

# BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

## Learning How to Understand and Apply the Bible

### Session One: The Authorship and Authority of Scripture

The most important principle of biblical interpretation is that the Bible has one divine author and each verse has one divine meaning, and our job is to discover God's meaning and apply it to our lives.

#### 1. The Authorship and Authority of the Bible

- a. **Background:** The Bible (*biblia*, books) consists of 66 books, divided into two sections: the Old Testament (39 books) and the New Testament (27 books). These books were written over the course of 1500 years on three different continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe) by at least 35 human authors, using three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek).
- b. **Inspiration:** While human authors wrote down the words of Scripture, the ultimate author is God. According to the theological doctrine of "inspiration," God spoke to the human authors through the Holy Spirit, inspiring them to write down exactly what he wanted to reveal. However, while God is the ultimate author of Scripture, he used the languages, personalities, cultural settings, and historical situations of the human authors to deliver his message, making the Bible readable and understandable to humans.
  - **2 Peter 1:21** – *"For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."*
  - **2 Timothy 3:16-17** – *"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."*
  - **2 Peter 3:16** – *"There are some things in them that are hard to understand (in Paul's letters), which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures."*

**The Verbal Plenary Theory:** "There is a dual authorship to the Scriptures. While the authors of the Bible wrote as thinking, feeling human beings, God so mysteriously superintended the process that every word written was also the exact word he wanted to be written – free from all error" (Robert Plummer).

- c. **Characteristics:** Since God is the ultimate author of Scripture, the Bible displays several important characteristics.

- **Inspired:** The Bible came directly from God through human authors.
  - **Inerrant:** The Bible contains no errors. Not only did God inspire the written text, but he oversaw the transmission and preservation of the text.
  - **Infallible:** The Bible will always lead to God's truth. According to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, "Scripture...is infallible, so that, far from misleading us, it is true and reliable in all the matters it addresses" (Art. IX).
- d. **Authority:** Since God is the ultimate author of Scripture, the Bible is our highest and final authority for all things pertaining to faith and life. In other words, the Bible is the ultimate source of truth, greater than human opinion, church tradition, scientific research, and logical reasoning. Our view of biblical authority is summarized by the Reformational teaching of "*Sola Scriptura*" (Scripture Alone). Martin Luther described Scripture as the "*norma normans non normata*" (the norm of norms that can't be normed).
- **The Geneva Confession** (1536) – "First we affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as a rule of faith and religion, without mixing with it any other things which might be devised by the opinion of men apart from the Word of God, and without wishing to accept for our spiritual government any other doctrine than what is conveyed to us by the same Word without addition or diminution, according to the command of our Lord." (Sec. 1)
  - **The Baptist Faith & Message** (2000) – "The Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired and is God's revelation of Himself to man. It is a perfect treasure of divine instruction. It has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter. Therefore, all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. It reveals the principles by which God judges us, and therefore is, and will remain to the end of the world, the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and religious opinions should be tried. All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation." (Art. 1, "The Scriptures")
- e. **Meaning and Message:** Since God is the ultimate author of Scripture, he has a specific meaning and message that he wants to communicate in every passage. Our goal is to discover what God intended and apply it to our lives. However, there's an issue. We live 2000-3500 years from when these words were written, which means that the divine meaning and message of Scripture is often clouded by history, customs, culture, geography, and use of language.
- **Quote:** "It is across this broad and deep divide of two thousand years of changing culture (more still in the case of the Old Testament) that Christian communicators have to throw bridges. Our task is to enable God's revealed truth to flow out of the Scriptures into the lives of the men and women of today." – John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*

Therefore, we need a method for discovering what God intended when he inspired each word to be written, and bridge that truth to our lives today.

## 2. Understanding God's Meaning and Message

- a. **Hermeneutics:** The process for discovering God's meaning is called "hermeneutics," more casually known as biblical interpretation. In essence, it's the method for understanding God's intended message and applying it to life. It's first understanding "what it meant" before discussing "what it means for me."
  - **Origin:** This term comes from the Greek word "*hermēneúō*," which means to explain or interpret. In ancient Greek mythology, the god *Hermes* was the spokesman for the other gods, taking what they said and explaining it to the people (cf. Acts 14:12). The word is used multiple times in the New Testament to describe someone interpreting and explaining God's Word. In Luke 24:27, as Jesus walked with two disciples on the road of Emmaus, Luke records, "*And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*"
  - **Spiritual Science:** Hermeneutics is a "spiritual science," which means that it's a combination of using scientific method and seeking the Holy Spirit's illumination. After discussing the scientific means for interpreting the Bible, Grant Osborne states, "Most important, hermeneutics when utilized to interpret Scripture is a spiritual act, depending on the leading of the Holy Spirit (*The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 22).
    - **1 Corinthians 2:14** – "*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand [see] them because they are spiritually discerned.*"
    - **John 16:14** – "*He [Holy Spirit] will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*"
    - **Luke 24:45** – "*And he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.*"
    - **Psalms 119:18** – "*Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.*"
- b. **Method:** In the spiritual sense, biblical interpretation should be first approached with prayer and humility. We ultimately need God's help to understand and apply his word. However, in the scientific sense, biblical interpretation involves the Historical-Grammatical method.

**Genre + Context + Words + Theology = God's Meaning**