

Discovery Class

Session 3 of 9: Schools of Interpretation and Observation, Part 1

Clayton Valley Church

Session Goals

These are the questions this session will chase down and answer. Keep them in mind as we work through the material.

- *Which approach to interpreting Scripture actually lets the text correct us, rather than the other way around?*
- *What does it mean to observe a passage carefully before trying to interpret it?*

A. The Grammatical-Historical Approach

Of the six historic approaches to interpreting Scripture, only one treats the text's own words, in their plain, ordinary, grammatical and historical sense, as the actual meaning to be found. This is the approach this whole course trains you in.

Definition: Scripture means what it says in its plain, ordinary, customary sense, the same sense words carry in normal conversation and writing. This is determined by grammatical and historical factors, not imposed from outside the text.

Key principle: There is only one sense to a text. Nehemiah 8:8 describes the Levites reading God's law and giving the sense so the people understood it. Luke 24:27 and 32 show Jesus doing the same with the Old Testament on the Emmaus road. Neither passage describes a hidden second meaning waiting to be unlocked. Both describe explaining what the words already say.

This approach already accounts for figurative language. When Jesus called Herod “that fox” (Luke 13:32), reading grammatically and historically doesn't force us into believing Herod grew a tail. It asks what the author intended by his words, whether those words are a plain assertion or a figure of speech. The controlling question is always what the author meant, not how many senses can be extracted.

Two distortions worth naming: Letterism, forcing a woodenly literal reading onto figurative language (treating “if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out,” Matthew 5:29, as a literal command rather than hyperbole), and its opposite failure, missing an author's plain intent because we're hunting for hidden meaning where none exists.

B. Survey of the Other Five Schools

The other five schools each replace the text's own plain sense with something else as the real source of meaning.

Allegorical: Treats the literal sense of the text as a shell to get past, in search of a deeper spiritual meaning underneath.

Devotional: Reads Scripture only to be edified, jumping to application before doing the work of interpretation.

Liberal: Holds that human reason is the final judge of what in Scripture is true.

Neo-orthodox: Treats the Bible as a witness pointing to revelation rather than revelation itself.

Emergent: A disdain for propositional truth, a disdain for certainty, and a disdain for doctrine. As a named movement it's largely faded, but its instincts persist today under the label of the Deconstruction Movement.

Full definitions for all five are in the handout at the end of these notes.

C. Four Examples Worth Knowing

In class, we worked through four real examples in small groups, testing what each school does to a text and what a grammatical-historical reading would do instead.

1. Allegorical: Augustine on Psalm 3:5

Augustine read Psalm 3:5, "I lay down and slept; I woke again, for the Lord sustained me," and said this really refers to the death and resurrection of Christ. In the Genesis flood account, he read the fig leaves as hypocrisy, the coats of skin as mortality, and the four rivers of Eden as the four cardinal virtues. Origen took this further, teaching that a single word could carry up to four senses at once, illustrated with the word Jerusalem: the literal sense (the actual capital city), the moral sense (Jerusalem as the soul, teaching how to behave), the allegorical sense (Jerusalem as the church, the content of the faith), and the anagogical sense (Jerusalem as heaven, the future hope). The problem is control. Once hidden meanings are permitted, any interpreter can find whatever meaning suits him, and there's no way to test it against the text itself.

2. Liberal: Lisa Miller and Al Mohler

Journalist Lisa Miller argued that Scripture has no fixed teaching on marriage, since Abraham and Jacob practiced polygamy, Jesus never married, and Paul treated marriage as a concession. Her conclusion: a mature view of Scripture requires moving past reading it literally. Al Mohler, President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, responded that her survey was selective, citing only scholars who agreed with her in advance, and that the presence of polygamy in the narrative doesn't erase the Bible's consistent teaching on marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman.

3. Neo-orthodox: "Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus"

A 1972 satire imagines Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann each answering a child's question about Santa Claus in a way that mirrors their real theological method: affirming resurrection language and Easter faith while treating whether the tomb actually emptied as beside the point. The article's own conclusion is that a faith surgically separated from history cannot survive its own logic. Luke ties Christ's birth to named, datable rulers (Luke 2:1-2) on purpose. The message depends on things having actually happened.

