

Hermeneutics

Module 3.2

Every time the Bible is read or heard hermeneutics happens. It happens over coffee, at lunch, early in the morning, and late at night. It happens when people are alone or when they are in a group. It happens when a Pastor prepares to preach or when a single mom encourages her child with a passage of Scripture. It can also happen while listening to the radio or while scrolling through a social media news feed. Hermeneutics happens all the time, in a variety of places, and by a multitude of people!

Hermeneutics is the process of determining what God has said in his Word and how it applies to our lives today. It is the process that everyone, regardless of age, gender, race, or background engages in when they read the Bible. While the average person may not think of reading or hearing the Bible in these terms, this truth remains nonetheless. Furthermore, like every other area of life, there are a wide range of approaches to this process.

As a Fellowship, we have stated that we are committed to “Biblical Truth.” However, how do we determine what biblical truth is? How can we, with confidence, open up God’s Word over a cup of coffee and give hope to a struggling husband or single mother? How can we, with confidence, know what passages speak clearly into today’s cultural issues? Furthermore, how can we, when needed, lovingly disagree with one another about an interpretation?

In short: Hermeneutics.

Our shared Commitment regarding hermeneutics begins with, “...*We seek to understand the intent of each biblical writer by using grammatical, historical, and contextual principles of interpretation...*”

To understand those words more clearly, and the process of hermeneutics more fully, a quick definition of these terms is needed. If hermeneutics is the process of determining “what God said”, here is how the following terms fit into this process:

- **Grammatical**—Understanding **how** God said what was said.
- **Historical**—Understanding **to whom** God spoke.
- **Contextual**—Understanding the **big picture** and **surrounding details** regarding what God said.

The process of understanding what God has said begins with understanding how God originally revealed his Word. God spoke to/through real people, at real points in history, and

used real languages. This means that the interpreter must seek to understand the words God originally used, how God originally communicated those words, and how the original audience would have understood what God said. This is what we mean by the word grammatical.

While we interact today, most frequently, with an English translation of the Bible, we must recognize that God did not reveal his Word in English. Consequently, the English translations should be faithful to what was originally written along with being understandable today. Furthermore, tools such as a concordance and biblical language dictionary can be immensely helpful in the process of understanding how God originally spoke his Word.

Helping us understand the grammatical aspect of hermeneutics is the historical aspect. Just as we understand that God had not originally spoken in the English language, we understand that he did not originally speak to us. God spoke to/through real people who lived in a different period of history than we do, and we must seek to understand what they would have understood.

For example, in Matthew 5:13 when Jesus comments about salt losing its taste and its saltiness not being able to be restored, we must remember that he was not speaking to modern day scientists. His original audience would have known nothing about chemistry, or the Periodic Table, nor the chemical compound of sodium and chloride that makes up salt. Their understanding of Jesus' words would have largely been limited to their daily experience and their interaction with salt. As interpreters living nearly 2,000 years later, these historical factors must be considered as we interpret what Jesus intended his original audience to understand.

The contextual aspect of hermeneutics can be very broad (big picture) and also very narrow (surrounding details). For example, broadly speaking, to best understand Jesus' interaction with the woman at the well in John 4 we need to understand why "Jews had no dealings with Samaritans" (John 4:9).¹ To do this, we need to understand what happened back in 2 Kings 14-17 and what led to the Assyrian invasion and subsequent Assyrian resettlement of Samaria which at the time was the capital city of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17). Narrowly speaking, we must not miss the fact that Jesus and the woman were actually at a well. The woman doesn't immediately understand what Jesus is saying to her because she is only thinking about physical water that will quench her physical thirst. However, Jesus is speaking of living water that will well up to eternal life (John 4:10-15).

As we seek to interpret and understand what God has revealed in his Word, we must understand **how** he revealed his Word, **to whom** he revealed his Word, and the **big picture**

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and ***surrounding details*** of the passage we are looking at. Another way to phrase this process is with the question, "what did God originally say to the original audience and what did they originally understand?"

The second part of our shared hermeneutical commitment reads, "*focused on Christ, led by the Holy Spirit, and oriented by grace.*" By this we mean, all correct interpretation has Jesus Christ as its focus, is empowered by the Holy Spirit, and is aimed at magnifying the grace of God in and through Christ.

Throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, God's redemptive work in and through Jesus Christ is the focus. Whether it is the hundreds of prophecies in the Old Testament that predict his coming, the sacrificial system of the priesthood that he fulfilled, or his promised return, Jesus is the focus. As we seek to understand what God has said, we must do so within the redemptive context that God is working in and through Jesus.

Thankfully, we are not alone in this process. God has not only inspired and preserved his Word by the Holy Spirit, he also illuminates his Word by the Holy Spirit. Jesus said in John 16:13-14, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you." Correct hermeneutics is focused on Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, correct interpretation aims to magnify the grace of God in and through Christ. Even difficult passages, like Psalm 5:5, where the Scriptures clearly say God "hates all evildoers," are passages that must be correctly interpreted to magnify the grace of God in and through Christ. For it is only when we understand the holiness, righteousness, and just judgments of God that we can understand his grace, mercy, steadfast love, and forgiveness. Gloriously, it is at the Cross of Christ where we see all of the attributes of God colliding together.

Our shared commitment states, "*we accept the absolute authority of the Bible rather than that of creeds, traditions, or leaders.*" To understand this last statement correctly, we must focus on one very important word, the word "rather."

Rather than viewing creed, tradition, or leaders as fully authoritative, we believe the Bible is, fully and finally, authoritative. Creeds, historical interpretations, and leaders, from both within our Fellowship and outside of our Fellowship, are helpful but only to the degree that they correspond to biblical truth. To state it another way, those within the Charis Fellowship do not appeal to a creed when determining biblical truth; we appeal to the Bible. In this regard, our Commitment to Common Identity or Statement of Faith, must never be considered anything

more than a reflection of biblical truth. We are grateful for such documents but we are not bound by such documents. We are bound by, and to, Scripture.

In the same way, we are grateful for historical interpretations of the Bible and the leaders who have gone before and are leading now; but we are not bound to those interpretations or leaders. We are bound to Scripture and Scripture alone. Commentaries, sermons, church history, and godly leaders can all be helpful...but they are not final.

Finally, the process of hermeneutics ends with application. Once the above details are understood, we work towards determining the principle, or truth, that a particular passage is communicating and then we seek to faithfully apply that truth to our lives. After all, this is what God intends for his Word to do. The Bible teaches us what is true, alerts us to where we have erred, corrects our missteps, and trains us for righteousness so that we may be men and women who are fully equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).