

## Bible Study on Hermeneutics – Handout 3

Grace Bible Chapel

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### Grammatical Principles of Interpretation (Under the Normative Approach)

#### Illustration: Three blind men and the elephant

Three blind men came upon an elephant and set about to describe it. The first, feeling the elephant's trunk said that the elephant is like a snake. The second feeling the tall side of the animal said that the elephant was tall, like a wall. The third, felt the tail and that the elephant is like a tree with flexible branches. Each one described accurately his experience of the elephant, yet the experiences were so vastly different that someone who had never hear of an elephant would not be able to imagine that these three descriptions fit the same beast. Each account true, but partial.

**The point** – we must look at the elephant (Bible passage) from every conceivable side, position, and possibility (do all systematic research) before we make a determination of what the elephant really is, or in the real case in point what the passage truly means.

**Ecclesiastes 12:9-10** – Solomon gives a good general statement of Biblical Grammar Interpretation:

Pondered – pay close attention to words

Searched out – penetrate & exegete the text

Arranged – went about it orderly (it fit the context, made sense, is consistent)

**Analytical** – moves from the specific to the general – microscopic method

**Synthesis** – various parts are viewed together, are seen in there relation to one another, and are regarded as a whole – telescopic method. Analysis concentrates on the infinitesimal, synthesis concentrates on the infinite. The synthetic method requires that we get a mental grasp of the Bible as a whole – using both methods in harmony provide the correct understanding of any passage.

Quote: Martin Luther:

*Said "he studied the Bible as he gathered apples. First of all he shook the tree, then the limbs, then the branches, then after that he searched under the leaves for any remaining fruit."*

#### Phenomenological Description:

The Bible describes things phenomenologically, i.e. as they appear to the human observer. For example the Scripture speaks of the sun rising in the east. This is a phenomenological statement. Scientifically, the sun doesn't rise at all. The Scriptures describe things the way they appear.

#### Examples:

**Jam 1:11** For the sun rises with a scorching wind and withers the grass; and its flower falls off and the beauty of its appearance is destroyed; so too the rich man in the midst of his pursuits will fade away.

**Eze 1:5** Within it there were figures resembling four living beings. And this was their appearance: they had human form. Each of them had four faces and four wings.

**Rev 9:2 -3** He opened the bottomless pit, and smoke went up out of the pit, like the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by the smoke of the pit. Then out of the smoke came locusts upon the earth, and power was given them, as the scorpions of the earth have power.

**Determining the General Meaning of a passage** Questions to consider:

- What did the passage convey to those whom it was addressed at the time they were addressed?
- Who is speaking and why?
- Who is being spoken to, and what general theme or issue is being addressed.
- Is it figurative language, command, instruction, or argument?

- Does the passage carry any special significance given the historical and social context?

*Pay attention to those elements that are repeated in the immediate context. What does the verse studied contribute to the overall meaning of the immediate context? How would the meaning of the immediate context be effected if it were left out?*

- Keep in mind the passages before and after – what is being discussed?
- Normally there is a new thought beginning with a new paragraph.
- Does it seem to conflict with other passages or biblical doctrines?
- Is there a progression in the story, account or argument? Is there a climax?
- Are there contrasts? Are there parallels or illustrations?
- What is implied by the use of particular terms, phrases, or sentences? Any implications must be clear and reasonable – be careful not to exaggerate or over extend what the text says in order to support a preconceived idea.
- Is there a command to obey? Is there an error to avoid? Does the passage point out sinful behavior or attitudes? Is there an example to follow? Is there a promise to claim? Does the passage highlight an aspect of God’s nature and character? How does it relate to glorifying Christ?
- Ultimately, the test of a good interpretation is whether it makes good sense of the text and its immediate context.

*Don't be too quick to run to a commentary – study the passage to come to your own conclusions, then pick good commentaries to review.*

**Recognizing Figures of Speech**

When the Lord told the church “*I will come like a thief*” (Rev 3:3), He did not mean He would come to rob. Instead the point of comparison is that He would come suddenly. When Job referred to the “*pillars*” of the earth trembling (Job 9:6), he was referring to the mountains of the earth.

**Antithesis:** opposition, or contrast of ideas or words in a balanced or parallel construction.

**Euphemism:** substitution of an agreeable or at least non-offensive expression for one whose plainer meaning might be harsh or unpleasant.

