative (GHN) School of hermeneutics recognizes the existence of such.

#### B. HISTORY

Ezra in particular is the first OT example of this hermeneutical usage. The Jews had been exiled in Babylonia and had lost their native tongue; they were now speaking Aramaic. Ezra therefore assembled the Hebrew people and explained the real intended meaning of the OT text to them. Ezra was not reading into the text his personal opinions (eisogesis); his was a GHN exegete.

Later, it was the exegetical (opposite eisogesis, lit. “to exit from”) approach to interpretation that set the stage for the Reformation, as Calvin and Luther explicated what was actually in the Greek New Testament (which had recently become available to the common man via the invention of the printing press). As Luther explained the intended meaning of the Apostle Paul from the Book of Galatians and Romans, the Soteriology (biblical doctrine of Salvation), the authorial intent of Paul, became known throughout the world to the masses: rather than read into the text his opinions on salvation, Luther preached only what Paul said: Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone! The basis of the Reformation was the GHN hermeneutic!

#### C. EVALUATION

1. The GHN method of interpretation is the usual secular practice for interpreting literature today, both present and ancient.
2. The GHN method exercises a control on the imagination of the interpreter. He or she cannot cavalierly say, “I think this is what God is speaking to me from this passage” if indeed what they conclude is not what the author intended for them to conclude from the passage. It is a disciplined objective method, not a subjective undisciplined method of understanding a written document.



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3. A large part of the Bible makes sense this way.

### D. SUMMARY

Luther said of the GHN method, “That is the true method of interpretation which puts Scripture alongside of Scripture in a right and proper way.”<sup>2</sup> Calvin said of the GHN method<sup>3</sup>....

**“IT IS THE FIRST BUSINESS OF AN INTERPRETER TO LET HIS AUTHOR SAY WHAT HE DOES SAY, INSTEAD OF ATTRIBUTING TO HIM WHAT WE THINK HE OUGHT TO SAY.”**

### E. AN ADDED NOTE

Unfortunately there are some Evangelicals of the Reformed tradition today who change their Hermeneutic of Scripture to the following hermeneutical method of Allegorical Interpretation when it comes to justifying their convictions regarding Biblical End Times, i.e. eschatological presuppositions. To illustrate: The following passages, when viewed through the lens of the GHN method, clearly and repeatedly underscore the return of Israel in the End Times: Isa. 27:42-44; 65; 66; Jer. 30-33; Eze. 36; 37; 40-48; Dan. 9:20-27; 12:1-3; Hos. 2:14-23; 14:4-7; Joel 3:18-21; Am. 9:11-15; Ob. 17; 21; Mic. 7:14-20; Zep. 3:14-20; Hag. 2:20-23; Zec. 13; 14; Mal. 4:1-3. I have listed most all of the return of Israel passages in the OT to illustrate that there are a boatload of them – indicating that God redundantly says He is not done with Israel; The NT Book of Revelations (cf. chap. 20) clearly indicates that God has big plans for those with whom He made an everlasting covenant in Genesis 12:1-2. The point in stating all of this is that in order to justify their presupposition that God is finished with Israel, some Reformed Evangelicals *must jump-switch to a different hermeneutical school*, they instead treat – and must treat – the mountain of aforesaid passages *allegorically!* Such a change in hermeneutical disciplines is less than genuine in my opinion; I fail to understand how

one can apply one hermeneutic in numerous passages to support their soteriological conclusions (among others) and yet another hermeneutic to support their eschatology! This exercise serves to specifically illustrate how hermeneutical beliefs relate to a legislator’s possible policy decisions, in this case relative to Israel. Conclusively, for sure there is a strong correlation between Biblical Hermeneutics and Policy Formation even within Evangelicalism!

## II. THE ALLEGORICAL SCHOOL

### A. INTRODUCTION

Allegory is the belief that there is a “hidden spiritual meaning that transcends the literal sense of a sacred text” (M&W). The allegorical school of biblical interpretation regards the GHN sense of a passage as a mere starting point for discovering the *hidden meaning* which is *deeper*, more *profound*, and more *spiritual* (supposedly). States Michaelson<sup>4</sup> in his analysis of this school, beneath the letter (rhete) or the obvious (phanera) is the real meaning (hyponoia).

**WHAT THE ORIGINAL WRITER IS TRYING TO SAY IS IGNORED. WHAT THE INTERPRETER WANTS TO SAY BECOMES THE ONLY IMPORTANT FACTOR**

“Allegorizing is like a fog which at first renders objects indistinct and then finally blots them out altogether.”<sup>5</sup> It is accurate to say of this method that, “imagination replaces observation.”<sup>6</sup> Out the window flies the objective pursuit of authorial intent and from down the hallway one hears the approaching voice of the imaginative Activist.

### B. HISTORY

There are many and varying historic schools of interpretation that are allegorical in nature. Already mentioned are some modern day Evangelicals who are selectively allegorical when it comes to



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Eschatology. The allegorical interpretive approach is nothing new. Greek, Jewish, Patristic (early Church Fathers), and Catholic biblical interpreters have subscribed to the allegorical idea. Philo (20 BC to A.D. 54), sought to give Scripture charm for unbelieving minds via allegorizing certain texts: He discarded the literality of biblical passages that proved offensive. Later, (unfortunately) Christians applied Philo’s principles to their own times. Some Patristic allegorists include Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Augustine.