4. Emergent Downstream: Sprinkle and Butterfield

Preston Sprinkle holds that a celibate Christian with same-sex attraction may legitimately describe himself as gay, treating it as a soft identity description rather than a claim about behavior, favoring pastoral nuance over settling the matter with a firm propositional line. Rosaria Butterfield has directly challenged this, arguing Scripture doesn't treat same-sex attraction as a neutral identity a believer may retain in chaste form. It is to be mortified, not

managed (Romans 8:13, Colossians 3:5), because the believer's identity is remade in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), not carried forward alongside an old one.

D. Observation: The Inductive Method

Definition: Observation means taking thorough, careful notice of a passage. It is the first of three phases (Observation, Interpretation, Application) and the one every later step depends on.

Inductive vs. deductive: Inductive study moves from facts to a conclusion. We gather what the text actually says, then let the conclusion follow from that evidence. Deductive study starts with a conclusion already in mind and hunts for verses to prove it, which is not always valid and is the seedbed of most of the errors above.

Exegesis vs. eisegesis: Exegesis means leading the meaning out of the text, discovering what the biblical author meant to say. Eisegesis means reading our own ideas into the text and finding a meaning the author never intended. Every school we surveyed except the Grammatical-Historical approach falls into eisegesis somewhere.

E. Block Diagramming

Procedure: Identify each main phrase in a sentence and write it on its own line, then indent any phrase that modifies another phrase beneath the phrase it modifies. This forces a decision about how every word relates to every other word, rather than letting the eye skim past those relationships.

Worked example: 1 Peter 1:1-2

1 Peter 1:1-2, ESV

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure.

Three decision points worth remembering:

- 1. “An apostle of Jesus Christ” nests under “Peter.”** Does “of Jesus Christ” describe Peter, or his apostleship? It describes the apostleship, so it nests one level deeper.
- 2. The word “that” is the hardest decision in the passage.** It could modify “Peter” (his purpose in writing) or “chosen” (the purpose of their being chosen). The more natural reading is the second. This is exactly why diagramming is worth the trouble: it forces us to notice an ambiguity we'd otherwise read past.
- 3. “May grace and peace be yours” stands alone, to the far left.** It's an independent blessing, a new main clause, not a phrase describing Peter or the readers further.

What diagramming accomplishes: It shows the grammatical structure of the passage, flags exactly where word relationships need real thought, and sets up the next step, asking questions of the text, which comes next week with 3 John.

Practice example: John 3:16

John 3:16, ESV

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Try diagramming this yourself before checking the model below.

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For God so loved the world,  
  that  
    he gave his only Son,  
    that  
      whoever believes in him  
      should not perish  
      but  
      have eternal life.
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Reasonable people can place the second “that” under “gave” or under “Son.” Either is defensible. The value of the exercise is noticing the decision has to be made at all.

Handout: The Other Five Schools of Interpretation

Take-home reference. Full definitions for the schools surveyed briefly in class today.

The Allegorical School. Treats the literal sense of a word or passage as only a surface layer, a doorway to a deeper, hidden spiritual meaning underneath. Rooted in Greek philosophical tradition before it entered Jewish and Christian interpretation through figures like Philo and Origen. Origen taught that a passage could carry up to four senses at once: literal, moral, allegorical, and future. The weakness is control. Once hidden meanings are permitted, the text stops correcting the reader and starts reflecting him back to himself.

The Devotional School. Regards the Bible primarily as a book meant to nourish personal spiritual life. Emphasis falls on being edified by a passage, often skipping past the work of careful interpretation to get there faster. Not wrong to want edification. Wrong to treat it as a substitute for interpretation rather than its fruit.

The Liberal School. Holds that human intellect is the final judge of what in Scripture can be accepted as true. Scripture is only as authoritative as it agrees with modern reason. Inspiration gets redefined as ordinary human inspiration, and the supernatural gets redefined out of existence.

The Neo-orthodox School. Not a single unified system, but a shared instinct: the Bible is a witness pointing toward revelation, not revelation itself. God's word "becomes" God's word to a person only in the moment of a personal encounter with it. Faith doesn't require the events Scripture describes to have literally happened in verifiable history.

