

## Bible - Interpretation

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### **What Is Grammatical-Historical Interpretation & Why Is It Important?**

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

**You can't know how to apply the Bible to life, unless you understand what the Bible really says.**

In our postmodern society, many people — even many pastors and theologians — have adopted the mistaken idea that careful interpretation of the Bible doesn't really matter. Some would even say it is impossible. What really matters, they say, is that you apply the Bible to your life. The problem with this line of thinking is that you can't know how to apply the Bible to your life, unless you understand what the Bible really says.

The only way to do that is to employ the method of interpretation that God's Word itself directs us to employ, and that method is grammatical-historical interpretation. No other method will yield a consistently accurate understanding of God's truth.

#### **God Hasn't Left Us On Our Own**

This is a vital point. God has not left us on our own. He has not left us in a fog of uncertainty. He has told us how to interpret His Word. There are not competing, equally valid, systems of interpretation. There is one God-given system, and it is the only valid system.

Why? Because the principles of grammatical-historical interpretation are derived from Scripture itself. They are an integral part of the system of doctrine contained in the Bible.

Truth is not variable, as postmodern society (and some in the church) would have us believe: "You have your truth, and I have my truth." Truth is definable, and it has only one

definition. But man is not the definer — God is. He has defined Christianity in great detail for us in His inspired Word. So in order for man to understand the definition of Christianity, we must employ God-given principles for the interpretation of His Word. Our thinking about the Bible must be governed by the Author of the Book.

### **The Right Starting Point**

The right starting point involves these presuppositions: God Himself has defined Christianity in the Bible. Christian truth is found only in the Bible, and it is objective truth. That means that it is true regardless of whether it speaks subjectively to the individual or not. It is true no matter how the individual may feel about it. It is true no matter what "spin" the reader may seek to place upon it. It is true for every individual in all times and in all places without exception. And, there are no contradictions within that body of truth.

### **The Right Principles**

But even with the right presuppositions, we need more. We must employ sound principles of interpretation, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in order to accurately understand the body of truth in God's Word. What are those principles? The following is from my book, *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism*:

One of the great truths reclaimed at the Reformation was the principle of *sola scriptura* — "Scripture alone." The issue before the Reformers was this: Shall Christians interpret Scripture on the basis of the often-conflicting pronouncements and traditions of the fallible (and often corrupt) rulers of the Roman Catholic Church, or shall we interpret the Scriptures based solely on the only infallible authority — the Word of God itself? The Reformers rightly concluded that Scripture alone can be trusted to serve as its own interpreter. Our attitude toward Scripture will drive our principles of interpretation.

The principle of *sola scriptura* is essential to sound hermeneutics. Employment of this principle led to the further development of the grammatical-historical method for interpreting Scripture. Use of the grammatical-historical method is not confined to Scripture. Its principles apply to any kind of literature. In the nineteenth century, Methodist Episcopalian theologian Milton S. Terry stated the most fundamental elements:

The grammatico-historical sense of a writer is such an interpretation of his language as is required by the laws of grammar and the facts of history. Sometimes we speak of the literal sense, by which we mean the most simple, direct, and ordinary meaning of phrases and sentences. By this term we usually denote a meaning opposed to the figurative or metaphorical. The grammatical sense is essentially the same as the literal, the one expression being derived from the Greek, the other from the Latin. But in English usage the word grammatical is applied rather to the arrangement and construction of words and sentences. By the historical sense we designate, rather, the meaning of an author's words that is required by historical considerations. It demands that we consider carefully the time of the author, and the circumstances under which he wrote....

A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture.<sup>1</sup>

These principles apply, whether one is reading the Bible, Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, or the editorial page of today's newspaper. But when we are dealing with Scripture, our use of grammatical-historical principles is governed by an

additional, overriding principle: that Scripture alone is the Word of God. This leads us to apply grammatical-historical principles in Scripture-directed ways:

1. Because Scripture alone is the inspired Word of God, every word having been authored by the Holy Spirit, Scripture is its only infallible and authoritative interpreter. No word of fallible man can stand in authority over the infallible Word.
2. Scripture is intelligible. God meant to communicate truth to man through the words of the Bible, in a manner that man can understand. God did not communicate in an analogous or indirect fashion. God communicated His own thoughts directly, and man can understand them because he is made in God's image.
3. Because it is the infallible Word of God, Scripture is internally consistent. God is consistent. With Him there are no contradictions or paradoxes. If we think we see paradox or inconsistency in Scripture, we are looking at God's Word improperly. God cannot lie.
4. Because God meant to communicate truth, and because Scripture is internally consistent, the words of Scripture have only one meaning in context. There may be multiple legitimate *applications* of a passage of Scripture, but a passage has only one *meaning in context*. This is what it means to interpret Scripture according to its *literal*, or normal, sense. Literal interpretation is not a "wooden" interpretation of words without regard to their surroundings. In literature of all kinds, the literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense; in other words, the meaning the writer actually expressed. In the case of the Bible, the grammatical-historical sense is the meaning that *God* intended to express, communicating through human writers. Interpretation according to the literal sense takes into account the Holy Spirit's use of figures of speech and literary forms (narrative,

history, poetry, instruction, etc.) found in the text, and the ways in which the same words and phrases are used in various portions of Scripture.

5. We are to employ passages in Scripture that are more clear on a particular subject to interpret those that are less clear, never vice versa.
6. We must always remember that the Bible we hold in our hands is a translation. It is important for ministers of the church to examine the words of Scripture in the original languages (Hebrew and Greek) and in their historical and cultural setting in order to accurately understand their meaning in context and to properly translate them into other languages, thus accurately communicating God's truth.
7. Extra-Biblical resources, such as language helps, commentaries, the writings of the so-called church fathers, and archaeological and scientific evidences, can be useful resources in correctly interpreting Scripture. But since they are the words and works of fallible men they are not authoritative. These resources and evidences must never be placed in a position of authority over Scripture itself, nor allowed to obscure the fact that God is the author of every word of the Bible. And, where Scripture and human scholarship come into conflict, our attitude must always be, "Let God's truth be inviolate, though every man becomes thereby a liar" (*Romans 3:20* — Robert Reymond gives this translation of the verse in his *New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, page 754).<sup>2</sup>

#### **References:**

1. Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Wipf & Stock, 199, pages 101 & 103.
2. Paul M. Elliott, *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism* (Unicoi, Tennessee: The Trinity Foundation, 2005), pages 240-243.

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