

Engaging Exposition: 10 Basic Principles of Hermeneutics

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I will dedicate two blogs to our ten principles. We will address five in each one.

Hermeneutics is *the proper use of the principles of interpretation to discover the author's intended meaning of a biblical text, with a goal of applying that meaning to a contemporary audience.* The following principles of interpretation are designed to safeguard our exegesis as we seek to discover the author's intended meaning and its significance for our contemporary audience.

1) The Bible is the inspired, infallible, and inerrant word of God.

We gladly affirm as a definition and description, "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" that was formulated in 1978. We believe the Bible is unique among human writings, and it must be studied with that in mind.

Scriptures, rather than our personal experiences, must be our starting point in hermeneutics. In other words, we must begin by asking "What does this text mean?" rather than "What does this text mean to me?" We must set aside any presuppositions which would hinder us from hearing the biblical texts as anything but what they are—the very words of God. Our failure to do this will affect our ability to discern the author's MIT (Main Idea of the Text). We must allow revelation to shape our theology rather than basing our theology on personal opinion. We must approach the Bible with a very clear understanding that it is a unique, divinely-inspired, divinely-preserved book. As a result, we will strive to teach it "correctly," knowing that it contains "everything required for life and godliness (2 Pet 1:3)."

2) The primary goal of hermeneutics is the discovery of the author's intended meaning.

The ultimate meaning of any passage of Scripture is that which the author intended. We believe the author's MIT can be discovered through the careful study of the words (semantics), grammar (syntax), and style (genre) that the author used to write his text, as well as through our understanding of the cultural, historical, geographical, and theological contexts that influenced his life.

3) The author's intended meaning is conveyed through the different layers of context.

The resurgence of expository preaching has resulted in the development of numerous resources to assist with the process of interpretation. Many of these resources emphasize the study of Hebrew and Greek, which is essential for becoming skilled in the practice of hermeneutics, exegesis, and homiletics. However, this emphasis upon the original languages has led some interpreters to place a greater importance upon the individual meanings of Hebrew or Greek words than upon the context in which they are found. Indeed, some pastor-teachers interpret entire texts based upon the meaning of a single word. This type of "word-driven" interpretation is flawed and even dangerous.

It is important to understand this principle: the individual words of biblical texts have meaning within sentences, paragraphs, and books. A word's meaning is determined by its relationship to other words within the context of sentences and paragraphs. The author's choice and combination of specific words becomes his vehicle for delivering content.

4) The author's intended meaning in every biblical text is always discovered within its own unique context.

When we think about the context of a text, we are focusing our attention upon a number of factors that existed when the author recorded his particular content for a particular audience. Biblical authors did not write in a historical vacuum. They addressed the specific needs of their own day. As a result, understanding the significance of the author's personal context, as best as we can, is important. Understanding the culture, history, geography, and theology of the writers and their audiences is helpful for discovering the historical particularity of biblical texts.

5) The biblical author's intended meaning in every biblical text is always discovered within its own unique grammatical content.

Eisegesis is one of the results of poor exegesis. Eisegesis is the practice of reading one's presuppositions and opinions into a biblical text, rather than allowing the text to reveal its own meaning. Interpreters may fall into this trap for a number of reasons. First, they may lack training. Second, some interpreters may have been exposed to a steady diet of topical preaching. This type of preaching often allows personal preference to drive sermon development at the expense of the meaning of a biblical text. Third, some interpreters may be driven more by personal ideology than biblical theology.

These interpreters may use individual verses or parts of verses to support their pet positions, despite a lack of biblical support. This type of interpretation, and the preaching it produces, is damaging both to the scriptures and the Church.

We, on the other hand, want to be interpreters who are committed to “correctly teaching the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15).” We are committed to allowing the text to reveal the author’s intended meaning by applying the principles of hermeneutics to the process of exegesis. For this to happen, we must be committed to understanding both the content and the context (near and far) of every biblical text.

When we think about the grammatical content of a passage, we are focusing our attention upon the literary elements that the author chose to frame his discussion. These elements include the author’s choice of specific words and the way he combined them into sentences and paragraphs, as well as the literary genre he selected (i.e., prose, poetry, historical narrative, wisdom, epistle, apocalyptic). When we consider this, we can see the dangers of lifting individual clauses or verses out of their specific literary and grammatical construction—it almost insures that the interpreter will misunderstand the content of the passage.

6) The author’s intended meaning should be interpreted literally, unless the genre and the use of figurative language suggests otherwise.

Hermeneutics has a famous axiom: “If the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense.” When we speak about the literal meaning of a text, we are referring simply to the natural interpretation of the words as they are joined together into sentences and paragraphs. The writers were normal, rational people who communicated in the same basic ways that we do, only in different languages and historical contexts. So, when you are interpreting a biblical text, if the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense. This observation does negate the intriguing issues of *sensus plenior* or Christological hermeneutics.

Now, if the literal sense is confusing, you may be encountering figurative language. We all do this, because we can say what we want to say more vividly and forcefully by figures of speech than we can by saying it directly. Figurative language helps make the “abstract concrete.” When a writer incorporates figurative language, often he is using the “connotation” of a word or words in order to provide a broader understanding of the concept he is addressing. The connotation of a word is what it suggests beyond what it

expresses: its overtones of meaning. Connotation is especially important to poets. It allows them to explore and enrich their content, and to do so with an economy of words.