**Hyperbole:** exaggeration for emphasis or for rhetorical effect.

**Metaphor:** implied comparison achieved through a figurative use of words; the word is used not in its literal sense, but in one analogous to it.

**Simile:** an explicit comparison between two things using 'like' or 'as'.

**Parable:** extended simile, comparing unlike things that are easily understood to reveal truth that is difficult to comprehend.

**Personification:** making inanimate objects animated.

**Anthropomorphism:** attributing physical characteristics to God.

***Determine the relationships between the key words and phrases. Especially be cognizant of connecting words:***

Contrast	but. however. even though. much more. nevertheless. yet. although. then. otherwise
Condition	if, whoever, whatever
Comparison	too. also. as. iust as. so also. likewise. like. in the same wav
Correlatives	as...so also, for...as, so...as
Reason	because, for this reason, for this purpose, for, since
Result	so then. therefore. as a result. thus. then
Purpose	that, so that, in order that
Temporal/Time	now. immediatelv. iust then. until. when. before. after. while. durina. since
Geographical	where, from

### **Examples:**

**Eph 2:1-5** And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ

**2Th 2:11** For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

**Rev 19:17** Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and he cried out with a loud voice, saying to all the birds which fly in midheaven, "Come, assemble for the great supper of God,

**Rev 20:1** Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand.

**Jam 2:24-25** You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. **In the same way**, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

### **Symbols:**

*Symbols make up a portion of the Bible. A symbol is some object or action which is assigned a meaning for the purpose of depicting rather than stating the qualities of something else. Symbols are sometimes called types – both represent something else.*

- A symbol does not have its symbolic meaning because of what it is in itself. It belongs only to its use as a symbol.
- Each symbol has a referent (what the symbol refers to). John 1:29 a lamb (object) pictures Christ (referent) with the meaning that Christ is a sacrifice just as the lambs of the OT law.
- Symbols have their base in something we can picture. They are based on literal objects or actions. The referent is not literally a lamb as in John 1:29, but there are literal lambs. A beast with 7 heads and 10 horns is not an actuality, but these symbols contain enough reality to stir the imagination and understanding of the communication.
- Most contexts define the symbols. In Ezekiel 37:4 the "dry bones" are defined in Ezekiel 37:11 as "the whole house of Israel."
- If the verse's context does not give the meaning of the symbol, then check other passages (normally there will be a reference to something the writer is considering from a similar context elsewhere).
- Look for one major point of resemblance and be careful not to make the wrong characteristic of the symbol. There is one meaning, and that meaning must be found in a careful study of the context, and other similar passages.
- Some parts of prophecy are symbolic, and other parts are not. Beasts in prophecy are symbolic, but kings are not.
- Do not symbolize that which can be understood as plausible or possible.

### **The Meaning of Words:**

*In the Grammatical interpretation process the text of Scripture is carefully studied (exegesis, the critical analysis of the text) to determine four important things:*

1. The meaning of the words (lexicology)
  - a. Etymology – how words are derived and developed
  - b. By usage – how words are used by the same and other authors
  - c. Synonyms and antonyms – how similar and opposite words are used
  - d. Context – how words are used in various contexts
2. The form of words (morphology) – how words are structured and how that affects their meaning

3. The function of words (parts of speech) – considers what the various forms do – attention to subjects, verbs, objects, nouns, and others.
4. The relationship of words (syntax) – the way words are related or put together to form phrases, clauses, and sentences.
5. This means it is necessary to study the tenses of verbs, nouns and pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and the ways these words are structured.

**Etymology** refers to the root derivation and development of words. The aims are:

- Get to the root meaning of the word
- To see how a word has developed

**Examples:**

- The English word “hippopotamus”  
From the Greek word *hippos* for horse, and *potamos* for river – “river horse”
- The Greek word “*ekklesia*” is usually translated “church”  
From the Greek “*ek*” meaning “out of” and “*kalein*” to “call or summon” – thus it was originally meant as those who were “called out of the unsaved to form a group.” It’s origin before being used for the church was a town crier summoning citizens for a meeting to discuss business.

*Sometimes the etymology of a word does not help determine the meaning of a word – there are a number of reasons for this, meanings change over time, and many words are used in a number of ways.*

- The Greek word “pneuma” – often translated “spirit” is derived from pneo “to breath”, but in the Bible the word pneuma only occasionally means breath. It also means wind, attitude, emotions, spiritual nature, and inner being in contrast to the physical being, angels and the Holy Spirit.

