
Hermeneutical Principles

“Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment.”

—Jim Rohn

ONE OF MY GREATEST vocational joys was my time spent at the Francis Schaeffer Institute (FSI) at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis from August 1999 to June 2007; there I proudly served as FSI’s Director. The mission then, and still today, is “to train God’s servants to demonstrate compassionately and defend reasonably the claims of Christ upon the whole of life.”

One way we lived out our mission was through a popular event known as “Friday Nights at the Institute” (or FN@I) where Christians were invited to speak on cultural artifacts from a Christian perspective . . . with one caveat—they had to avoid using a lot of Christian language. One such talk was given by a dear brother, Mark Robinson, on the topic of jazz improvisation. The title of his talk was “John Coltrane: Contingency and Constraint.”

It can be summarized this way: “jazz improvisation is both contingency (freedom to create) and constraint (bounded by basic rules).”¹ I like how he juxtaposed freedom with boundaries. As we seek to rightly interpret Biblical texts, however, eisegesis is not allowed—or we do not have the *freedom* to create meaning as we desire—as we are *bound* by a set of rules or principles.

1. Facebook message from Mark Robinson, May 18, 2015.

In this chapter, I provide some basic rules for doing Biblical interpretation. Here are ten (10) practical hermeneutic principles (HP) that anyone can use. In some cases, I have provided a specific *discipline* to exercise.

HP#1. The Holy Spirit is our chief superintendent when doing biblical interpretation.

Think of the Holy Spirit like the AV-8B Harrier²—a military aircraft that not only vertically lifts off, but, but *hovers* too. We must invite the Holy Spirit to “hover” over us as we begin on the interpretive journey, because, “the recognition of revelation as revelation must itself be the work of God—more accurately, the work of the Spirit.”³ It is only the Holy Spirit who can truly illuminate the Holy Scriptures and “confirm the truth that [God] has revealed”⁴ to us.

Discipline: Ask the Holy Spirit to hover over you or help you as you interpret as only He, as God, can rightly discern the thoughts of God (1 Corinthians 2:10–16).

HP#2. *Context is Emperor!*⁵

Passages in the Bible must be interpreted *in their rich context*. Most of the interpretative process occurs here, as we must consider two important contexts:⁶

2. Prior to teaching, I worked full time as an engineer and part of my tenure as an engineer was spent working for McDonnell Douglas (now Boeing) in St. Louis, MO. One of the perks of working for a military aircraft manufacturer was seeing the planes that we produced. One such plane was the vertical take-off and hovering aircraft known as the Harrier.

3. McGrath, *Theology*, 135.

4. Adams, *Truth Applied*, 143.

5. Or “Context is King” or “Context is Monarchy.” The former statement I heard repeatedly from Dr. Jimmy Agan and the second has been quoted by Dr. Jay Sklar. Both Agan and Sklar were professors of mine at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, MO.

6. There is a third context that I have termed the “Redemptive-Historical Context.” This context is interested in where the passage falls along the redemptive-historical timeline. During this stage, we look for progress, continuity, development, or other patterns through the periods of redemption. This

- *Literary Context*—here, you must ask how do the verses around your passage and, the book in which the passage of Scripture (POS) is placed, aid you in understanding your passage;
- *Cultural-Historical Context*—here, you must ask about rituals, customs, social conventions, dress, architecture, family structure, and climate. You must also ask: what was happening politically, religiously, militarily, environmentally, economically and philosophically, etc. at that time.

If you fail to consider both contexts, you risk misapplying God’s Word; and you effectively risk misquoting and misrepresenting God! Although more will be said about these two important contexts in Chapter 3, let’s consider some brief examples of each context and how each one clarifies the meaning of a passage of Scripture.

