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Hermeneutics: Can You Make the Bible Say What You Want?



European depiction of Philo (1584), who sought to give Scripture charm for unbelieving minds by discarding literal details that to him seemed offensive.

How many times have you heard someone respond to your biblically based reasoning with, “Well, that’s a matter of your own interpretation.” How do you respond when someone tries to neutralize your authoritative use of the Bible? How should you respond? Perhaps you’ve even given up using the Bible authoritatively because of this feedback. This study should encourage and help you if that is the case.

At the risk of sounding like a “smarty pants,” I typically ask a question in a loving response, “So, what school of biblical interpretation do you subscribe to?”

Understanding the five major schools of biblical interpretation is an important study in order to gain wisdom and better insight into another’s approach to Scripture—and how it so often affects personal beliefs and policy positions. Read on, my friend!

Ralph Drollinger

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDIES

- White House Senior Staff:* Thursdays 7am, OMB Conference Room, hot breakfast served.
- Cabinet Members:* Wednesdays 7am, location undisclosed, refreshments served.
- Senate Members:* Tuesdays 8am, rotating offices, hot breakfast served.
- House Members:* Thursdays 7:45am, The Capitol Hill Club, hot breakfast served.

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The views expressed in each Bible study are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the position of any individual Bible Study Sponsor.



Local Government Ministries



As CapMin’s Director of Recruiting for Local Government Ministries, Dr. Dan DeShong is seeking qualified candidates to create ministries to city and county elected and appointed public servants across the United States.

Dr. DeShong, who is also Director of Local Government Ministries (LGM) in Greater Sacramento, CA., led the first LGM Bible study to city and county commissioners.

Earlier this year the Sacramento-area public servants concluded the curriculum, *Oaks in Office: Biblical Essays for Political Leaders*, which contains 52 of the most pertinent Bible studies Ralph Drollinger, President and Founder of Capitol Ministries, has authored to meet the spiritual, personal, and professional needs of Christian legislators over his more than 24-year ministry. The Sacramento

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I. INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics is the art and science of scriptural interpretation; in my years of ministry, I have discovered that most people do not even realize there are differing schools of biblical interpretation, let alone understand them. In this study I will attempt to educate you on today’s major hermeneutical schools and help you gain a rudimentary understanding of each, because how one interprets Scripture shapes his worldview. For public servants, worldview is crucial! It informs the construct of policy formation! This study then, is foundational to your wisdom quotient and your ability to properly ascertain why people think the way they do.

Hermeneutics determines the methods, techniques, rules and principles that the student of the Bible incorporates in order to arrive at his understanding of the following:

What does the Bible mean by what it says?

That is the vital question the science and art of hermeneutics attempts to answer. Likened to proper and improper exegesis of the United States Constitution, there needs to be a learned and practiced discipline in order to be effective and congruous in discovering what the author meant by what he or she said throughout Scripture.

During the Supreme Court nomination process, the words “originalist” and “textualists” are often discussed and defined. Justices who hold to this philosophy of interpreting the U.S.

Constitution are disciplined to discover authorial intent relative to what they have written: understanding what the author meant by what the author said or wrote is the goal of originalists/textualists. In a similar way, Bible interpreters in the same camp are those who ascribe to the Grammatical-Historical-Normative (GHN) school of biblical interpretation. They are intent on discovering what the Bible author meant by what he recorded. This school of biblical interpretation will be the final one that is explained in this study.

Now add to this explanation our past studies of the book of Proverbs. You may remember that Solomon often categorized people into three general groups when it came to wisdom (or a lack thereof): the simpletons, the scoffers, and the wise. As you study what follows, can you apply those monikers of distinction to the lives of those who subscribe to each of these hermeneutical schools? Keep that thought in mind as you work through this study.

The background of the word hermeneutics is quite interesting. Hermes was the Greek god who allegedly interpreted the message of the gods to mortals. Lest one think the word or idea of interpretation is a purely secular derivative, the word is used by Christ Himself in Luke 24:27:

“Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”



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

Christ, the master of hermeneutics, the greatest interpreter of Old Testament (OT) Scripture, is talking to the two disciples on the Emmaus Road. As He interprets from the OT the things concerning Himself, their hearts became enlivened and illuminated as a result of the interpreter’s bringing the Scriptures alive to them (Luke 24:32):

“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: If proper hermeneutics is used sensitively by the Spirit-led believer, likened to Christ, such can lead to vital life-changing/policy changing results in the lives of those with whom one comes in contact—both on the floor and throughout life. Conversely, to misinterpret Scripture is to void 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. One’s hermeneutic will determine his worldview, or conversely, as is often the case with unbelievers attempting to do what is right in their own eyes, their worldview will determine their approach/hermeneutic to Scripture.

