

Week I: Hermeneutics – The What and the Why

I. The What

A. Before embarking on our quest, there are a few issues of definition that need to be addressed. The following is a list of common definitions for hermeneutics:

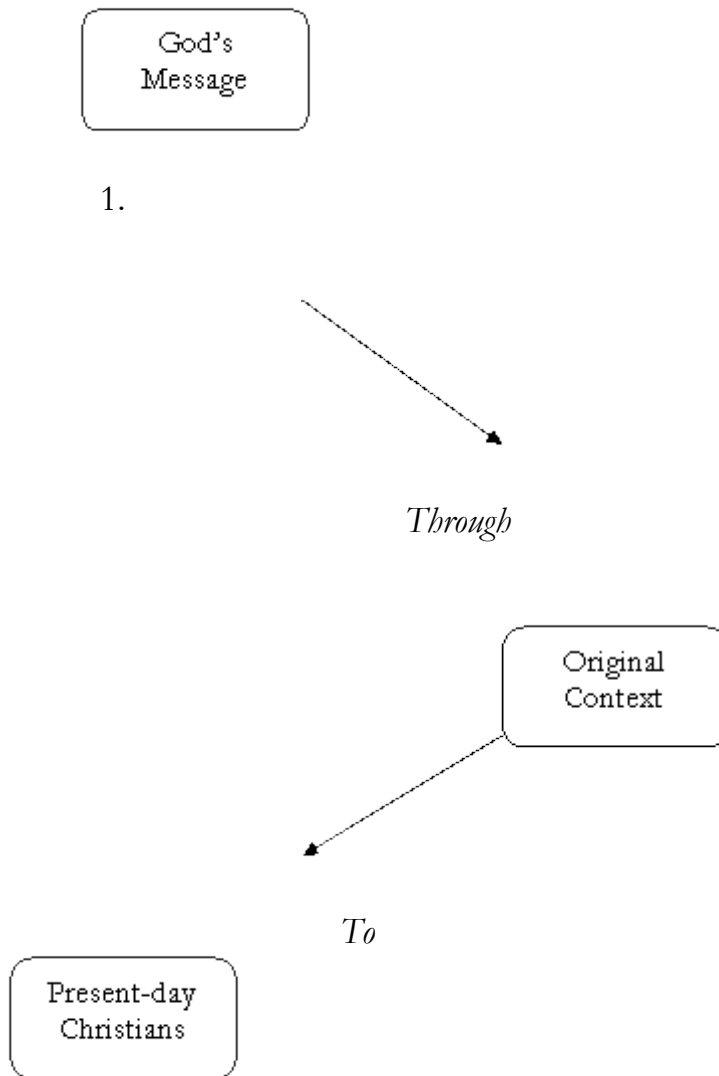
1. “The practice or discipline of interpretation.”^[1]
2. “The science (principles) and art (task) by which the meaning of the biblical text is determined”^[2]
3. “[Hermeneutics] describes the principles people use to understand what something means, to comprehend what a message – written, oral, or visual is endeavoring to communicate.”^[3]

B. From these definitions, it is clear that hermeneutics does not apply simply to the study of the Bible, but to the understanding of *any form* of communication. It can thus be described as the principles needed to accurately understand what is trying to be communicated. However, the question still lingers as to *why* hermeneutics are needed. After all, aren't Christians illuminated by the Holy Spirit in their understanding of scripture? Why then do we need an external set of principles when we have the Spirit as our teacher? We must address these questions next.