Literary Context Clarifies Meaning

Consider the word “mystery” in Colossians 1:26–27. This word is not so mysterious after all because if we consider the *literary context*—namely, all the verses around it—Colossians 1:24–2:5, we find that “mystery” is God’s unfolding redemptive plan through the finished work and person of Christ. Eugene Peterson’s *The Message Bible* confirms this meaning of “mystery,”

“This *mystery* has been kept in the dark for a long time, but now it’s out in the open. God wanted *everyone*, not just Jews, to know this rich and glorious secret inside and out, regardless of their background, regardless of their religious standing. The *mystery* in a nutshell is just this: Christ is in you, so therefore you can look forward to sharing in God’s glory. It’s that simple. That is the substance of our Message” (Colossians 1:26–27).

Knowing the literary context prevents us from reading our definition of mystery into this passage of Scripture.

particular context is not discussed in this book.

Cultural-Historical Context Clarifies Meaning

Why did Judah regard his daughter-in-law, Tamar, as a prostitute in Genesis 38:12–15? Judah assumed Tamar was a prostitute because of her lone presence by the roadside. So, the cultural-historical context answers our question: Tamar's lone presence by a roadside conveyed to her clueless father-in-law, Judah, that she was a prostitute (see also Jeremiah 3:2 which ties "by the road" with prostitution).

Consider Luke 10:4 also. On the surface, Jesus' instruction to His disciples to "greet no one on the road" seems rude and rather, unChrist-like. However, authors Klinck and Kiehl provide this helpful insight, "at times people overdo even friendly greetings and hospitality, and the Oriental custom tends to become long, drawn out, and repetitious."⁷ So, instead of wasting time in meeting these customary social obligations, Jesus wanted His disciples to proclaim the gospel. Without this insight, we would think that Christ was training his disciples to be socially rude to strangers.

HP#3. Beware of the influence of your "traditions."

When we interpret Scripture, we bring many assumptions to the table based on our own life and history. These assumptions are influenced by our gender, our experiences (the good, the bad, the ugly), our ethnicity, our denominational affiliations, and our traditions. While there is nothing inherently wrong with our stories, we must be very careful not to allow ourselves to see the Scriptures solely through these personal lenses. I agree with the author, Carson, when he writes, "it is all too easy to read *traditional interpretations* we have received from others into the text of Scripture."⁸ We must always allow our passage of Scripture to speak louder than our own assumptions, and louder than what others have told us (including mom and dad, our denominations, our systematic theology and what we have always heard about a passage). I remember a student who grew up in a certain denominational tradition; and

7. Klinck and Kiehl, *Everyday Life*, 164–65.

8. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 17.

his tradition taught that one can lose his or her salvation based on John 15:1–9. And he stood adamantly firm on his denomination's conviction; that is, until he took my course on Biblical interpretation. He discovered that this teaching was incorrect.

Discipline: Ask God to help you read passages as though you were reading them for the first time. And ask God to attenuate the other voices.

HP#4. Honor the original meaning of the text.

We *are not to* ask, "What does this passage of Scripture mean to *me*," as this is known as the "reader-response"⁹ method. This particular interpretation method is bad news as it is open to anyone's guess, personal preference, and experience. The reader-response method of interpretation is like interpretation by committee, and is not recommended. Instead of asking what this passage of Scripture means *to me*, we must ask "what did *God intend* for this passage of Scripture to mean?" In other words, while a passage of Scripture may have many applications, a passage of Scripture, a verse, chapter, and a book can *never* mean what it was not intended to mean! Or, as one elderly Christian brother put it, "a verse [a book, a chapter] has *one* truth but many applications. To illustrate this point, consider Table 1 below.

9. See Kaiser and Silva, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 33.

Table 1. *One Original Meaning and Many Applications*

Passage of Scripture	What is the Original Meaning?	Applications
Psalm 1	This wisdom psalm is about two ways to live, and two corresponding outcomes	Acquiring wisdom does not happen by osmosis; rather, we must read and meditate on God's word. Happiness is not found in the lifestyle of the ungodly. We should pray for those who follow the ungodly way as we know their fate.
Esther (entire book)	The entire book of Esther is about God intervening, and turning the tables in favor of His people	God is often inconspicuously acting behind the scenes to turn our awful situations—experiencing unfairness on the job—into fair situations. Our deliverance sometimes occurs at the intersection of God's sovereignty and our human responsibility.