What follows is an evaluation of the five leading schools of Hermeneutics. I will try to simplify and summarize each as best as possible for quick and easy understanding by analyzing each in a similar way: a quick overview, the history, an evaluation, and a summary. Can you spot which hermeneutic someone you may know is incorporating to justify an opinion? This study should aid in your ability to be more discerning. Of the five I will save the best for last.

II. THE ALLEGORICAL SCHOOL

A. OVERVIEW

The Allegorical School of biblical interpretation regards the literal, grammatical, and historical sense of a passage as a mere starting point for discovering the presumed hidden meaning of the text, which is often thought to be deeper, more profound, and more spiritual. Herein it is believed that beneath the letter or the obvious, lies the real meaning. In his analysis and conclusions regarding this approach to understanding the Bible, A.B. Mickelsen says, “What the original writer [of Scripture] is trying to say is ignored. What the interpreter wants to say becomes the only important factor.”¹ He goes on to say, rightfully so, that “Allegorizing is like a fog which at first renders objects indistinct and then finally blots them out altogether.”² It is accurate to summarily state that in those who utilize this method of understanding God’s Word, “imagination replaces observation.”³ The interpreter is reading in his understanding of the passage. Such an approach leads to a much higher degree of subjectivity in understanding God’s Word compared to the grammatical-historical-normative discipline of interpreta-

♥ VERSE OF THE WEEK

Luke 24:32

“Were not our hearts burning within us while He was speaking to us on the road, while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?”



If proper hermeneutics is used sensitively by the Spirit-led believer, likened to Christ, such can lead to vital life-changing/policy changing results in the lives of those with whom one comes in contact: both on the floor and throughout life.





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group is still meeting with Dr. DeShong to study the Bible.

“The experience was exhilarating to say the least!” Dr. DeShong said. “None of us had any idea that the Bible had so much to say about immigration, parenting, racism, deficit spending, and other contemporary issues. One elected official had planned to leave politics and now he says, ‘No wonder God has me in this position!’

“As Christians, we sort of take biblical precepts and doctrines for granted, but when the issues are broken out in specific chapters like Ralph has done in *Oaks in Office*, they become very clear and very real.

“This first group was pretty excited about this study and will be sharing their story with city and county commissioners around the country. Who knows where God will take this?”

tion (number 5 in this outline).

B. HISTORY

Many historic schools are allegorical in nature: Greek, Jewish, Patristic (early church fathers), and Catholic. One leading proponent of allegorical interpretation was Philo (20 B.C. to A.D. 54); he sought to give Scripture charm for unbelieving minds by discarding literal details that to him seemed offensive. He accomplished this via allegorizing those texts. Later, Christians applied Philo’s principles in their own times. Some Patristic allegorists include Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and even Augustine.

C. EVALUATION

1. It is subjective; each man is a law unto himself.
2. It is rationalistic; the Scriptures are manipulated to suit man’s reason.
3. It obscures Scripture by imposing eisegesis⁴ (reading in) in place of exegesis (reading out of).

D. SUMMARY

Allegorists distort plain passages by reading in meanings which have no valid connection with the obvious, literal sense.

Allegorists deem the interpreter of Scripture the authority, rather than the Author of Scripture.

It is imposition in place of exposition. Does the Bible really mean 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 interpretive approach.

This view holds that human intellect is adequate in itself to select between what is acceptable and what is erroneous in Scripture. The theological liberal approach to Bible interpretation presumes that Scripture can be true only when it harmonizes with man’s reason; final authority is therefore seated in man: hence, “The final and supreme authority is transferred from God to the throne-room of the human mind.”⁵

Approximately 35 “Christian” denominations subscribe to this hermeneutic. Nationally and internationally The National Council of Churches and The World Council of Churches adhere to this interpretive approach.

B. HISTORY

Systems of men such as Thomas Hobbes and Baruch Spinoza, F.C. Baur and the Tubingen School of criticism are responsible for birthing this hermeneutic relatively late in church history. Albert Schweitzer and J.M. Robinson on the quest for the historical Jesus have also fostered this viewpoint. Many others in early America, such as H.E. Fosdick and other purveyors of the social gospel movement bear responsibility as well.

Liberal hermeneutics grew in unison with the social gospel movement, AKA Theological Liberalism.



C. EVALUATION

1. It is rationalistic.
2. Inspiration and supernatural are both redefined. For example, since the mind of man cannot explain miracles, the miracles of the Bible must therefore be discounted.
3. The presupposition of human accommodation redefines, if not erases, much historically accepted 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

Neo-orthodoxy is an interpretive approach which denies propositional, objective, authoritative revelation. In justification of that premise, proponents of this school believe that the Bible is only infallible when revelation was given to the writers of the Bible, i.e., when God actually spoke it. And in its forward look, inspiration then only occurs subjectively “when God speaks to you through it now.” It follows that Neo-orthodoxy states that the Bible has instrumental authority because it is an instrument pointing to Christ, but it does not have inherent authority.