*With such words the immediate context often, though not always, helps determine the meaning of the word. Means of determining:*

- Note the usage of a word by the same writer in the same book.
- Note the usage by the same writer in his other books.
- Note the usage by other writers in the Bible – this can be helpful especially if it is in a context either similar or beneficial (according to the situation) to disclose the authors intent.

*A word can have different shades of meaning and you cannot assume that Peter, John and Paul meant the same thing every time they would use a particular word. However, in general there is a great deal to understand about the meaning of a word in a context.*

- You must first look at the immediate context, that is, the sentences surrounding the word. Then look throughout the same writing for the same word (software is particularly useful). This is your best source of understanding why the writer used that word and what it means.
- Secondly, if needed, you can refer to another writing by the same author. This may be helpful, but the context must be considered.
- Lastly, you can refer to other books in the Bible. This last step should be done with much care because this can result in misunderstanding what the author originally meant with a particular word. The farther you get away from the immediate context, the meaning that you get for a word become less reliable.
- Read a good word study book on the definition of the word, and how the word is used. A good word study will sometimes give the meaning from extra-biblical writings as there are many words in both Hebrew and Greek that are used only one time in Scripture.
- See how a word differs from its synonyms – this can help clarify the meaning – often the meaning is only in varying shades:

In Colossians 2:22 “commandments” suggest laws to be obeyed, and “teachings” (i.e. doctrines) imply truths to be believed.

- See how a word differs from its opposite (antonym):

In Romans 8:4-9 “flesh” could mean the physical body (in contrast to the human spirit). However, by noting how “flesh” contrasts with the word “spirit” in verses 6, 9, and 11 we see that “spirit” means the Holy Spirit rather than the human spirit. Therefore “flesh” in verses 4-9 means the sinful nature.

### **Consider the context for these reasons:**

- Because words, phrases, and clauses may have multiple meanings - examining how they are used in a given context can help determine which is the correct meaning – simply put, it must fit.
- Thoughts are usually expressed by a series of words or sentences, that is in association, not isolation. What precedes, and what follows. It must be in logical agreement.
- False interpretations often arise from ignoring the context – **example:** Psalm 2:8 “Ask of Me, and I will make the nations Your inheritance, the ends of the earth Your possession” is often used by missionaries to speak of anticipated conversion promises. However, the context before and after make it clear it is referring to God’s promise to His Son. The Hebrew word for “inheritance” has to do with possession and occupancy – a physical inheritance.

**We must make sure we have the right basic meaning of a word in mind – this requires understanding it from the culture and the context:**

#### **Grammatical Usage**

“Bear one another’s burdens....”

The letter bears his signature

“Behold, you will bear a son”

John must bear the difficulty of his journey

“My punishment is too great to bear”

This situation will bear investigation

Mark bears himself well

“They will bear you up in their hands”

Grief bears heavily upon her

“Your servant has killed the lion and bear”

#### **Grammatical Meaning**

(Galatians 6.2) Carry, transport.

To carry with or on something.

To bring forth or to give birth.

To hold up, sustain.

(Gen 4:13) To undergo, to endure.

To be capable of withstanding.

To conduct oneself, behave oneself.

To carry over, to hold onto.

To be oppressive, to weigh down.

A large animal with shaggy fur.

Some of the most familiar Bible words can have multiple meanings and those meanings must largely be determined by the context. If we presume the meaning or miss the meaning it can radically affect our interpretation and understanding – **examples:**

- **“World”** (John 3:16 not just Jews; 1 John 2:15-16 world system of evil; 1 Pet 3:3 adornment; John 17:5 the whole created universe; 1 Tim 6:7 life in the physical world)
- **“Faith”** (Jude 3; Gal 1:23; Rom 3:3; 1:17; Eph 2:8; James 2:19)
- **“Salvation”** (Exodus 14:13 safety; Luke 1:71 Israel’s release from enemies; Luke 18:42 physical health; 1 Tim 2:15 from insignificance; Acts 27:20 safety; Rom 5:9 from penalty of sin)
- **“Law”** (Rom 2:14; 8:2 a principle; John 1:17; 45 the first 5 books of Moses; Mat 22:40 all the OT)

The context of the paragraph and the entire book should always be considered when understanding the meaning of a word or a phrase:

- The Immediate context – John 2:19 Christ speaks of “destroying this temple” – in verse 21 it is clarified as referring to His body.