The Emergent Movement. As a named movement, this has largely faded from evangelical conversation since the early 2010s. But its core instincts persist: a disdain for firm propositional truth, a discomfort with certainty, and a suspicion of doctrine as an obstacle to relationship with Jesus rather than its foundation. These instincts resurface in new debates long after the original movement's name has gone out of use.

Today's heir: the Deconstruction Movement.

Commentators widely note the resemblance between Emergent-era criticism of evangelical institutions and today's deconstruction movement, in which believers publicly work through doubts about doctrine and church structures, often ending in a full departure from the faith. Those who leave evangelicalism through this process are commonly called "exvangelical." Not everyone treats the two movements as identical. Some argue Emergent aimed to reimagine Christianity from within, while deconstruction today more often aims at leaving it altogether. Either way, the same underlying instinct, distrust of certainty and doctrine, runs through both.

Homework

Answer all three questions before next class. There is no grade. Write out your answers, then compare them honestly with the response guide.

Question 1: Identifying the Approach

Read each short statement below. Name which school of interpretation it reflects, and in one or two sentences, say what a grammatical-historical reading would do differently.

a. “Modern, educated readers know better than to take the Bible's miracle stories as literal fact. What matters is the moral lesson underneath, not events that ancient, prescientific people mistakenly believed happened.”

***Response guide:** a. Liberal. The statement makes modern reason and scientific plausibility the standard by which Scripture's claims are judged. A grammatical-historical reading takes the text's own claim to describe real events on its own terms.*

b. A well-known early church teacher read the Parable of the Good Samaritan as a coded history of humanity's fall and redemption, not a straightforward lesson in neighborly mercy. In his reading, the man going down to Jericho is Adam leaving the heavenly Jerusalem for the fallen world. The robbers are the devil and his demonic powers, stripping humanity of the garment of virtue. The priest and the Levite are the Law and the Prophets, who pass by because the old covenant lacked the power to fully heal the wound. The Samaritan is Christ, who binds the wound with oil and wine. The inn is the Church, the innkeeper is the Church's leadership, and the two denarii left behind represent the knowledge of the Father and the Son. The promise to return is Christ's promise of his Second Coming.”

***Response guide:** b. Allegorical. This is Origen's reading of the Good Samaritan from his Homilies on Luke. Every character and object is assigned a hidden, symbolic referent, none of it drawn from anything the parable's own words signal. A grammatical-historical reading asks what Jesus' original hearers would have understood: a lesson about who counts as a neighbor and what mercy costs, prompted by a lawyer's question in Luke 10:29.*

c. “The virgin birth doesn't need to be historically, biologically literal for the Christmas story to be true. What matters is the meaning it carries, God with us, not whether Mary was a virgin in the clinical sense.”

Response guide: c. Neo-orthodox. The statement separates the truth or meaning of the virgin birth from whether it actually, biologically happened. A grammatical-historical reading takes Matthew's and Luke's own claims (Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:34-35) to be a real, historical claim about how Christ was conceived.

Question 2: Diagramming 3 John 1-4

Block diagram 3 John, verses 1 through 4, using the procedure from class. Identify each main phrase and indent modifying phrases beneath the phrase they modify.

3 John 1-4, ESV

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul. For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

Your diagram:



Response guide, model diagram:

The elder
to the beloved Gaius,
whom I love in truth.

Beloved,
I pray
that all may go well with you
and
that you may be in good health,
as it goes well with your soul.

For
I rejoiced greatly
when the brothers came
and
testified to your truth,
as indeed you are walking in the truth.

I have no greater joy
than to hear
that my children are walking in the truth.

A strong attempt doesn't need to match this exactly. What matters is that each modifying phrase nests under the phrase it actually modifies, and that connecting words like “as,” “for,” and “than” are placed carefully rather than skipped.

Question 3: The Three People in the Letter

Last week's homework had you read 3 John in full, twice a day, for five days. Drawing on that reading, name the three people the letter centers on, Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius, and write one or two sentences on what the letter actually says about each one.

Response guide: A strong answer notices specific details tied to each name: Gaius welcomes traveling missionaries and walks in the truth (vv. 1-6). Diotrephes loves to be first, refuses to welcome the brothers, spreads unjustified accusations, and puts people out of the church (vv. 9-10). Demetrius has a good testimony from everyone, including from the truth itself (v. 12).