### C. EVALUATION

1. It is subjective; if Scripture means what we think it ought to mean, each man is a law unto himself.
2. It is rationalistic; the Scriptures are manipulated to suit man’s reason and his predetermined emphasis or conclusion.
3. It obscures Scripture by imposing eisogesis in place of exegesis.

### D. SUMMARY

Allegorists have distorted plain passages by reading in meanings that have no valid connection with the obvious, literal sense. It deems authoritative the interpreter versus the author; it is imposition in place of exposition. Does the Bible really say what the interpreter thinks it says?

## III. THE LIBERAL SCHOOL

### A. INTRODUCTION

Typically, the one who poses the retort, “But that’s a matter of your own interpretation” subscribes to this camp. The theological liberals believe that the Bible can be true only when it harmonizes with man’s reason. The final seat of authority therefore rests with man.

**THIS VIEW BELIEVES THAT HUMAN INTELLECT IS ADEQUATE IN ITSELF TO SELECT BETWEEN WHAT IS ACCEPTABLE AND WHAT IS ERRONEOUS IN SCRIPTURE**

Unfortunately there are about 35 “Christian” denominations that subscribe to this hermeneutic. Nationally and internationally The National Council of Churches and The World Council of Churches hold to this interpretive approach.

The essence of liberal biblical interpretation is that human intellect is adequate in itself to select between what is true and false in the Bible. **Bill O’Reilly** recently more than intimated this kind of hermeneutical thinking in his book *The Killing of Jesus* when he proffered that Jesus never spoke words of forgiveness to the thief on the cross next to Him. **O’Reilly’s** views however starkly contrast with the account of Dr. Luke in the NT Gospel account bearing his name (cf. Lk. 23:42-43)! In making this statement then, **O’Reilly** has placed his own intellect and authority above that of Scripture. Illustrated then by O’Reilly is this relative to the essence of liberal hermeneutics:

**“THE FINAL AND SUPREME AUTHORITY IS TRANSFERRED FROM GOD TO THE THRONE-ROOM OF THE HUMAN MIND.”**

The above quote from Rosscup<sup>7</sup> is a fitting summation of the inherent problem with this camp. The Bible can be true only when it harmonizes with man’s independent reasoning. The problem is that Scripture claims to be inerrant (2Tim. 3:16-17) and also states that the mind of man is fallen and tainted by sin (Gen. 3). Hence, related to the aforementioned illustration, if one believes salvation is merited by more than simple trust and faith in the forgiveness of Christ, Jesus’ words to the thief on the cross must be somehow be discounted by a human mind that is (perhaps) fixated on a differing presupposition relative to how someone garners salvation. Said another way,



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if one believes that salvation is merit based, then the unmerited-based salvation granted by Jesus to the thief must in some way be incorrect: when human authority attempts to trump scriptural authority the intended meaning of the Scriptures tainted.

### B. HISTORY

Ensuing from German Higher Criticism of NT source documents, a doubt-filled way of thinking that germinated in Germany’s School of Tübingen, came liberal hermeneutics. When Tübingen began criticizing the various source documents that comprise the formation of the Greek New Testament, the downstream floodgates were opened. Those who helped turn the valves were Hobbs, Spinoza and F.C. Baur, Part and parcel with the Social Gospel movement, liberal hermeneutics were a basic ingredient in the hugely damaging work of H.E. Fosdick during the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Albert Schweitzer and J.M. Robinson in their hubris, *Quest for the historical Jesus* also assume the veracity of this hermeneutical way of thinking.

### C. EVALUATION

1. It is rationalistic.
2. Since the mind of man cannot explain everything God reveals in Scripture, miracles for instance, the miracles of the Bible must therefore be discounted. Both inspiration and the supernatural are redefined and confined to the ceiling of man’s mind.
3. The presupposition of human accommodation erases much of God’s revelation and Bible doctrine.

### D. SUMMARY

With a liberal hermeneutic man quickly and arrogantly becomes the judge of Scripture, versus Scripture being the judge of man.

## IV. THE NEO-ORTHODOX SCHOOL

### A. INTRODUCTION

This hermeneutic is a bit more difficult to understand. To begin with, think of Neo-Orthodoxy as a reaction to cold Liberal Protestantism in search of a more personable faith (a noble pursuit, yes, but its attempt to achieve this is done in a wrong way). Neo-Orthodoxy is an interpretive approach that denies propositional revelation and employs the premise that the Bible is only infallible when it can occur subjectively in the recipient’s life: “when God speaks to you through it.” Neo-orthodoxy states: the Bible has instrumental authority because it is an instrument pointing to a personable Christ, but it does not have inherent, objective propositional authority. Bottom line: the Bible is God’s Word when it speaks to you; it can become the Word of God when God chooses to use it to reveal Himself. As you can see, this is a highly mystical and subjective means of interpreting Scripture.