Passage of Scripture	What is the Original Meaning?	Applications
Luke 18:1-8	This passage is about being persistent in prayer	All those who are 'destitute' should be persistent in prayer. Those who pray demonstrate their faith in God. Those who pray demonstrate "living by faith and not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7).
John 13:1-20	This passage is a picture of what humble servant leadership looks like; and where foot-washing serves as an illustration of humility. ¹⁰	Rendering humble service means nothing is beneath my dignity to do—like changing the bed pan of an elderly person who has lost control of his bowels. ¹¹ Biblical leadership demands serving those who follow you. Husbands lead their families by serving their family.

Discipline: Avoid the 'reader-response' method of interpretation. Do the necessary hard work to discover God's original

10. Some denominations have taken the application of this passage a bit further and made 'foot washing' a church ordinance. That's not the intent of this passage.

11. My late mother-in-law, Shirley A. Holmes, did this type of work in a

intent of the passage as the Bereans did! (Residents of the city of Berea in Acts 17, the Bereans were considered of more noble character than the residents of the city of Thessalonica). We can commend the Bereans for two reasons:

1. The Bereans did not take what the highly credentialed Apostle Paul was saying for granted; and;
2. They *examined the Scriptures* themselves (see Acts 17:11). The word 'examine' means to "sift up and down, *make careful* and *exact research* as in legal processes in the Scriptures for themselves."¹² I pray that you model this noble attitude of these Jews of the Berean synagogue.

HP#5. Every word is divinely inspired in the Holy Bible; however, the paragraph and chapter breaks are not divinely inspired.

This means that we should not rely on chapter breaks or paragraph breaks to determine the limits of our passage of Scripture (more about determining the limits of our passage of Scripture later). Chapter or paragraph breaks were not in the original Hebrew and Greek texts, they were simply added by English translators for our reading convenience.

Beginning in Genesis, for example, Genesis 1 ends at verse 31 in our English Bibles; however, Moses' train of thought does not end at verse 31; rather, it continues to and concludes at Genesis 2:3. So, Genesis 1:1-2:3 captures his singular stream of thought. In like manner, the narrative of David's thrilling victory over the taunting and sacrilegious Goliath runs 1 Samuel 17:1 through 18:5. In the book of Ephesians, the gospel imperatives are meant to impact one's home and social life; thus Paul applies the gospel to the family unit and society in Ephesians 5:22 through 6:4 (or 6:9).

nursing home. She was a beautiful example of a servant.

12. Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 314.

HP#6. Being familiar with the Bible can actually be an enemy of understanding the Bible.¹³

We have either said or heard any combination of the following before: "I know this passage of Scripture by heart" or "I know this Biblical story" or "I have heard this passage of Scripture preached or taught before." And while all of these statements might be true, I also agree with the author and my colleague, McCullough, who reminds us that "reading or absorbing the Word of God requires an open mindedness, an attitude that you haven't heard it all before."¹⁴

Discipline: Pray and ask God to allow you to see and hear the passage of Scripture as though you were seeing and hearing it for the very first time.

HP#7. The interpreter must exercise exegesis (seek the intended meaning) while diligently guarding against eisegesis (reading in a personal interpretation).

Exegesis occurs when the interpreter *draws out* the intended meaning from the passage of Scripture and *eisegesis* occurs when the interpreter reads his/her interpretation *into* the passage of Scripture. Sadly, there are too many examples of the latter in our culture. For instance, the prosperity gospel, radical feminist theology, and liberation theology are three incorrect outcomes of many Bible interpreters practicing eisegesis instead of exegesis. All of these incorrect outcomes began with an initial foreign framework. For example, those with prosperity gospel leanings come to the Bible with this belief about God: God wants me to be materially prosperous, so this belief is imposed on passages like 2 Corinthians 8:9. Similarly, radical feminist theologians approach the Bible this way: God is a God for the oppressed. Women have been oppressed by men; so God seeks to level the playing field. Thus, radical feminists read the Bible through the lens of this belief system. So, passages like 1 Timothy 2:8-15 are seen as not relevant to our time and

