

Biblical Interpretation

Pre-Class Reading Assignment: Grudem - Chapter 1, "Introduction to Systematic Theology"

Definition of Terms

1. **Hermeneutics** (from the Greek "to interpret") is the study of methods of interpretation, especially the interpretation of Scripture.
2. **Exegesis** (from the Greek "to lead out of") refers to two things:
 - A collection of tools used for interpreting the Bible (analysis of the text in its original languages, study of the history and culture in which the original text was written, comparison of the text with other Scriptures).
 - A method of determining the correct application of Scripture, by limiting one's application only to what the text says; drawing meaning *out* of the text rather than imposing meaning *into* the text.

Attitudes Toward Bible Study

1. Negative: "The Bible can't be understood." But see 2 Peter 3:16. We believe in the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture for anyone who reads.
2. Lazy: The Bible takes too much work." But see 2 Timothy 2:15-16. God's will is for us to "be diligent ... workers who ... correctly analyze the Word of truth."
3. Magical: "A verse a day keeps the devil away." This is Bible study based on the use of a devotional guide. Such devotionals are not bad, but tempt the reader to believe that he has satisfied God's requirements by reading a passage – any passage.
4. Intellectual: "The Bible is part of the world's great literature, and nothing more." Bible study that impacts the brain and not the heart is not what God intended.

*"(I)n most parts of the Bible everything is implicitly or explicitly introduced with "Thus saith the Lord." It is ... not merely a sacred book but a book so remorselessly and continuously sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach."*³

³Lewis, C. S., "The Literary Impact of the Authorised Version," *Selected Literary Essays* (1950), p. 144.

5. Apologetic: “I’m going to master the Bible so I can debate its problem passages.” Any approach to Bible study is illegitimate if it leads to intellectual, social, or spiritual pride.
6. Teachable: “The Bible is God’s message to me. I must learn it, heed it, and practice it.”

Approaches to Bible Study

1. Haphazard: “I open the Bible, read whatever appears, and expect to get a blessing from it.” God gave us an orderly Book; he expects it to be studied in an orderly fashion.
2. Second-Hand: “I trust whatever the preacher, teacher, or commentary tells me.” We dare not make a little “pope” out of the teacher or commentator. God wants us to trust his direction, and to accept human assistance while praying for discernment.
3. Methodical: “I follow a four-legged approach to Bible study.”
 - *Observe!* What does the passage say? Read the text repeatedly. Make notes.
 - *Compare!* What do other passages say (1 Cor. 2:13)? How do other Bible authors treat the same topic? How do these texts relate to one another? Correlate. Integrate. Synthesize.
 - *Interpret* (John 5:39; Matt. 24:15)! What does it mean? What did it mean in its original culture and historical setting? Use Bible study helps to draw out the meaning.
 - Bible Atlas
 - Bible Dictionary
 - Word Studies
 - Alternative English Translations
 - Commentaries (exegetical, expositional, devotional, practical)
 - *Apply* (James 1:22)! What does it mean to me? Determine what the text leads you to believe or practice. Use the text as a step to further your own Christian growth.

Philosophical Presuppositions that Affect Bible Study

1. Institutional: “My Church knows how to interpret the Bible, and I dare not disagree.”
2. Second Document: “The Bible is the First Document, but God has given a Second (or Third or Fourth) Document to explain the Bible.”

3. Human Reason: “The Bible can only mean what the rational, mature human mind can understand.”
4. Experience: “The Bible’s meaning depends on my personal experience. It’s only the inspired Word of God when it inspires me.”
5. Imagination: “The surface words of Scripture have hidden meanings. We will know the truth only when we uncover the hidden meanings.”
6. Literal/Cultural/Historical: “The Bible has a plain message when viewed through the context of its historical and cultural setting. Where there are two equally plausible interpretations of a passage, we must weigh the evidence and prayerfully choose the one that seems best.”

Basic Laws of Biblical Interpretation

1. The Law of Grammatical Construction

- Take statements at face value unless otherwise implied.

The words of Scriptures should be taken in their common meaning unless glaring inconsistencies arise with other words in a sentence, with context, or with other parts of Scripture.

- Determine the *usus loquendi* – the usage of the word at the time of writing.

A word may acquire a different meaning over a period of time (2 Thes. 2:6-7).

