

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 TIMOTHY 2:15



CHAPTER 10

Can You Make the Bible Say Whatever You Want?

How many times have you heard someone respond to your Biblically based reason 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.

At the risk of sounding like a “smarty pants,” I typically ask a question, lovingly, in response, “So, what school of Biblical interpretation do you subscribe to?” Understanding the five major schools of Biblical interpretation is important in order to gain wisdom and insight into how one’s approach to Scripture affects personal beliefs and policy positions.

Hermeneutics is the study of Scriptural interpretation. In my years of ministry, I have discovered that most people do not realize there are differing schools of Biblical interpretation, let alone understand them. Let us look at these major hermeneutical schools to help gain a rudimentary understanding of each, because how we interpret Scripture shapes our worldview. For Public Servants, worldview is crucial! It informs the construct of policy formation.

Hermeneutics is the methods, techniques, rules, and principles that the student of the Bible incorporates in order to answer the question:

What does the Bible mean by what it says?

That is the vital question that hermeneutics attempts to answer. Like proper and improper exegesis of the United States Constitution, there must be a learned and practiced discipline in order to be effective and consistent in discovering what the author meant by what is said throughout Scripture.

You may remember that in the book of Proverbs Solomon often categorizes people into three general groups when it comes to wisdom (or a lack thereof): the *simpletons*, the *scoffers*, and the *wise*. As you study what follows, see how you would apply those monikers to those who subscribe to each of these hermeneutical schools.

The background of the word *hermeneutics* is quite interesting. Hermes was the Greek god who was said to have interpreted the message of the gods for mortals. Lest you think interpretation is a purely secular endeavor, 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 and greatest interpreter of the Old Testament 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 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: proper hermeneutics sensitively offered by the Spirit-led believer can lead to vital life-changing/policy-changing results, both in political debate and throughout life. Conversely, to misinterpret Scripture is to void it of its power. We read of this power in 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.

Our hermeneutic will determine our worldview, and conversely, as can be seen with unbelievers who do what is right in their own eyes, our worldview will determine our hermeneutical approach to Scripture.

What follows is an evaluation of the five leading schools of hermeneutics. I will try to simplify and summarize each as best I can for easy understanding, analyzing each in a similar way: a quick overview, history, evaluation, and 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 discerning. Of the five I will save the best for last.

The Allegorical School

OVERVIEW

The allegorical method of Biblical interpretation regards the literal, grammatical, and historical elements of a passage as a mere starting point for discovering the presumed hidden meaning of the text, which is often thought to be more profound and more spiritual. It is believed that beneath the letter of the Word, or the obvious, lies its real meaning. In his analysis and conclusions regarding this approach to understanding the Bible, 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 say of those who utilize this method of understanding God’s Word that “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 interpretation that we will discuss later.

HISTORY

There are many historical schools that have taken the allegorical approach: Greek, Jewish, patristic (early church fathers), and Catholic. One leading proponent of allegorical interpretation was Philo (20 BC–AD 54). He sought to give Scripture charm for unbelieving minds by discarding literal details that to him seemed offensive. He accomplished this by allegorizing texts. Later Christians applied Philo’s principles in their own times. Some patristic allegorists include Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and even Augustine.

EVALUATION

- The allegorical method is subjective; each man is a law unto himself.
- It is rationalistic; the Scriptures are manipulated to suit human reason.
- It obscures Scripture by imposing *eisegesis* (reading into the text) in place of *exegesis* (pulling meaning out of the text).

SUMMARY

Allegorists distort plain passages by reading in meanings that have no valid connection with the obvious, literal sense. Allegorists deem the interpreter, rather than author, as the authority.

The allegorical method is imposition in place of exposition. Allegorists leave people wondering, Does the Bible really mean what the interpreter thinks it means?

The Liberal School

OVERVIEW

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 in itself adequate to select between what is acceptable and what is erroneous in Scripture. The Liberal theological approach to Bible interpretation presumes that Scripture can be true only when it harmonizes with our independent reason; final authority is therefore seated in us. Hence, “The final and supreme authority is transferred from God to the throne-room of the human mind.”⁴

There are approximately thirty-five Christian denominations that subscribe to this hermeneutic. The National Council of Churches and The World Council of Churches adhere to this interpretive approach.

HISTORY

Systems developed by Hobbs, Spinoza, F. C. Baur, and the Tubingen School of Criticism are responsible for birthing this hermeneutic relatively late in Church history. Those on the quest for the historical Jesus such as Albert Schweitzer and J. M. Robinson 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, also known as Theological Liberalism.

EVALUATION

- The Liberal approach is rationalistic.
- *Inspiration* and *supernatural* are both redefined. For example, since the human mind cannot explain miracles, the miracles of the Bible must therefore be discounted.
- The authority of human reasoning redefines, if not erases, much historically accepted Bible doctrine.

SUMMARY

With a Liberal hermeneutic, we arrogantly become the judge of Scripture, instead of Scripture being our judge.

The Neo-Orthodox School

OVERVIEW

Neo-Orthodoxy is an interpretive approach that denies propositional, objective, authoritative revelation. In justification of that premise, proponents of this school believe that the Bible is only infallible where revelation was given to the writers of the Bible—when God spoke it back then. And looking forward, Biblical inspiration only occurs subjectively “when God speaks to you through it now.” Neo-Orthodoxy states that the Bible has instrumental authority because it is an instrument pointing to Christ, but it does not have inherent authority.

HISTORY

Names associated with Neo-Orthodoxy are Karl Barth (since its inception), Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr.