13. Dr. Robert Smith, Guest Lecturer for the Covenant Theological Seminary J. R. Wilson Preaching Lectures, Fall 2005.

14. McCullough, *Sense and Spirituality*, 48.

are dismissed. Liberation theologians, like radical feminist theologians, see God as a liberator from the oppressor. So, instead of seeking the intended meaning of the text, liberation theologians impose a liberation motif on passages that were never intended with this meaning.

HP#8. Scripture interprets Scripture. African theologians dubbed this practice the “analogy of faith.”¹⁵

In other words, we “reason by analogy from clear Scriptures to unclear Scriptures. [And in the process] the church guards the Scriptures; the Spirit guards the truth attested in Scripture.”¹⁶ For example, let’s start with an *unclear* passage: John 4:10. Specifically, what is this ‘gift of God’ to which John is referring? When we reason by analogy, or compare other passages, such as, Acts 2:38, 8:18–20; 10:45; Jeremiah 2:13, 17:13; and John 7:37–39, we discover that the ‘gift of God’ is the Holy Spirit who is also referred to as “living water.” Refer to Appendix A for the actual steps to discover that John equates the ‘gift of God’ with ‘living water.’

Knowing the meaning of first fruits in Leviticus 23:9–14 aids us in understanding Paul’s use of the phrase “first fruits” in 1 Corinthians 15:20. The feast of first fruits celebrated the first crops but it also celebrated the idea that more crops were to come and be harvested. Paul then uses first fruits in this way: Jesus’ resurrection is to be celebrated for sure; however, His bodily resurrection assures more bodily resurrections are yet to come. Remember: the best and most reliable commentary on the Holy Scriptures are the Holy Scriptures!

HP#9: Interpreting God’s Word requires humility.

The prophet Isaiah wrote in Isaiah 55:8–9 that God’s thoughts are *higher than* our thoughts—think stratospherically higher. Now consider what the author Chesterton, says, “the poet [the Christian who uses his or her mind and imagination] only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is [the rationalist] who seeks to get the

15. Oden, *Rediscovering the African Seedbed*, 128.

16. *Ibid.*, 128.

heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.”¹⁷ Now juxtapose the prophet Isaiah’s and Chesterton’s words with the arduous task of biblical interpretation. What does this all mean? On one hand, we must do our due diligence in interpreting God’s Word; however, on the other hand, because of our finiteness and fallenness, we should not be too proud to humbly seek the help of other brothers and sisters, in the body of Christ, who are more adept at biblical interpretation. (Willfully and stubbornly refusing help is being prideful, and simply crazy!)

HP#10. Hermeneutics is a means to an end; that end is responding to God with all the faith, love, worship, and obedience that He intends.

Biblical hermeneutics is a means to an end. That “end” is applying God’s Word in all areas of our life—in the home, at the workplace, on the athletic field, in the neighborhood, in the grocer check out line, in the public square, and in foreign lands. This means of course: if I am interpreting Scripture for my own edification and admonition, I must allow the Bible to *tell me what to do*; if I am preaching, I must be willing to *tell people what to do*; and if I am teaching God’s Word, then I must be willing and courageous to *tell people what to do*—because the “purpose of the Bible is to change life”¹⁸ so that we respond with all the faith, love, worship and obedience that God deserves and intends.

Identifying a “Passage of Scripture” (POS)

~~The reader has noticed thus far that I have used the phrase “passage of Scripture.” A “passage of Scripture” refers to one or more verses that convey a single and coherent thought: think of a passage of Scripture as a paragraph in an essay. For example, the epistle 1 Peter has one major theme. The Apostle Peter had a purpose in mind when he wrote this book, which can be summarized this~~

17. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 13.

18. Adams, *Truth Applied*, 35.