B. HISTORY

Recognizable names associated with the germination of Neo-orthodoxy are Karl

Barth (since its inception). Now splintered into several movements, other names associated with it are Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr.

C. EVALUATION

1. Denies the Bible is the Word of God; claims it becomes the Word of God when God speaks to a man and he responds.
2. Only that part of the Bible which witnesses to Christ is binding, and the seat of authority for deciding this is in man’s mind.
3. Many Bible episodes are treated mythologically, i.e., as teaching serious theological principles but not as having literally occurred.

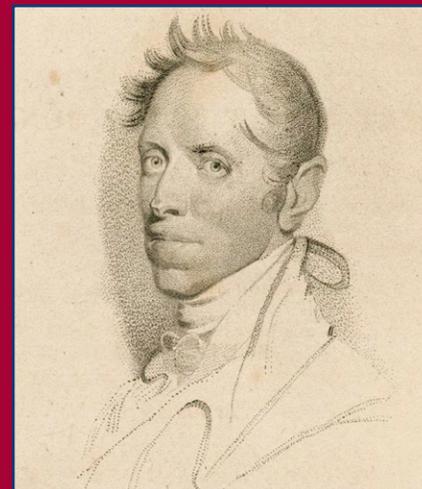
D. SUMMARY

In essence, this school ends up destroying objective spiritual experience because it is based on (by their own doing) an unworthy, unreliable book.

Keep in mind that both Theological Liberalism and Neo-orthodoxy were founded and based upon supposedly biblically contradictory archaeological and scientific evidence of several hundred years ago. These schools were germinated from false premises.

These respective disciplines and their discoveries have thence validated biblical accuracy time and time again. Accordingly, these two interpretive approaches were formulated in and from a seedbed of what has since been deemed outdated and myopic research. The rug has been

Robert Treat Paine



“I believe the Bible to be the written word of God and to contain in it the whole rule of faith and manners.”

— Robert Treat Paine, signer of the Declaration of Independence, attorney general of Massachusetts, judge, military chaplain.

Robert Treat Paine, *The Papers of Robert Treat Paine*, Stephen T. Riley and Edward W. Hanson, editors (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1992), Vol. I, p. 49, Robert Treat Paine’s Confession of Faith, 1749.





William Samuel Johnson



“Adore Jehovah, therefore, as your God and your Judge. Love, fear, and serve Him as your Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Acquaint yourselves with Him in His word and holy ordinances.”

— William Samuel Johnson, signer of the Constitution, member of the Continental Congress, judge, framer of the Bill of Rights, president of Columbia College, U.S. senator.

E. Edwards Beardsley, *Life and Times of William Samuel Johnson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1886), pp. 141–145.

pulled out from under them. A rough parallel is illustrated by the discipline of geography: who would be deemed credible today if he postulated and extrapolated religious beliefs based upon a flat earth presupposition?

V. THE DEVOTIONAL SCHOOL

A. INTRODUCTION

This view 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.

B. HISTORY

Many are those who reduce Scripture primarily to a “what’s-in-it-for-me today?” book of devotions. Among them are Medieval Mystics. Pietists, Puritans, Quakers and familiar, specific names such as John Wesley, Matthew Henry, F. B. Meyer, and A. W. Tozer.

To develop but one, the Pietists Movement was a reaction to cold, stale, dead doctrine in the late 1600s and early 1700s centered in reaction to German Lutheranism.

C. EVALUATION

1. In essence it seeks application which is essential and desired.
2. There are dangers in abuse—parachuting in on only certain segments of the whole counsel of God; therefore, there must be a balance between the whole of Scripture and isolated application. Abuses include allegorizing, excessive typology,⁶ and neglect of prior doctrinal bases. In simplicity, one can isolate a passage in disregard

for context, thereby misinterpreting the authorial meaning.

3. The overwhelming persuasiveness of doctrinal constructs gained through in-depth study of God’s Word can be lost in terms of soul sanctification. A high carb diet is thought to build spiritual musculature over and above a high protein diet.

D. SUMMARY

These writers tend to pass over technical problems, difficult passages, and doctrinal emphases in exchange for securing a quick applicable thought that might further godliness in the life of the individual. Devotional hermeneutics tends to underemphasize if not denigrate scholarship for the gain of a quickly digestible, sweet edifying idea. In terms of public servants and the need for scriptural bases in the formulation of good policy, the country is in dire need of biblical scholars who have a deep grasp of the whole counsel of God.