Consider Psalm 23. David wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd.” David is using the connotation of a shepherd to give us an important metaphor for God. Like a shepherd, he provides (“there is nothing I lack”), he cares (“he lets me lie down in green pastures”), he directs (“he leads me beside quiet waters”), he encourages (“he renews my life”), and he guides (“he leads me along the right paths for his name’s sake”). All of these traits are connotations we derive from our understanding of the word “shepherd.”

7) The author’s intended meaning in a specific biblical text should be informed by the writings of other biblical authors on the same concepts.

As we study the totality of scripture, we will encounter many reoccurring, theological concepts. This makes sense when we remember that the Bible is a progressive revelation of God’s redemptive purposes in the world. As a result, we should expect to encounter these theological concepts as they are revealed and developed in the Scriptures. Be prepared to let other biblical texts inform our understanding when they share the same theological concepts. This is what we mean by inner-canonical. In other words, we begin with a presupposition that there is a unity of theological concepts within the Scriptures, and we must be prepared to allow our understanding of those concepts to influence our interpretation of individual texts. As a result, it is important to adopt the following guidelines to help us understand and teach theological concepts.

First, the interpretation of brief texts is always influenced by our interpretation of longer texts that share the same theological concept. Sadly, many an error in doctrine has resulted from an interpreter who built a whole theology on a brief text (often taken out of its context), while ignoring the clear teaching of a lengthier text on the same concept.

Second, interpreters must distinguish between “descriptive” and “prescriptive” texts in Scripture. Fee and Stuart state, “Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative way-unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way.”

Third, the interpretation of obscure biblical texts should be influenced by texts on the same subject that are more fully developed.

8) The author's intended meaning in a specific biblical text may have a fuller meaning, but that meaning can only be determined on the basis of subsequent biblical revelation and the whole canon.

As interpreters, we are searching for the author's intended meaning in every Old and New Testament text. Since God's revelation is progressive, we must acknowledge that the Old Testament writers did not have the benefit of New Testament revelation. Granted, God allowed certain Old Testament authors like Daniel and Isaiah to have glimpses into the future outworking of his redemptive plan, but they did not have all of the particulars. Paul describes this truth in Ephesians 3:1-7. Paul stated that the mystery of the gospel, and its global application, was revealed to him following the ascension of Jesus. We cannot of our own accord, therefore, force New Testament revelation upon Old Testament texts.

However, the Bible is one book with one divine author. It does tell one great story framed in a "grand redemptive narrative." All the "little narratives" have their place in the "big narrative." Further, there are Old Testament passages that are specifically declared in the New Testament to have some level of "fuller meaning." In the field of Hermeneutics, we refer to this as the *sensus plenior* of the text. Now to be clear: it is not a different meaning but a more full meaning with implications and significance the human author did not fully know or grasp.

Second, these fuller meanings are not the result of allegorical interpretation, but they are revealed by subsequent revelation. Individual texts must be interpreted within the larger context of the entire canon. This is especially true when studying the Old Testament. As interpreters, we study the Old Testament from a New Testament context. We do not read the Old Testament like Jewish rabbis! We read the Bible, all of it, as Christian Scripture. As a result, we are able to see a foreshadowing of New Testament teaching and theology within the texts of the Old Testament.

Revelation is progressive, and so we find that the New Testament informs the Old Testament and reveals legitimate instances of *sensus plenior*. However, we also recognize that the Old Testament informs the New Testament, something some expositors miss or neglect too often. Bryan Chapell provides helpful insight for us. He states, "Christ-centered preaching rightly understood does not seek to discover where Christ is mentioned in every text but to disclose where every text stands in relation to Christ."

9) The author's intended meaning in a specific biblical text will never be in contradiction to his own writings or the rest of the canon.

Despite the individual nature of the parts, we affirm that the Scriptures comprise a single whole that can never contradict itself. At the core of this conviction is an even greater conviction about God, who is the ultimate "Author" of the canon. Because God is the ultimate Author of scripture, we can expect to find unity in the immediate, sectional, book and canonical contexts as well.

10) The author's intended meaning in every biblical text has a theocentric/Christological purpose, and as a result, it has significance for all people, in all places, at all times.

Once the interpreter has discovered both the content and the context of a biblical text, his final task is to verbalize his understanding of the author's intended meaning. This is the goal of hermeneutics and the moment of truth in exegesis. The author's intended meaning will always be theocentric-it will reflect the great truths about God and His Christ. After all, the Bible is first and foremost a record of God's redemptive plan for the world, through Messiah Jesus.

In recent years, the Church has experienced a significant increase in man-centered preaching. This type of preaching, which places its primary emphasis upon the "felt needs" of the listener, often substitutes psychology for exposition. Greidanus states, "In contrast to anthropocentric interpretation, therefore, theocentric interpretation would emphasize that the Bible's purpose is first of all to tell the story of God. In relating that story, the Bible naturally also depicts human characters-not, however, for their own sake but for the sake of showing what God is doing for, in, and through them." Our awareness of the theocentric nature of Scripture will help ensure that our interpretation and preaching are God-centered with a Christological focus (cf. John 5:39).

These ten principles serve as the foundation for our exegesis. It is important to keep them in the forefront of our thinking when we study the Bible.