EVALUATION

- Neo-Orthodoxy denies the Bible is the Word of God and claims it *becomes* the Word of God only when God speaks through the Bible to a person and that person responds.
- Only that part of the Bible that witnesses to Christ is binding, and the authority for deciding this is the human mind.
- Many Bible episodes are treated mythologically, i.e., as teaching serious theological principles but not as having literally occurred.

SUMMARY

In essence, this school ends up destroying objective reliance on the Bible because it considers the Bible an unworthy, unreliable book. Both Theological Liberalism and Neo-Orthodoxy were founded upon archaeological and scientific evidences of several hundred years ago that brought Biblical veracity into question. Discoveries in scientific disciplines have since that time validated Biblical accuracy time and time again, rendering these two interpretive approaches outdated and myopic. The rug has been pulled out from under them. A rough parallel is illustrated from the discipline of geography: who would be deemed credible today for postulating religious beliefs based upon a flat-earth presupposition?

The Devotional School

OVERVIEW

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.

HISTORY

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

As one example, the Pietists movement was developed in reaction to the cold, stale, dead German Lutheranism of the late 1600s and early 1700s.

EVALUATION

- The Devotional approach focuses on application that is personally applied.
- There are dangers in zeroing in on narrow segments of the whole counsel of God; there must be a balance between the whole of Scripture and isolated application. Abuses include allegorizing, excessive typology, and neglect of prior doctrinal bases. One can isolate a single passage while disregarding context, thereby misinterpreting the authorial intent.
- Larger doctrinal constructs that give meaning to the sweeping themes of Scripture can be lost in the pursuit of the isolated snippet.

SUMMARY

Devotional hermeneutics does not honor Scripture as a whole piece, but narrows the focus in exchange for securing a quickly applicable thought that might further godliness in the life of the individual. It tends to underemphasize, if not denigrate, scholarship, for the gain of a quickly digestible, edifying idea. For the formation of good policy, the country is in dire need of Public Servants who have a deep grasp of the whole counsel of God.

**Do you aspire to change the course of our nation?
If so, you need more than a devotional diet of the Word of God!**

Another result of this minimalistic approach to understanding God's Word is that the door is often flung wide open to *eisegetical*⁵ and *typological*⁶ 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.

As in the case of the athlete who habitually consumes candy bars for quick energy while neglecting well-rounded meals, aspiring men and women of God must consume a balanced, high-protein Biblical diet, not just fast-food devotional snacks.

The Grammatical, Historical, Normative School (GHN)

OVERVIEW

In this last school, the meaning of a passage of Scripture is determined by what was thought to be the understanding of the words in the context of the time they were penned. The meaning is derived from 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 an understanding of the author's use of varying styles, figures of speech, parables, metaphors, hyperbole, irony, euphemisms, paronomasia, proverbs, personification, oxymoron's, etc. In Latin this is referred to as *usus loquendi*, i.e., the semantics within a speech culture. In his classic textbook on hermeneutics Ramm calls this "the literal stratum of language."⁸ The GHN school of hermeneutics recognizes *usus loquendi* and attempts interpretation with that in mind.

HISTORY

Ezra, the Jews of Palestine, and Christ all incorporate this discipline as evidenced from and within Scripture itself. Chrysostom, Luther, and Calvin subscribed to the GHN hermeneutic. Ezra in particular is the first OT example of such. The Jews have been exiled long enough in Babylonia to lose their native tongue; they are now speaking Aramaic. Ezra therefore assembles the Hebrew people and explains the real meaning of the OT text to them. Later in Church history it was the exegetical (lit. "to lead out") approach to interpretation that set the stage for the Reformation, as Calvin and Luther explicated what was actually in the Greek New Testament that had recently become available to the common people.

EVALUATION

- This is the usual secular practice in interpretation of literature. For example, Supreme Court justices who apply this approach to constitutional interpretation are known as *originalists*, while judges who read their views into the document are deemed *activists*.
- A large part of the Bible makes sense this way.
- This system exercises control over the imagination of the reader.

SUMMARY

Luther said, “That is the true method of interpretation which puts Scripture alongside of Scripture in a right and proper way.”⁹ Calvin said, “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.”¹⁰

The GHN school of hermeneutics must be the thinking person’s choice. It allows the Bible to remain untainted by subjective interpretive interference. This is the usual practice of interpreting past and present secular literature. It is the only school with a controlling force over eisegesis—our imagination foisted onto the Bible.

The Allegorical, Liberal, and Neo-Orthodox schools of
hermeneutics are the children of scoffers. The Devotional school
is the brother of simpletons. It is the Grammatical, Historical,
Normative school that is the father of the wise.

The next time a friend or fellow Public Servant quips, “That is a matter of your own interpretation,” ask what hermeneutical school he or she subscribes to, and be prepared to debate the merits, or lack thereof.

Having identified a rational approach to Bible interpretation, you may be wondering how else rational reasoning plays into your Christian thinking. We’ll explore that now.

Notes

- 1 A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 28.
- 2 Ibid., 37.
- 3 James E. Rosscup, “Hermeneutics Syllabus” (unpublished, rev. April, 1999). Some of this chapter has stemmed from this godly man’s work.
- 4 Ibid., 41.
- 5 *Eisegesis*: “the interpretation of a text (as of the Bible) by reading into it one’s own ideas,” By permission. From Merriam-Webster.com © 2017 by Merriam-Webster, Inc. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/eisegesis>.
- 6 Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 123–127. “[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), 123–127.
- 8 Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 124.
- 9 Martin Luther, *Works of Martin Luther*, The Philadelphia Edition, Vol. III. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1943), 334.
- 10 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, translated and edited by the Rev. John Owen, Christian (Grand Rapids: Classics Ethereal Library), Preface, accessed March 15, 2018, www.ccel.org.