Do you aspire to be a man or woman of God who changes the course of our nation? If so, you need more than a devotional diet of the Word of God!

Also stemming from this minimalist approach to understanding God’s Word, the door is often flung wide open to eisegetical and typological forms of interpretation. In contrast, the apostle Paul said in Acts 20:27: “*I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.*” Paul endeavored to get the big picture; so should we.



Likened to the athlete who tends to habitually consume candy bars alone for quick energy, discounting a balanced, high-protein diet does not benefit the aspiring man or woman of God over a long period of time, neither in personal edification nor in policy formation.

VI. THE GRAMMATICAL, HISTORICAL, NORMATIVE SCHOOL

A. INTRODUCTION

In this last school, the meaning of a passage of Scripture is determined by what was deemed to be the basic, customary, socially acknowledged designation of the terms used at the time they were penned. The literal sense is the basic meaning evidenced by the grammatical and historical factors at the time of authorship.

It is important to note what this school is not. It is not characterized by Letterism, or a wooden literalism.⁷ Rather, it allows for the author to utilize figures of speech, such as parables, metaphors, hyperbole, irony, euphemisms, paronomasia, proverbs, personification, oxymorons, etc. In Latin this is referred to as *usus loquendi*, i.e., the semantics within a speech culture. In his classic textbook on Hermeneutics, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, Bernard Ramm calls this “the literal stratum of language.” The GHN school of hermeneutics recognizes, and has in its mind, the existence of the literal stratum and use of language and attempts to deduce authorial meaning by the author’s use of figures of speech, parables, metaphors, etc.

B. HISTORY

Ezra, the Jews of Palestine and Christ, all incorporate this discipline as evidenced from and within Scripture itself. John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, and John Calvin ascribed to the GHN hermeneutic. Ezra in particular is the first OT example of such. The Jews had been exiled long enough in Babylonia to have 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. Later, and in church history it was the exegetical (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).

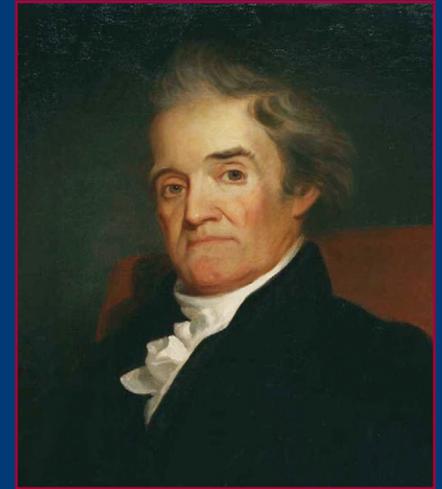
C. EVALUATION

1. This is the usual practice of interpretation of literature. Again, a Supreme Court Justice who applies this approach to constitutional interpretation is known as an “originalist/textualist.” To the opposite, a judge who reads his or her views into the document is deemed an “activist.”

In essence, the activist Bible interpreter or today’s activist judge believes they know better than the author.

2. A large part of the Bible makes sense this way.
3. It exercises a control on the imagination.

Noah Webster



“Our citizens should early understand that the genuine source of correct republican principles is the Bible, particularly the New Testament, or the Christian religion.”

— Noah Webster, revolutionary soldier, judge, legislator, educator, “Schoolmaster to America.”

Noah Webster, *History of the United States* (New Haven: Durrie and Peck, 1832), p. 6.





D. SUMMARY

“That is the true method of interpretation which puts Scripture alongside of Scripture in a right and proper way.”⁸ “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.”⁹

VII. CONCLUSION

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

Whereas the Allegorical, Liberal, and Neo-orthodox Schools of Hermeneutic are the children of scoffers, the Devotional School is the brother of simpletons, it is only the Grammatical-Historical-Normative school that is the father of the wise.

When a friend or fellow public servant quips, “That is a matter of your own interpretation,” ask what hermeneutical school he subscribes to—and be prepared to debate the merits or lack thereof.

1. A.B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, p. 28.
2. Ibid, p. 37.
3. James E. Rosscup, Unpublished *Hermeneutics Syllabus* (Rev. April 1999). Some of this study has stemmed from this godly man’s work.
4. Rosscup, p. 41.
5. *Eisegesis*: the interpretation of a text (as of the Bible) by reading into it one’s own (Merriam-Webster).
6. “[It] differs from a symbol or an allegory. It is a representation of an actual, historical reference. Often it relates to analogous fulfillment in Christ of OT stories and parallels. This was a very popular approach to interpretation in the Middle Ages.”
7. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970) p. 123–127.
8. *Luther’s Works*, Philadelphia Edition, Vol. III, p. 334.
9. Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, Preface, p. 334.

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