- Determine the tense, voice, and mood of each verb.
- Consider the presence or absence of the definite article (“the”, John 1:1).
- Discover the identity and function of the important nouns in each sentence.

2. The Law of Context

- Scriptural statements should never be lifted out of their context (Matt. 27:5 with Luke 10:37).
- The context includes history, author, theology, and geography.

3. The Law of Scope

- The scope of the Book is the end or purpose which the writer had in view. Logically, a study of scope should precede a study of context.

4. The Law of Unity

- This hermeneutic rests on the premise that the Bible is an inspired unity.
- If the Bible is truly the work of one Author, there will be no genuine contradictions between passages (Eph. 2:8-9 with James 2:24). Apparent contradictions demand cautious application, further research, and patience.

5. The Law of Dispensational Distinctives

- Definitions
 - “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God” (C. I. Scofield; Merrill F Unger).
 - A dispensation – an economy – is “the order or condition of things prevailing in one special age which do not necessarily prevail in another” (H. A. Ironside).
 - “A dispensation is a period in which certain ‘rules of the game’ apply. History (the ‘Game’) has moved from one dispensation to another when God announces certain changes in the ‘rules of the game’” (G. A. Ryerson).

- The Dispensations

Note: The Dispensations will be discussed more fully in a later segment. For now, please note that this Law is not considered by some conservative Bible scholars.

- Innocence (Creation to the Fall)

- The rule: Don't eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen. 2:17)
 - The conclusion: Disobedience and expulsion (Gen. 3:24)

- Conscience (Fall to the Flood)

- The rule: Present sincere sacrifices to God (Gen. 4:3-4)
 - The conclusion: Wickedness and annihilation (Gen. 6:7)

- Human Government (Flood to Abraham)

- The rule: Execute those who commit murder (Gen. 9:6)
 - The conclusion: Idolatry and preparation for Redeemer (Gen. 12:1)

- Promise (Abraham to Moses)

- The rule: Abide in the land (Gen. 12:1-3)
 - The conclusion: Bondage and deliverance (Ex. 19:8)

- Law (Moses to Christ)
 - The rule: Keep God's commandments (Ex. 20:1-17)
 - The conclusion: Captivity and judgment (2 Kings 25:1-11)

- Grace (Calvary to the Second Coming)
 - The rule: Accept Christ as Savior (John 1:12)
 - The conclusion: Armageddon and the Throne (Eph. 1:10)

- Kingdom (Second Coming to Eternity)
 - The rule: Obey the King (Isa. 11:3-4)
 - The conclusion: Judgment and Renewal (Rev. 20-21)

6. The Law of Circumstance

- The background, education, personality, and religious experiences of the author
- The date and place of writing
- The political, cultural, and religious circumstances at the time of writing
- The writing style of the author

Recommended Reading

Chafer, Louis Sperry, *Systematic Theology, Vols. I-IV*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993. Originally published by Judson Press, 1907.

Gotquestions.org, "What's the Difference between Exegesis and Eisegesis?" Colorado Springs, CO: Got Questions Ministries, 2016.

Kohlenberger, John R., *The NIV Exhaustive Bible Concordance*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015.

Mickelsen, A. Berkeley, *Interpreting the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eermans, 1963.

Morgan, G. Campbell, *The Parables and Metaphors of Our Lord*. Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1943.

NAS Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. La Habra, CA: Foundation Publications, 1997.

Pentecost, J. Dwight, *Things to Come*, Section One, "The Interpretation of Prophecy." Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1958.

Pfeiffer, Charles F., editor, *Baker's Bible Atlas*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1961.

Ramm, Bernard, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*. Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1956.

Ryrie, Charles C., *The Basis of Premillennial Faith*. New York: Loizeaux, 1953.

_____, *Dispensationalism Today*. Chicago: Moody, 1956.

Tan, Paul Lee, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*. Rockville, MD: Assurance Publishers, 1974.

Unger, Merrill F., *Principles of Expository Preaching*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955.

Walvoord, John F., editor, *Inspiration and Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957.

Assignments for Next Segment ("The Doctrine of God's Word")

1. Read Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, chs. 2-8.
2. Answer one or more of the "Questions for Personal Application" at the end of each chapter, and be prepared to share and discuss your answers in class.