### B. HISTORY

Karl Barth. Since its founding after WWI, as a reaction to cold Protestantism that seemed cold, detached and ineffective. Subsequent to its founding Neo-orthodoxy splintered into several movements led by Brunner and Niebuhr.

### C. EVALUATION

1. This hermeneutic denies that the Bible *is* the Word of God; it claims that the Bible *becomes* the Word of God when God speaks to a man and he responds.
2. Only that part of the Bible that witnesses to Christ is binding, and the seat of authority for deciding this *is in man’s mind*. Therefore akin to Liberal Hermeneutics, fallen man becomes the ultimate and final judge of Scripture, both in the sense of what is authoritative – and when it is authoritative. As such the Bible is mystical and



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subservient, versus propositional, objective and always authoritative.

3. Many Bible episodes are treated mythologically, i.e. as teaching serious theological principles but not as having literally occurred.

### D. SUMMARY

In essence, these schools end up destroying objective spiritual experience because (by their own account) they are based on an unworthy, unreliable book. Keep in mind that both Liberal and Neo-Orthodox Theology were founded on supposedly biblically-contradictory archeological and scientific evidence of several hundred years ago when man thought he had empirical data that seemingly discounted the long held premise of biblical inerrancy. These respective disciplines and their subsequent discoveries have since validated biblical accuracy time and time again, leaving the two theologies and their hermeneutic equivalents with little present buoy. Accordingly the human-authority bases of these interpretive approaches is formulated – from and on – myopic and now outdated research.

This fifth school of misinformed biblical interpretation may surprise you....

## V. THE DEVOTIONAL SCHOOL

### A. INTRODUCTION

This view of interpreting Scripture regards the Bible as a rich book primarily given to nourish the spiritual life of the believer. Emphasis is placed on the edifying aspect of Scripture. While seemingly noble, it reduces the Bible to little more than a “What’s in it for me” book of self-helps!

### B. HISTORY

Medieval mystics. Pietists, Puritans, Wesley, Matthew Henry, Quakers. F.B. Meyer, A.W. Tozer. To develop one of the aforesaid briefly, the Pietist movement was an earlier (in comparison to Neo

Orthodoxy) reaction to cold, stale, dead doctrine in the late 1600’s and early 1700’s motivated in reaction to post Reformation German Lutheranism.

### C. EVALUATION

1. In essence it seeks application that is essential. As such it is better than nothing.

2. There are dangers in its abuse; therefore there must be a balance between the whole of Scripture and its isolated application.

3. Abuses include allegorizing, excessive typology (seeing Christ in OT passages not intended to be a type of Christ or an illustration of a biblical principle), and neglect of prior doctrinal bases. In simplicity, given this hermeneutic one can forever view the Scriptures as something they can “parachute in on,” read a passage and go on with their daily lives. This view and use of Scripture leads to a cavalier consideration for context, thereby misinterpreting the authorial meaning.

### D. SUMMARY

These writers tend to gloss over technical problems, difficult passages and doctrinal emphases in Scripture in exchange for the applicable, devotional thought that furthers godliness in the life of the individual. Devotional hermeneutics tends to underemphasize scholarship for gain of a quickly digestible, sweet edifying idea. As it pertains to Public Servants, Devotional Hermeneutics leads to the neglect or misuse of Scripture – due to ignorance – when it comes to policy formation.

**STRONG SPIRITUAL MUSCULATURE  
FOR PUBLIC SERVANTS IS ONLY  
DERIVED FROM WORKING OUT AND  
CONSUMING A HIGH PROTEIN DIET OF  
THE WORD OF GOD ON A REGULAR  
BASIS!**

Devotional Hermeneutics is the diet of Dough Boys! With a Devotional only view of God’s Word,



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the door is swung open to eisogetical, typological interpretations. Scripture calls believers to be soldiers, not Pillsbury Dough Boys! Paul said in Acts 20:27: “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.” Paul feasted on the whole of Scripture and so should we! America is in dire need of leaders who have spiritual muscle and a devotion-only attitude regarding God’s Word just doesn’t do it!

### CONCLUSION

The Grammatical, Historical, Normative (GHN) school of hermeneutics is the thinking person’s choice. It allows the Bible to be innocent until proven guilty and objective versus subjective. This is the usual practice of interpreting secular literature, both present and past. It is the only school with a controlling force over eisogesis—man’s imagination foisted upon and over the Bible.

When a friend/fellow legislator quips, “that is a matter of your own interpretation” ask what hermeneutical school they subscribe to – and then be prepared to debate the merits or lack thereof of their hermeneutical approach to Scripture – assuming they know what they are talking about.

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<sup>1</sup> Ramm, Bernard *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) p. 123-127

<sup>2</sup> Luther, Works, Philadelphia Edition, Vol. III. P. 334

<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, Preface

<sup>4</sup> Mickelsen, A.B. *Interpreting the Bible*, pp. 28

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37

<sup>6</sup> Rosscup, James E. Unpublished *Hermeneutics Syllabus* (Rev. April, 1999). A large part of this study has stemmed and is quoted from this godly man’s work.

<sup>7</sup> Rosscup, p. 41