John 2:19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

John 2:21 But He was speaking of the temple of His body.

- The Writing context – 1 John 3:6 cannot mean that a Christian never sins because this would contradict 1:8, 10, and 2:1. It therefore means that Christians do not practice sin 1 John 3:8 as the unsaved.

1John 3:6 No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.

1John 3:8 the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.

1John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

**Morphology** refers to the way words are inflected, that is formed or put together.

In both Greek and Hebrew the meanings of words are changed by inflections at the beginning, middle, or ending – these small changes make major differences in tense (past, present, future), voice (active or passive), mood suggesting the kind of action (indicative – is in effect, interrogative – is a question, imperative – is a command, optative – is a request).

**Syntax** is the way in which words are put together to form phrases, clauses, or sentences. Single words by themselves seldom convey a complete thought. How they are organized creates the meaning:

- The man hit the ball hard
- The ball hit the man hard
- The man hit the hard ball
- The hard man hit the ball
- The hard ball hit the man

**LANGUAGE** – we have studied the root meaning of key words, but language is about fitting those words together, understanding how the various clauses and phrases are connected in a given passage, while using the correct grammatical form of the words. Written language consists of paragraphs, sentences, clauses, and words.

**Clauses** – a clause is a grammatical unit of words comprised of a subject (the person, place, thing, concept or idea, or action) being discussed and a predicate (the verb indicating action, state, or condition). Clauses are both independent and dependent.

“Christ died” – a single unit with a subject and predicate (independent)

“He chose us” (Eph 1:4) – subject, predicate, & object (independent)

“We always thank God” (Col 1:3) – “We” subject, “always thank” predicate with adverb, “God” the object of the thanks (independent) – “when we pray for you” (is a dependent clause) – this second clause requires the first clause for its meaning.

**Dependent Clauses** are of several types – understanding each type helps to clarify the communication of the writer – the mood of the statement.

- Causal “We always thank God...because we have heard” Col 1:3-4
- Concessive “Though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit” Col 2:5
- Conditional “Since you died with Christ..why...do you submit to rules?” Col 1:20
- Purpose “We pray this...in order that” Col 1:10
- Result “Pray...so that” Col 4:3
- Temporal “When you were dead in your sins...God made you alive with Christ” Col 2:13

*The point is by identifying the kind of clause in a passage, and understanding the relationship of dependent clauses leads to the ultimate meaning of a passage. When I look at a passage, I should use these relationships to direct my understanding of the intention of the writer.*

***The order of words:***

“God is love” or “Love is God” – the same words, but the order changes the meaning.

In Greek special emphasis is given to words, phrases, or clauses by placing them at the beginning of a sentence (or in some instances at the end) instead of what we think of as the normal word order of subject, verb, and object. This is very telling for interpretation:

“In Him” (Eph 2:21) is placed in the Greek at the beginning of the sentence. The weight of focus is on what He is doing.

“not” (1 Cor 1:17) is placed at the beginning of the sentence in Greek, in order to emphasize the negative idea.

### **Summary:**

*Grammatical interpretation means giving attention to the words of Scripture and how they are used.*

*While it seems a bit technical, it is essential if we are to understand the Bible properly.*

The following is a summary outline of the procedures suggested for proper grammatical interpretation.

Discover the meaning of a word

Examine the etymology of the word, including its original meaning and any different meanings that develop from it

- Discover the usage of the word
  - By the writer in the near context or same book
  - By the same writer in other writings
  - By other writers in the Bible
  - By other writers outside the Bible (use good word study)
- Discover how synonyms and antonyms are used
  - Consider the contexts
    - The immediate context (chapter, paragraph, surrounding verses)
    - The context of the book
    - The context of parallel passages
    - The context of the entire Bible
- Decide which meaning best fits the context and thought of the passage
  - Procedures for discovering the meaning of a passage
    - Analyze the passage, its elements, noting its parts of speech, the kind of sentence it is, the kind of clauses it has, and the word order
    - Pay special attention to the meaning of key words
    - Consider the influence of each part of the sentence on the thought of the whole

\* Principles and concepts derived from: “Principles of Protestant Interpretation” by Bernard Ramm, or “Interpretation” by Roy Zuck