

Hermeneutics

By Doug Hamilton

Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15, *“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.”* The word he used for *“handling accurately”* was an engineering term for building a stone wall. It means to *“cut straight”*. A builder would take a pile of stones, cut them down, and mortar them together to make a wall. If he were in a hurry and not careful to pay attention to detail in cutting all the stones, the results would be obvious. The wall would be crooked and the workman’s skill would be called into question. Eventually it would fall down and likely hurt others in the process. Timothy was expected to skillfully teach the word in a manner which did not include *“quarrelling about words”* and *“godless chatter”* (2:14,16). To do so would lead people into further ungodliness and likely eternally hurt them in the end.



The same principle is applicable to us today. We must be sound in the construction of our interpretation of the holy Word of God. If we carelessly parse the scriptures in a way that includes the shoddiness of *godless quarrels* and *opinions*, then be prepared to receive a crooked wall which will endanger the spiritual lives of many.

In reflection of this, I would like to begin this series of *Important Christian Topics* by examining a subject referred to as *Hermeneutics*. Hermeneutics is defined as *“the science of interpretation, especially of the Bible”* (Dictionary.com). Often when there are radically differing opinions to a passage of the Bible, it is because of the difference in the Hermeneutic. Usually these discussions end in the phrase, *“That’s your interpretation; we will have to agree to disagree.”* When that is brought up, it introduces the objective to research the standard of interpretation (hermeneutic) which is being carried out.

Paul told the Corinthian saints in *1 Corinthians 1:10*, *“Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.”* Many of the disagreements among the Christian world would be resolved if the hermeneutic was similar to begin with.

What are the Three Powerful Perspectives of a Sound Biblical Interpretation?

There are many factors which must be raised when utilizing a standard of interpretation. The first and foremost factor of a biblical hermeneutic is to determine if the person believes that the Bible is the whole Word of God. If it is not, then there will never be agreement among the worshippers of Christ.

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1) The Bible the whole word of God.

Christians claim to be the followers of Christ. If Jesus believed something to be true, and we are followers of Jesus, then it would make sense to be in agreement with Jesus, would it not? What did Jesus believe concerning the words of the Bible?

Christ recognized the books of the same Old Testament which we have today.

- Luke 24:44, "Now He said to them, 'These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.'"

The Jews of Jesus' day lumped the writings of the Old Testament into three categories:

1. The Law of Moses: The first five books of the Bible.
2. The Prophets: Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, the major and minor prophets.
3. The Psalms: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, 1 and 2 Chronicles.

Jesus obviously accepted the same Old Testament which we have today as inspired by God. If we claim we follow Him, then we ought to hold the same perspective as Jesus. If our Savior agreed with Psalm 119:160, "*The sum of Your word is truth...*", then the sum of the Old Testament is truth.

Jesus's words were the oracles of God.

- John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."
- Mark 13:31, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away."
- John 14:24, "...the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me."
- Matthew 4:4, "But He answered and said, 'It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD.'"
- John 7:16, "So Jesus answered them and said, 'My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me.'"

The words of Jesus were not simply the phrases of a man, but of God.

Jesus gave the Apostles inspired authority.

- John 17:17, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth."
- John 17:20, "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word..."
- John 14:26, "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you."

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- John 15:26, “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, *that is* the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me...”
- 1 Thessalonians 2:13, “...when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted *it* not *as* the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.”
- 2 Peter 3:15–16, “...just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures...”

We must always keep in mind that the Leader of our Christian faith moved His apostles with the Holy Spirit unto inspiration. *Jude 17*, “...beloved, ought to remember the words that were spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ...”

The Apostles confirmed the Old Testament as the inspired word of God.

- Romans 15:4, “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”
- 2 Peter 1:20–21, “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is *a matter* of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.”
- 2 Timothy 3:16–17, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

The Apostles backed up the teaching of the New Testament with the miracles of the Holy Spirit.

- Mark 16:20, “And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed.”
- 2 Corinthians 12:12, “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.”
- 1 Peter 1:12, “...those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look.”
- Romans 15:19, “...in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.”
- 1 Thessalonians 1:5, “...for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction...”
- Hebrews 2:3-4 “...After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, ⁴ God also testifying with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.”

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It was with this in mind that the writers of the New Testament could say with confidence that all scripture is inspired by God and is a powerful force in the lives of the individual.

- 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.”
- 2 Timothy 3:16–17 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

2) Speak Where the Bible Speaks; Be Silent Where the Bible is Silent.

- 1 Corinthians 4:6 “...so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written...”
- 2 John 9, “Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God...”
- 1 Peter 4:11, “Whoever speaks, *is to do so* as one who is speaking the utterances of God...”

We must be very careful to base our opinions on what the Bible does say instead of what the Bible doesn't say. Always be wary of the phrase, “*The Bible does not say...*” When we do this then we are arguing from a position of ignorance.

3) Context! Context! Context!

a) There are literal, figurative and literally figurative verses in the Bible.

- Jesus called the Pharisees a serpent in Matthew 23:33. This was figurative.
- Paul was bitten by a serpent in Acts 28:3. This was a literal snake.
- Moses held up a bronze serpent in John 3:14. This was literally a figurative snake.

b) There is context of passages, books and Testaments.

- Job's wife said, “*Curse God and die...*” in Job 2:9. This is not commanded to us, but was spoken from the lips of a frustrated wife and mother.
- Elijah was told to go to the Brook Cherith where he would be fed by Ravens (1 Kings 17:3-4), but it is not commanded to us.
- Numbers 28:3-ff states the people of God were to offer a continual burnt offering twice daily. That is under the Old Covenant. In the New Covenant we becoming the “*living and holy sacrifice*” unto God (Romans 12:1).

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- c) There various styles of writing in the Bible.
- Prophecy books like the Minor Prophets and Revelation.
 - Historical books like 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Joshua and Judges.
 - Poetical books like Psalms and Song of Solomon.
 - Instructional books like the Epistles and Proverbs.
- d) There are historical backgrounds.
- The four gospel accounts in the New Testament were targeted to different types of people in the Roman Empire.
 - All the epistles were written to Christians, not the lost.
 - Revelation was written in *apocalyptic literature*.

All these and many more are written in a context which must be considered before making broad application. To pretend they were written to the modern day individual void of historical context would be foolish to apply without understanding.

It is very important when gaining understanding of the scriptures to be on the same page when it comes to a biblical hermeneutic. Three areas which God's people can come into agreement is 1) The Bible is the whole word of God, 2) Speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent, and 3) Context. I am firmly persuaded if we can agree on these three principles then we would be in agreement on 99% of all the issues. When we deviate from these principles, bad things will occur in the end.

Closing Story: *Best Interpretation*

In about 512 B.C., as Darius I of Persia led his armies north of the Black Sea, the Scythians sent him a message comprised of a mouse, a frog, a bird, and five arrows. Darius summoned his captains. "Our victory is assured," he announced. "These arrows signify that the Scythians will lay down their arms; the mouse means the land of the Scythians will be surrendered to us; the frog means that their rivers and lakes will also be ours; and the Scythian army will fly like a bird from our forces." But an adviser to Darius said, "The Scythians mean by these things that unless you turn into birds and fly away, or into frogs and hide in the waters, or into mice and burrow for safety in the ground, you will all be slain by the Scythian archers."

Darius took counsel and decided that the second was the right interpretation, and beat a retreat!

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