II. The Why

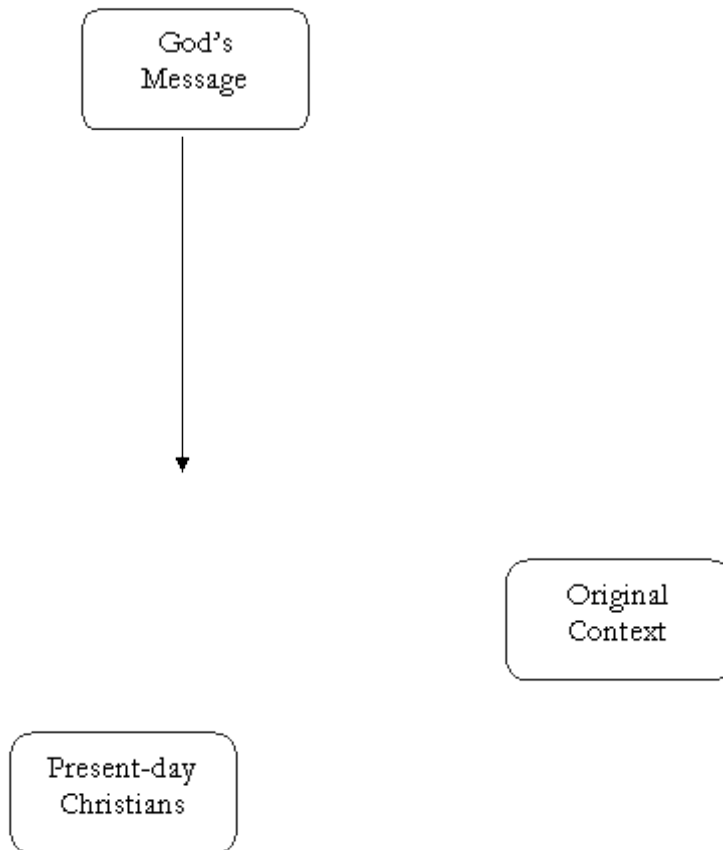
A. Hermeneutics are needed in virtue of the nature of the Bible. Throughout its history, the church has affirmed the dual authorship of the Bible; that is, its message is a combination of both *divine* and *human* authors. Therefore, while the Bible has eternal relevance, this relevance is communicated in the context of historical particularity.^[4] The following diagram illustrates this:

1. God's Communication:



The diagram presents a position that is rather counter-intuitive. This is because many Christians arrogantly assume that God's communication is directly to them *without* any original context. The following diagram illustrates this erroneous view.

2. God's Communication:



Such a view detaches the Bible's message from its original context, and (as we shall see) its original meaning. When we lose the original meaning, we lose any chance at gleaning scripture's contemporary relevance. This view must be rejected, and hence we must grapple with the difficulties inherent in having God's word communicated through an antecedent context.

B. Zuck^[5] is helpful in listing some of these difficulties in the forms of "gaps":

1. *A Time Gap* (Chronological) – We were not alive at the time of the writing of scripture, and thus cannot ask the writers or hearers what was meant.
2. *A Space Gap* (Geographical) – These people lived a great distance from us, and this geographical distance puts us at a disadvantage.
3. *The Customs Gap* (Cultural) – The customs of the Ancient Mediterranean World were much different than those of today. Therefore, it is important to know the customs of these

people in order to understand the message of the New Testament.

4. *A Language Gap* (Linguistic) – The Biblical languages have peculiarities unknown to the English language, as well as foreign idioms. Further the transmission of the original manuscripts down to us today makes it difficult to know precisely what the author said.
5. *A Writing Gap* (Literary) – The literary forms of the Ancient Mediterranean World (e.g. parables, proverbs) differ from those used today.

C. In addition to this problem, there are a number of faulty presuppositions that *we* bring to the biblical text. As Russell says, “Culturally, most Americans have developed bad reading and interpretive habits. Also, we have bad interpretive theories underlying our popular hermeneutics.”⁶⁴ Therefore, not only are there difficulties because of the original context, but our own interpretive faculties present us with difficulties!

D. Let’s see if we can get a better understanding of how these difficulties manifest in our first case example:

Case Example #1: Matthew 18:15-20

Being that we have not been able to study any of the aforementioned difficulties at an in depth level, this case study is meant only to give a general overview of some of the problems we will face in the interpretive process. This passage is especially good at highlighting some of the pitfalls in interpretation, as we will see in going through the following questions:

- In what context have you normally heard 18:20 used?
- What is the main point of this passage?
- What is the main issue being addressed?
- Are there any hints in the context as to what 18:20 means?
- In what context is this scripture (find OT referent) used in other places in the Bible?

As we see, this scripture has a different meaning than what the church has traditionally thought. Further, we see how faulty presuppositions, coupled with an ignorance of the original context (both historically and literarily) leads to a misreading of the Bible. Hopefully it is clear from this that the need for proper interpretation is pressing!

Since we have problems both with our own presuppositions, and with the original context, we will examine these individually. Over the next two weeks, we will take a candid look at ourselves, and see what we can do both to overcome faulty reading habits and understand the world of the Bible better.

^[1] Robert Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) 17.

^[2] Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (USA: Victor, 1991), 20.

^[3] William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004) 4.

^[4] Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stewart, *How to Read to Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 17.

^[5] *Ibid.*, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, 15-18.

^[6] *Ibid.*, *Hermeneutics TTBE 517*, 3. We will address the issue of presuppositions in more depth at a later point in the class.